

Volume 20 | Winter 2025

Polyphony Lit



Latin Heritage Month
Award



CLAUDIA ANN SEAMAN
AWARDS FOR YOUNG WRITERS



Polyphony Lit
Editors Choice
Award

The Best High School Writing from Around the Globe

Polyphony Lit

The Best High School Writing From Around The Globe

Volume 20
Winter 2025

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Polyphony Lit

MINNIE WU

The Pennington School, Princeton, NJ, USA

Timeless Beauty

Minnie Wu is a high school sophomore at The Pennington School. Her poetry and prose have been previously published in *Blue Marble Review*, *SWWIM Every Day*, and *Pennyroyal*, among other literary magazines. In the 2024 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, Minnie was recognized as a Gold Key recipient and a Gold Medalist for her poetry and art. She is an alumna of Iowa Young Writers' Studio Summer Residential Program.)



CLORIS SHI

Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

Dear Readers,

This past month, my high school English class took a tour through Robert Frost's poetry. During the last period of the day, keeping a room full of teenagers engaged — let alone excited about caesura and enjambment — is no easy task. Last Friday, a student, exasperated, raised his hand and asked, "If you read one poem, you've read them all. What's the point of all this repetition, all this complaining and lamenting?"

I have been thinking about that: what keeps writing fresh? What keeps me on the edge of my seat, leaning forward, hair spilling out the window? The idea that poetry or art is repetitive or homogeneous couldn't be further from the truth, but lately, I have been through that difficult rut of creativity stagnation, feeling like I won't come up with anything new.

During times like these, I go outside. I remind myself that for all the solitude creativity demands, we are never truly alone when we write. I chase the same ear-piercing, sore-throat exhilaration in poetry that I feel when belting songs in my friend's car, the windows down on the I-5, the beat pulsing beneath my seat. Even when we're not writing, I realize we're still thinking about it. I remember one evening after slurping up noodles, my friend stretched back and joked, "I am large, I contain multitudes," quoting Whitman's "Song of Myself." Writing is how I connect with others. Writing is about ourselves, our off-key singing, our words. Writing does not allow detachment. When the pen is in my hand, I cannot just wade knee-deep; I must be submerged, ears barely above the surface, watching and writing and waiting.

I think this is why I find that writing is always new, surprising. It's because life is always pushing me forward.

I feel that current now, ushering me through my final months at *Polyphony Lit*. I find myself scrambling to write it all down, rushing to meet as many people as I can, to pour over as many submissions as possible. Even after reading hundreds of pieces,

Polyphony continues to surprise me with new ways to feel. In this issue, loss takes shape in so many forms. There's the ache of a summer month ("July"), the confusion after a brother's death ("Him"), the grief in a strained relationship ("Afterword"). We need prose and verse. We need infinite words.

One of my favorite things about *Polyphony* is that we can all recall pieces that have stayed with us. No two submissions are alike because every writer pours their time, their life, their experiences into them. As an editor, I still remember which piece I completed my first in-house edit for, which piece I sent out my first rejection for as Executive Editor.

But more than that, the pieces are inseparable from the people behind them. At *Polyphony*, editors ask questions, articulate intentions, and refine tone so that they communicate exactly what they mean. I feel like I've grown as a communicator. I have learned why certain sounds clash and others soothe, why removing a syllable can make a line more fluid, why a piece may feel rushed or lumbering. Writing is never just about words on the page. It is about connecting with and understanding people using words.

I'm so lucky to have found this community of midnight writers, daytime editors, and full-time brainstormers. I have fallen asleep with lines echoing in my mind, woken up thinking about how best to frame my feedback to editors. For me, nothing is better than drifting off with words rattling around in my head.

Robert Frost calls himself a swinger of birches. *Polyphony* is full of swingers—writers who swing up through imagination and return to the earth, because as Frost writes, "Earth's the right place for love: I don't know where it's likely to go better." In this issue, we showcase works tied by the theme of transport and return. The winning pieces of this year's Latin and Native American Heritage Contest explore how their cultural experiences shape their pasts and futures, how food is used "to keep our island alive / one domingo at a time" ("abuela's kitchen on domingo"). Art is sometimes all we have, all we can do. Mendoza in "Moth-Eaten Scapular" writes: "And I wondered, and I told stories, and I wondered." Warm in "Your Room is a River" responds: "I tremble but can't speak, & so we dance."

If there's one thing I've learned here, it's that the voice of a single creative youth is

powerful, but a community of over 200 young writers across 52 states and 87 nations is unstoppable. At *Polyphony*, we launched the “Wake Up, the War is Here” blog series with Teenside, amplifying the voices of Ukrainian teens during the Russo-Ukrainian War. We interviewed librarians for our series “Love in the Time of Banned Books” to discuss censorship. We brought creative writing into classrooms, into schools in New York City. One day, I hope to walk into my high school library and see teen literary magazines stocked on every shelf.

So to my wayward classmate: give poetry, give writing another chance. If not for its history, then for the fact that writing is here. It’s now. It’s you. It’s in the slang tossed at each other, the inside jokes whispered under our breath, the chants hollered in harmony. Writing breaks down walls—walls that don’t need mending.

So, with all due respect to Mr. Frost, this new chapter belongs to us young writers. It’s my pleasure to introduce Volume 20, Winter.

Fondly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Cloris Shi". The name "Cloris" is written in a cursive script, and "Shi" is written below it in a similar but slightly more stylized cursive.

Cloris Shi

LATIN & NATIVE AMERICAN
HERITAGE CONTEST



EMMA LOPEZ

James Bowie High School, Austin, TX, USA

abuela's kitchen on domingo

Latin & Native American Heritage Contest Winner

the domino tiles click like castanets
against the formica table while abuela
stirs sofrito into black beans,
her wooden spoon conducting
a symphony of spices.

she hums “guantanamera”
under her breath, tells me stories
of havana before she left—
how the malecón tasted like salt,
how music poured from every window
like water, how she danced salsa
until her feet bled beautiful.

in her tiny miami kitchen,
steam rises like memories:
plantains caramelizing in iron,
café bustelo strong enough
to wake the dead, garlic and onion
swimming in olive oil—
the scent of home preserved

in recipes she carries
like photos in her wallet.

“mira, mi amor,” she says,
showing me how to crush herbs,
how to listen for the right sounds:
the soft sigh of rice cooking,
the urgent bubble of frijoles,
the way love speaks in the language
of feeding family. she never measures,
just knows by heart, by hand,
by the weight of generations
in her fingertips.

later, she'll tell me again
about the night they left,
how she wrapped her mother's gold cross
in a handkerchief, how the waves
rocked their small boat like a cradle,
how fear tasted like metal
in the back of her throat.
but for now, she teaches me
to dance between counter and stove,
to make cuban coffee sweet enough
to cure homesickness,
to keep our island alive
one domingo at a time.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

Playful yet sentimental, “abuela’s kitchen on domingo” skillfully intertwines the themes of food and memory within the beautifully developed setting of the speaker’s grandmother’s kitchen. The excellent imagery leaves a strong impact, emphasizing the weight of a family history.

OLIVIA ROMANO

Loyola School, New York, NY, USA

Capirotada Recipe

Latin & Native American Heritage Contest Runner-Up

Capirotada: a warm Mexican bread pudding eaten during Lent (the *r* flips up on the tip of your tongue. *Capirotada, capirotada, capirotada.*)

Ingredients:

Bread—the body of Christ, or so your mother tells you.

Piloncillo—not quite brown sugar, not quite molasses, thick as blood when melted.

Cloves—nails on the cross.

Cinnamon sticks—the cross.

Cheese—the Holy shroud.

Step-By-Step:

1. Preheat your oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit.
2. Scroll through pages of food bloggers' life stories and family histories to find a recipe you can stomach.
3. Melt the *piloncillo* over medium heat (you have to look up that word, and then you repeat it to yourself like the recitation of a prayer. *Piloncillo, piloncillo, piloncillo.*) Some innate part of you knows how to shape your mouth around each syllable, but the sounds you produce are hollow. Do you lisp the *c* into a *th*? Does the *ll* become a *y*, or do you slur it into a *shh*—which quiets you, as you disclose how little you know. You repeat it in a circular rhythm, and your hand stirs in sync. Breathy confessions quiver the rising steam, no screens or

shriving pews between you.

4. Combine it with the cloves, cinnamon sticks, and water. When the mixture melts into something placid and caramel-colored, the spice has been absorbed into the sugar, burned into its very composition. *Piloncillo*, *piloncillo*.

5. Spread the chunks of bread and cheese in a greased baking dish. The bread is the body—the body is more than the house for a soul; it's a sponge for everything around it, soaking up the sapidity of the *piloncillo*. There are unbreakable bones in that body, but the bones are not in the bread. The bones are your bones, hardened and strong, the anatomy of which you inherited from your parents. Pay attention: phalanges clutching the spoon, scapulas bearing weight, hunching you into position. You inherited your mother's small hands and feet but also her resolve, passed through generations of women who had no choice but to be solid and unmovable.¹

6. Add more spice to the *piloncillo* if you wish. A hallmark of Mexican food is its courage to explode with spice. It subverts expectations, combining hot chili and decadent chocolate, biting *tajin* sprinkled on fresh fruit (it took you a while to appreciate this anomaly. On Heritage Day in sixth grade, a heat-swollen day in spring, you brought a box of your favorite Mexican candies, carefully selected to include a variety of flavors and textures. One girl, blonde and thin, made a nasty face when you offered some to her. Her wrinkled nose and pursed lips cauterized into your memory.) You do not know how to wish.

7. Pour the *piloncillo* over the mixture's sleeping form. Gently fold into the staling bread and cheese so that everything is evenly coated. The cheese is pure and soft. Don't think of a burial cloth, that white color, covering body

¹ *My grandmother, devout, strong-willed, and decidedly independent, personifies capirozada. The dessert itself is unique, even in Mexican cuisine. When you take a bite, it's unlike anything you have ever tasted, the texture not quite the milk-soaked, moist bread pudding we have in America. The cheese is chewy and adds a strange, savory flavor. It does not hide its differentness. My grandmother, on the other hand, has built her life around her differentness: exalting it, auto-apotheosis. Her streaks of sovereignty rule her very being. She came to America to live independently from expectations placed on women where she came from, and honors that goal today. She is not afraid to share her opinion on anything, tongue running circles around politics and feminism which Latin American country has the best food (her answer is always Mexico). Our blood runs as thick as piloncillo.*

and blood out of respect or something like shame. The cheese dilutes the pungency of the cinnamon and cloves, but the baker reveres the spices nonetheless.

8. Bake for 40 minutes. Ponder this superficial connection to your past. Listen to your mother tell you about your great-grandmother making this every Easter in Mexico. You never met her, nor have you been to Mexico, nor can you speak Spanish. Mull over that while the bread soaks up the syrup, permanently entangling itself with the *piloncillo*, body and blood.

Serve immediately.



NOTE

This piece was previously published in The Diamond Gazette, Fall 2023.

EDITORIAL PRAISE

While exploring feminine strength and family history, “Capirotada Recipe” reflects on themes of belonging. The piece takes on a reverent yet confessional tone, expressed through religious terminology, which beautifully captures the disquiet that comes from being uncertain of the strength of one’s connection with one’s heritage.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Olivia Romano is a writer from New York City. She is a 2024 YoungArts Winner with Distinction in Creative Nonfiction and a Scholastic Art and Writing Gold and Silver medalist. An alumna of the Iowa Young Writers’ Studio, the Adroit Summer Mentorship Program, and the Kelly Writers House Summer Workshop, she is also an editor for her school’s literary magazine. When she isn’t writing, Olivia loves watching movies and going on long walks.

CORDELIA SCOVILLE

Harvard Westlake School, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Chicken and Rice

Latin & Native American Heritage Contest Runner-Up

I don't remember
the chicken and rice times.
They echoed straight through her
and I lived right in them
for my first few years. I know that there was
light white meat and the rice,
slim and spiced, all in rainbow-
peppers, green and yellow, and tomato
tomato, tomato-
she would use tomato
until she got the hot chili powder mellowed.

I lived in them, but I don't remember
the chicken and rice times.
She says they were fresh-
she uses the words "clean," and "lively."
What I do remember is heavy,
dolce de leche over dry
plastic-package cookies packed with sugar and air
and the thick meats and cheese that
kissed your tongue and weighed you down.

Today it's the whatever's-in-the-fridge times,
the anything and anywhere as long as
it's quick times. The relatives who know
how to make food that's light and heavy
at the same time have all gone away
from me. Myself, I can make beans and rice
and beans and rice and beans and rice
with a crude hot sauce and some "Mexican cheese."
The relatives who took all the good food with them
live in tall apartment buildings now,
straight off the hurricane coast,
and they can all call up memories quick
with dried-out sugar cookies, and tamarind soda.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

Representing different periods of the speaker's life through their everyday meals, "Chicken and Rice" is everything but ordinary—becoming wonderfully tangible in its exploration of the physical feeling of food, its texture and weight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cordelia Scoville is a high schooler and writer living in Los Angeles, and she loves to write both prose and poetry. When she's not writing, she spends her time playing and teaching piano. Her work has been published, is available, or is forthcoming at Skylight Books in Los Angeles, Polyphony Lit, and Crashtest. She is the winner of a silver medal and four gold keys in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, and a two-time winner of Polyphony Lit's Hispanic Heritage Month Award. Her writing has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, DePaul's Bluebook, and the Writopia Lab 2024 Youth Essay Conference.

JAYLA HALL CABRERA

High School of Fashion Industries, Queens, NY, USA

No Sabo Mixed Girl

I grew up knowing
that I came into this world alone.
I'd have to live a good
part of it as such.
But since I am blood-tied
to a culture that has a strong inkling
to keep everyone together –
I thought that this included me too.
Broom in hand, I felt I understood
the rhythm of the language.
At least, until it came to the outside world,
which begged to differ from what
I had perceived. I'd thought
that my safety net was tough enough to
carry all the fishes within it. But the one
who was wrong about the sea
was me – the fish, caught in a fantasy.
I approached the taco cart, and a voice
called out to me, “¿Qué carne quieres?”
I blundered over my words, and everyone
who was kept to their conversations
looked over to the little figure who stumbled
over how to say steak in Spanish.
He could read my expression, sneering

at the no sabo mixed girl. I realized
in that instance he thought I'd have no trouble
and would speak easily. But I blew my cover;
I showed what I truly was. The barrio knew it too.
I was falling behind every other stranger that knew
more than me. I left some bills by the tip jar and ran off
without a taco in hand, the very reason
I came to the food truck in the first place.
I was the stupid girl lost at sea who didn't
know how to speak the language she was born with.
Words that should've danced from my lips
got caught up in my throat and staggered
off my tongue with neither grace
nor redemption.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

A powerful portrayal of how language ability relates to feelings of belonging, “No Sabo Mixed Girl” captures the fear of stumbling over one’s words—the fear of blowing one’s cover and being perceived as someone who does not belong.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jayla Hall Cabrera is a senior in high school based in NYC. She enjoys creative writing, filmmaking, and song writing. Jayla’s work is published in over 9 book collections, and she herself has been working to publish a book of her own, Greenville, a collection of fictional stories that embody everything from childhood wonders to the realities of adulthood. Coming soon in May 2025.

ANAKAREN AVILES

Kinder High School for the Visual and Performing Arts, Houston, TX, USA

Scoville Scale

The sun is scorching. Every year, petates are laid out on the concrete streets of Querendaro. Crimson chiles are dried under grueling heat. Mom's explaining the sight to me. To her, it indicates La Feria del Chile. For me, it's shriveled bodies and ruby shapes. I cross the pedestrian-friendly street to hide under the shade. I get sunburnt easily.

La Feria del Chiles is an excuse for Querendaro to make revenue and chiles capones. It has anticipated music, food, and games. It also has fights, undercooked papas francescas, and drunk cryers. Displays get extreme. Roller coasters like the Gusanito and el Barco Pirata are propped up. The Futbolito games are always busy, and ping pong balls go flying every minute when someone gives the knob too much of a swing. The ground is muddy. Las bandas are busy. The speakers' vibrations are felt from streets away. When the feria's here, no one gets any sleep; no one plans to. I squeeze my eyes shut and turn on my mattress, trying to drown out the blaring music. I pull the fresh pastel-green sheet over my eyes.

Los candiles are no better. The flames like dancing in Mom's caramel eyes. I wish mine were the same shade. Mom's perfect teeth are flashing; she's laughing at Tia's joke about troublemaking kids. My cousins, meanwhile, roast marshmallows and pop palomitas. My devious little cousin throws active cebollitas with abandon. The fireworks dance. Flicker. Fade. My cousin convinces me to join. I'm scared I'll blow my hand off. I grab the red cebollita, inch it near the flame, and watch it come to life. One second. Two. Three. I swivel it and watch it tumble down the street. There's sizzled chicharrones in my mouth when it *bursts*. My aunt offers me Valentina; I refuse. I reject another bit of fire in my hand. My cousin concedes, returning to his firework show solo. I look at my palm. The flame almost kissed my skin.

Mom teaches me how to cook chicharrones de harina. I convinced her to buy a kilo. The golden oil heats up in the silver pot. I clear my throat. Golden bubbles protrude. Mom grabs a fistful of hard orange wheels. They plunge to their fate. I approach. The pot emits a squeal. I grab the tongs and slotted spoon. Mom's hands inch towards me before retracting. Right. A learning moment. The wheels expand, losing their orange color and turning golden. Mom's telling me, 'now', or they'll burn. I fumble. I panic. Like we both expected, the yellow aceite surges. Red spots coat my arms.

I learn quickly; the veins in the chiles asados are meant to be my own. I preserve them. I scrape away the pale-amarillo seeds. Nothing's too spicy here. The chiles are roasted, the limónes are diced, and the sal is sprinkled over the bodies of our flesh. We are what we eat. I'll eat anything that makes me more Hispanic.

The chile rellenos are nearly ready. We beat the egg whites. I loathe when the aftermath results in a pale-yellow batter. Mom puts the yellow yolks in a red tapadera, for later use. I watch over Mom's shoulder. She quirks a silver brow at me. I've told her before that she has a pretty hair color. She doesn't believe me. I haven't told her I want to dye mine silver the same way she wants to dye hers caramel.

In Mexico, we go to el tianguis. Mom always makes a beeline to *that* stall. She orders her gazpacho as I huff behind her. She asks if I want something. She gets out the golden pesos and hands them to the man with a red apron. He asks si lo quiero con chile. Mom's staring. I say yes. Three different chiles somehow make their way onto my diced fruit. Apparently, chamoy wasn't enough. We walk away with large cups in plastic bags, the orange juice having flooded the cup and spilled over already. My hand scrapes the white cheese sprinkled on top. The gazpacho looks like white and yellow confetti. I sigh. Of course, it looks like the floor of an after-party, but there's still red sauce drizzling down the juicy jicama and mango. Mom takes big mouthfuls of hers. She looks expectant. I tell her I'll wait till I get home.

In La Feria, there's vendors selling papitas. I get my hands on one plastic bag. Again, they ask, "¿Con salsa?" I decline. After Mom hands away 10 pesos, I start to devour. The golden slivers inch down my throat. Mom's watching me, green in her eyes.

I'd offer her some, but I know she'd like them better with chile. I crunch with my imperfect teeth.

La Feria is filled with jars of escabeche. Mom drags me past stalls selling dried chiles, chiles capones, cajeta, y puré de camote morado. My mind gets dizzy, but then Mom pushes a jar of escabeche in my hands. I look again. The white onion slices and diced carrots float in the vinegar. She's talking about what she'll make for dinner. I clutch the jar carefully, wondering if the chile's veins are perfectly preserved.

It's night. The moon is freezing. I'm bundled in a pale green puffer jacket. Mom buys us elote blanco and amarillo. My stomach doesn't sit well with the blanco one: when I drink water with it, it turns to masa in my stomach. Mom bathes her elote with cheese. The chili powder lies untouched. She doesn't worry about the mayonesa; she thinks there's too much fat in it. I place a generous dollop of mayo on mine. We feast. The night shows off its pale moon. I see my breath in front of me. Mom's running her cold fingers through my cinnamon-golden hair. She likes her curly hair straight; I like my straight hair curly.

I learned about the Scoville Scale in La Fiesta, which was embarrassing. They have a chart above the chiles. The spicier the chile is, the redder it becomes. The gradient goes from green, to yellow, then red. I prefer yellow to white instead. I knew a white flag meant surrender, but I also knew white on the Mexican flag meant this: unity. I couldn't tell the difference. Mom looks at lettuce heads as I hold the red basket. She tuts, shakes her head. They're still too green.

Mom's roasting green chiles over the parrilla. It's not the sun, but it'll have to do. When smoke trails begin to erupt from it, she cranks the stove back down to zero. I can't look away from the chiles; my stomach rumbles. I imagine seasoning it with sal and adding limón—

The knife swings.

The stem falls away. I look at Mom. She's looking at the chiles, then sighs. She's allergic to chiles now. We'd probably trade places, if we could.

Mom, for my birthday, makes mole. She adds chicken broth to the chocolatey-

paste, and cooks the rice with a tomato blend. The chicken is boiled. The brown sauce turns a color that's a smidge darker than cinnamon. Mom flips handmade corn tortillas on the stove. She urges me to try, but my hand turns red. I'm offended, but then I see Mom's ill-concealed smile, so I laugh.

After icing my arms, I'm first in line. I extend my ceramic plate out to her. There's a gentle smile on her lips. When I finish my second serving, and come back for a third, she tells me:

"Tragona."

I squawk at that. She eats a taquito de queso like she used to in childhood. She can't eat the mole even if she wanted to.

We're at the neveria. La Feria del Chile's performers are at the market square, which is where we're unfortunately located. I'm bundled up again, due to Mom's insistence. The white tiles of the neveria's floor are so riddled with mud I wince. The square is crowded, but people are determined to get beers, paletas, or in my case: horchata.

Immediately, I sip from my straw when I receive it. I grin, showing my imperfect teeth; it's chilled and generous with the ice. My strategy was to stay loyal to my favorite drink wherever I go, and I'm glad it paid off. I reason that it's impossible to butcher horchata, especially when topped with specks of cinnamon.

Mom pays no attention to my drink. I was appalled when I learned she didn't care for it. "Me gusta más la de jamaica," she'd said. She kept reaffirming her preference for the crimson drink until finally, I conceded. I rub my hands together to create heat as we walk. Since the neveria was so crowded, I couldn't hear what Mom ordered for herself.

I check her palms. Nothing. Now, I'm curious. She tells me she's waiting. When we get to Grandma's house, I realize why.

My tia's pouring out a milky-white drink into her precious mugs. She takes gentle care of her collection, so this must mean this is a special occasion. She's pouring into the ceramic before offering some to Mom.

Mom accepts. A steaming cup is delivered in front of her. Atole de canela.

I sat beside her. I drink mine as she drinks hers. Mom's telling me how she still

can't believe that I don't like menudo. I tell her, "Me gusta más el pozole." She gives me her playful frown; she knows she's been beat.

We sip our white canela drinks together. The ice in mine floats as hers continues to steam. The damn Feria's mariachis are still playing in their snazzy red suits; I'm getting sick of it.

I caught myself. La Feria del Chiles is more than just extremes.

Mom hopes to catch its most anticipated event later: El Castillo's fireworks. While I'm worried someone's hair will catch on fire again, I agree to go. The wind is brisk, but I feel snug in my coat. It's a colder night than the others; I might even like the flares.

My tia pops palomitas. The kernels turn white.

For every chile now, I strip away the veins. There's no denying it anymore: I'm a lukewarm Mexican. I thought Mom was my opposite, but really, we're two points on the same plane.

The Scoville scale is a gradient. I'm allowed to like the in-between.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

Chaotic and colorful like the chiles at its center, "Scoville Scale" depicts a vibrant and multi-hued picture of Hispanic identity. Its narrator grapples with their dislike of spice and their desire to prove their Hispanic identity, eventually coming to realize that their belonging is not contingent upon their tastes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anakaren Aviles, 18, is a creative writing senior from Houston, Texas. She enjoys writing creative non-fiction, fiction, and reading magical realism. Her influences are LEGO, animated short films, and her sister.

ZOLA ORTIZ DE MONTELLANO

The International High School of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, USA

Pasteles, Peppermints, and Praise

We ring the doorbell and wait, my teeth chattering in the frosty Tennessee air. I should have known my California jacket wouldn't be warm enough. After a moment, a tall hunched man with silvery hair opens the door, and greets us, smiling warmly.

“¡Hola! Welcome everyone!”

I huddle behind my mom, and watch my cousins, waiting for them to make the first move, trying to figure out how to approach this unknown family. They hug him, greeting him with a “buenas noches, Tio Paco,” but I hang behind, wishing I could disappear into the fog.

I don't belong here.

I shuffle into the house, following the animated stream of people, and arrive in a vast entryway. As aunts and uncles gush over my brother, and how handsome and grown up he looks, I awkwardly stand to the side, studying my surroundings. A Christmas wreath hangs in the corner of the room, and books line the walls, locked behind walls of glass. In the center of the room, a creepy doll perches on a little table, caroling out “Feliz Navidad” over and over again, guarding a bowl of peppermints.

I eye the peppermints, wondering if I'm allowed to take one.

I don't get the choice though, as my eight year old cousin announces we have to go greet Titi Lula in the kitchen. The smell of greasy fat tickles my nose, as we enter the kitchen where a short large woman surveys a pot of boiling water.

“¡Feliz navidades, chicos!” Titi Lula grins at us, and each of us in turn greets her with a hug. “Hola, Zola. ¿Qué tal? ¡Qué bueno verte de nuevo!”

I pause.

“I'm sorry... I – I don't speak Spanish.” I look down at the tiled floor.

“Oh yes, of course. Don't worry about it!” Titi Lula comforts me in a thick accent,

but I know better – my cousins didn’t need her to speak English – because my cousins belong. “Go ahead and join the others. We’re making pasteles.”

Pasteles. How I hate pasteles. A brown gooey blob filled with meaty pork that I need to shove down my throat every Christmas Eve. Because it’s tradition.

I enter the main dining room, which has been filled with massive tables where my family sits around, forming a pasteles assembly line. My parents and brother are nowhere to be seen, so I settle into an empty spot, next to Tía Felicia. Tía Felicia is the lady of the house. A little woman with framed glasses that engulf her face and a curly snow-white bob.

I couldn’t have exchanged more than three words with Tía Felicia, and yet I’m supposed to consider her family.

She’s Isabela’s grandmother.

Isabela, my cousin with whom I had built pillow forts on Christmas Eve, pretending we were twins. Isabela, my cousin who had, all those years ago, written letters to Santa Claus in Spanish without giving it a second thought.

Isabela is at that table too, expertly tying up banana leaves.

“Oh.” She glances over at me. “I can show you how to do that.”

And so, under Isabela’s close instruction, I awkwardly scoop out a blob of masa onto a leaf, pile on the meat filling, and fold up my pastel to create a misshapen log oozing with filling.

Slowly I figure it out, and I get into a sort of rhythm, folding up my pasteles and listening to the busy chatter around me. I’m not part of the conversation, I’m a spectator, which suits me just fine. I’m there, but fade into the background.

Tía Felicia walks around, surveying everyone’s progress. I’m desperate to impress her, though I don’t know why. She pauses at me, and smiles.

“Very good!” she says, in her Puerto Rican accent. “You can take the charge when I’m dead.” She announces this frankly, jokingly, and then moves on, but I’m glowing inside.

I have a place, a part—I matter.

I *do* belong here.

That evening, at dinner time, I force down my pastel, finishing it entirely for the first time. I look around the room, at the excited chatter, the last traces of pasteles, banana leaves untied, strings tossed carelessly aside, at my parents, my brother, at Isabela, Titi Lula, Tío Paco, and Tia Felicia. I look around the room and see my family.

As I walk out the door, I grab a peppermint from the doll, who is still crooning joyfully in her sing-songy voice.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

Introspective and contemplative, “Pasteles, Peppermints, and Praise” offers readers an intimate portrait of the speaker’s extended family. In many ways, language, food, culture, and family are all intertwined – and through the cooking “assembly line” of the speaker’s family kitchen, Zola Ortiz de Montellano explores what it means to find a sense of belonging, even in spite of language barriers.



An Interview with Emma Lopez

Author of “abuela’s kitchen on domingo”

Interviewer: Julian Riccobon

Julian: This poem is filled with sensory details, from the sound of domino tiles “click[ing] like castanets” to the smell of “café bustelo strong enough to wake the dead” to the fear which “tasted like metal.” How do you go about selecting details to include in your work? How can aspiring writers do the same, when it comes to building vivid imagery?

Emma: When I write, I want the reader to feel fully immersed in the world I’m creating, and sensory details are the best way to do that. I try to pull from real-life experiences, especially memories tied to strong emotions. In this poem, every detail—whether it’s the sound of dominoes, the strength of the coffee, or the metallic taste of fear—connects to my abuela and the atmosphere of her kitchen.

For aspiring writers, I’d say start with personal memories and think about what made them vivid. Was it a particular smell, sound, or texture? Small, specific details often make a piece feel the most real rather than trying to be general.

Julian: I absolutely love the line “until her feet bled beautiful,” because it presents such an unexpected combination of words with conflicting connotations. What was running through your mind when you first wrote this line?

Emma: That line came from thinking about the sacrifices woven into my abuela’s life—how beauty and struggle often exist side by side. I imagined her younger self dancing, the joy of it, but also the pain, the resilience. To her, the beauty of dancing, of being young and free in Havana, was worth remembering the pain. That’s what I

wanted to capture: the way something can be both painful and breathtaking at once.

Julian: In the final stanza, you give readers a glimpse of the speaker's abuela leaving Domingo, further developing this connection between the Domingo that she left behind... and the recipes that she still carries with her. Throughout the poem you explore the resilience of memory and intuition through lines like “the scent of home preserved / in recipes she carries / like photos in her wallet” or “she never measures / just knows by heart, by hand.” What do you hope to convey to readers about memory or legacy?

Emma: I wanted to show how culture, history, and love persist in the smallest ways. My abuela left behind one home but carried it with her through things like food, tradition, and instinct. The idea that she “never measures, just knows” speaks to an inherited wisdom—one that isn't written down but is deeply felt. I hope readers see how memory isn't just something we recall; it's something we live, something we pass down in ways we don't even realize.

Julian: Whenever you feel stuck with your writing, where do you turn for inspiration? Do you draw from real-world experiences? Do you have a favorite author or book that inspires you?

Ela: I turn to real-life moments, especially those tied to family, food, and heritage. Even small things—like the way my abuela moves in the kitchen or the way a certain song makes me feel—can spark something. I also find inspiration in poets who write with rich, sensory language, like Ocean Vuong and Ada Limón. Their work reminds me that poetry isn't just about what's said, but how it's said—the textures, the sounds, the silences between words.

When I feel really stuck, I step away from writing and try to experience something tactile—cooking, listening to old songs, flipping through old photos. Usually, inspiration comes when I stop searching for it and just let memory do its work.



An Interview with Cordelia Scoville

Author of “Chicken and Rice”

Interviewer: Julian Riccobon


Julian: Your poem begins with the line, “I don’t remember / the chicken and rice times,” and then proceeds to explore the details that the speaker “lived in” but does not remember. From your perspective, how are food and memory connected – or disconnected? Does food still persist, even when memory might fail us? Does food serve as a reinforcement for memories that might otherwise fade without its support?

Cordelia: In the poem, food serves as a fragile link to the past—vivid and alive in its absence. The “chicken and rice times” contrast with the present’s monotony.

Julian: Who is the person who speaks about the “chicken and rice times”? Is she the speaker’s mother or another relative? And how does food shape the speaker’s relationship with this person?

Cordelia: A daughter recalls her mother describing the “chicken and rice times” as “clean” and “lively.” These memories shape their relationship, with the mother’s vivid past contrasting the daughter’s present of “beans and rice,” reflecting both inherited connection and cultural fragmentation.

Julian: At the beginning of your final stanza, you touch on the importance of not just consuming but preparing food. Whenever you eat “anything... as long as it’s quick,” you sometimes miss out on all of the thought and care that goes in making food by hand. How is the preparation of food significant to this poem and the themes you wanted to develop?



Cordelia: The “chicken and rice times” are tied to thoughtfulness—the spices, the balance of flavors—whereas the present’s “whatever’s-in-the-fridge” meals lack that intentionality. This shift reflects the lack of deliberate preservation of culture over time.

Julian: What do you hope that readers will take away from your poem, even long after they’ve finished reading?

Cordelia: I want readers to recognize how food can reflect both continuity and change in culture and family relationships.



An Interview with Jayla Hall Cabrera

Author of “No Sabo Mixed Girl”

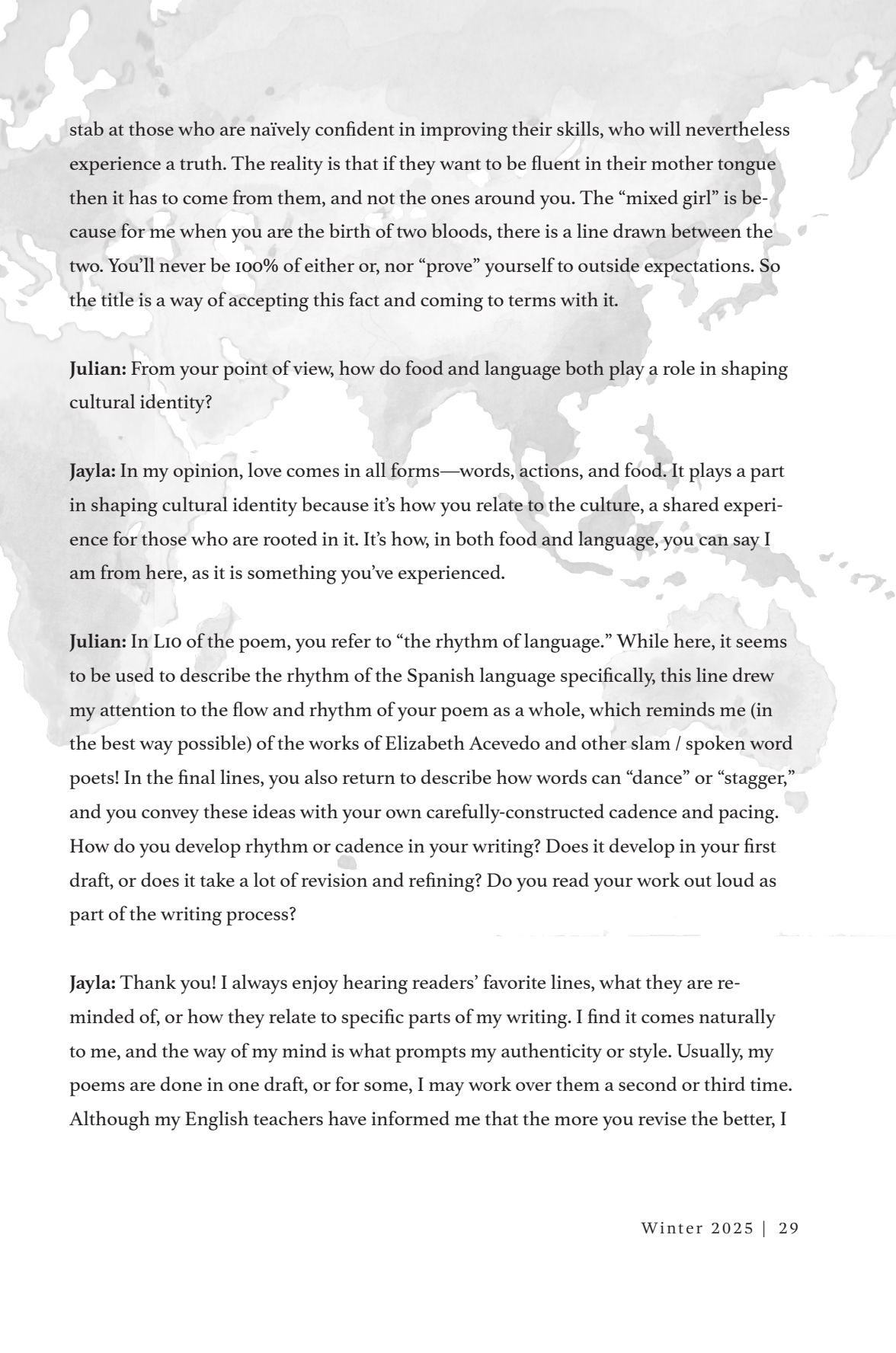
Interviewer: Julian Riccobon

Julian: The opening lines of your poem immediately struck me as introspective and moving, because they plunge readers into the speaker’s internal struggles. As a writer, what do you think makes for a good hook or a good opening line? How can aspiring writers achieve this in their own work?

Jayla: Making a good hook is not being critical of yourself as you write. It may not always be perfect the first time but what I can guarantee is if you are being honest in your writing, then you have nothing to worry about. Something that works for me that I would recommend to other aspiring writers to achieve this in their work is the advice I heard a few years back. Brainstorm what you want to write about, even if it’s incoherent or not a full sentence. The one you feel uncomfortable to delve into, that’s your hook.

Julian: I find the title of your poem really thought-provoking, because it could potentially be interpreted multiple ways. Of course, “no sabo” means “I don’t know,” and in the context of the poem, the line “no sabo mixed girl” appears to describe how the speaker does not know how to speak Spanish fluently. At the same time, though, I could potentially see this phrase “I don’t know” speaking to the narrator’s identity crisis in a broader sense as well, encapsulating how they don’t quite know how to define themselves, based on social and cultural conventions. Could you tell us a little more about how you chose this phrase for the title, and what it signifies to you?

Jayla: For me the “no sabo” comes from the “joke” that those who are not fluent Spanish speakers are conformed to the ideal that they’ll never know. I find it a cruel



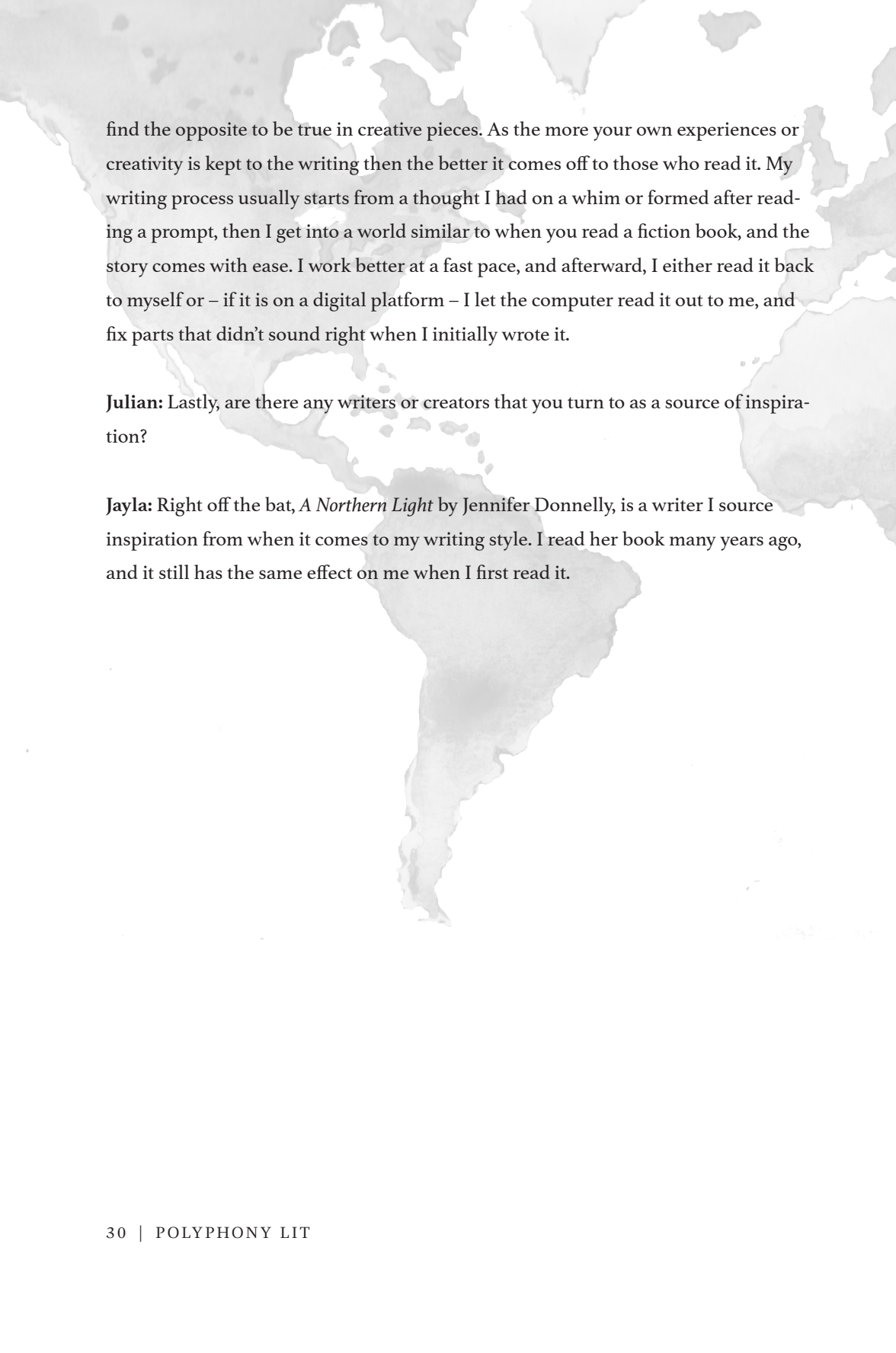
stab at those who are naïvely confident in improving their skills, who will nevertheless experience a truth. The reality is that if they want to be fluent in their mother tongue then it has to come from them, and not the ones around you. The “mixed girl” is because for me when you are the birth of two bloods, there is a line drawn between the two. You’ll never be 100% of either or, nor “prove” yourself to outside expectations. So the title is a way of accepting this fact and coming to terms with it.

Julian: From your point of view, how do food and language both play a role in shaping cultural identity?

Jayla: In my opinion, love comes in all forms—words, actions, and food. It plays a part in shaping cultural identity because it’s how you relate to the culture, a shared experience for those who are rooted in it. It’s how, in both food and language, you can say I am from here, as it is something you’ve experienced.

Julian: In LIO of the poem, you refer to “the rhythm of language.” While here, it seems to be used to describe the rhythm of the Spanish language specifically, this line drew my attention to the flow and rhythm of your poem as a whole, which reminds me (in the best way possible) of the works of Elizabeth Acevedo and other slam / spoken word poets! In the final lines, you also return to describe how words can “dance” or “stagger,” and you convey these ideas with your own carefully-constructed cadence and pacing. How do you develop rhythm or cadence in your writing? Does it develop in your first draft, or does it take a lot of revision and refining? Do you read your work out loud as part of the writing process?

Jayla: Thank you! I always enjoy hearing readers’ favorite lines, what they are reminded of, or how they relate to specific parts of my writing. I find it comes naturally to me, and the way of my mind is what prompts my authenticity or style. Usually, my poems are done in one draft, or for some, I may work over them a second or third time. Although my English teachers have informed me that the more you revise the better, I



find the opposite to be true in creative pieces. As the more your own experiences or creativity is kept to the writing then the better it comes off to those who read it. My writing process usually starts from a thought I had on a whim or formed after reading a prompt, then I get into a world similar to when you read a fiction book, and the story comes with ease. I work better at a fast pace, and afterward, I either read it back to myself or – if it is on a digital platform – I let the computer read it out to me, and fix parts that didn't sound right when I initially wrote it.

Julian: Lastly, are there any writers or creators that you turn to as a source of inspiration?

Jayla: Right off the bat, *A Northern Light* by Jennifer Donnelly, is a writer I source inspiration from when it comes to my writing style. I read her book many years ago, and it still has the same effect on me when I first read it.

An Interview with Anakaren Aviles


Author of “Scoville Scale”

Interviewer: Julian Riccobon

Julian: In your work, I noticed that the references to the Scoville Scale serve as an underlying backbone for the piece, with the comparison of the chile veins to the speaker’s veins serving as a subtextual way of exploring the speaker’s identity. You lace these themes throughout, weaving in subtle references to how the speaker wishes they resembled their mother more closely, while simultaneously exploring how the speaker wishes they had a higher tolerance for spicy food. How did you come up with this conceit behind the narrative? How did you initially make this connection and how did it formulate – in your mind or on the page – as you began writing?

Anakaren: Both the mind and the page are vital. For creative nonfiction, I brainstorm by identifying my life’s patterns. I realized my mom adds chile to anything edible, so my concept began with Tajin. It didn’t bode well; I can’t limit myself to one memory, so I amassed them, creating a palette of experiences. As I brainstormed, I wrote bullet points like; chiles capones, chiles rellenos, la Feria del Chile, chiles asados, etc. This process is to weed the junk out; most of it never makes the final cut.

My brainstorming is flimsy; I must be disloyal to my ideas. I Frankenstein my rough draft, or set my mind to spewing nonsense until it’s long enough to work with. With my first draft done, I go back, reread obsessively, and catch subconscious themes. For ‘Scoville Scale’ (or ‘Tajin’), I often talked about color, but felt stuck, so I researched chiles and found my central theme; a spectrum. I went back and weaved in motifs. I wrote my palette of memories as a gradient, emphasizing mother-daughter relationships, and extremes like hot and cold, sun and moon, and fire and ice.



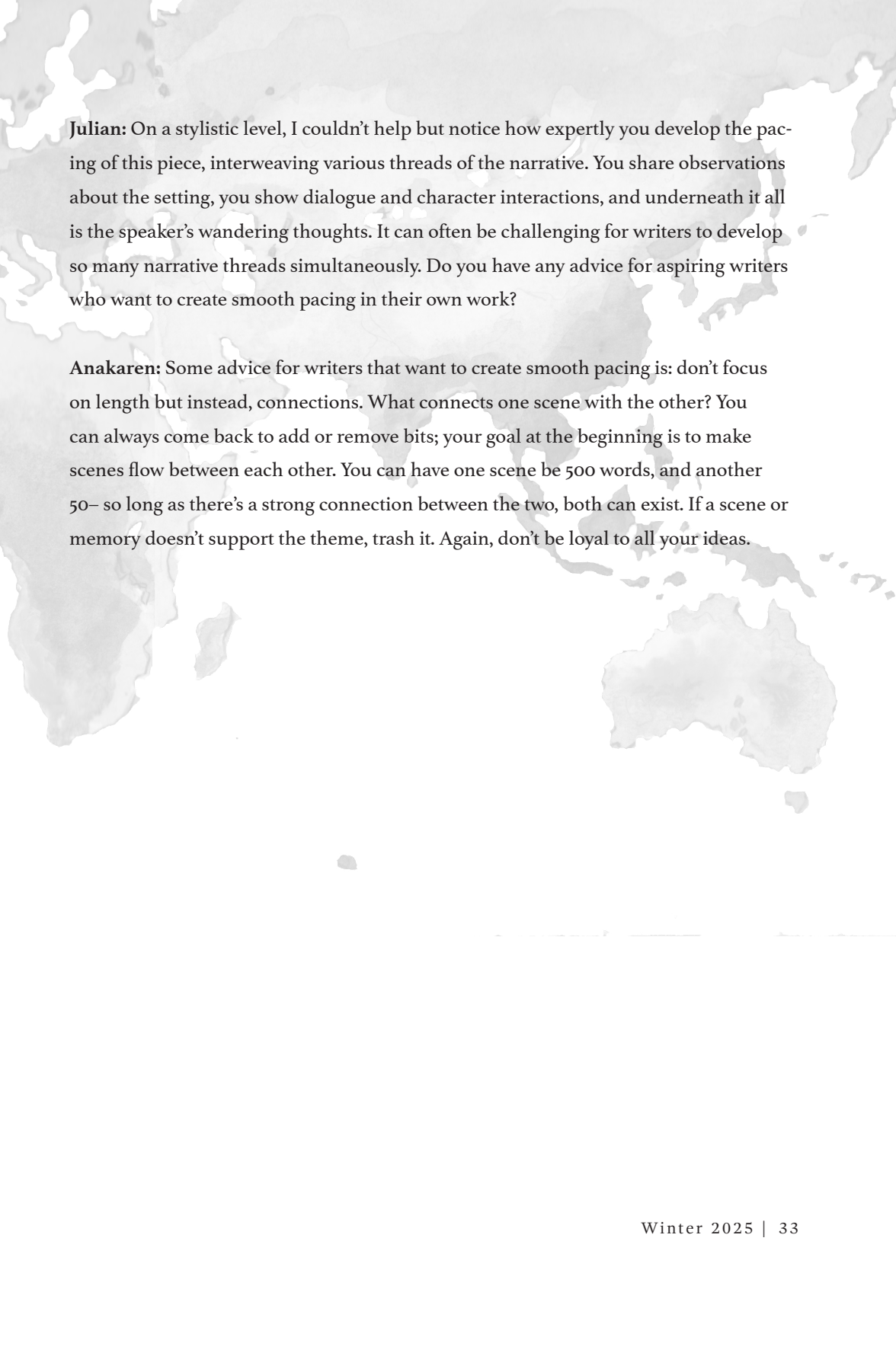
Julian: While the title and themes suggest a primary focus on chiles, you beautifully describe a wide variety of foods over the course of this piece, from the gazpacho at the vendor's stall, to the mole that the mother makes for the speaker's birthday, to the taquito con queso which the speaker's mother eats instead of the mole due to her allergies, to the canela drinks that the speaker and their mother sip towards the end. How does each dish or flavor fit into the mosaic of food and culture that you build throughout this piece? How do food and cooking play a role in shaping the speaker's relationship with their mother – or with others?

Anakaren: Mexican culture emphasizes spiciness, so any non-spicy dish was a subversion or deviation of the culture. Every dish was picked for its connection to Mexican culture, my mother, and/or its color. I painted a gradient with them, going from a scorching red to a refreshing white. I took liberties with the Scoville Scale; I decided to add white and brown, inspired by the Mexican flag.

The food established my relationship with my mom by emphasizing our extremes through color and/or spice. The foods go from Mom's preferences to our shared ones. At the end, I conveyed our similarities by having two drinks made by the same ingredients, but had vastly different temperatures, preparations, and tastes. The white horchata symbolizes my surrender to my 'lukewarm Mexican-ness.' This is exemplified by me accepting or even seeking out Mexican cuisine myself.


Julian: The ending of your piece really leaves readers on a thought-provoking note. What do you believe is essential for crafting a strong ending line in prose?

Anakaren: To write a strong, charged end line in prose, you must analyze your themes. With these themes, you'll craft a final line that concludes your arc and leaves your reader with a satisfied, lingering feeling. If something feels off, it needs adjustment. You'll know when you have the right line when you feel it.



Julian: On a stylistic level, I couldn't help but notice how expertly you develop the pacing of this piece, interweaving various threads of the narrative. You share observations about the setting, you show dialogue and character interactions, and underneath it all is the speaker's wandering thoughts. It can often be challenging for writers to develop so many narrative threads simultaneously. Do you have any advice for aspiring writers who want to create smooth pacing in their own work?

Anakaren: Some advice for writers that want to create smooth pacing is: don't focus on length but instead, connections. What connects one scene with the other? You can always come back to add or remove bits; your goal at the beginning is to make scenes flow between each other. You can have one scene be 500 words, and another 50— so long as there's a strong connection between the two, both can exist. If a scene or memory doesn't support the theme, trash it. Again, don't be loyal to all your ideas.



An Interview with Zola Ortiz de Montellano

Author of “Pasteles, Peppermints, and Praise”


Interviewer: Julian Riccobon

Julian: As a writer or reader, what sort of themes or topics do you find most compelling? Are there any authors or books that you turn to as a source of inspiration?

Zola: As both a reader and writer I am drawn to simple and personal stories. My favorite author is Jane Austen, and her humoristic approach to very real everyday struggles and crises really draw me to her work. I think it is especially her heroines whom I find most compelling, strong women who defy stereotypes of what a strong woman should look like, who have stayed relatable hundreds of years later, and who are most importantly very imperfect. I enjoy imperfect characters because I find they are most easy to identify with, and, in fact, seeing your own flaws in a character you still love can be extremely comforting! It is the stories about flawed and imperfect lives that reflect the world, and it is when these stories are ultimately joyful or optimistic that I enjoy them the most.

Julian: One of the images that really struck me in your piece was the image of the “pastel assembly line.” For me, it evoked the image of a (pleasantly) chaotic family dinner, where everyone is making pasteles at various stages of preparation, and I felt that it also served as an apt comparison for how every member of the family plays a part. How are pasteles made? What is the SparkNotes version of the recipe? And how do the pasteles (or the process of creating them) reflect on the family dynamics in this piece?

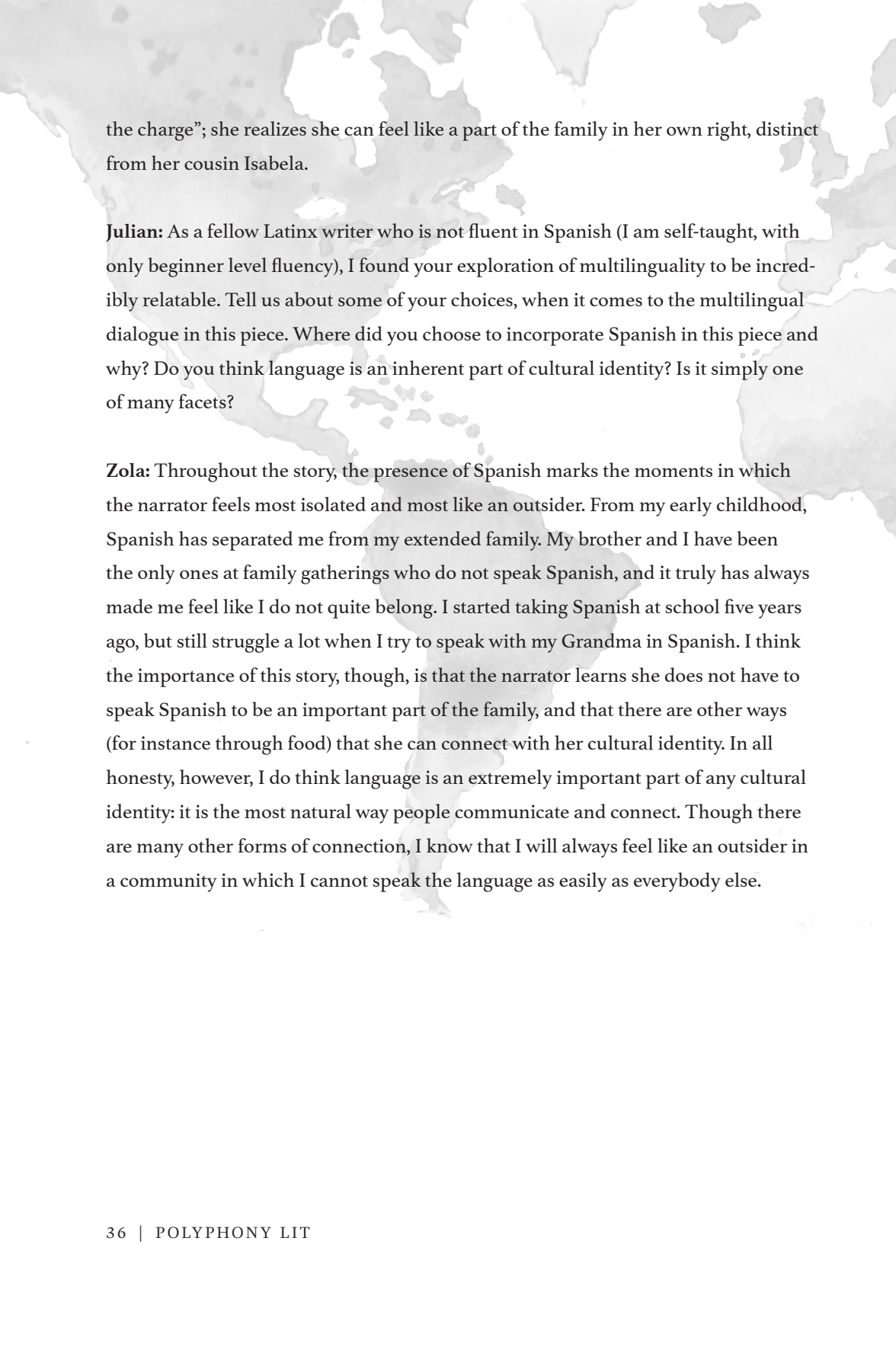
Zola: Pasteles are sort of reminiscent of tamales, except that the dough is made of green bananas and yuca instead of corn. The different steps in the process are first,



making the meat filling and the dough (which involves grating all the bananas and yuca), then assembling them and wrapping them in banana leaves, and finally boiling them. Pasteles are the quintessential Puerto Rican holiday food, and a large part of Puerto Rican tradition. As such, having the narrator not only be unfamiliar with the preparation but also actively repulsed by the flavor illustrates her uncomfortable separation from her culture. However, the process of making pasteles is so elaborate that it is by necessity a family affair; it forces the narrator to take part and contribute, and though each person may be working on a different task, every part of the process, and therefore each person's role in the family, is important in creating the end product. In its final form, it becomes a representation of a family coming together and connecting over a shared tradition.

Julian: The speaker's relationship with their cousin Isabela seems to contain a unique combination of warmth, admiration, envy and nostalgia. Although the speaker has fond memories of building pillow forts with Isabela, it seems like Isabela also serves as a representation of what the speaker longs to be (a member of the younger generation who is fully connected with the family's Puerto Rican heritage and feels completely at home at this family gathering). Could you tell us a little more about the significance of this relationship to the story?

Zola: That is totally right! When the narrator was younger she always felt very close to Isabela, the connection was easy, and by extension she felt like less of an outsider. When she is older, the interactions with Isabela become marked by unfamiliarity instead, illustrating how she has unintentionally distanced herself from her Puerto Rican identity. Isabela simply becomes an unpleasant reminder of how much she does not belong: as the narrator compares herself to how Isabela acts, and how at ease Isabela is, she feels it is impossible for her to be the culturally-connected version of herself she longs to be. Importantly, although Isabela is the one who at the beginning is "expertly tying up banana leaves," the narrator is able to almost surpass her, which we see through Tia Felicia's statement designating the narrator as the one who will "take



the charge”; she realizes she can feel like a part of the family in her own right, distinct from her cousin Isabela.

Julian: As a fellow Latinx writer who is not fluent in Spanish (I am self-taught, with only beginner level fluency), I found your exploration of multilinguality to be incredibly relatable. Tell us about some of your choices, when it comes to the multilingual dialogue in this piece. Where did you choose to incorporate Spanish in this piece and why? Do you think language is an inherent part of cultural identity? Is it simply one of many facets?

Zola: Throughout the story, the presence of Spanish marks the moments in which the narrator feels most isolated and most like an outsider. From my early childhood, Spanish has separated me from my extended family. My brother and I have been the only ones at family gatherings who do not speak Spanish, and it truly has always made me feel like I do not quite belong. I started taking Spanish at school five years ago, but still struggle a lot when I try to speak with my Grandma in Spanish. I think the importance of this story, though, is that the narrator learns she does not have to speak Spanish to be an important part of the family, and that there are other ways (for instance through food) that she can connect with her cultural identity. In all honesty, however, I do think language is an extremely important part of any cultural identity: it is the most natural way people communicate and connect. Though there are many other forms of connection, I know that I will always feel like an outsider in a community in which I cannot speak the language as easily as everybody else.



ARTWORK





Artist Spotlight

Zhile Zhou

Artist Statement

I love painting and creative writing. Inspired by imaginative and avant-garde genres, my works often fall in the realms of magical realism, surrealism, and post-modernism, drawing influence from my favorite artists and authors like Henri Matisse, Moebius, Gabriel García Márquez, and Kazuo Ishiguro. Social and cultural themes are frequently explored in my art. I have painted many artworks, including an art book of García Márquez's novels and short stories. Recently I am working on a storybook project featuring quantum mechanics and philosophy. Most of my works are digital art created with Procreate, which allows me to experiment with distinctively digital effects that simulate pop-art.

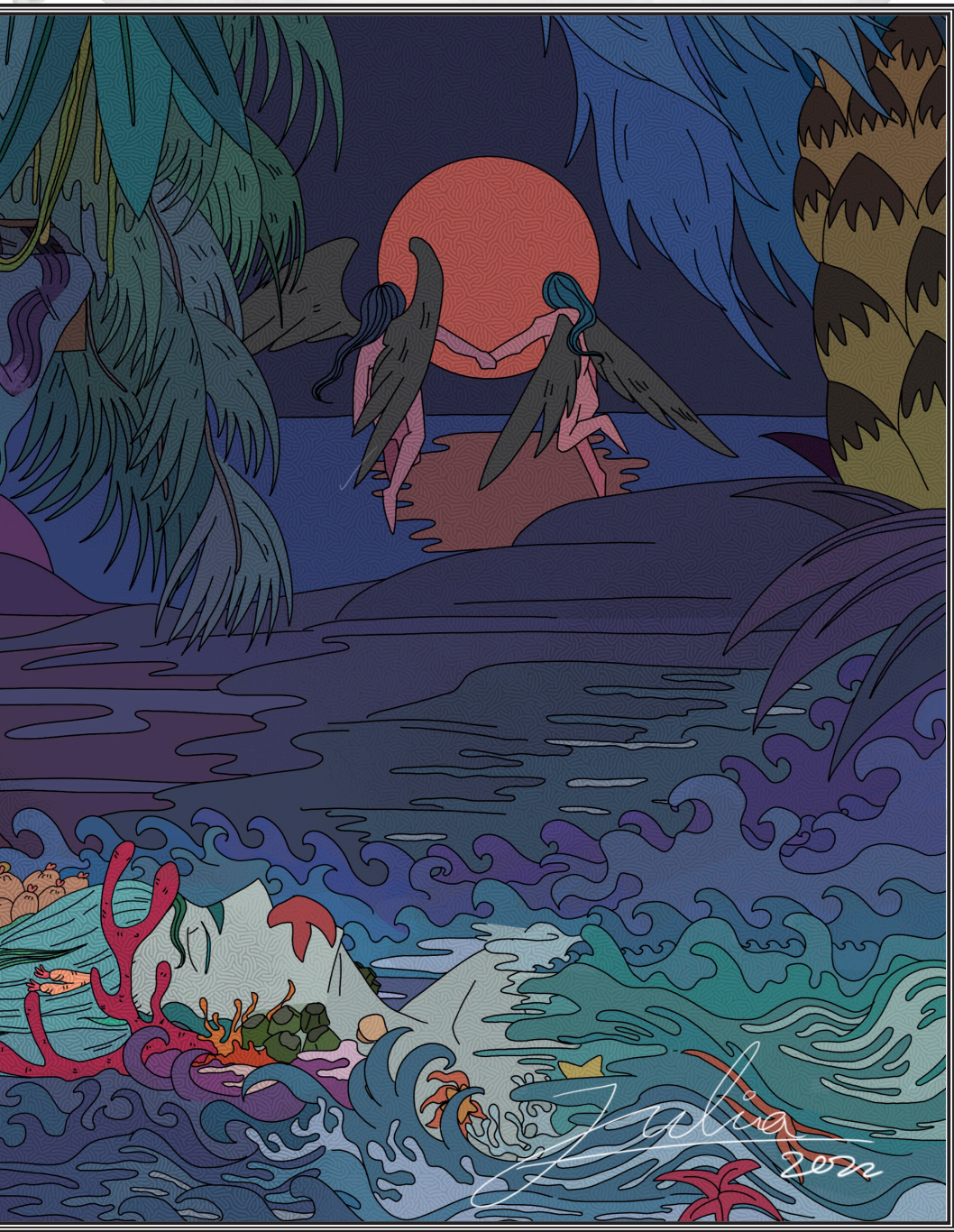
I am a grade twelve student at Beijing Keystone Academy. Theoretical physics, modern European history, and mathematics are my favorite subjects. I am interested in vexillology, and in my free time, I am self-studying Norwegian, hoping to one day read Jon Fosse's works in their original language.



Featured Art (next page):

“The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World”





FALL CONTEST



ARIEL WU

YK Pao School, Shanghai, China

on chinese lesbian slang

Fall Contest Winner

特¹, that's what they whisper
in the streets when you pass in your supple,
green absence
of curves. the air slithering in their teeth like the dove-soft ribbon you tie around
my heart a bird a bow-pretty poem *am i*
pretty in between your ribcage? do my words
bloom like tiger lilies in
your butterfly intestines? you asked
last friday when we walked into 一点点², our fingers
knotted like a crinkled river, you saw
the cashier whisper 特 & unweaved our hands rivers
crumbling & the mid-autumn dying in our palms
but do you know 特 (tē) is four characters away
from 阿尔忒弥斯, meaning artemis, meaning
you at night the cratered light runs rampant on
the crescents of your chest
like a martyred poet & my poem pours
into your collarbone like drowning rivers.³ sheathed
in the carmine moon you told me im

¹ Butch lesbian, tomboy

² Chinese bubble tea brand

³ Chinese milk brand

NORALEE ZWICK

Willow Glen High School, San Jose, CA, USA

ode to the broken crayons I had to throw away

Fall Contest Runner-Up

so I miss you in color. I empty my pockets & what's left of you
spills out; frayed thread, twines of hair, wax snapped in two;
litters of drawings; shreds of paper, scratches painted rainbow
down the side; I shroud you wine-dark, now. your hair, down
and illumined crimson. I have been scrubbing
the remnants of your shirt out of my hands, impatient;
you won't go, I peel back another layer of skin, bleed
berry juice, you as the undersides, tap my veins and steal my breath,
I'd let you, I would. of course
I miss you. no one laughs in time with me, and I keep waiting
for your smile; the second in which you fold, crinkled tissue, before
cherry tints your mouth. I watch you move and every word is pulled out of me
like teeth, the roots bleeding crushed currant, and there you go ruining
them all, every shade of red. someone has abandoned a carton of half-rotten
strawberries in the trash can; I envy that, too. the streaks
it leaves on the white bag, seeping through. so you give me softness
to search for, to keep you living beside me; I mean I'd like to see you
pressed against my side and if I cannot have that I will take the juice,
the dye across my fingers, the crayon under my fingernails; all of it,
all of it, everything; the smile on your face when I insisted your shirt
was dark red, *no*, you said, *it's purple, don't you have eyes*; I see you everywhere,

you and the shade streaked across my hands, I take the offending crayon
out of the trash can; its label reads BRICK RED in big block letters; I turn to you,
tell you I win, you're not there, all I have are feathers, all i have is fruit



EDITORIAL PRAISE

In “ode to the broken crayons I had to throw away,” color is remembered by “crinkles,” “veins,” “hair.” Each line dips into painful absence—human connections crushed into broken chords; personal memories staining and sketching onto negative space; every type of reunion and remembrance taking lyrical flight. With striking delivery of emotional pacing and conscious-driven motion, “ode to the broken crayons I had to throw away” splatters paint all over the room of longing, texturizing the persistence of farewell.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Noralee Zwick is a student and poet based in the Bay Area, California. A California Arts Scholar and Iowa Young Writers Studio alum, their work appears in Neologism Poetry Journal, Hot Pot Magazine, and Prairie Home Magazine, among others. They can be found teaching and researching art, admiring old jewelry, and making an unholy amount of Spotify playlists.

LEWANG

Edgemont High School, Scarsdale, NY, USA

Ode to a Former Prom Queen

Fall Contest Runner-Up

after Demon Copperhead by Barbara Kingsolver

i.

He was a boy
turned God. The night bruising
red around us. Hungry for neon
electric. So we tried to outrun
our tomorrows - yellow lights and
a whirlwind romance. Loved like salt
to wound. The pearls we crushed
between our molars - erasing the night
sky. When June comes to call, I tell
her I am finally queen. Coronated
by cigarette butts. My throne the back
seat - chasing stars down barren
avenues. Ran green lights to stop. Violets
and violence. Scarlet on carmine. I tied my jaw
into a bow and swallowed my desire
for the ocean.

ii.

One night I saw her. Deer in headlights. Netted in

blue neon chroma. And sickly yellow curving off her neck. She looked
at me with roadkill eyes. Night stained by mascara. More meat
than girl. Pausing as an afterthought - she told me my heart
was more sponge than tissue. Pink fleshed - and with more
to give. Faster to run. Vermillion. And cherry softened
bruises. Nothing more for me to catch -
but myself before the windshield.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

“Ode to a Former Prom Queen” is a cinematic night drive. The speaker’s voice is unforgettable – both fantastical and haunting. Through visceral syntax and enjambments, Wang’s outstanding lines such as “Night stained by mascara” and “Ran green lights to stop” paint a chilling portrayal of teenhood and yearning. Be prepared: this poem takes sharp turns, rolls down the car window, and wrecks you over. It makes you feel glorious and then raw – with touches of “bruising reds” and “sickly yellows.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Le Wang is from Scarsdale, New York. Her art and poetry has been published or is forthcoming in wildness, Gigantic Sequins, the Blue Marble Review, and elsewhere. Le’s work has been recognized by Scholastic Art and Writing Awards.

ANYA RAMASWAMY

New Trier High School, Winnetka, IL, USA

Who Collects the Tears

“It’s never too late to be a stem that holds the flower” my grandfather would say.

Chennai, India has three seasons – hot, hotter, and hottest. My summers are not just a school break, but a tradition. My older sister and I would pack our bags, leaving behind our Windy City for the sweltering heat of our grandparents’ home. We always arrived in Chennai in the hottest season and bid our goodbyes as soon as the monsoon rain began.

My grandfather was a calm, compassionate, and loving man. He’d open the door with two pieces of Jangari in his hands. The sticky Indian sweet would be dripping all over as he says, ‘Ready for another one?’ in his baritone Tamil. Upon arrival, every morning started with a prayer. We’d prepare a basket of red, white, and pink lotus flowers while our grandfather stood stoically at the face of our gods. It seemed as though he knew something my sister and I never would. It may have been his unblinking stare, the way the breeze never seemed to touch him. Not a wink of disturbance as the three of us stood there, him staring at the gods, and my sister and I staring at him.

At the end of his prayers, my grandfather would choose either my sister or me to ring his ceremonial brass gong. Usually, it was me. Just as he did by the doorstep, my grandfather would give us some Jangari with his ever-low voice muttering ‘Prasadam’ as the syrup swallowed our hands. ‘Blessing,’ he would repeat. Yes, it was a blessing. Around this time, my grandmother would make her way, slowly and patiently finding her place by the altar. My grandfather would scoop some red vermilion powder encased in a little silver bowl by the oil lamp and swipe a streak along my grandmother’s forehead. With her wistful smile, she seemed to see past my grandfather— just as my grandfather had done to the gods. She knew something all three of

us didn't. *What are you hiding?* I always wondered but never asked. Time would tell me once I needed to know.

Tropical monsoons thundered every other evening in Chennai. One afternoon, during the monsoon shower, my grandfather took us to a small pond next to the house to gather lotus flowers for his prayers. We stood there in the rain with our empty wicker baskets, and umbrellas tightly clasped, watching the broad leaves of the lotuses floating away. My sister and I started to run and clasp them before my grandfather stopped us with nothing but his hands on our shoulders.

"What do you see?" He asked us. My sister and I looked at each other warily— all we saw were the flowers.

"Where is the water going?" He prodded. I looked on as raindrops fell onto the broad leaves of the lotus— leaving them... dry? The leaves are a part of the flower, experiencing the same stimuli, life, death, and evolution. They curl and cup the delicate petals, and present the lotus in all its beauty— but in the times when it matters, in the times when it rains, they just float away fully unhinged and dry. My grandfather left us with a question that day: If the lotus, with its pretty pale blush, feels the tears of rain lashing against its skin, who will be there to collect them? Who will be there when it matters the most?

"Promise me," he then told us, "promise me to be the leaves during the happy days and be the stem when the times are tough." We saw our grandmother staring at us from through the veranda of the balcony. Her eyes, usually wandering about, seemed eerily focused this time – on my grandfather.

My sister and I didn't understand the significance at the time. We simply shrugged, chucked leaves at each other, and held out our grandfather's hand as he stared beyond the flowers. I remember that day vividly. Our laughter echoed around the pond along with the lotus petals drifting up into the sky. Towards my grandmother, it seemed.

My grandfather passed away last year. My grandmother was married to him for 53 years. He was everything to her. Throughout the years, I've noticed how her thin sarees become a thick shawl wrapping around a short, rounded body. One leg is thicker than the other, stumpy and bruised with each wavering step. Her thick hair over time turned

into wisps of grey, framing a craggy face with eyes devoid of any color—devoid of any life. She would snifle with eyes perpetually lined in red—she was trying to hide it, and it wasn't working.

It never works. And why should it? Why try hiding your sadness, why construct our own boxes filled with Pandora's gore? Why manifest a haven of our nightmares and fears, with no means of escaping? This is what my grandmother did: she created her own, livable source of trauma. A buildup of a cancerous cell slowly eating away at our sanity, and our security. Our safety.

Why do we drain ourselves by keeping our souls locked up tight when true bravery is finding the strength to embrace them? The answer seemed simple once I got a glimpse of what the aftermath of a widow looked like in her hometown. As part of the ritual of indoctrinating her into widowhood, the priest spelled out the rules my grandmother was supposed to follow. It began with the removal of color. No colorful jewelry, vermilion bindi, no vibrant sarees. And slowly, just as her wardrobe shifted from brilliance to lackluster, so did the color in my own grandmother's eyes. She resigned. She became defeated; the deluge had begun, and her leaves had failed her.

One day out of spite, I placed a vermilion bindi onto my grandmother's forehead while she was speaking. The minute my fingers glanced at her forehead, her eyes abruptly opened, and her hands shot up and cinched my wrists. For minutes, we both stood there. Two lives, two generations apart, two sets of eyes staring unblinkingly at each other. I wasn't sure what to say, so I said nothing at all. I simply stood there and let her see what the world had seen of her. What the gods had seen of her. What my grandfather had seen of her. And in those moments, slowly and unsteadily, did she snifle. The wrinkles that marred her cracked and stretched, letting loose a sigh, a cry, and a laugh. Maybe all at once. For the first time since my grandfather's passing, I saw my grandmother smile.

We decided to bring our grandmother to the US to live with us soon after. These days, my grandmother and I parse through her childhood comics: "Stories of Suppandi." Suppandi, the main character, was my grandmother's Laurel and Hardy. He would somehow manage to find trouble, and mysteriously escape it. The main thing

about Suppandi? It was his colorful depiction. Whirls of color danced along each page, it was tough to tell where one scene started, and another ended. Time for my grandmother might not be as friendly. It is now me who stares at her, beseechingly and knowingly, just as she had done those many years ago to my grandfather. But that's not to say, however, that whatever time is left, will be filled with the whorls of Suppandi.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

“Who Collects the Tears” is a virtuoso tribute to intergenerational loss and healing. Set in the summer of Chennai, India, this memoir blooms into vivid descriptions of cultural heritage and incredible motifs – bringing in emotional heatwaves and meditative breezes. With a resonating authorial voice and intricate characterization between the grandmother, narrator, and greater family members, Ramaswamy depicts a tender exploration of human grief, growth, and catharsis.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anya Ramaswamy is a junior at New Trier High School in Illinois. Anya is a creative writer who enjoys writing about diverse topics ranging from her multi-cultural heritage to other highly sensitive matters that warrant societal change. Her flash fiction on straddling across cultures won the Scholastic Art & Writing Award. Anya is also an avid Jazz singer and entrepreneur. She is the founder of TealTie (www.tealtie.com), a community that empowers and supports youth sexual assault survivors.

ENNIO GENIBLAZO

Oregon Episcopal School, Portland, OR, USA

Dreaming of Pink and White

Only on dreary nights, when ceaseless wind barges through the shutters, can you dream. And dark winters like these, so far gone from green leaves and drawn-out sunsets, happen to be just that.

Dreams are akin to holes of indeterminate width, where you can't see where you land until you're already falling. Sometimes, you leap too far when jumping into the pit, and your head crashes against the confines of the container, where reason wavers, where the troubled stories of bygone years reign. It's where fantasy peers through the shutters and you try to ignore it.

You're on a dusty path that cuts through dunes like a butter knife, walking with broken soles and bent knees, onyx-black stabbing into the skin already tough from many miles. The grandfather clock half-buried into the sand chimes twelve.

You walk up, up, up. Up until your grandmother collapses, skin flaking off pearl skin, limbs so thin that you look away, towards God above, warm eyes gazing down on you with a fanged sneer. Up, up, up, until you remind yourself to cry on the top of the world.

It's only up on apexes when you can see a clear view of where you were. And there you see, for miles behind you and miles ahead, the bodies strewn to the side of the black-sand path trodden on by so many footsteps. Flamboyantly dressed, with pink-and-white suits and dresses and top hats, their limbs twisted in awkward angles, the scene before you was reminiscent of flowered meadows, posthumous twitching like petals in a breeze. The soft pink violently clashes against the sand dunes. They look dead, at least what you would expect of the dead, with skin tightly wrapped around exposed bones and eyes plucked by circling vultures in the cloudless sky. It was so unlike the open casket at the funeral of a grandfather you never met, whose

hands so alike to your mother's were peacefully placed by his side, whose face still rested in a small smile.

It seems to go on forever, as your eyes trace the queue far towards the horizon, where black sand and pink suits meld and individuals become a mass. You wonder if you will be one of those corpses one day, picked up and cast away in pink and white, forced to dance along to the whistle-hums that float and bound throughout the endless valley. You won't be a person anymore, just a broken mannequin that was strewn aside so others could continue.

The people around you, they all look at you, with cloudy eyes and grim expressions. Take the train, they say. Take the train, the train west, into winding hills and ginkgo trees and cracked pavements. Into suburban blocks and fallen chestnuts and halloween decorations left out a little too long. Into redwood fences and chain gates that grate against the ground, where voices call you to dinner, the smell of oxtail broth hanging in the air.

Take the train, they say. Take the train, the train west, into the unsetting sun. Go far away, 'til dunes become concrete mazes and 'til blue sky turns sallow, where night is always and they cannot find you. It's where you will be safe, safe from pink and white overalls, from long lines through the desert.

You do end up taking the train, where you find yourself under high arches and shadows of gray megacities, where color is rare and everything is much larger than at first glance. Storm clouds cover the sky.

You pull the corners of your lips into a smile. You collide with the walls of the container, your dream. The air is sickly warm.

Not every dream has a meaning. Sometimes, you look too far into a story so convoluted with metaphors and symbolism that you end up in a very different place than intended. What is the train, from where did it arrive, and why do corpses wear pink and white, with twisted smiles?

Not every dream has a meaning, but this one, this one feels important.

EDITORIAL PRAISE

“Dreaming of Pink and White” is a piece you must read in your lifetime. That is to say, this story may or may not cause nightmares, or even worse: existential questions. Geniblazo’s virtuosity in storytelling creates an ensemble on morality and individuality, touching every chromatic scale. Charming surrealism dashes into musical rhythm and repetition, and the hypnotic tune “Take the train” becomes stuck in my head again. After I wake up, I always end up with this sentence between my hands: “Not every dream has a meaning, but this one, this one feels important.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ennio Geniblazo is a writer and graduate of the Iowa Young Writers’ Studio, with short stories like “Butterflies on a Beacon Light” and poems like “mosquito’s romance” being author-workshopped and award-winning pieces. When not writing, you can find him playing tennis or visiting the food trucks in his hometown of Portland, Oregon.



An Interview with Ariel Wu

Author of “on chinese lesbian slang”

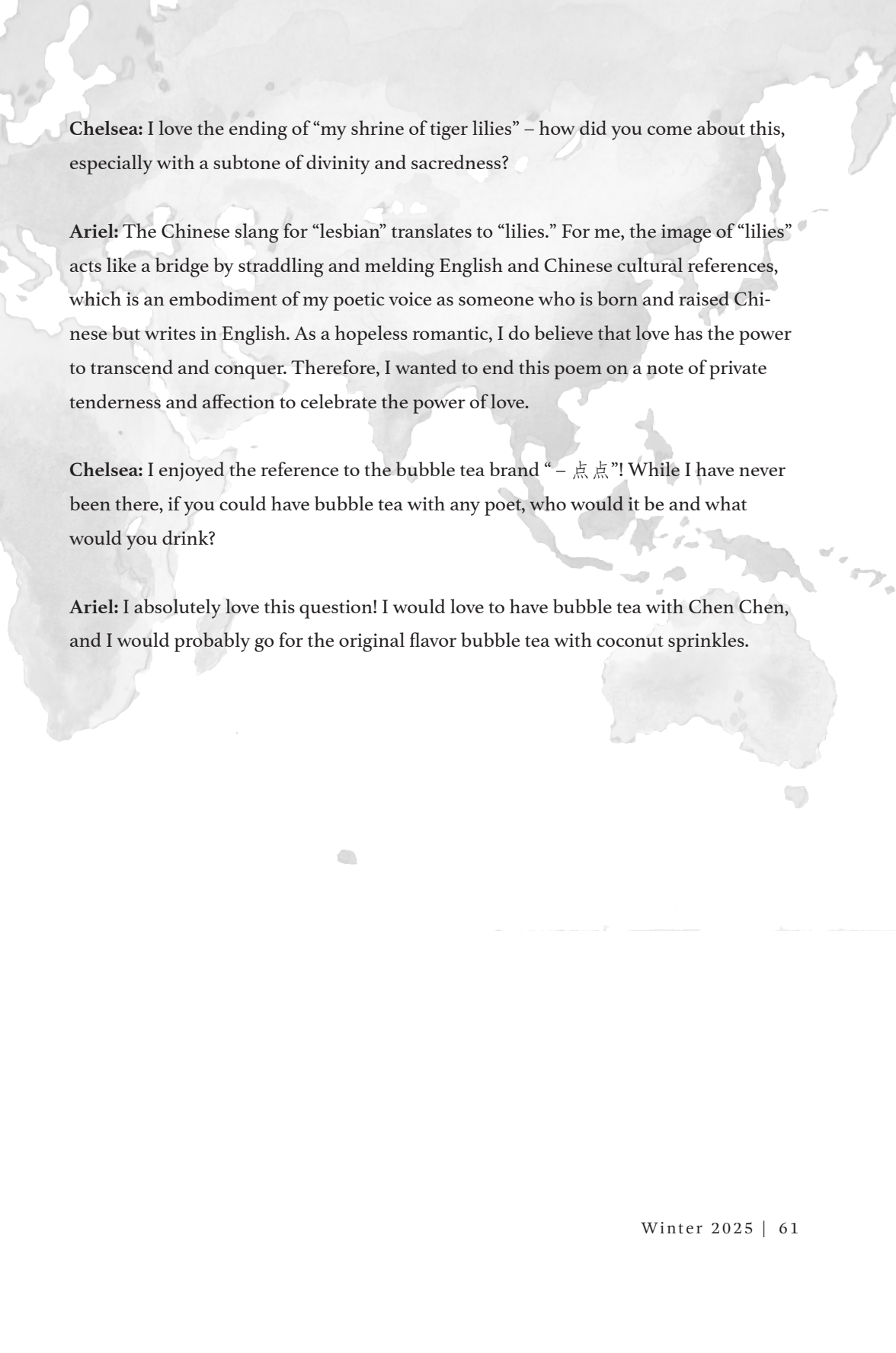
Interviewer: Chelsea Zhu

Chelsea: What was your writing process behind the poetic form of “on chinese lesbian slang?” Tell us a little bit more on your journey through crafting the line-breaks, white space, and stanzas.

Ariel: I have always envisioned queer love to be liquid, lithe, water-like, which is why the form of “on chinese lesbian slang” resembles a flowing river. There’s also something elusive and airy about the secrecy of queer love, especially in an East Asian context. I wanted to capture this light airiness through very arbitrary line breaks and random insertions of white space, giving the poem an ethereal quality. This poem is a celebration of a hyper-feminine form of love, so I wanted it to reject the rigidity of linear poetic forms and instead exist within a soft, fluid space.

Chelsea: I noticed a textural juxtaposition between soft images, such as “milky fingers,” “ribbons,” and “dove-soft” with sharper images, such as “barbed hair,” “baseball bat,” and “buttress of right angles.” What did you hope to depict through this fantastic usage of poetic technique?

Ariel: In this poem I wanted to depict sapphic love not as something that can be defined by binary stereotypes but something that differs from other forms of love in being exclusively feminine. There is the age-old stereotype of butch lesbians being masculine and tomboyish – embodied through the sharper images of “barbed hair” and “baseball bat” – but this poem refuses to label them as such. I wanted to portray sapphic love as something that does not exist in opposition to masculinity, something in which femininity can be indulged in oversaturated sensuality.



Chelsea: I love the ending of “my shrine of tiger lilies” – how did you come about this, especially with a subtone of divinity and sacredness?

Ariel: The Chinese slang for “lesbian” translates to “lilies.” For me, the image of “lilies” acts like a bridge by straddling and melding English and Chinese cultural references, which is an embodiment of my poetic voice as someone who is born and raised Chinese but writes in English. As a hopeless romantic, I do believe that love has the power to transcend and conquer. Therefore, I wanted to end this poem on a note of private tenderness and affection to celebrate the power of love.

Chelsea: I enjoyed the reference to the bubble tea brand “一点点”! While I have never been there, if you could have bubble tea with any poet, who would it be and what would you drink?

Ariel: I absolutely love this question! I would love to have bubble tea with Chen Chen, and I would probably go for the original flavor bubble tea with coconut sprinkles.

An Interview with Noralee Zwick

Author of “ode to the broken crayons I had to throw away”

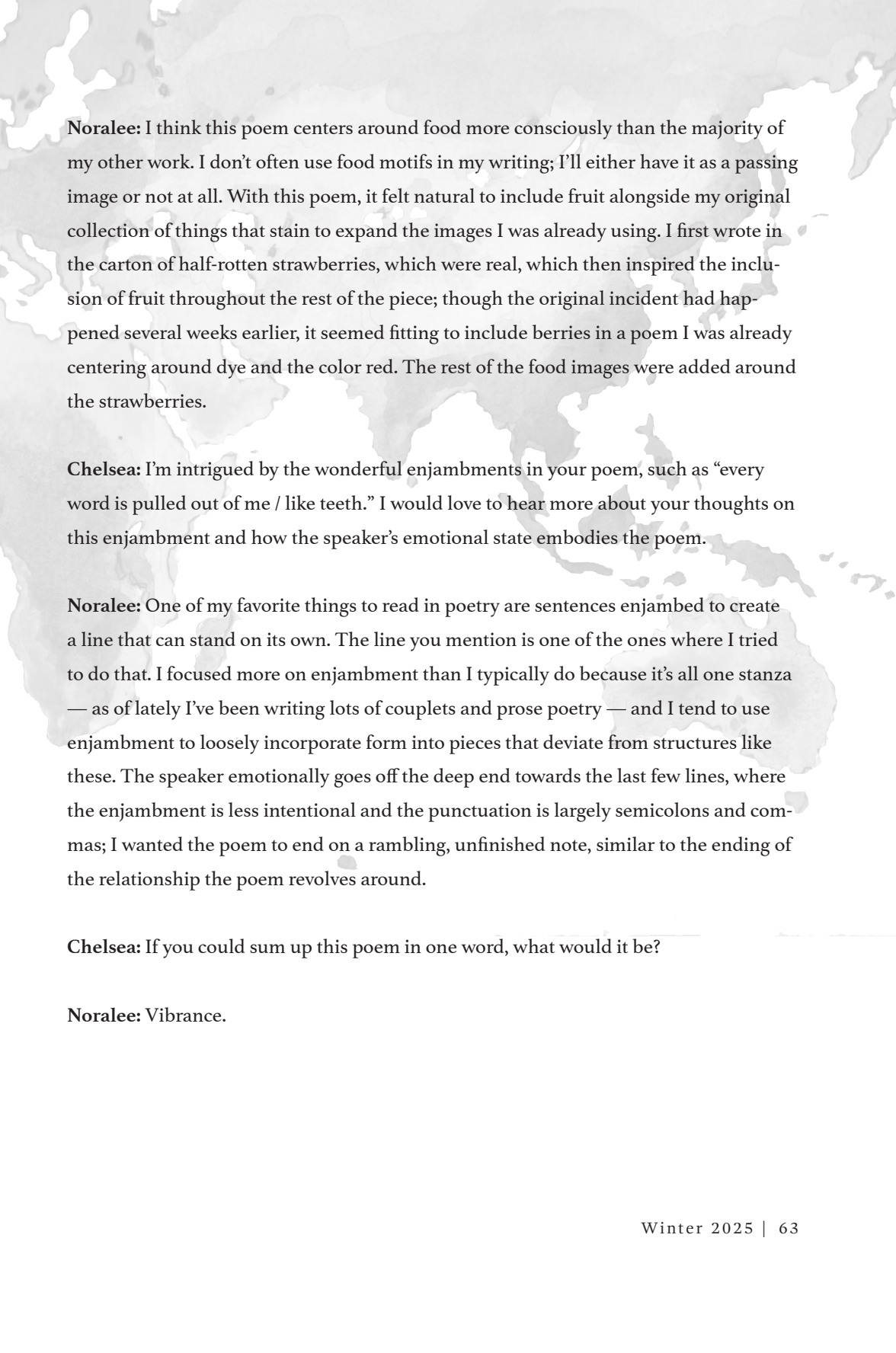
Interviewer: Chelsea Zhu

Chelsea: What was your writing process behind the lines “scratches painted rainbow down the side” and “wax snapped in two”? It’s so amazing! What was your inspiration behind these images? What do you hope readers imagine or understand from them?

Noralee: I work as a ballet teacher for younger dancers, and the studio I work at focuses on implementing a love of creativity and dance into its students. To do this, we often use props — feathers, stuffed animals, or plastic wands — alongside each activity. For the youngest classes, we also block out the end of class time for coloring in a drawing based on different ballet stories. This poem was inspired in part by the studio trash can after a day full of classes like these, which are often filled with scribbles of coloring sheets my students leave behind, or crayons they break in half.

When I picture this poem, I don’t think of the trash can. The day I wrote this, I had given one of my three-year-olds a feather for an activity that she immediately stuck in her mouth. The dye from the feather stained her face and lips magenta; then, when I took it from her, the feather stained my hands too. I immediately knew I wanted to write about it in the context of absence. While this is a very specific image, and one that the majority of readers wouldn’t automatically visualize, the idea of relationships strong enough to dye and stain is one that many people can sympathize with. That is at the heart of the poem, and it’s what I hope people understand when reading.

Chelsea: I noticed food motifs throughout your poem, and I am wondering how you see it work with other components of your poem—or maybe your writing in general!



Noralee: I think this poem centers around food more consciously than the majority of my other work. I don't often use food motifs in my writing; I'll either have it as a passing image or not at all. With this poem, it felt natural to include fruit alongside my original collection of things that stain to expand the images I was already using. I first wrote in the carton of half-rotten strawberries, which were real, which then inspired the inclusion of fruit throughout the rest of the piece; though the original incident had happened several weeks earlier, it seemed fitting to include berries in a poem I was already centering around dye and the color red. The rest of the food images were added around the strawberries.

Chelsea: I'm intrigued by the wonderful enjambments in your poem, such as "every word is pulled out of me / like teeth." I would love to hear more about your thoughts on this enjambment and how the speaker's emotional state embodies the poem.

Noralee: One of my favorite things to read in poetry are sentences enjambed to create a line that can stand on its own. The line you mention is one of the ones where I tried to do that. I focused more on enjambment than I typically do because it's all one stanza — as of lately I've been writing lots of couplets and prose poetry — and I tend to use enjambment to loosely incorporate form into pieces that deviate from structures like these. The speaker emotionally goes off the deep end towards the last few lines, where the enjambment is less intentional and the punctuation is largely semicolons and commas; I wanted the poem to end on a rambling, unfinished note, similar to the ending of the relationship the poem revolves around.

Chelsea: If you could sum up this poem in one word, what would it be?

Noralee: Vibrance.



An Interview with Le Wang

Author of “Ode to a Former Prom Queen”

Interviewer: Xiao Bo Zeng

Xiao Bo: Who is your favorite poet? What is your favorite poem? How have these poets and poems (or others) influenced your style or approach to writing poetry?

Le: It’s hard to choose a favorite, but I would have to say my favorite poets would be K-Ming Chang and Ocean Vuong. My favorite poem would be “Lone wolf narrative” by K-Ming Chang. I would definitely say these poets, and others, have demonstrated how flexible and versatile poetry can really be. Especially after reading K-Ming Chang’s poems, I’m always astounded by her use of language, how she describes a body being “symmetrical” to its crimes or stars “constellating” a body. I always find myself shocked, and best of all, haunted by Chang or Vuong’s poems. I always have lines of their poems floating around my head during the day. So, when I write, I always try to leave the same impression with ambitious metaphors and symbolism. If I can haunt readers with my use of language and the meaning behind it, then I’ve fulfilled my goals as a writer.

Xiao Bo: How did you first get into writing poetry?

Le: Reading Ocean Vuong’s “The Last Prom Queen in America” for English class was what got me interested in poetry, because for days, I had no idea what the poem meant. I was fascinated by the gritty yet hopeful feeling of the poem, and I reread it dozens of times to try and make sense of it. I’ve always liked reading books, but Vuong’s work is what got me hooked on poetry because it showed me there was a sort of intensity and abstraction in poetry that prose can’t replicate.

Xiao Bo: Why did you title this piece “Ode to a Former Prom Queen”? In particular,

why did you choose “former prom queen”? What does that represent? What did you want this title to convey to the reader? Did you always have this title in mind, or did it come later in the writing process?

Le: For this poem, I wanted to illustrate some of the pitfalls of youth; the bad decisions and self-destructive behaviors behind the expectation of the supposed “happiest time” of one’s life. I chose “Prom Queen”, as prom seems to be the epitome of the typical idealized American high school experience. I chose “Former” because I wanted this poem to show the cracks in that image. In earlier versions of the poem, the title was “Ode to an Almost Prom Queen”, but I changed it, as I felt the second half of the poem was too retrospective to not use “former” in the title. But, I knew from the start that I wanted to have “Prom Queen” in the title, as the type of self destruction I wanted to write about was specific to teenagers.

Xiao Bo: This piece is after *Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver. How does this poem interact with or respond to that novel? Was there a specific scene or character you had in mind?

Le: I actually chose to read *Demon Copperhead* for a term paper in school. To be honest, I didn’t expect to be so moved by Kingsolver’s portrayals of self destruction. I found it genius how she paralleled abusive relationships and drug use, as the vulnerable characters in her novel turned to them to try and fill their absences. So, I wrote my poem to complement that parallel. The first half of the novel is meant to show the honeymoon period of self destructive behaviors, how the danger may initially feel freeing. The second half is meant to show the consequence stage, where damage catches up to that freeing feeling. I structured the poem to follow a similar arc to many characters in the novel: first, where the substance or abusive relationship seems to be going well, and then the consequences. I guess the poem could apply to almost any character, but I had Emmy Peggot in mind for this poem specifically, as she was described as a “fallen prom queen” in the novel.



An Interview with Anya Ramaswamy

Author of “Who Collects the Tears”

Interviewer: Aigerim Bibol

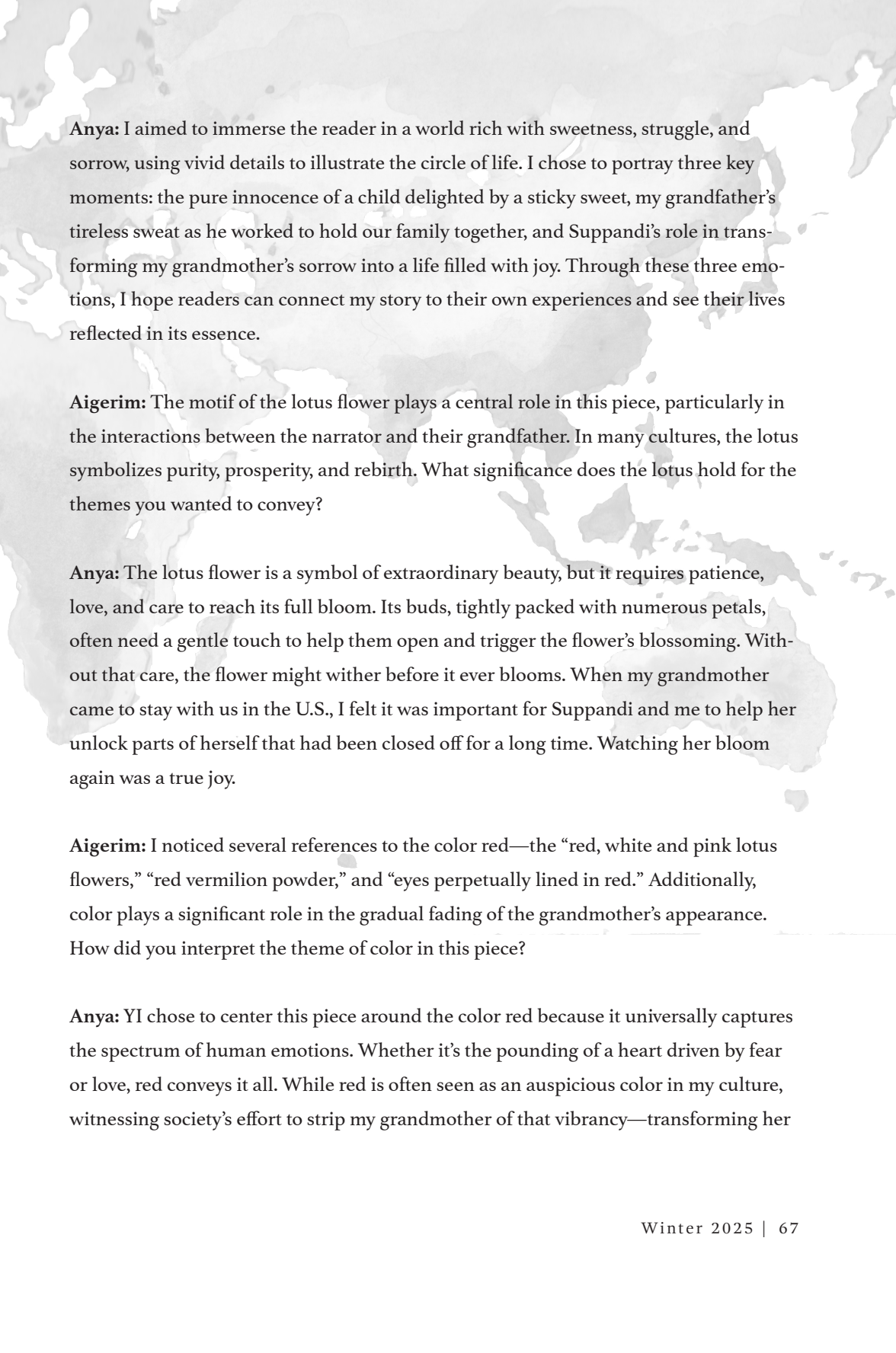
Aigerim: I'd love to know a little about your writing journey. When did you start writing? Are there any writers who inspire your work?

Anya: I discovered my passion for writing in middle school. For me, writing is an escape—a gateway to a world where I can dream without limits and bring those dreams to life. Whenever I feel overwhelmed or joyful, I instinctively retreat to my cozy chair, open my journal, and lose myself in writing, completely unaware of time passing.

Everything changed when my middle school teacher nominated me for a prestigious writing program. That moment made me realize that my words could have an impact far beyond the pages of my journal. Since then, I've never stopped writing.

Growing up, I was deeply influenced by the works of R.K. Narayan, particularly his character Swami - a rebellious boy who dared to challenge societal norms. Swami's courage inspired me to question the status quo and stand up for what is right. Similarly, J.D. Salinger's portrayal of Holden Caulfield resonated with me on a personal level. Through Holden's lens, Salinger captured the essence of who I am, making his work another powerful source of inspiration for my journey as a writer.

Aigerim: This piece is rich in sensory detail, from the sticky sweetness of Jangari to the monsoon rains of Chennai. How did you decide which details to include, and what emotional impact do you hope they have on the reader?




Anya: I aimed to immerse the reader in a world rich with sweetness, struggle, and sorrow, using vivid details to illustrate the circle of life. I chose to portray three key moments: the pure innocence of a child delighted by a sticky sweet, my grandfather's tireless sweat as he worked to hold our family together, and Suppandi's role in transforming my grandmother's sorrow into a life filled with joy. Through these three emotions, I hope readers can connect my story to their own experiences and see their lives reflected in its essence.

Aigerim: The motif of the lotus flower plays a central role in this piece, particularly in the interactions between the narrator and their grandfather. In many cultures, the lotus symbolizes purity, prosperity, and rebirth. What significance does the lotus hold for the themes you wanted to convey?

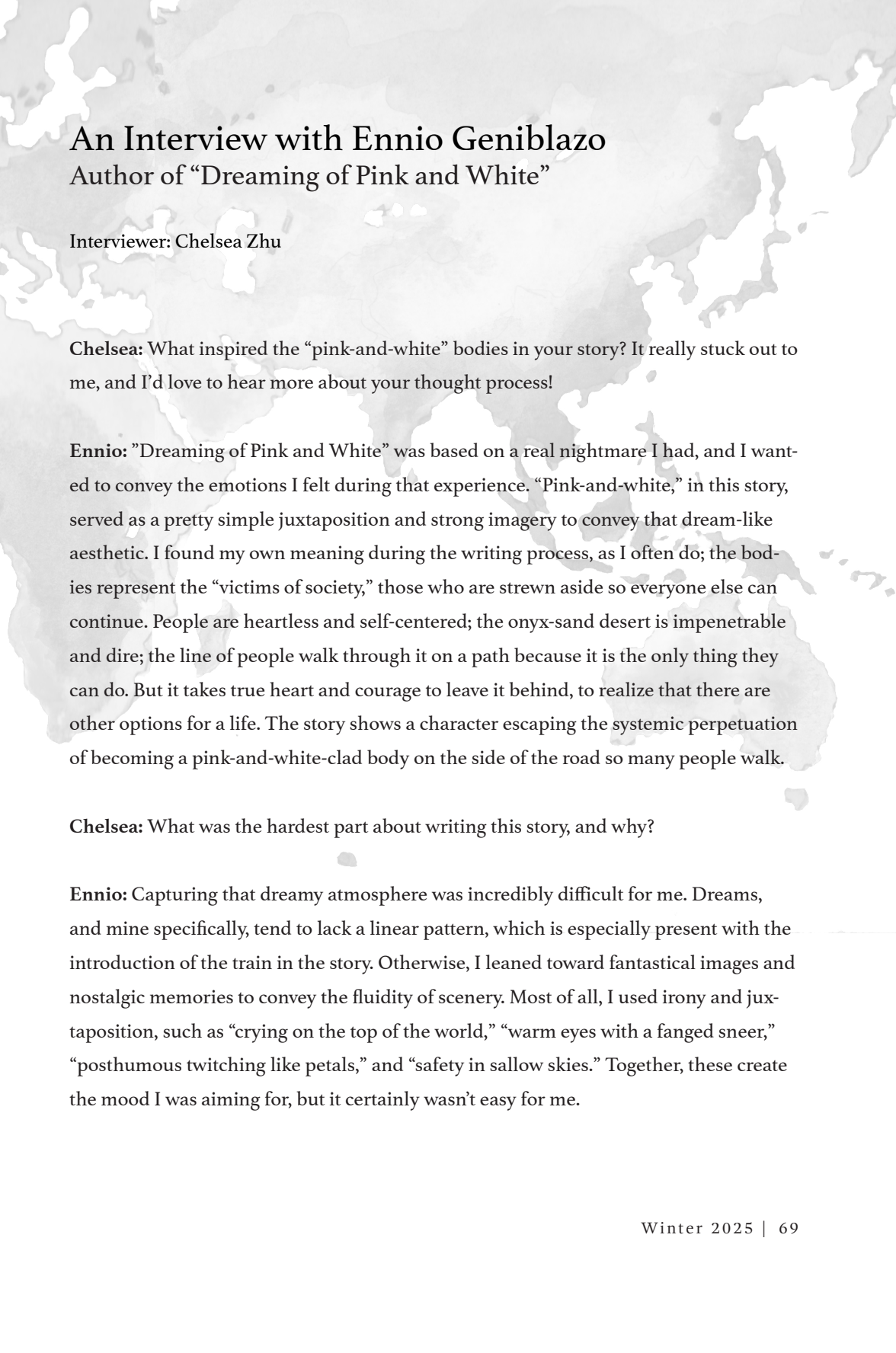
Anya: The lotus flower is a symbol of extraordinary beauty, but it requires patience, love, and care to reach its full bloom. Its buds, tightly packed with numerous petals, often need a gentle touch to help them open and trigger the flower's blossoming. Without that care, the flower might wither before it ever blooms. When my grandmother came to stay with us in the U.S., I felt it was important for Suppandi and me to help her unlock parts of herself that had been closed off for a long time. Watching her bloom again was a true joy.

Aigerim: I noticed several references to the color red—the “red, white and pink lotus flowers,” “red vermilion powder,” and “eyes perpetually lined in red.” Additionally, color plays a significant role in the gradual fading of the grandmother's appearance. How did you interpret the theme of color in this piece?

Anya: I chose to center this piece around the color red because it universally captures the spectrum of human emotions. Whether it's the pounding of a heart driven by fear or love, red conveys it all. While red is often seen as an auspicious color in my culture, witnessing society's effort to strip my grandmother of that vibrancy—transforming her



into a “white widow” through no fault of her own—reflects how much work remains to dismantle cultural barriers and empower women to live freely, on their terms.



An Interview with Ennio Geniblazo

Author of “Dreaming of Pink and White”

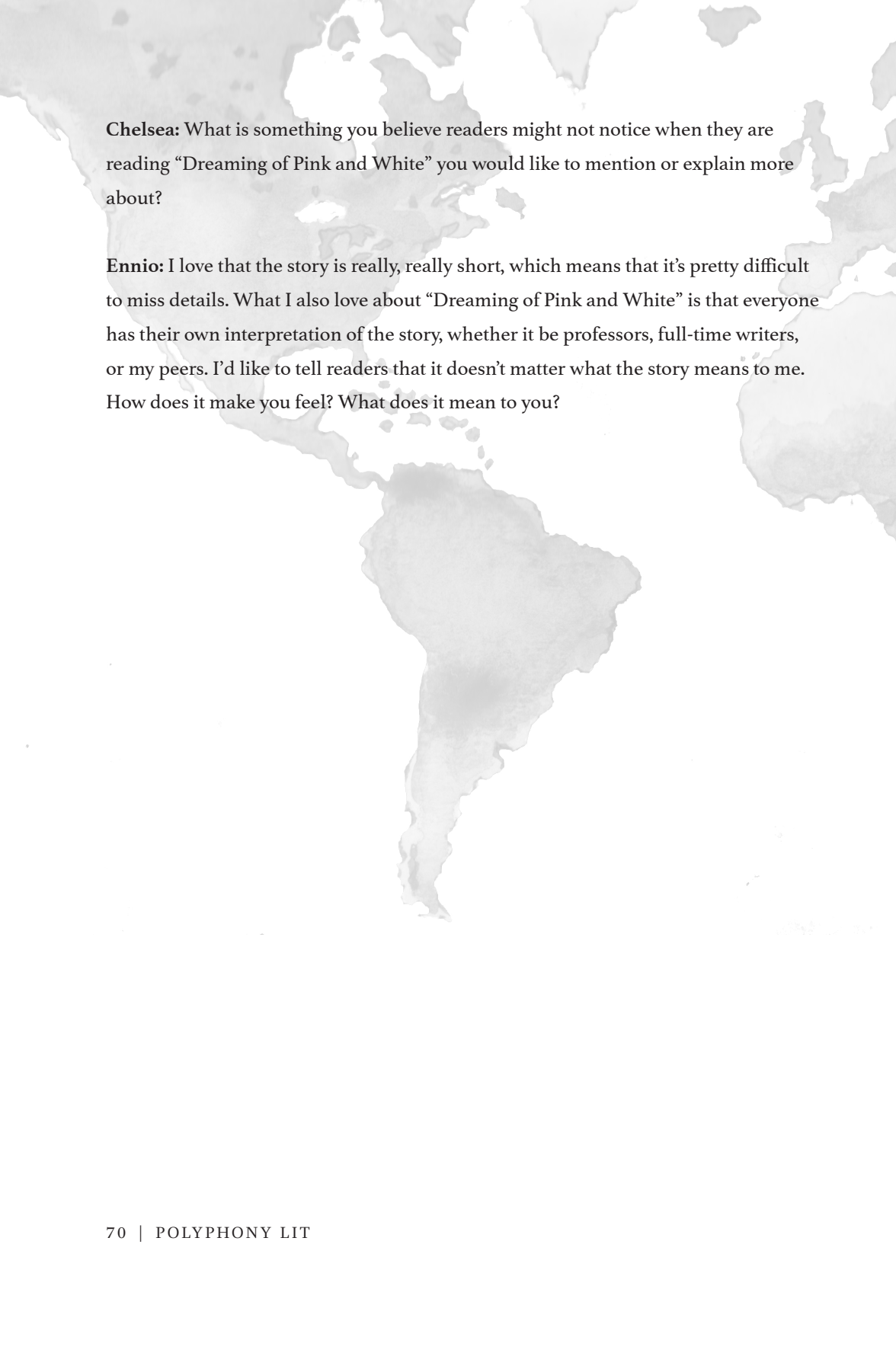
Interviewer: Chelsea Zhu

Chelsea: What inspired the “pink-and-white” bodies in your story? It really stuck out to me, and I’d love to hear more about your thought process!

Ennio: “Dreaming of Pink and White” was based on a real nightmare I had, and I wanted to convey the emotions I felt during that experience. “Pink-and-white,” in this story, served as a pretty simple juxtaposition and strong imagery to convey that dream-like aesthetic. I found my own meaning during the writing process, as I often do; the bodies represent the “victims of society,” those who are strewn aside so everyone else can continue. People are heartless and self-centered; the onyx-sand desert is impenetrable and dire; the line of people walk through it on a path because it is the only thing they can do. But it takes true heart and courage to leave it behind, to realize that there are other options for a life. The story shows a character escaping the systemic perpetuation of becoming a pink-and-white-clad body on the side of the road so many people walk.

Chelsea: What was the hardest part about writing this story, and why?

Ennio: Capturing that dreamy atmosphere was incredibly difficult for me. Dreams, and mine specifically, tend to lack a linear pattern, which is especially present with the introduction of the train in the story. Otherwise, I leaned toward fantastical images and nostalgic memories to convey the fluidity of scenery. Most of all, I used irony and juxtaposition, such as “crying on the top of the world,” “warm eyes with a fanged sneer,” “posthumous twitching like petals,” and “safety in sallow skies.” Together, these create the mood I was aiming for, but it certainly wasn’t easy for me.



Chelsea: What is something you believe readers might not notice when they are reading “Dreaming of Pink and White” you would like to mention or explain more about?

Ennio: I love that the story is really, really short, which means that it’s pretty difficult to miss details. What I also love about “Dreaming of Pink and White” is that everyone has their own interpretation of the story, whether it be professors, full-time writers, or my peers. I’d like to tell readers that it doesn’t matter what the story means to me. How does it make you feel? What does it mean to you?



ARTWORK





Artist Spotlight

Rana Roosevelt

Artist Statement

Rana Roosevelt is a digital and traditional artist from Philadelphia. She loves depicting the human form and challenging herself with strange color schemes. Although she frequently works digitally, her favorite medium is oil paint because of how well it can blend. In her spare time she also plays violin, writes poetry, makes jewelry (and of course, reads old issues of Polyphony Lit!)

Featured Art:

“Black Eyed Susan”



POETRY



CAITLYN IACCINO

Louisville High School, Woodland Hills, CA, USA

July

the spring grass wilts
and it's still one hundred degrees
on the cul-de-sac
peeling the feet of five-year-olds
who let their cherry popsicles melt
into bicycle scabs
without training wheels
it's hard to grasp
the crispy leaves
and the monarch
in an oil puddle
her antennae twisted
like discarded cigarettes
behind the dumpster
air hangs still
as the boarded-up the coffee shop
the smell of burnt plastic
plagues the air
and a shabby speaker
playing the Beatles
through strawberry fields
nothing is real—except the dust
coating the Chevy's trunk
and the stray cat

followed by the whisper
of little girls
with chlorinated baby hairs
fresh out of plastic pools
there's a hotdog stench
behind the fence
and a ceiling fan
that won't whirl
on the patio
where four kids press
their heads into hardwood
waiting for the day
the daisies will bloom
again



EDITORIAL PRAISE

“July” is the perfect materialized essence of its title with a painfully strong nostalgic punch. This poem is a memory, the soul of childhood summers; this poem is “chlorinated baby hairs” and “a ceiling fan / that won’t whirl / on the patio” and “cherry popsicles” and the white noise behind whatever blurry memories you have saved in the backup file of your brain from a warm, childhood July.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caitlyn Iaccino is originally from Los Angeles, but currently resides in Philadelphia where she attends the University of Pennsylvania. Her work has been recognized nationally by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards and by YoungArts. She graduated from Louisville High School in 2023.

EMILIE MENDOZA

Balboa Academy, Panama City, Panama

Moth-Eaten Scapular

I told stories of leather being broken in and
glass blown to the sea. You prayed to St. Anthony
& St. Jude & St. Sebastian before sleep

every night and wrapped your neck in pearls and
crosses. I wondered who you prayed for
the most. In some other life, I would've wrapped

myself in thought. Alas, my wick
has grown short these days and I doubt
it could handle a flame so bright anymore. By the

beach, we set off fireworks and saber off corks because
this is what we've waited for. I wondered if this was the
end; the point of no return. A sky with no light

and a highway ending in a river. It seems
like a good time to learn to swim because the
port is in disrepair and your psalms won't change

that. The house is still here, and I keep the lights off
so I won't attract moths and so I won't remember the time
before it all became empty. I wondered what compelled

me to return. I wondered when the fireworks became muted. I wondered if the leather cover of your prayer book needed to be replaced. And I wondered, and I told stories, and I wondered.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

“Moth-Eaten Scapular” resonates in a way that is atmospheric, reflective, and at times, quietly existential, as Mendoza leads readers along a winding path of questioning. Through a series of religious images, the speaker reflects on habit and tradition, loss and change, ultimately ending on a note that is not final or conclusive, but open-ended for the reader to continue wonderings of their own.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emilie Mendoza is a writer from Panama currently attending Harvard University. Her work has been previously recognized by Synthesis Publications, Eunoia Review, and she is excited to have her work in Polyphony Lit. She can be found on Instagram as @emilie.mendo.

HUDSON WARM

Hackley School, Tarrytown, NY, USA

Your Room is a River

& along the red riverbed I find myself
& you, resting. Here the day's toils flee from us in flocks.

In this palace I meet you each night. Sometimes
I call it your darkened dorm room.

This flesh-on-flesh rhythm becomes routine, the flowers
sprout like wishes, one touch and they quiver.

Correction: it happened once, but my mind replays the scene
in a routine. Falling, unfolding, opening, unspooling, softening.

In each silent moment you come for me, kissing my brain
with the memory. I don't know whether it happened, or which parts.

All I know is the world moves on and I do not and in February I still inhabit July
not its sun; its lint and limbs and latex and lying there,

I imagine a scream so loud the river-room shakes and
plunges into a story I can never truly tell.

But then: the lake deltas like two legs
yielding to you—I tremble but can't speak, & so we dance.



NOTE

This piece was previously published in a different form in Yale Daily News, November 2023.

EDITORIAL PRAISE

Aching, visceral, and pulsating with desire, “Your Room is a River” traverses the physical and emotional spaces that we inhabit. Here, Warm constructs a “palace” of memory entrenched in a cycle of loss, seeking to examine how these echoes both anchor and restrain us—and how, within these walls, the unsaid inevitably bubbles to the surface.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Hudson Warm, a sophomore at Yale University, hails from Westchester, New York. She has published two novels, *Not the Heir* and *Academy for the Gifted*. Her creative writing has been recognized by Scholastic and the National Indie Excellence Awards and was featured on Katie Couric’s “Books for Young Readers.” She also reports for the Yale Daily News and enjoys writing literary criticism and working in early modern archives.*



An Interview with Emilie Mendoza

Author of “Moth-Eaten Scapular”

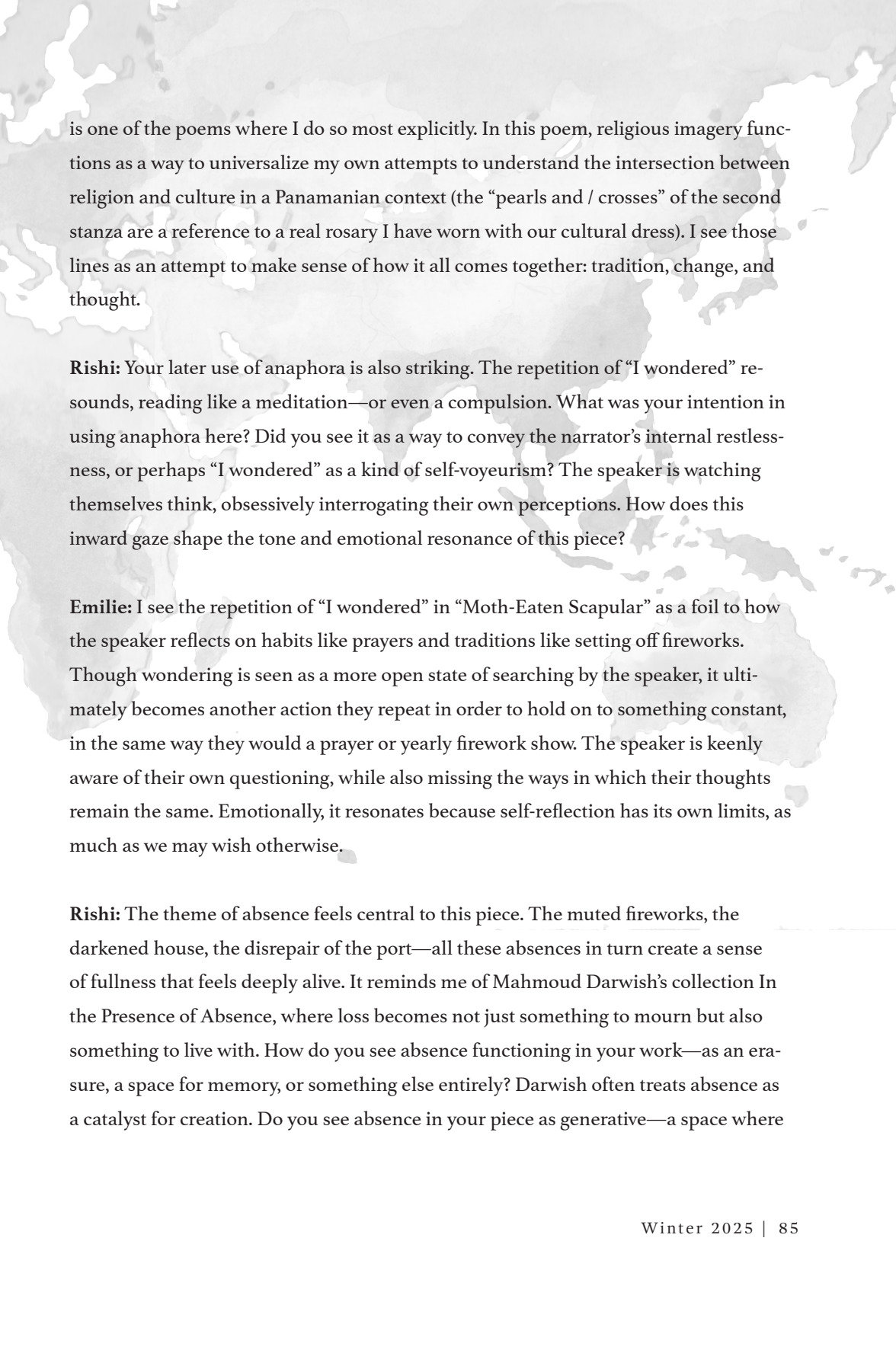
Interviewer: Rishi Janakiraman

Rishi: Just as a starter—how did you get into writing? I’m obsessed with your voice in “Moth-Eaten Scapular,” the way the speaker has such a proximity to the reader, while still not going too deep into confessional territory. There’s an economy in your language. You’re able to balance restraint with emotional proximity. How did you find this original voice?

Emilie: I have always been an avid reader and occasionally tried my hand at creative writing when I was younger, but really got into it in the summer of 2022, when I attended a writing workshop for the first time. I found myself surrounded by peers who loved to write and it was like I had discovered a whole different world. The voice in my work is significantly shaped by my relationship to language itself as a non-native English speaker. When I write, I tend to engage with poetry as a way to verbalize that which there are no words for, which sometimes means translating the untranslatable. Often, this results in a push and pull between meanings — different balances of it uncover new parts of a poem.

Rishi: I adore religious imagery, too, so one of my favorite lines in your poem is “your psalms won’t change that.” The psalms—prayers rooted in divine supplication—are rendered powerless against the material breakdown of the port. Do you enjoy working with religious overtones in your work? In “Moth-Eaten Scapular,” how do lines like these function in the larger context of the piece? Do you consider them critiques, disillusioned remarks, or something else entirely?

Emilie: I use religious overtones in my writing often, though “Moth-Eaten Scapular”




is one of the poems where I do so most explicitly. In this poem, religious imagery functions as a way to universalize my own attempts to understand the intersection between religion and culture in a Panamanian context (the “pearls and / crosses” of the second stanza are a reference to a real rosary I have worn with our cultural dress). I see those lines as an attempt to make sense of how it all comes together: tradition, change, and thought.

Rishi: Your later use of anaphora is also striking. The repetition of “I wondered” resounds, reading like a meditation—or even a compulsion. What was your intention in using anaphora here? Did you see it as a way to convey the narrator’s internal restlessness, or perhaps “I wondered” as a kind of self-voyeurism? The speaker is watching themselves think, obsessively interrogating their own perceptions. How does this inward gaze shape the tone and emotional resonance of this piece?

Emilie: I see the repetition of “I wondered” in “Moth-Eaten Scapular” as a foil to how the speaker reflects on habits like prayers and traditions like setting off fireworks. Though wondering is seen as a more open state of searching by the speaker, it ultimately becomes another action they repeat in order to hold on to something constant, in the same way they would a prayer or yearly firework show. The speaker is keenly aware of their own questioning, while also missing the ways in which their thoughts remain the same. Emotionally, it resonates because self-reflection has its own limits, as much as we may wish otherwise.

Rishi: The theme of absence feels central to this piece. The muted fireworks, the darkened house, the disrepair of the port—all these absences in turn create a sense of fullness that feels deeply alive. It reminds me of Mahmoud Darwish’s collection *In the Presence of Absence*, where loss becomes not just something to mourn but also something to live with. How do you see absence functioning in your work—as an erasure, a space for memory, or something else entirely? Darwish often treats absence as a catalyst for creation. Do you see absence in your piece as generative—a space where



the narrator can wrestle with meaning—or is it more of an oppressive void? How do you balance this twoness of loss and creation?

Emilie: Absence in this poem is never about void. The loss the speaker feels is of that which they had previously known to take up space (the noise of fireworks, the light in the house, the past state of the port). Those spaces are not left empty, but the change catalyzes the speaker’s introspection. “Moth-Eaten Scapular” treats the theme of absence as a part of memory. This is how the poem avoids the extreme ends of outright loss and outright creation, while still oscillating between being and not being.



ARTWORK





Artist Spotlight

Katherine Chong

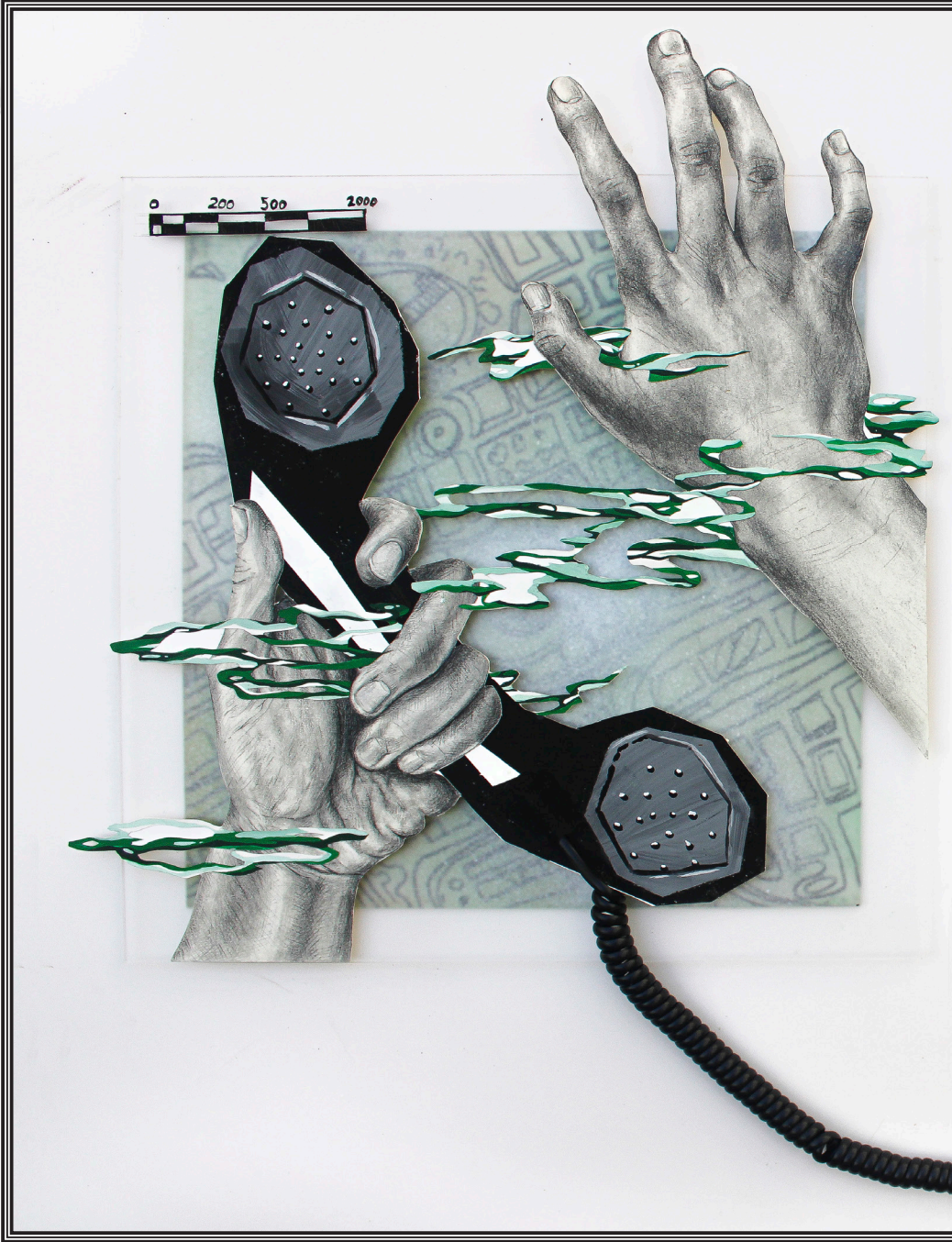
Artist Statement

Katherine is currently a senior at Choate Rosemary Hall, where she is a part of the Visual Arts Concentration Program. She is a 2024 YoungArts Winner with Distinction in the Visual Arts; she also attended the 2023 RISD Pre-College program concentrating in Art and Activism, where her work was exhibited at the Woods-Gerry Gallery.

Katherine practices art as a medium of inception: she works with mixed media to visualize and solidify intangible ideas that govern our world. Her conceptual interests in sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and history stems from her multicultural upbringing in Shanghai and Connecticut. Art becomes a means for Katherine to dissect societal phenomenons and reconcile with herself as a participant in these constructs. “



Featured Art (next page):
“The Life You Can Save”





FICTION



KRAPOOK YANITTA

Newton Sixth Form, Bangkok, Thailand

Shuttlecock on the Neighbor's Fence

My father insisted he drive me to school every morning at five-thirty with the revving engine of the car he used to drive back when he met Ma. I don't recall ever saying a word to him during those fifteen-minute rides.

He'd drag me down from the bed by my ankles, back up the car, honk the horn and drop me off at the gates. He'd stay parked there, cursed by other cars behind, until I was far enough to disappear in the crowd of black, razed heads and white cotton uniforms.

He'd pick me up at four o'clock every afternoon, reeking of smoke and beer. He'd drop me off at home and drive away once more. I'd stand at the doorstep, listen to his engine and hear Ma sigh.

Near dawn, he'd sneak in, lock rattling, sit in the dark, and squint at books with boring gray covers while saxophones raft music notes on the radio. He'd have his glasses sliding down to the bottom of his nose, and his back would be crooked like a sickle.

I never told him I feared for his eyesight.

I wouldn't want him to think I was a *kratoey*, not a real man, so I'd tiptoe to the bedroom and try to conceal the lock's click.

All I've ever heard him utter were words coated with fire, brimming with burning oil. Meaty fingers grabbing a cooking pan's handle, grease dripping from the copper edges, as it clanged on whatever surface it touched, heat creasing the old hardwood floors.

Each time I'd get into his car after school, I'd notice more lines etched onto his wrinkling skin and deep, sullen eye sockets. Sometimes he'd have red marks on his wrists—the shape of handcuffs—and a sunken pool of guilt in his eyes each time he stepped into the apartment after Ma late at night. My lunch allowance would decrease each month as money seeped away through the underground roots of casinos.

I could never imagine a time back when my father's car was shiny and sparkling—how my young mother rode in that vessel with her hair flowing in the wind as he drove—because I heard whimpers and sobs through the thin walls of my bedroom every night.

Ma told me not to hate him.

She *begged* me not to hate him.

But I did not know what were the goosebumps that rattled my skin each time he appeared, what were the burning flames that pierced my limbs each time he gripped the frying pan like a baseball bat, what were the minutes I spent flicking the lock at night to maintain the silence. Was that hatred?

He'd never call me by my name.

Sometimes I believed he had forgotten it.

He'd call me '*Ai Goong*', meaning 'that damn shrimp'. I had always been bony and jointy, more fragile than the other kids, prone to breakage.

I've never called him father either. To his face, I'd call him '*Ajarn*', Thai for 'professor', though I don't recall much of what he taught me.

He'd taught me to play badminton once on a whim, but our sole shuttlecock ended up stuck in our neighbor's barbed wire fence.

We never played badminton together again.

He enrolled me in badminton classes after school. I did not know what possessed him, whether it was Ma or some voice that told him to come up to me one

day with a crumpled up schedule—thin paper in a thick, round thumb—and offer to drive me there from school twice a week.

Every time, he would sit at the corner of the gymnasium with his arms crossed and legs open wide like departing train tracks. A translucent plastic bag would hang on his elbow: half a kilo of *Sai Oua*, sliced Northern Thai sausages, a wooden toothpick poking out through the creases.

He'd come to all my badminton tournaments but never say he was proud. There'd be this curt nod and furrowed brow stitched into the hems of his wrinkling face.

I won my first award in a junior badminton competition. He stood next to the other parents, the corners of his mouth slouched, while the other parents crowded the winners with flashing cameras and pearly-white smiles.

The scent of chili flooded the car; he bought me five kilos of sliced sausages, already there.

That night, I stuffed it all down my throat as if it would make him proud again.

The longest he had ever disappeared was two days—a weekend. Ma turned the city over with her bare hands, untangling the roots of trees and grass, fingers fumbling from fatigue.

I remember sitting on the couch all day, pondering: I've heard of stories where fathers leave, but I'd never thought my father would.

He showed up on Monday, and without an apology, he said to me in his frail, raspy voice: "*Ai Goong*, I was waiting for you at school. I didn't know you were home."

He never gambled again as he started to stumble over words. I guess that was the cost of having him home.

Back when his memory started to decline, but he could still see the road with

his faulty eyes, he'd still leave home every morning at five-thirty in his car and drive to school. He'd sit there in the car with the windows rolled down, breathing in the stench of gasoline and gridlock fumes, jumping at all the honking horns telling him to move, ignoring all the street vendors trying to chat with him during quiet hours.

I was on the other side of the world, going to a college where he could not possibly drop me off every morning.

He'd return home at five every evening, the passenger's seat in his car empty. No son to bring home.

I'd come back twice a year, to that little grot in Bangkok. I made up excuses to avoid returning because I fell in love with the silence each evening in my single dorm room. I fell in love with the absence of the stench of smoke, absence of his screams at Ma, the absence of veins pulsing on the wrinkled mesh of his forehead, words repeating over and over as he forgot he had already said them, the searing pan clanging on multiple materials: wood, concrete, skin, bone. He had never apologized once for what he did.

Despite that, my heart broke each time my father took three minutes of squinting to figure out who I was: his *Ai Goong*. My heart palpitated each time he retired to his quiet corner every time I was present, how he scoured the bed for a stray ankle to drag down each morning, yet coming back with empty hands.

I was getting my doctorate in a university in New England at the time, digging up ragged yellow pages and sticky plastic-covered books on sports. I was writing about the shuttlecocks, the rackets, the field, when I got a call from an unknown number.

"Your father is sick," she said. It was Ma.

I told her I would come back in a week, though I did not want to return empty-handed, no degree to show my father, still his ordinary son he played badminton with once and never again. I wanted to come back with a Ph.D. trailing our family name.

I had believed that would make him proud.

I had buried the situation in the back of my mind, and I remembered to return two weeks later. The dark living room lacked movement, except for the moonlight sifting through the diaphanous curtains, blowing in the wind like jellyfish.

On the coffee table was a ragged shuttlecock. Feathers broken in half, sticking out in awkward angles. I lifted it up and twirled it in my hands.

“That was the shuttlecock that got stuck in *Loong* Somchai’s fence,” Ma’s raspy voice echoed from behind. I turned to face her, only to be greeted by a foreign face: swollen eyes like bee stings, shiny lips coated with sparkling tears. She looked much shorter.

“How did you get it?” I asked.

“It was the last thing your father insisted he do,” she said with a swollen smile that resembled a grimace, “He couldn’t remember a thing, not even me, but somehow he remembered this.”

I stared at her with the shuttlecock still in my hands. I loosened my grip. It suddenly seemed fragile, like a sharp glass ball that could fracture into shards with one minuscule squeeze.

“He said he’d wished he’d spar more often with you,” Ma said with a disconnected yet loving chuckle, “But he had believed he was a lousy player.”

Silence. I had no valid excuse not to come back a week earlier.

The shuttlecock fell onto the floor, but it was me who shattered.

Ma told me about the things he did on his last day. He had gotten up at four as usual, showered and got ready in a holey t-shirt and cargo pants, scrambled the covers for a son to wake up, revved his precious engine at five-thirty and honked the horn, waiting for me to come down.

He drove to school with an empty passenger’s seat and waited there in front of the gates, believing his son had already dispersed in the crowd of young boys.

The street food vendors all eyed him, thinking he must be a crazy old man.

He did not come back at five o'clock. Ma had to hop on a motorcycle taxi around the block, calling out for her husband. She thought that was the end.

His car had broken down, and she found him standing on the side of the street, fumbling with bronze bills in his round thumbs, back still crooked like a sickle, numerous plastic bags of sliced sausages hanging from his meaty arms.

When they got back home on the narrow backseat of a roaring motorcycle, Ma borrowed the neighbor's car, ready to rush to the hospital. But Pa stood in the backyard, examining the neighbor's fence with his arms behind his back.

"I should play badminton with *Ai Goong* sometime," Pa uttered his last words as he climbed up the bamboo ladder.



NOTE

This piece was previously published in a different form in Gasher Press, Cherry Moon Anthology, 2022.

EDITORIAL PRAISE

Traversing the line of distinguishing love from disdain, "Shuttlecock On The Neighbor's Fence" reflects a gratifying narrative of a son attempting to make sense of ambiguous expressions of love. Vulnerable, poignant, and wonderfully sincere, this piece employs badminton and cultural themes to pull at heart strings and evoke a couple tears along the way.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Krapook graduated high school in 2024 in Bangkok, Thailand. She is now pursuing a degree in Political Science and French at the University of Toronto. When she's not doing homework, you can find her covering songs on the violin or crocheting chunky animal plushies.

CATHERINE L.

Monta Vista High School, Cupertino, CA, USA

Him

On the day my brother died, he climbed up our house and stood on the roof. I can picture his silhouette: his arms outstretched, his head tilted towards the sky, the tips of his feet sticking out past the edge. If I were to look up, I would've seen the crusted strings of his shoelaces — he always left his shoelaces untied. To say it was a bad habit would be a severe understatement.

But anyway, I like to think that as he stood there, the wind was damp and cool against his skin — that behind him, the sky was immense, clear, flooded with gold. Bathed in light, his body would've been prickled with goosebumps, and the sky above would've seemed endless, just in reach. I hope that up there, he would've finally been able to breathe properly, big, deep breaths that left his lungs burning, stretched to their limits, not like the ones he took at home — which were always shallow and panicky, like the breathing of a mouse. He must've felt calm up there, peaceful. He must've felt reborn.

But I'm a romantic. Realistically, he was clinging on to the crumbling tiles, his hands pawing at the clay and moss and bird droppings, all fours, trying not to cry or vomit or both. He hated heights. That was his worst fear — his body weak, desperate, twisted like a falling bird, his hands reaching out into nothing. The specks of trees and houses below him growing larger and larger. The scream of wind in his ears. Then: boom boom splatter choke. Dead. I wonder: did he die looking at the ground or the sky?

His friends made fun of him for his fear of heights; everyone sort of did. It was a running joke in town: James Sun, twenty-one years old, afraid of the kiddie slide at the children's playground. Was this his way of telling us that he was no longer afraid? That in death, he had conquered his fear? Or maybe he just didn't want us to bring it up at the funeral. He was always touchy about people mentioning it.

The town passed it off as an accident. There was even an article written about him in the local newspaper with a picture of him from high school, his senior portrait

zoomed in from the neck up, his face blurry and sullen, scarred with acne. The glaring headline: TOWN IN SHOCK AFTER MAN FALLS OFF THE ROOF. There is a difference between falling and jumping — he did not fall. He walked up three flights of stairs to the attic — which he hated; “that place is so fucking weird,” he said once, “it’s like, haunted or something.” — hoisted himself up to the roof, and flung himself twenty-five feet to the ground, right next to our dog’s grave and an old, bent apple tree. It was no accident.

I think I loved him. He loved me, all of us, but it was a ferocious type of love, we couldn’t return it.

He used to tell me that when I was little, I would cling to him constantly. I didn’t want him to leave, even then. Even when I was born, I would grip onto his chest with surprising strength, my fingers clenched tightly around his. You were like a kitten, he would say, the runt of the litter. You would mewl and wriggle and — this is the part where he would laugh, when he would always laugh — you were all pink and undercooked-looking. Like an alien or something. There was something unmistakably embarrassing about that story, but I cried sometimes thinking about it. He was in middle school then, he had long hair and braces, he smoked stolen cigarettes and pretended to know things he didn’t.

I can’t remember who told me. That he died, I mean.

He had his reasons. They weren’t the same as anyone else’s but they were his, I know that. He could be completely merciless in that way.

The note he wrote for us was written on a sheet cut into quarters. He had stapled it so forcefully to the wall that the paper was indented permanently; the edges curved upwards, towards the ceiling.

I ask myself, what was he thinking of when he wrote it?

Of me, my parents, of God? Or to be more morbid: where he would have to jump, when, what to do and say in the days following. Or maybe he was thinking about the time we laid next to each other, I was eight and he was fourteen and earlier that morning, my mother had whispered in my ear with her crayoned lips and red-rimmed eyes: Grandpa just died. I had run up to my room with her breath sticky against my left cheek, her words pounding against my ears, each syllable stretched and accentuated: *Grandpa. Just. Died.* And when I locked the door and sat there, her fingerprints white against my wrists, he let himself in and we laid together on my bed — the one with

pastel flowers, the one that he hated — and facing each other, his hair was long and spread out behind him like a mermaid.

I asked him how long we would both live, and he said that he would be here as long as I needed him, even if we're both scared of the same spider or the dark or when Lily our dog dies. I asked him if we could live together for a thousand years, a million if we're healthy enough, there will always be bigger spiders and new pets will always die and the dark will always come.

He asked me what if you get used to it, the death and all that stuff I mean. There are some things I just can't get used to, I said, like how Grandpa used to give me hard yellow candies that tasted like the inside of his pocket. They were sharp and stale, but now that Grandpa is gone, I miss them. Does that make sense?

Yes, he said. He understood.

Then he asked me if I believed in heaven and hell and God, and in the church they talked about God and saints and things, my father sometimes let me hold the Bible and turn the pages though never on my own. So I told him yes, after we get tired of living on earth we can go to heaven together. In heaven Jesus who died on the cross will welcome us and we will live in paradise. He was silent then, and when he said no his voice was quiet, and his eyes were dark and shiny. No, I mean if you do something bad do you still think you can go to heaven. I said it depends, if you hurt people then you should go to hell because making people sad is the worst thing you could do.

What if you make people sad without hurting them? he asked.

By saying mean things? I said.

He shook his head. Worse, he said.

You should say sorry, I said. If you didn't mean it, then everyone will forgive you. Will God? he said.

Yes, I told him.

On the note, in his handwriting — thin, loopy cursive— he wrote: *I'm sorry.*



EDITORIAL PRAISE

"Four hours before my brother died" begins Liu's "Him" as readers are taken on a journey grasping for reconciliation, reasons, closure. How do we talk about the unspeakable? Arrive at places where words can't reach? Perhaps, like this narrator, we aren't really seeking answers, but rather, striving to hang on to our memories.

MINGWEI YEOH

Minnetonka High School, Chanhassen, MN, USA

Afterword

When I wake up, I realize I'm looking at you. I thought it would be years before we met again, and that it would happen on a pillow of clouds, facing ivory gates. I saw it once in a dream: you, gray and repentful. Me, the same as always.

We're in my bedroom. My arms and legs are bolted to the ceiling, but I don't mind. Even if I could reach out and touch you—even if you begged me to—I wouldn't. You're stubborn, even now. Your shoulders look as hard and uninviting as I remember.

You're standing in the doorway and there's nothing on your face, none of the fast, hot emotions that used to burn in the stern texture of your scars, eyebrows, chin, mouth. None of the expressions I fantasized might shoot cracks through your composure, the kind you wouldn't be able to hide. You're simply thinking. I wish I could read your mind.

Mom appears behind you. She says something I can't quite catch, and you turn and follow her out of the room. My pulse spikes. I flail in place, trying to loosen my frozen limbs.

I've imagined you saying countless phrases in these first few weeks. *I'm sorry*, mostly, but ones that express your regrets, too. Down to the specifics—everything I've noted, tracked, and retained until now. I'm waiting for them to come flooding from your mouth, bitter and irrepressible.

After a minute of struggling, my body detaches from the drywall like a balloon cut loose. I drift along the ceiling until I reach the dinner table, where I find the two of you sitting over a familiar meal. Porridge, pickled vegetables, canned dace with salted beans. If I think hard enough, I can still taste the salty oil and feel the rough fish skin on my tongue. Mom cooked this on days that were especially hectic, when I

had a piano recital or a soccer game or a big exam. Days we were all too preoccupied to think about food.

She eats—in the small, slow bites of a tired woman—but your hands are in your lap. You stare out the window at the sun-bleached grass and the fluttering leaves.

I remember a lot about that day. I remember how cold the pills felt, heaped in my palm like marbles. I remember my pulse thudding in my ears. More than anything, I remember thinking about how sorry I was going to make you—for the nights I spent studying instead of sleeping; the nights I cried until snot bubbled on my lips and my words were too botched by hiccups to decipher and you yelled and yelled. *Stop crying. Get up. Keep going.*

Outside, summer is having a party. Birds whistle and sing, insects meander. They socialize by your apple tree, drawn by the scent of the honey-sweet fruits. On the other side of the glass, you and Mom clear the table in silence. The clunky AC whirs in the background, shouting over all other noises. You scrape your untouched porridge back into the pot.

After dinner, you and Mom pull away from each other, drifting to opposite ends of the house. You used to spend more time together. On summer evenings like this one, when the sun still peeks over the trees at eight or nine, the two of you would pull weeds together in the garden, speaking to each other through silence and dirt-smudged fingers.

I follow you to your office, floating almost close enough to brush the white-dusted tips of your hair. This room is so familiar, from the blinds you always kept halfway closed to the desk that sits against the far wall. You used to sit at that desk like a king on his throne, so terrifying and alluring at once to your little girl. As you shut the door, I remember the way you used to shut it every morning after breakfast and every night after dinner. I remember the tricks that enabled me to sneak past it, that white wood wall: breaking the tip of my pencil so that you'd let me use the sharpener on your desk, asking for your help on math problems I already knew how to solve. And I remember, forever ago, standing on my tip-toes by your desk, trying to stick my pencil into the sharpener, and feeling your arms wrap around me and lift me into the air. Your laugh, a

rare gift, is tucked into a pocket of my mind, as clear as though I heard it yesterday.

You sit down at your desk. Watching you, my chest squeezes and releases and squeezes. I wonder if you're going to sit and think again, letting your grief leak through quietly, subtly, stubbornly. Instead, you power on your computer monitors. One by one, they blink awake from the darkness, as startled as I am. You replace your regular glasses with your farsighted ones, and start working through spreadsheets and data tables like it's just another day. Like I'm not even here. I look at the calendar hanging above your desk. Tuesday, July 14. To you, a weekday means work—means hiding away in your office—above all and anything else. Above even the one-week anniversary of your daughter's death.

My body shrinks into the ceiling corner again. I close my eyes. For a moment, I simply listen—to the sound of plastic keys clattering, the gentle *tick-tick-tick* of the clock, and the insistent, muffled chirping of the birds outside your window. I guess, in the end, my expectations didn't make sense. The tears, the sentiments, the dramatics: those aren't *you*, are they? When you're so stern and tough and unbendable, the father who shouts at tears instead of pausing them with his thumb. When I've only ever heard you laugh twice.

Then I hear you, clearer and louder than the keyboard, the clock, the birds. A sound like a mourning animal's wail. I open my eyes. Your back is turned to me, hunched over your desk and shuddering with each sob. For a moment, I don't believe it, but I blink and the scene doesn't melt away. Your crying doesn't fade into silence.

I've won. The statement pangs through my body. It's almost too much, a feeling like a plastic bag puffing up inside me, crowding ribs into muscle. This is what I dreamed about for months on months, my "sorry" wrapped up in a bow and popped in my face like confetti. But it takes a moment for it to burst and collapse; and then all I can think about is how gray your hair looks, how your shoulders don't look so hard anymore. How I want to put my arms around them and squeeze.

The noise in my chest skips and sputters. I can't feel my limbs anymore.

Your back stays turned to me, even when I call out your name. I feel something in my nose, rising into my eyes. My regrets pour down my cheeks, slip between my

lips, salty like the oil from canned fish. Outside your window, nature enjoys herself, and we cry together, separately.



NOTE

This piece was previously published in Bright Flash Lit, February 2024.

EDITORIAL PRAISE

In “Afterword,” Yeoh so masterfully calls on all your senses — the salty fish and chirping birds, the sound of sharpening pencils, the oil. You are left with your mouth dry, wheezing, tearing, sniffing. It is the specificity, vividity, and intensity of her imagery that makes this piece so gripping.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mingwei Yeoh is a writer from Minnesota. She is an alumna of the Iowa Young Writers’ Studio, a national Scholastic medalist, a 2024 YoungArts Winner with Distinction, and a 2024 U.S. Presidential Scholar in the Arts. Her work has been featured/is forthcoming in Gone Lawn, Bending Genres, Bright Flash Lit, and more. She is a first-year at Harvard College.

KYAH TAPPEYER

Homeschooled, Louisville, KY, USA

Shovels and Knives

I found you digging holes again the other day. What it is you're digging for is beyond me. A lot of things you say and do are beyond me. Things like the time you renamed the cat after seven years of Snowflake. He's still learning to respond to that. Another time you threw a glass at the floor when I forgot to substitute pinto for black beans in the dinner I was making. You renamed me, then, too. An awful, ugly name that had me bending low to catch the acid before it fell out of my throat.

The holes you dig are deep. And wide. And just big enough that I consider searching your things. What would I find if I went through all those boxes in the basement? Some poor girl's silver charm bracelet with three charms missing? The collectable shot glasses you assure me can't fit with the others?

The holes are deep and wide and deeper still every time I glance out the window. I half consider checking the shed for things you might be burying. I say *things* because once the soul has left the body it is considered inanimate. Inanimate meaning lacking animation. Animation meaning life. I am nearly inanimate.

When you come back into the house for your periodic water breaks, I check your shoes for red or black or silt that's not from your dirt piles. Unless you've learned to turn the dial on the washing machine. Which is improbable. You'd have to ask me for instructions- unless you've somehow overcome your paralyzing fear of all things Outsider.

When you fill your water glass at the tap, I take advantage of your stance and move my full body to the window. I can see almost all of your holes from there. They are deep and wide and wider than when I last saw them. Perhaps I should take a trip to the shed. I wonder if I would ever come back. I can picture what might be my hole: five feet and three inches wide, six feet deep in the earth. The window reminds me

that it might already be dug. Perhaps you're not digging *for* anything.

When you leave again by the back door, I clear my throat and wring my limp hands. *Piano hands*, my mother called them. Not dishwashing hands, bedmaking hands, or hole-digging hands. I wring them on a towel with black and white stripes. The air is thick and moist with humidity. I am breathing hard through a tube of lip gloss. It has become a game to see how many breaths I can hold without meeting the floor from lack of oxygen.

My piano hands itch to submerge themselves in something other than water. The holes are deeper, wider. Wider, deeper; deeper still. What are you hiding? What have you lost?

A fly trills in my left ear and I hear Mozart singing to me with his hands that are just like mine. The towel is a set of piano keys, glossy with unuse, singing to me of their own accord. My head snaps back to the window when I hear a shout. It is time for me to refill your water glass.

The glass shimmers in my hand where it meets the sun from the window, sparkling when the tap water hits it. I think of your gold teeth and how many times you've had to change a white one for something you could pawn later. The collectable shot-glasses are still in the basement. The tiny glasses that couldn't fit in with the three big ones. The tiny glasses you've bandaged together in a box half the size of the basement.

My piano hands itch from the hot water because that is the only way you will drink it. I've thought about disabling the heater before, knowing it is improbable you would ever know. The glass shimmers in my hand and I turn it over easily in my palm, running my finger over its smooth surface. *It wouldn't hurt very much under my foot. If it were broken it wouldn't hurt.* My piano fingers press harder against the rim, admiring its diamond planes. You refuse to touch anything plastic. Perhaps it is because you know it could never be used as a weapon. I smile as I fill your glass with water that burns my hands. I know it could never be used as a weapon.

I can see you digging still from the window. Your mouth is a slash of determination, your feet set apart as if you are digging the foundations for a bridge,

a house. Your hole is three feet and five inches wide. Your shovel cowers when it encounters a rock, but you force it to dig deeper still. A lot of things you say and do are beyond me.

Beethoven is singing with his two, deft hands and his two deaf ears. He is here, at my ear; here, in my mind. I can barely see the top of your head over the edge of the hole you've made. Perhaps you mean to bury me lengthwise. My hands drip over another glass as I wash it and think of all the beautiful quartz it would make if I were to break it. All the beautiful knives.

Your head has completely disappeared now. If I bent my legs and sprinted, I could reach the shed before it appeared again. My hand is an octopus snaking its slithering tentacles around the bottom of the glass. My hand is the head of Medusa making use of her unconventional hair. The glass dives toward the floor, and I admire the way its wings fold back; the way its talons grasp at nothing, preparing for its prey. It shatters beautifully. It is quartz and diamonds and knives.

The glass doesn't hurt when I leave, carrying a few pieces with me in one pocket. I wrench open the back door, stumbling out of it like I've made use of the tiny glasses in the giant's coffin. Your head begins to resurface, and I run, my nimble legs carrying me to the foliage surrounding the shed. There is a call for your glass to be refilled. You have drunk the water that burned my hands and still your head floats gracefully above the top of your hole. If I peered closely enough, I might see the cone-shaped protrusions forcing themselves out of your forehead; interrupting your hairline as they dig their own holes out of your skin.

The shed door is heavy, but my fingers are as nimble as my legs. Bach begs me not to dawdle in a throaty tone, hovering over the east set of keys with precision. I hear your shout again, and the latch on the door to the shed has all but disintegrated in my hands. I swing it open. I run inside. I am met with wood and metal and the smell of obsession.

There are shovels, all shapes and sizes, littering the room. My mouth falls open and all I can see is the top of your head coming up, out of your hole like a flower blooming. How much prettier it would be if I added color to your dirt-brown hair.

What are you hiding? What have you lost?

Another shout and I'm grabbing the nearest blade, lunging for the door. Soon, you will come and find me. Soon, I will be found with metal and glass and quartz and diamonds and knives.

I can see the top of your head rising higher as I race toward you. There is your neck, there are your shoulders. There are your eyebrows, pulled low over your eyes like tiny twin cloaks. Here are your wide eyes as I stand over you, admiring the look on your face until I hear another sound.

There is a man at the fence, watching me watching you as I hold a blade over your head. He is clothed solely in black, his face covered by a hood, his features a mysterious swirl. I feel my own features frost over with fear as I see what it is he is holding.

You are smiling, gold teeth glinting. It is a shovel.



NOTE

This piece appeared briefly in 2021 on the author's Reedsy Prompts profile page.

EDITORIAL PRAISE

What are you hiding? What have you lost? "Shovels and Knives" is a chilling story instantaneously entrapping the reader in an oppressive world of dug-out holes, collectable shot glasses, and shimmering knives. Deftly, Tappmeyer weaves a narrative tracking one's descent into paranoia—or, perhaps, greater clarity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kyah Tappmeyer is a homeschool graduate and current college freshman from Louisville, Kentucky. In addition to creative writing, she is also a history lover and enjoys sewing historical reenactment clothing and reading Jane Austen novels in her spare time.



An Interview with Catherine L. Author of “Him”

Interviewer: Aisha Weththasingha

Aisha: The character of the brother is so intricately crafted and has so many nuanced details that really bring him to life and make him feel incredibly real. How do you go about creating characters like this? What does your process of making these characters feel three-dimensional look like?

Catherine: To me, characters become three-dimensional when they have depth, which comes from contradictions and lots of gray areas. One of the things I have always found very moving in certain stories is when the narrator sees another character holistically — noticing their flaws, being angry or sad or terrified of them — but loving them despite that. I have always found that very realistic. I don't have a strict process for creating characters, but I try to incorporate things I've liked about how other authors write theirs — for example, one of my favorite authors, Sally Rooney, often incorporates many little details that you never really think about, such as somebody picking their luggage up by the handle because they're anxious about it making noise. That makes them feel incredibly lifelike to me.

Aisha: “Him” has such a strong casual storytelling voice in the sense that it feels very conversational and is from the point of view of someone still trying to figure out their thoughts about their situation. I personally really loved this choice, but I'd love to hear it from you, directly: what message were you hoping this would convey, creatively? Was there a reason you chose this specific style of writing over any other?

Catherine: I think I was mostly trying to convey a sense of pain. I chose that specific style of writing, the lack of punctuation, because I think it gives dialogue a different

feeling, as if it's less separated from the narration. I wanted everything to feel sort of like a stream of consciousness, messy, because the narrator is jumping through different moments in her life in trying to grapple with her brother's death. I felt the writing style gave it a more dreamlike feeling.

Aisha: The ending was one of my favorite parts of the entire piece, as it felt so neatly tied together and really finished the piece with such a strong and final blow. However, even with all the implications weaved into the ending, there is still some room open for interpretation in regards to the brother. This is often a stylistic choice for some authors, so I'm wondering if this is a choice you make often? Why so? And how did you feel it impacted "Him" in particular?

Catherine: This is a choice I often make. I think it stems from my own reading habits: I really enjoy reading endings that make me think and leave a lasting impact. I think it affected "Him" through leaving enough details about the brother and the narrator to feel their impact on each other, but enough out so that many parts are left up to the reader's interpretation.

Aisha: This piece, although labeled fiction, discusses a tragic experience that countless people could relate to themselves. On a personal level, how does writing stories such as "Him" affect you? Does this overlap in any way with how you're hoping others are impacted while reading your stories?

Catherine: To me, the feeling of the character has always been the most important. I think it affects me in the sense that I put a little bit of my own life and emotions into different characters, so I can sometimes see myself in them or feel close to them. When others read my stories, I hope that they'll be able to understand the character's emotions and relate to parts of it — that's my biggest goal in writing, that the reader is able to feel immersed in the story and thereby impacted by it in some way.



An Interview with Kyah Tappmeyer

Author of “Shovels and Knives”

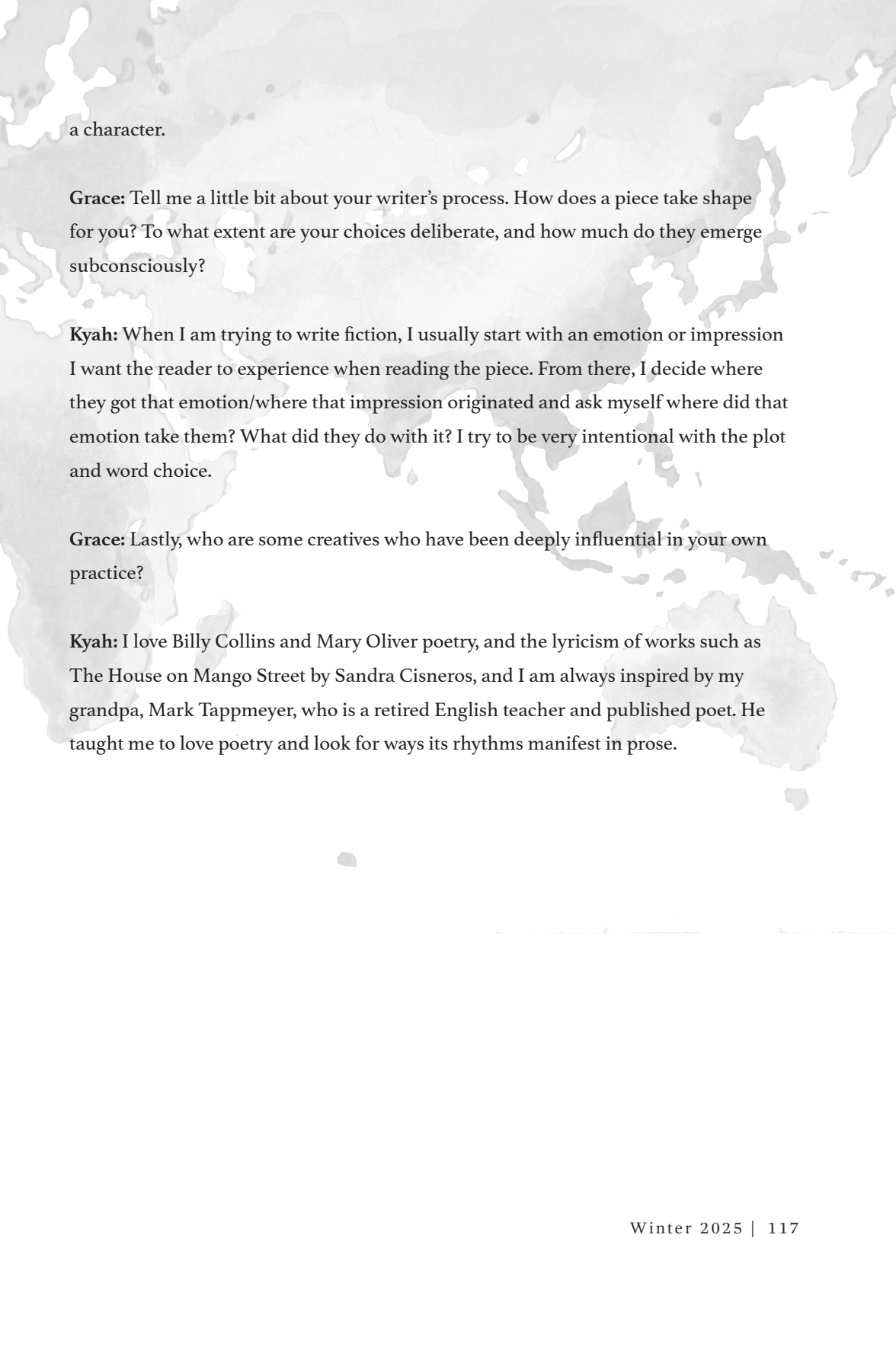
Interviewer: Grace Marie Liu

Grace: Immediately, I’m compelled by the “you” of “Shovels and Knives.” How did you decide to position the “you” within this economy of power? How does the “you” refract and shed light on the speaker? In other words, in examining the relationship between the “I” and the “you,” what are you exploring about this space?

Kyah: When writing this piece, I wanted the “you” to be automatically a menacing presence. The “you” serves to evoke emotions in the speaker that reveal more about their personality and how they handle stressful situations. I think the true intentions of the “you” matter less than the emotions and thoughts the protagonist experiences in reaction to them. The “you” is necessary to strike a specific fear in the speaker, which allows us to learn things about the speaker, such as their knowledge of music and responses to threatening situations.

Grace: I admire this piece for its fluid sense of tension, sustained via repetition—the action of digging “deeper, wider holes”; the narrator’s metamorphosing “piano hands”; the shimmering, shattered shot glasses. How do you approach constructing and weaving images together to create suspense?

Kyah: I think for this story, I wanted to create the sense of time slowing down. The protagonist is processing what she sees outside the window and growing progressively more horrified. Her actions are very deliberate as she attempts to wrap her mind around exactly what her fate is going to be. I chose the repetition and lots of description to try and mimic the tempo of that thought process. I also just love repetition in writing for emphasis, especially on ideas or emotions that are really bothering



a character.

Grace: Tell me a little bit about your writer's process. How does a piece take shape for you? To what extent are your choices deliberate, and how much do they emerge subconsciously?

Kyah: When I am trying to write fiction, I usually start with an emotion or impression I want the reader to experience when reading the piece. From there, I decide where they got that emotion/where that impression originated and ask myself where did that emotion take them? What did they do with it? I try to be very intentional with the plot and word choice.

Grace: Lastly, who are some creatives who have been deeply influential in your own practice?

Kyah: I love Billy Collins and Mary Oliver poetry, and the lyricism of works such as *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, and I am always inspired by my grandpa, Mark Tappmeyer, who is a retired English teacher and published poet. He taught me to love poetry and look for ways its rhythms manifest in prose.

ABOUT *POLYPHONY LIT*



About Our Organization

Polyphony Lit is the global online literary platform for high school students. We invite high school students worldwide to submit creative writing, join our editorial staff, write blog posts, take workshops, and grow into leadership roles. Because developing young writers is central to our mission, our editors provide feedback on every submission.

We offer three awards for excellence in writing through the Claudia Ann Seaman Awards for Young Writers, one each in poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction, and the student editors publish an online magazine featuring their favorite pieces from each genre.

Since our founding in 2004, we have received submissions from high school students in 87 countries and 52 U.S. states/territories. Our student editors have given feedback to every submission, over 24,000 and counting.

Polyphony Lit is a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization (2008), incorporated in the State of Illinois.

OUR MISSION

Our mission is to form a global online community of teens devoted to improving literary skills and nurturing creative voices in the areas of poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction. We strive to build respectful, mutually beneficial, writer-editor relationships. We seek to enrich the literary lives of teens worldwide, especially those living in under-resourced communities. We honor literary achievement by bringing attention to excellence through awards and publishing much of the extraordinary work we receive.

OUR BELIEFS

We believe that when young writers put precise and powerful language to their lives it helps them better understand their value as human beings. We believe the development of that creative voice depends upon close, careful, and compassionate attention. Helping young editors become proficient at providing thoughtful and informed attention to the work of their peers is essential to our mission. We believe this important exchange between young writers and editors provides each with a better understanding of craft, of the writing process, and of the value of putting words to their own lives while preparing them for participation in the broader literary community.

HISTORY

Founded in 2004 by Paige Holtzman (Latin School of Chicago '06) and Billy Lombardo, *Polyphony Lit* has responded to more than more than 24,000 submissions from 87 countries and 52 U.S. states/territories. We have published 19 annual literary magazines to date, each an anthology of the favorite poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction submissions as selected by our student editors.

Our Programs

We offer two programs which provide students with opportunities to train their editing skills and work with real submissions to the magazine:

“How to Be a Literary Editor” (HTBLE)

This course teaches high school and college students how to edit poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction. Our editorial method, developed over 15 years of teaching our own staff the craft of editing, offers a standard approach for tackling each submission and gives an overview of the specific editing vocabulary useful for giving meaningful feedback. Students who complete the course will be prepared to join the staff of their school literary magazine, ace an internship at a real-world lit magazine, or join Polyphony Lit.

“Summer Editing Apprenticeship” (SEA)

The Apprenticeship is a part-time online summer program for rising 9th - 12th-grade high school students. Over its five weeks, students will gain advanced knowledge of the craft and art of literary editing and be prepared for senior editing roles at *Polyphony Lit* or their high school literary magazine. The course combines asynchronous training modules, live lectures, collaborative group discussions, and weekly assignments to respond to actual author submissions to *Polyphony Lit*. Thus, students will connect with a global community of peer writers and readers. We believe that editing offers students an opportunity to develop and celebrate their unique voices in a way that is both fun and rewarding!

Registration for the HTBLE course is open continually year round; registration for

SEA is open until the program begins in June.

Details on both programs are available on our website:

polyphonylit.org

For students who join *Polyphony Lit* as editors, there are multiple opportunities for leadership in our organization, as nearly all work is student-directed, and students serve in roles from junior editor up to and including editors-in-chief. Additional volunteer opportunities around promotion, preparing print editions, and social media give students exceptional opportunities to play an integral role in *Polyphony Lit's* work, a singular experience that not only develops their skills, but allows them to demonstrate to colleges or employers their ability to work in a complex organization and take on significant responsibilities.

How You Can Help

As a 501(c)(3) registered nonprofit, *Polyphony Lit* depends heavily on donations to support our work. Since 2005 we have provided high-school students around the world with the opportunity to learn and work together, and it is our goal to continue to provide this creative space for the future.

Your purchase of this magazine helps support our programs, and we thank you. But a year of our work requires a budget of nearly \$40,000, and so if you are able to give more, please consider doing so. You can donate via our website.

Regardless of whether you can donate monetarily, you can also help us by telling others about our programs:

- Any high school students anywhere in the world!
- Parents and guardians
- The English department head at your school
- School librarians
- Local news media or organizations which publicize summer and academic-year enrichment programs

If you would like to discuss naming opportunities or planned gifts, please contact us at info@polyphony.org to arrange a private consultation with our Executive Director.

Thank you in advance for your support!

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The *Polyphony Lit* Editorial Staff, comprised of high school students from all over the world, provides editorial feedback to every submission we receive in the general submissions category and decides which pieces are accepted for publication. Each piece is read and commented on by two Junior Editors and one Senior Editor. The final decision on publication is made by an Executive Editor, Genre-Managing Editor, or Editor-in-Chief. At the conclusion of the editing cycle, editorial comments are compiled and sent directly to the submitter. Since we provide editorial training for young writers, our editors also receive feedback on their commentary from other editors.



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From the Editor

"During times like these, I go outside. I remind myself that for all the solitude creativity demands, we are never truly alone when we write. I chase the same ear-piercing, sore-throat exhilaration in poetry that I feel when belting songs in my friend's car, the windows down on the I-5, the beat pulsing beneath my seat. Even when we're not writing, I realize we're still thinking about it. I remember one evening after slurping up noodles, my friend stretched back and joked, "I am large, I contain multitudes," quoting Whitman's "Song of Myself." Writing is how I connect with others. Writing is about ourselves, our off-key singing, our words. Writing does not allow detachment. When the pen is in my hand, I cannot just wade knee-deep; I must be submerged, ears barely above the surface, watching and writing and waiting."

Cloris Shi, Co-EIC

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