



09-25

ISSUE TWO: PLACE

Symphony At Stop 34

I ended another evening bitter, leaving the office building hours past when I'd planned to be home. The daily stress of work, of life, eating away at my very being. I loathed the idea of taking the bus home, of the time it would still take before I could hit my bed and start this all again tomorrow.

I ran across the streets, desperately hoping to catch the 8:15 bus, cursing as clouds dumped buckets of water from an angry sky. Pulling my coat over my head, I turned the corner as stop 34 comes into view. I stand across the street, waiting for a car to pass.

The bus stop glowed with an almost ethereal light; a stark contrast to the muted tones of the rainy evening. A lone figure sat there wearing chunky headphones that displaced their hair, seemingly lost in a world of their own. The rain poured down, beating the glass and the pavement around them, yet they remained unfazed, their face, serene and calm. The gentle movement of their hand was like that of a conductor leading an invisible orchestra. In that mundane setting illuminated by the cold blue light of a nearby sign, they had found their stage, their symphony, their home. It was a fleeting moment of beauty carved out of the ordinary. I watched briefly, in awe of the scene that somehow captivated me. Slowly the bus pulled up to the stop, its squeaking brakes cutting through the pitter patter of the rain. The conductor boarded, greeting the driver silently as they took their seat.

I gazed at stop 34, drenched to the bone, as the bus pulled away and waited a moment before taking the conductor's place on the bench. I breathed in deeply, exhaling the irritation that I'd been carrying from my day, listening closely to the rain. I sat silently thinking of the conductor who'd served as a reminder that peace and comfort can be found in the most unexpected places.

And I waited for the 8:45 bus.



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JOURNAL



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*“I visited many places,
Some of them quite
Exotic and far away,
But I always returned to myself.”*

— Dejan Stojanovic



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A Letter From The Editor

With a little bit of magic, we made it to our second issue. These writers have truly outdone themselves. This quarter's theme was 'Place,' and you will soon experience 'place' and what it means as identity, as a participatory state, and as a fragment of being in this world.

It had me reflecting on what 'place' means to me within these contexts. I have been lucky enough to experience many parts of the world and even live for long periods in some of its greatest cities. I have had the privilege to watch the sunrise over the meandering bend of the Thames on Richmond Hill in London. I have hopped in and out of jazz clubs on Frenchman Street under the full moon in New Orleans. And of course, I have held some of life's most precious and treacherous experiences on the same coin in Tacoma.

This issue highlights that 'place' is a liminal space, not a fixed one. Most everyone who wrote in wrote of 'place' in this way. 'Place' was always a *representation* of something, or someone, else. There is a great deal of sentimentality in this issue, but all of it is authentic. Almost all of it is political in one way or another.

So, dear reader, I ask you now: What does 'place' mean to you? Is it a physical space? An identity? A moment in time? Perhaps it is a fantasy made entirely of your own devices. Could it be a memory? I'd like to think that one or many of these pieces will help you on your journey back home or back to yourself or back to your place as a citizen of this globe we spin around on.



Me & Dad, 1999

Place, I think, for me, will always come back to how my identity is shaped by the community I exist in and the people I love. "There is no place like home," as they say, though home can be anywhere and everywhere all at once. Right now, my place is with my dad. Any day spent with him is not a moment wasted.

Sincerely,
Melanie Cole

the spine of STORIES

Words and Photo by Tieshka K. Smith

I am Germantown Avenue, the artery that pulses through centuries. From my dusty beginnings as a dusty path carved Lenape feet, to the cobblestones laid with care aside trolley tracks, I've been witness to it all. Dreams, despair, joy, and struggle-- they've all traveled my length, leaving traces in the grooves of my stones.

This moment here, where I cradle the weight of a man resting at the edge of Maplewood Mall, is just one of countless stories. I know him, though we've never spoken. He's one of many who have paused on my margins to think, to wait, to breathe.

The hat he wears, tilted slightly forward, shades his eyes, but I sense the weariness in the way he sits: His hips barely balanced on the cold cement post. His silence mirrors my own, though the years have taught me to speak in other ways.

I have carried carriages and Cadillacs, bicycles and footsteps, the laughter of children running late to school, and the sighs of elders walking home with heavy groceries. I've listened to sermons spilling from open church doors and the basslines of hip-hop thumping from passing cars.



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GERMANTOWN AV
N ARTERIAL S

Breakfast All Day

Steak / Hoagie

ATM

Welcome

JETSERV

I've felt protests shake my spine
and parades dance along my
surface. Each brick, each stretch of
asphalt, is a memory embedded in
me, stretching from Chesnut Hill to
Old City.

Across from this man, B&B Breakfast
& Lunch has its own story to tell. I've
known that building when it was
something else entirely, decades
ago. Its windows have held the
reflections of many like him--those
looking for a hot plate of food or a
bit of comfort.

It stands now as a quiet observer, its
neon "OPEN" sign flickering with
resilience, echoing the spirit of this
neighborhood.

To the south, I carry whispers of
independence, where
revolutionaries once walked my
length with ideas too bold for their
time. To the north, I rise toward
Wissahickon's embrace, where
trees hold secrets older than my
cobblestones. In Germantown, I am
the thread connecting generations
of shopkeepers and strikers, poets
and passerby, all of them marking
me with their lives.

And today, this man is part of my
story, too. His stillness holds a kind
of gravity. Perhaps he's waiting for
the 23 bus that will whisk him into
Center City. Or perhaps he's just
pausing, letting me cradle his
thoughts for a while. My
cobblestones beneath him
remember the sounds of the trolley
wheels sparking in the early 1900s
and the shouts of street vendors
hawking their goods. I've held up
horse-drawn carriages, heavy
trucks, and the soles of those
walking without a destination. I've
carried their burdens, even when
they didn't notice me.

And then, there's you. I feel your
weight lightly on me as you stand,
raising the lens. I hear the click of
your camera, capturing this
moment, this intersection of time
and place. You've walked my length
before, haven't you? Searching,
observing, trying to make sense of it
all. I see you, too, as part of my
endless procession of witnesses.

Dear OCEAN

BY COURTIE LEIGH

Dear Ocean,

I have a confession to make.

I know you're not the ocean. You're just a small pond on some property behind the trees that filled my lungs with childhood air. I know your waters hold no sharks, no crushing waves, or the capability of hosting hurricanes. Your drops of water only host the skipping stones and the ripples of air. Still, in my head, there are foggy memories of my young brother finding seashells by the white wooden bridge, one that was painted with age, then has surely caved in today.

The bridge is not the only thing that caved in, Ocean.

I'm sorry if this title belittles you; it's meant to lift you up. You were the grandest thing my little eyes could visit at the drop of a hat. I bragged to my playground pals, proudly announcing I spent every summer day at the ocean. In reality, Pawpaw took my hand and led me down the gravel path into the woods. We skipped rocks and watched the deer run behind the Amish family's house on a hill, their dotted doe skin reflected in you, a natural mirror. Pawpaw often rose from bed, sleep still sitting in his eyes, and asked if we wanted to visit you. My brother would yell, "Me! Me!" and I'd join in with excited laughs.

Everything is different now.

Eye rolling has replaced excited laughs. My brother's life has no room for skipping stones. I'm sure you're aware of the fact that Pawpaw doesn't rise like he used to. Age started knocking on his door, and he walked right in.

Ocean, I used to blame you for what happened to him. I'm sure you'll recall the last time we visited. The long walk back, sweat dripping from my Pawpaw's brow as the confusion set in. His mind began to unravel with each stone we skipped. I worried as we followed behind my Uncle's frantic car, all the way down to the

hospital. I wondered if you were worried too, if you were overcome with dread as you watched from the treeline, unable to follow and confused when he returned home, a quieter version of himself. Then I realized if you hadn't called to him that day, maybe he wouldn't have gotten sick. I got bitter.

Now I understand. It wasn't you, it was the heat. It's always the heat. This summer, last summer, and just another last week. This is why we don't visit anymore. I should go back, see you again, maybe mail you this letter. But Pawpaw can't skip stones anymore, or guide my brother and me along the trail, keeping his cane handy in case we run into snakes.

I still carry you with me. I hold the memories tight. I feel your breeze when I visit the white decaying house, taking comfort in your solemn greeting, beckoning, calling.

Thank you for still keeping watch over them even as I was bitter.

Ocean,
I love you,
so I let you go.

a legacy of tipping

JOHNNA PARKER

Date	Table	Guests	Server
			208102

Date	Table	Guests	Server
			208102

APPT-SOUP/SAL-ENTREE-VEG/POT-DESSERT-BEV

16/2 hrs
6 Chs R.
6 Chs Fuzer
3 hrs
3 jelly

Tax
Total

Thank You — Please Come Again

when i visit that diner on the outskirts of my small hometown—part restaurant, part market, part gas station—its front door lined with fresh watermelon and cantaloupe in the summer, poached deer-heads hanging from the walls, twenty-five-cent queen anne candies, and all-white waitresses, i think

about the Black restaurant workers and railroad porters, making zero dollars an hour in the wake of the civil war, relying on the tips of the people who never even wanted their labor to stop being “free” in the first place. the legacy of slavery must be built into those diner walls painted brick by painted brick. racism feeding capitalism like a gluttonous dog with fangs. on

the wall rests a painting that reminds me of the white house burning down in 1814; of the Black homes that were probably in flames just down the road when my grandmother was a child. find irony in the waitress calling my Black family and sweetheart, baby, honey, sweetie, darling, not at all unkindly, as she flinches from the possibility of any of our hands connecting with hers. setting footlong hotdogs onto the table, she breathes a sigh of relief, thanking god we hadn’t tainted her. funny that somehow we seem to have traded places despite Black workers still living in poverty, making half of the minimum wage. despite the fear and disgust on her face—the tables left unturned even though we fought for a seat.

a wednesday drive

RAJANI GUDLAVALLETI



Popping on the hazards, I stopped my car in front of a hydrant at Broadway and Eager. He was waiting in the usual spot, leaning against a railing at the corner entrance to the Park View apartments. Adorned in his quintessential crown of headphones with half a cigarette at the tip of his lips and eyes closed with a stolen nap. Dark blue windbreaker over a black hoodie, crisp jeans, and clean white sneakers. Work ID lanyard hanging out of his pocket, daring to fall to the sidewalk.

"Now, I know you're not planning to smoke that in my premium vehicle," I hollered after manually rolling the window of my cracked blue used Toyota. Brisk December air hit as I remembered loving living in Baltimore

meant dealing with the weather.

Sly let out a raspy baritone guffaw, "I know, I know, Rajani!" He stretched out the "i" at the end of my name like a DJ just popped on his jam: *ayyy*. He lightly landed in my car and rolled up the window. The smells of menthol and sandalwood circulated our small space. During these couple of years, roaming Maryland together, advocating for harm reduction policies, I had become accustomed to the ways Sly's presence opened my senses.

We snapped into our routine. "Now I know *you* have that strong-ass coffee. Giving *me* this mess this early. Rajani has *got* to have her coffee." I guffawed at him before taking a big swig. Sly

was keenly aware of what people consumed and what it did for them. We settled into our seats and started west along Eager, bumping every pothole these streets had to offer.

Passing the Latrobe Homes, a sprawl of low-rise public housing surrounded by grass and iron fencing, I thought of our friend: "We picking up Lawrence today, Sly?"

"Nah, Lawrence... he isn't feeling so hot."

I had spotted Lawrence the other day, trading hands with a young man by the Penn-North Metro Stop. Not an appropriate time for my loud hellos and banter. I was hoping to get eyes on him again since he hadn't come to work.

Unprompted, Sly offered, "Yeah, he's my boy. I got him." Lawrence and Sly were old friends who took good care of each other. I appreciated his loving confidence. The safety of community in his words.

After some vibing to KRS-One along the quiet streets toward downtown, Sly sighed, "I have some questions for these people today, Rajani. I got *lots* of questions."

"Oh! Pray tell?" I requested, with a dramatically silly flair.

Sly chuckled and raised his hands chest height to begin, "Cause I'm

thinking, right? People I know are still actively using. Heroin, fentanyl. I don't want them to die. All over the world, safe injection spots work. Excuse me-- overdose prevention centers." He corrected with a smile and an elbow toward my shoulder, showing he was practicing the talking points.

Pride was seeping from my pores. I loved days like this. When Sly was on one. We were a dynamite pair, fueling each other's confidence to be honest advocates for drug users. He continued with no signs of questions, as much as an understandable desire for people to listen. Sly described how overdose prevention centers--places where people can legally use drugs in hygienic privacy, with access to life-saving people, tools, and services--bring people inside, out of public spaces.

"*But* we aren't removing them from the community like these politicians go on talking about. Saying we are *cleaning* the streets. We ain't dirt! With OPCs, we are *creating* community."

I was practically jumping from my seat. Sly was in sermon mode, and I was trying very hard to maintain my driver's focus to keep us both safe. I allowed breath to honor his brilliance. His grief and frustration. Our community often vented together about policymakers' motives, even the ones who claimed to be on our side. Sly had been suspicious of motives to get drug users off the street. Our goal

was not to hide our loved ones who use drugs for the comfort of the privileged, but to carve a protected place in our shared community.

We continued our journey into the city's historic Mount Vernon neighborhood, covered in empty storefronts and weathered rainbow flags. Glancing up at my first solo apartment, a 450 square-foot studio I paid for with graduate student loan dollars, I drifted off to how lonely I felt, and I thought of how my father spent his days back in California when he didn't have a place to call home.

"Growing up," I had started speaking unconsciously, "I knew eviction and bankruptcy by eighteen. Our landlady would knock so loudly it scared me running into my bedroom. Once, she even came right in. It's like, we had a home, but we didn't have privacy. Privacy is so..." I flew away a bit, lost in memory.

Sly's voice snapped me back to the present. "Rajani, I didn't know all that about you. I guess I thought... with you going to Hopkins and all..." he drifted off, looking out the window. We had entered West Baltimore's wide streets and abandoned buildings. Groups of young folks were bundled up, leaning against walls and sitting on stoops, ensuring all their shadows were in sight.

The mention of Johns Hopkins University, a notoriously abusive

system in Black Baltimore often caused me to awkwardly recoil in education privilege guilt. I tried to return our conversation to dreaming of safer places. We found the vastness of West Baltimore instead. A pit grew in my stomach as anxiety stuck to my personal story sharing. I took in the empty rowhomes and sidewalks sprinkled with cocooned people, tired and cold. I re-focused on listening to the repetitive radio beats.

After some time, Sly broke the silence of my mind, "You hear from Benny Ali?"

I deeply exhaled, "Mr. Ali?" Benny's regal disposition led me to honorifics. "Sort of. I heard from Brooks that he had some medical procedures."

Sly sounded worried, "We just passed Benny's old spot and I was thinking on him."

We sat, quiet, lost in shared thoughts and hopes for our person. When he worked outreach with us, Mr. Ali often shared with complete strangers about squatting in abandoned rowhomes ("*abandominiums*," he would say) to use drugs privately or with trusted others. The stress and tension of getting caught by police was still in his muscles.

Sly opened up. "When using drugs outside," he paused, "it's beyond embarrassment. It is downright demoralizing. I nodded my head and released a loving sigh. We let the

steady music center our bodies as we each floated into our thoughts, feeling unified in our silence.

As we passed the woods and stone bridges of Leakin Park, I fixed my mind to solve the struggle for privacy and dignity. I dreamt of a place where people often treated patients or inmates were instead just seen and known as social beings. Amidst the forests of West Baltimore, my thoughts trailed towards the park's flowered gravestones and large wintered trees.

"It's scary how anonymous you can become," Sly mumbled in a way that both startled and warmed me, a reminder we were in a continued conversation.

"Like when I was out there, I wasn't a person, I wasn't nobody. But at the same time, I had no real privacy, man." He shook his head until his eyes opened, and he sat up.

My eyes were tearing up as I needed my head with my entire torso. "Society treats privacy as a privilege," I offered, "but we all deserve a place to do what we do with some dignity."

Sly added, "I had a place to be; I was lucky. But sometimes I didn't want my kids to walk up on me. I wanted to know, you know, we're a good family. We're good people. I was just going through some things.

I breathed and touched his arm,

hearing signals of his spin into a grief place. "Everyone deserves a safe place to be human," I affirmed as I gave his shoulder a squeeze and drove us out of the park into Woodlawn, a neighboring community both Baltimore and its own place. The tones and textures shifted around us as we passed single-family homes with car pads and paved walkways. Speeding by possibilities and histories.

"I appreciate you, Rajani," He took his palms up, "It's good to open up with each other. To know who we're fighting inside.

I smiled and nodded with tears at bay as we arrived. We circled the massive parking lot for conference signage, squinting to see the venue's concrete columns and chandeliers untouched since the 1980s. Parking. I thanked Sly for riding with me.

"Of course, Rajani! I got you."

"And I you, good sir," I said with a slight tip of an invisible hat.

We both chuckled at the silliness and deep sighed our way to work.

Sudikshaa Amar

FOR THE
REDWOODS
[after John Shoptaw]

For the exalted red-tailed and Cooper's hawks
and the coast redwoods, our saged elders
of the storm, aged & burdened,
bruised but uplifted by the prolonged fire seasons
you gently cradle the diaspora
that bears to witness your guardianship

You hold my skewed spine with your hardened roots,
each crest emerging from the woodchipped, dirt-laden concrete.
For, I know you're grieving your fallen siblings and kindred
across coastlines and continents.

For the lone purple foxglove and the shrub of armenian blackberries and the
slender-wooley marbles
holding your weight within your small cellulose tendrils

Abdomen sprawled from dead confier

Frail
exoskeleton beckons
sheilding away from
rising billows and screens.

For the goldenback ferns and the june grass,
your wings outstretched towards the beaming sun,
no matter the wreckage.

For the lthuriel's spear and hound's tongue,
where your wilight petals provide refuge for hatched larvae and ground beetles

For my milkweeds and weeping Pacific bleeding hearts

If it ever comes down to this, the road that
eventually leads to 680-S will persist like magnetic poles when
induced by electric current.
Raging like the toyon & yarrow roots
fighting like flooding asphalt deposits.

For it is a pleasure to look after my dear redwoods.

Adam was a butterfly
between a werewolf
and Reggie Jackson
in the lower school
Halloween parade

karner
BLUE
jason o'toole

We carried hand painted signs
to Guilderland Town Hall
Save The Karner Blue
they assured us some
would still exist in Ohio

and built their shopping mall
with a memorial
to dead butterflies
by the unstaffed
information desk



DAYJHA MCMILLAN

OCTOBER 11TH

2024

Onions browning. I hear them singing around like little Black girls at a park in the summer. I'm making jalapeño macaroni and cheese, and I'm high. I've just unpacked my veggie-sprawled canvas tote bag after what might have been one of the most beautiful Seattle days.

This morning, I woke up with my future, legally-bound partner. (We've talked

about marriage, I swear! I think I'll marry them in this lifetime.) Anyway, I woke up to the most perfect gray sky--the kind that makes you want to play hooky with your loved ones, watch matinees, and talk about the spectrum of humanhood.

Like clockwork:

Me: *opens eyes*

Them: *nuzzle, nuzzle, kiss, kiss*

Every morning, they ask me, "How were your dreams?" with big, beautiful brown eyes that could make the moon jealous. For the past week, I've been rudely awakened at 1:42 am by this alarm. It sounds like it's coming from outside. I don't know what it is, but it's made me paranoid--Googling things like, "Hearing alarm same time every day" and "What does it mean to hear the same alarm at the same time every day?" Yes, I'm woo-woo and honestly, too spooky for my own good.

At 11 am, I ate my favorite yogurt with my favorite granola (both were on sale!) and got ready to leave my apartment. I wore my black, 90s-inspired fluffy, fuzzy hat that I bought at a Value Village in 2016, and played my 'On Repeats' playlist on Spotify. "I Can Make It Better" by The Whispers began bumping in my AirPods, and I was entranced in my current 'on repeat' daydream--me in the 70s, at a gay club, doing 70s coke, which I imagine was pure as hell, grooving to this song with my love, big boisterous hair bouncing--

The light rail has been paused for five minutes at Stadium Station. Fifteen minutes later, we're instructed to get off due to a mechanical error.

This is CLASSIC Seattle bullshit. Our newly expanded, silly little speed train that's been under construction for months, causing our North-South city to halt in its very real tracks. I walked from Stadium Station to the International District, desperate to get to the ceramics studio. I received a scholarship to be a member here, which my woo-woo ass has linked to an omen, "We must really not be getting a job soon," because I only receive ceramic scholarships when I'm only the brink of unemployment. (More on that later--I have a whole conspiracy!)

As I walk, "Best I Ever Had" by Drake (I know...) comes on, and I'm back in my daydream world, my favorite place to exist. I go to one of my favorite bakeries in Seattle, Fuji, to get a drip coffee with cream and an azuki malasada (if you know, you know). I started creating at the studio shortly after. I listen to my favorite astrologer, Renee Sills of Embodied Astrology, and try not to think about the job I applied for on Sunday.

The weather is still perfect. Gray, mild, slightly warm--ideal for walking.

I text my high school best friend, Z, asking if I can visit them at work. They say yes! (Yay! I cold-called three people because I needed to be around friends.) After ceramics, I start the journey from the International District to Capitol Hill. (*Please, light rail, be working!*) It was working! I walk 17 minutes from the station, up the steep John Street hill toward 19th Ave E, where Z works. When I arrive and ask if they're working, two white ladies at the hostess stand look at me with sad, amused eyes and say,

"Oh, honey, they don't work here anymore. Can I get you a drink, though?"

HA. I walk out and text Z. "WHERE TF DO YOU WORK? I just went into your old job thinking you were there 🤡" They respond, telling me they work on 12th Ave E--7 (Seattle) blocks away. I get there 15 minutes later.

Z works at a high-end tapas bar and is maybe the cutest bartender/barista you've ever seen. If I had money, I'd spend it all tipping them. I ate a dish so divine: marinated pork-stuffed squid in chorizo tomato sauce. Utter perfection. I left their job feeling tipsy and full of verve. As I'm crossing the street toward Elliott Bay Books, I whip my head to the left and see a phenomenal sunset. The kind of sunset that makes people pull out their phones, hoping to capture just a fraction of its beauty. The kind that brings people together.

I love bookstores. I love that you can buy a book and keep it forever if you want. One of my dearest friends, also a writer, recommended two memoirs. I left Elliott Bay \$38 poorer with *Heavy* by Kiese Laymon and *Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls* by T Kira Madden. For the last four years, I've claimed that my book purchases are part of the "research" phase for writing my own book (whatever lies we gott tell ourselves, right?). Naturally, I'm giddy. It's been a perfect day, and it's only 8 pm. I decide to walk a couple of blocks further to say hi to a friend who works at a natural wine bar. Five minutes later, I arrive. They aren't there. I figure they must already be at the new bar they're opening--when the sudden urge to pee hits me.

Now here's where things get dicey.

Seattle is not a public restroom kind of place. You can't find a public bathroom unless you're in a park--and not every park, just some of them. (I wonder how they decide this.) I freeze, trying to figure out. WHERE and HOW I'll be able to relieve myself. I didn't want to spend more money. I'm *unemployed*, let's not forget. After sitting on Pike Street, far too long for my comfort, I made the big-girl decision to buy a teeeeeny bit of ice cream just to use the restroom. My wallet and I are definitely ready to go home.

On the 60 bus, I have another great idea: it's only 8:30 pm, so why not go to Beacon Hill Red Apple, the local boutique store and one of the last ones remaining, and grab supplies to make mac and cheese? I can get high! The bus stops on Beacon Ave S, and I get milk, cheese, and Pop-Tarts from the store before walking home. 9:10 pm, and I'm high, listening to my onions brown. They jump and sing in the pan like Black girls playing at a park in the summer. Today was a perfect day.



THE THUNDER SPIRIT

BY DOUGLAS THORNTON

Night time—the orange
clouds withhold oncoming rain;
afar the thunder
lingers to oblivion:
restless are the ways
that fulfill unspoken dreams
their lives amongst us,
as time that summons passing
as a startled bird
to wake us in the moonlight
of a winter sleep.

SOMETHING ABOUT BIG CITIES

BY JB POLK



There's something unsettling about big cities. "But it'll be easier here, where everything has no name, life is private, almost secret, and the entire damn place is just an enormous grid of streets and plazas," I reasoned as I crossed the street in front of the bus station.

I had just gotten off a bus from Columbus, Ohio, where I had stayed for barely a few hours, and was immediately overwhelmed by the crowds, skyscrapers, and constant noise. After Middlebury, population 1,054 (minus one now), the fast-paced rhythm made me feel small and insignificant.

As if it were issuing a warning. A threat, even. Everything feels amplified— sounds, smells, even people passing each other with the politeness of strangers. With a spiritual distance rather than a physical one, because nothing is truly physically distant in a city.

"Once you leave, you'll never come back," Mimaw Louise said to me as we said our goodbyes. "You'll find yourself taken in by the bustling city where folks don't say hi to one another, and the trees are nowhere to be found. No fresh air and hardly any water. It'll pull you in and never let you go."

She seemed to be right. Everywhere I looked, people were lost in their thoughts, wrapped in the privacy of their coats, eerily like ants scurrying around an anthill. They moved aimlessly from one place to another, rushing along set paths as if on rails. There was no clear purpose to their actions, at least none I could see, and the mechanical, unplanned movements disturbed my sense of order.

Because in Middlebury, every action has a purpose—people move only when they need to and with a specific goal: to fetch water, to cook, to get drunk at the bar, or to pray in the church. Even in their inactivity, there is intention—"work when you must, rest when you can," we say.

It's easy to tell seasons apart in Middlebury—by the smell of the fields or the scent of ripe fruit, by the winter silence, or the cheerful chatter of nest-building birds in spring. Here in the city, the only noticeable smell is the stench of petrol

fumes and dust, and the sounds range from blaring horns to the screeching of metal to the rustling of litter tumbling down the street.

Where I come from, color is important, whether it's the damp darkness of the soil before it's plowed or the sun's burnished glow. In the city, color doesn't matter much because everything is gray, brown, or nondescript. And despite tall buildings draped with lights, magnificent architecture, and advanced technology, everything seems pushed into decay and on the verge of collapse in a giant cloud of dust. I didn't care for the city, but my likes and dislikes carried little weight. I was doomed. I was stuck. I was...lost.

"I hope I'm wrong, and everything here has some intentionality, some purpose, just as the ants in the anthill do, but I cannot see it," I thought.

Anyway, there I was, far from home, even further from my past. Running away from Presbyterian Middlebury, population 1,054, where the idea of single motherhood at seventeen was frowned upon and where everyone knew everyone else's business. Worse – they had opinions. And they wanted to make them yours.

Now, in this bustling metropolis, I was just another face in the crowd, insignificant and anonymous. And everyone could stuff their opinion.

I started to walk, the bag with the few belongings, including Mimaw's photo, brushing against dozens of legs that strolled, dragged, hurried, or shuffled, seemingly indifferent to the turbulence surrounding them.

I was searching for the group home I'd heard offered support and resources for pregnant girls who could keep their babies and experience the joys and challenges of single motherhood. Or, if they prefer, place them for adoption. Alternatively, they might choose a more drastic solution...

It was meant to be a place where I could work out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. Without any rush, I'll figure it out at my own pace. Well, within reason, or more precisely, within the next six to seven months. Because it wasn't a matter of chance, I wasn't cruel or callous. But I had myself to think about. At seventeen, it was a tough decision to make—either way.

When I finally found the address, I was surprised. It had once been a fancy neighborhood, where all the splendor and glitter of a big urban center came alive. But the influx of immigrants from dozens of countries had transformed it into a vibrant mosaic of cultures. Extremes clashed, and shops and restaurants with strange names popped up everywhere: "Ling's Take-away," "Fatima's Bazaar," "L'Chayim Tours," and "Pasta de la Nonna," along with more familiar hamburger joints and finger-lickin'-good fried chicken— eight dollars for a full bucket.

A few remnants of past elegance still linger—mansions built by Texan oil tycoons or city bankers' turreted villas now turned into single-room flats for young office workers and shop clerks from the big department stores.

At last, I spotted the house, sandwiched between two crumbling buildings, set some thirty yards from the sidewalk. The street was secluded, perfect for a line of work involving teens who, as my Mimaw concisely said, "had a bun in the oven," lacked family support, and had to seek help elsewhere, maybe in a big, intimidating city just like have to do. The house was large, with a varnished door featuring a lion's head knocker and a big brass number 9. Curtains covered its windows for privacy. I set down my bag and knocked softly.

The sound of footsteps echoed inside. A moment later, the door creaked open slightly. A young girl peeked her face through the gap like a jack-in-the-box. "It's early. We are not open until ten," the words issued sibilantly from between her carmine lips.

"Wait!" I shouted, driven by a sudden surge of resolve. My anxiety was so intense that I almost stuck my foot between the door and the jamb.

"I was told..." I paused, blowing at a wayward strand of hair that had fallen onto my forehead.

The girl's almond eyes, wrapped in a mesh of black lashes, regarded me with undisguised curiosity.

"In trouble, are you?"

"In trouble sounds soooo much better than a bun in the oven," I laughed inwardly. Her voice carried a hint of a foreign accent, but it wasn't too strong, softened by years of living in the country. Most likely in this very same big, intimidating city. A sudden jab of panic, as sharp as an actual physical pain, stabbed at my stomach. Or maybe it was the life that was beginning to stir within me.

"What if they tell me to go away? Where will I go?" I thought with panic. After a moment of hesitation, the girl's face relaxed and adopted a determined look—no sign of doubt left. She sighed and swung the door wide open.

"Never mind. You'd better come in. We will first have a cup of tea and then see how to help you."

Suddenly, nothing felt unsettling about the big city anymore. It seemed that even in the hustle and bustle of urban life, you could find kind-hearted people. I was no longer alone. Nobody would judge me, even if they had opinions. I could finally let my guard down and be myself. I could take my time and decide what to do next without pressure. I could ignore expectations I couldn't meet or stop listening to opinions. "Thank you, big city," I murmured, taking a big gulp of my tea.

FROM THE MOTORWAY

by **Libby Walkup**

Photo by Paul Passing Through

The trees here are new, or my bleary, red-eyes are after deplaning at Gatwick in the early morning English mist. While my classmate slept through meals, leant forward, long blond hair fanning her arms and seatback tray, I drifted in and out of some state of delirious not-sleep, head lolling against the rest, mouth agape and dry. And now here, on this coach from London to Oxford, have I seen trees until now? Still leafless in early spring, they knot and twist as if reaching for the intermittent sun, like Michelangelo's Prisoners struggling to burst free from the stone and step into the light.





Jason Williamson CHILDHOOD HOME

Years of early Saturday mornings have me restless long before my alarm sounds. My feet itch for the feeling of pedals, even though I haven't ridden a bike in so very long. As an adult, I don't have to worry about the bakery being closed tomorrow, they are open every day in the US. But when I close my eyes, I can almost see the path again.

I used to be able to imagine it so clearly, but time has stripped much of that now. Hazy memories lead me down streets I have long forgotten the names of. The feeling of the wind in my hair as I fly down the hill, trees passing me by like old friends. It was the same path I took to get to school, but I can't remember the way anymore.

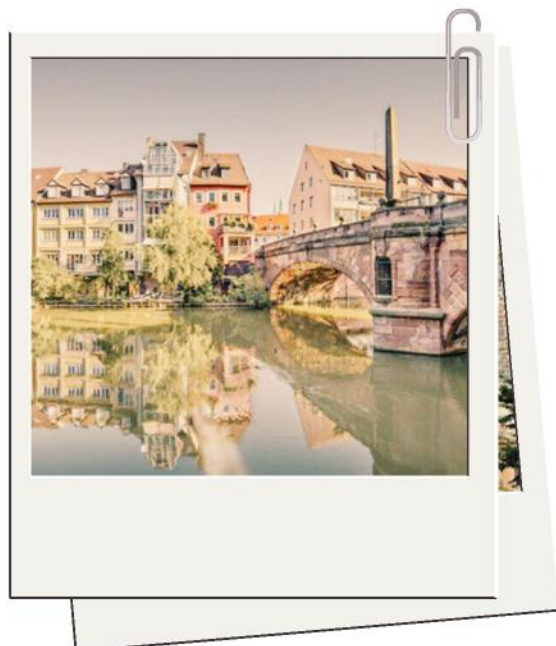
I know that the bakery in the same row of buildings as the magazine shop my Oma's friend owns. It's one of the few memories my childhood left me. There's also a Delicatessen for our lunch meat to have with bread. But I would be unable to tell you which order the three shops were in in their plaza.

Time has stripped so much of me.

But it couldn't take the way that place made me feel. The smell of good bread all around me. The joy of returning with my prize carefully tucked in the basket on the front of my bike. The sight of my Oma, tiny compared to the rest of the house, bustling around to make soft boiled eggs for the weekend treat. The family crammed together around the table while passing the bread basket.

Time has, and will, rob me of many memories.

But it can't ever erase the love that I feel for my childhood home. Even when nothing shows up when I close my eyes. I will always remember how it made me feel.



The Roots of IMMIGRANT PLANTS

by Tamoso Deep



A place is a restraint. It is where you are anchored and planted--unless, of course, you absolutely love it.

I look at the gray sky every time I ride the MRT in Dhaka. People here call it the *metro*, but my guitar instructor told me that the metros are usually underground. This is my city, where I was transplanted two years ago.

Before that, I lived in Kuala Lumpur, tired of walking on roads flooded with sunlight. The rays reflected off the blue glass walls of the towers around me. And I thought it was a triumph of capitalism. It was a cruel city, where you could never finish walking.

But that applies way more to

Singapore. My eyes were busy comparing how close the buildings were to the MRT line when I was there. I detested the Dhaka MRT route plan. When I briefly returned to Bangladesh, it seemed like this new MRT line--the first in the country--would knock off the balconies of at least a dozen buildings.

This is a city without towers. There are almost no skyscrapers at all. The tallest building can't compete with the tallest tree here. And the sky looks dirty, too.

My socialist spirit drains away every day. I'm still in disbelief that I'm here. My wallet is too dry now to afford a trip abroad. I feel stuck. And this feeling goes against my

beliefs in socialism, class struggle, and so on.

This is a city without swimming pools--almost. How long can you cherish it? Cherishing it is a full-time job, and we're doing it badly. We only pretend to cherish it because it makes good content--sentiments we can sell to the countrymen.

But a place is a restraint, almost like a house arrest or a quarantine. People grow from the seeds planted here, and here is where they remain--unless they excel at producing fruits good enough for other gardeners.

In those cases, they are transplanted to Canada, Malaysia, Australia, Dubai, or New Zealand.

The sky looks too dirty here. This city doesn't have a proper skyline. It's too dizzy to be photographed.

The MRT pillars now announce glory. They were covered with graffiti after a glorious revolution last year. But given the chance, the citizens of this country will escape. They will immigrate somewhere else. For now, they are fending for themselves.

They say people have roots. An immigrant has none. An immigrant plant has transplantable roots--strong enough to be replanted.

How do I define a place? I see it as a restraining order, a life sentence that forces people to rot in a broken city for a lifetime. I see it as the only room I have now, where I must live for months, or perhaps years, to come. I see it as a cage, the quintessential manifestation of claustrophobia.

I see it as the slaughterhouse where my wings were clipped, where I had to limit my dreams.

Because I chose not to be a hypocrite, baby!

I chose to speak the truth. I chose to do away with the glory of living through the bloodshed, and I survived anyway!

A place handcuffs you. A place keeps you rooted--for a minute, a few hours, or a lifetime.

I still mix up MRT and LRT. I have to Google to be sure which is which. But that's a relic of the past now, a fading memory of my life in other countries.

And I've decided to chase the mirage again. I will immigrate again--soon, as soon as life allows.

I have no roots to grow in this soil.

19 July 2025

tamozo deep



ODE TO A TEAL BACKPACK

Alex Dawson

Past the nosy iguanas on Isla Isabela and
into Ollantaytambo, city of rock and
remembering. These are the places
I've carried you.

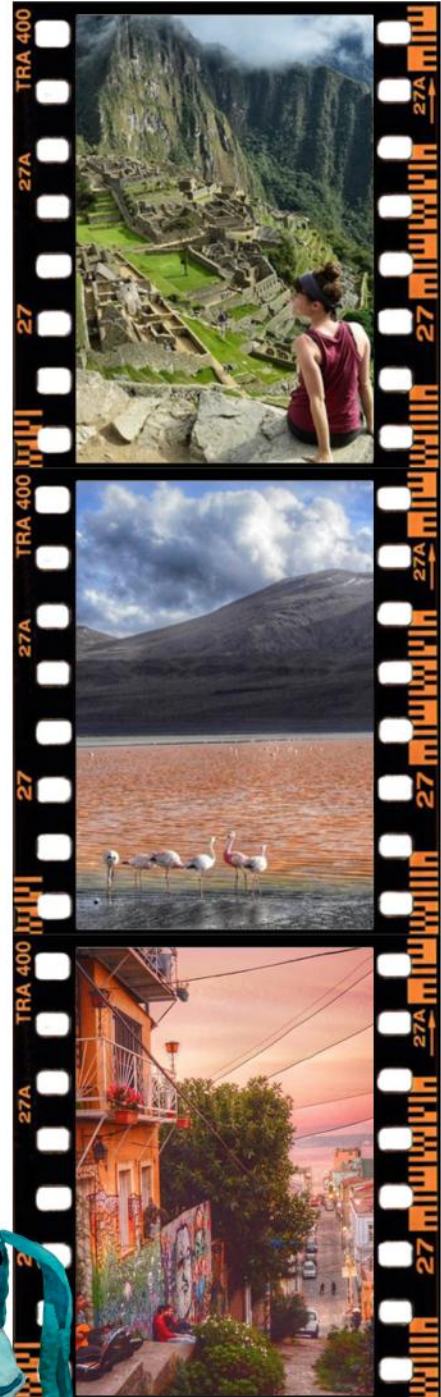
Onto that murderous mountain
night bus, winding its way
up to Cusco, while The Passion
of Christ played over and over
on that broken TV.
You were there, that moment
I realized God could
laugh, too.

Oh no!
I almost dropped you off the top
of Machu Picchu.
That is to say, I almost dropped myself,
because who wouldn't think
of jumping into clouds like that?

Do you remember
that citrus sunset in San Pedro?
That neon lagoon
with its civilization of flamingos?
My breath still catches in my throat
as I recall you trembling on my back,
in La Paz, the electric danger
of that city.

And in Valparaiso,
keeper of my artist heart,
did you lay down, next to me,
and did you dream?

All this is to say,
for all those many miles,
I don't know if I was the carrier,
or the carried.
All this is to say, I'm glad
we made it here,
to this small room,
this quiet exhale of a life.



*Photos courtesy
of Alex Dawson*

The sea in Malta wasn't like the one I knew. Not the heavy, slate-gray Puget Sound that had shaped my childhood in Tacoma—a sea that taught you how to be quiet, how to carry pain like driftwood in your coat pockets, how to apologize before you even knew what for, and how to wear grief like rain jackets. The Pacific was a sea of violent restraint. Of shadows and stillness. It didn't give. It endured. But the Mediterranean? The Mediterranean shimmered. It was eerily clear and bathwater warm.



I stood waist-deep, clinging to the ladder that connected the limestone-laden landscape to the sea, nervous. Unlike the Maltese, I had been raised in a place where you couldn't see your own feet underwater—where swimming meant bracing against cold, not slipping into warmth. Here, the sea lapped at my body with a terrifying familiarity, like it already knew my name. Which was, frankly, unnerving, because these days I find myself asking who I am now anyway?

Doctor of Psychology. Opera singer. Tacoma girl turned London scholar with a dissertation that had nearly broken me: "Sing Me to Myself: The Fragmentation and Reconstruction of Identity in Professional Vocalists." It had been a love letter and an autopsy to performers like me, whose voices served both as prayer and prison. I had studied them clinically, but I had bled right through the footnotes. I had studied singers who lost themselves in their roles, who confused applause with affection, who mistook their worth for how long they could hold a high note. I took care to speak of them in careful, academic language, like I wasn't one of them, too.

But I was. I've always been. I survived ethics committees, condescending reviewers, and men who called me "love" because calling me by my name was "a bit much considering the casual nature of the research." Casual, my ass. I hadn't taken a real vacation in years. So when my supervisor, who insisted on being called "Bob," said, "Why don't you go do something mad for a change?" and my therapist said, "You should try not solving anything for a while," I packed my bag, grabbed my husband, and booked a week in Malta.

I had written about traumas of every variety, studied them, wrestled with them like Jacob and the angel, and yet here I was, thirty-seven, with a nearly empty apartment back home and the vague suspicion that I had just spent years researching other people's pain to avoid touching my own. So now I stood in a borrowed swimsuit—because I would never swim in public back home on the edge of a limestone shore where knights once died, pirates once wept, and wars once came and went like summer storms.

I was here to swim.

To float.

To let go.

Truthfully, I had come to Malta not for answers, but for space. To not perform. To not explain. To see who I had become when no one was listening. I let go of the ladder and swam farther into the water than I ever had before. Past the sunburnt tourists. Past the children shrieking in a dozen languages. Past the noise of it all. And then, as though overcome, I dove.

Beneath the surface, everything softened. There are neither theory nor statistics down here. No performance anxiety. No need to prove that I still had perfect breath control or an elegantly structured paragraph. Just salt and lungs. Just light filtering through the water like a cathedral ceiling. I allowed myself to float back up to the surface. And for the first time in years, I did not feel watched.

Somewhere deeper, Dragut the Corsair had died, struck by cannonfire during the siege of 1565. I'd written about him in a footnote once, in a chapter about myth and power in opera plots and how we remember those we perceive as our enemies or competition. Now I floated above his grave, whispering, "Sorry, Dragut. Your story deserved a better editor." I laughed. The kind of laugh that slips out sideways. Not practiced. Not polite. Not calibrated for resonance. Just real. And then I found myself sobbing. Because sometimes healing comes like that-without a climax, without ceremony, without anyone noticing but the sea. I stayed there for a long time. Long enough for my fingers to wrinkle. Long enough for the sun to dry the worry from my shoulders. Long enough to feel like maybe I wasn't broken, just tired.

When I finally walked back up the limestone shore, an older woman with a crocheted umbrella handed me a biscuit and said in broken English, "You swam far." I nodded solemnly. "I think I needed to." That night, on my balcony, I held a small stone I had brought from Owen Beach in Tacoma. I carried it every day in my pocket through four years of coursework, dozens of countries, competitions, concerts, my marriage, and breakdowns. It had somehow anchored me while I was so far from home. Now, it felt heavy in my hand. I kissed it. Whispered, "I'm okay," and dropped it into the Mediterranean as an offering and an act of letting go (much overdue). The sea didn't answer. It didn't need to. The sea isn't sentimental. But it remembers. It doesn't demand perfection. Just presence. Just return.

I slept with salt on my skin and with the sensation of lightness on my chest, and if I dreamed, the sea dreamed with me.

Somewhere in the deep, a voice echoed back: "Well done, Doctor. You made it. You're here."

Contributor Bios



Alex Dawson

Alex Dawson is a writer, wildlife photographer and adult ESL teacher from Toronto. Her photo-poetry book "All these Living Things" landed at #2 in nature poetry on Amazon's Bestseller List. She has been published by "The Queen's Quarterly", "The Bombay Literary Magazine", "Gather Poets" and more. Her writing can be found on Instagram and Substack @alexdawcreates.



Amanda Eckstrom

Amanda Eckstrom is a research psychologist and an internationally acclaimed operatic soprano. After several enriching years in London, she returned to Seattle this year with her husband. An amateur essayist and poet, she channels her love of nature, song, and painting into vibrant creative expressions, enriching her multifaceted artistic and richly varied academic pursuits.



Courtie Leigh

Courtie Leigh is an English Studies major at Ball State University. Passionate about writing, Courtney explores human experiences and the things that keep her up at night. In her free time, you can find her sipping on coffee, puzzling, or rocking out with her 3 year old cat, Luna Lou.



Dayjah McMillan

Dayjha is a dreamer and schemer committed to the lifelong practice of playing as a healing endeavor. Leo Sun/Aquarius Moon--they strive to understand "balance" in their daily passions, a lover of everything sensuous, and textile owner of an exquisite book collection. She writes because her life depends on it.

Contributor Bios



Douglas Thornton

Douglas Thornton is an English teacher living in France. He has published two books of poetry (The Uninitiated, Woodland Poems) and a collection of prose (Seasons Of Mind) while currently maintaining a website:

www.fromapoet.com. You can also connect with him on Instagram **@from_a_poet**



Jason O'Toole

Jason O'Toole is Poet Laureate Emeritus of North Andover, MA. He serves on the advisory board of the New England Poetry Club, and as treasurer of the Independent Living Resource Center San Francisco. His newest collection is **The Strange Misgivings of the Sadly Gifted** (Dead Man's Press Ink).



Jason Williamson

Jason Williamson was born in Germany but currently resides in Tucson, Arizona. When he is not writing, he is making art of all kinds- from digital art, to drawing and watercolor. He also enjoys singing, costume design, and playing Dungeons & Dragons.



JB Polk

Polish by birth, a citizen of the world by choice. First story short-listed for the Irish Independent/Hennessy Awards, Ireland, 1996. Since she went back to writing in 2020, more than 150 of her stories, flash fiction, and non-fiction, have been accepted for publication.

Contributor Bios



Johnna Parker

Johnna Parker (she/her) is a Black poet/writer from North Carolina. She is a rising senior in college studying English and creative writing. Her poetry and flash fiction will be featured in the forthcoming Haunted Words Press Our Dearest Devotions Collection as well as the Spring 2025 issue of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's literary and arts magazine, the Coraddi. You can find her on Instagram @ [_johnna.nicole_](#) and on Substack @ [anxiousblkgirl](#).



Libby Walkup

Poet and artist, Libby Walkup, has been published in *pioneertown lit*, *Red Weather*, and *Fractured West*, among others. She's earned multiple master's degrees across two continents in creative writing, book arts, and library science. She writes and edits *unraveling*, *unmoored*, a publication of embodied practice and poetics.



Rajani Gudlavalleti

Rajani Gudlavalleti is a writer, facilitator, and organizer. She grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and grew into herself in Baltimore, Maryland. Rajani was selected as a creative nonfiction fellow with *Roots. Wounds. Words.* and the Gardarev Center. In 2025, they self-published their first book, *knots*: a collection.



Sudikshaa Amar

Sudikshaa Amar is a poet raised in the Bay Area and a student at UC Berkeley studying neuroscience and history. Their work has been published in *IAMB*, *LiveWire*, *Kinpaurak*, and *Wordgathering*. When not writing, they like to crochet and forage for mushrooms along East Bay oak and coast redwoods.

Contributor Bios



Tamoso Deep

Tamoso Deep is a self-identified poet and dreamer. In 2023, he founded 'Hungry Kim,' a cookie shop at the Cyberjaya campus of MMU, Malaysia, his alma mater. Currently, he works as a freelance writer and journalist in Bangladesh. Occasionally, he makes short films, too.



Tieshka K. Smith

Tieshka K. Smith is a Philadelphia-based writer and photographer whose work explores race, memory, and place. Through words and pixels, she centers Black life, joy, and resistance. She is the author of *Compositions of Black Joy* and a longtime documentarian of shifting urban landscapes.



Melanie Cole

Melanie Cole is a writer and poet from Tacoma, Washington. She has been writing for most of her life, but decided to bring her writing to light when a colleague encouraged her to submit a pitch to a local magazine. You can find Melanie's work in *Grit City Magazine*, *Dandelion Revolution Press*, on *The Mighty*, and upcoming in *PHIL Lit*.

