

2024
UNSWEETENED





UNSW Student Life

UNSWeetened acknowledges the traditional owners of the lands of UNSW and all our places of home and study. We acknowledge the Bedegal people, the Darug people, the Gandagara people, the Ngunnuwal people, and the Gadigal and Wangal peoples of the Eora Nation.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of UNSW, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander storytellers. This is, was, and always will be Aboriginal land.

Dedicated to Mum and Dad.
Thank you for believing in me.

Foreword

I came to this year's theme, warmth, after thinking about what really mattered in life. To me, warmth is an affirmation of life itself, a testament to an enduring belief in the goodness of humanity—despite how it may be tested and trialed and found wanting at times—and choosing to walk in this world with an open heart. It is a comfort to know that life is full of small miracles and that love is there even when the world is dark. My hope is that you may find comfort as you read this year's print edition.

From my time here with UNSweetened I realise there is so much care that goes into anything and so many different moving parts that it is a little miracle that anything good is made. Life is made up of these small miracles.

But this is all thanks to every single one of you that the journal has stayed, and even expanded with an online edition to showcase more of the emerging writers on campus. The dedication and love the community has towards UNSweetened is incredible; I have been so privileged to see another year of lovely writing and the support behind it.

My eternal thanks to the incredible authors who generously shared their work with us; our sponsors who understood our purpose of nurturing emerging writers; the 2024 volunteer team of senior editors, designers, illustrators, and content curators whose time, creativity, and passion has made this year's UNSweetened a thoughtful, kind, and wholesome one.

Lychee Lui
UNSweetened Coordinator

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Funded through a 2024 UNSW Anti-Racism Grant, proudly awarded by EDI in the Division of Societal Impact, Equity & Engagement





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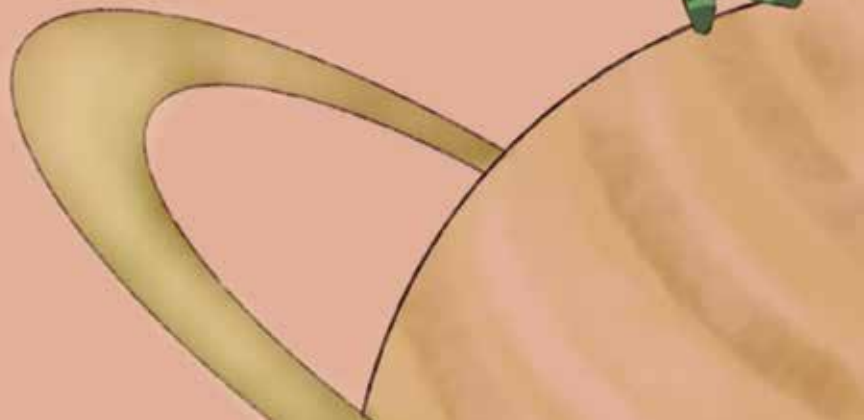
The First Astronauts

Eliza Hoh

When people discuss the first astronauts, they'll likely speak of Yuri Gagarin in the '60s or perhaps the first man to walk on the Moon. What most don't know is that long before 'man' fled Earth on a flying metal machine, two cheeky children went up to space. Of the little we know about these little astronauts, one fact about them outshines all the others — that they loved each other.

You can't blame them for going to space on the day they did — it was a real scorcher. The braids in their hair were sticking to the back of their necks, their cheeks were flushed. The largest and wisest tree tried with all its might to shield everyone, but the attempts were to no avail. The grown-ups groaned into the ground, fanning themselves with their hands with little relief. Nothing could dispel the Sun's stubborn beams. So, the little ones were instructed to simply sit still and wait for the heat to wash away. But of course, that would not do — there was playing to be done.

The children snuck away from their grownups and began to whisper ideas to each other— pausing between conversational bursts to wipe sweat from their brows. They knew that the higher you were, the cooler it got. But they had already climbed the tallest tree, and it had done little to lower their body heat. These children made





it to the top of the tree, not because they were careful or slight for their family lovingly described them as daredevils, but because they were very determined indeed. And they wanted to get even higher. For years and years, they did not believe there was any higher you could reach than the top of a tree, until that day.

The children hatched a plan. With the help of a friendly creature, they might be able to go higher than the tips of the tree. Much, much higher indeed. They asked an old bird (who was on the next branch over) if they could hitch a ride before their mums called them over for dinner. The bird agreed. Birds of this kind were so reclusive that you wouldn't be able to find them today, even if they weren't extinct. But something about these children sent a spark through the old bird's heart — a flicker of hope that had been left dormant for too long. The bird had heard the qualms of the children and watched the sweat bead down their skin, and so agreed to help them out. The kids built a saddle from leaves and fixed it on the bird's back, careful not to snag its delicate feathers. The three critters squeezed each other tight and soared through the skies. None of them wanted to stop, so they flew higher and higher and *higher*.

Today, we have oxygen checks and in-depth protective procedures when people go to space. Contemporary astronauts have described the journey up as loud, pulsing, and deafening. This journey, however, was absent of metal clanging or radios harping on. The only sounds were the flap of wings and squeals of delight. The star children giggled when their braids started floating up. The bird smiled as the little ones stood on their heads and somersaulted past comets.

The children chatted to the Moon and Sun in an icy, heated conversation. They leapt through Saturn's rings and swam through the constellations. They ran their fingers through the mane of The Lion and the roars of delight from all involved sent ticklish vibrations through their bodies. They hopped the express shooting star to visit Sirius and play fetch. For an hour or so in Earth time, life in space was blissful.

That was until they learned that alarmed yells from their grown-ups many, many kilometres down were still loud enough to reach them up there. Booming voices consisting of equal parts annoyance and concern echoed between the planets and looped back to the children's ears. While these children were cheeky, they surprisingly did not ignore the calls of their parents from down below.

They held no fear in returning to Earth, for they loved Earth dearly. After all, that is where they met each other — how could they leave behind a place as magical as that?

They waved goodbye to their new friends and hopped onto the old bird's back.



Re-entry is the tricky part. It has been described as crushing — akin to the pain of a thousand burning suns pulverising you beneath their grasp. Re-entry can be much, much hotter than the hottest parts of Earth that the little astronauts were trying to escape. But luckily for them, the elderly bird had wings large enough to fan them and keep them cool as they glided back down to the tree just in time for their supper. Despite the very effective flap of the bird's wings and the coolness of the night sky, they still felt warmth through their tummies at the thrill of their adventure. Not even the most powerful of wind gusts or the coldest of winters could take that feeling away from them.

The astronauts scurried down the tree's trunk and hoped no one noticed the moondust scattered on their grinning cheeks. Like many children today, they scoffed down their meal and ran away quickly to play some more, illuminated only by the friendly stars that — after their visit — shone a little bit brighter.

After their play date, The Lion roared with less ferocity. Sirius learned new tricks. The Sun and Moon began to speak to each other with softer words. The Sun became less hot, the Moon became less cold, and they both sparkled more than ever before. All was well.

We don't know their names or their faces, but we know that these little ones loved each other very much. We also know, with certainty, that their grown-ups scolded them for flying off like that.





Groovy Little Bug

Elude

Groovy little bug,
Sonder the city lights,
Waltz past concrete clubs,
A jungle of flashing lamplights,

Groovy little bug,
Pass(er) by,
Is that Jake and Jacob in the
corner of your eye?
Under the overarch of Main
Street highway,
Crosses by their hand,
An ignition cord on fire,
Pale pyre,
Gasoline, desire,
Parting the darkness,
Cinders amidst your little light,
Carry it upon your wings,
As their lip's part for tonight,
'I love you...'
'We can't...'
Shed it across the melancholy
of *goodnight*.

Groovy little bug,
Find your way to the apartment
complex on Brown Street,
Where the fireworks spark from
a heart inside,
4th of July,
Intermittent by a beautiful
orange chiffon,
And the scarlet of Vanessa's
eyes,
Red, orange, yellow,
Little suns replace tears on
pages,
Amidst the lamplight,
Her heart fizzling on the pour-
ing parchment,
Ink melding the chains of past
reprise,
Purging starlight,
Into sunshine,
No longer an afterthought,
Patter your eyes,
Pass(er) by,

‘What if I can’t live up to it?’,
Tiptoeing on the vices of time,
‘Will I be fine?’,
Red bleeds into the room,
It’s time to say *goodbye*,
Vanessa’s window shines bright,
‘I’ll be alright.’

Groovy little bug,
Red trails upon you,
As you make it to the mural by
midnight,
Next to the skate park,
Fatima sits above a dead body,
A witness to murder you are
tonight,

Her hands bleed red,
From a life she shed,
As the body of her expectations
lay by the paint she used to
colour,
The sedimentary sight,

A solace of surgery,
A reprimand of her soul,
A daughter carried by the dan-
delions,
Of the Baghdad seaside,
To the coast of Australia,
Her colours were never bleaker
amidst the canvas of white,

‘Why do you wear that?’
‘What a sore sight?’
Stares,
She fuels her fire,
She paints her skin onto the
walls of the night,
A murderer,
Of the persona she is given be-
cause of how she gleams,
And does not ‘shine’,
A surgeon of her skin,
A mortician of her tears,
Wildfire streaks down her

cheeks,
‘My daughter, you’ll be fine,’
Love carried amidst your bod-
ice,
And the hues of night,
Pass(er) by,
Groovy little bug,
‘Sondering’ amidst human lives,
Take in every sight,
Do you wish the see the rest of
human life?
Maybe tomorrow night,
We can go to the countryside!



Swimming Lessons

Laura Gordon

This is a love story.

2022 - 22 Years Old

Two young girls run across a beach, shrieking. They're laughing, the bottom of their skirts soaked by the sea, but they don't care. My eyes begin to tear up as I watch the scene play on my laptop screen.

I can't remember the last time I ran, other than from an ibis trying to steal my lunch. I didn't realise I'd grown up already. I'm aware it says "Birth year: 2003" on my license, but not grown up, grown up. I used to be so preoccupied with seeming grown-up that I frowned upon childish interests, but now it's too late. I'm officially an adult, whose opportunities to run carefree along stretches of sand are few and far between. I roll over in bed, re-fluffing my pillow. It's stained with mascara marks because I was too lazy to take my makeup off after getting home last night – well... really this morning – which my Uber receipts love to remind me of. They all just seem to be mocking me when I open my email to read:

"Your Sunday morning trip with Uber:

We hope you enjoyed your ride this morning. (Fuck you Uber you know I spent the entire ride trying to not throw up while the driver tried to set me up with his son).

Total A\$25.67

3:07 am (Insert here some guy's address who's not your boyfriend to your house)"

The younger me would be impressed with how the older me is now. Drinking, parties, boys... Younger me was incredibly naive, sheltered, and a late bloomer. She couldn't have imagined the novelty would ever wear off. The current me knows that sometimes you wake up in your bed, or someone else's, with dry mouth and hangover shakes, smudged mascara, two missed calls from your Mum, and \$103 less in your bank account.



Sometimes it's pretty regrettable, actually.

"But we're in our twenties!" My friends and I tell each other when we're out together debating a certain decision, like ordering another margarita jug when we have work the next day, or booking flights

to Europe that we can't afford. 20s. That number alone justifies you doing a lot of dumb shit. We'll never be this young again, in this same place, with the same people, so... why not?

Your 20s as a young woman in the 21st century is supposed to be an age of liberation, enlightenment, and empowerment. Except, my friends and I don't know if we feel all that empowered sometimes. We often sarcastically insert phrases like "I love being a woman" at the end of our stories about cynical things, like how everyone only seems to be into casual dating these days. Maybe it's unfair to say we're not empowered. We never had to live without having access to the pill, we weren't forcibly shut out of the workforce (for the most part), or only taught domestic arts in school. We're not some perky 'girl bosses' on a motivational poster. We're just boring, normal people going about our boring, normal lives who never stop to ask, "Hang on, do I feel empowered right now?" because that just sounds lame. I don't think this is something men ever have to think about in their daily lives. If they shave their legs they don't think, "Am I doing this for me or for the patriarchy?" When they care too much about receiving male validation, they don't have to feel like they've set back an entire movement.

I Died: An Interlude:

I am currently in the process of dying and withering away. I feel like a piece of uneaten fruit left out on a dinner party table with a weird film forming over me. And the people



walk past the table at this dinner party, and no one wants to eat the weird lone piece of fruit left out on a lone plate on the dining table. But I'm a pretty, young thing! Why is no one devouring me? Someone! Devour me now, please!

I'm in my prime, aren't I? This is the most magical time of all the times that have been thus far. I'm floating away in the wind. Won't someone catch me quickly? Pluck me from the air and undress me and kiss me all over and never let me go.

I force intimacy. I do. I do...

I will never watch my clothes spin around in the washing machine with your clothes, watching as they entwine themselves. I'll never take them out when they're done and fold our clothes together and put them away in the set of drawers we share.

I will wither away on the table. I will never achieve the purpose that I blossomed for; that I was peeled, rinsed and presented for.

I want to grab my own hand and push myself in front of a stranger on a sunny day and say, "Here! She's yours now!"

I want to lie down on a sticky floor, littered with confetti, in a dark room under bright lights and thumping music in some act of weird performance art. I want to just be done with it all if no one will have me. People can step around me and I won't budge because I am doing something down here!

Fine, I'll hoist up my skirt and trudge off into the wilderness and become a wild thing on my own

instead. I'll drink and dance and sing and act like I don't ache inside.

I want to stand up at the table at that dinner party and scream! I want to frighten the guests and stop their chatter. Perhaps their plates will jump up off the table and their food will rearrange itself. I want to force them to confront themselves and their pathetic dinner party, so I don't have to confront mine. But they'll just scoop me up under a glass jar and carefully carry me out to the garden, releasing me into the night air, and softly shutting the door behind them.

Memory Box:

In this moment of twilight, this in-betweenness, is the chance to sift through the remains of my past, to hold them up and re-analyse them. In lamenting every one of my romantic relationships, I've kept an imaginary memory box that I fill with all the things that remind me of them.

Marcus –

Campus coffees, art museums, hidden bars, The Godfather, the scent of clean laundry, his blonde hair, study dates.

Joseph –

Jazz music, his red Jeep, weed smoke, vinyl records, his painting studio, Danny's bar and its whiskey cocktails, navy sheets.

Evan –

Rugby, Delwood Beach, Mac Miller songs, Italy, my green dress, New Year's Eve, summer, late-night kebabs, his Nikon D7500 camera.

I've left some of these memory boxes out. One...that is too painful to remember still.

We all have *one*.

I think it's funny that none of these relationships were all that significant, yet I hold onto their artefacts and act as their museum curator,



making sure they're safe, occasionally dusting them off.

To be honest it's a pretty shitty museum that no one else would want to visit. The audience would probably look at the glass case with some beer coasters inside and think, "Huh... weird choice."

There's an empty red wine bottle that still sits on my bookshelf as a token from a past relationship, but it's not as special as the crescent moon tattoo on my ankle I got with my best friend to match the starburst on hers. The sprig of baby's breath he tucked behind my hair isn't as beautiful as the scar on my leg I got from falling over whilst playing in the rain with my sister. The red cherry wood guitar pick I gifted him isn't as valuable as the gold earrings my friend bought me for my 19th birthday – which I wear on every special occasion.

Layla:

2007/2022:

I'm hanging up my backpack, which is nearly the same size as me, on the hook outside our kindergarten classroom. A girl with tan skin and frizzy brown hair is putting hers up next to mine. I'm slightly younger for my year, a nervous little thing... or maybe I'm not. Was I anxious then? Or did that come later? I seemed to have no issue turning to this girl, who introduced herself as Layla, asking if she wanted to be my friend. I wish making friends was that easy in your twenties.

Layla moved states when we were fourteen, but we never let the distance impact our friendship. I've visited her apartment a dozen times in Brisbane. It's an old, white, two-storey building with a terrace on the river.

I'd booked the flights a month before to be there for Layla's 21st birthday party, unaware that I'd be broken up with four days prior to flying over. Her birthday weekend would, unfortunately, partly become about distracting me from my devastation.

This involved:

Margaritas, Ben and Jerry's ice cream, homemade pizzas, 2000s teen



romcoms, tequila shots, flirting with random men, kissing random men, nearly going home with random men but deciding better — *thank god!* Posting to Instagram but ignoring who viewed it, crying in the bathroom, smoking blueberry-flavoured cigarettes with a drug dealer named Bossie (not his legal name), crashing a friend of a friend's 21st, meeting a man with the same name as my ex and immediately ending the conversation there. Layla wiping the tears off my face and giving me a pep talk in the middle of a bar and flying home two days later with a screaming baby sitting behind me.

With anyone else, I probably would have just cancelled the trip altogether. But it wasn't just anyone — It was Layla.

Remember, this is still a love story.

Sky:

2023:

Right after my most recent heartbreak, after he left my house and I had a good cry in the shower, I messaged my friend Sky so we could get dinner together because I didn't want to be alone. I sat on a bus, trying not to look at the couple sitting across from me hugging each other, and met her outside the Lebanese place where I continued to cry as families ate around us. They carried on with their meals, pretending like they didn't see me. I pointed out spots around the city that he took me to on dates. Throughout the night, she listened to my tearful laments about my lost romantic future. She reassured me that my mascara wasn't smudged and it did not make me look like a raccoon, as we sat on a bench eating ice cream

together. We had known each other for a solid amount of time, but she was still a relatively new friend and had never seen me cry before.

I still can't look at the Sydney Opera House the same way, or the streets in Newtown, old pubs in The Rocks, or LimeBikes. At least now I also think of hazelnut ice cream and sitting cross-legged with Sky as we talked for hours, looking out on the harbour.

16,632 Kilometres Away:

Present:

There are daffodils growing outside my apartment window. I'm halfway across the world.

I'm standing in my shower, listening to the soft music playing from my phone — “Slipping through my fingers all the time,” I realise I feel a lot taller now. I bought a new perfume to wear whilst I was away, switching it out for the old one to force myself to associate new memories with this new, powdery floral scent.

I took a pink, bitter-tasting pill the other night in Amsterdam and made my friends hold my hands so tight the entire time and promise that they wouldn't let go. My best friend entwined her fingers with mine and held our hands in her pocket so we would both stay warm. As we stood there, cheek to cheek, she told me I'd be okay.



Flowers Do Not Last Forever

Annie Ming Kowalik

They say she is beautiful.

Look there, swaying, a rose in the breeze. Warmth blooming across soft cheeks.

They say she dances upon the floor like a lily across the water.

See there, a peony in bloom, unfurling herself delicately, sensually. Skirts oh so perfectly caught in the wind. They say her voice is the sweet nectar of agreement. Her steps the fallen colours of cherry blossoms.

Oh, how she moves, like every man in the world is watching her. There is an inviting heat radiating from the place she touches your shoulder, eyes slanted up in innocent curiosity under thickly dolled lashes. A perfect student of what has been taught. She has learnt well: to be wanted is to be loved. Indeed, they're the same thing, mother says. Swapping jasmine for patchouli in perfume will sweeten the skin regardless, will it not?

She is schooled to be beautiful so that in the first fresh dawn after winter 步步生蓮¹! Her mother and the nurses and the red that has begun to stain her sheets when the moon has barely risen declare that, at last, she is ready to be tasted. She will be found delicious; she will be found loveable.

She preens just as she is told, for her three-inch golden lotus feet have been perfectly wrapped in fresh silk and dabbed in sweet mandarin oil. This season of Spring is kind, and rosy, like plum wine. Her cheeks burn prettily, cosily, and the men stare like she is a budding Queen of the Night; enchanting; new.

Unspoilt.

¹Lotuses spring from her every step.



That summer, the burly soldier's yellowed teeth bite chunks out of sun-baked peach and whilst their eyes bite chunks out of her flesh. Blooms are carved from sandalwood into a litter. This sweet-smelling cage is draped in red and painted in gold, shimmering under lattices heavy with oils sweating in the midday sun

At sunrise, she holds herself straight as red cloth is wound through her hair, across her chest, tightening around her waist. Her feet are sealed in scarlet, and she looks every inch the bride.

They say she is beautiful.

In the forenoon, before the ceremony, her mother pins a phoenix coronet into her hair. It's the most expensive thing she's ever worn. "Your hips, use them to your favour. Remember, to be wanted is to be loved."

At dusk she finds that her husband must love her. Oh, how he wants her, how he exults her tiny steps, how he orders rose petal cakes. "For my flower," he whispers as he downs cherry wine from one of her lotus shoes. Then he kisses her. Hard.

At his lips' touch she blossoms for him like a flower, eyes with a doe-like curiosity that invites warmth, the sigh she had practised again and again the night before rising perfectly from between her parted lips. She looks to her mother and finds her beaming with pride.

Yet the mouth that sucked upon hers was not one of perfume as promised, but of sour, rough insistence. And her heart seems to twist. Love is warm, love is sweet, her poetry promised. Why does it hurt so?

"Try much for a son and some for a daughter," the party choruses as her husband pulls her to her aching feet, it is time.

At midnight, the happy couple is carried to their perfumed married bower. The ladies push themselves along her stomach with wrinkled hands, grasping the fabric of her robes and patting her legs so that they'll carry well. Her mother pinches the blossom's pallid cheeks, forcing hot blood to bloom across a powdered face. "Do not worry, for 赠人玫瑰, 手有余香². To be wanted is to be loved, and even you can see that he wants you."

² Flowers will always leave a part of their fragrance in the hands that bestow them.

In this late solstice heat, as she is laid down on plucked, wilting petals, she is deflowered.

Autumn. It is the Year of the Wood Monkey. Moons have risen again and again to find clean sheets, revealing the swollen expectant belly of this blossom, heavy with fruit. It is her fourth time. Her eyes are heavy with poppy juice, her limbs too heavy for dainty lotus feet. Her rosebud mouth dry from the blaze in her head. Sticky with sweat, her head pounds as heady opioid vapours hang in a poisonous haze above her bed. The ache in her legs washed away by indulgent poison, fingers white like gardenias laced across a translucent jade pipe. And her door is barred by woven-orchid lattices, slid open only by her husband's adherence to eternal marital duties. Confined here, to bed and to be bedded, the world outside can only suppose that she was beautiful, some summers ago.

This flower has not seen the sun but through filigree floral holes in her carved prison bower, and cannot move for the thorn in her side, in her belly, through the twisted soles of her feet. The wintersweet oil beside her pillow curdles as attendants pull putrid overgrown nails from aching skin. An embroidered peony is drenched in crimson and tossed to the flame. The edges char and start to tear.

Has winter always been so cold?

Ranunculus paste trembles upon cheeks bruised blue and purple. There is no flame, no warmth, no wood. The fourth babe is also a girl, and her eldest daughter screams as young feet are tenderly snapped in two.

“To be wanted is to be loved,” the faded flower upon a twisted stem repeats as she winds tight fabric around bluing toes. “And I will make them want you.”

Fingers sooty with kohl caress eyelids that were once said to hold all the warmth in the world. “I can be beautiful again, and they'll want me,” the herbarium specimen, dried and desiccated, promises as she devours morning glory, heads first, and cries out as her feet crack. Her husband is below, having a feast.

“Try much for a son and some for a daughter,” the guests cheer, and the newest flower blushes and looks up through dark lashes, creamy flesh ready to be sampled.

In this winter, the cold bites hard and the blossoms frost over. There is something brittle in the cinders of her heart. They say she was beautiful, but 花无百日红, fortune and flowers do not last forever.



Transmissions From An Odyssey

Niki Almira

My father always jokes that I'm of a distant alien species. He says that it's because I was ugly when I was born; glistening red with remnants of my mother's womb and all the wrath she suppressed corroding my veins. It showed on my face, a baby born with the features of fury unaddressed for a thousand years. It would be nice if that were true. To have your mother's wrath run laps through your bloodstream and burn its imprint on you. To be a product of your mother and therefore exist in the world to live the life she put on hold when she had you.

Once upon a time my mother chose love.

She devoured all twelve pomegranate seeds,
And one more for posterity.

Six sends the world into a drought for half the year. Thirteen and the walls won't stop whispering regrets in my ear. I wonder how my mother took the leap into a chasm she couldn't see the bottom of. Foreign, us eldest daughters, to the concept of love that makes your heart flutter; the love that welcomes you home to the rickety enclosure of your kin. Maybe my father did love my mother once, and my mother did love him even more. It must have been there at one point in time, when all the wrath



was love before it corroded itself from within. It must have been there because my mother did choose love; she chose to have me, and I wonder whether the only reason is her wish. That I would be loved eternally in compensation for her share from my father that failed to deliver.

The wrath of my mother might have made my blood run cold;

...that could be a sensible reason. That could be the reason I didn't cry as my grandfather was wheeled into the crematorium fire. My grandmother was forcefully stripped naked of her love for him, undressed for the first time after half a century with only garments from the best. They burned the intricate laces of photographs and fabric scraps of home videos to warm her bare skin, but no memory could be sacrificed to make her body stop shivering.

Her soul joined him in the pyre; maybe finally she could feel the heat.

...that could be a reason why I stood silent as my father plucked from the forbidden tree. My mother jumped into a chasm blind, and he built a lookout at the cliffside where his mistress could gaze upon the view. The lady and I shared popsicles as we looked down, bonded in the way people of similar age do; all the while I covered up father's rendezvous to my mother with lies about cigarettes and milk.

Marriages don't bind without love to tie the vow;
fathers don't return until they finish milking the cow.

Love is never warm to me, it always burns hot.

...is how I justified the one time I got together with the person I had a crush on for three years when they came to me as a rebound. They burned so hot and I wasn't burning at all, so we got together. My tongue jutted out to lick the flames, drinking it hungrily until my stomach charred.

I don't know love if it is not a fire.

...was how I approached the first crush I had in elementary, the one I chose through a game of eeny meenie miney moe during English class. The teacher was talking of Cupid like a long-lost confidante. Years later, I still choose my crushes through games of eeny meenie miney moe. I sniff the scent of burnt ashes like how wine connoisseurs pop open their nostrils for vino. I chase my crushes relentlessly, jutting out my dull matchhead, praying that one of them can make me burn.

It's easier to believe that I am of a distant alien species.

When I see someone, I don't see them as *the one*. I see them in strings of zeroes and ones. But that way I hold my tongue from the blame aimed at my father and mother, for this genetic hole

in my heart that is supposed to be warmth is all I can give out.

My mother swallowed whole twelve pomegranate seeds and planted one inside me. So that way I won't have the lost life of my mother printed on my palm, reminding me every time I hold it against someone that my purpose in life is to find someone to love.

What is there to foster from the promise of posterity
that breaking the deal would make you lose the last of your humanity?

Maybe I come from a distant planet, where its inhabitants reproduce by warming up their bodies against each other, and by that I mean hug each other and throw words of affirmation and then you get pregnant. Maybe then they co-parent but the only time feelings are involved is when they shout out how pretty, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine the other is! And so they become a family of four.

Maybe I am from the moon. Not the Earth's moon; I am too insignificant to be the only one orbiting around a someone. Maybe I am Europa. Insignificant in that I am the smallest, but significant enough to delude myself into thinking: That even with the absence of love I am still able to reflect the warmth I absorb. Europa must be like me. So severe in her disconnect from the human race, that it took Zeus being a bull to mend her wrath back into love.

Do you think being able to bounce the warmth of the Sun is enough?

The moon must be lonely.

I wonder if my mother ever felt this lonely. I would rather disgust myself with the thought that my mother and father once loved each other because to live but not love is so goddamn isolating. Do you see all those people? In love, forever secure in the engulf of each other's warmth?

Love grows posterity that always remembers a time when you exist.

If one is lost to history did they ever truly live?

I see but I do not feel.

I videre sed non sentiunt.

I write cheat sheets of how to connect with the feelings of love. I write characters in moulds of tropes to teach me how it unfolds. When they fail, I rip them apart from everything that they loved the way I was ripped apart from my mother's womb with my sack of love still stuck on the walls of her belly. Tragedies, they call them. But tragedies end with an ultimate tragic denouement. My life still goes on.

I see to feel.

I videre sentire.

I devour romantic melodramas in zero-point-five speed. Taking notes on it in the name of research, I chew the paper to mush and hope that it seeps through my teeth and into my blood. The screen zooms in on lips dancing upon each other and the background reflects my chapped ones. I pray that no one will ever have to experience grinding theirs on my asphalt.

I read cheat sheets and flip my stomach inside out to carve butterflies on its walls but they lay flat, wings ripped, refusing to take flight.

I remember the strobing lights when I was on the run. Under the lights humans were engrossed in the ritual; they lathered themselves in each other's body fluid and merged to a giant blob. When the DJ switched the tune the blob pulled me into some knotty dance sequence involving hands exploring my body, grinding hips and biting lips. The parts of me that they touched glistened with a slimy texture I couldn't shake off. My body burned, and the run to the bathroom felt like an escape from a biohazardous area. I wonder whether the acrid smell of biohazard came from inside me.

I threw up the carcasses of the butterflies I carved into myself. Someone held up my hair as I was crouched on the toilet seat and I thought: This is it, if I am able to love then this is the moment those strobing lights will stop to shine the spotlight on us. The thought made me vomit another round and her gentle hand stroked my back.

The strobing light illuminated red, green, blue.

I squinted my eyes, and the blob separated into familiar silhouettes of bodies exploring, grinding hips and biting lips. My eyes were met by a face identical to mine. They donned the shiny glow of sweat; I looked at my own skin scrubbed clean. They slammed their chapped lips to those of the girl holding up my hair. The light paused its strobe to centre in on them; my stomach rearranged. I am forever trapped outside the window looking in.

Would you be brave to experience the mythology that you could've been?

The giant blob chanted Aro.

Aro.

Aro.

Cupid wants his aro back.

Take a symbol of love and drop letters from it as an apology that I exist, with the absence of the feeling that brought me to exist. Half-bred. They hold a trial for me and have the stake ready.

I am cursed with a repulsion that I tried hard to divert with impossible illusions of love. I said *I like girls* in a world where loving a girl is unforgivable if you present as one. In this new world where loving anyone is forgivable what red herring can I use to cover up my crime?

You are not welcome in our space.

Doomed to be from the outside looking in, forever a moon reflecting the rays of love the Sun gives out in excess.

I am of a distant alien species.

Real love is warm, but as my hands inched closer to the fire I pulled away to discover frostbite. My molecules are moulded to fit the strange terrain of a different plane, and my body reacted with convulsions when the world forced upon me the image of two bodies—one of them me—merging into a creature of saliva and sweat.

You're shivering.
Is it cold?

I throw myself into the fire and the frostbite freezes me into a specular being. My mother's wrath flows through my blood and becomes my single life force even as my organs shut down, unable to sustain itself without the heat. The pomegranate seed grows to a tree where the forbidden fruit came to be. Humans loved under the canopy, and I shield them from the heat of wrath I've long familiarised myself with. I shouldered the burden of my capital punishment but in this incorporeal form the heat finally hits me. I am sent to the human race to reflect warmth to them.

I see therefore I feel.

Ideo ergo sentio.





forgetting blooms

Joy Paola

i was a child of the lake and if i close my eyes i'd
have to give you a name.
a short name, one like *grief*,
that bites,
like a parasite.

a long one, like *sadness*, that envelopes and em-
braces with a cold kiss, and endless ocean arms.
if i fade out before my time, will the lake
name me too?

will it call me *fear*, because i was so afraid of
diving in that one summer? when, after cross
country practice, they all leapt up from the boat
shed and jumped in, laughing as the shimmering
sunset splashed them silver.

or will you call me *home*,
friend,
companion, remembering the days i hid
under a tree with a composition notebook,
speaking to no one but the honking geese. shiver-
ing as my breath clouded the page, all because
my own dedication meant that much to me.

will you call me *warm*, because of the
people i walked with under the branches, making
our way around in a perfect loop?
cradling drinks from the coffee shop, sipping in
between words, affection written in lulls
and breaks of conversation. because of
the sun heating cool freshwater drip-
ping down our legs as we ascended the
paddleboard, how my life jacket felt

like a close hug.
will you call me *surprise*, *thrill*, *astonish-
ment*, even—

because of the secret party i spent so long plan-
ning for my best friend at the picnic tables,
dancing around the grass to her favourite music.
watching the sun slip down the glistening hori-
zon while we sipped ice cold pineapple and mint.
oh, but if i run from you, will you call me
abandonment?

because you miss the way i adored the trees, how
i'd escape to the lake after a long day inside, how
i'd scramble home as soon as it got dark?
will you call me betrayal, because i found some-
where else to spend my days?
because i locked my goodbyes in a heart-shaped
treasure chest and dropped them in your
silty depths, never to be uttered of while
looking you straight in the eye?
if i turn back to see the lake as the sun sets
one last time, will you call me *memory*,
because i too slipped from your mind,
just like the sleek fish that glide past your
fingers, just like the autumn breeze.

will you call me *memory*, because you too know,
there will come a peaceful day when the sun rises
and you find that you can barely even
remember me?



She's Looking For Love!

Tania Toh

Name: Dawn.

The first people who loved me chose my name. The new people after them just stuck with it though they'd say it differently. Coldly. Always loudly, faces red and contorted.

Breed: Beagle. Female. Tricoloured.

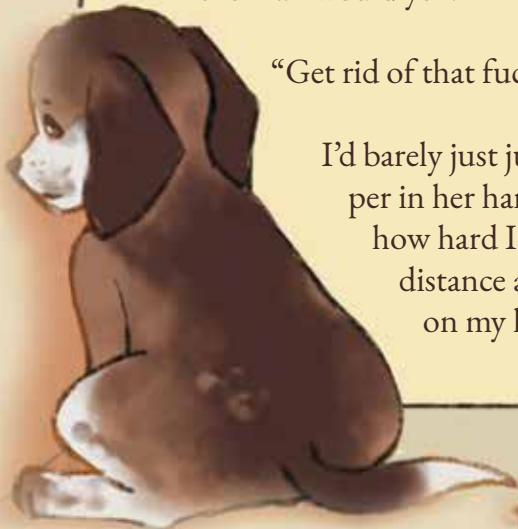
Like an afterthought comprised of leftover paints. Tricoloured, as in black and brown, and little white feet that sometimes make mud tracks against the polished, pearl tiles. That was when I would spend the afternoon digging away under the sun while the kids were at school and the adults were at work or brunch, and when they returned, I would sit meekly in my guilty corner with my tail thumping up and down and my eyes looking anywhere but into theirs. Just like that, I would give myself away, and they'd chastise me,


“Stop digging, Dawn!”

But they'd never lay a hand on me, except to scrub the dirty browns from the whites of my fur. The new family were less forgiving. My first week at their house the nerves and emotions got the better of me and I was digging again. From somewhere inside the brick and stone fortress the man would yell:

“Get rid of that fucking dog!”

I'd barely just jumped from being startled when the woman ran out with a slipper in her hand. She'd smack and smack and smack me some more no matter how hard I cried at each blow, while the man continued his tantrum some distance away. He'd throw his half-eaten apple at me, and it would hit me on my head.





I'd never dig again.

Age: Four and a half.

I don't remember my mother. After I was born, I was cleaned off by a bigger dog I couldn't see yet and would never see again, but whose nose at that moment felt right against my skin. She picked me up gently by my neck and tucked me safely into her. She curled her own body around my tiny one, so frail yet full of life to come, and she vowed that this time she'd never give me up. In the years after me, her new puppies got to stay. Loved like I had never been loved before. *I don't remember any of this.*

When I am one month old, some people come to visit. A woman speaks to the man that usually fills our food bowls up. Some kids come to the garden and scoop me up from the grass into their arms and say lovely things to me that I can't quite recall now. Another mother with her own little children to love. They've come after spending yesterday scrolling through adoption sites and advertisements, before seeing me at last on Facebook Marketplace right before dinnertime.

The little girl calls me tiny. The little boy declares that he loves me.

At three years old, they packed their bags, their lives and the whole house up to move to Sydney in the night. They haven't taken my things with theirs.

Please come back.

The next day I wake up in a new place I've never seen before. Rusting metal bars cage me in, and my tummy feels odd against the cold steel floor and the thought of this foreign hostage environment. *Where am I?*

Voices rise from inside the house, saying things like:

“What the fuck do we do with that dog?”

“You're the one who agreed to take it!”

“Why is it fat as fuck?”

Soon faces accompany those voices – one scrawny shell of a man and one hollow, always-sucking-on-a-cigarette woman. These are new people assigned to me.

Who are you?

At four-and-a-half years old, sirens shriek and wail, waking the whole suburb up. This comes after the father has kicked me for digging for rocks, and I've let out a loud cry that the neighbour overhears. I bark for the sirens to stop – this is just the kind of noise that will get me smacked again. Officers jog in and pound on the door and the house comes alive. One finds me cowering by the shoe rack and holds me close to him, taking me to the car. Then, I'm left at the shelter, with other dogs, and no one has loved me since.

But at least I'm almost five! This is the oldest I will live to; though I don't know it yet, because at approximately five years, nine weeks, and two days, they'll tell me I'm taking up too much space in the shelter.

Additional Comments: History of abuse. Afraid of intimacy. Disordered eating.

For a while, I wasn't allowed to eat anymore. They said I was too fat. But I could never help myself; I'd beg for crumbs off the table when they sat and ate their dinner, they'd smack me and yell at me and call me "Piece a Shit," really loudly again, while bits of spit would fly out of their gaping downturned mouths.

Even then, I never learned; I never listened. Maybe that's why I was always talking to the moon and making friends with the garden rocks. I was just looking for love.

When I'm five years, nine weeks and two days old in the doctor's office, they think about how soft my fur feels under their gloved latex, and how quick and short my breaths come, one after the other, as they hold me down and draw the needle close. They hear the blood rushing in my flopped-over ears and my heart racing against my ribcage as I realise that something has gone horribly wrong. I am scared to close my eyes.

One of them tears up, looking away – she cares.

That's all I ever wanted.

Yellow Moon

Joyce Li

When Samuel used to think of autumn, he would think of leaves turning russet scarlet, black birds weaving through the pallid skies in Chaozhou as they departed for the winter. He would think of the moon, this universal constant that hung above his head like a golden yolk. Now, standing in the kitchen where decades of family dinners have culminated in the musky smell of ginger, Samuel thinks of his mother.

Tonight, she has insisted, yet again, on making Mid-Autumn Moon Festival mooncakes: round pastries stamped with Chinese characters to denote symbols of fortune and prosperity. The familiarity of the recipe is engraved into the intricate lines on the backs of her hands and the crow's feet nestled around her eyes. The homemade mooncakes reminds Samuel of chilly nights and hand-knitted scarves, the eagerness with which he used to reach for her perfectly partitioned pastries. Of course, he is eager to help.

He realises she has prepared well in advance when she retrieves the container of salted egg yolks from the fridge. Samuel can imagine her moving about the kitchen, preparing the yolks like she did so many times before: rinsing the raw egg yolks, dipping them into baijiu, and drumming her fingers against the counter while they bake. He easily falls back into his old role, swiftly kneading the dough for the mooncake skin. At one stage, he senses her familiar eagle-eyed gaze. It is fleeting, its sharpness dulled by age. Still, he is amused at the thought of her glancing over her shoulder to check whether he is doing things correctly. Samuel turns his attention to the sweet lotus seed paste and apportions it into round clay mounds. Soon, he has a tray of them ready to go, small, perfect moons ripe for pressing beneath the weight of warm palms.

Assembling mooncakes requires patience. They envelope the yolks within lotus seed paste, then encase it within a thin layer of sugar-brown dough. A lever-like mould is used to press the pastries into shape for baking. In the past, it was not uncommon for Samuel to disfigure his first mooncake, but many autumns have passed since his mother needed to worry about his technique. He has cultivated his art in making mooncakes, the work of an alumnus who has learnt much from his teacher. There is no need for her further prompting a quick-witted quip or the occasional sigh. The absence of her voice is a hallmark reminder of the confidence that she has in him. There is no more standing in a school

uniform, with the cotton sleeves carelessly rolled up to his elbows, or the faded woolly scarf itching at his neck.

The pair work comfortably in silence. His mother hunches over her mooncakes; the slight tremor in her hands makes her fingers resemble butterfly wings beating beneath the harsh fluorescent lights. He watches in admiration, then confusion, as she methodically wraps the yolk in the dough, and then places it in the lotus seed paste.

“Ma, you’re doing it wrong.”

His mother’s hands, ancient masters of skill and refinement, pause in mid-air.

“Here,” he explains, stepping forward. “You put the paste *before* the dough, remember?”

He does not have the heart to tell her that this was what she used to always remind him about, that this used to be *his* mistake and not hers.

The woman stares blankly at him. For a moment in Samuel’s mind, he is no longer in the kitchen but in the dining room with his Chinese relatives. He sees himself as a seven-year-old. His clumsy fingers use the chopsticks in a knife-like action to fossick for food. He goes in once, twice, and with each primitive stab, his mother winces. Samuel sees himself as a former twelve-year-old making mooncakes, dropping one of the precious salted yolks on the tiled floor. His smile sags down beneath the weight of her rebuke, which speaks of the importance in being prudent and diligent. In his memory, he is nodding profusely, determined to not repeat the same mistake. Then Samuel sees himself leaving for university. On the morning that he is supposed to catch the plane, his mother delays him by double-checking whether he packed everything required. Their last half an hour before his departure is spent arguing about whether he should bring this not that, tactfully dancing around their more pressing debate: whether his chosen discipline was the correct choice. When she tries to give him something to ‘eat on the way’ in the cab, Samuel takes one glance at the worn, plastic lunchbox, notices something in the taxi-driver’s expression, and snaps at his mother that he is running late. The guilt gnaws at his stomach long after he arrives at the gate, half an hour early.

It feels like that was only yesterday. The stiffness in his mother’s lower lip and harshness of her frown has long faded. Is it true that as humans age, they grow closer to the ground? Even in class, while he drew curves and mapped out the steep inclines of hyperbolas, how did he never notice the deepening arch of his mother’s back? The lines slowly etched into the corners of her mouth?



Samuel coughs and eases into his new role, one where he is the adult, and his mother is the child.

“Ma, go make the tea,” he instructs gently.

She nods and slowly retreats from her position near the counter. When she is not looking, he hurriedly discards the ruined mooncake and prays she will not notice.

He spends the next half an hour completing the rest of the mooncakes. His mother watches him from the other countertop. After this is all over, he will help her clean up the table. It is covered with teacups and the opened box of mooncakes he recently bought from the Chinese grocer. Clearly, she does not realise how much she used to complain about their sweetness. In fact, she has already started to eat one. Samuel grimaces when he notices how she slices the mooncake into even halves, only to carefully prod and gouge out the filling. He blames it on the shakiness of her hands. When she lifts her miniscule plastic fork, the two prongs momentarily resemble children’s chopsticks or the forked tongue of a snake, a homage to her acidic comments that once corroded his peace. Then Samuel blinks. The illusion dissipates. Time has left nothing behind but his mother eating mooncake.

When his mother eventually withdraws from the kitchen, Samuel realises that she has set aside exactly one half of her mooncake for him. He hesitates, surprised she even remembered. There was a time, so very long ago, when such rationing was necessary. Now, he smiles faintly and lifts her plate, adding it to his list of things to carry into the living room.

The kettle behind him sounds. Samuel turns to check that the oolong tea is ready for serving.

He has learnt with experience that mooncakes and tea always go hand in hand.

Everything feels sweeter having tasted the bitterness.



100 100



Making me hurl every inch of my body that denies itself.

Snug beong-geojimoja swaddles my shouting cultural ignorance;
Snug bucket hat sheathes my pestering denials of identity;

Making me tear open my stigmas and let them drip away.

Lovingly STRAY KIDS hides away the sobs;
Lovingly Silverchair disguises the weeping;

Making me scream out my heart and let it beat with honesty.

Warm sebae seizes its moment to stand out;
Warm hug snatches its minute to emerge;

Making me gently caress the hidden desires that I let lay dormant.

Miyeokguk, meat pies, samgye-tang, chicken soup,
Hanbok, sunnies, beong-geojimoja, bucket hat,

Duality's pots broil and seethe begging to pick just one.

K-pop, INXS, STRAY KIDS, Silverchair,
Greetings, screams, sebae, hug.

I blow on the steam and then take from two.

100 100

100 100



100 100



Comfort Food

Hannah Cheah

I remember being fifteen, body aching and brain sluggish from another day of school with all the drama that comes with being fifteen. I walked through the front door and was greeted by wafts of garlic and onions sauteing, and a pot of water bubbling in the kitchen soon to be turned into spaghetti bolognese. The smells of my childhood home were always tantalising previews of what I would taste later that evening: the textured sauce of salty minced beef, shredded carrots and zucchinis, acidic tomatoes, umami from the single anchovy mashed into the sauce, and cracked black pepper to finish. I would take some the next day to school. We found a loophole in the ‘no homemade hot-food’ rule by putting the leftover bolognese sauce between two slices of bread to have as a sandwich.

Eighteen brought with it newfound independence and freedom. No longer was I confined to the routine of school, extracurriculars, homework. I spent the days at college studying with friends and working at the café on campus where I picked up shifts as a barista. And still after a long day, I would open the front door to the crackling of spices in a frying pan; wafts of a mixture of clove, coriander seed, turmeric, mustard seeds, and dried chilli would welcome me home. The spices were the perfect base to add finely sliced cabbage to, turning into a bright yellow dish affectionately referred to as “yellow

cabbage” to have alongside Mum’s homemade butter chicken. The rice cooker whistling in the corner of the kitchen signalled that dinner was almost ready. There was familiarity in the routine of setting the table for four and serving the rice; a third of a cup for Mum and myself, and two heaped scoops for Dad and Beth; chilled water to combat the heat and humidity of equatorial living, and then we were ready to eat.

The small apartment at the top of two flights of stairs was just the right size for our family of four. We fit many more than four around our dinner table though, sharing food and stories with friends and family from other cities, states, and countries around the world. We have a friend, Chris, from England who was Dad’s apprentice for a couple of years. Whenever he came for dinner, Mum would make sure to cook a meal that required a knife and fork so Chris could have a reminder of home back in England, while in Malaysia.

Eating in groups has always been so much a part of my life, that when I cook for one and eat by myself, the experience is incomplete. Even the Malaysian brand of two-minute noodles cooked up in my college dorm room — no matter how much they tasted of home — I found the quietness of slurping them by myself, deafening.

Up the hill in Randwick there is a café-bakery on High Street called 22 Grams. I assume that the name comes from the weight of their dose of coffee grounds to make an espresso shot. The coffee is particularly good as they roast their own beans on site. Walking into the café, you're immediately greeted with the smell of fresh bread baking and coffee brewing. As you approach the counter, the cabinet of fresh pastries demands your attention, filled with a wide variety of baked goods from savoury cheese and spinach croissants to sweet spiced apple and fig muffins. My friend Grace and I agree that the almond croissants here are the best in Sydney. Many early mornings have been spent at cafes from the city to the beach in search of the perfect almond croissant. None can beat these flaky buttery layers of pastry, the creamy almond custard filling, topped with a crispy almond sugar topping. We make an effort to find any opportunity to go and share one. There is a murmur of conversation among the people chatting in the café, but the prominent sounds are that of the baristas making coffee. The light tap of the coffee basket as the used grounds from the previous espresso



shot are discarded, the whirring of the grinder as a new dose is dispensed, the hiss of the steaming wand frothing the milk (dairy and alternative) to a smooth microfoam and the clink of ceramic cups meeting saucers as the coffee is served up.

Grace asked me once if there was coffee culture in Malaysia. The question took me by surprise. I told her that what we would call “coffee shops” were very different to what “coffee shops” are in Malaysia.

There's something comforting about the chaos of a hawker stall: The roar of the gas burners, the clanging of cooks scraping their woks, the chatter, with the yelling of “*kopi bing satu*” over the top of the throng, the aroma of sesame oil, ginger, and chilli fill the air. The hawker stall in Brickfields holds particularly fond memories. Most weeks of Year 12, my friend Vivian and I would have lunch there at least once. The regular orders were: Char Koay Teow, Pork Noodle Soup, Pan Mee, and Hainanese Chicken Rice. The Pork Noodle Soup stall is a particularly famous one. ‘Peter’s Pork Noodles’ reads the Perspex sign above the stove. Peter had been cooking pork noodles in this stall for over 20 years. Everyone in Kuala Lumpur who ate pork had heard of his noodle shop. When eating Pan Mee, we had to be careful to ask for the chilli to be on the side. They would give us a little plastic side dish heaped with roasted dried chilli. If you forgot to mention this when ordering, your bowl of noodles would have a heaping pile of dried chilli in one corner, threatening to burn every last tastebud off your tongue. The question at the end of a meal was always whether you were sweating because of the roasted chilli oil you added to your food, the general humidity of Kuala

Lumpur, or the fact that you were sitting next to the biggest gas burner in the hawker stall.

Being nineteen and moving out of home for the first time in 2020 did not particularly feel like good timing. Having been in university accommodation for all of five weeks, suddenly we were locked in with nowhere else to go. With international borders closed, I was stuck in a college with no way to leave. My friend, Clarity, who grew up in Brisbane was in a similar position. Her parents moved to Australia from China before she was born and she grew up Asian in an Australian environment. My parents had moved to Malaysia just after I was born, so I was a half Malaysian-Australian in an Asian environment. The first thing that we bonded over was food. Both being young and homesick we ended up ordering in a wide variety of Asian food in order to cope.

She introduced me to the *chirashidon*, a Japanese rice bowl with sashimi on top. It remains one of my favourite Japanese meals to this day. The act of eating the *chirashidon* is almost a ritual:

placing a small amount of wasabi on a piece of sashimi, gently picking up the sashimi with the chopsticks and dipping it in a small amount of soy sauce and eating it in one bite. A mouthful of white rice follows. In between types of fishes, the pickled ginger acts as a palate cleanser, preparing the tastebuds for the new flavours to come. Many nights were spent sitting on the floor of our college common room eating *chirashidon* or pho.

I still eat pho the way that she taught me to: add the bean sprouts, mint, and coriander early so that they begin to cook in the steaming soup; drizzle in the hoisin and chilli sauces to the broth to enhance the flavour; wait to squeeze in the lemon slice until you have less than half the soup left so that you have a refreshing change towards the end. The slurping of noodles to fill our hungry stomachs and hearts marked many nights of our two years living in student accommodation.

Moving into a share house did not cure my homesickness. I did, however, find friends who were eager to join me in endeavours to recreate the dishes that I grew up eating. My friend, Howie, lived down the road from me and enjoyed adventurous cooking. Growing up in the country, he had always been curious about food from beyond his little part of the world. Living on campus with people from all over the planet, there were many opportunities to find other people like myself who were interested in international food. There was a particular time we had a food adventure field day. We drove through the city and out the other side to the Sydney Fish Markets where we found and bought a whole red snapper. While we waited for the fish to be cleaned and scaled we sampled some fresh oysters that could only be



described as tasting like the ocean itself. On the way home we stopped for some doughnuts from a Redfern bakery that had unique flavours such as lemon merengue pie and pistachio matcha. Once we got home, the real challenge started: Recreating a Hong Kong Cantonese style steamed whole fish. The familiar fragrance of ginger, spring onions, and sesame soon filled my kitchen as we prepared all the ingredients to top the fish and cook the sauce. Half an hour later, a gorgeous, sweet, steaming fish emerged from the pan infused with ginger, spring onions, sesame, and soy sauce. The two of us ate more than half the fish with steamed rice and some stir-fried vegetables in one sitting.

The very idea of home is a funny one. In some sense, home is now the strange flat with skylights instead of windows that I share with two others. The responsibility for creating the experiences that make a home now falls on me. There are new sounds and smells that characterise my home. The bubbling of the electric kettle boiling to make the third pot of tea for the day. The low hum of the oven accompanied by the sweet aroma of sugar and spices as chai chocolate chip cookies bake. The bubbling of a pot of pasta boiling as I prepare rigatoni with Sasha using a jar of pre-made pesto and a tub of bocconcini “milk cherries”. The simple and cheap meal gives us glimpses of home even as we try to forge our own belonging in the new city we live in.

The fourth year of living in Sydney brings with it the strange experience of being twenty-two. I cook with my friends from university and we pretend to be real adults. There’s something strange about two anxious souls taking

comfort in the food that we prepare and eat. It reminds us that we’re here and still living.

I think the sharing of food is a love language. I go over to Samuel’s share house or sometimes he comes to mine and I’ll cook lunch or dinner from whatever I can find in the pantry. Sometimes it’s pasta, sometimes it’s noodle soup with the precious noodles that I pack in my suitcase when I come back to Sydney after my most recent trip to Kuala Lumpur. We have a routine and understanding: I’ll cook and Samuel will wash up afterwards. One day I go over to his place and we cook my mum’s spaghetti bolognese. We sauté the onions and garlic, adding in the tomato paste, anchovy, and Worcestershire sauce. We fry the beef mince before adding in the passata and herbs. We take care to not overcook the pasta and top it off with a healthy loading of cheese. It doesn’t taste quite the same as when she makes it, but just for a moment, we can imagine that we’re kids again as the flavours and fragrances of childhood hold us suspended in time.





Red Is My Blood, White Is My Bone

Jocelyn Lim

One Friday morning, I stood in my class critique session as we discussed my amazing Fine Arts peers' works. The lines and rows of colourful paintings on classic canvas or off-white paper or metal or glass decorated the room from wall to wall, making the messy painting room look almost like an amateur gallery. As our group moved through the room, nodding at the artists' statements and presentation, we stopped at a Chinese student's painting collection. At first glance, I could tell it was a representation of cultural identity – the sharp monolid eyes on the porcelain pale face and carmine background. I was suddenly reminded of a Sri Lankan friend of

mine who did a charcoal and ink drawing of a collage with masks, dancers and peacock feathers for a studio

class. In that same class, a Japanese friend made a kimono with found fabric, painted and dyed with various patterns. The works were beyond beautiful, so deeply personal and yet it captured the struggle of a whole mass of people born bound under the same borders of land. I felt nothing but utter appreciation for their artistry, how intricately they shared this secret understanding that seemed to elude me entirely.

I had never understood patriotism – that pang of belonging to a limited territorial space that defined where you came from and what stereotypes you'll live with. It seemed odd to me, even as a child, that where I came from, what colour my skin was, how my eyes looked, and my hair type mattered at all.

When my family moved to Australia in 2019, I sat on the plane trying not to cry. I was leaving behind the best friends whom I had known since I was five, and I worried I would make no friends in high school. But that didn't happen; in fact, my friend group was probably the largest one in my year with over twenty people. They drifted to separate corners as time passed by, forming their own countries, including myself.

My first complaint when I moved was the jarring gap between our currencies; the way a bottle of supermarket over-sweetened tea was five times

the price of what it would be in Jakarta. That was my first wave of homesickness, a yearning for the cheap convenient stores that overpopulated every suburb on my rocky-road streets. Street food stalls saturated every corner of busy cities, where a brown-paper wrapped portion of fried rice, topped with chilli and egg in generous amounts, cost little under two Australian dollars. Maybe there were questionable hygiene practices, with their murky water buckets and rusty table legs, and street cats purring up around your chair begging for a piece of chicken. But I've never felt sick having their food and if you were a local, you would know these stained-shirt men in bucket hats and fanny-packs full of paper cash, taking no card, made the best food you could find. This national poison coursing through our food was called 'authenticity', the toxic we had been born to tolerate. Snakes don't die from their own venom. It was why I was dumbfounded when my mother told me my New Zealander uncle suffered a stomach ache during his first visit to Jakarta after his first round of street food.

My Yi-yi (one of my mother's older sisters) moved to New Zealand long before I was born and married a Māori man. When he visited for the first time, I was wide-eyed over the sight of such a big man, standing so tall he could easily touch the ceilings of my house without getting on a chair. Something like the giants in those folktales my other

Yi-yi told me, as I laid my head on her lap on the way to her physical therapy for her paralysis. The green ogre *Buto Ijo* came to mind. The powerful giant who gave the barren woman cucumber seeds to grow a child; with the condition that the child must be returned to him on

her seventeenth birthday. I was intimidated and hid, in the way shy children hid behind their parent's legs, tugging at their pants as they peeked. But he was a nice man and the first English-language native I'd spoken to. I was most fascinated by his accent, the way each word rolled down his tongue as naturally as the rhythm of breathing. A fluency I had only known to mimic based off the American cartoon channels my cabled television offered. Was there a way to perfect my speech in the way my uncle spoke?

I wouldn't say I wanted to be Caucasian, but I was surrounded by it, almost encouraged to want it. The girls on my Instagram feed had golden blonde hair and ocean blue eyes, the actors on television, popstars and celebrities too. I didn't want to be white, but I dyed my hair with silver stripes and when the cool metallic colour washed off in a fortnight, I was left with blonde streaks. It felt almost insulting since I was halfway there, I was pale enough, yet it was still a different 'whiteness'. Staring at the mirror, I didn't recognise who was looking back. A cross-nationed zebra with no specific home. Yet still, a creature of blood-red flesh and ivory-white bones.

I used to be part of my middle school choir, and I would sing a different national song every first Monday of the month, alongside the national anthem that was impossible to forget. Students of every grade, from first primary to senior twelfth would line up in order under the humid tropical sun of the sport's quad. Each class separated into two rows for girls and boys arranged from shortest to tallest, with their class president on the far right. Each class was a small country too; obeying the command as the presidents set them to resting

position, then straight, then bowing, arms tucked behind their backs in silence. I used to be part of my class's country, but after joining choir we had a whole section in the farthest right, and I stood singing in the soprano's section. Losing a year group, the age and year label dissolved into a mass built of stronger lungs and fluid vocal cords.

"Merah darahku, putih tulanku," was the first line of "Kebyar Kebyar" by Gombloh, a patriotic song we often sang during flag ceremonies in Indonesia. It translates to "Red is my blood, white is my bone"; a metaphor for the colours of our flag. But why did that stand for Indonesia? "Don't all humans have the same red blood and white bones?" I asked myself as the lyrics went by and I hit the higher note. There was another song I remembered especially, *"Mengheningkan Cipta"* where the crowd of students and teachers are commanded by the 'Salutations Officer', typically the highest year group's class president, to bow their head down in memorial of all the heroes fallen for our freedom. The song was slower than the usual upbeat march of the national Indonesian 'red blood' rhythm, it was almost sad. Though I understood every word of the lyrics, I couldn't sympathise with those decade-old losses.

But what I did feel was when, at the tender age of five, my Kuku (my dad's sister) took me to a shopping centre to do some Chinese New Year shopping. The area where my Popo and Kung-kung (my dad's parents) lived was where dark-skinned, Javanese people were most populous. The suburb with high crime rates and tattooed thugs leaning against neighbourhood walls with smoke dancing out their lips. As a family of thin-eyed Chinese-Indonesians, we widened our eyes as far as we could

and slipped through the automated glass doors quietly. As we stood still on the escalator taking us up, Kuku pulled me close and whispered, *"If they ask where you're from, tell them you're from Bandung."* I nodded but didn't understand why at the time.

11 years prior, in 1998, my father sped through traffic with a heavy friend on his tiny motorcycle on the way home from university. His friend had the same milky complexion and squinting eyes. The professor had urgently dismissed their exam period to send them all home due to the political uprising as our military-focused second president fell out of his position. The blue afternoon streets were streaked with flames, the scent of roasting rubber and metal stung his nose as the adrenaline forced his eyes open against the wind. Screams rang out the ragged street as rows of forcefully undressed Chinese women were defiled by military soldiers with buzz cuts. Heads of Chinese men rolled down the street in bloody trails. The same blood-red neck stumps and ivory-white bones protruding from the cut. He was being chased by a mob of dark-skinned men with flames blaring at the tip of their wooden sticks, vicious as wild cats with gleaming eyes.

Meanwhile, an hour away in the small neighbourhood alleyways my grandparents called home, a group of unruly, paranoid so-called 'pure Indonesian' men were marching and knocking house after house. Equipped with shovels, garden forks and wooden bats, they asked to see who lived in these houses; to see if anyone was porcelain pale with monolid. And only then did I comprehend what Kuku meant – what

she was trying to say was, “*Don’t tell them you’re Chinese, it’s dangerous,*” because she saw, she heard, the voice at the door as my sun-kissed grandparents answered with wide open eyes while she hid far back in the storage under a pile of dusty unused furniture, peaking through the tiny window slit, trembling more at the sight of the darkness of their skin than the darkness of the unlit room.

This was why when my cousin married the tan Balinese man, my dad smiled sheepishly as he spoke to my Ah-ma (my mother’s mother), “It’s a shame he’s not Chinese.”

A Freudian slip of fear.

It was hard not to hate my country, for all the xenophobia, racism, misogyny, or religious discrimination, for their close-minded unity. *The violence, the violence, the violence.*

Yet nothing brings me more joy than seeing another Indonesian movie make it onto Netflix. How my entire family circles around the screen with curious smiles asking, “Is it Indo? Is it Indo?” and how we all agree it should be watched together. At dinner time, we sit together on our couch with Indonesian-style stir fry and the rice we always had for dinner, chewing silently, eyes off the subtitles. Nothing brought me more joy than when

we open the kitchen cabinet and take out a bag of Indonesian chips we saved from our yearly home visits, savouring them, chip by chip, like edible gold. Nothing brought me more joy than watching NIKI, the Indonesian pop singer, make it to the top Spotify charts and movie albums. Nothing brought me more joy than catching Indonesian words spoken in public by strangers I don’t know.

“*Mengharumkan nama bangsa*” means “to make our nation fragrant.”

If there was anything I could do for Indonesia, I want to make it fragrant – to be an artist or writer who spoke fluent literature and artistic genius, with “Indonesian” in the first line of my Wikipedia page. I want the fellow Indonesians, here and there, and everywhere else in this world, to feel that hot pang of pride in their chest and smile widely as they proudly claim, “She is Indonesian [just like me].”

I am Indonesian, red is my blood, white is my bone.

I hope I can say I am proud of that someday.





Advice For The Living, From Dead Girl.

Inayat Juno Mander

PRE-DRINKS

Q | Heya, Dead Girl! Love your column, your advice is always soooo good, so I thought I'd ask you. I have a friend who's throwing a massive rager this Saturday, and debating who should host the prep party before hers. Candace has the nicest bathroom, but Lickory's parents leave their drinks out in an unlocked cabinet, but I have the most make-up and the cutest clothes so if they wanna borrow them I think they should come to mine. So, who would you recommend take charge for pre? Also do you have any easy pre-party cocktail recipe recs? Thanks in advance!

A | The slide of girl body across girl body. Flighty beings passing each other in a hazy rush of thrown clothes and mascara. Every girl in this room carries themselves with the relaxed ease of someone getting ready to put on a familiar performance. Experimentation from younger years becomes familiar routine, until the day we grow

bored of this particular role and its lines. Even then, there's the buzz of excitement under our thin skins. We are young and the now feels like a forever. Blush for one, big lashes for the other. In the mirror, I do my eyeliner thick and black. The bathroom I'm in now was not always familiar to me. The first time, I'd fumbled around it, embarrassed, but with frequent visits her place became a little bit more mine. I remember it's details well now. Where the birth control pills are kept, and the painkillers, and the tampons. In plastic cups, we pour out lemonade and vodka. Cheap and easy. She hands me hers when I ask for one, goes to the kitchen to make herself another. I'm always careful with my lipstick stains on cups. I place it right over hers.

Dead Girl's Advice: Fight for what you want, but drinks always taste better from a friend.



BONFIRE

Q | Whatsuppp Dead Girl, the boys put me in charge of the bonfire at the Montgoms' beach party next week, but I have like, no idea how to make a bonfire. Can't swap jobs with the guys coz I have no money for drinks and I sure as hell ain't stayin' sober to be DD. Got any advice on how to make a big ass fire and not die? No offense.

A | The details of the car ride there are forgotten in the hoots and chatter. We all know when we've arrived. From a distance, the glow is soft. But when we're tromping down towards the party, we can feel the heat simmer against our skin. Almost a threat. Nervous sweat preluding sweat. From the dancing and the fire and the summer to come. The drinks come from coolers, but by the time they reach our hands they are warm with body heat and the fire. Someone paranoid vaguely mentions the dangers of having a bonfire in the middle of the woods. But their friend tells them to stop being a baby, throws in a few large logs, pre-cut and prepared. Douses the base of the fire in kerosene. The flames at the base flicker, then grow when they realize they are being fed, sparks reaching towards the burning stars in the sky. There is something cosmogonic beginning to alight in the center of the dancing throng and it makes us party harder. There is something alight in my center when I look at her and it makes me drink more.

Dead Girl's Advice: Wood and fuel and hope and pray.

TOUCH

Q | Ok, so here me out Dead Girl. Last week I hung out with this really cute guy from my science class. We've hung out a bunch of times and he's always been really nice but this time something was... different? He was way nicer, opening doors and paying for stuff. More playful than usual, and you should've seen the way he looked at me. He was also wayyy more touchy. Like moving my hair out of my face and linking arms while we walked. He even held my hand on the way home! I swear he wanted to kiss me before he left but he didn't, and ever since then he's been avoiding me. Should I ask him why he's playing hot and cold with me, or am I just reading way too much into innocent touches? It's all I've been thinking about recently, please give me some advice so I know what to do.

A | The music goes all the way up, and the wild dancing starts. Bodies against bodies, boys with girls, thin sheens of sweat reflecting the strong firelight. At some point in the night, she comes back to me and we're dancing. Her warm skin against mine, the wild thump of my heart-beat, blood rushing to my face. She's my best friend, so I know about her idle crushes, the boys she's kissed, the ones she's wanted to fuck, the one she took in the backseat of his car an hour ago. But her chest is against my back, her breath against my ear, her hands burning marks into my waist. She's playing a cruel game, but I let her.

Dead Girl's Advice: Speaking breaks illusions, do you really want the truth?

ADRENALINE

Q | Hey Dead Girl, need some advice. Ages ago me and a bunch of my buddies went skydiving and it just lit something in me, I got hooked on the adrenaline rush. So I picked up a bunch of stuff, recently bought a dirt bike off a buddy of mine. Took it for a spin. Got hooked immediately. I've always been a safe driver but it's different with the bike—the rush is crazy good, and a few risks never killed anyone, but my parents have started getting really stressed. They're always on my ass about it and are even talking about confiscating it. Me and a buncha biking friends have a comp coming up too, how do I get them to chill out and stop being so intense so I can go?

A | At the end of the night, we all clamber towards the same big truck. The boy at the wheel is clearly a little tipsy, but she climbs in, so I do too. We're driving a little too fast with the windows down and the wind in our hair, screaming along poorly to late night hits on the radio. She looks at me and grins when our song comes on. Those green eyes make a thrill run down my spine. She takes my hand at the chorus. My voice grows hoarse as it struggles to make space for my heart. Everything is too much and too fast, but it feels good. The way my stomach flips and my organs swerve wildly, the way my lungs compress on themselves as my ribs crash downwards in a surprised exhale. It's because I am feeling like this that I don't notice. I see her brows furrow and then her eyes widen, and then the car is wrapping itself around a tree. The iron crumpling, the glass shattering, my heart seizing, and her scream.

Dead Girl's Advice: There are things worth dying for. Even now you would have fol-

lowed her in. Choices made for my love, to the end.

BLOOD

Q | Dead Girl, are you even real? Do you feel? Do you bleed?

A | Red is a warm colour, and it is warm everywhere on the tarmac. She is lying near me. I'm reaching for her, and I think she is reaching for me. Everything hurts in a faraway sort of way, and I can't feel her, but her warmth is seeping into my shirt, coating my fingertips.

Dead Girl's Advice: Everyone knows warmth.

GASOLINE

Q | Oh my god, Dead Girl I JUST got this brand new car for my birthday and it's literally the coolest thing ever, but like paying for it is sooo expensive and I'm literally scraping to make Rego, and don't even get me started on how much gas costs, fuel prices these days are stupid insane. And inflation?!! Do you think I should not use my car for a while? But like, ugh, I cannot take fucking public transport EVER again. Help me Dead Girl!?

A | My head hurts, and there's a strong smell coming from the car. "Is that gasoline I smell?" It's a quote from her favorite movie. I remember it because even now I want to see things through the lens of her. Things are always better that way. Nothing is good about this, but my fingertips are almost brushing



against hers.

Dead Girl's Advice: I make my choice and I die with it.

FIRE

Q | Confession time Dead Girl. I know you aren't what you say you are. Everyone thinks you're so nice and helpful, but I know better. Call me ASAP, or I'll burn the place on 21st and 6th down. Talk to you soon Dead Girl.

A | Something sparks. A warm light illuminates her. I can't see her face, so I don't know if she's alive. I need to know. I try to get up, but my body won't respond. I wish I'd told her to get out, I wished I'd made her stay with me instead, I wish I'd told her the truth about what I felt, back when I was so sure I still had time. I make one last desperate move as the small engine spark becomes something bigger, becomes a real regret. I manage to at least wrap my hand around hers. Everything is so warm, but I feel so cold.

Dead Girl's Advice: I know fire better than you, and I know loss better than you, too. Switchboard Operator 87 in Coleeon, to STD Call 133.56.78 Area Code 83. Near 14th and 4th. Don't threaten Dead Girls, they've got nothing to lose.

DON'T TAKE ADVICE FROM THE COLD.

Q | Hey Dead Girl, heard this is your last article for this magazine. You have no idea how sad I am to hear that; I've been reading this magazine for years and you quickly became one of my favourite writers. I have no

idea what I'm going to do without your advice every month. Please update us if you start another advice column somewhere else. Gonna miss reading you here, but still NEED your advice. Please don't stop writing!

A | Cold, cold, cold, even as the world around me burns. I wonder if I'm going to hell. People always say girls like me go to hell. I hope she isn't there too, I hope she follows. Then I stop thinking, or hoping, or feeling anything at all. She's all alone now. I'm sorry.

Dead Girl's Advice: I'm sorry.

NOTHING IS WARM ENOUGH TO KEEP OUT DEATH, EXCEPT LIFE, AND YOU.

Q | Thanks for everything Dead Girl, it's been a good run. Any last piece of life advice for your loyal readers before we say farewell forever? — Much love, your editor.

A | Everything here is dark and foggy and cold and naturally, dead. I'm a little warmer than the other's though. She isn't here. I've looked everywhere. She's gone. But the memories of her keep me warm, and I imagine what it's like for her back where she is. I hope it is good. I hope I get the chance to hear all about it one day. My heart doesn't beat. But it feels, and it hopes.

Dead Girl's Advice: Keep the memories forever. Even after all the pain, they still glow warm.





Pocket

Charlotte Wang



In this
small
sacred
space
under my covers

Anything is possible

In the early hours of the morning
The memory of being with you
just a few days ago
still fresh

The day not having shaped
my mood and thoughts

No chance for doubt to creep through

In this
little pocket
of the
day
week
month
year

In this passing frame of my life

I love you
And you love me too.



Learn By Touch

Maya Alborz

It was a fire that rain couldn't put out. The description of the thing had come in through Ben's work email: some lady had found it in her backyard during a crazy downpour. She'd peered out of her back window and seen a glowing yellow and orange flower, pulsating under the rain for hours. What *do* you do when you spot a real alien, a bizarre natural anomaly? You call, Ben thought, those heartless, shadowy Government Scientists who would've ripped Stitch open without a thought for Lilo. The type who stalked the compound's hallways, speedwalking to their next Important Destination, clipboards in hand.

Ben personally thought it might be something radioactive, something cancerous. The orange

glow of it seemed unnatural, flickering against the compound's blue-white walls. But Jerry had told him to not be ridiculous and do his job. *Do your job!* If it was in a glass box with fifty cameras pointed at it, what the hell did they need a guard for?

But he stood there, eyes trained on the fire, thinking about how hot and humid it had been recently, the air refracting unsteadily, making everything wobble. Maybe this was why: this new resilient type of fire, a novel type of burning that couldn't be suffocated, a new plague to really cement 2024 as the year of the apocalypse.



Ben's phone buzzed discreetly in his pocket. He wasn't supposed to have it on during his shifts, but over the last year he'd mastered the art of checking and responding to messages without being Seen by any Serious Persons striding past, any one of them (he was sure) powerful enough to fire him on the spot if they wanted. *Benny, dad cancelled tomorrow he has work. You're with me this weekend. We'll do something fun. Love you, take care x.*

Someone else was approaching, quickly, in clacking heels. He slipped his phone into his pocket and snapped his gaze back onto the fire. The Scientist (he assumed) rounded a corner and was gone. He looked down at his shoes.

Cancelled again. It'd been three months that his dad had been at his new place and he hadn't even seen it yet. Without Ben meaning to, his brain rifled through the events of the past three months. He'd only gotten two credits and a pass last term. Was that why? A faint memory of his dad coming into his room and seeing him on his phone, his untouched textbooks piled on his desk, made his face burn.

And his girlfriend had dumped him. Well, not dumped exactly. More of a passive ghosting. His dad had stopped asking about Jessica ages ago anyway, didn't seem impressed by her to begin with. And Ben had started breaking out a little around his chin. Maybe his dad just didn't want a pimply loser slouching around the new place.

Or maybe what happened last year really *was* a big deal.

His Mum had spent so long with him afterwards, explaining how breaking a bone is one of the most painful things a human can experience, and that *anyone* would cry, even Dad himself.

But you couldn't forget the look on his face, the way he joked about it with the other dads, his coldness with you. Maybe this had been the last straw in your strained relationship with him.

Something crackled. Ben looked back up and noticed the fire had morphed, somewhat, into a rounded heart. It was strange, really, looking at fire completely unattached to a log or a match or... anything. It just sat there with the point of the heart resting on the floor like a foot, the body facing Ben directly, almost beating as it flickered. This really was bizarre. He'd better stop messing around and actually do his job. There were still (another sly check of his phone) four hours until the overnight guy took over. God, his attention span was completely shot. After work he'd lock himself in his room, skip dinner, and just start his commerce assignment.

No more excuses.

"Shh..." He stopped again and sharpened his focus. The sound seemed to come from the fire. "Shh..." There it was again, a soft whisper. Ben's widened gaze flipped between the fire and the door leading out to the hallway. He was told to report any changes, but didn't want to miss anything else... But there were cameras. Maybe if he was quick—

"Ben. Don't go."

He sprinted for Jerry's office, nearly losing his balance twice in the process, slamming his ID card across various sensors. The out of place clack echoed obscenely through otherwise quiet halls, undoubtedly disturbing countless politely surprised Scientists along the way. When he finally got there and blurted it all out, Jerry, who had been drinking something brown out of a "World's Best Uncle" cup and reading *It Ends with Us*, rolled his eyes dramatically. Wordlessly, he pulled up the feed out of a list of what looked like a hundred other rooms containing as many specimens. He unplugged his headphones and let the recording play. Radio silence.

"It's probably stopped by now... it happened a few minutes ago," Ben said lamely, burrowing his toes in his shoes. He remembered the urgency with which he sprinted to Jerry's office and cringed. No matter how fast he ran, the embarrassment always caught up with him in the end.

Jerry went back three minutes. Nothing. Then, the sound of Ben gasping (his voice unrecognisably high-pitched) and smashing through the doors. The fire sat in its enclosure the whole time, obstinately normal and not morphing into a heart or anything else of note.

"Auditory hallucination," said Jerry, showing his teeth as he enunciated theatrically. "It happens a lot, especially when you're in a really quiet environment for a long time."

"But... it shushed me. Then it told me not to go, *and* it called me by my name."

"Did you happen to introduce yourself?" Jerry smirked. "If it happens again, we'll consider giving you some time off. It's some new type of fire, not the *burning bush*." He snorted to himself as he reached for his book. "Back to work."

Ben could still hear Jerry chuckling as he went back, trudging down the hallway. Back at his post, the fire looked just as it had on Jerry's screen.

After an hour he heard it again. "Ben... come closer." Something about the way it chose its intonations was bizarre, alien. It kind of sounded like Christopher Walken.

He rolled his eyes, happy with his decision to ignore it. No way was he going to risk losing a job his dad had worked so hard to get him.

"Accounting is hard, Ben. Cs get degrees."

Ben almost laughed but stopped himself. This was getting serious. If he heard a single other thing, he'd —

"You're not hallucinating." The voice was becoming clearer, smoother as it slid into focus, its accent now closer to home.

Why did all the weird health things happen to him? First, it was that rash on his chest no one would believe was a problem, then one of his toes had swollen up and he'd almost had a panic attack in the MRI machine. Now, he'd started hearing voices. Maybe the pressure of uni was getting—

“Why don’t I tell you something you don’t know? That way you can be sure this is real.”

He stood completely still, willing the voice to stop.

“Did you know most koalas have chlamydia, Ben? It’s true. You can look it up.”

With nothing to lose, he pulled out his phone and searched “koalas chlamydia?” It was true, but he was unmoved. Probably just a gross fact he’d picked up somewhere and forgotten about.

“You really impressed your psychology tutor yesterday.” He thought back to yesterday’s tutorial and winced. It was only a general education unit, and it was still kicking his ass. “You’re top of your class.”

Ben closed his eyes completely, raising his eyebrows. A hidden narcissistic streak, to top off the psychosis. Fantastic.

“Ben, I can promise you I’m real. I’m really talking to you.”

Nope. Some unconscious part of him with information about the sexual health of koalas and a desperate need to believe he was a genius would not cost him this job. He flexed his jaw muscles and squared his shoulders again, evoking a Doberman, or a Pitbull.

“Ben, you think your father doesn’t love you.”

What was this, an afternoon special? His mind forcibly replayed the unpleasant memory of the

time his mum dragged them all to a family psychologist after the divorce. The psychologist’s slow and patronising tone, Ben and his mother on the couch, his father standing by the window, looking out. “David, your son needs to feel like he’s still a part of your life. That just because you’ve divorced his mother, it doesn’t mean anything has changed between you and Benjamin. Isn’t that right, Benjy?”

Jesus Christ. She didn’t know anything about his father. Or about Ben. He was a big American Pitbull, a Bully. A humongous one.

“But you’re wrong.” There was that breathy voice again.

Ninety percent muscle and an iron will.

“Do you want to see?”

He was so tempted to close his eyes, to turn away. The shock of this weird fire when he’d usually just be on regular security detail, and maybe some background anxiety about cancer. That’s all this was.

You said you could handle the long hours, the silence. You said you would keep it together. Keep your word for once.

The fire roared and expanded itself upwards and outwards into a screen. In it, dimly at first, but gradually more and more clear: Ben’s dad, his face bright, smiling like Ben hadn’t seen it in years. He watched in open-mouthed surprise as his dad began to speak to him.

“Ben, I’m proud of you,” he beamed. “It’s okay to cry, son. My strong boy. You get hurt, you pick yourself back up and keep going. Just like I taught you.”

Ben barely had time to register what was happening when his dad’s face faded, and the fire shrunk back down as if nothing had happened at all.

“Wait,” he said aloud before he could stop himself. “Bring him back.”

He eyed the door, contemplating running back into Jerry’s office. Instead, he froze, waiting.

“Dad?”

He felt a cold, biting disappointment like a stinging slap across his face. But then it happened again. “Where are you?” he heard in his father’s voice. “Benjamin?”

Ben took one heavy step toward the fire, his eyes stuck on what he was sure was the back of his father’s head. He just needed to get his dad’s attention.

“Dad!”

He stepped closer. Beads of sweat sprang up on his forehead. He wanted to bang on the glass wall, but he was worried the glass would shatter and hurt his dad. He knew that the door was open. All he needed to do was turn the handle. As the door swung open, his dad turned around and smiled, his smile spanning his whole face, unbridled joy and pride clear for anyone to see.

Finally, this was Love, with a capital L. Not just loving someone because you gave birth to them. Loving them because they were special, because they were worth loving. A loud, booming alarm rang out in the distance. Probably the compound realising their mistake, that they’d locked up a prominent businessman like some kind of freak of nature.

“Ben!” It was his dad’s voice, but he’d never heard it like this before, like a scream of joy. Ben rushed forward, his dad’s arms warm on his back. “I’m so proud of you, son. I’ll never leave you again.”

Ben wanted to respond in kind, but for some reason opening his mouth felt impossible, as though it was glued shut. Anyway, he wasn’t worried. He knew his father would understand. After all, his dad loved him very much. He could finally feel it.

Military Punctuality

Yaniagh

The third floor fire escape staircase is cold.

I tell myself, *it's the stony tiles I'm sitting on*. The nightly breeze makes me bristle, my back against the wall emanating that chill. It's cold all the same, and what matters is what I find when I look up and ahead.

It's my favourite spot in my high school dormitory.

I tell myself, *it's the sky*. Soft orange that's a little like a caress, kind when it eases me into the night, generous with the moon and the stars when dark finally takes. What matters is it's mine.

Over time it has transformed from a place I feared –I have always had a fear of falling– into a make-shift sanctuary. I tell myself, *it's the place itself*. The perceived sensations on my body, lulling me into serenity.

The thing with the third-floor fire escape staircase is it's a shell. It doesn't matter. It doesn't exist in its romanticization outside of my head. The thing with the third-floor fire escape staircase is it's a limbo, where falling starts sounding like floating, and maybe the faint laughter of my friends in their rooms and the distant sounds of cars yards away from me in my palace.

Come morning when I open my eyes and see the face of my roommate still fast asleep on her bed five feet away from mine, I think, *early mornings aren't cold here*. I let the water hit my hands, swirl around my mouth, splash against my nose, my face, forehead down to the ears, then hands to elbows right before my feet. I let it happen and I think, *perhaps this place has just given me thicker skin*.

I knew what I signed up for –grey walls, tough love, soldierlike– but did I really?



There are many things this place has given me; military punctuality is one. It comes easy with time when the people taking care of you are those disciplined into that chain of command. Compartmentalising matters of the heart is another. It comes easy with time when one has had to do it for as long as they've breathed. Rage is another. It rears its ugly head one Friday night and it stays like an extra limb that itches to crush.

There are many things this place has given me, another is the particular sort of torture of these things compounding into this one, repugnant thing. It's like a tightness in your chest, when all things calcify within your ribcage, right next to your beating heart. Restraint, telling you, *quiet and listen, speak when spoken to, don't argue it*. Burden, telling you, *you aren't ordinary, you've gotta give more than you're given*. Confined, telling you, *stay in that box, grow in and only in it, this is where you are now*.

You're told to do and to avoid and you're still met with a hammer. Your bones grow tougher by day. A hammer is still a hammer. *Stay in that box*, each hit says.

The idea that I could grow outside the box exists in the third-floor fire escape.

Sometimes the immersion breaks, because a mind palace isn't fortified, but you welcome what you can't be rid of, eventually. I welcome to my palace the melancholy that simply pours, pours, and pours. I welcome it with military punctuality; five minutes, ten minutes, hurt for the people I miss outside these walls and hurt for the person burdened and kicked down within these walls. I welcome it with military punctuality, and therefore compartmentalising hearts matter starts tasting like nothing at all, because to taste is to feel.

The thing with the third-floor fire escape staircase is it's a contradiction in itself, because it exists in a cage that fills you with red-hot rage, and it tells you not to feel.

So, when I say it's cold, it's a little like maths. There's that fire you carry –the one pulsing next to your heartbeat– and then there's the third-floor fire escape staircase. The shell, the limbo, the contradiction. When I say it's cold, what I mean is it's the furthest away from that fire I can get.

When I think, *why that space?* I think about every other space tainted by the fire. You can see the burn marks, almost, in all those grey walls. It's there in my room, the one I share with two kindred spirits, when one towering figure with her rage grown like a second head shows up in the doorway. It's there in the hallways next to classrooms, where more towering figures with tongues like vipers' slither and search me like they're expecting disobedience. It's there in every spot I've heard another towering figure talk of people smaller than them like pawns, like they aren't too, only with metal-made peace-making tools in the borders and districts with people they think are smaller than them.

The thing with the cage filling you with red-hot rage is, you sit there for longer than five minutes and you wonder, if you are as cruel as they are by virtue of tossing yourself in the cage, if you will be as cruel as they are the second your bones are too hard to break, and if you are forgiven because the box has teeth that chew you up until you're bloody.

When I think, *why that space?* I think about trying to love around the fire and how hard it is. I think of laughter cut short and smiles wiped out with callous remarks. I think about the malevolent intent of saying, you're not worth anything but the confines of this box. I think about trying to allow myself the act of loving a girl in this cage, in all the ways loving could go, and I think of the rule written in bold letters in their books saying this love is wrong and punishable with a kick to the curb and eternal damnation.

Why that space? Because it is untouched. Because it is the precarious line between the cage and the outs. Because hate doesn't exist there, therefore neither does the ugly, damning, fury.

When I say it's cold, what I mean is it's the closest to warmth I can get.

The joy of friends, unfiltered, unquestioned, because I cannot see their faces. I cannot see them and see the fire that has touched them, and by relation me, within this cage. I am not asked to look, I am not asked to participate, I am not asked to do anything; they are simply there, close by, the umbilical cord of the place's violence tying us together, and their ability to still laugh in the face of it all.

When I say it's cold, what I mean is it's peaceful.

The thing with the cage is there's no half measures. You have two choices. Let them pull you down, let them push the hate and the anger down your throat until you choke it up all over their floor, and then the hammer is there anyway because *restrain, burden, constrain*. You cannot be too angry. There is no way you won't be too angry. You never had a chance.

You have two choices. Don't let them have it. It is not the opposite of rage. It is not cold. It is nothing at all. You are not you. Your bones harden, and you don't even feel it.

You have two choices. You have no choices. You will oscillate between the two, swinging side by side, over and over, until one day, you tell yourself, *this is not forever*.

When I say it's cold, what I mean is it's placating.

I hear the laughter of my friends. I know I am not alone in this cycle of fire and void. I hear the cars moving. It sounds a little like hope, one I'd taste soon enough, and *thank God*, thank God my friends will taste it too.

Love manifests in odd ways the more you're spread thin and crushed too hard. It manifests in anger towards the shared enemy and the understanding resignation of sitting together in the dark once the shouting has stopped. It's damn hard to love around the fire. It happens anyway.

I know it happens because I sit in the third-floor fire escape staircase and feel the closest sense of comfort at the familiar voices of my friends' laughter. I know it happens because I read those blocky letters in the rule book and broke it anyway. I know it happens because now, thousands of miles away from the cage, I think of my friends, finally breaking their boxes, too, and I think.

When I say it's cold, what I mean is it soothes.

A balm to the burn.

A gentle blow to a scrape on the knee.

A reminder that the shape of love -jagged,
imperfect, bent, and chipped-
will always linger.



Fluoresce

Gabe Cant

You were *omphalotus nidiformis*. *Aequorea victoria*. Copper (II) chloride.
Extra-terrestrial.

Green-skinned. Thin-limbed. Wide-eyed.

When Sydney slept, you moved in midnight circles, hushed whispers, silent footsteps. You were led to havens of black quietude, where humans dared not go at night, and even the moon refused to shine. An underground Parramatta bar. A shadowed Blacktown alleyway. An empty Penrith carpark complex.

It was always a crude ceremony. There was no music, no food, no lights. But there were bodies, dancing bodies; you slow-danced with the others. The nameless, faceless others. You clung to their thin hands and bony shoulders, together weaving around puffs of smoke and puddles and discarded bottles. Your legs worked up a rhythm to the silent beat: forward, backward, in, out.

That night, something in the cavity of your chest that resembled a human heart began to quake. *1. 2. 3. 4.* With each beat, hungry fingers reached out from your chest and folded through your flesh, fiddling through bones and planting seeds. *1. 2. 3. 4.* The seeds struggled and stretched and took root, flowering through your body until veins and arteries twisted their way through you. *1. 2. 3. 4.* The thumps of your heart insisted on being heard. They carried through your arteries to your feet. The bare soles of your feet pattered against the ground. The patter transformed into waves that rippled along the concrete. Ripples turned to waves; waves turned to breath. You breathed, the concrete breathed, the city breathed.

*You silent soul, you unacceptable soul, you invisible soul.
That silent city, that unacceptable city, that invisible city.
All was revived. All was alive.*

All was swallowed by alien green.

At night, unseen by the world, alien souls fluoresce.

You were welwitschia mirabilis. Barium pyrotechnics. Ground malachite.
Extra-terrestrial.

Green-skinned. Long-legged. Strong-skulled.

Normally, when the sun rose, you would melt into murky puddles and downcast eyes. You would slink up against the walls or down under your covers because Sydney was not built for someone like you. Someone who danced the way you danced. Who danced with the people you danced with. Who danced around the natural order of things, around the way humankind were meant to dance.

From that night, when I locked eyes with you, it was different.

As the sun rose, that sun that normally withered and illuminated you in unbearable visibility, we did not cease to dance. Instead of shrinking, we let your hearts thump. *1. 2. 3. 4.* With each thump, our steps grew stronger, your hands gripped tighter, my mind clutched tight a desperate refrain, *1 i'm alive 2 i'm alive 3 i'm alive 4 i'm alive.* The boundaries between you and me had blurred, faded, distorted. We had each undergone osmosis; diffusion of the soul. *1. 2. 3. 4.* Together, we *melted* into the warmth of the sun's glow, the warmth of each other; the warmth that can survive only when the heart thrums loudly but gently but indubitably;
i love you.

Together, we dissolved the boundaries between
pride and shame,
day and night,
local and foreign,
acceptable and alien.



That day, visible to the world, the sun-rise was alien green.



The Briefest Form Of Forever

Chris Lin

This is how we braved
the briefest form of forever:

lying on a sidewalk the width
of two nervous breaths. In the morning dew

when I peeled your warmth from my body
& sneaked out of church to touch the grass

where we laid. The footsteps of summer
soaked in your T-shirt. This is how

we danced: two parentheses holding
a word (together). Leaning on the steps

of your rain-soaked brownstone you kissed
me like a camera. How a love could feel eternal,

which is to say: impossible. And what's prayer
& consummation but the way you move

your tongue? So I met poetry again
like an old lover. I found a name for us

but it got stuck in the pages, it got lost
in the night you pierced your ears





& looked beautiful enough to be surrendered,
to brave the blood we pressed against

each other. How only a broken body survives
the flood. When the summer was up

there was some other name on your skin,
a palimpsest of seasons. But still you held

our *forever* like a waist, the way a comma
cradles a thought. We found heaven

& it was two boys on a motorbike,
the moonlight shining through the holes

in your body. I felt possible,
finally.

& this is how we lost
the most beautiful form of forever:

a promise upturned on the side
of the road. I wrote it all down,

even your ears. How the love rushed
through your eyes, maroon gushed



from stained skin. How the film developed
on your lips just to seal it tight. Just to leave

a polaroid behind, because to shoot
is to grieve what you cannot change.

I stare at the road &
it's December again:

the city a tender blue,
my name an iron on your body

like a wildfire you can't rinse
off your hands.

With the moon spilling her youth
on two fragile bodies I hold

your waist, feel the warmth spread
into my neck. And I hold us close

for one warm breath; to make it last
if only until sunrise.





Cigarette Smoke


Kaity Lawrenson

My grandmother lights her cigarettes on the toaster's orange electric coils, then slaps at the smoke like she is batting at a man or a ghost or a curtain. She is the quiet space in my memory sitting silently on the long unlovely street that winds and whirls down toward time.

It's a Saturday.

"Frida," she croaks through her hoarse, nicotine-drowned vocal cords, "Hand me the raspberry jam." I stand there, knees tucked inwards as though I'm nervous to present show and tell. And I watch in awe. She taps the butt of her cigarette over the sink, sprinkling ashes over last night's plates like snowflakes falling and sifting towards the ground.

"Frida baby," she repeats, this time a little slower.



Her fingernails perch on the ends of her hands like leaves sitting on a pond surface, drawn from veiny, wrinkly fingers that curl like crows' feet. She reaches toward my arm. My grandmother's hands are widowed brides that grew old at the doorstep waiting for a better day. They land coldly, calmly on my skin. My grandmother's hands are swan necks wrapping around the acres of my wrist folds as if each finger is chasing layer upon layer of cells and pure, white space. I feel her blood enter mine. I feel the space between us stretch for hours into days and days into

years, yet I could reach her back in seconds. Her brittle bones tuck away inside her skin like they must abandon her surface. They don't want to see outside anymore; they don't want to feel outside anymore. She squeezes.

"The jam?"

"Bobbe," I whisper into the smoke. It blows toward her and away from me, slowly curling into itself and then dispelling away into nothing. She looks at me with patience permanently painted on her ancient skin.

"Tell me why your hands look like that," I say softly, as so not to disrupt her protracted sucking at the moist tip of the cigarette, her cheekbones revealing themselves from beneath her leathered skin. I wait for her to open her eyes. It is almost like she is dreaming there, right in front of me. Like magic and colours and lights are in motion beneath her lids that only she could understand. Her exhale lasts for eleven years. A smile then slyly appears, crawling onto her lips and pulling her cheeks up toward her ears.

"My dear Frida," my grandmother rasps, "They left me there. I held onto the bar, and they kept hitting. I could not move."

"Who left you there Bobbe? Who hit you?"

"The Boche, my sweet. The Boche."

She smiled and closed her eyes again. The dreaming. My grandmother always seemed to mask pain and trauma in the delicacies of her smoke. The smoke stops time. I have always been entranced by the smoke – the way it moves and interrupts the air without permission. Sometimes it made my eyes sting, and my vision became blurred by wells of water that drown my eyelids. For the four seconds that I cannot see, I'm not so sure I'll make it, until I scrunch up my face and press my palms into my sockets, and each bead of salt gently pulls away.

It's a Saturday.

A lip of wind teases the yellowing curtains that frame my grandmother's kitchen window. The air catches the skirt of the tablecloth that sprawls the dining table, and I watch my grandmother crease her newspaper and move the ashtray

to reach for a hairpin while silver ribbons spill from her crown into the air before her face. The kitchen counter divides the room. I stand behind it, watching her wallpaper mould, as if I could see the past seven and a half years between my grandmother and I building a mountain of something on top of itself.

“Frida,” she breathes, a thick spell of smoke escaping her throat and attempting to meet me in the kitchen, but sadly falling victim to the breeze. “Any day now with the jam, my sweet.”

My hands are submerged in hot water. I bathe them beneath bubbles of soap, feeling around in the kitchew “Just a minute, Bobbe,” I dry my hands, staining the tea towel that I bought her three years ago as a souvenir from South Africa. It looks at me, creased and weathered, trapping my gaze in its already fraying corners that beg for a seamstress. But I don’t remember how to sew.

The jam this month is a little paler than usual. It licks the sides of the jar as if it understands the transparent nature of the glass. As if it understands it must put on a show, it must convey all its jelly folds and clustering masses of red through the hexagonal fishbowl. But the jam tucks itself into the corners, obnoxiously, which means I can’t get any red onto my knife. And then because I struggle to get in the cracks, I end up getting red where it shouldn’t be. It’s on the knife handle. There’s a smidge on my palm too. Which then of course means I have to wash my hands again and paint over the cartoon map of Cape Town with a striking red, all the while the toast I am supposed to be making my grandmother is shrivelling up on the china.

It’s a Saturday.

The weeds have begun to unfurl in the cracks of stone paving that swallow the entryway garden of my grandmother’s home. I stand an equal distance between the rotting front porch and my hatchback. The engine fumes patiently wait beside the gate, whose rich, red rust has begun to flake, finally. There is a humidity that sinks the air down toward my ankles and I almost don’t walk toward the door. I have seen the sky paler before, but there is something about the texture of it, maybe the shade? This blue is unfamiliar, it seems hidden in the vastness, waiting to scare me at my next turn.

My grandmother’s eggshell fingers twist the doorhandle. Her hands are the first thing I see; they appear at the door frame like a magic trick, clever and mysterious, but there is a lingering sense of silent, well-intended deception. My grandmother’s hands are

wallpapers in my subconscious. They are a manuscript I attempt to read, if I could only grab a steady hold of the paper between my fingers. My grandmother's hands are sleeping dragons that dare to be woken. Ancient beasts blooming of majesty, yet it is trapped in their slumber, a wild force of reckoning caught tight in their slow breathing, slow dreaming. Smoke rises from their nostrils in curls of grey clouds; the only hint of their rampage, the only clue that their danger lies dormant.

"How's my baby Frida," The purple, greying skin that folds over my grandmother's lips are spinning fantasies that shapeshift through the days, collapsing into themselves as time folds neatly into squares. I do not understand their language. I watch the wrinkles stretch around like an accordion, enabling sudden glimpses of yellowing teeth that trap a thick, broken vocal.

The toaster is on when I walk into the kitchen, burning air. Her fingers whisper softly into her cigarette, crimping and losing contact with the underlying flesh, almost protesting the mild orange stick for all the blood she'll never get back. The cupboard door that stores all the jam hangs by a single hinge, its corners dangling over the wavering heat that danced above the orange electric coils. Tickles of white mould spread themselves against the inside of the jars like dotted stars against a thick raspberry sky. Stars that taunt me. Mock my being. Look below themselves to find me.

My arms dagger the air, stretching across the room past my grandmother's body, toward the stars to take them away. They cannot be here, not with my grandmother. Not in this cupboard. Not above these coils. Not in this kitchen. Not in the spoiled and tangy air that stumbles in from the window. These white tickles know nothing of me. There should be nothing but red. Sickly sweet, pulsing, throbbing red. My fingers travel to the edge of the air which hugs the glass.

"Frida," my grandmother slices the air open with a spiked tone from her throat. She digs her nails gently into my skin. "Let it."



Cassandra Of Troy Curses The Sun From The Depths Of A Bar In New Orleans

Pieta Hochstetler

Knock the whiskey back:
one, two. Ignite. Feel it scorch
down
the long slide of your throat,
hot like
dry wind on dry earth. Something
about the burn steadies
you.

Light (sun?) catches the
edges of vision.
Fluorescent flame flickers
in an
unsteady halo,
cascading light bright
enough to burn.

The fire laps gently at the oil:
watch it consume
cast long shadows over the laminated
countertop. Speak,
and your voice flares
flickers fades

in this uneasy haze of drink and its
hollow warmth.
You are Cassandra: daughter of
Troy;
speaker of
truth. Your words have brought
cities to ruin and
men to their
knees.

(Hold the Sun once beloved—
cradle his warmth
with the care of a
lover;
now forsaken —
see how it burns
burns
burns.)

Who will believe the mad
ramblings of a half-grown
girl?



Ophelia with her dead
flowers:
look how she drowns

amongst them, sleeping;
blacked-out drunk in a puddled
bathroom.
Do you still mourn?

Turn to spurned, bloody Lucia;
her voice a drunken
elegy, a lament
for the man whose blood stains her hands

*il dolce suono, mi colpi
di sua voce—*

cut her off at the next
drink or she'll condemn you too.

Unlucky last cubicle on the left;
Bertha sighs, forgotten.
Mad scribbles frame the cistern,
hearts locked up and
left behind. Will she still
be with you
come morning, or are you the latest in her
long line
of jailers? Go on,
unlock the
bathroom door.

(Add her to the list.)

Is this
how the story goes?
Pick up your drink; slam
it down; raise your hand to
flag the bartender. Watch
as his eyes skip right over
you.

You spark a revolution, one that
burns
over scuffed floors and sticky tables,
catching on wood
seeped with
heady alcohol. Your boots scuff the
polish
and stain the counter, leaving
marks that the bartender swipes
over
with a wet cloth; once,
twice. You roar past the burn
in your throat, only to be
dragged
down to your
seat— coals in ash.

Is this what you are now? A girl
starting fires that always go
out?





(Maybe soon they will
bury you.)

And though you clutch the
hand of the grave-digger as
he begins to bury
you and scream, I WAS RIGHT,

I WAS RIGHT, I WAS RIGHT ALL
ALONG—

all he can do is pull away
and resume once more, leaving
the
imprint
of warmth where a hand should be.)

What is it like, to be loved
by the Sun?

It is not
a small thing.



Synthetic Simulacrum's

Shan Walton

Content Warning: Sexual Assault

Acid dripping from the ceiling splits hair and cook's flesh. The mirrored doors of the wardrobe grant an obstruction-free view of the show. Naked, barely discernible from pale pink bed sheets,

I give in to her demand for a game.

“Huh! You blinked first,” she cackles.

It doesn't matter how many times she wins. She's never satiated. A hunger matching that of every daughter raised by the padlocked snack cupboard mothers of the 2000s drives her. Hair is straightened, collar bones are stuck out, stomach is sucked in, lip corners stretched to cheekbones. Satisfied by my efforts, she gifts me the costume of the day.

Stockings worn three days in a row struggle to contain thighs. Mind ponders the feeling of them.

How funny, to spend 12 hours a day in tight itchy socks that climb from toe to belly button. How peculiar to forget their existence and then abruptly remember that synthetic suffocation.

I silence the screams of my pores.



I've only recently started wearing stockings again, the Sydney winter and the echoes of my mother's proclamation of the importance of hiding bare legs, (because what an embarrassment to be found out to have a body), has gotten to me as I've aged. I wear the same cheap pairs I used to wear under my pleated school skirt. I think of Lolita when I wear them in my twenties.

I've tried my best to stomp that little girl down the shower drain with my thrown-up dinner more times than I would care to admit.

On my birthday a few years ago, a glassie I met working at the pub asked how attached I was to the pair of black stockings I was wearing.

“Oh, they were like ten bucks at Priceline, it's whatever.”

He proceeds to rip the tights from the crotch before shoving his dirty fingers inside of me. It stings like lemon juice in a paper cut and my hips buck asking for more.

Pleasure follows Punishment; Fulfilment of Promise follows Flagellation; Heaven follows Sacrifice.

I hold this boy in the palm of my hand and the dribble of my cum on his bedsheets affirms a knowing of that.

I have a body, and I know how to offer it, and he knows how to take it.

He asks me to open my mouth.

He asks me to kneel with my back to the wall.

He asks me to look up at him while he bruises the back of my throat.

I have been thinking about how I used this as another excuse to put off visiting the family dentist.

I made him sleep in the wet patch of me and the satisfaction of knowing that makes me smile.

Tears stick my eyelashes to my face. Comfort in the thought that my body can achieve the function it is made for turns my sweat to WD40.

He is a deferred engineering student, saving to ski in Canada for a season. He likes to scuba dive and collects rocks. He is teaching himself to DJ. He tells me he gets hard every time he walks into the staff room because he can smell my perfume.

He is the exact kind of guy my parents would love me to bring home.

He carries band-aids in his pocket just in case. He peels back the wrapping so delicately, taking time to consider where the perfect place to adhere will be. He administers a kiss upon my forehead post-operation, so gently, 'Thank You,' escapes me like a fly at a barbecue lunch, too quick for the resounding smack of my father's hand on the dining table.

I flinch.

Marks I asked him to leave in swatches of blue and purple hide underneath high-waisted jeans designed to accentuate the smallest part of me.

*He loved me,
he loved me,
he would hate me,*

*I hated him,
I hated him,
I wanted to love him.*

...

Anxiety that the two of them can smell that my clothes need to be washed fix my shoulders into a position unnaturally close to my ears. My wardrobe has been operating out of my car for a little under a month. My stockings are particularly pungent. Recently, the inside of my eyelids displayed rows and rows of washing machines. Crashes of soapy waves harmonise with the clinks of keys left in pockets. The laundromat opera scores the twenty-minute naps I give in to, with the disarming of my forehead upon the library desk. In these treats of dissociation, I am a towel fresh out of the dryer, warm, comforting, wanted.

I need these people to like me enough to let me live here.

I have been thinking about the advice from the girl I sat next to in year ten science. A tighter pair of underwear should be worn over the top of stockings to keep them in place. Her advice is survived by the red line that continues to cut my stomach in half.

I remember crossing one leg over the other. I remember curating a casual exposure of thigh in the slit of my skirt.

I knew how to use my body to get what I wanted. I knew how to use my body to get what I needed.

When rolling those nylon snakes from toe to hip I perform obliviousness, ignoring the discharged bleach spotting the crotch.

People are nicer to you when they want to have sex with you. People are nicer to me when I let them.

After a quick tour of the house and an exchange of Inner West Share House meditations including:

“Yeah, insulation, who needs that anyway...”

“I have come to see mould as character building.”

We sat down to talk.

“God, I feel like I’m 18 again, trying to impress the USYD Gender Studies majors in Campo Park,” I joke, spinning my ring around my thumb.

“Yeah, bless, it really is all downhill from that first menthol bummed off some skinny bald girl who misquotes De Beauvoir in your ear,” they respond amongst amused exhales.

I attempt to wrap up the meeting by asking if there’s anything I could bring to the house, an energy, an appliance, a proficiency at remembering to fill up the ice tray.

“Girl, there isn’t anything you need to bring to this house except you, and perhaps a strap-on big enough to kill the spiders I squeal at. Just show up exactly as you are, it’s okay to leave a spoon in the sink for a few days or whatever. We look after each other here. You don’t need to be anyone. Welcome to the dykehouse baby.”

I adjust the way that I’m sitting to make my skirt cover up my previously exposed thigh.

...

Handfuls of hair sat in the bathroom sink when I was first initiated into the divine feminine. It was the morning of my first Holy Communion. My mother had just excavated layers of my scalp with the cheap chemist hot rollers that had she sent me to bed in the night before.

“Stop crying. The family will be here any minute,” proclaimed my mother in the same authoritative tone that silenced the chatty kids at Sunday school.

There’s a picture of me in a white dress from the day of my first communion where I appear off guard walking down the stairs.

I understood beauty as powerful that day, my hair cascading past my shoulders in perfect ringlets.

Sometimes I am glad we all at least got this day in the church with the white dress and the flowers and the candles and the priest, knowing they won’t come to my next one.

I avoided meeting my mother's eyes in the bathroom mirror.

I rolled 'The Word of the Lord' around my mouth like a butter menthol for something else to focus on.

It was an honour to be chosen to read. I remember my mother reminding me of this when she used the credit card my father didn't know about to buy my dress.

A mother, father, grandparent box set for each of the one hundred and ten students that made up my year four class would be in attendance.

"Is the Word of the Lord a question to you girl? Drop the intonation, clarify your articulation, look out to the parishioners as you say it, finish with your heart, speak the gospel's truth," boomed Father from the other end of the church in our mass rehearsal.

...

Welcome to the St. John Bosco Primary School Year Four Mass, where we celebrate the blessed sacrament of the first Holy Communion of our nine-year-old flock. Please bless yourself with the provided holy water on arrival and bow before taking your seat in the pew.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

With the touch of her skin to mine I am butter. With her I *am reduced to a softened thing, salty, smooth, melting, I am a forgotten wheel of brie left in the bottom of a Sydney Park picnic basket*, sticky all over the foil that contains me.

Brothers and Sisters let us acknowledge our sins, and so prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries.

I don't remember getting here, couldn't tell you who opened which door when and if I walked up the stairs or was carried. *I remember the blush she painted on my cheeks standing at the foot of the bed she laid me down on, the pause she indulged in before calling me beautiful.* She peels fabric away from my skin so confidently, like a hiker with an orange at a rest stop. Plunging thumbs separate rind from flesh, forbidden fruit exposed.

I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned,

I want Her.

She wants me.

May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life.

I want her to take her time. I want to swim through the black pools of her now dilated pupils. She asks to watch me in her bedroom mirror, for me to shake and sweat and moan and drip while I lay on top of her. She asks to taste me after I'm finished. She tells me I've done good. She holds me. She tells me I'm good.

Lord, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Lord, have Mercy.

She listens to my thoughts about the books I've read stacked on her side table while she draws circles on my bare back. We declare Joan Didion a genius and fuss over Ocean Vuong's lyricism. She tells me she wants to climb inside my brain and look through my filing cabinet of thoughts. *I think I might just let her.* I struggle to find where her skin begins and mine finishes.

The Lord be with you.

The stockings now banished to a corner of the room witness her hold me as I sob on her altar. They watch me bury my head in her armpit and dampen her pillowcases. Those synthetic black snakes hear her ask me to let it all out, hear her tell me she loves me too. *I don't know how to believe these things yet. I don't know how to believe that I am more than a body sacrificed for sin.*

May almighty God bless you, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And I love her, and I think she loves me, and I love her and I want her to love me and I love her and I am learning to trust that she loves me too.

Go in peace, glorifying the Lord with your life.

The stockings stay in the corner of that room. I do not wear them the next day. It is too cold for bare legs but nevertheless, my milk-white thighs persist.



Antioxidant

Josie Kurnia

Lapsang souchong—notoriously dark and smoky, like a campfire burning its last embers

I'm frozen on the spot yet my skin is burning. My eyes linger on his figure. He smiles slightly, hiding what the devil on his shoulder speaks to him. His friend claps his back and asks how he's doing. He opens his mouth in response. I tune out, wary of what might come.

Even so, I want nothing more than to shove myself in front of him and ask him what it's like. The words almost spill out of my lips. I clap my hand over my mouth as I bend over, hair falling onto my face. I force myself to focus on the pattern of the bricked floor. I burn the shade of bronzed brick into my mind, but, against my will, I drift further and further away from the rustic orange. Stuck in this moment, I gaze at this painfully familiar face, seeing nothing but my own reflection in blue-green eyes. I avert my gaze before he speaks.

“Do you not remember me?”

Peach oolong jasmine—a smooth green tea blend with hints of peachy sweetness

In another world—our damned past—he had the decency to give me a proper smile. His smile would spread to his entire face, eyes lighting up. We sat on a picnic mat, watching the sun slowly hand over the reins to the moon. I shuffled a little

and the picnic mat rustled against my leg.

“Impatient?” he asked.

I shook my head, heat in my cheeks. “I just don't want to get pins and needles.” The rapid beating of my heart mashed with my words, as if I was tasting them before I allowed them to leave my lips.

“Hm, too bad,” he smirked.

I barely felt him move as he slid closer. He started to slowly massage my shins. His touch was soft, gentle but firm, dedicated to give me the utmost care in every movement. His expression landed somewhere in between nonchalant and loving. My mind couldn't figure out where—but my heart revelled in the knowledge that it wasn't pure carelessness.

“You deserve to be taken care of,” he said after a prolonged silence.

I put my hand on top of his. “It's okay.”

How was his gaze toward me so full of life, so rich in love, yet so casual? He was made for this moment—to pull me into his elaborate game, only to dangle me over a cliff edge and let go of my hand. Did he know what it feels like to be brought up high, then suddenly dropped to the bottom with



nothing to hold onto? When, a year later, he left me on the floor of my living room, looking up at him with tears in my eyes, I wondered whether I should have looked at him for a bit more, a bit longer, a bit deeper.

Hojicha—charcoal roasted tea that goes down easily, with a bitter aftertaste

He looks at me like we're never going to see each other again. All this looking, just to sit quietly opposite me. I feel a stiffness in my shoulders and a painful sense of déjà vu as I return his gaze. I didn't expect for him to clash with the familiarity of my living room, nor to navigate his way inside with ease. Under the table, my fingers scrape against the cotton linen of my pants, nails digging into my thighs. I desperately hope he hasn't caught that I haven't cleaned out his last remnants. His thumb rubs the handle of a spoon perched on his cup of coffee. Wispy brown strands of hair fall onto his face, narrowly avoiding his eyes. His gaze flits between the swirls of milk within his coffee and the polished silver teaspoon. Muted teal eyes hesitantly tug onto my brown ones. Their intensity forces my gaze onto the plastic sheen of my dining table.

"Stop looking at me like that." The words feel like rocks scraping my tongue. He shakes his head in some makeshift apology, hair fluffing around everywhere and gently covering parts of his eyes. But he doesn't stop looking at me, searching for something he threw away when he decided to leave. He knows it's futile. He can't dig up a grave he buried himself. The bitter aftertaste of his melancholia, mixed with the murkiness of his remorse, twists my stomach into a series of endless knots. Knotting, then unknotting.

"I..." his eyes breaking from mine, "I didn't want you to feel like I deliberately wronged you."

"But you did."

His eyes change into something unnervingly serious.

One second.

Two seconds.

He brings the cup of coffee to his lips. His hand tenses around the handle, knuckles white.

Three seconds.

"This isn't about you." The words slide off his tongue.

"But you hurt me," I spit back. I have the urge to slap my hand onto my mouth as some sort of makeshift apology for my retort. My eyes glance down in embarrassment—make him think you're sorry for everything, my mind yells, then grab him by the collar and slam him to the floor so that you can get your sweet revenge—but my heart is too curious and forces my eyes upwards. I pretend like I don't know that the way he rubs his forearm is a way of calming himself down, or how he never seems to cut his bangs despite constantly complaining about how they block his vision.

"I just..." he takes a deep breath. I can smell the coffee lingering between us.

“I didn’t want things to end as badly as they did,” he continues. “Even though we broke up... you’re a wonderful human, just not *mine*.”

“Broke up?” I nearly gag. “You were the one who tossed me aside for your pathetic ‘ambitions!’ Sleeping your way up the corporate ladder!” I stand up, propelled by my raised voice. I can’t see anything else but him, only him, and the way he sits in front of me—

“Did you think you could win me back if you grovelled at my doorstep for hours, begging me to let you inside?” I hiss. “Playing the victim only a week after you decided to ruin my life?”

Nausea crawls up my throat the more I speak. He looks at me like he can’t bear to hurt me but I catch the corners of his mouth turn slightly upwards. It’s so slight that I have to take a second to refocus. I breathe in sharply.

“Or did you think you might as well spend time with me after, I don’t know, never having time for me?”

“Sometimes,” he sniffs, trying to tug at my heartstrings, “you have to do what it takes to succeed.”

I gulp, forcing my nausea down.

“Get out.” I put my head in my hands. I can still feel him standing there, looking at me with undisguised pity. I close my eyes, tightening my fist. I’m drowning. A high-pitched *hum* takes control of my ears. I can’t get him out of my house, my mind, my life—

I snatch his cup, gritting my teeth, raising my arm—

The cup shatters against the table—

Pieces and pieces, falling over—

Sharp edges cutting—

“Get out!”

A metallic smell. Blood?

The last thing I see of him is his slumped back turned towards me. He walks out, shirt stained by coffee, and a fresh cut on his arm.

Decafearl grey—decaffeinated black tea with notes of bergamot oil

The odour of a sharp, tart coffee blend lingers in the air after he leaves. I feel his absence in the way I can’t find the energy to clean up the broken cup on the floor. Neither do I clean up the coffee stains, though I know I’ll be kicking myself for it later. It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters. He’s finally gone.

What is it like to live your life, knowing that you’ve destroyed mine in mind, body, and soul?

What is it like to feel nothing?

What is it like to lead me to my downfall?

I lay down on the floor, staring at the monotonous white paint on the ceiling. I rifle through what I still remember of *him*—the sweet

beginning, the comfortable middle, and the oversteeped end. After a while, the nausea from earlier starts to make its way back up, relentless. I stumble to the bathroom, hissing sharply when my foot lands on a piece of broken porcelain. I hurl myself over the toilet bowl and let everything out—my vomit and my tears.

I hover over the toilet for a while. The only sound that rings in my ears is my breathing. A rhythmic sharp intake in, then out.

“He’s nothing to me,” I repeat to myself, murmuring lazily. I try not to remember anything as I slip into nothingness.

Assam tea—rich in taste, leaving behind hints of burnt sugar

I wake up, pressed against the tiles of my bathroom floor. I stay there until all I can feel is my own body heat, my mind relentlessly urging me to go and brew my morning tea. As I get up, my joints crack in concerning places. I splash cold water onto my face, acting as if nothing happened. Stray droplets fall onto the tiles.

Nothing *did* happen. I meet my own eyes in the mirror. They tell me only of my own heart’s desire and its subsequent failure, chastise me for thinking that I could be different, be the one, the longer I look. The ominous *drip...drip...drip...* of the tap keeps my gaze locked on my reflection.

Then everything hits me. Up in my head, pounding against my skull. Each realisation falls upon me, travels down my throat and embeds itself in my heart. I grasp my chest in a futile effort to

alleviate the pain, but it evades me, shooting down to my legs and straight into my knees. I buckle from the weight of—

My heart—

My own failure—

My downfall—

Him, until the end—

I almost feel like I might explode into pieces. The shattered coffee cup glares straight into my eyes—its sharp edges and pathetic memories and all. It lays to rest on my living room floor. The coffee stains around it display a grey-scale crime scene. As I sweep the shards away, leaving the coffee stains for me to deal with later, I can’t help but think, again, and again, and again.

Maybe this is why I drink tea, and you drink coffee.





Bagni Regina Giovanna

Angela Wang

A hidden gem 30 minutes from Sorrento”
Secluded waters once frequented by Naples’ Queen
It’s divine. You’d think so, too.

“Swim amongst Roman ruins” – how cruel!
To lounge, squeal, and splash in their faces
While they lie, Hedone’s house no longer.
A truth they’ve battled with since 1 AD.


A villa once, crushed forever.
What happened? Who wouldn’t want this?
Surrounded by cliffs that rise from the Tyrrhenian Sea;
A divine tragedy, I can’t look away.

A starfish keyring jingles from the strap of my tote
As I walk through the shrubs surrounding the swimming hole,
The words “Love, Perth” mostly faded.
The place we first and last met.

My mind plays us, over and over
On the opposite coast to home;
Laughing into each other as the limestone cliffs
Of Parakeet Bay hide us from the sun.

Oh, it was so real!






It took one weekend,
One confession in the blue,
To want to tell you everything, and for you to do the same.

Did you bring me to Rottnest,
Like how Giovanna brought her lovers to Pollio Felice?
Swimming out to the rocks and sharing tales of past summers.
What are you looking for?
Shade? Solace? Please don't say love.

Are you my ruin, or my palace?
Are we fools crowned in a bygone world;
A crumbling scene by Hubert Robert?
That depends: "Will you be back next summer?"

Giovanna, the Queen that you are!
Did you gaze into his eyes,
Wondering, Is he a holiday, or is he forever?
The sun is setting, and I can't decide.

Linen gowns have been swapped out for sparkle knit bikinis
Yet our hearts beat to the same rhythm.
I swim in your waters,
Hoping to find what clues you have left
on the rocks we both lie on.



Meet the Authors



Angela Wang

Angela Wang is a fifth-year Engineering student at UNSW. This is her first published poem. She is interested in reading about distant worlds and coming-of-age. She is a sucker for love, her Notes app, and is most likely dreaming of where to travel next.



Annie Ming Kowalik

Annie Ming is an Engineering student with love for communication. Her writing is concerned with the intersections of our histories, heritage, and womanhood, and the dualities of the East meeting the West. Annie has been published in the Nan Manefield, Northern Beaches, Little Star and UNSWeetened.



Charlotte Wang

Charlotte is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Engineering. Her creative practice spans engineering and poetry. She reads and writes in order to understand and create.



Chris Lin

Chris Lin is a second-year physics and mathematics student who channels his creativity through poetry and creative writing. He has been published once before in the UNSWeetened Online Journal. He is interested in linguistics, love, and stories about stories.



Eliza Hoh

Eliza Hoh is a first-year Bachelor of Arts/Education (Secondary) student with a passion for writing and performing. In 2023, she was a winner of the inaugural Sydney Morning Herald Essay Prize. Most recently, she was published in the 41st issue of UNSW's Framework.



Elude

Hi, my names Elude, and I'm a first year psychology student who enjoys writing for fun. I am interested in reading and writing all types of works, especially those imbued with strong emotional depth.



Gabe Cant

Gabe Cant is a 1st year Arts/Science student, who enjoys learning about all the cogs that makes our beautiful world tick. He enjoys representing these ideas through written word vignettes and sketches, with a particular interest in writing evocative and gritty urban landscapes.



Hannah Cheah

Hannah is in her final year of Arts/Education majoring in English and History. During her time at uni, she has been published in the UNSWeetened Online journal. Hannah is particularly interested in memoir and the relationships between food, culture, family, and the sense of self.



Inayat Juno Mander

Inayat Juno Mander is a Bachelor of Arts (English/Film Double Major) student in her third year. Primarily a novelist and fiction writer, she has been previously published in Nowhere Girl Collective and Blitz. She likes to write about ghosts, in every sense of the word.



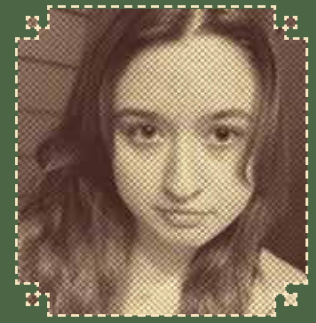
Jocelyn Lim

Jocelyn Lim is a third-year Fine Arts student at UNSW. She has been published in the online UNSWeetened literary journal in 2023 and 2024. She is interested in absurd incomprehensible horror, the essence of humanity, religious allusions, and the written tragedy.



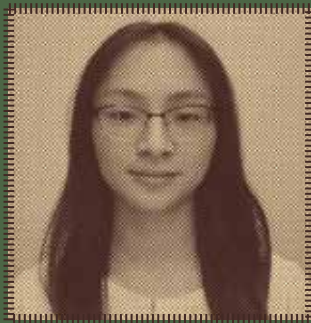
Josie Kurnia

Josie Kurnia is a 2nd year Social Work/Arts student. An avid writer, this is her second time being published in UNSWeetened. She seeks to channel her emotions into her pieces, informed by readings of realist and fantasy genres.



Joy Paola

Joy Paola is a first year Science / Arts student at UNSW. She writes poetry to capture feelings and experiences, and is interested in stories about memory and the passage of time.



Joyce Li

Joyce Li is a fifth-year Commerce and Law student at UNSW. She is interested in a wide variety of literary genres, from contemporary introspective works to fiction. She has been published in the online UNSWeetened journal and received the Prose Winner award at the Emerging Features event.



Kaity Lawrenson



Laura Gordon

Laura Gordon is a fourth-year Media/Arts student at UNSW. She has been an active contributor to both UNSWeetened and Newsworthy. Laura is an avid creative writer keen on exploring coming-of-age and womanhood in the contemporary world.



Maya Alborz

Maya Alborz is a second year Creative Writing and English student at UNSW. She enjoys reading a wide variety of genres, in particular psychological fiction. She is interested in writing that allows us to consider viewpoints other than our own, fostering empathy and understanding.



Mia Ok

Mia Ok, Bachelor of Media (screen and sound production)/Arts. Poetry, Song writing, and Filmmaking. Grapefruit [Nostalgia] on Online UNSweetened Literary Journal 2023. My favourite pieces to write are poetry. I particularly enjoy implementing rhyme scheme into my poetry as I also love to write songs. My all time favourite thing to read is romantasy!



Niki Almira

Niki is a second-year student at UNSW and doesn't like to be reminded that they are no longer a freshie. They write pieces that explore the complexities of the 'self' and deconstruct language and form, but read Wattpad fanfictions, mostly. They were published in the 2024 UNSweetened online journal.



Pieta Hochstetler

Pieta Hochstetler is a first-year Media/Arts student, as well as a writer, poet, and artist (but only in her spare time!). She is interested in the intimacy of second-person narratives, fairytales that break the rules, and the narrow spaces between grief, love & hate.



Yaniagh

Yaniagh is currently a first year student in Psychological Science. Sporadically writing all her life, a short story of hers was published under the anthology "Sayap-Sayap Pertiwi" back in her home country. Other times, she veers into writing and reading introspective pieces, horror, and romance.



Tania Toh

Tania is an emerging writer from Western Australia and Malaysia, and is currently in her third year of a Bachelor of Law and Arts (majoring in Creative Writing). She's always loved reading and writing stories, especially relating to love and tragedy; though these days the only thing you'll find her reading is unfortunately her law textbook. Some of her favourite authors include Madeline Miller who wrote the Song of Achilles, and Justice Michael Kirby for his impeccable dissenting judgments.



Shan Walton

My name is Shan (She/They), and I am an Arts student wrapping up my undergraduate year in Creative Writing and Gender Studies. I write an experimental blend of Fiction and Non-Fiction in my degree and on my Substack under my name to both understand and to be understood. 2023 UNSweetened essay winner, 2024 Goodspace 'What Makes us Human' Exhibition, Shan's Substack.

Acknowledgements

The UNSweetened Literary Journal team would like to thank Chloe Kelly and Dom Lakis for their direction, guidance, and care in developing this year's print edition. We would like to thank Arc Marketing for their continual support – especially Katie Vicary and Bianca Knoechel, social media queens, Tiera Boogaard and Sandra Tu, incredible design mentors, and Mitchell McBurnie, behind-the-scenes marketing whiz. We thank our sister publications, Blitz and Gamamari, whose support for uplifting student voices enriches us all.

We would like to thank the UNSW Bookshop whose steadfast support throughout the years has empowered us to foster such an engaged, creative, and kind community. Special thanks to UNSW EDI who enabled us to celebrate the storytelling craft of people of colour through the 2024 UNSW Anti-Racism Grant. We want to thank our judges who shared their time and expertise with us. It is your support that allows us to celebrate the very best of student writing.

Our eternal thanks to all those who contributed to UNSweetened, whether to the journal or the community, you have made warmth real.

Personal Thanks

I'd like to thank Mum and Dad. Without you, warmth wouldn't have been possible.

Huge thanks to my senior volunteers! Connor and Bella, thank you so much for being such stellar editors. A debt of gratitude to my designers: Annie, Garima, and Jasmine in particular, you have made the journal look splendid through InDesign wizardry.

Massive thanks to all of the volunteers who have contributed to this journal. Without you, this journal wouldn't have been possible. Thank you for sharing your time, energy, and passion.

Finally, thank you to my friends, family, and every lovely soul I've had the honour of crossing paths with. I hope our paths continue to cross. Thank you all so much.

And to Jiang Cheng, thank you for everything.

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UNSWeetened 2024

ISSN 1441-1415

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UNSWetened is published by Arc @ UNSW Limited.

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