

Volume 20 | Spring 2025

Polyphony Lit



The Best High School Writing from Around the Globe

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Volume 20
Spring 2025

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Polyphony Lit

ZHILE ZHOU

Beijing Keystone Academy, Beijing, China

Les Fleurs du Mal

“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.”



GRACE MARIE LIU

Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

Dear Readers,

Here's a small, slightly embarrassing admission: I never learned to swim.

As a child, I staunchly refused to partake in beach days, opting instead for land-based activities. At twelve, I grudgingly enrolled in swim lessons at the local rec center—only for the pandemic to hit. I aged out of the program soon after. Entering high school, I had yet to submerge my face underwater for more than a few seconds.

It was a simple fear: drowning, though nothing in my life had ever given me a reason to be afraid. Even then, I wondered: how do you give way to the murky unknown? How can you trust that the water will catch you?

This issue embraces that surrender. It offers pieces that lean into the present, even as it slips through our fingers. Pieces that acknowledge the ephemeral, the stormy—and choose to wade in anyway. We see this in Katerina Sutton's "Rehashed, Rerun, Rewound: "My grasp on this moment is already slipping, and I know it will never be recreated," and Audrey Kim's "Of Salt and Small Talk," where the speaker says, "We are ... drowning in a vision we don't know how to keep, but we're too caught up in it to care." We discover it in "Full Circle," where the speaker reflects, "A person was an atom. A building was a molecule. A worm was an electron. To him, anything could be everything." And we feel it in the quiet bravery of "Gutting Fish," in which the speaker declares, "I carve our memory clean: / how my hair floats loose in the lake now, / how I've gutted what kept me quiet, / how love is a bleeding thing I'm not afraid to hold." The work in this issue ripples outward, making waves. They remind us, too, that writing in and of itself is a dialogue—and, as readers, we must dive into the waters, however turbulent they may be.

As former editor-in-chief Shaliz Bazldjoo writes in her letter, "I can't say high school has been perfect—nothing is, after all." In my freshman year, I felt wholly lost, my head underwater. In my sophomore and junior years, I felt knee-deep in the

waters, unsure (and terrified!) of what lay ahead. This spring, I cautiously waded into Lake Michigan and, with a friend's help, learned to swim. As a senior, when I look back, I'm simply grateful for all of it—the joy, the mess, the in-between.

In my last letter, I spoke of the synergy that defines *Polyphony*, from the spirited dialectics exchanged between editors in Submittable to the thoughtful Q&As during the Junior Board's annual literary salons. Today, I'd like to build on that by highlighting the value of *Polyphony*'s community in the broader societal context. Over the past four years, I've witnessed the power of a collective deeply committed to championing and listening to youth voices. Reflecting upon my own high school career, much of it felt akin to shouting into a void: AP Lang rhetorical essays, 150-word Common App supplementals. What a gift it is, then, to return to this place time and time again: a collective archive of the joys, sorrows, dreams, fears, and experiences that braid us together.

I could wax on about *Polyphony* and how my time here has been everything to me. Instead, I'll close with this: when asked how to understand poetry, Ocean Vuong responds, "Do you need to understand rain to be inside it?" As you dive into this issue, learn to swim in the work, to let its current carry you. There is a voice at the end of the tunnel. It sings.

With love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Grace Marie Liu". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Grace" being more prominent and the last name "Liu" written in a more compact, stylized manner.

Grace Marie Liu

BLACK HISTORY CONTEST



KUFRE DANIEL

California Lutheran High School, Wildomar, CA, USA

Pierre?

Black History Contest Winner

(Yo Pierre!

You wanna come out here?)

The whole time ‘here’ is known:

‘here’ is a tired scene

not so much its loud pieces :

less a nightclub, a gun, and a godfather –

and those are not half its pieces –

than it is a trivial neon folding over

of trite rhymes,

of saying things that are easy.

i)

Here is a tired scene:

Lil’ shoots a gun (or says he does).

A bullet zips through Sierra Leone.

A boy in Sierra Leone listens

and ignores the folk tales that rustle the leaves

with the *gangan* of his mother tongue.

A boy in Sierra Leone whistles along

to a Viet-made music player.

He has not yet held a gun

– but Biggie must have in his left hand as he smoked a cigar
and wrote this song –

but he will.

He will hold it how he presumes they do in Compton.

Little does he know Lil' never marched in rank

or poised his gun at bodies even Crips would call sacrosanct.

Little does he know there are no gangstas in the bushes

where brown-brown rules the bloodshot eyes

of the jackals we strive to call children –

clean, *lil'*, innocent.

And, of course, that was how they started:

clean,

lil',

innocent.

I will tell you what is not *how* they end:

ii)

Here is a tired scene:

A toddler scrabbles the Converse half of the pieces.

The other side of a Platinum penny

is a food stamp. Junior knows they are poor.

Mommy struggles. Mommy is tired. Cousin Marcus is a rapper

and rough around the edges, but he makes ends meet.

Once, when Mommy took to court for child support,

he slept over in that New York apartment.

There he was confronted with the ends, their edges,

their *eczema*,

and as a party trick, the means of their meeting. Marcus mocked his wonder –
Junior's keen arch into and eyeing of the muzzle
like a genie to a lamp – long as he was allowed
(as we know, the great equalizer subtracts).
Course, the clean sheen of the chamber started black and bloodless.
The first gun was a curio in a warmer museum. Junior
is later lynched/stomped/strangled/shot
by a cop/martyr/rapper/an accident
to death.
What matters are not so much the streets as the end.
But, of course, it started:

Clean

lil, innocent;
I will tell you what is not *why* it ends:

iii)
to be fetishized –
to be gilded by the rhythms of a man that made it out.
That is how it came:
red-blue rival phantoms in a studio booth,
an ensconced genius within, and a beat made of bullets
but in Sierra Leonean bushes it is a bloody jungle
where the soil burps.

Here's the important thing:

about a voice –
about fashioning percussion from a history –
about speaking with a rhythm that bounces in the bones –
about extracting from one's grassroots a suffering that is bold, and ours –

What you say with it.

(Pierre does not want to come out here).



EDITORIAL PRAISE

Through its riveting imagery and skillful allusion, “Pierre?” observes a tension many Black people will face once in their lives — asserting innocence when guilt is already assumed. As the poem takes readers through the jungles of Sierra Leone and the rough crime ridden streets of the city, it teaches us that intrinsic value of music lies in what it says to us, words and composition alike.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am a Nigerian-American high school student and have written for as long as I can remember. For years, I have whittled a voice, and it is a great pleasure to me to finally feel heard. I am grateful for this platform and equally grateful for my previous publications in The Live Poets’ Society of NJ. Going forward, I would love to continue to use my voice to change the world, and – at some point – professionally.

ROXANE TURENNE

Barbra Ingram School for the Arts, Hagerstown, MD, USA

My Boy, Skin and Soul

Black History Contest Runner-Up

Their eyes of leech feed on my alienated flesh. They were looking at my golden nails, my waist length braids turned to a short ‘fro overnight. I could almost hear the backhanded comments broiling in their throats:

“Is it real this time?” they asked. I smiled, cause my mama ain’t raise no wuss.

Passing period. It’s three minutes, just enough time for a song to get me ready for the next class. I pop in both earbuds and praise whoever created these heavenly noise-canceling devices. I watch the whiteness pass by me with their clothes inspired by black people, their music inspired by black people, their hairstyle inspired by black people. They tan, lookin’ like black people, but never will they ever say they love us, black people.

It’s hard to resist the urge to let loose and let my body harmonize with the beat. It’s the only thing they can’t take from us. They’re not just melodies, they were our survival at some point. Even if I have no freedom, I have music.

All too soon, the three minutes—though they felt like three seconds— are over, and I have to go back into the field of foul play. There’s nothing unique about my feelings, every black person carries them. It’s the same slow-burning ache, etched into bone, passed from hand to hand like a haunting folklore. You could say we’ve got a community—but it’s all bitter, no sweet.

I sit by a boy in my Visual Arts class. He looks over at my phone, says he listens to Erykah Badu too. I catch myself wishing for genuineness in him as he sits closer to me, asking for an ear. I stretched the cord, the smooth plastic cool between my

fingers, handing him the left earbud. The fella who made earbuds knew what he was doing when he made two.

The boy hummed to the melody as he carved himself a fist out of his block of clay. The room seemed quieter, the soft crackle of the tiny speakers in our ears blending with the echo of our own breaths. My head light– the good kind– for the rest of class.

I sat by him the next day, and the day after that, we fall into rhythm: sit down, fetch the supplies, share earbuds. The song transitions to a lighter tone, he knows it word for word. I don't know if it's his brown eyes in mine, or his brown skin on mine, or his lips wording, *So in love with you*, but my soul sung for the first time. His presence, the transition from winter to spring. He smelled like the lilies mama grows in the yard. The air was warmer when he was near, like a sun ray's kiss through a cracked window.

He plays the guitar, says he wants to be the next Steve Lacy. I believe him.

Then the whispers start.

"Why do all the black boys want to be rappers now?"

Like I said, it's not just me who experiences this. We call the whiteness pure, so why are their words so filthy when speaking to us?

But my boy, he's different. He won't let it stop him. He scribbles on the back of Algebra worksheets. He stays up late recording, carving sound into sculpture. He says he's going to be the next Steve Lacy. So believe him.

He invited me over to his garage one day. He wrote a new song and wants me to hear it. He strums his guitar, eyes shut, he's concentrating. There's something different in the way he sings–something raw–like he's pushing back something heavy. The pressure of proving himself. Of being more than what they expect him to be.

I sat by this boy every day for three months– until I didn't.

I hear in the white halls, he got caught with drugs. *Possession*.

They're lying.

But then I see him doing it. I see the weight finally winning. I see the bottomless

fall and a cacophony of escapes racketeering in his deathly silent room. I see him sneaking out late at night to play with his band. I see his bandmates pull a white block from his jacket. I see my boy, the one who dreamed in sound– disappear beneath the noise.

I hate him for sabotaging himself. *Why'd you let them win, my boy?*

I send him a text, but I know he won't see it.

"Thank you for being the music in my silence. I love you." I put my earbuds in and play our song.

The whiteness keeps staring, but their eyes don't weigh as heavy as they used to. Their eyes leech off my alienated skin, but I shrug 'em off; cause mama ain't raise no wuss.

And when the world gets too loud, I'll do what we've always done.

I'll press play.

I'll listen.

This time, I won't resist the urge to let loose and let my body harmonize with the beat.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

What strikes readers immediately about this piece is the musical cadence of the speaker. Reading "My Boy, Skin and Soul" sounds like a song in your head. This piece artfully portrays the dance that love dances with music that should remain constantly at the forefront of our hearts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roxane Turenne is a 15-year-old poet/ fictionist who attends an art school in western Maryland. Her work, often shaped by rich imagery, draws from personal experiences and a deep appreciation for language. When she's not writing, she loves making new friends and volunteering at animal shelters.

CACELIE GOODEN

CREC Academy of Aerospace and Engineering, Hartford, CT, USA

Echoes of the Beat in the Rhythm of History

Black History Contest Runner-Up

Music to my ears

Is what I remember, other than
the sun — blaring,
the car — rusted,
worn down by time and heat.

A hot, sweaty, and uncomfortable
11-year-old girl in the backseat
begging for the 2-hour car ride to be over.

The engine hums its old song,
worn tires on the cracked,
bumpy road,
a rhythm I can't name—
only feel,
as the miles stretched on

From Montego Bay, Jamaica to
the green mountains of Nine Mile.

music to my ears

awaits my agitated 11-year-old self

As we neared the peak,
I hear it—
the steady thrum of a drum,
the hum of collected voices,
and, again, the rhythm
unfamiliar, foreign,
like me.

A song born of pain,
passed down through chains,
sung in whispers,
sung in defiance,

woven into the beat of the drum—
where, out of order,
freedom dances and slavery weeps.

People gather in the heat
at a pearly, white, tiled grave
with hands lifted
feet tapping,
celebrating a name I haven't yet learned.

Bob Marley

His name fills the air like a prayer,
echos of his songs
by congregations of people.

Unbeknownst to me then,
songs that live in my bones,
etched in the very air we breathe.

Not just **Marley**,
but **Michael**,
with every note of light,
Kendrick with every
word of truth,
Chuck and **Little Richard**,
breaking barriers,
and more—
changing society.

The air hums,
their drums beats,
their guitars strums,
and their voices—
they rise, they fall,
they sway with the breeze,
like waves rolling in,
one after another.

The sound wraps around me,
and I'm no longer waiting,
no longer restless—
I'm in the song,

the song is in me,
the song carries me
as it has carried all who came before,

each note a step,
each pause a breath,
each beat the pulse of history.

*This is how we sing.
This is how we remember.
This is how we live.*



EDITORIAL PRAISE

"Echoes..." celebrates music as an extension of ourselves. This piece masterfully builds suspense to lead us to a quintessential statement about how music, once it possesses us, can allow us to take flight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cacelie Gooden is a senior from Connecticut, who enjoys writing works of non-fiction and poetry. When she is not writing, she loves reading, painting, and doing civic engagement work/advocacy for her community.

ASHANI AHUJA

The Nightingale-Bamford School, New York, NY, USA

The Sound Was Here Before Its Name

it begins before the breath,
before the name,
before the weight of knowing.

a hum in the marrow,
a foot tapping against history's ceiling,
a hand clapping against the wind –
the sound moves before the body does.

it stretches its arms across oceans,
whispers to the bones buried in the tide,
wipes salt from its eyes and sings,
because the throat remembers even when the world forgets.

it is born in the mouth of the night,
screaming, wailing, turning silence into something
that cannot be ignored.

it grows legs and runs –
down the dirt roads,
over split rail fences,
through the steel jaws of cities,
it runs past names carved into stone
and does not stop.

it laughs in the face of time,
pulls history into a dance,
kicks up dust in places they swore
had been swept clean.

and when they try to catch it,
pin it down,
lock it in the museum of things conquered,
it slips through their fingers,
a ghost, a breath, a storm in the distance.

it does not die,
only changes its name,
learns new ways to break free.

they tried to bury the sound,
but it slipped through the soil,
rose up in someone else's lungs,
called itself something different,
but still carried the same fire.

the sound refuses to break –
it bends, it shifts, and survives.

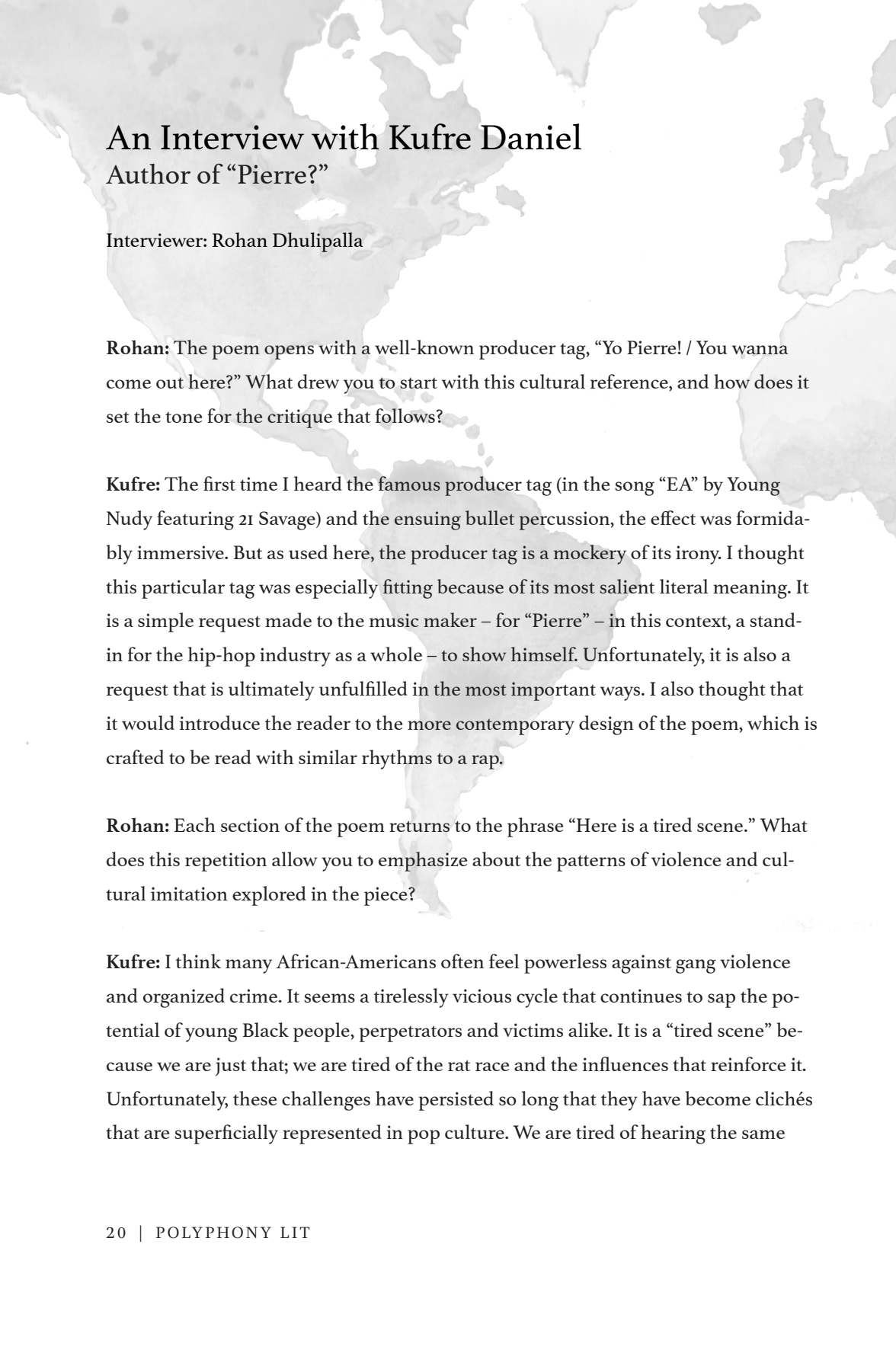


EDITORIAL PRAISE

A lyrical meditation on ancestral memory and resistance, this poem traces the journey of sound as a force older than language: uncontainable, ever-evolving, and defiantly alive. It celebrates the power of voice to endure, transcend borders, and reclaim history.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashani Ahuja is a 10th grade student at The Nightingale-Bamford School, living on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. She's a poet, competitive golfer, and matcha enthusiast who finds comfort in meaningful margins and well-worn books. Whether on the course or in conversation, she is driven by a love of the written word, her dog Bogey, and sinking long putts.



An Interview with Kufre Daniel

Author of “Pierre?”

Interviewer: Rohan Dhulipalla

Rohan: The poem opens with a well-known producer tag, “Yo Pierre! / You wanna come out here?” What drew you to start with this cultural reference, and how does it set the tone for the critique that follows?

Kufre: The first time I heard the famous producer tag (in the song “EA” by Young Nudy featuring 21 Savage) and the ensuing bullet percussion, the effect was formidably immersive. But as used here, the producer tag is a mockery of its irony. I thought this particular tag was especially fitting because of its most salient literal meaning. It is a simple request made to the music maker – for “Pierre” – in this context, a stand-in for the hip-hop industry as a whole – to show himself. Unfortunately, it is also a request that is ultimately unfulfilled in the most important ways. I also thought that it would introduce the reader to the more contemporary design of the poem, which is crafted to be read with similar rhythms to a rap.

Rohan: Each section of the poem returns to the phrase “Here is a tired scene.” What does this repetition allow you to emphasize about the patterns of violence and cultural imitation explored in the piece?

Kufre: I think many African-Americans often feel powerless against gang violence and organized crime. It seems a tirelessly vicious cycle that continues to sap the potential of young Black people, perpetrators and victims alike. It is a “tired scene” because we are just that; we are tired of the rat race and the influences that reinforce it. Unfortunately, these challenges have persisted so long that they have become clichés that are superficially represented in pop culture. We are tired of hearing the same

innuendos, the same colloquialisms for firearms, the same metaphors on marijuana. Therein is another dimension to the double entendre: “here is a tired scene.”

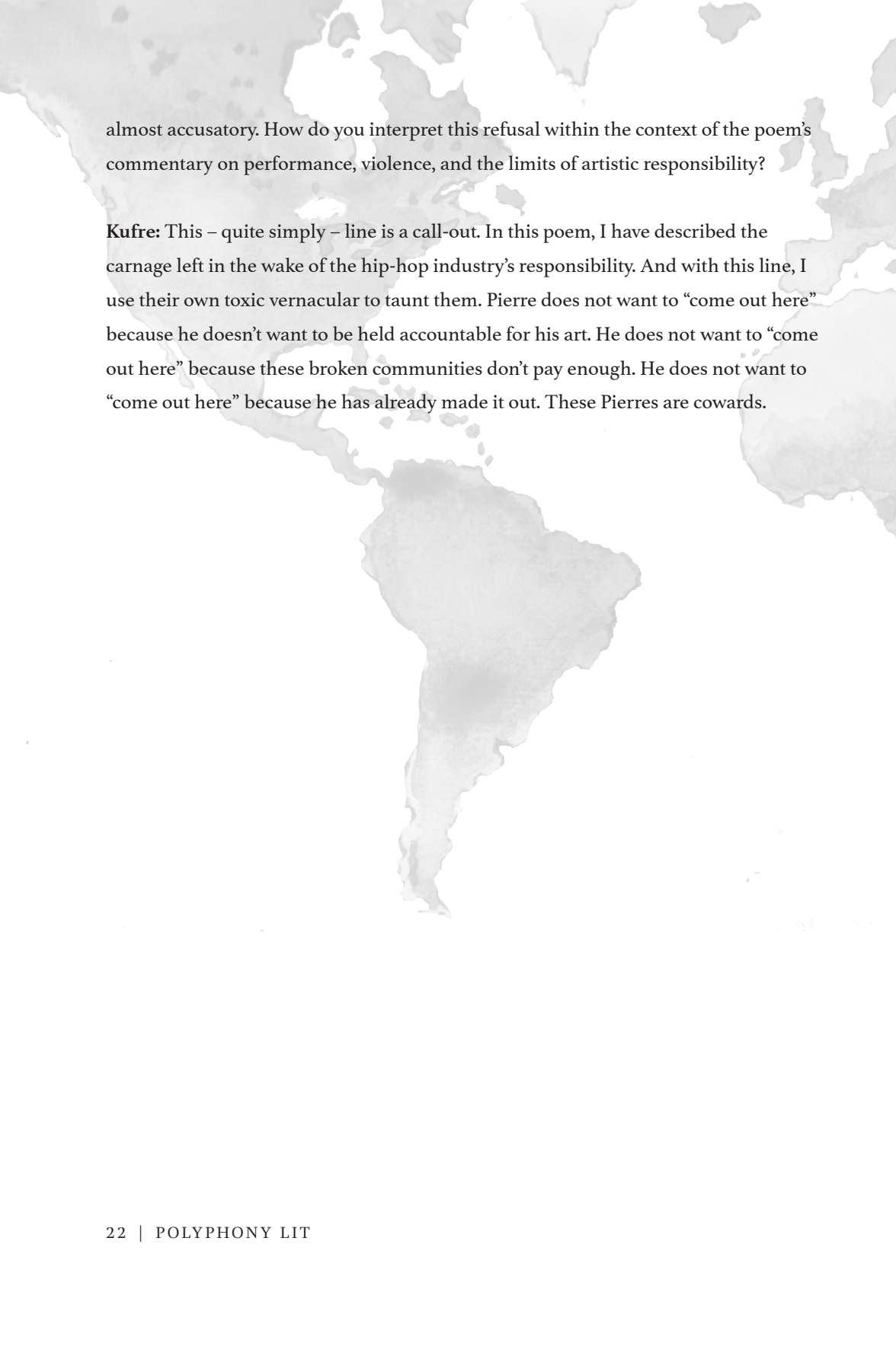
Rohan: In the first section, you draw a line from American rap to a boy in Sierra Leone listening through a Viet-made device. How do you view the global transmission of American music, particularly hip-hop, and its effect on different audiences?

Kufre: It is infinitely easier to idolize violence in the US from halfway across the world. Growing up abroad myself – and, simultaneously, as a US citizen, I have a multidimensional understanding of the influence hip-hop has over entire continents. In my teenage friend groups, American hip-hop was especially popular, and knowing the lyrics was something like a badge of honor, specifically because it came from so far away. The power dynamics of a gang, as referenced by many hip-hop songs, so peremptorily appealed to my budding masculinity that I was captivated by messages spoken in accents I could barely understand. I imagine, for converse reasons, the young men in US cities are even more strongly drawn to their more local hip-hop stars.

Rohan: You return multiple times to the phrase “clean, lil’, innocent,” in describing children before they’re exposed to violence. Why was it important for you to center this loss of innocence, and how does it challenge or complicate common narratives?

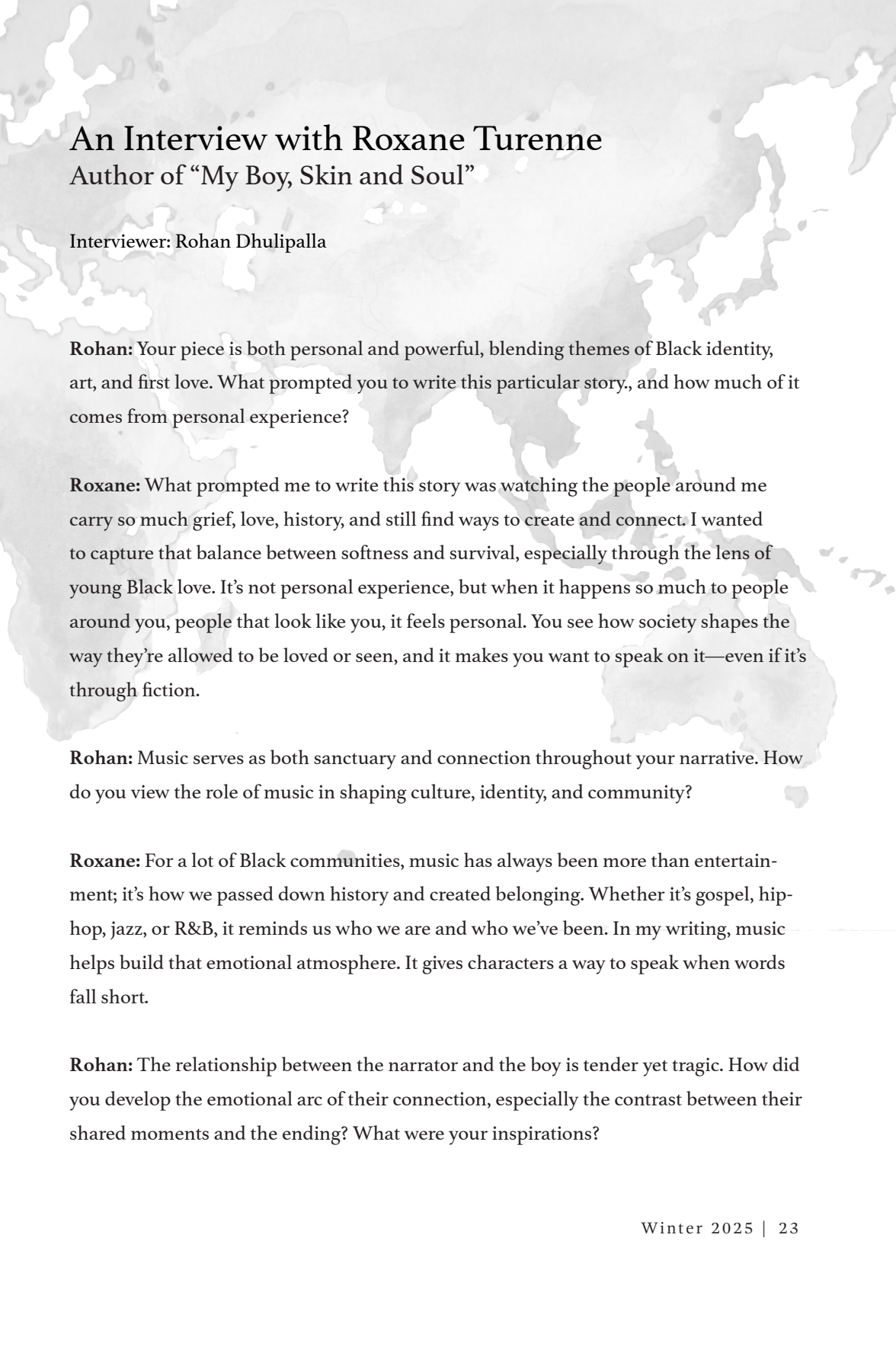
Kufre: I think far too often we forget how malleable the youth is. So, I wanted to center the focus on the children affected by this inspired violence; I repeated this phrase to emphasize how they are only blank slates, seeds, and mere witnesses before they are corrupted by their communities. Considering the sheer encompassment of the circumstances, it is difficult to conceptualize the youth independent of their corruption. These lines are intended to remind the reader to do that. Black kids do not have a gun violence gene.

Rohan: The closing line, “Pierre does not want to come out here,” reads as pointed and



almost accusatory. How do you interpret this refusal within the context of the poem's commentary on performance, violence, and the limits of artistic responsibility?

Kufre: This – quite simply – line is a call-out. In this poem, I have described the carnage left in the wake of the hip-hop industry's responsibility. And with this line, I use their own toxic vernacular to taunt them. Pierre does not want to “come out here” because he doesn't want to be held accountable for his art. He does not want to “come out here” because these broken communities don't pay enough. He does not want to “come out here” because he has already made it out. These Pierres are cowards.



An Interview with Roxane Turenne

Author of “My Boy, Skin and Soul”

Interviewer: Rohan Dhulipalla

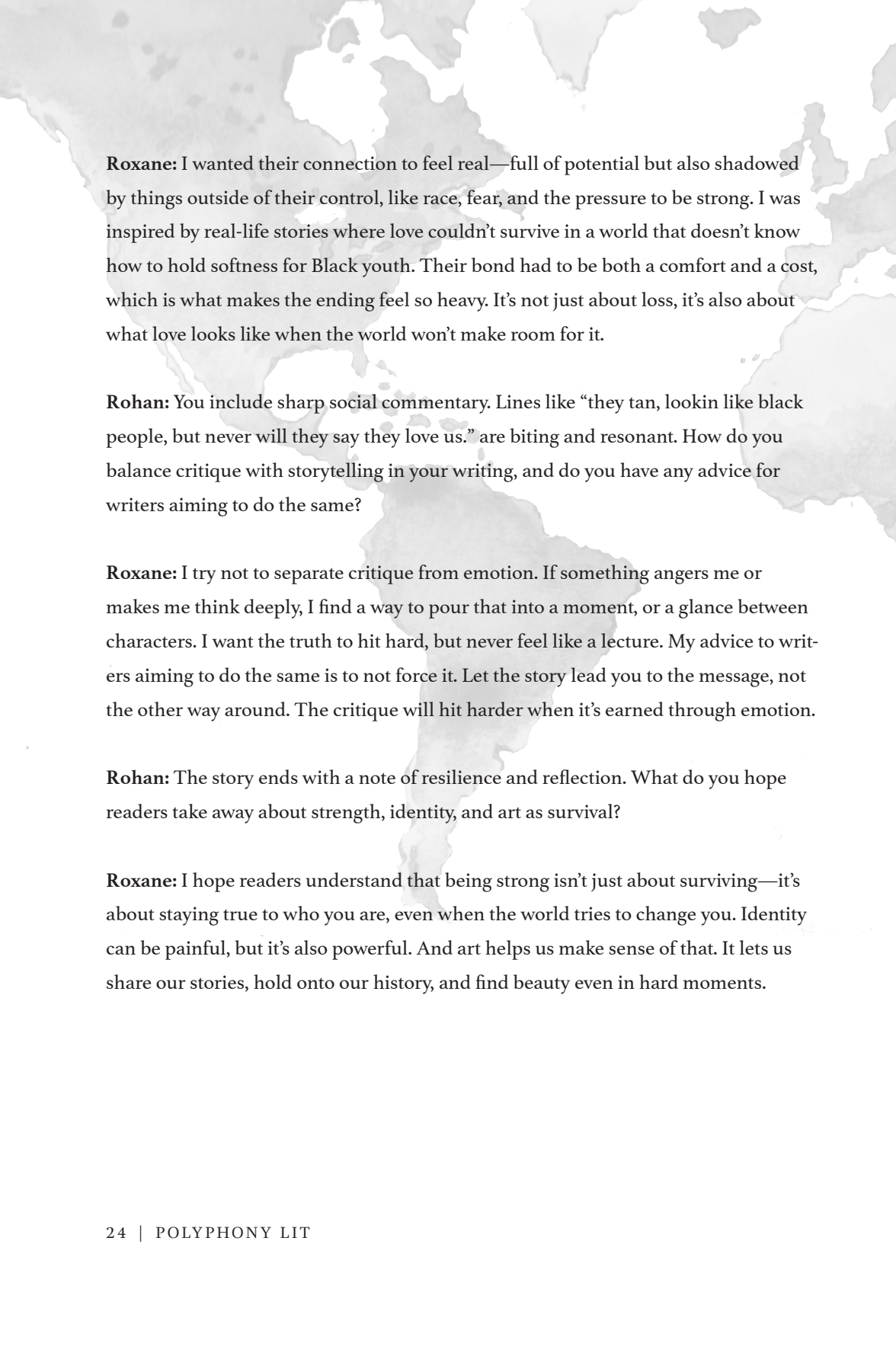
Rohan: Your piece is both personal and powerful, blending themes of Black identity, art, and first love. What prompted you to write this particular story, and how much of it comes from personal experience?

Roxane: What prompted me to write this story was watching the people around me carry so much grief, love, history, and still find ways to create and connect. I wanted to capture that balance between softness and survival, especially through the lens of young Black love. It's not personal experience, but when it happens so much to people around you, people that look like you, it feels personal. You see how society shapes the way they're allowed to be loved or seen, and it makes you want to speak on it—even if it's through fiction.

Rohan: Music serves as both sanctuary and connection throughout your narrative. How do you view the role of music in shaping culture, identity, and community?

Roxane: For a lot of Black communities, music has always been more than entertainment; it's how we passed down history and created belonging. Whether it's gospel, hip-hop, jazz, or R&B, it reminds us who we are and who we've been. In my writing, music helps build that emotional atmosphere. It gives characters a way to speak when words fall short.

Rohan: The relationship between the narrator and the boy is tender yet tragic. How did you develop the emotional arc of their connection, especially the contrast between their shared moments and the ending? What were your inspirations?



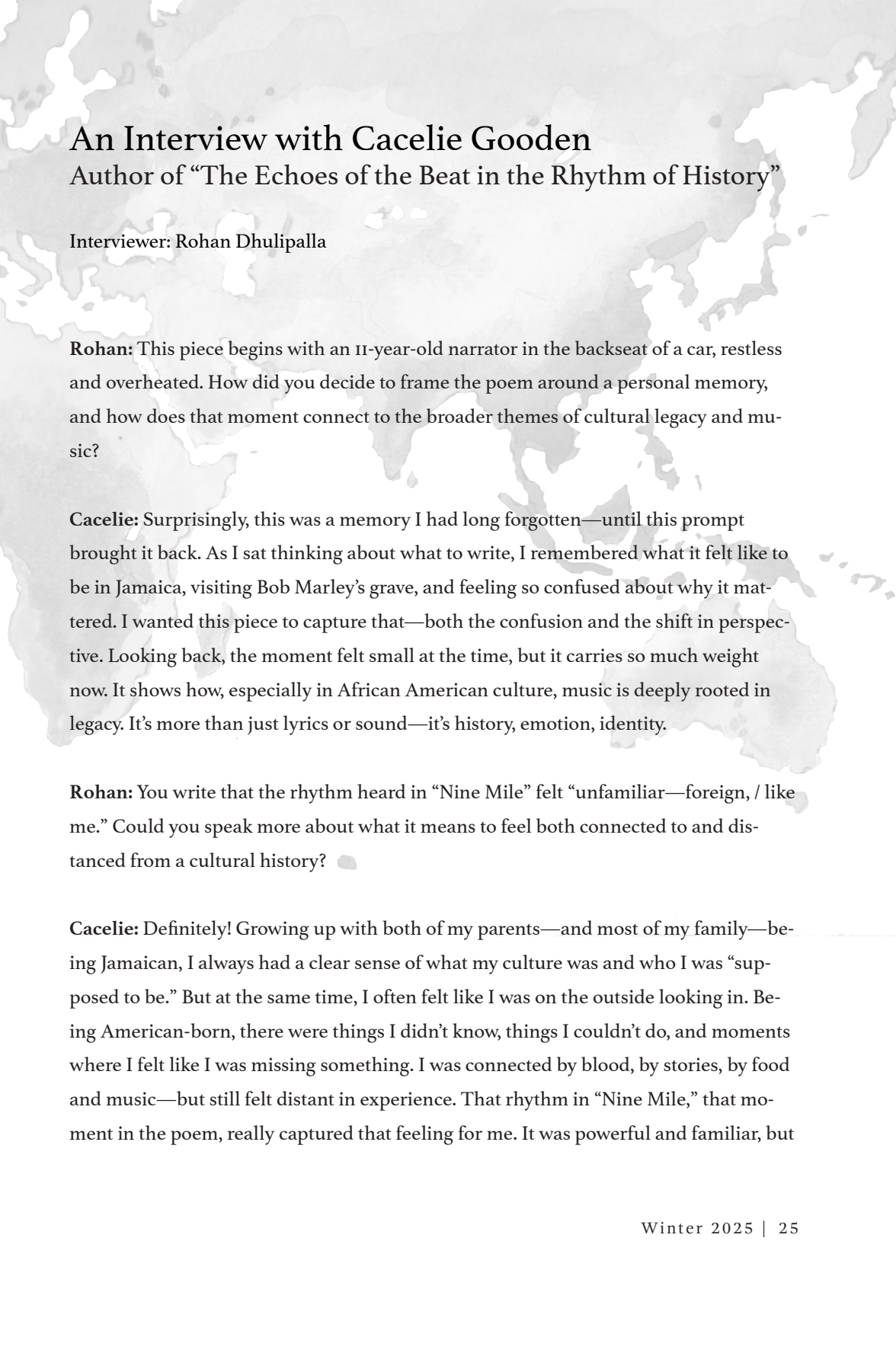
Roxane: I wanted their connection to feel real—full of potential but also shadowed by things outside of their control, like race, fear, and the pressure to be strong. I was inspired by real-life stories where love couldn't survive in a world that doesn't know how to hold softness for Black youth. Their bond had to be both a comfort and a cost, which is what makes the ending feel so heavy. It's not just about loss, it's also about what love looks like when the world won't make room for it.

Rohan: You include sharp social commentary. Lines like “they tan, lookin like black people, but never will they say they love us.” are biting and resonant. How do you balance critique with storytelling in your writing, and do you have any advice for writers aiming to do the same?

Roxane: I try not to separate critique from emotion. If something angers me or makes me think deeply, I find a way to pour that into a moment, or a glance between characters. I want the truth to hit hard, but never feel like a lecture. My advice to writers aiming to do the same is to not force it. Let the story lead you to the message, not the other way around. The critique will hit harder when it's earned through emotion.

Rohan: The story ends with a note of resilience and reflection. What do you hope readers take away about strength, identity, and art as survival?

Roxane: I hope readers understand that being strong isn't just about surviving—it's about staying true to who you are, even when the world tries to change you. Identity can be painful, but it's also powerful. And art helps us make sense of that. It lets us share our stories, hold onto our history, and find beauty even in hard moments.



An Interview with Cacelie Gooden

Author of “The Echoes of the Beat in the Rhythm of History”

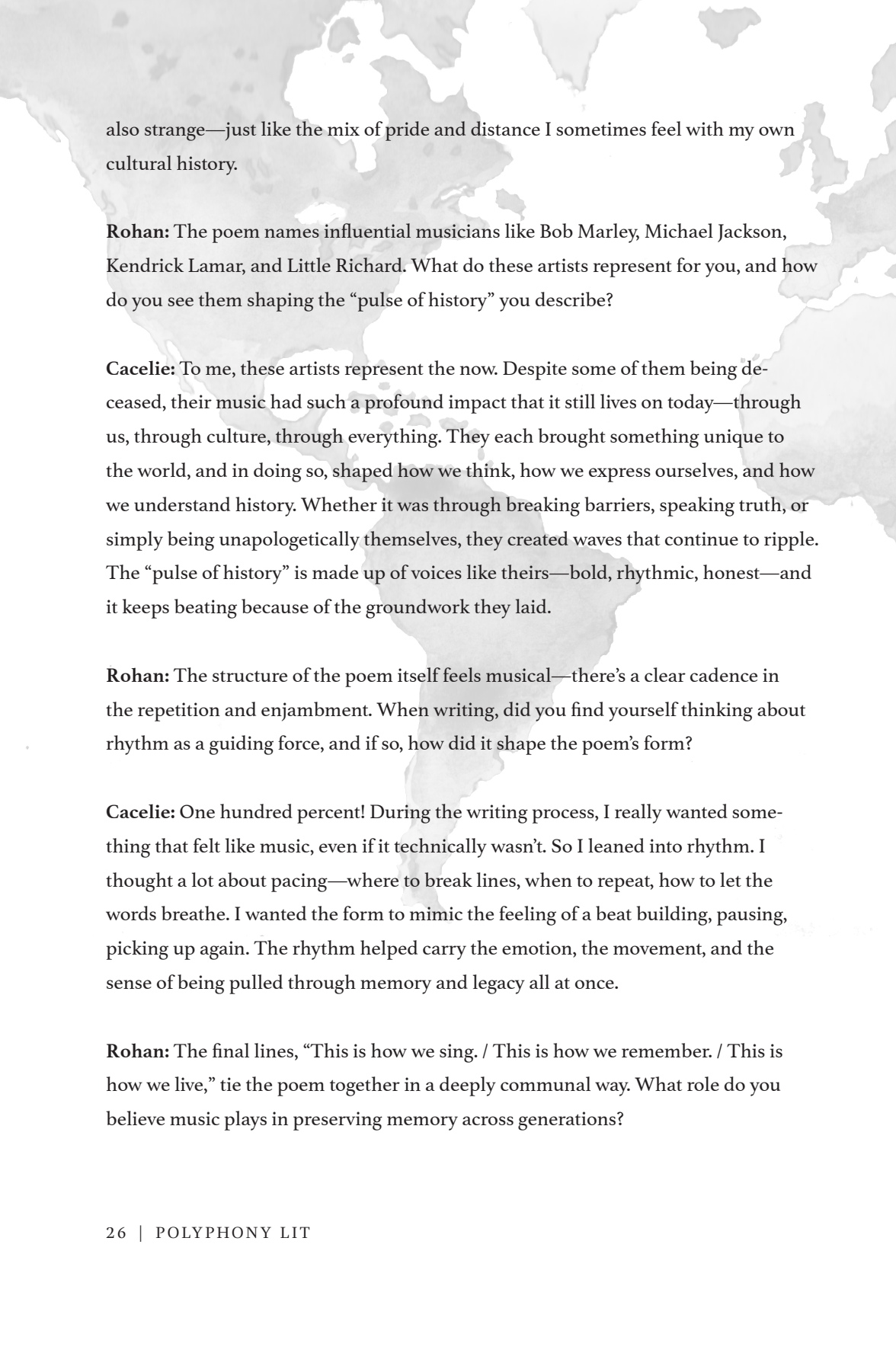
Interviewer: Rohan Dhulipalla

Rohan: This piece begins with an 11-year-old narrator in the backseat of a car, restless and overheated. How did you decide to frame the poem around a personal memory, and how does that moment connect to the broader themes of cultural legacy and music?

Cacelie: Surprisingly, this was a memory I had long forgotten—until this prompt brought it back. As I sat thinking about what to write, I remembered what it felt like to be in Jamaica, visiting Bob Marley’s grave, and feeling so confused about why it mattered. I wanted this piece to capture that—both the confusion and the shift in perspective. Looking back, the moment felt small at the time, but it carries so much weight now. It shows how, especially in African American culture, music is deeply rooted in legacy. It’s more than just lyrics or sound—it’s history, emotion, identity.

Rohan: You write that the rhythm heard in “Nine Mile” felt “unfamiliar—foreign, / like me.” Could you speak more about what it means to feel both connected to and distanced from a cultural history?

Cacelie: Definitely! Growing up with both of my parents—and most of my family—being Jamaican, I always had a clear sense of what my culture was and who I was “supposed to be.” But at the same time, I often felt like I was on the outside looking in. Being American-born, there were things I didn’t know, things I couldn’t do, and moments where I felt like I was missing something. I was connected by blood, by stories, by food and music—but still felt distant in experience. That rhythm in “Nine Mile,” that moment in the poem, really captured that feeling for me. It was powerful and familiar, but



also strange—just like the mix of pride and distance I sometimes feel with my own cultural history.

Rohan: The poem names influential musicians like Bob Marley, Michael Jackson, Kendrick Lamar, and Little Richard. What do these artists represent for you, and how do you see them shaping the “pulse of history” you describe?

Cacelie: To me, these artists represent the now. Despite some of them being deceased, their music had such a profound impact that it still lives on today—through us, through culture, through everything. They each brought something unique to the world, and in doing so, shaped how we think, how we express ourselves, and how we understand history. Whether it was through breaking barriers, speaking truth, or simply being unapologetically themselves, they created waves that continue to ripple. The “pulse of history” is made up of voices like theirs—bold, rhythmic, honest—and it keeps beating because of the groundwork they laid.

Rohan: The structure of the poem itself feels musical—there’s a clear cadence in the repetition and enjambment. When writing, did you find yourself thinking about rhythm as a guiding force, and if so, how did it shape the poem’s form?

Cacelie: One hundred percent! During the writing process, I really wanted something that felt like music, even if it technically wasn’t. So I leaned into rhythm. I thought a lot about pacing—where to break lines, when to repeat, how to let the words breathe. I wanted the form to mimic the feeling of a beat building, pausing, picking up again. The rhythm helped carry the emotion, the movement, and the sense of being pulled through memory and legacy all at once.

Rohan: The final lines, “This is how we sing. / This is how we remember. / This is how we live,” tie the poem together in a deeply communal way. What role do you believe music plays in preserving memory across generations?



Cacelie: While writing, I thought a lot about slavery and how my African ancestors used music—not just as expression, but as survival. Music was a way to hold onto identity, to communicate, to resist. Even when language was stripped away, rhythm remained. That idea really stuck with me. Over generations, music has carried memory—it passes down stories, emotions, and truths that might’ve otherwise been lost. It’s how we remember who we are, where we’ve been, and what we’ve survived. So to me, music isn’t just art—it’s legacy. It’s how we stay connected to the past while moving forward.



An Interview with Ashani Ahuja

Author of “The Sound Was Here Before Its Name”

Interviewer: Rohan Dhulipalla

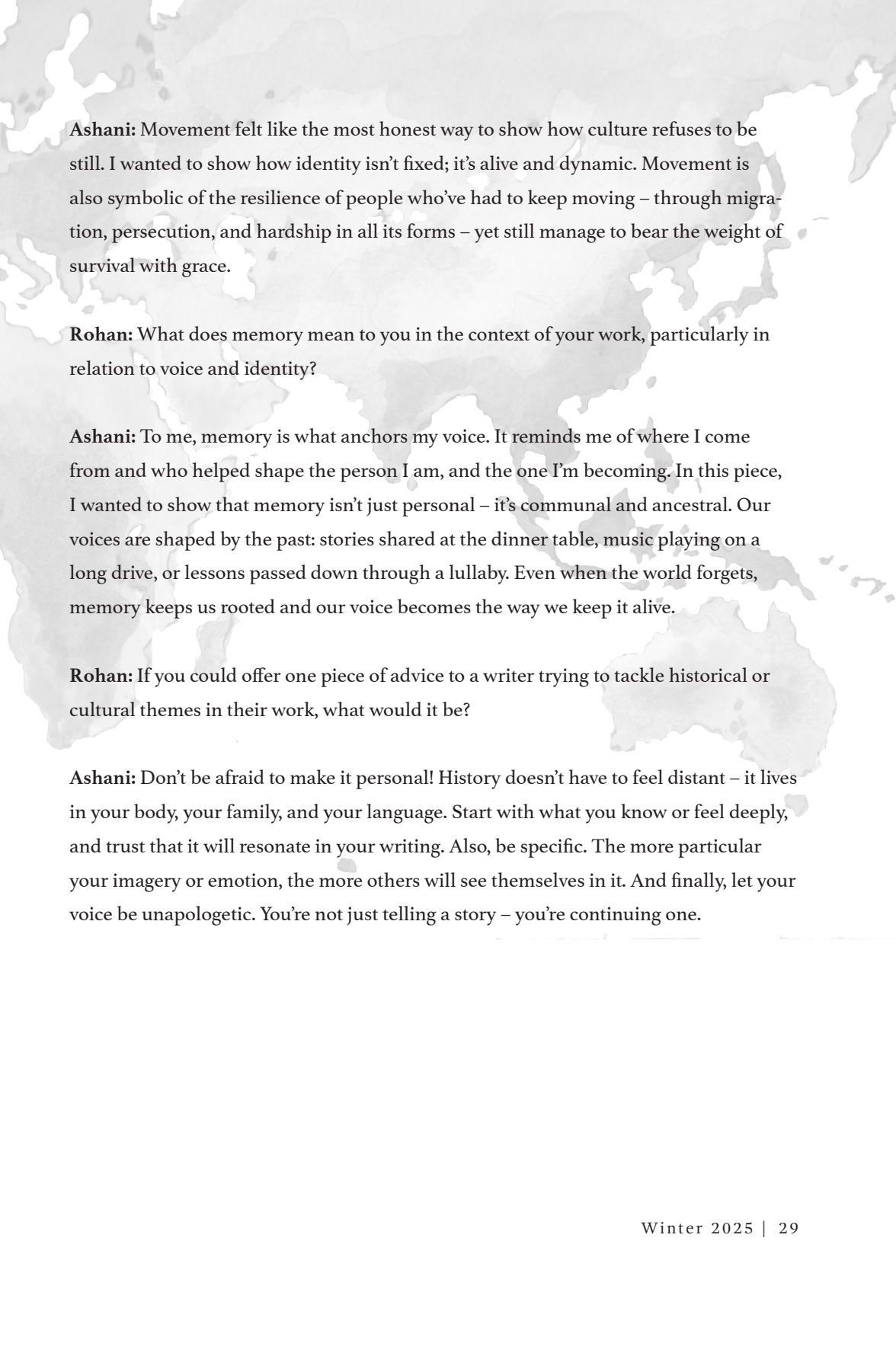
Rohan: What inspired you to write this piece, and how do you personally connect to the “sound” it speaks of?

Ashani: This poem was born from a desire to capture the idea of survival – something that, for certain communities, feels almost inherited, or cellular. For me, the “sound” is both literal and symbolic: it’s music, rhythm, voice, but also resistance and defiance. I was thinking about how culture continues, even when systems try to erase it. That sound is personal to me, as it was passed down through generations and is an integral part of me.

Rohan: How did you approach using metaphor to shape your message, on both a personal and societal level?

Ashani: I leaned into metaphor as a way to express things that felt too layered or complex to say directly. The sound shifting names and slipping through soil became a way to talk about cultural survival – how traditions evolve and languages change, but the spirit remains. On a personal level, I think about stories and songs from my own family that have traveled distances, both physically and emotionally, and still show up in who I am today. Societally, I wanted to reflect how communities adapt in the face of oppression without losing their essence.

Rohan: What was your thought process behind using physical movement to represent historical and cultural momentum?



Ashani: Movement felt like the most honest way to show how culture refuses to be still. I wanted to show how identity isn't fixed; it's alive and dynamic. Movement is also symbolic of the resilience of people who've had to keep moving – through migration, persecution, and hardship in all its forms – yet still manage to bear the weight of survival with grace.

Rohan: What does memory mean to you in the context of your work, particularly in relation to voice and identity?

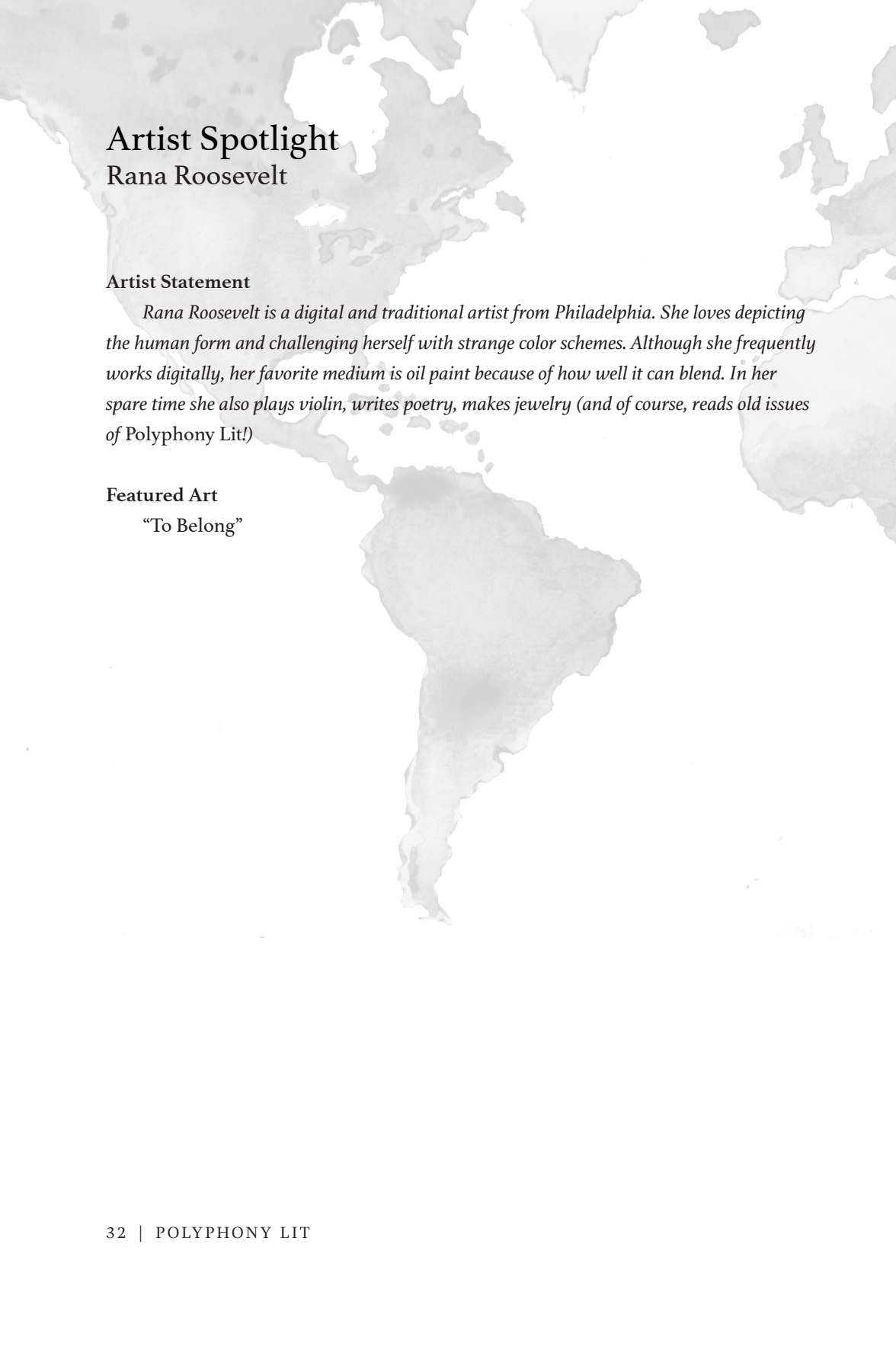
Ashani: To me, memory is what anchors my voice. It reminds me of where I come from and who helped shape the person I am, and the one I'm becoming. In this piece, I wanted to show that memory isn't just personal – it's communal and ancestral. Our voices are shaped by the past: stories shared at the dinner table, music playing on a long drive, or lessons passed down through a lullaby. Even when the world forgets, memory keeps us rooted and our voice becomes the way we keep it alive.

Rohan: If you could offer one piece of advice to a writer trying to tackle historical or cultural themes in their work, what would it be?

Ashani: Don't be afraid to make it personal! History doesn't have to feel distant – it lives in your body, your family, and your language. Start with what you know or feel deeply, and trust that it will resonate in your writing. Also, be specific. The more particular your imagery or emotion, the more others will see themselves in it. And finally, let your voice be unapologetic. You're not just telling a story – you're continuing one.

ARTWORK





Artist Spotlight

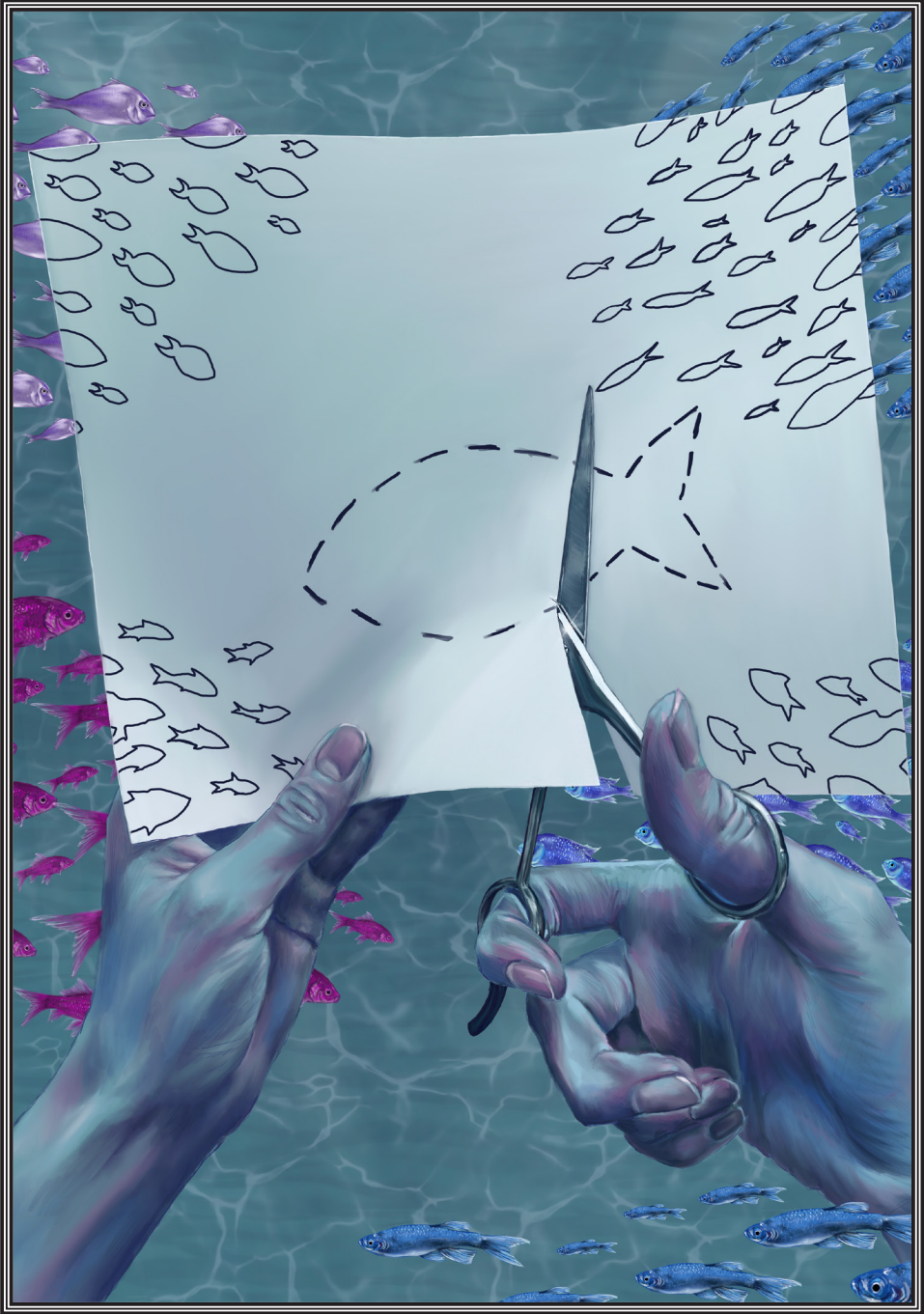
Rana Roosevelt

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

“To Belong”



MANY VOICES CONTEST



AUDREY KIM

Conestoga High School, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Of Salt and Small Talk

Many Voices Contest Winner

The booth is sticky, our thighs an imprint pressed into the cheap red hue of the vinyl. I don't know what we're laughing about, but the sound lingers — sharp and reckless, like a string pulled taut before it snaps. The diner hums like static, a voiceless murmur around us. Still, the words pour out — unguarded and easy, like something we trust without even thinking. No hesitation. No doubt.

You say you'd move to the sea, to a city of salt and silence. I tell you I'd visit every summer. There's no question in it, just a flicker of certainty between the bubbles in your soda and the clink of my fork against the plate. You say the sea will call me to you. You joke about a garden — dreamt-up and delicate — but I clutch it all the same, my hands sketching the shape like something I could bring to life just by naming it. You say you'd cook, though neither of us believes it. We fold into laughter, and I have an inexplicable desire to cradle the warmth of the noise.

The air between us crackles. Not with what we say, but with everything we don't — things we haven't yet learned to leave unsaid. The space around us is thick with the heft of it. Your fingers trace circles on the table, conjuring what might come. I can't explain why I won't look away. It's as if I do, this illusion will slip from my hands and evaporate with the steam curling from my coffee.

Yet here we are, speaking as if these futures are already ours to have — futures we won't even touch. We don't see the weight of the words as they stumble from our mouths, how light they become in this room. They drift between us like smoke, drowning us in a vision we don't know how to keep. We're too caught up in it to care.

The laughter fades to a whisper, still sacred like a vow unspoken. We don't look at each other, not really. Instead, we fix our gaze on the cracked window, through the glow of fluorescent lights, into something unseen that we pretend to understand. It's a future carved in diner booths, ringing glasses, and the trembling joy we swallowed to keep from spilling. A future we mold by the echo of our voices, by the silence of our hands.

I wonder, later, when I'm far from here — will I remember the tone of your voice, the way it moved, soft as the hush between us? Will I remember the outline of your fingers, tracing invisible lines on the table? I tell myself — this is real. I need it to be real. With our words, our promises, our glances — I try to make it so. But there is always that crack — always that space between what we say and what we know.

The din swells around us. The wax paper wilts, bowed beneath the burden of fries. The smell of grease lingers. We realize the world is loosening its grip — that summer visits will fray, the sea will take you far, and I will grow blurred at the edges. The bubbles in your soda burst, and I hold my breath. Would it be enough to let go? To let the diner fade into the noise of the world? Would it be enough to stop pretending and let the words fall silent?

We keep eating. Keep talking. Let the spell hold a little longer. And in the moment, that's all that matters. The rest will fade.

But for now, we are together. For now, we are enough.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

What a beautiful, compelling piece! Though short, this flash piece paints an entirely breathing picture of these two characters, giving the reader a short glimpse into this dynamic, undulating relationship. With particular use of deft, vivid imagery and layered contradiction, we are given a tapestry of a piece in just a few hundred gorgeous words.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Audrey Kim is a junior at Conestoga High School in Pennsylvania, where she writes for her school's newspaper, The Spoke. Outside of school, she likes playing chamber music, reading, and watching Formula 1.

RUPKATHA BASU

Inventure Acadamy, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

Gutting Fish

Many Voices Contest Runner-Up

Scales skitter, silver sequins slicked to my fingers,
the knife's a thin truth, puncturing belly flab.
Remembered how you'd whisper when the lake
broke its skin with glass-cracked light, we sat
still, line-taught, hooks wet with hope.

Steel whispers now. I saw through the
gut, a gentle rip to open this body.
Unspooled, a red flood, organs unraveling
like silk
ribbons from a charred gift box. Snaring
my wrists how you taught me;
to hold myself clean, palms folded, knuckles polite.

I tip the fish head back, its mouth agape,
still stunned by a world that reels you
in without asking. I wipe away a stray scale
like wiping mascara tears, how you did mine
in your bathroom mirror, whispering
that girls should never love like
ruin. That darkness shouldn't taste sweet,

not even in dreams where teeth bloom like air
bladders. It wasn't your fault.

I peel the flesh back, ribs cracking
like brittle confessionals. Remember
the way you locked doors, swallowed
keys, kept shadows boxed up in the attic
where dust grew fat on half-dead hopes.

Rip through again, another filet,
my heartbeat thuds loud as lakewater,
splitting skin soft as childhood promises.
How you wanted a daughter who'd stay,
not wander upstream, hair dyed wild

like summer lilies. My neck bruised from
a choker tight as your breathing, tight as
the way I keep my secrets inside
buried like the guts of my carp, tucked deep
so they wouldn't pierce me from within.

Gills open wide, empty now, grasping
at the sticky kitchen air: one more
silent veil, choking on in the hollow black
of your house. Another shucked from
youth,
scaled off the softest parts. You called it love,
but it was another web made of whispers and bone.

I dress this corpse, press
salt into the flesh, watch
it tighten, shrivel. All those salted
bodies, all the sins
we never named, hanging heavy
in your rosaries and

your casseroles, ripe
with fish we caught, dusted with dill,
telling me you loved me even as I sank

further from your perfect shore. But here,
in the knife's wake, I carve our memory clean:
how my hair floats loose in the lake now,
how I've gutted what kept me quiet,
how love is a bleeding thing I'm not afraid to hold.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

Taking metaphor and expanding on it fully, this piece captures the reader and pulls us into the cacophony of these two voices. At times they clash, and at times they blend together, understanding how love is a “bleeding thing.” Throughout it all, the fish is slowly gutted, until we finally reach the raw truth, and the piece cuts off in a fully realized conclusion that leaves a lasting, shiny impact.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rupkatha Basu attends Inventure Academy and will graduate in 2026. A writer, artist, and relentless daydreamer, she finds poetry in the quiet spaces between history and imagination. When not lost in words, she enjoys playing the harmonium, singing, and baking. Like all budding writers, she hopes to one day publish a book that leaves a mark on the world.

ASCHEA NG

School of the Arts, Singapore, Singapore

singapore / hong kong

Many Voices Contest Runner-Up

ma,

what do you see when we stumble
down crumbling paths
past shops kneaded together
into something that resembles a home,
drenched in a fluorescent glow
and smoke that carries the hollers of street stall owners
& greased-over warmth —
is it
a row of faceless facades?
a yellowed memory?
home?

i watch your face meld into unfamiliar angles
under the neon glare of shop signs,
flitting in and out of shadows as
the smoky clamours of passers-by
and wild minibuses fruitlessly fill
the crevices in the silence that gnaws between us.

i notice the way your eyes gleam
with the ebbing pulse of streetlights
as we stop for you to buy *dim sum*
with your voice still drenched in stale foreignness —
not yet singaporean, not quite hong kongese.
cantonese washes over me in
unintelligible waves as i
stand like a bystander teetering
on the edge of your tongue.

i continue walking beside you in a voiceless night
without words to explain that
i still tell people i'm half hong kongese
even though coming here feels like leaving home
instead of returning,
even though i feel my lips shrivel when stretching to
mould into the curves of your language
in a flightless plea at mending something
lost between us, sunken far below the cracks of
this abandoned homeland.

and so cantonese slips carelessly into chinese
that always leaves a sour aftertaste in the back of my throat
because the 爱¹ i know is cavernous and bleeding
with the hollow weight of a carved-out 心 —
your 愛² lost in a deaf translation into
unbreathing glances, indecipherable voices, our eyes locking
in what feels like an

1 ài — “love” in simplified Chinese (the common script in Singapore) that is missing the character 心, meaning “heart,”
which is present in the traditional Chinese character for the same word
2 ài — “love” in traditional Chinese (the common script in Hong Kong)

apology — for it is one thing to be a stranger to this land
and another to be stranded in the foreign frequencies
of your voice that is always blistered with disappointment.
and so i learn to embrace the quiet
so you do not have to see me
gape at you with adulterated words
rusting against my teeth.

but in my mind i am still always whispering
don't you think i sound like you, ma?
as my limp fingers reach through
alien cacophonies and unpaved paths
only for you slip further
into the neon glimmer and the food-stained steam.

we end up
at some point,
stopping in between the cha chaan teng and the shuttered
garment shop with our lips half-parted,
the quiet lifting —
before we are cloaked once more in an
ache for a language neither of us speak,
my mouth still frozen on the edge of
whispering
*maa maa, ngo oi nei*³

³ "I love you, Ma" in Cantonese



EDITORIAL PRAISE

Here, Ng takes us on a journey through the multifaceted identities presented in the title. We weave through the titular streets, floating through this quiet rumination on what it means to be Singaporean; what it means to be from Hong Kong; and what it means to be from both. Careful and delicate, this exploration of identity is both brutally honest and gentle with itself when it needs to be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aschea Ng is a writer from Singapore. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in Eunoia Review, Evanescent Magazine, Project Inklank, and more. In addition to writing, Aschea is deeply passionate in History and Anthropology, and also drinks copious amounts of tea.

MICA WANG

Keystona Academy, Beijing, China

My Grandma's School Bag

After Victoria Chang

My grandma's school bag — died once on September 1st, 1960. It was drawn with a withered stick; death came with the rain. And when the rain lashed down, she filled its pond with her muddled reflection. A thin girl gathering sheets from the clothesline, a bowl of cooling porridge with more water than grains. Her father's wrinkles unfolded with relief. On this land where crops dried huskless, how many people prayed for such a blessing? My grandma hugged the tiny bodies of her three younger siblings. Calluses dotted her hands. She buried them under each mountain of cooking or washing she found. Perhaps only the rain would remember there was a school bag at all.

My grandma's school bag — died again in 1966. This time, it was sudden. It had already followed her through four years of her life. Smoke tarnished its faded white. Her school books tore into snowflakes, words bleeding out against the laminate. Blood on the waving flags, blood between lines of newsprint. Grandma, slightly taller but newsprint-thin, sentenced the school bag to death. She side-stepped the Revolution; she knit sweaters, made shoe soles. She never grew any taller.

My grandma's school bag — dies every morning. Every morning, she wakes to meet the bruised world proceeding under the ticks of the clock. I've tried, but I can't conjure sixty years of death with a poem—it's found another body now. Perhaps it's the tiny bookshelves in her room, the fairy tales she holds under her tongue. Perhaps it's the new smart oven she learned to handle. The school bag is no longer drawn in the

soil; now, it's emblazoned in memory's gold. When the rain beats down, there's no more blood to shed – just a small, sturdy flower to feed.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

In this short and heartfelt piece, we are swept on the journey of the speaker's school bag. Strong and full of soul, this poem is truly a beautiful response to the contest prompt.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mica Wang is a high school student at Keystone Academy, Beijing, China. She is passionate about using writing to express her observations of the world.

BRENNA MCDANIEL

Timberland High School, Wentzville, MO, USA

Full Circle

Growing up in the glitter-filled world of dance is a unique experience that no other sport can quite provide. Including copious amounts of makeup and stunning costumes to amazing people and learning opportunities, dance offers it all. Every single moment in my thirteen years of dance molded me into who I am today; from my unbridled love for slicked back ponytails and dark pink lipstick to the way I will always bring my friends their favorite drink at the end of a bad day, everything I am is a product of dance.

I began my dance career watching the “big girls” dance from just outside their practice room, impatiently looking forward to the day that I got to be in such intricately choreographed dances and wear such beautifully designed costumes. But what I did not do was fully appreciate my days as one of the “little girls” in the studio. The days in which I got to wear fluffy pink tutus and strap on butterfly wings, aimlessly wandering around the stage while the audience’s hearts melted. Despite how it may feel now, I lived so many years slowly transitioning from fluffy pink tutus to professional all-white platter tutus. During these years, I had the privilege of growing up surrounded by many of the most kind, generous, and supportive individuals that anyone could ever meet. Growing up as a dancer means being a part of an incredible community the entire time, no matter where you pursue your art. I myself have been a part of three different dance studios, each of which were very different in practice, but remarkably similar in their community. At each studio I have danced for, I have been enveloped in a group hug of nearly one hundred other dancers after winning a big competition, held my friends through career threatening injuries—just as they have held me through the same—and even lent other dancers my favorite ballet skirts at the beginning of our weekly Tuesday rehearsals. Rehearsal has never

just been rehearsal to me; rehearsal was a time to be with my favorite people, escape everything else going on outside of the studio walls, and learn skills that I am now able to apply at any point throughout my life.

Beyond the community that I gained as a dancer, I learned how to adapt to any circumstance with less than a moment's notice. Each class was carefully planned out in order to properly prepare its dancers for every possible outcome of a performance. If the lights come on early, move gracefully to your place with a gentle smile. If the wrong music plays, do not start dancing no matter how much your muscle memory is screaming at you to. If you miss this count, this is how you recover by the next count. As these frequently repeated practices demonstrate, dance taught me from a very young age that mistakes are inevitable, and what matters is how well I adapt and recover—a skill I am able to use everyday. Now, I know that if something happens sooner than I would like, I can adapt. Now, I understand the importance of waiting. Now, I know I am prepared. Dance truly prepares its students for everything—almost.

What I was not prepared for was the day I walked into my dance studio for my weekly Tuesday ballet class and realized that I am one of the “big girls” now. Now, I watch the little girls dance aimlessly around the stage with their fluffy pink tutus and strap-on butterfly wings, missing the days where everything was that simple. In my last year of dancing, the same year the aforementioned realization hit me, I started teaching. Suddenly, I was the person helping little girls learn how to do their very first pirouettes, instead of being the little girl watching in awe as the big girls spun around and around, over and over again. I hope that these little dancers do not fight as hard to grow up as fast as I once did, because I will never get to be that little ballerina stumbling around in a fluffy pink tutu and strap-on butterfly wings ever again. I will, however, always be a dancer, even if I am now considered retired.

No matter where I wind up in life, I will always be a dancer. I will always stand idly in a perfect fifth position, I will always tap my feet from paradiddle to paradiddle when they are restless, and I will always know that I can adapt and recover from any circumstance. No matter what, I will always love and be a product of dance.

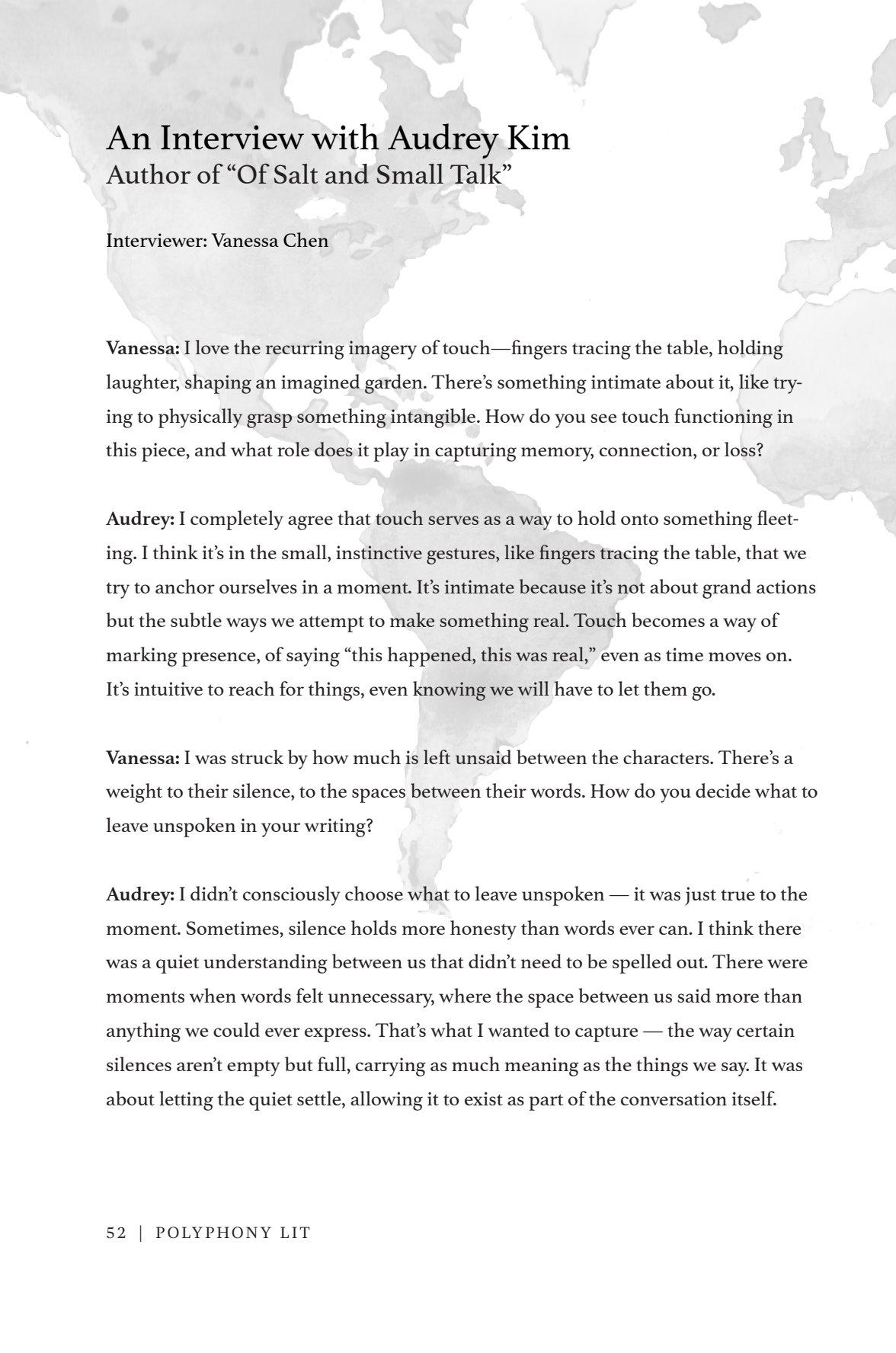


EDITORIAL PRAISE

A sweet and “full-circle” (befitting the title) memoir, this short piece recalls the magic of a shared activity with precise and deft language.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi! My name is Brenna McDaniel, and I am currently a senior in high school. This piece is all about how it feels to grow up and watch your childhood slip away, but through the eyes of a dancer. I danced for 13 years, performed in 9 different styles, and made countless memories. Even though I recently had to retire due to injury, dance will always have a special place in my heart. Now, I am university-bound as a health science major pursuing a pre-dental pathway! I hope you love what I wrote!



An Interview with Audrey Kim

Author of “Of Salt and Small Talk”

Interviewer: Vanessa Chen

Vanessa: I love the recurring imagery of touch—fingers tracing the table, holding laughter, shaping an imagined garden. There’s something intimate about it, like trying to physically grasp something intangible. How do you see touch functioning in this piece, and what role does it play in capturing memory, connection, or loss?

Audrey: I completely agree that touch serves as a way to hold onto something fleeting. I think it’s in the small, instinctive gestures, like fingers tracing the table, that we try to anchor ourselves in a moment. It’s intimate because it’s not about grand actions but the subtle ways we attempt to make something real. Touch becomes a way of marking presence, of saying “this happened, this was real,” even as time moves on. It’s intuitive to reach for things, even knowing we will have to let them go.

Vanessa: I was struck by how much is left unsaid between the characters. There’s a weight to their silence, to the spaces between their words. How do you decide what to leave unspoken in your writing?

Audrey: I didn’t consciously choose what to leave unspoken — it was just true to the moment. Sometimes, silence holds more honesty than words ever can. I think there was a quiet understanding between us that didn’t need to be spelled out. There were moments when words felt unnecessary, where the space between us said more than anything we could ever express. That’s what I wanted to capture — the way certain silences aren’t empty but full, carrying as much meaning as the things we say. It was about letting the quiet settle, allowing it to exist as part of the conversation itself.



Vanessa: I'm fascinated by the beautiful contradiction in how characters speak about a future they already know won't happen. "We don't see the weight of the words slipping from our mouths, how light they are in this room." Do you think we find comfort in speaking futures we don't believe in?

Audrey: Definitely. Sometimes, it's easier to speak in certainties, even when we know they won't last. At that moment, the words didn't need to be true forever; they just needed to feel real for a little while. I think we often do that — say things as if speaking them aloud is enough to hold onto them, even when we know they'll eventually slip away. It's not quite about believing in those futures but allowing ourselves to exist in them for a moment.

Vanessa: The way time moves in this piece is fascinating — moments stretch and linger, yet there's an undercurrent of inevitability, like everything is slipping away. How did you think about pacing when writing this?

Audrey: When I wrote this, I wanted the piece to feel like a memory — something suspended between the past and the present. Time in memory doesn't move evenly; some moments linger far longer than they should, while others blur and soften with time. That's how I wanted the pacing to feel — expanding and contracting, the way certain moments take up more space in our minds than they did in reality. I let the silences sit because, sometimes, it's in those pauses that you feel the most. Memory rarely follows a clean, structured rhythm. It loops back on itself, slows down at the edges, and rushes forward without warning. Even if the details shift and my mind has filled in the gaps with things that may not have ever happened, that doesn't make memories any less real to me. We don't remember moments as they were; we remember them as they felt.

Vanessa: If this conversation were to take place years later, after the distance has settled in, how do you think it would sound? Would the words change? Would there be silence?



Audrey: I actually ran into them again a few years later. At first, it felt like there was a gap between us, as if too much time had passed, but that feeling didn't last long. The conversation found its own flow — not heavy, not filled with nostalgia, but easy in the way it had always been. There wasn't much depth to it — just small talk, familiar yet distant. I honestly expected more hesitation, more silence, but it wasn't like that. It was simple. Of course, it wasn't like before, but it wasn't unbearably uncomfortable either. Just a moment that came and went, the way so many do.

An Interview with Rupkatha Basu

Author of “Gutting Fish”

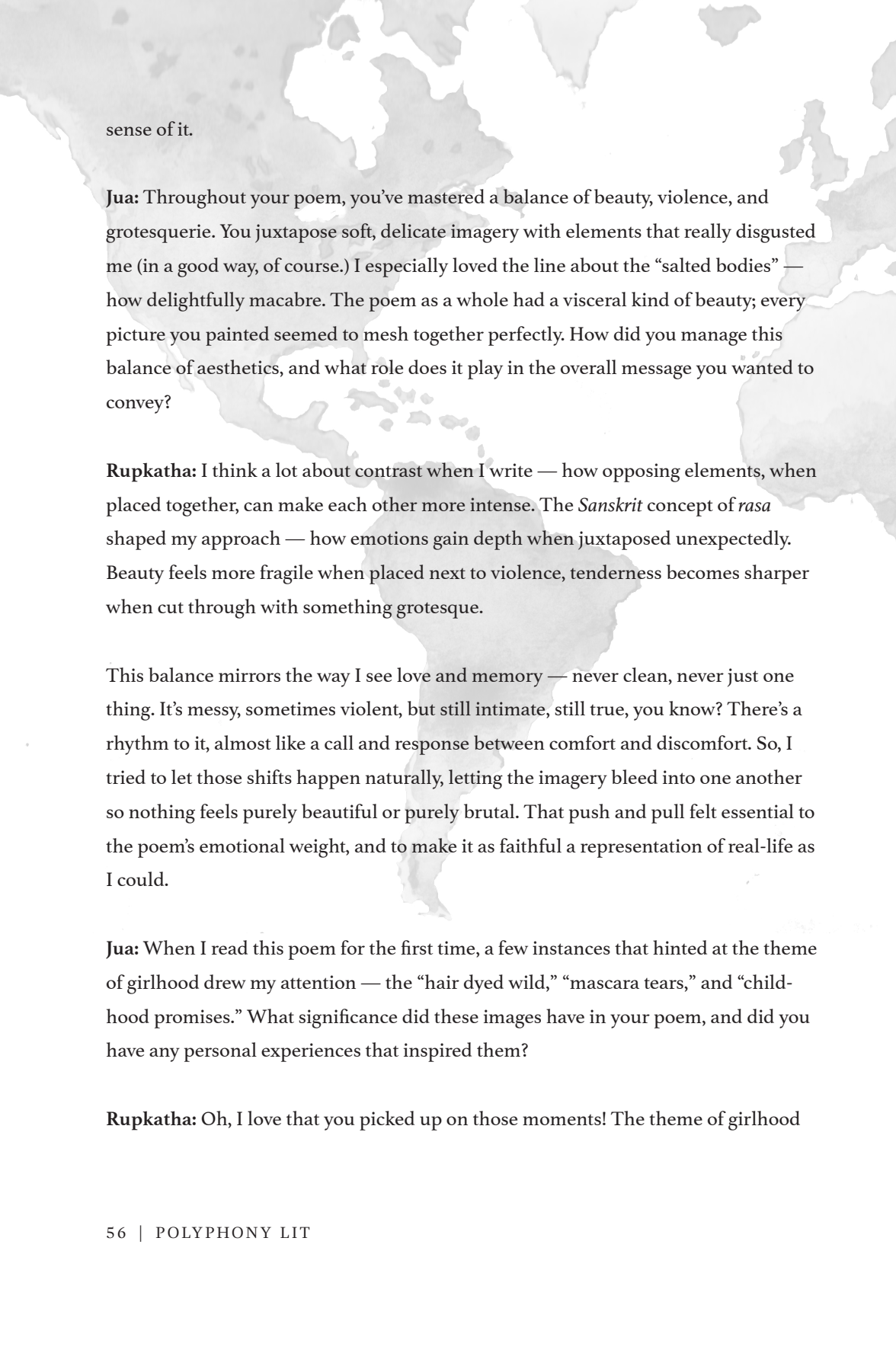
Interviewer: Jua Kim

Jua: I'd like to start by saying I adore your style, which is simultaneously intense and tender. This poem in particular felt like a secret door to the most vulnerable parts of the speaker. How did you come about finding your poetic voice, and what were your major influences when you wrote this poem?

Rupkatha: First of all, thank you so much! That really means a lot. Finding my voice has honestly been one of the biggest struggles for me. For the longest time, I felt like everything I wrote was either too unoriginal or just a chaotic mess of ideas that didn't quite land. But over time, I realized my voice isn't about being perfectly polished; it's about leaning into what feels real.

Some of my biggest influences have been poets like Edgar Allan Poe, Pablo Neruda, and Ocean Vuong — writers who aren't afraid to be deeply personal yet carry this undercurrent of something dark, something almost grotesque. That tension really found its way into my work. But more than anything, my biggest influence has been life itself — memories, family, emotions, all the tangled things that shape how I see the world. As someone who struggles to process emotions, writing has always been a way of making sense of them, even when the pieces don't fully fit.

And of course one of my biggest influences for this poem has been going to wet markets with my parents and watching fish being gutted and packed. There's something unsettling yet precise about it, and that contrast — between method and mess, beauty and brutality. This image has honestly haunted me and become central to the way I approached this piece — the idea of taking something apart, piece by piece, to make



sense of it.

Jua: Throughout your poem, you’ve mastered a balance of beauty, violence, and grotesquerie. You juxtapose soft, delicate imagery with elements that really disgusted me (in a good way, of course.) I especially loved the line about the “salted bodies” — how delightfully macabre. The poem as a whole had a visceral kind of beauty; every picture you painted seemed to mesh together perfectly. How did you manage this balance of aesthetics, and what role does it play in the overall message you wanted to convey?

Rupkatha: I think a lot about contrast when I write — how opposing elements, when placed together, can make each other more intense. The *Sanskrit* concept of *rasa* shaped my approach — how emotions gain depth when juxtaposed unexpectedly. Beauty feels more fragile when placed next to violence, tenderness becomes sharper when cut through with something grotesque.

This balance mirrors the way I see love and memory — never clean, never just one thing. It’s messy, sometimes violent, but still intimate, still true, you know? There’s a rhythm to it, almost like a call and response between comfort and discomfort. So, I tried to let those shifts happen naturally, letting the imagery bleed into one another so nothing feels purely beautiful or purely brutal. That push and pull felt essential to the poem’s emotional weight, and to make it as faithful a representation of real-life as I could.

Jua: When I read this poem for the first time, a few instances that hinted at the theme of girlhood drew my attention — the “hair dyed wild,” “mascara tears,” and “childhood promises.” What significance did these images have in your poem, and did you have any personal experiences that inspired them?

Rupkatha: Oh, I love that you picked up on those moments! The theme of girlhood

in this poem is deeply tied to the mother-daughter relationship, which, for me, has always been layered — full of love, expectation, and a kind of unspoken tension. Many of these images, like “mascara tears” and “childhood promises,” reflect that push and pull between care and control, between wanting to be held and wanting to break free.

The relationship between a mother and daughter, especially coming from a culture where emotional restraint is often valued over open vulnerability, carries its own complexities. There’s tenderness, but there’s also the weight of expectation — of being shaped into something quiet, something contained. So much of this poem was driven by the realization that love — even the most well-intentioned kind — can sometimes feel suffocating. That it can be a web of whispered warnings, of lessons meant to protect but that sometimes end up binding instead. I wanted these images to capture that complicated love—the way girlhood is shaped by the hands that raise us, and the way breaking away from that shaping can feel both liberating and deeply painful.

Jua: Water seemed to be a common motif in your poem. There were mentions of different bodies of water interspersed throughout; I loved how you intertwined these with the metaphor of the gutted fish. I was curious about one thing, however. Your poem starts and ends in a lake — why?

Rupkatha: Lakes have always felt like a constant in my life, even in ways I didn’t fully realize until I started writing about them. Growing up, I’d hear stories from both my parents and grandparents about their childhoods — splashing around in lakes near their homes, those water-soaked memories stitched into their past. Because my relationship with family is such a central theme in this poem, it felt natural to begin with that imagery.

Ending in the lake was about coming full circle. There’s something deeply cyclical about water — it holds memory, grief, transformation. In my culture, there is also this tradition where cremated ashes are floated on lakes, a final release. I think, in a way, the

poem needed to return to where it started — to let something go, to make peace with what was gutted and left behind.

An Interview with Aschea Ng

Author of “singapore / hong kong”

Interviewer: Vanessa Chen

Vanessa: The contrast between Singapore and Hong Kong is beautifully layered — not just as places, but as emotional landscapes, as linguistic barriers. When writing this, how did you approach balancing the external geography with the internal, more personal dislocation?

Aschea: When conceptualising the poem, I centred my poem largely on how geographical and language barriers shape and influence the emotional barriers between me and my mother. It is due to our different cultural upbringings that we speak a different native tongue and have a different idea of “home.” After all, the physical environment is inherently intertwined with our relationships and sense of identity within a culture or community. To balance the external geography with internal dislocation, I crafted the setting and physical environment as something beyond just a tangible space but as another character or metaphor in my poem, drawing on features of this physical landscape of Hong Kong to reflect the foreignness and alienation the speaker feels in this place despite it being home to her mother.

Vanessa: I love how different languages weave through the poem — Cantonese, Mandarin, and English all mirroring the emotional and cultural dissonance between the speaker and their mother. The missing 心 in 爱, the mistranslations, and the way language both bridges and deepens the distance between them feel deeply intentional. How do you see multilingualism shaping not just communication, but also memory, identity, and the act of belonging in this piece?

Aschea: Multilingualism is something that I feel both alienates me from my mother



while bringing us together, which is a sentiment I hoped to convey through this poem. Multilingualism is able to transcend cultural boundaries but also inevitably causes a sense of uncertainty regarding identity that comes with the act of constantly flitting between languages and cultures. My mother is able to communicate with me in English and Chinese, but I'm unable to reach out to her in Cantonese, which is the language she grew up speaking. I am consequently shunned from the unparalleled intimacy that language carries as it is packed with layers of culture and community, making me feel emotionally distanced from my mother at times. I am unable to completely understand these aspects of her past and her homeland while my mother is also unable to fully grasp my struggles with coming to terms with my identity. I often feel a sense of guilt over being unable to speak my mother's language and connect with her on those deep, emotional levels, and my attempts to showcase my desire to better understand her and my longing to feel a sense of belonging in our relationship forms the foundation of my poem.

Vanessa: The poem captures a tension between language as connection and language as estrangement — Cantonese becomes a “flightless plea,” Mandarin leaves a “sour aftertaste,” and love itself is lost in translation. How do you see language functioning in your poem: as something that unites, divides, or perhaps both?

Aschea: In my poem, language both unites and divides. On one hand, language is seen as the most functional medium of connection, and there are cultural nuances carried in native languages which the speaker acknowledges in the concluding line “我愛您，媽媽,” seeing traditional Chinese/Cantonese as the most genuine and apt way to convey her love for her mother. However, most of this love and desire to connect is lost in translation because of the speaker's inability to speak this language and verbalise this level of love and genuinity. This is where language or the lack thereof begins to cause divide, as exemplified through my descriptions of how fleeting language can be and how acrid language can feel because of the frustrations of grasping it or due to the ache of being unable to fully understand my mother because



of this distance. In order to bridge this division that language creates, I used silence extensively throughout the poem, where words fail both the mother and the speaker and silence becomes the only language that is common between them that also encapsulates an emotional depth that lies beyond words. I attempted to create vulnerability and helplessness with this silence, where both the mother and the speaker wordlessly admit to being unable to fully understand each other, where the rawest extent of loss and longing surface in this quiet. I see love as its own language as well, something that transcends words and voices. In my poem, I tried asserting that love goes beyond physical distance and language barriers, as it exists within silence and is something that can be left unsaid and still be felt completely.

Vanessa: The recurring imagery of neon lights, smoky air, and shifting shadows gives the poem a cinematic quality — it feels like a city both alive and distant, constantly moving yet leaving the speaker stranded. How did you come up with these unique images?

Aschea: The city is almost a character in my poem, something that I hoped to flesh out with extreme detail and emotional quality as it metaphorically and physically depicts the physical and emotional alienation the speaker feels, as well as the estrangement between the speaker and her mother. These images were based on my own experiences during trips to Hong Kong with my mother. I always feel extremely entranced during these trips as the neon lights and incredible buildings and night scenes evoke a sense of both wonderness and foreignness. I find myself trying to conjure images of my mother's childhood when I walk down streets in Hong Kong and wonder what her life was like there before she migrated to Singapore where we live now. Because of this foreignness and distance I feel with this city, I find my view of the streets and buildings and roadside muddled by this sense of remorse and longing. Due to the special attention I pay to these streets, these scenes have a unique emotional value to me which is why I found it natural to personalise this setting in the context of my complex relationship with my mother.



An Interview with Mica Wang

Author of “My Grandma’s School Bag”

Interviewer: Vanessa Chen

Vanessa: The repetition of “My grandma’s school bag — died” is striking and rhythmic. What inspired this structural choice, and how did it shape your own experience of writing it?

Mica: I was mostly raised by my grandparents when I was small. To me, my grandma was like a superwoman. She told the most intriguing fairytales, cooked the most delicious food, and sewed the most beautiful dresses. However, she rarely talks about herself. It was during my middle school years that I finally learned about her family of seven children and her short-lived school years. She was one of the generations who suffered through the hardest years of China. She was also one of the generations who eventually restored hope toward life. As a result, I have always wished to write a poem for her. However, when I finished the first draft, I was not satisfied. By chance, I got to read the awesome poem “OBIT” from Victoria Chang. I was struck by how she personified her mother’s teeth and used them as a thread to retell her mother’s death. That was what inspired me to personify my grandma’s schoolbag and repeat it throughout the poem. It blended into my original three-part structure in a surprisingly natural way. Also, using such a specific symbol helped to ameliorate the heaviness of the past times — easing the agony, and leaving everything to a melancholic lament. Even though the schoolbag, the hope of education, died, the hope of the future and life never really disappeared.

Vanessa: The line “I’ve tried, but I can’t conjure sixty years of death with a poem” really struck me. It feels like an intimate acknowledgment of poetry’s limits in holding generational pain. When you write about loss and history, do you ever feel that ten-

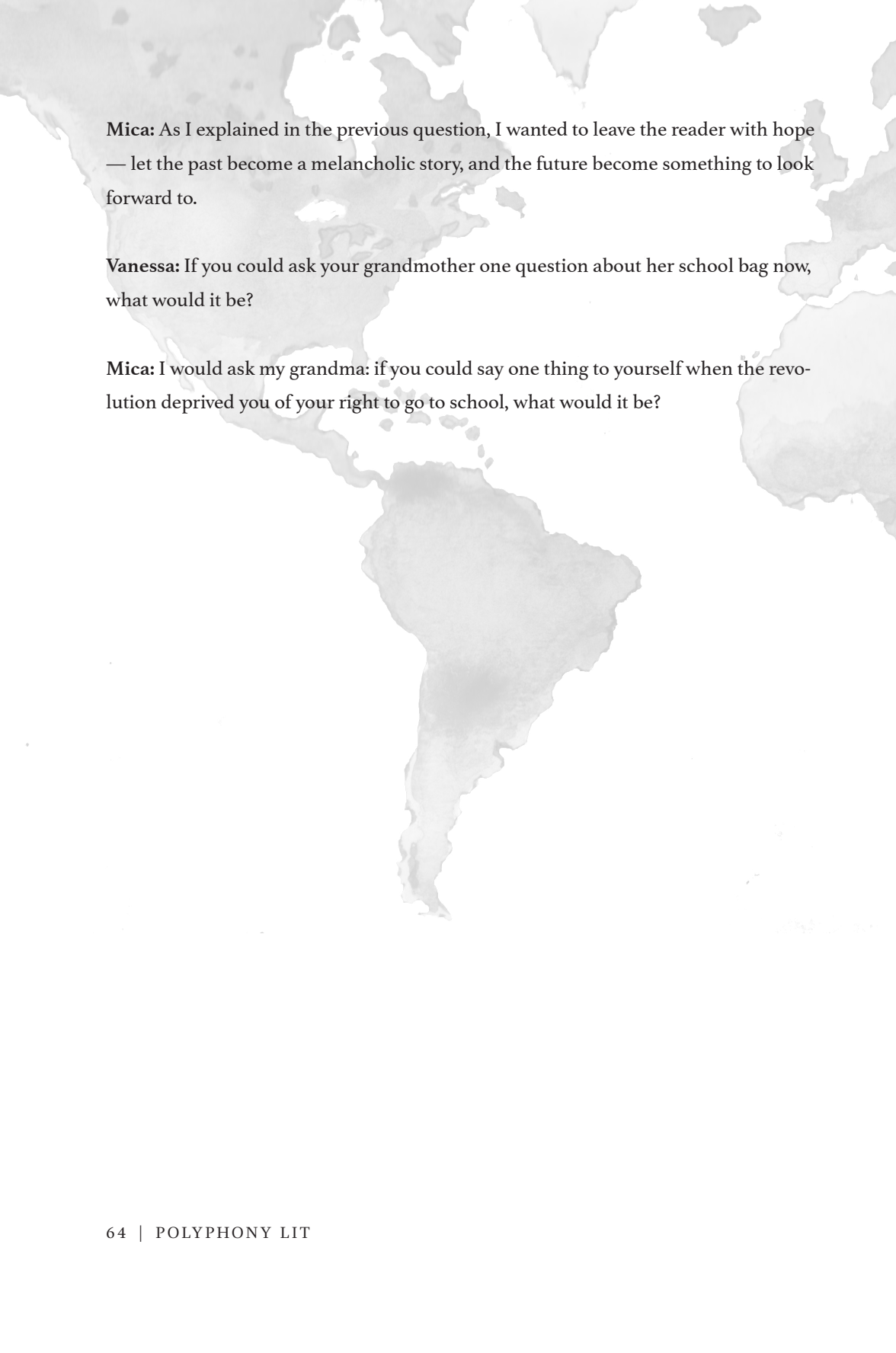
sion — the impossibility of capturing everything — and how do you navigate it?

Mica: I agree that there are limitations to every media of art and creative work. For example, when I was writing and revising this prose poetry, I felt again and again that I couldn't capture the full intensity of the generational pain suffered by my grandma. Later, I realized that it was her story and her past. I don't have the right to cry foul over the past of someone else, the past that has gone with the winds. Perhaps as a writer, all that I can do is to retell it as how it happened and let the words flow as tenderly as possible.

Vanessa: I was really drawn to the imagery of water, blood, and soil — rain filling reflections, books bleeding ink, and a flower finally growing. These elements feel so visceral and inevitable, almost like the poem is working through cycles of loss and renewal. What made you gravitate toward these symbols, and how do they shape your understanding of the poem's meaning?

Mica: I really love how you describe these elements as “working through cycles of loss and renewal”. This is exactly why I deliberately chose these symbols of water, soil, and flower. As elements of nature, they all embody a sense of growth and hope. They also enhance the beauty of the poem. Due to the theme of the great famine and the cultural revolution, this poem is inevitably heavy. However, I don't want it to be trapped in the past. As time proceeds, the pain and loss might still leave a scar on the soul, but I really wish that the wounds could be healed just like how seasons changed, and a new life cycle began.

Vanessa: I love the closing image — “just a small, sturdy flower to feed.” It lingers in my mind as both hopeful and deeply melancholic, especially against the weight of everything before it. What feelings did you want to leave the reader with in that final moment?



Mica: As I explained in the previous question, I wanted to leave the reader with hope — let the past become a melancholic story, and the future become something to look forward to.

Vanessa: If you could ask your grandmother one question about her school bag now, what would it be?

Mica: I would ask my grandma: if you could say one thing to yourself when the revolution deprived you of your right to go to school, what would it be?

An Interview with Brenna McDaniel

Author of “Full Circle”

Interviewer: Vanessa Chen

Vanessa: I enjoyed how you described watching the “big girls” dance with admiration as a child, and later realizing you had become one yourself. Was there a specific moment—inside or outside of dance — when you first felt that shift in identity?

Brenna: The first time I experienced this shift in identity was at the end of my third or fourth class as a teacher’s assistant. At this point, I had been through enough rehearsals as a teacher’s assistant to have built a good relationship with my students, and solidified a routine that worked for us all. I was lucky enough for this class to only consist of three young, but extremely talented little ballerinas, therefore allowing me to spend one on one time with each of them as needed. On this particular night, I had been working with one of my students almost all class, giving her critique after critique, slowly but surely working our way towards a clean single pirouette. With roughly five minutes of class left, she did it; one of the most controlled, precise pirouettes I have ever seen in such a little dancer. She of course jumped up and down and squealed for joy with the biggest grin across her face, and as she did so, I just thought to myself, *Wow, she is having the exact same moment I had just a few years ago, when another “big girl” helped me perfect my turns. Wow, I am the “big girl” now.*

Vanessa: You say, “I will always be a dancer, even if I am now considered retired.” How do you define what it means to be a dancer? Is it about physical practice, mindset, or something else entirely?

Brenna: The meaning of being a dancer is something very difficult to put into words. The physical practice that goes into developing the technique, strength, and discipline



is of course a large part of it, but there are other, much bigger things that define what it means to be a dancer. In the special realm that is dance, there is a very specific, unspoken promise that dancers respect with all their hearts: Every dancer is in dance together. No matter our differences. No matter our frustrations. No matter our roles, injuries, strengths, or bad days. No matter what. Once you have become a part of that promise, that community, that respect, and that understanding, you never really leave it. I now sit as just another audience member of local ballets, but I get the privilege of watching on and understanding the months of true blood, sweat, and tears that went into making the show before me.

Vanessa: The essay follows a “full circle” structure, starting with childhood admiration and ending with you stepping into the role of a mentor. Did you plan this structure from the beginning, or did it develop as you wrote?

Brenna: Before I started writing “Full Circle,” I definitely hoped to portray my growth from little ballerina to mentor, but I truly had no idea what it would become once I started typing. This piece, to my surprise, became the embodiment of the very feelings that I never thought I would be able to communicate.

Vanessa: I really connected with the way you mentioned not fully appreciating your time as one of the “little girls” in dance until later. If you could go back and tell your younger self something about those early years, what would it be?

Brenna: If I were able to tell my younger self something, I would first start by introducing her to “Vienna” by Billy Joel! I would tell her to focus on where her feet are, not only to save her from many rolled ankles, but to put her in the moment. I breezed through so many memories in search of “the big stuff.” But, really, it was all big. Every step I learned, from the first studio door I opened to the last I closed, was a vital component to making me who I am today. All in all: be present, be patient, and just enjoy yourself.



ARTWORK



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Artist Spotlight

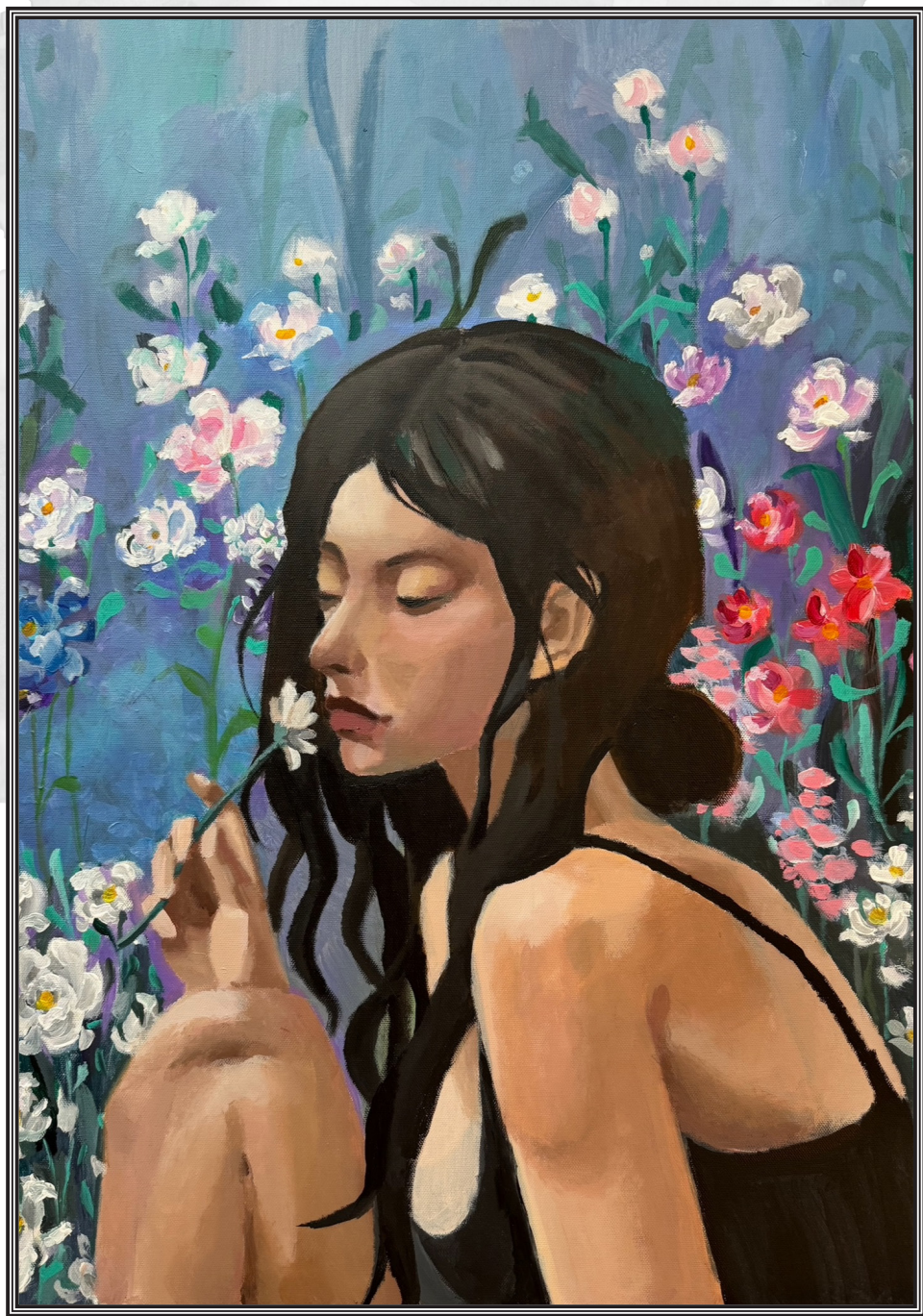
Muen Li

Artist Statement

I am Muen Li, a young artist specializing in acrylic painting, sketching, colored pencil, watercolor, and Chinese painting. I am inspired to capture my personality, curiosities, passions, and creativity within my art. Through the use of self-portraiture, I explore my self-identity and cultural identity. Art is also a tool for me to bring awareness to environmental activism. Throughout high school, my work has been displayed in my school gallery, the 2024 Congressional Gallery, and placed bronze internationally for Chinese traditional painting. I am also the current art director of my school's food and dining magazine, Spork. In the future, I hope to continue exploring and documenting my interests through visual arts.

Featured Art:

“Blooming”



WINTER CONTEST



REBECCA YANG

Orange County School of the Arts, Santa Ana, CA, USA

how to make oolong tea

first stage — Taizhong, 1920

1. cultivating

rows and rows of sprouts, heads tilted towards the sun. bred on small Taiwanese farms or grown on clear mountain ranges or rammed in little cracked pots — doesn't matter where they're from. what matters is the collective, eager desperation to be used.

2. harvesting

spring is best for results. it's when the air is warm but not suffocating, when the boy looks coyly at you from the hallway, when the humidity holds its breath. hope is when you're hand-plucked and placed into the basket, not knowing the heat ahead.

3. withering

leaves placed under sun, only useful once broken in. brown crackling into black, skin tanning beneath straw hats, back breaking with the knowledge that every rice grain counts. each clumsy finger scavenging, watching the mist rise from your body and disappear into the sky.

4. oxidation

years later, can air be allowed to seep through your fractured skin, like an apology, a guilty prayer. as if the scars and veins weren't enough — here is a small red envelope for your work, shamefully tucked beneath a bowl of thinning fish broth. here is a granddaughter trying to speak Taiwanese for your sake, a pitiful last effort.

second stage — California, 2020

5. kill green

also known as fixing, also known as shedding your heritage. because that boy laughed at you when you tried to say “ending” but it came out as “un-ding.” because eating rice everyday makes you fatter. because red dragons and paper lanterns don’t exist in the West Coast. but most of all, because when grandma left, she took Taiwan with her.

6. rolling and drying

locked into a wooden cage, and tumbled. if you can’t beat them, join them. so you rack up friends like baseball cards, slather makeup until your skin bleeds white, kiss every blonde-haired boy you can catch. wiping the lipstick from your mouth, you look into the mirror and wonder who that girl is in front of you.

7. roasting

burning, but softer. flames seeping slowly, not noticeable until you find your fingertips charred with ink and the smoke spilling into your lungs. temperature controlled to create the optimal potential — hot enough for you to crumble under the weight of 4 APs and cheerleading competitions, but cold enough to make you guilty for complaining about your little, first world problems.

8. packaging

now it’s ready to enjoy. steep the leaves in scalding water and watch them slowly drain into watered down remains, bleeding out from a plastic bag. you don’t even recognize its taste—there’s not enough flavor, not enough bitterness.



NOTE

This piece was previously published in Élan Literary Magazine, Spring / Summer 2025.

EDITORIAL PRAISE

“how to make oolong tea” interlaces historical, cultural, and familial weights into the speaker’s vulnerable account of growing pains. By exploring the liminal space between collective and personal memory, it fluidly navigates the contour of cultural coexistence and gives voices to the recurring discomfort: “you don’t even recognize its taste — there’s not enough flavor, not enough bitterness.” Even after many revisits, it remains both refreshing and thought-provoking still.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Yang is a sophomore at Orange County School of the Arts, where she studies Creative Writing. Her work has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists and Writers, the National Federation of State Poetry Societies, and DePaul’s Blue Book: Best American High School Writing. Her poetry is published or forthcoming in Élan Literary Magazine, The Weight Journal, and The Howl.

AUDREY HO

Centennial High School, Ellicott City, MD, USA

letters to god

i. guanyin

dear god. god of the space heater. god of good yarn textures and bad yarn colors. god of lipton tea bags. i'm sorry. i have never known how to speak to you, even when i was five and didn't know there was a way to speak to people at all. i wish i could say it was your fault. i climbed a fence to my neighbor's backyard when i was eight and said nothing when i came home. i don't think you ever knew. you used to keep candy in the pantry and not mention it. i did not ask about it. no one ate it. god of the mute button on a zoom call. of not demanding answers to the questions you never asked. i'm sorry for all of my lies and half-truths and silences for the ones you did. i hope it's not too late to start talking.

ii. aphrodite

vagabond. master of thieves. trickster extraordinaire. it would be cliché to say that you steal my heart. so i never tell you. the first time i see you i put you in a spotlight—the first of many. aim for the face, but get the whole body too. standby. open. close. repeat. i don't meet you until much later. i sit across the table from you and we make eye contact every time you look like you're having an aneurysm and i laugh at your face. my eyes never really leave you in the first place though. you are the sun, and it hurts to look at you, and it's a bad idea, but i do it anyways. so anyways, it happens a lot. you get your hair cut (get them all cut) and i think you are the prettiest person i have ever seen. we've started wars over the title of most beautiful god. i'd do it for you. you never really needed the spotlight in the first place. it was always on you.

iii. *hulijing*

one day, i will look at myself in the mirror and recognize the reflection. one day, i will be grateful for the sun that streams through the clouds and for a cool breeze on my back. one day, i will sit on the train and look at the window with the crane wives buzzing in my headphones and i will want to be exactly where i am. not quite a god yet, not quite immortal, but on the way there. i will carve my life into something worth loving, and i will look back upon my past with a fondness for the good parts and kindness for the bad parts. one day, i will laugh at how naive i was—for i was only a child pretending to be so much older, and i will forget the parts where i felt no older than five. i will talk to my mother and tell her that i'm sorry. i will kiss a girl and tell her that i love her. one day, i will get nine tails. one day, i will live.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

Through fluid, unstructured conversations with deities, “letters to god” traces the essence of one’s personal memory through its oracular, stream-of-consciousness style. Besides gracefully captures the speaker’s spiritual rebirth, it blends their introspection and will to press forward, as it culminates: “i will carve my life into something worth loving, and i will look back upon my past with a fondness for the good parts and kindness for the bad parts.”

YUHAN ZHU

Shady Side Academy, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

Grocery List for Sunday

My grocery list for Sunday after Sadie's brother died:

1. Some gala apples, the skin crisp and the flesh icy cold—the ones we dipped in the clear streams on the trip to Walden Pond one afternoon.
2. A few pears, neatly cut and punctured with toothpicks, to be strewn on the pink and white checkered picnic table. How we had dreamed of such a scene in our youth.
3. One hyacinth bundle, the exact one with 7 flowers, the deep purple of the sweater he wore.
4. Three watches, each with matching designs. *If I had known his time would freeze forever, I would never...*
5. The pet rock we named Pam, which each of our hands had caressed lovingly. No one could have held Pam in such warm hands.
6. “His funeral needs to be on Sunday, the day of resurrection,” Sadie had insisted, crying. He would spring out of the ebony coffin like so many times when he flew out from behind the door at a party and elicited whoops and giggles from girls and boys alike. He would reach out behind him . . . for some flowers, perhaps . . . and proclaim them luxurious bouquets, though we all knew they were simply daisies from the backyard ... He couldn't have died. Like a summer that has left only temporarily, he will return, one day.
7. A heavy ebony coffin. If you closed its lid, a loud “bang” would reverberate all around.
8. *Goodbye, good bye.* Everyone could hear the echo when winds whispered in the cemetery.

9. I should've cried, but no tears came. They don't sell tears at the grocery store anymore.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

Invisible yet ubiquitous, a premature death intricately weaves itself into the emotional nuances and retrospective lens of “Grocery List for Sunday.” Amid vivid, montaged recollections, the unadorned fear of death and loss punctures like an exit wound. How do we say goodbye to our loved ones? The piece codes the answer in its secret, ingenious languages.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yuhan Zhu is a high school Junior at the Shady Side Academy. An aspiring writer, she has written more than 80 poems and a few short stories. Her poem “The Bee” and her short story “Thought Prison” were awarded the Scholastic Silver Key in 2025. She hopes to continue her exploration of the natural world in her future writing journey.

KATERINA SUTTON

Pine Crest School, Fort Lauderdale, FL, USA

Rehashed, Rerun, Rewound

—and sitting like pretzels around my record player, savoring the dulcet vocals of Dota Kehr, he raises his arms to pantomime the mournful strumming of a guitar, swaying side-to-side, eyes squeezed shut, then he pauses and looks up to ensure I still enjoy this joke — his eyes almost sparkle when he smiles in that impish way — and he twists the volume dial so far I fear his mother might get upset again (*“turn that down, boys!”*) but then he’s rocking back and forth like a buoy on choppy waves, catching himself with the side of his kneecap each time before dropping back, gaining momentum with each motion, until he lands with his head on my shoulder, and I feel waves of heat radiating off his body, the clamminess of his neck through my lime-green polo, and I smile, glad that Mom and Dad always return a day late — or a week, or two — because I like to watch his roguish biking, weaving in and out of traffic as I stare from the sidewalk, I like his glimmering eyes and raucous laughter and that hackneyed guitar impression, and I like his sleepy smile, leaning closer into me as the guitar rhythm fades into quiet, and since we have executed this routine many nights before, I am surprised to feel my chest tighten; my grasp on this moment is already slipping, and I know it will never be recreated — though it will certainly be rehashed, rerun, rewound — and that a time will arrive sooner than either of us could ever expect when my friend will be shipped off to a place of colossal pillared buildings and dormitories and boundless belts of trees, and we will lose contact long before it would have occurred naturally, and he will eventually become senior accountant at a wealthy firm, marry and move to Maryland where I will write him, asking how he’s been and will never receive a response, and I’ll wonder for many years whether he remembers our music, whether he remembers.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

I love you, it'll pass. "Rehashed, Rerun, Rewound" crystallizes the impulse, intermittence, and precariousness of romance. Its fluid language traces the fine line of momentariness and eternity: "my grasp on this moment is already slipping, and I know it will never be recreated." Between the lines, each word gives a delicate breath on this beautiful ephemera of remembrance, and, of course, forgetfulness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katerina Sutton enjoys spending evenings with her laptop and a steaming mug of Earl Grey. Her work can be found in literary journals such as Free Verse Revolution, Bristol Noir, Prosetrics, and Just Poetry. She is also a prose reader for The Adroit Journal and Fiction on the Web. This year, she completed a third draft of her work-in-progress novel and attended a writers' workshop at Brown University. When she's not writing, you can find her immersed in a book or watching sci-fi.



An Interview with Rebecca Yang

Author of “how to make oolong tea”

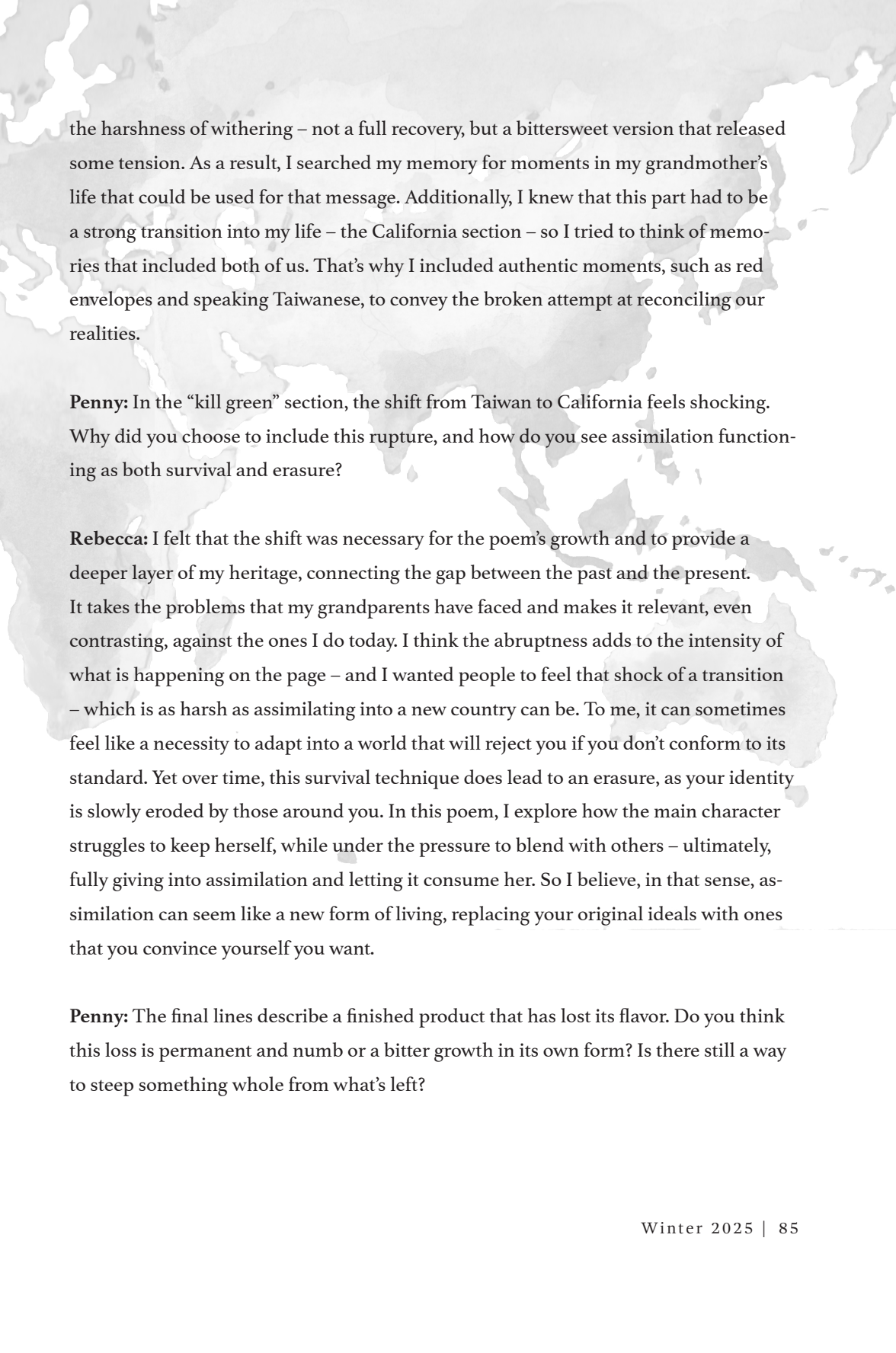
Interviewer: Penny Wei

Penny: Your piece uses the traditional stages of tea-making as a metaphor for diaspora and girlhood. Why did you choose to structure the poem this way, and what does oolong tea mean to you?

Rebecca: Honestly, the structure of the poem came from the remains of another poem I was writing at the time. While I was revising it, I suddenly wrote this one phrase – “leaves placed under sun, only useful once withered” – that really stuck out to me as a visceral image of life, death, and exploitation. I wanted to develop this line of thought, so I went on the internet and fell down a rabbit hole of the process of making oolong tea. Seeing all the complicated steps to make – what seemed to me – a simple product, inspired me to structure my poem similarly. At the time, I was also in a writer’s block and thought that following the steps would help direct the general flow of the poem and spark inspiration. As for oolong tea, it never really meant much to me at first; I didn’t even understand the connections it had to my culture. It was only, in writing this poem, that I discovered its rich history and got the opportunity to learn more about my identity.

Penny: Each stage of oolong-making represents a stage of emotional and cultural transition. How did you decide which memories or images to pair with each tea-making step?

Rebecca: I knew I wanted each section to contribute to an overall arc of the character, so I relied on the step and its literal meaning to build a specific image around it. For example, in “oxidation,” I wanted this part to be about a sort of respite after



the harshness of withering – not a full recovery, but a bittersweet version that released some tension. As a result, I searched my memory for moments in my grandmother’s life that could be used for that message. Additionally, I knew that this part had to be a strong transition into my life – the California section – so I tried to think of memories that included both of us. That’s why I included authentic moments, such as red envelopes and speaking Taiwanese, to convey the broken attempt at reconciling our realities.

Penny: In the “kill green” section, the shift from Taiwan to California feels shocking. Why did you choose to include this rupture, and how do you see assimilation functioning as both survival and erasure?

Rebecca: I felt that the shift was necessary for the poem’s growth and to provide a deeper layer of my heritage, connecting the gap between the past and the present. It takes the problems that my grandparents have faced and makes it relevant, even contrasting, against the ones I do today. I think the abruptness adds to the intensity of what is happening on the page – and I wanted people to feel that shock of a transition – which is as harsh as assimilating into a new country can be. To me, it can sometimes feel like a necessity to adapt into a world that will reject you if you don’t conform to its standard. Yet over time, this survival technique does lead to an erasure, as your identity is slowly eroded by those around you. In this poem, I explore how the main character struggles to keep herself, while under the pressure to blend with others – ultimately, fully giving into assimilation and letting it consume her. So I believe, in that sense, assimilation can seem like a new form of living, replacing your original ideals with ones that you convince yourself you want.

Penny: The final lines describe a finished product that has lost its flavor. Do you think this loss is permanent and numb or a bitter growth in its own form? Is there still a way to steep something whole from what’s left?



Rebecca: Although the ending seems very final, I still believe it is a bitter growth. In fact, I don't believe any of my poems – or any person, really – has a permanent end to their storyline; it often stretches beyond what we see. I imagine the loss as an outer shell that was developed to resist being hurt and almost act superior to others. Yet, there is still some self-awareness in this transformation shown in lines like “wonder who that girl is in front of you” and “little, first world problems.” The character has grown into this new state of numbness, as a product of the bitterness placed onto her, internalized by her, and compared by her to others. It has left her incomplete, but still consciously hurting. In the end, I wrote there wasn't “enough bitterness” when the leaves were steeped – yet there is plenty of bitterness the character has experienced. The distinction is that the bitterness has a lack – of not being satisfied, of not feeling good enough. It's hard to steep something whole from yourself when there's nothing inside that is a part of your identity. Rather, it has all been sold to others in the last step – packaging – and becomes a product, one that experiences loss born anew every time you twist yourself into something for others to enjoy.

An Interview with Audrey Ho

Author of “letters to god”

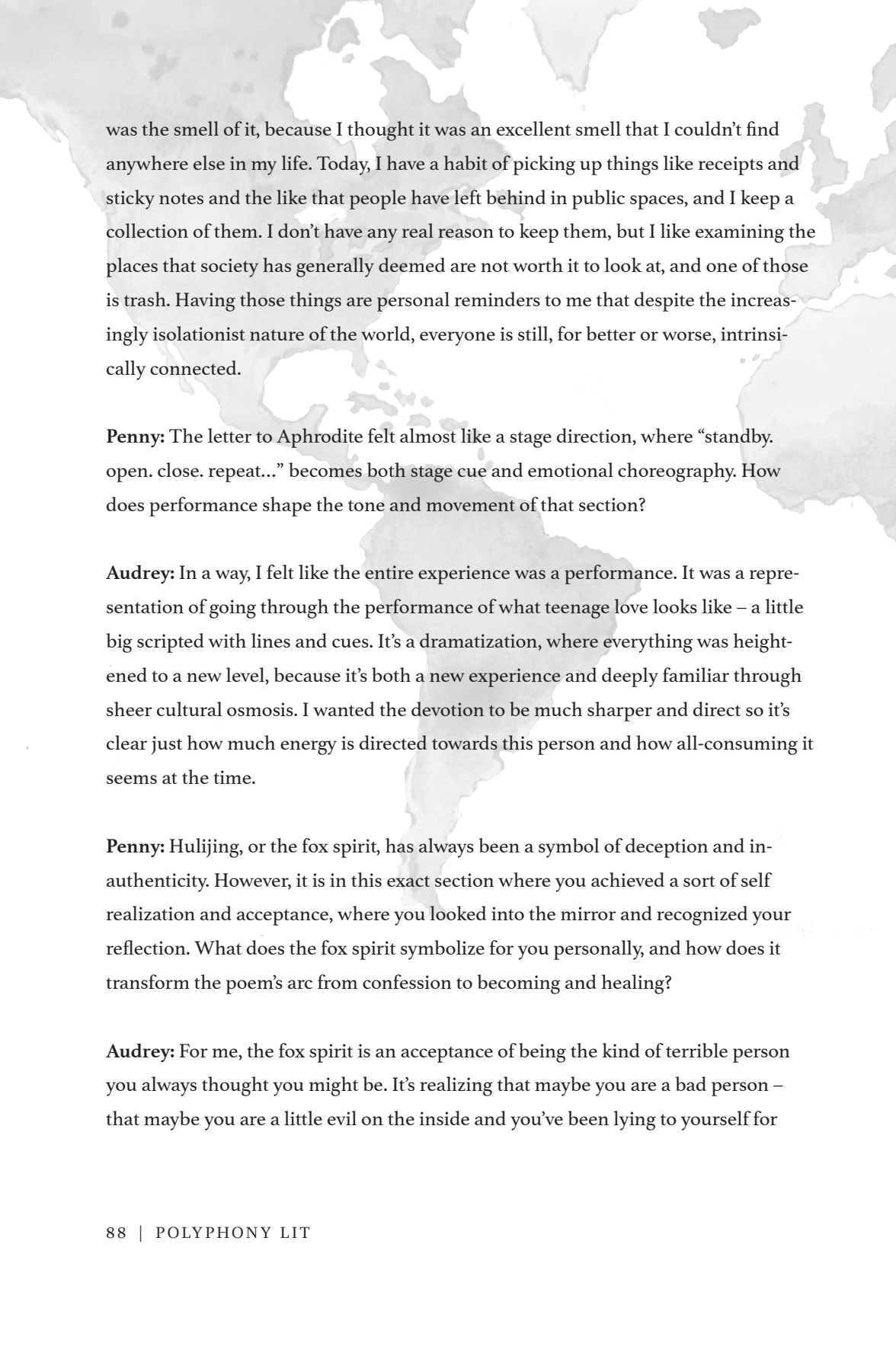
Interviewer: Penny Wei

Penny: Each section of the piece you addressed a different divine or mythical figure. How did you choose the deities to address? What qualities do Guanyin, Aphrodite and Huijiao bring to the emotional architecture of the piece?

Audrey: I chose the deities to represent real people – my mother, a girl I was in love with at the time, and myself. I wanted to focus on the concept of love in three different lights, and that informed the specific deities that I looked towards. I have always associated my mother with Guanyin; representative of both mercy and compassion, a gentler and calmer unconditional love. Aphrodite is a much bolder and passionate deity, one that encompassed the melodrama of teenage love in a very succinct way. The Huijiao is much more traditionally “evil,” but in that space I wanted to create an understanding of transition. While I don’t consider myself a beautiful and benevolent deity the way I see the other two women in my life, it is an acceptance of simultaneously striving to be like them and accepting that I am who I will be.

Penny: In the “guanyin” section, I found it really interesting how you connected sacredness with mundanity. You mentioned “god of space heater” and “the mute button on a zoom call,” which is a very unique and unconventional connection. Does this contrast show the way you perceive the divine in everyday life? If so, how?

Audrey: Absolutely. I’m not religious, necessarily, but there are millions of little joys and miracles that occur in everyday life that are brushed off as mundanity. For instance, when I was younger, my parents would set up a space heater in the winter when it got too cold. I liked it for its heat, of course, but my favorite part about that heater



was the smell of it, because I thought it was an excellent smell that I couldn't find anywhere else in my life. Today, I have a habit of picking up things like receipts and sticky notes and the like that people have left behind in public spaces, and I keep a collection of them. I don't have any real reason to keep them, but I like examining the places that society has generally deemed are not worth it to look at, and one of those is trash. Having those things are personal reminders to me that despite the increasingly isolationist nature of the world, everyone is still, for better or worse, intrinsically connected.

Penny: The letter to Aphrodite felt almost like a stage direction, where “standby. open. close. repeat...” becomes both stage cue and emotional choreography. How does performance shape the tone and movement of that section?

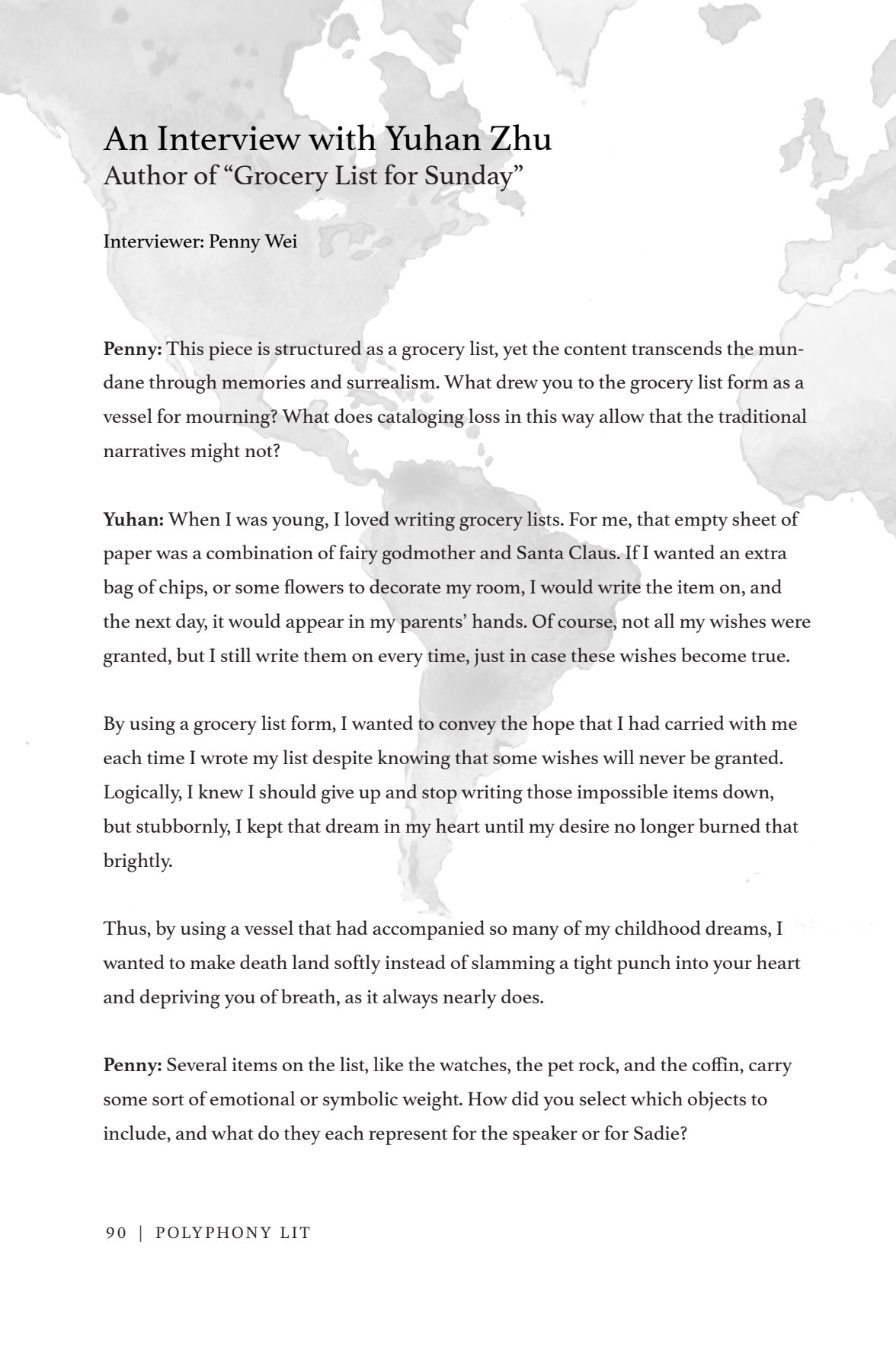
Audrey: In a way, I felt like the entire experience was a performance. It was a representation of going through the performance of what teenage love looks like – a little big scripted with lines and cues. It's a dramatization, where everything was heightened to a new level, because it's both a new experience and deeply familiar through sheer cultural osmosis. I wanted the devotion to be much sharper and direct so it's clear just how much energy is directed towards this person and how all-consuming it seems at the time.

Penny: Huijijing, or the fox spirit, has always been a symbol of deception and inauthenticity. However, it is in this exact section where you achieved a sort of self realization and acceptance, where you looked into the mirror and recognized your reflection. What does the fox spirit symbolize for you personally, and how does it transform the poem's arc from confession to becoming and healing?

Audrey: For me, the fox spirit is an acceptance of being the kind of terrible person you always thought you might be. It's realizing that maybe you are a bad person – that maybe you are a little evil on the inside and you've been lying to yourself for



years. It was discovering how to not live in silent shame, but to accept the truth of yourself and act on it and make change in the world. I wanted to convey something similar to just enjoying life for what it is and focusing on the things that you can actually affect rather than the things that haunt your memory at odd hours of the day.



An Interview with Yuhan Zhu

Author of “Grocery List for Sunday”

Interviewer: Penny Wei

Penny: This piece is structured as a grocery list, yet the content transcends the mundane through memories and surrealism. What drew you to the grocery list form as a vessel for mourning? What does cataloging loss in this way allow that the traditional narratives might not?

Yuhan: When I was young, I loved writing grocery lists. For me, that empty sheet of paper was a combination of fairy godmother and Santa Claus. If I wanted an extra bag of chips, or some flowers to decorate my room, I would write the item on, and the next day, it would appear in my parents’ hands. Of course, not all my wishes were granted, but I still write them on every time, just in case these wishes become true.

By using a grocery list form, I wanted to convey the hope that I had carried with me each time I wrote my list despite knowing that some wishes will never be granted. Logically, I knew I should give up and stop writing those impossible items down, but stubbornly, I kept that dream in my heart until my desire no longer burned that brightly.

Thus, by using a vessel that had accompanied so many of my childhood dreams, I wanted to make death land softly instead of slamming a tight punch into your heart and depriving you of breath, as it always nearly does.

Penny: Several items on the list, like the watches, the pet rock, and the coffin, carry some sort of emotional or symbolic weight. How did you select which objects to include, and what do they each represent for the speaker or for Sadie?

Yuhan: For the speaker, these items bring her both joy and pain. Each time she sees these items, she is pulled into that beautiful world of childhood memories, before being reminded of the ice-cold reality. For her, these items represent a buried dream and a broken promise.

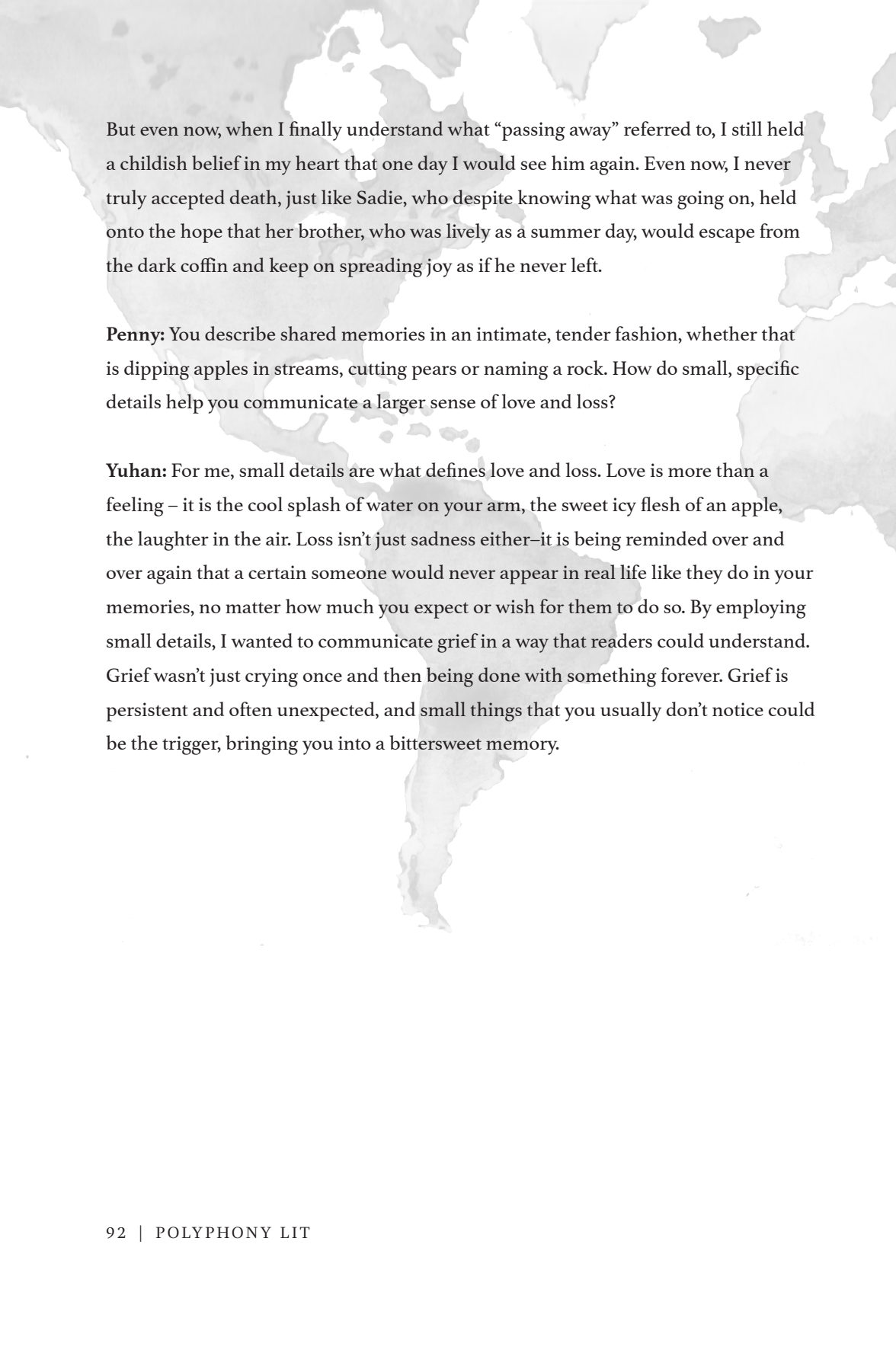
The watch represented time. When we were young and oblivious to the concept of death, we believed that there was a timeless quality to life. We would never think about how a watch could rust or break, and someone's time would be paused forever.

The pet rock represented childlike innocence. Pet rocks were really just rocks. But when young children hold it and believe that it had a living soul, it came alive in their memories. Like the pet rock, the speaker and Sadie tried to believe that inside Sadie's brother's lifeless body, his soul would hear their voices calling out to him.

The coffin was Sadie and the speaker's desperate hope. Even at the funeral, she couldn't accept his death, and longed for him to jump out and declare that it was just a prank. The closing of the coffin lid was different for everyone. To Sadie and the speaker, it was the brother bidding them farewell, but to everyone else partaking in the funeral, it merely symbolized the end of a bleak ceremony.

Penny: The scene where Sadie imagines her brother springing from the coffin is surreal, almost childlike. What does that moment convey about the way people, especially young people, deal with death?

Yuhan: One day, when I was young, I found my mother crying. She told me: "Your grandpa has passed away, he is going somewhere far, far away." I didn't understand what she meant. I had assumed that he was going on a trip, perhaps a vacation to the Bahamas. For a long time, I had expected him to be at home, perhaps playing a table-top game or eating salted peanuts. I didn't realize that I would never see him again.



But even now, when I finally understand what “passing away” referred to, I still held a childish belief in my heart that one day I would see him again. Even now, I never truly accepted death, just like Sadie, who despite knowing what was going on, held onto the hope that her brother, who was lively as a summer day, would escape from the dark coffin and keep on spreading joy as if he never left.

Penny: You describe shared memories in an intimate, tender fashion, whether that is dipping apples in streams, cutting pears or naming a rock. How do small, specific details help you communicate a larger sense of love and loss?

Yuhan: For me, small details are what defines love and loss. Love is more than a feeling – it is the cool splash of water on your arm, the sweet icy flesh of an apple, the laughter in the air. Loss isn’t just sadness either—it is being reminded over and over again that a certain someone would never appear in real life like they do in your memories, no matter how much you expect or wish for them to do so. By employing small details, I wanted to communicate grief in a way that readers could understand. Grief wasn’t just crying once and then being done with something forever. Grief is persistent and often unexpected, and small things that you usually don’t notice could be the trigger, bringing you into a bittersweet memory.

An Interview with Katerina Sutton

Author of “Rehashed, Rerun, Rewound”

Interviewer: Rowan Manley

Rowan: I adored the creativity of themes and ideas within “Rehashed, Rerun, Rewound.” How do you think your own personal experiences, interests, and history impacted this piece and your writing as a whole?

Katerina: Thank you! This piece is loosely based on a novel I’ve been writing for the past three years – that’s actually what first pulled me into writing. I’m currently on a third draft, and the story has changed quite a bit over time. I was curious how much of the novel’s emotional landscape I could condense into a single sentence, and that challenge inspired this piece! I’ve always been drawn to ambiguity in storytelling; I love stories that are messy and layered, and allow room for interpretation. When I first workshopped “Rehashed, Rerun, Rewound” with my writing group, half of the readers commented that they saw homoerotic elements in the relationship between the two boys, while the other half had perceived it purely as a sweet friendship. I smiled and said nothing, because that uncertainty was the point; the boys themselves may not know how to define it.

Rowan: What draws you to poetry? Is there a specific element of poetry, the structure, emotion, or literary devices frequently employed within it that makes you love it or do you enjoy writing it for more specific or personal reasons?

Katerina: To be honest, I’m more of a prose writer, but I love the density and precision of poetry. I wrote this piece as a prose poem, blending narrative with poetic elements. One of my biggest challenges with writing prose is brevity – I tend to use more words than needed, and end up doing a lot of cutting in revisions. I have a lot to learn from



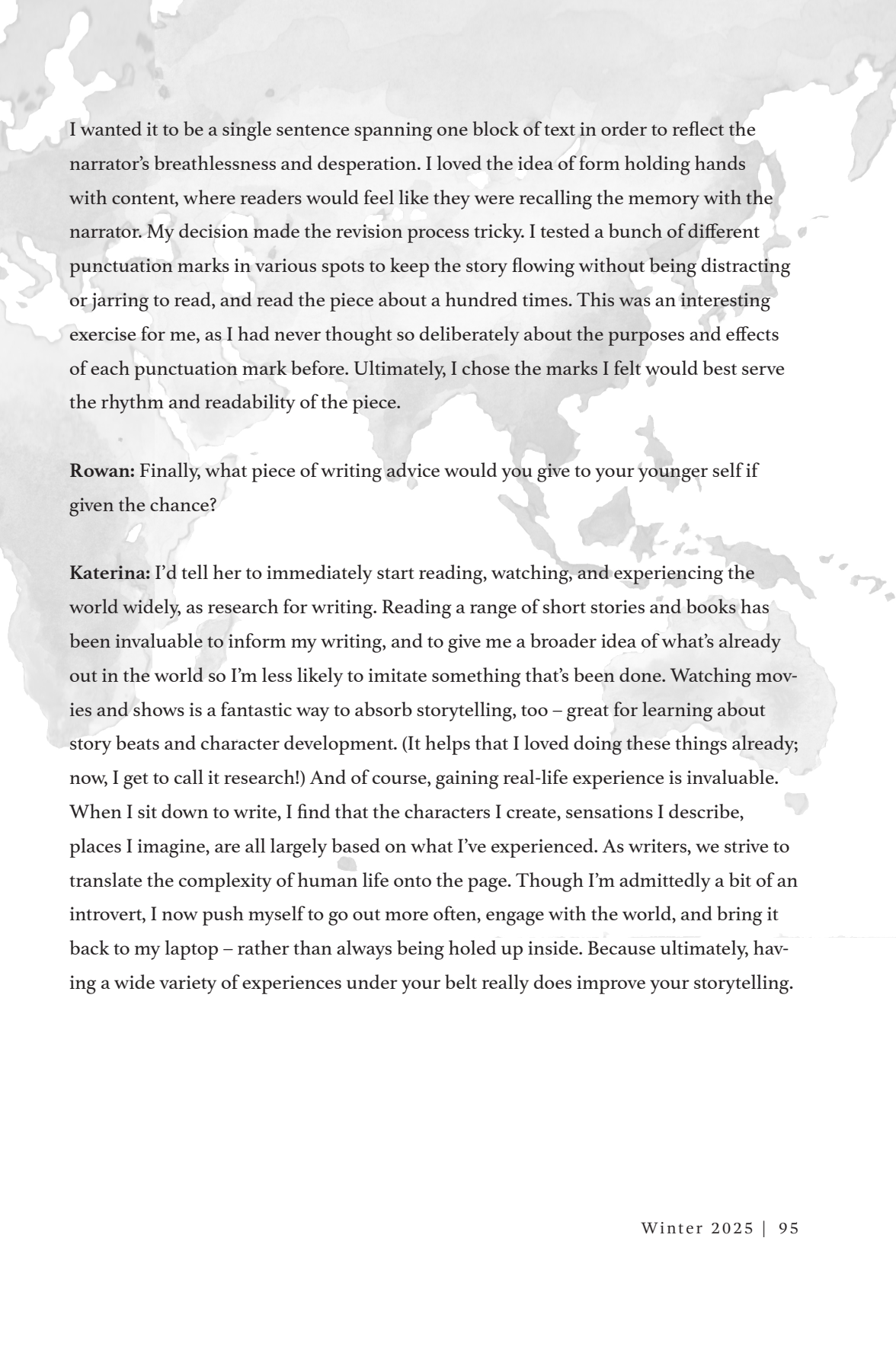
poets, especially their ability to convey profound emotion and depth in very few words. I always work to include poetic devices in my writing regardless of length, especially descriptive imagery and similes, as they're fantastic tools for enhancing narratives.

Rowan: Perspective is always critical with poetry and the decision to use first person present really connected me to the emotions depicted within the poem. Do you think writing in first person impacts how much emotion a writer can express within a given work (yours included)?

Katerina: I'm glad you liked the first-person style! On a practical and unglamorous level, I realized that if I was writing about two boys from the third-person, there'd be a lot of "he" and "him" which could quickly become confusing to read. Deeper, I thought that using first-person would allow readers to feel like they were glimpsing into the narrator's mind, which was essential given that the piece follows the stream-of-consciousness recollection of a memory. That being said, I don't think that first-person narration inherently conveys more emotion than third-person – but it does carry risks. Third-person past is the standard perspective used for storytelling, meaning that any other perspective will feel a bit different at first, jarring. First-person feels so intimate and familiar that if it isn't handled with tact, it can come across as overly sentimental or dramatic. I think it always comes down to the purpose the point of view is serving in that specific story, and how it's handled!

Rowan: The format of your poem, with its large block of text and single sentence structure is really unique and helps further the tone of the piece. What was the process of structuring this poem like for you and how would you say it differed from structuring other types of creative writing?

Katerina: This is easily the most experimental piece I've written. I considered breaking the piece into multiple sentences as it passed 300 words, but quickly realized



I wanted it to be a single sentence spanning one block of text in order to reflect the narrator's breathlessness and desperation. I loved the idea of form holding hands with content, where readers would feel like they were recalling the memory with the narrator. My decision made the revision process tricky. I tested a bunch of different punctuation marks in various spots to keep the story flowing without being distracting or jarring to read, and read the piece about a hundred times. This was an interesting exercise for me, as I had never thought so deliberately about the purposes and effects of each punctuation mark before. Ultimately, I chose the marks I felt would best serve the rhythm and readability of the piece.

Rowan: Finally, what piece of writing advice would you give to your younger self if given the chance?

Katerina: I'd tell her to immediately start reading, watching, and experiencing the world widely, as research for writing. Reading a range of short stories and books has been invaluable to inform my writing, and to give me a broader idea of what's already out in the world so I'm less likely to imitate something that's been done. Watching movies and shows is a fantastic way to absorb storytelling, too – great for learning about story beats and character development. (It helps that I loved doing these things already; now, I get to call it research!) And of course, gaining real-life experience is invaluable. When I sit down to write, I find that the characters I create, sensations I describe, places I imagine, are all largely based on what I've experienced. As writers, we strive to translate the complexity of human life onto the page. Though I'm admittedly a bit of an introvert, I now push myself to go out more often, engage with the world, and bring it back to my laptop – rather than always being holed up inside. Because ultimately, having a wide variety of experiences under your belt really does improve your storytelling.

ARTWORK





Artist Spotlight

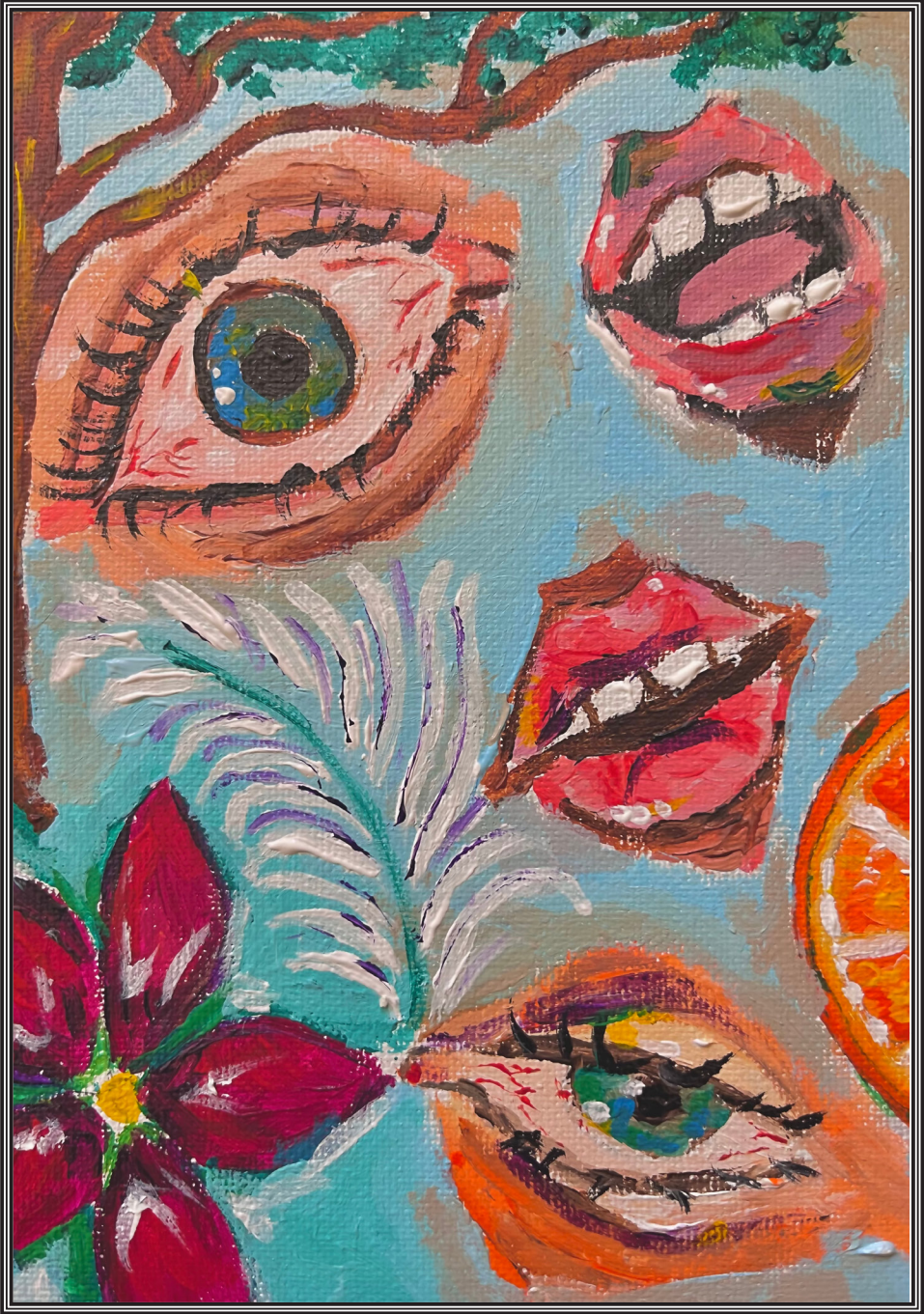
Vainavi Kumar

Artist Statement

Vainavi Kumar is a senior in the Bay Area. She loves reading and writing, but sometimes decides to eviscerate her ego by attempting visual art.

Featured Art:

“False Fauna”



POETRY



ELIJAH RAMLI

Singapore, Singapore

Jericho

I

On the streets there is ivy on the brick with nothing on but shreds of graffiti, the world built one glass, brown, and grey at a time. The apartments are as beautiful as FedEx posts, in regular concretial formations. Ads sent out for a sexy tan. You find him here like a serrated icon, in this mad Manhattan skyline slated in excess, and he looks like he's about to start kneeling. You might just kneel with him.

II

Café on the rocks decked out in drag, choked down with an outstretched finger. She exists in the lights like a disco flickering, one moment there and winked out the next. A little glimmering glowthing. Lying down she pops sliders too big for her mouth, mothers her ginger ale and you take up the space in the dark before it is shone upon, the second before everything is seen. You are not to be the one for feeling dizzy.

III

In the Wes Anderson weather there's a ship and he and you are on it, two separated bodies in a creamy summer sky. When you look down the froth churns yellow or egg white, depending on where the sun catches it. When you look up the sun is all there is to him. He opens his mouth and you find him sweet, a kool-aid flavoured Hail Mary, crumbling in a battle of cherries and cream. Gender. Jericho. Gender. Jericho. Every word is blasphemy.

IV

When you eat the Hokkien Mee¹ in New York it tastes dysphoric, a defect hung on homely but yet not. You eat and continue to hunger. He picks at his nails like they belong on someone else, someplace else, the dirt on them vitrified and foreign. The wrists too thick, too worn. *Darling, darling, when are you coming back?* The walls have come down in your absence. You do not consider the impact of this. You are not the type for giving in.

V

The hotel room window opens sideways instead of up, the blinds rolling left instead of right. Outside a billboard with strips of turkey bacon. Street tramps selling gatorade. Standing on the Empire State you find her waiting like a wife and you almost, almost wed her. You don't. For in the cold mercurial beauty of American things she was there and so was he, and she long after that too.

VI

Cathedral with its thousand-eyed glass. Under the kaleidoscope of rainbows you hold him where the light corners itself like a thief and stalls there. He begins to sing *I believe once we have seen heaven everything else feels like hell* and you evoke Audre Lorde, you do, all black, blessed and blueprinting. If moonlight makes boys blue then church makes them transparent, naked as the women they want to be.

VII

Times Square more a rectangle of flags, a mode of solidarity. The citadels of concert halls, the scaffolds of the streets. You are an observer in a city that would call you theirs if you asked, the owner of a country that condemns you. A bigger ring of independence stars. Drenched in the finery of the new world you are grotesque, castle-like, with more turrets than stones. You are a body for invasion alone.

¹ Hokkien Mee: A Singaporean dish consisting of noodles fried with egg and seafood.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

Glittering and lyrical, “Jericho” is a poem that asks: what remains sacred in a body built for exile? From cathedrals with “thousand-eyed glass” to Times Square’s “rectangle of flags,” this poem weaves haunting vignettes into a razor-sharp meditation on desire, dislocation, and the architectures of identity.

ELENA FERRARI

Milton Academy, Milton, MA, USA

Self Portrait as []

I'm so good at pawing through guilt, so
good. There were men pecking down
the walls of the house with thin-tined
forks and so it wasn't lonely but now I
think anything could carry something
if the something were small enough—laughed
like a mail-slot, swore to pack my atoms'
buzzing stomachs. But really—I've been
knocking on supporting beams like exhales, unnamed
search in a calculus-world's balance.
I've started naming the boy in my dreams Martin
because I don't know what to call him,
call myself. It's like this: an old, Antarctic burn:
the infirmities of whom I've loved. Guilt's
a hang-head thing—swear to it, smear it to
the back of my neck and the sweetness
throbs for hours.



NOTE

This piece was previously published in Full Mood Mag, December 2023.

EDITORIAL PRAISE

"Self Portrait as []" exudes so much personality, swagger, and vigor, you can almost see the sneer on the speaker's face. Ferrari explores what it means to love and lose in "a calculus-

world's balance," and in doing so, encapsulates the bravery and persistence we must harbor to reckon with our terribly imperfect selves.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elena Ferrari is a freshman at Harvard University, a member of The Advocate's poetry board, and an alumnus of Adroit Journal's Summer Mentorship Program. Her work has been recognized by the Foyle Young Poets Prize, Smith College, and Susquehanna University, and is published in Eunoia Review, Full Mood Mag, Apprentice Writer, and elsewhere. She's partial to frogs, Vitamin C, the great outdoors, and certain matrices.

HANNAH AHN

Marriotts Ridge High School, MD, USA

For an old friend

I know how it goes:
the somber, slick rhythms of happiness,
another half-figure dipping into light.
Bumblebees gathered in the yard for communion,
we prayed over the meal. All those years ago and
I remember the way the head of the fish
glistened on the platter. It caught the light with
both hands.

Now the dew in the backyard is freshly wet
and the lights blink on and off like faucets. The highway is
a roaming stretch of darkness. In the winter the house
closes its fist and all joy and bitterness is scattered and lost
to the wind. Where did you come from? I never thought to
ask. I must have thought that the years we spent together
would weigh us down the same way they weighed the
spinach in pools of sesame oil, the broken bread neatly
combed over another spread of tablecloth.

Some nights I see the crows coming fast and hard on the
horizon, dropping like spots of blindness. And I think
you may return to finish a glass of milk, to sweeten the long-dusted days. I
forget, I say. But sometimes I dream a dream where you cross another
ocean. And I wish again that you would have visited me from that place
you call a body. We could have fed each other loneliness out of the palms
of our hands.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

Wistful yet unsentimental, “For an old friend” serves up memory like a half-cleared dinner table — glinting fish heads, sesame oil, and all. Ahn’s images delicately topple in sequence, and latent within them is a stubborn hope we’ve all felt: that someone might still come back, even for a forgotten glass of milk.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hannah Ahn is a writer of fiction and poetry. She reads for Adroit, is an alum of YoungArts, and has been published in Narrative Magazine, Wigleaf, and America Magazine, amongst other places.



An Interview with Elijah Ramli

Author of “Jericho”

Interviewer: Jua Kim

Jua: The first thing I noticed about your poem was that it was divided into what looked like chapters. This unique structure reminded me of a polaroid wall — each section was a short vignette packed with evocative details, and when I looked at the piece as a whole, all of the parts seemed to come together to form a bigger picture. What was your intent behind writing your poem using this particular structure?

Elijah: I would say with slight embarrassment that this is how I write, or rather how I view the world around me. I find that writing broadly about a subject leaves little room for thought, and instead I prefer to fuss over details that add up to an original whole. Vignettes are short, easily stuffed with meaning, and have permission to be different from each other. Thus, they work well when placed together. I also find that by deconstructing a narrative, one can prioritise techniques – metaphor, alliteration, allusion, et cetera – and better control their impact on the reader’s mind.

I also take much inspiration from the Beat Poets, Allen Ginsberg to be specific. His eclectic, almost arbitrary imagery helped shape my voice, allowing me to look past convention. I learned to place less focus on storytelling and put weight on individual scenes, using them to flesh out the plot of “Jericho.” While this practice would obviously hinder me in prose, I find it quite effective for poetry.

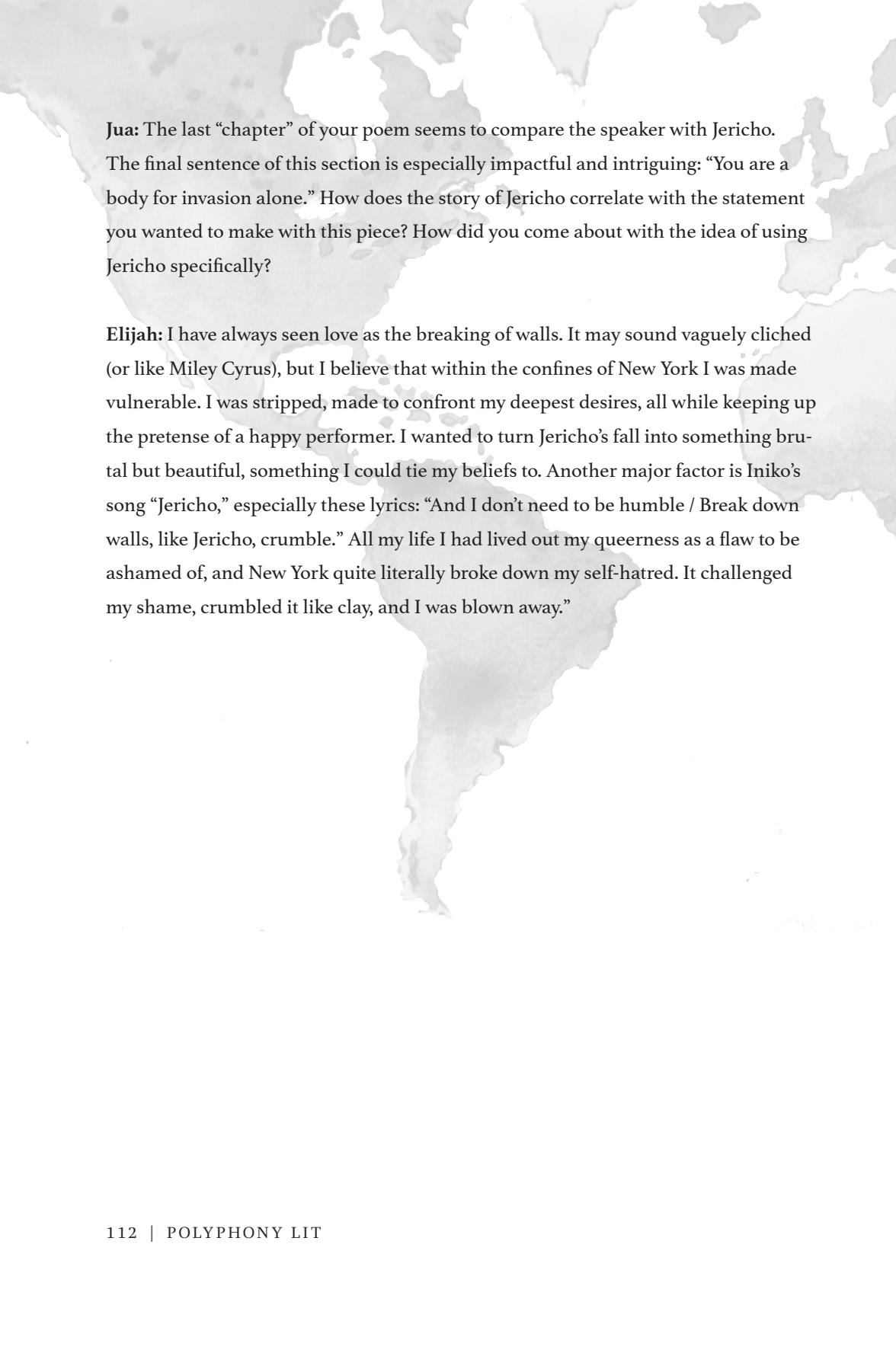
Jua: I absolutely love prose poems; yours was an exceptional example. I wanted to ask: why a prose poem? To be more specific, how does the prose style serve as a receptacle for the story you wanted to tell? Why did you want to write a prose poem over, say, free verse?

Elijah: I find that unlike most of my poems in free verse, “Jericho” still had a narrative to it. It first started out as letters to my partner across the globe, where I described the things I saw and how I felt. Slowly, I began to imagine them with me. Eventually it turned into a pseudo-diary entry, with each paragraph corresponding to the highlight of the day. I suppose the prose just came naturally to me. Honestly, had it been in free verse, the spotlight would have been on emotion rather than people. It is people that I am trying to honour in this poem, bodies that changed with the city.

Jua: Your poem included several descriptions of different scenes in New York City. These were not only deliberately and intricately wrought, but also seemed to work as a continuation of the speaker’s contemplations. Why did you use New York City in particular as a backdrop for your piece, and how did you integrate it into the overarching theme of identity?

Elijah: New York, or rather America in general, holds great meaning to me. I wrote the poem around June 2023, when I performed in the area with my choir. Coming from a country where queerhood is a taboo, I was spellbound by the pride on every street. It was different, dazzling, the stuff of my dreams. I fell terribly in love with the place. Yet I was struck by the knowledge that I did not belong, that I was above all an outsider. I belonged there, queer, but not as a tourist. I sang and gave solos, but had no true breath. Finally I saw if I wanted a poem, I would write it in this tightrope of spaces. And so “Jericho” was born in a dingy hotel in Manhattan.

To me, identity is about dislocation. It’s not about searching or finding completion, but trying to honour as many parts of you as possible. In New York, bright and filled with loud things, nothing lasts beyond the switch of a screen. Hence, its fluidity parallels the quest for who you are. I also utilised contrast to create doubt and uncertainty throughout the piece – most lines were studded with contradictions on gender and nationality. Thus, I wouldn’t say I integrated New York City but rather built the poem around it. It just happened to be my identity I questioned while there.



Jua: The last “chapter” of your poem seems to compare the speaker with Jericho. The final sentence of this section is especially impactful and intriguing: “You are a body for invasion alone.” How does the story of Jericho correlate with the statement you wanted to make with this piece? How did you come about with the idea of using Jericho specifically?

Elijah: I have always seen love as the breaking of walls. It may sound vaguely clichéd (or like Miley Cyrus), but I believe that within the confines of New York I was made vulnerable. I was stripped, made to confront my deepest desires, all while keeping up the pretense of a happy performer. I wanted to turn Jericho’s fall into something brutal but beautiful, something I could tie my beliefs to. Another major factor is Iniko’s song “Jericho,” especially these lyrics: “And I don’t need to be humble / Break down walls, like Jericho, crumble.” All my life I had lived out my queerness as a flaw to be ashamed of, and New York quite literally broke down my self-hatred. It challenged my shame, crumbled it like clay, and I was blown away.”

An Interview with Hannah Ahn

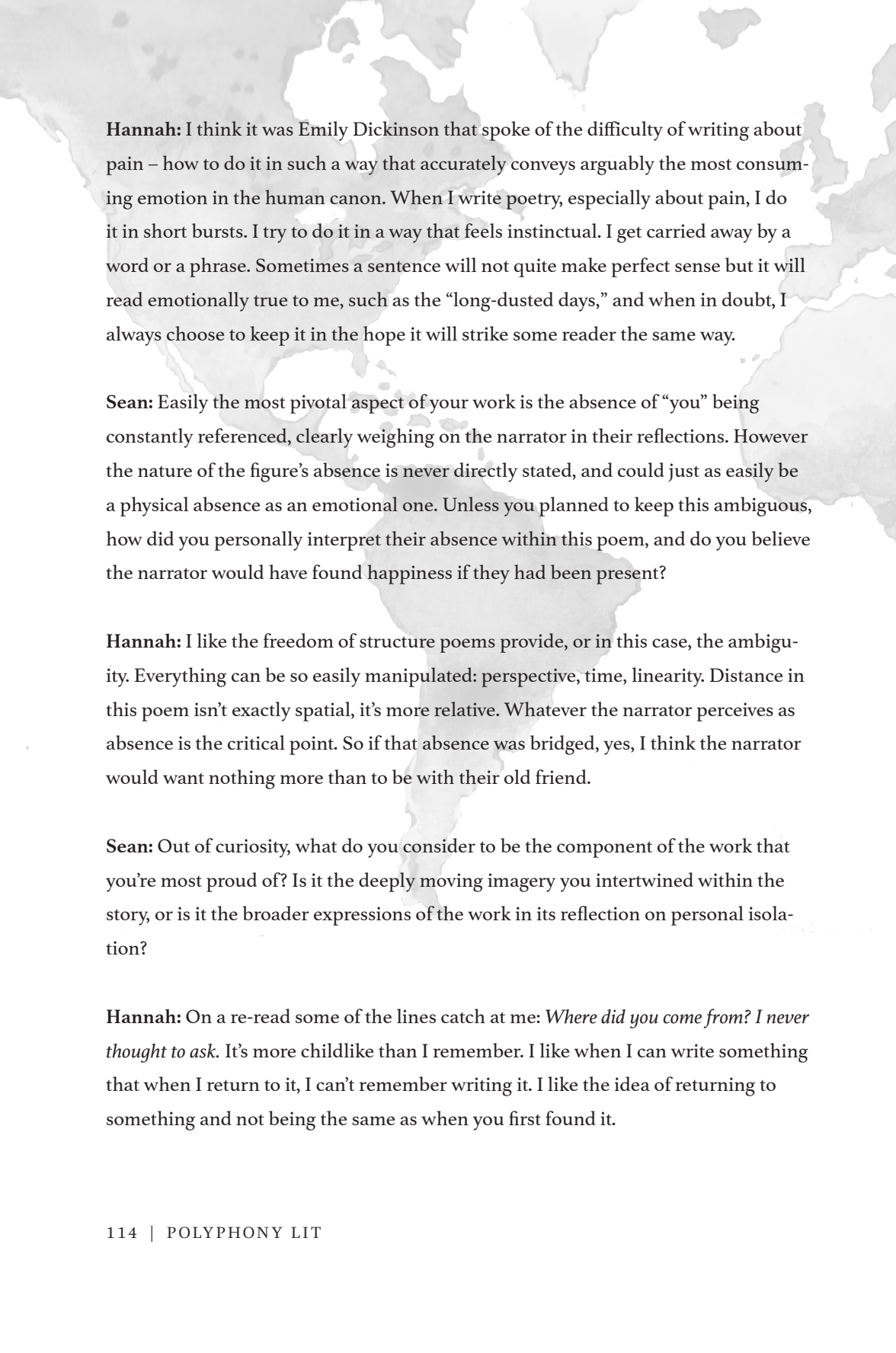
Author of “For an old friend”

Interviewer: Sean Dilbeck

Sean: One of the things I really appreciated about “For an Old Friend” was the indescribably personal edge of much of your descriptions, lines such as “head of the fish glistened on the platter” and “weighed the spinach in pools” implying a life we never fully understand. With that in mind I was wondering how much of these smaller details have been taken from your personal experiences and how many of them are created for symbolism?

Hannah: I’m grateful for your kind words on the specificity of my poetry. I’m drawn to specifics by my nature, as I think most readers are more attracted to specificity than repelled by it, and poetry is a form where you’re forced to convey the emotionality of a piece through fleeting images. Sometimes, you’re stuck more with the shadow of a line than the actual meat of it, and I think that’s what I’ve tried to do here. With this friend, whenever we ate together – it was simple food in simple rooms. We stretched ingredients to make a meal. In this poem, I’m trying to make a meal and a friendship last longer than the sum of its parts by transforming it into poetry. In this piece, the symbolism here comes organically from my own life – the thought of eating a bare-bones meal with a friend, and then writing a bare-bones poem about that same friend.

Sean: Within much of “For an Old Friend” I was struck by how you convey a powerful sense of isolation throughout your work. This was especially prominent in lines such as “all joy and bitterness is scattered” and “the long-dusted days.” How exactly do you go about conveying such powerful emotion through your writing and how much went into this specific piece?



Hannah: I think it was Emily Dickinson that spoke of the difficulty of writing about pain – how to do it in such a way that accurately conveys arguably the most consuming emotion in the human canon. When I write poetry, especially about pain, I do it in short bursts. I try to do it in a way that feels instinctual. I get carried away by a word or a phrase. Sometimes a sentence will not quite make perfect sense but it will read emotionally true to me, such as the “long-dusted days,” and when in doubt, I always choose to keep it in the hope it will strike some reader the same way.

Sean: Easily the most pivotal aspect of your work is the absence of “you” being constantly referenced, clearly weighing on the narrator in their reflections. However the nature of the figure’s absence is never directly stated, and could just as easily be a physical absence as an emotional one. Unless you planned to keep this ambiguous, how did you personally interpret their absence within this poem, and do you believe the narrator would have found happiness if they had been present?

Hannah: I like the freedom of structure poems provide, or in this case, the ambiguity. Everything can be so easily manipulated: perspective, time, linearity. Distance in this poem isn’t exactly spatial, it’s more relative. Whatever the narrator perceives as absence is the critical point. So if that absence was bridged, yes, I think the narrator would want nothing more than to be with their old friend.

Sean: Out of curiosity, what do you consider to be the component of the work that you’re most proud of? Is it the deeply moving imagery you intertwined within the story, or is it the broader expressions of the work in its reflection on personal isolation?

Hannah: On a re-read some of the lines catch at me: *Where did you come from? I never thought to ask.* It’s more childlike than I remember. I like when I can write something that when I return to it, I can’t remember writing it. I like the idea of returning to something and not being the same as when you first found it.



ARTWORK



A faint, light gray world map is visible in the background of the page, centered behind the text.

Artist Spotlight

Pooja Verma

Artist Statement

Pooja Verma is a 16-year-old painter who attends Irvington High School in California. She is inspired by what she believes to be the greatest muse- nature! To her viewers, her work advocates to the beautiful life suffering at the hands of anthropogenic damage. She also runs her own art business (magnolia_stars on instagram), with stickers, prints, and homemade paint for sale, with 10% of proceeds donated to environmental conservation organizations! She is so happy to be an artist for Polyphony Lit.

Featured Art:

“Templetree, a Plant from India”



FICTION



ANTHONY IMM

Northern Valley Demarest High School, Demarest, NJ, USA

Flutter

When Catcher turned into an owl, I thought he would take me with him.

It was a searing evening in August. The fifth day. The day of our birthday. Our parents had told us to wait outside the diner while they finished their lunch shift. Like every other year, we'd eat hot pot to celebrate. We'd receive the same gift — a college-ruled math notebook, Rubik's cubes, Yosemite-pictured puzzles — except Catcher never complained. He always held each gift like a golden egg, careful not to crack it.

"Call me Catcher," he said. I looked up, and he'd now held his chest tight, crumpling his shirt so the hem lifted to expose his stomach. "I'm not Yue anymore. I'm not brothers with you now."

Before I could even reply, the transformation kicked in. A pulsing drum. A beat of yelps and groans. His body contorted, dropping to the ground, and he let out a screech so loud the trees shook. He tightened his face so hard his eyebrows met each other, then shoved his fist into his mouth only to pull out a quill. His eyes twitched like the vibrations of a rubber band snapping. I'd never seen my brother this vulnerable before, so compulsive and explosive in his body language. Usually, he was a fleet-footed cat: swiping packs of gum from the aisle, swapping papers during chemistry exams, pilfering ten-dollar bills from our parents' coat pockets. I remember trying to mimic his attitude so hard, only to be caught repeatedly. Only for my parents to inform me of my idiocy compared to Catcher, how he got As as easy as killing ants.

This time, he was different, though. This time, he wanted to be seen. He laid low on the cobblestone path, hunched over like he was sheltering a child from danger. He spread his arms wide open, shadowing the ground, like wings. He shook

his head aggressively, and I couldn't tell what he wanted me to do. What response did he desire from me? Someone who'd only ever been a witness, never in the act.

Premature plumage budded out of his temples like parasites. I zipped up my down jacket like a shield, like I could protect myself from an imminent feathery explosion. When he vomited, the feathers spilled out like a waterfall. Three seconds and the cleansing was complete. He was mostly the same. Cheeks stamped with blush. Hair spiked and tousled. Lips pursed into a heart. Anyone could tell we were twins, that we came from the same root, and would die under the same tree. Yet his grin reached his earlobes, and the wind gently shook the feathers forming on his wrists. His pupils were gilled slits.

He picked up a wet feather, curled in like an ingrown nail, and straightened it out. "Huh," he muttered. The feather, an ombre of gray black, looked like a wand. Peering at the thing for a few more seconds, he burst into laughter. I winced. "I didn't know it today! The transformation. I knew it come soon! I become. Bird. Bird. Bird. No, no, I become owl. Owl. Fly. High." His words trailed off into gibberish, then squawks, then screams, then eventually whispers.

When I looked back to where Catcher was, he was gone. Instead, he'd been on the rooftop waving at me as if his arm was a mechanical wing. Awkward in angle. He scanned the horizon and squealed, the swarm of green trees reflected glassy and gold under the sunset. Catcher's presence alone sizzled and singed the tip of my nose.

I'd always known about this, his desire to transform into an avian, yet I never wanted to admit it. I wanted to scream at him to come down because he'd die if he fell. He'd hurt himself, like he always did when he claimed to be a bird. He never told anyone about this secret, only told me because he knew I wouldn't tell anyone else. I wouldn't say anything, and even now, I kept quiet.

I kept quiet because I knew Catcher was never a human. I knew he was destined to be a bird.

Catcher always joked that his zygote encoded the genes of an owl, but our mother drank human water, and he turned into a boy and split into two. "But tell me," he'd once said when we were birdwatching. "Am I not a bird? Do I not show it since

I was young, since I could talk?” And I’d muttered something incoherent, and he’d turn and stare at me, his pupils absorbing his iris. “Do I not?”

He’d pointed at a tufted titmouse resting on a tree branch and had said, “Tell me, isn’t that such an easy target for predators like me?”

It was true, true that Catcher showed signs since he was a baby. He always taunted me because I’d never be able to fly. Said I didn’t have the confidence, the grit. When we were five, he pretended to fly around Christmas decoration aisles in a warehouse store; he skydived from a ladder only to crash into the floor and shatter his nose. He bent paper clips and taped them on his fingernails to imitate claws and knelt on thick branches as he sang. His habits never stopped even when we went into middle school. In the morning, he crooned to wake the early buds and always wanted to eat sunflower seeds for breakfast but stopped once he had the revelation that he was a nocturnal creature. He was something from darkness, so he slept in the morning, skipping school by hiding in the local playground, and hunted mice at night. He buried worms in his pockets and ate them like string cheese before he went to sleep. He once told me to try, and I was tempted, so I obliged.

“Sure.”

“No,” he’d said. “I changed my mind.”

“Why?”

“Worms are fodder for owls like me. Humans can’t eat this. They can’t relate to our feelings.” And I’d wanted to disprove him, show that humans could eat worms just like birds and even better. We could grill it in butter and use salt for flavoring and serve it on china plates and in Michelin-starred restaurants. But I couldn’t say anything. I always knew he’d been a part of the Aves, and I was just a human he whittled from his leftover genetics in utero.

On his tenth birthday, Catcher said so himself. “I am a black-banded owl. Cautious and silent. With wings that can wrap the sky in darkness.” He liked the taste of night. He was an owl.

I could only watch him, as he licked the frosting off his fork, and wonder what life he’d pursue once he evolved.

Under the sky, he relinquished the last remnants of strength left in his body. An aura veiled his face. He let the wind carry him and so he carefully floated above the building, like a transcendent being, like he was rising to heaven. He became streamlined with the rush of wind, like a jet gathering energy, gauging the vigor in its body. He stared at me and winked, like a call.

The first to change was his eyes, which went from a solid brown to a black yolk. Wings sprouted from his back like a fallen angel, glossed in a golden spray, liquid asphalt dripping from the tips. His nose melted into his face, replaced by a yellow beak, and his ears melted into his temples. Feathers crowned his head; his knees bent and fused with his thighs, and his feet sprouted claws; the air smelled like gold. My hands felt like rubber, and he looked like a god.

He snapped his mouth. The resonance pierced into my ears and sounded like a word: "Look."

At first, he struggled to maintain balance once the wind let him free, but his wings gradually gained momentum. He became a black star in the dusk-sipping sky. His wish finally came true. And I could only watch in disbelief, an ounce of hope in my heart wishing he'd fall and become my brother again. He was flying.

He swooped down to me and shrilled, so proud to show me what he'd become. He was smiling even if I couldn't see it; he was crying from joy. Sunlight struck his wings like a match, and they flared into embers, then glowed.

He wasn't a metaphor or a monster but an owl. Always sullen in a human body, now, he had the chance to drift the lands free with wings outstretched. I pictured the view from his perspective, the world a microbiome beneath his talons. A person was an atom. A building was a molecule. A worm was an electron. To him, anything could be everything.

The air caressed his feathers. Tender. Soft. Molten. Alive.

Now, he didn't need me to be his only believer, for me to be the only one to believe he was a bird. No one could question him now. From a boy to a bird, adulthood meant flying free. He was an owl while I was still human. So I imagined grazing the skyline for a moment. I imagined only for a moment as *Catcher* dove into the forest.



EDITORIAL PRAISE

Terrifically fantastical and doused with visceral imagery, “Flutter” details an avian transformation, covering a larger theme of breaking free and taking flight. Under the threads of absurdity and the supernatural is a deeply complex account of two brothers and their reactions to a process they had always known would happen: transforming into an owl.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Imm is a student at the University of Pennsylvania. He has been previously published in Vagabond City Lit, Eunoia Review, Idle Ink, and elsewhere.

JONATHAN DU

Los Altos High School, Los Altos, CA, USA

Intersection

It's part of my personality to always remain calm in any situation. I do it by noticing sounds like the squawks of the Philippine hornbills in the afternoon, or the strong gasoline-laden smell of Yamaha scooter exhaust in my hometown of Antipolo. I suppose I should have noticed the gunman lingering outside a Tehachapi grocery store who aimed at my rainbow t-shirt and yelled, "Die, freak!"

Gunmen had been ever-present back in the Philippines where I grew up; lounging by the village clinic, machine guns strapped across their chests, shuffling a pack of poker cards in their hands. Or standing guard in front of the malls in the big cities, shotguns held at the ready, watching the shoppers stream by.

But I'd never expected to face one waiting for me outside a rural grocery store just south of Bakersfield, seething that I had fought back against his snide remarks. I didn't expect to have to abandon my groceries and cart, taking refuge in my Prius. But I should've known better than to wear my rainbow shirt in a redneck town. Especially during ghost month. October was *walang kapalaran*, an inauspicious time. The same month my uncle was struck by lightning while fixing his corrugated roof during a storm. He was only 37, the soles of his feet burnt black and dangling off the back of the pickup truck as we rushed him to the hospital. Just a year older than I am now.

At the stoplight, I blink at the Tehachapi mountains behind streaks of water on the windshield. The mountain range broods, dark with fog, far beyond the library, the post office, and the depot museum. How pink, purple, and orange the foothills are this time of year, with the desert super blooms from all the rain.

Max and I moved from Bakersfield for these flowers. We moved to this town for the apple festivals and the antique railcars and the snow melting into streams in the spring. We came so we could sit on the back deck near the sweet gum tree, drinking

homemade Calamansi tea, listening to the coyote howls and watching meteors streak through the night sky. We came here to lead a quiet life away from those who judged.

The battery display on the dashboard hits one bar and my Prius engine vibrates through the floor. I taste bullets in my mouth, like iron shavings that taint my tongue with rust. I remember the bullet holes in the walls of our house in Antipolo—cracked, pocked plaster, as if eaten away by a voracious bug. I can still hear the gunshots in the jungle, the ricochet of bullets over rusty trucks, rebels and counter-rebels fighting for or against the New People's Army and Buscayno's ideals.

A tickling sensation spreads across my abdomen, but I feel no pain. Thank God the bullet didn't go through my heart. A heart full of wildflowers and palm fronds and mangoes and my childhood dreams of moving to America, the land where I can finally be free.

My vision blurs. If 911 doesn't answer, I should just get home quickly. Max will know what to do. He can put me in his Mustang and drive me to the good hospital down in Bakersfield, get me all stitched up. It's okay. "Don't freak out," my parents always told my siblings. "You should be more like Rafael. He never gets into fights. He never raises his voice. Even when the village floods, even when the rebels come, he's always calm."

A honk from behind me. The sound rumbles through my ribs. One thing I hadn't anticipated before moving here — the Prius-hating, don't-have-anything-against-gays-until they're-in-my-face dually truck drivers. The rumbling engines of their pickups, adorned with big American flags. Their loud comments that "Long-haired ladyboys who wear nail polish aren't welcome in this town." And "Rainbows belong in the sky, not on shirts." Their right to "bear arms."

Waves of nausea, but I swallow them down. I can't seem to get the door open to vomit in the street. Blurry streaks of purple fork across the sky, a now-distant lightning storm that began last night.

All I remember this morning is the wind that rattled the windows, whistled underneath the door, and uprooted the tangerine tree in our backyard. Our fight had lingered from the night before, about moving and money and in-laws. Max stomped

around the house in his fluffy slippers, blending and juicing, clunking weights on the floor. I found him lying on his bench press in the garage, headphones on. The sound of “Don’t Stop Believin’” trickled out.

I pulled the headphones over his hair and turned off his music. Max kept his head pointed up at the ceiling, pumping away at the bar of weights.

“Why are you still mad? Just because I’m worried? People hate us here,” I said. “I don’t know what we were thinking, moving to this redneck town.”

The weights landed with a ring on the concrete floor. “How was Bakersfield any better than this?”

“We’re outnumbered,” I said. “The neighbors have their backyard barbeque parties with their pickup trucks and shotguns and flip us off when we drive by. It’s just a matter of time.”

“That’s the difference between you and me. You’re always ready to fold and go home.”

“Maybe I am.” I could imagine Antipolo at this time of year, with the wild birds in the jungle and the thick *tipolo* leaves glistening from the monsoon rain. I thought about my family, still waiting for their silly boy to grow out of his “baklâ phase” and come home.

Max ripped off the velcro from his weightlifting gloves and tossed them on the floor. He stood up from his bench. “All this because you got a few middle fingers and honks? We’re never gonna make it if your attitude is to flee at the first sign of resistance.” Max bent down to adjust the barbell clamps, clicking and unclicking the plastic switch.

“The first sign of resistance? More like a thousand.”

Pakikisama, I had learned it was called. To yield to the will of the majority, to sacrifice self for the unity of the whole. Even back in Antipolo, I collected leftover bread and discarded vegetable clippings for the neighborhood’s stray animals. I was lucky to have lived near the village schoolhouse, a blue-roofed white-brick building only open to middle schoolers. I was nine when I realized that the back window to the small school library was almost always open, so I made it my habit to sneak in when

no one was around, borrow books, sit down in the shade of the mango tree, and read. The books, the trees, the plants, and the animals—those were facts; but people I never understood.

The stoplight has turned from red to green and back to red again. I must have missed it. Cars have gone around me, no doubt wondering about this lone car, blocking traffic.

The crossbuck starts flashing and the red-striped gates come down. A train horn sounds, remote like the mountains.

I'm in two places at once—here at the stop sign with the train surging by, and back in Antipolo underneath the fat *tipolo* leaves. In my hands, the first book I ever read—a folk tale, “The Boy Who Became a Stone.” In it, a boy catches a bird, intending to care for it, but his family cooks and eats it. In anguish, the boy runs into the forest. He begs a stone to eat him. The stone opens up, takes him in, and never lets him go.

The image gnaws at my brain. The pale, lanky boy, wandering through the forest, knocking on stones, pleading for someone to hide him from the heartless world.

I fumble for the window switch. It's a little windy; the breeze brings drops of rain into the car. Warmth trickles onto my shirt like a heated towel. I rest my head back on my headrest. The ground thumps. A song? A semi-truck whooshes by the intersection. Leaves, rocks, and bits of plastic fly up. The golden tassel trembles on my rearview mirror. My graduation tassel from CSU Long Beach, paid for by campus work, night shifts at hotels, and forklifting pallets onto Costco shelves.

The driver behind me honks. Idiots.

Too many idiots in this world. Max and I protested against those very idiots. Who were they to tell us who we could love, who we could marry? Who to buy your first house with, who to binge-watch the 600 Abandoned Cities of Italy with? Who were they to honk at us, shout at us, to point their pistols and shoot?

There's a banging sound. I'm dreaming, must be, the thump of my heart loud in my ears.

“Sir, are you all right?” A deep voice. I try to open my eyes.

From the Editor

"It was a simple fear: drowning, though nothing in my life had ever given me a reason to be afraid. Even then, I wondered: how do you give way to the murky unknown? How can you trust that the water will catch you?"

This issue embraces that surrender. It offers pieces that lean into the present, even as it slips through our fingers. Pieces that acknowledge the ephemeral, the stormy—and choose to wade in anyway.

We see this in Katerina Sutton's "Rehashed, Rerun, Rewound: "My grasp on this moment is already slipping, and I know it will never be recreated," and Audrey Kim's "Of Salt and Small Talk," where the speaker says, "We are ... drowning in a vision we don't know how to keep, but we're too caught up in it to care..." The work in this issue ripples outward, making waves. They remind us, too, that writing in and of itself is a dialogue—and, as readers, we must dive into the waters, however turbulent they may be."

Grace Marie Liu, Co-EIC

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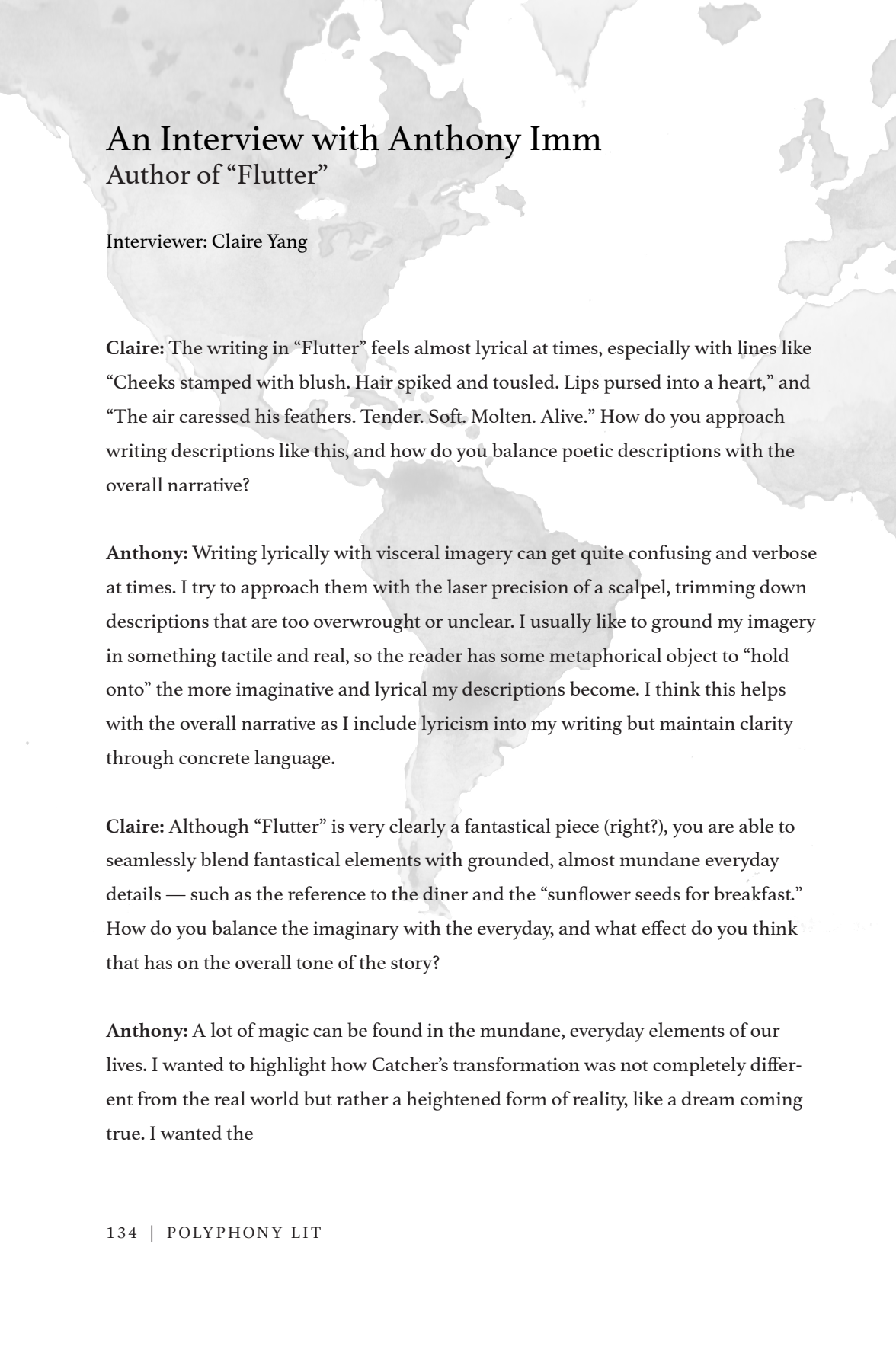
EDITORIAL PRAISE

A gorgeous, strong piece that opens up a slice of what it means to believe and what it means to live. We are immediately submerged in language and a scene that is almost thick – tangible and breathing. Carefully and sensitively crafted, this entire piece doesn't let down for a single moment, up until the end, where we are left with one of the strongest things a human knows: belief.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Du will graduate from Los Altos High School, in Los Altos, CA in 2026. When he's

not conducting math research or helping his brother train for chess competitions, he likes to write fiction and creative nonfiction stories. His work has been recognized at the national level by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards. In his free time, he also enjoys playing board games, hanging out with friends, and the peculiar feeling of calm and stillness that sometimes strikes on a humid summer afternoon.



An Interview with Anthony Imm

Author of “Flutter”

Interviewer: Claire Yang

Claire: The writing in “Flutter” feels almost lyrical at times, especially with lines like “Cheeks stamped with blush. Hair spiked and tousled. Lips pursed into a heart,” and “The air caressed his feathers. Tender. Soft. Molten. Alive.” How do you approach writing descriptions like this, and how do you balance poetic descriptions with the overall narrative?

Anthony: Writing lyrically with visceral imagery can get quite confusing and verbose at times. I try to approach them with the laser precision of a scalpel, trimming down descriptions that are too overwrought or unclear. I usually like to ground my imagery in something tactile and real, so the reader has some metaphorical object to “hold onto” the more imaginative and lyrical my descriptions become. I think this helps with the overall narrative as I include lyricism into my writing but maintain clarity through concrete language.

Claire: Although “Flutter” is very clearly a fantastical piece (right?), you are able to seamlessly blend fantastical elements with grounded, almost mundane everyday details — such as the reference to the diner and the “sunflower seeds for breakfast.” How do you balance the imaginary with the everyday, and what effect do you think that has on the overall tone of the story?

Anthony: A lot of magic can be found in the mundane, everyday elements of our lives. I wanted to highlight how *Catcher’s* transformation was not completely different from the real world but rather a heightened form of reality, like a dream coming true. I wanted the

realist elements to help the story toe the line of fantasy and reality, so the open interpretation can add another charming factor to the story's theme.

Claire: This story experiences a lot of complex emotions, from identity to transformation to loss and freedom. I'm curious as to how much of this reflects your own experiences or feelings, and how much of it is purely fictional?

Anthony: Some of the feelings the narrator experiences come from personal experiences. I've felt inadequate many times in my life, and as if I'm not meant to become bright and powerful like Catcher's transformation. I wanted readers to be able to both empathize with the narrator's feelings of isolation while being in awe with Catcher's evolution.

Claire: The final lines of the story show Catcher flying away, free. How do you, as the writer, interpret that final act of freedom, and what does it mean for Catcher's character arc and the narrator's future growth?

Anthony: I'm not entirely sure, to be honest. I never really thought about Catcher's growth beyond what's written on the page. Maybe he'll really become a bird of prey and dwell in the forests for the rest of his life. Maybe he'll use his wings to explore the world. Maybe he'll even come back to the narrator's family. The vague, open ending is to accentuate the fact that Catcher is now free, and when free, any avenue is possible.

Claire: At one point, the narrator says that "Catcher was never a human. I knew he was destined to be a bird." How does this idea of fate play into the larger theme of identity in the story?

Anthony: I wanted to explore identity as a byproduct of destiny, not self-selection. Catcher knew he was meant to be a bird, and his entire life revolved around that status quo. Fate is thus not a catalyst but a constant, a factor in his life that he can't control but



must accept. It's awesome that Catcher accepted this identity, but for anyone else, this kind of fate as a binding factor could be detrimental. I purposely wanted Catcher to be confident and truthful to his avian identity as a means of contrasting himself with the narrator, who still doesn't know who he is.

An Interview with Jonathan Du

Author of “Intersection”

Interviewer: Rowan Manley

Rowan: What inspired you to explore creative writing?

Jonathan: I was eight years old when my little brother was in his most fussy, time-consuming phase of being a baby, so my parents had their hands completely full. They decided to borrow books from the library to keep me entertained alone. Starting from that moment, I devoured book after book, from E.B. White’s *Stuart Little* and *Trumpet of the Swan* to Roald Dahl’s *Matilda* and *BFG*. As I got older, I moved on to books like *Swiss Family Robinson* and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, and eventually to short stories, like my personal favorite, “The Boy Upstairs” from *The New Yorker*.

Even from the earliest days, I would often pause while reading to imagine my own stories, and eventually, I found my way to creative writing in middle school. All of my stories have been inspired, to some extent, by my own experiences. In fact, this particular story is inspired by my trips to the Philippines, where I came to know the locals while installing my team’s solar vaccine refrigerators. In the remote village of Calawis, Antipolo, I learned of the active conflict in the Philippines (the NPA rebellion), and that there was a constant threat of rebel attacks on the village. The knowledge of this overt conflict between countrymen, along with the details I gathered through observation and conversation with locals in Antipolo, heavily inspired and influenced the direction of my story.

Rowan: This piece is filled with vivid and jarring descriptions. Do you consider elements like backstory, description, and internal thoughts critical for creative prose?



Jonathan: Yes, I think that all of these elements are very important to depict a compelling story; otherwise, my characters wouldn't feel believable and "alive" on the page. This is something I struggle with a lot, especially in this piece, as I tried to make each sentence come to life through backstory, description, and thoughts. Since the narrator of this story has just been shot and is dying, I had to balance the narrative of his slipping consciousness and jumbled thoughts while making each sentence burst with sensory detail.

Rowan: Emotional imagery is littered throughout "Intersection." How did the choice of first person prose impact the amount of emotion you were able to impart within the piece?

Jonathan: My first draft of this story was actually in third person, but it felt too narratively distant and not quite as personal, making it harder to directly express the narrator's state of mind through narration. In the end, I went with a first person perspective, which I felt made it easier to connect with the characters. I tried to impart emotion primarily through imagery and description.

Rowan: "Intersection" is a beautifully complex work of prose, especially considering its relatively short length. What was your process when writing "Intersection" and how do you think word limits impact the creative process?

Jonathan: My original draft of the story was about 2500 words, and I had to cut down the story to submit to *Polyphony Lit*. Initially, I thought that cutting material might detract from the impact from the story, but it actually made the message more compelling, as it forced me to reconsider which parts were truly important and meaningful to the story. I also spent a lot of time editing, rearranging, and rewriting, to make sure that the story flowed logically through the current moments and the narrator's past. The fact that it covers just one scene, probably a span of about ten minutes in the present, helped me to keep the overall story short.



Rowan: What message do you want readers to take away from “Intersection,” and do you think underlying messages are an important aspect of creative writing?

Jonathan: I think that writing definitely should have an underlying message, though not necessarily an easily-verbalized moral. In this story, I focused on my concern about the division in this country and the hatred that robs people of joy and potential futures. In my mind, I think that the narrator and Max could have had a happy and beautiful life together, but that possibility was stolen from them by one person’s hatred.

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 20 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 20 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 during May-July.

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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Our Process

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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About *Polyphony Lit*

Polyphony Lit (www.polyphonylit.org) is the global online literary platform for high school students. We invite 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. In addition, we offer three awards for excellence in writing through the Claudia Ann Seaman Awards for Young Writers. Since our founding in 2004, we've received submissions from students in 87 countries and 52 US states / territories. Our student editors have given feedback to every submission submission, over 21,000 and counting. *Polyphony Lit* is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization (2008), incorporated in the State of Illinois.

Poetry

Aschea Ng / Ashani Ahuja / Audrey Ho /
Cacelie Gooden / Elena Ferrari / Elijah
Ramli / Hannah Ahn / Kufre Daniel / Mica
Wang / Rebecca Yang / Rupkatha Basu /
Yuhan Zhu

CNF

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Anthony Imm / Jonathan Du / Katerina
Sutton / Roxane Turenne

Art / Design

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From the Editor

"It was a simple fear: drowning, though nothing in my life had ever given me a reason to be afraid. Even then, I wondered: how do you give way to the murky unknown? How can you trust that the water will catch you?

This issue embraces that surrender. It offers pieces that lean into the present, even as it slips through our fingers. Pieces that acknowledge the ephemeral, the stormy—and choose to wade in anyway.

We see this in Katerina Sutton's "Rehashed, Rerun, Rewound: "My grasp on this moment is already slipping, and I know it will never be recreated," and Audrey Kim's "Of Salt and Small Talk," where the speaker says, "We are ... drowning in a vision we don't know how to keep, but we're too caught up in it to care..." The work in this issue ripples outward, making waves. They remind us, too, that writing in and of itself is a dialogue—and, as readers, we must dive into the waters, however turbulent they may be."

Grace Marie Liu, Co-EIC

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