



**REBIRTHS:  
WINTER ISSUE**

ISSUE #1

*SPONSORED BY THE  
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S  
WRITING GUILD*

# REBIRTHS

**Pen&Quill    April 2024**

# EDITOR'S NOTE

It is with the utmost warmth and excitement that I present to you Pen&Quill's Winter Issue titled Rebirths!

Founded nearly a year ago in my bedroom, Pen&Quill emerged with one mission: to nurture and support emerging young writers. Writing and reading can be overlooked in daily life, but it is the foundation of human society, and P&Q aspires to instill within young writers a reverence and love for the craft; ultimately, pointing them towards a lifelong hobby or even profession!

As we embarked on our inaugural issue, our team wanted the theme to be special, and when we landed upon the word, "rebirth," we knew it was perfect. "Rebirth" embodies the hope that winter provides--the promise of renewal, of rebirth, because even as winter kills with its chill, it does not last forever.

Rather, it points to a new birth. In many ways, I find that this parallels the journey of young adulthood, where growth, exploration, self-discovery, and self-destruction converge. However, just as winter surrenders to the promise of spring, so too do the darkest chapters of our adolescence give way to hope.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all who contributed to this issue. P&Q received submissions from 9 different countries across 4 continents, as well as from 7 different U.S. states! It is my desire that this journal serves as an enduring testament to the diverse, nuanced perspectives our very youth have on the topic of rebirth.



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# Dreaming

**CLAUDIA WYSOCKY / NEW YORK, UNITED STATES**

Days without end and, to be honest, nights too,  
Honeyed with answers—I find my answers in you.  
You have cradled me as you would every other  
Pair taking solace in a sleepless bedroom—  
Unable to rest or be found at rest outside you.  
I lift my eyes to the night. You, I will see.  
And soon I will see you walking with me back home.  
Because you have become my home; my only one.  
Knowing my mind may be in turmoil—you hold me firm,  
And me, accustom to conquer the world, or die—  
“I am not going to let you die,” as I say it—  
Your eyes find me. I can see you swallow.  
We shall live. We shall live.  
If we stay here for long, we shall both grow old,  
Showing a wisdom in the face of all things—  
...Tonight I saw, in the dark and all undone,  
Your face. One moment you were not there,  
One moment I believed I heard you cry,  
And yet, it was in another place and time,  
You saw it too. And wondered,  
Was I lying?... Did I dream?  
The grass was golden; the horizon and the sky—

Unlatched, new, bare planets—or worlds.

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## Editor's Comment – Michelle Li

The ending of Wysocky's piece is a poignant blend of beautiful and homely, yet also heart wrenching. Despite the poem's swift pace, Wysocky expertly guides readers through abstract imaginations of faith to concrete courage. I found the use of simple language to convey such complex, profound feelings wonderful, offering readers a glimpse into emotions that appear larger than life.

# Pile of Parts

**OSKAR LEONARD / WIGAN, UNITED KINGDOM**

Rip my tongue from my throat  
and allow it to join the ground,  
fleshy red melding with concrete.  
Ply my teeth from my gums,  
one by one, and let them clatter  
down, dancing staccato.  
Pluck my eyes from my skull,  
blind me to life and breath,  
and force my soul to sing again.  
Turn me into a pile of parts  
on the pavement, able to  
create a whole, but unwilling.

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## Editor's Comment – Jamie Kim

A captivating poem about self-destruction and rebirth, Leonard's "Pile of Parts" lingered on my mind long after its last line. The imagery of ripping out one's own tongue and teeth is as captivating as it is eerie, and juxtaposed with the apparent yearning for wholeness adds a layer of complexity to the poem. Ultimately, the piece left me wondering about how much of ourselves must be destroyed and dismantled in the pursuit of renewal.

# i disappoint you again & drift into celestial reckoning

**CAILEY TIN / MANILA, PHILIPPINES**

Your voice is an astral lament, throat as parched as the lunar  
surface echoing across this cosmic expanse, & I wonder, in a  
hazy daze, wrapped in moonlit reverie, if you saw the pregnant moon  
outside & the way it hangs heavy like it carries the weight of

the universe's gifts. We once watched together how the stars gathered on the  
full moon to witness celestial birth. & now, your voice rings like  
a cosmic storm again, but your gaze has gentled; in your eyes, I picture the  
moonlit glow on a glassy lake, its waters blank & bleak. I wonder if

the sky was that empty when I was born—you once blamed only my  
horoscope instead of me, cursing the starless night because you thought  
that day you were carrying the universe's gift, too. You thought  
I deserved stars clustered around, bathing me in soft luminescence.

You told me that the day I was born—the day I kissed your right  
cheek & the world dimmed—fell on a waxing crescent moon, at



midnight, with such faint earthshine that the glow retreats into the shadows like the way I shrink in a universe where you assure me it's

not my fault, not my fault that I was born on a waxing crescent moon, one that symbolizes the beginning of a cycle, but in reality, you've given me too many chances & I've held onto too many beginnings. I only need one in this universe where time is on a

rewind, time is in reverse, & my head spins from how many thank yous & sorrys I could swallow down. In this universe, I un-apologize as the hollow bowl of food in front of me fills itself up. I un-eat everything & stop begging for forgiveness because no longer am I another

mouth to feed, no longer another body—re-entering infancy—to envelop in a delicate glow, like a celestial child. The older I get in the real world, the less I'm donned as one—the cosmic, stellar prodigy—I'm sorry, I am not as exceptional as I used to be & it had nothing to do with

the moon. In a reverse cosmos, I return to stardust, reflected by the lake in your eyes as its ripples pulse backward, unfolding vibrantly into the next wave, its dreariness dissolved. Here, I tell you I still want to re-mature into a radiant star, shape & reshape to saturate the void in your sky, even with just one twinkling light.

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## Editor's Comment – Lucy Pupolo

I loved this poem instantly. Tin's imagery surrounding the cosmos is so well-articulated and impressively consistent without becoming repetitive. What truly strikes me is the openness of its message, inviting different interpretations which add to its allure. The mood it sets is masterfully nuanced, somber at points but never despondent. I found the final three stanzas particularly enchanting, where the poem reverses in on itself and we spin back through time, once again at the mercy of the universe.

# changing seasons

**AIGERIM BIBOL / MARYLAND, UNITED STATES**

i. winter - hibernation

in the quiet of winter's grasp, love lies dormant  
icy breath & crystals of frost  
& moments frozen in shared solitude  
two lovers cocooned in frost-kissed silence  
the whispers like the hushed snowfall  
blanketing the world in crystalline secrets

ii. spring - awakening

thawing earth a fertile ground  
for fragrant zephyrs & tender shoots  
blossoming in delicate grace  
sun-kissed petals & dewdrops on leaves  
future unfolding like a flower in bloom  
glistening in the soft blush  
of a reborn world

iii. summer - passion

two souls dance in the sweltering heat  
beneath the golden blaze of a midsummer's kiss  
as the sun bows to their feverish entwining  
& in the cerulean sea of desire  
they navigate uncharted waves of ecstasy

languid days & sweat-soaked skin  
a wildfire that consumes reason  
leaving only the embers of passion's aftermath

iv. autumn - embrace  
the leaves cascade in a tapestry of farewell  
crimson & gold & amber  
a bittersweet sonnet to the fading sun  
in the brisk breeze, a whispered adieu  
love dissolves like shadows at dusk  
leaving only echoes of rustling winds

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## Editor's Comment – Michelle Li

Bibol portrayal of both the passion shared between two individuals and the enchanting cycle of the four seasons is truly extraordinary. The imagery throughout is nothing short of haltingly beautiful, and the parallel between the two lover's relationships and the gently, everchanging weather was undeniably brilliant, leaving me breathless.

# The Hue of Life

## MAYAS/COIMBATORE, INDIA

In a world where you see black and white, you experience your first colours when you meet your soulmate. Until that one fated encounter, the world you see would be painted in every hue of black, grey and white. And those who have experienced colour tried to describe it to the rest of the world but it seemed like a fantasy for those who have never met our other halves. It would always be an unreachable reality they brushed with only the tips of their fingers, but not quite reaching out.

It has been sixteen years, seven months and twenty-six days.

She waits each day, her eyes eagerly skipping over each person in the crowd, hoping for that fairytale experience where two pairs of eyes would lock onto each other while every hue and shade of every imaginable colour rushed in like a whoosh of wind. But as the days went by, her heart started losing the spark she kept alive inside her. She stopped looking around and kept her eyes trained on the ground she walked on. She stopped visiting the local bookstore at the corner of the street she religiously went to every day. She stopped living. Each day, she got up and existed for a reason she did not know of. Slowly, the cold steel grey she saw around her started seeping into her lungs, muting the vibrant tint of life.

But there was a seedling of flame in her that could not be stamped out, come hell or high water. She lifted her eyes from the harsh coldness of the concrete floor and looked straight ahead.

And in front of her, she saw her reflection in the tall, glass windows of a shop. She saw herself standing, slumped and lifeless. The sky seemed to bear down on her

with its heavy, dark clouds and the universe caved in on her, rendering her breathless.

Beneath the abundant walls she had built around herself, she saw a flicker of red in the distance living on. Somewhere miles away in her eyes, it called out to her in its siren song. Her eyes were a maze she wouldn't mind getting lost in.

It was gradual.

At first, it was the CDs on display that sang out to her. As she tilted her head like an inquisitive sparrow, a hue of iridescence snaked its way through the CD and before she knew it, every single one on display exploded with colours. It wasn't the way she imagined it would be. It was the kind of explosion that was slowed down; a slowed time-lapse of her world erupting with blue, lilac and green. The skies were an indescribable shade of clear blue she could stare at forever and never get tired of. She could see the ochre of the flower growing in the cracks of the pavement under her feet. And the most breathtaking of all, the CDs on display glittered like thousands of diamonds under the direct sun. And on them, a distorted reflection of herself waved back at her. She moved in a trace, shifting her gaze from each one as she held her breath. She dared not to breathe too hard, afraid that if she did, it would shatter this fragile dream. Time came to a standstill as she stood frozen in front of the vintage shop as pale snow drifted down from the skies and onto the earth, covering it in a blanket of sacred white.

All along, it had been her. She was her own soulmate, she realised. The moment she looked at herself, really looked, that was the moment she had fallen in love with herself all over again. It made her wonder where the love was concealed within her. She chose to believe that it had been there all along and that all it takes is one right word to unlock the sealed labyrinth of love within a person. All it takes is one tiny crack in the way you perceive to completely shatter the way you see the world forever.

The vibrant array of colours of the CDs danced in the single ray of sunlight peeking through the heavy, grey clouds. As if under a spell, she took one single step towards the shop. All it took was one more step into the shop and she was surrounded by the warm colours of the discs. As she glanced outside, she saw that the world outside wasn't as cold as before. The sharp lines and angles seemed to blur and soften around the edges, beckoning her outside to wrap her in life's embrace. At that second, she felt as if she had bigger things waiting for her at the end of the line. She wouldn't stop here. She wouldn't stop until she lived out all the colours of the world. Every shade, every hue, and every tint.

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## Editor's Comment – Claire Beeli

Koi weaves together compelling plot, vivid imagery, and poignant metaphor to create a truly lovely coming-of-age story. Her imagination constructs a fitting vehicle for relatable themes of freedom, passion, and the specific desire to experience as much as possible; it's a story every young person will relate to.

# I Don't Blame Icarus, I Too Missed the Sun

**ABIGAIL ROSE / VIRGINIA, UNITED STATES**

When you've been trapped in the dark for long enough, all you want is for the sunlight to fill you up. To drink it in until you start to glow. But it's easy to forget that the sun can still burn, and you can still drown. Sometimes you're so desperate for the opposite of what you've lived that you go too far in the other direction and find yourself back where you began. When you're starved of something for so long, it's easy to feast until you retch, and all the joy spills out, ruined, and leaving a bad taste in your mouth.

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## Editor's Comment – Jamie Kim

From Rose's title, I immediately found myself captivated by the piece. By utilizing the second-perspective narrative, Rose offered a refreshingly intimate, nuanced perspective on a well-known myth. The imagery of drinking the sun, of longing and desire, of eating until one retches, left me breathless, contemplating the extents of human desire.

# Mastectomy

**FAITH TALAMANTEZ / CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES**

One time I  
took a knife to my chest.  
Maybe I could do it, what  
my future husband feared I would.  
When blood started rolling down my  
chest, I grieved for him. My man  
would be so mad at his ugly  
bride who couldn't live  
in a house with mirrors  
because she kept  
banging her head  
against them.  
I am now  
mistaken for  
a man. I love it,  
when he's afraid of me.  
They told me, this is what  
insecurity will do to you. A girl  
is without her body now because she  
never wanted what it gave her. This is  
what it means to take your life into your  
own hands. My tits are gone. Now this  
is what it feels like to give up the things  
that you were told made you a woman.  
I let him drown in the blood that spilled



from my flat chest and I let myself  
know what it feels like to be an ugly  
woman. One who can understand why  
witches are always insane women  
who eat their children.

I told him to go  
to hell, and he  
just clung  
to me.

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## Editor's Comment – Jamie Kim

Talamantez's "Mastectomy" commands attention from the very first line, whether it's the boldness of form or the hauntingly raw imagery. The poem examines the internal struggle between personal identity and social expectations, each line seeping with emotion. A captivating reflection on womanhood, autonomy, and identity, Talamantez's writing is undeniably visceral and powerful.

# An Ode to Ulwandle

**GABRIELLA LOPES / SOMERSET WEST, SOUTH  
AFRICA**

My Ulwandle\*, oh how you dance;  
You stir your silk cloak and  
lay down treasures at my feet,  
tales you bring through  
whispers and trinkets  
you kiss my neck—  
My Ulwandle, oh how you dance;  
in your dark heart, a twisted affair,  
you leap into the depths; when I stretch  
I reach for you and you toss me out  
the cuts you leave at my ankles  
you dampen my soul  
My Ulwandle, oh how you dance  
in this grotesque ballet, a tragic trance  
I, the Land, caught in love,  
I wish to explore your being  
my creatures cry a forbidden plea  
for you to spare my heart—  
“I will suffocate you,” you tell me

\*Ulwandle means “Ocean” in Xhosa, an indigenous South African language

your voice quivers.  
“As will I,” I respond  
meek, a confession.  
Oh, how you dance—

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## Editor's Comment – Michelle Li

The brevity of Lopes's language is striking, perfectly balancing concision and richness of meaning. The repetition used throughout the piece was executed with perfection, and left me sentimental for a place I've never been. Through the poem's examination of the destructive relationship between land and water, I see Lopes grappling with his personal feelings for Ulwandle, navigating themes of cultural significance, beauty, and danger.

# Jona and the Grim Reaper

**YALE COOPERSMITH / NEW YORK, UNITED STATES**

Jona woke to find the Grim Reaper floating behind her. She thought that she must be dreaming. Her dreams had been weird since lockdown began a month ago. Hadn't she just read an article about how people were reporting unusually vivid dreams? She decided this had to be it. Considering the bright, sunny Saturday morning, she figured she could go back to sleep for a bit and let her mind work itself out. But when she woke up, the Reaper was still there. She sighed, scrubbed her hand across her face, and sighed; she didn't have time for this.

"I know people are dealing with weird mental breaks because of the isolation, but this is ridiculous! This thing is not even scary!" she muttered as she got out of bed, hauled herself to the bathroom, and stuck her toothbrush in her mouth. She'd made sure to remember to brush her teeth every morning since lockdown began, as her mom somehow always knew when she hadn't brushed. Maybe moms had telepathy. She then got on proper clothes, and dragged her computer out to the kitchen table.

She heated water on the stove for a brunch of boiled eggs while answering some emails; during quarantine, more people needed help with computer glitches than ever. The Grim Reaper still floated behind her, more like a kid's balloon toy than a specter of death. It didn't scare her. It didn't scare her as she continued to answer emails, or when she ate her breakfast of boiled eggs, or during the rest of her day. It didn't even scare her as she turned off the lights, and tucked herself into bed.

The fear got her when she checked the news. Jona tried to stay off the internet during the day, opting for books she had always meant to read, or TV shows friends

raved about endlessly. But at the end of the day, in the lonely darkness of her room, she gave in to the urge to see what was happening in the world beyond the walls of her apartment. The picture wasn't pretty: 23,000 deaths, 600,000 confirmed cases. Images of bodies in white trash bags being piled on top of each other, driven to funeral homes to be cremated. Nurses caught on camera in hazmat suits, their tears staining the plastic inside their face shields. It was gruesome, downright biblical.

For some reason, Jona thought of Noah's Ark, the waters swallowing the whole wicked world. Hadn't God sent a dove with an olive branch as a symbol of his promise to never kill off humanity again? To Jona, that promise had been snapped in half across the world's knee. It felt like the world was ending, that this virus would be the thing that killed her. Jona tore her face away from her phone, her heart racing. In a moment of horrific judgment, she chose to look back at the specter of death following her. How do you describe death? Some people think of worms burrowing through dirt and flesh. Others think of a gush of warm, red blood and sharp teeth. Yet others see the frenzy of an ICU, and the haunting tone of a flatlining heart monitor following it.

Jona couldn't articulate what she saw, but she knew it was death incarnate. People don't like to confront their mortality for a reason. The moment you understand just how fallible your entire existence is, you feel like you could be taken out at any moment. You could eat a nice breakfast, or you could choke on a boiled egg and die because you're all alone or with people who don't know CPR. You could be walking around town, and die suddenly from an imperceptible heart murmur that no one found until it was too late. You could feel a soreness in your chest and develop a small cough, and find out you have untreatable lung cancer. There are so many ways to die.

Until the pandemic, Jona had felt mildly invincible. Her job as a trade-school trained computer programmer felt fulfilling and intellectually stimulating. She enjoyed good health; she exercised every day, and tried her level best to eat right. She could spend a night out with friends and not feel bored. She had a nice apartment in the heart of her city's downtown. Life had worked out well for her. And yet, her life would never again be able to stave off the knowledge of her inevitable death newly lodged in her DNA.

She tried to suppress a scream, and failed. She looked at the Grim Reaper again, to see if maybe looking at it would get rid of the panic in her soul. It didn't. The Reaper smiled grotesquely, and beckoned her towards it with a bony finger. In that

moment, Jona knew: if she walked towards that Reaper, then her life would end. She didn't know how to explain how she knew, but she knew the same way every small forest animal knows a mountain lion may be waiting in the bushes. With that, Jona ran out of the room, pillow in hand, into her bathroom. She locked the door, and turned on all the lights. The Grim Reaper still floated behind her, and she could still feel its presence with her eyes closed. But the light made it seem less real. Jona fell asleep in the bathtub, clutching a small rubber duck tightly like a talisman that could ward away death.

The next morning, she couldn't pretend nothing happened. The fear still coursed through her, unmoved by sleep. She got up and brushed her teeth vigorously; if she missed a spot, she could get a cavity which could turn into an infection which could kill her if it was a strain that couldn't be treated with antibiotics. She then heated up water on the stove for boiled eggs, and took care to place each egg into the water carefully; a splash of water could burn her skin which could lead to the burnt skin becoming infected which could turn into a whole body infection which could turn into sepsis which could kill her. When eating her eggs, Jona mashed them with a fork; if she took too big of a bite, she could choke on it and pass out alone in her apartment, which would mean assured death. She spent the rest of her day afraid.

Same as yesterday, she answered emails, watched TV, and read books. But now, with the threat of death literally looming over her, she went through her day with an abundance of caution. When she went to bed that night, she spent hours staring at the horrifying news sweeping across her phone screen. She could practically feel the Reapers's breath on the back of her neck with how close it got to her during those fear-filled nighttime hours.

Life, however fragile it now seemed to Jona, continued. The early spring months of the quarantine melted away into summer. Higher death counts accompanied higher temperatures, which she spent with the windows open and the AC on full blast, watching TikToks on her phone. Summer turned into a crisp fall, full of more death and more movies and more mashing of eggs. She watched the autumn leaves fall from her window. She knew other people went out on walks every once in a while, or drove out to the countryside. Jona hadn't left her home since the Grim Reaper started haunting her. She took enquiries over Zoom, people asking about their buggy laptops from their obviously cracked phones. Her conversations consisted of an endless chorus of, hello? are you there? can you hear me? Sometimes Jona stared out her apartment window, and wondered if she wanted anyone besides the Reaper to be able to hear her again.

Then winter arrived, a flurry of cold rain knocking against the apartment windows. She watched old Christmas movies, and wondered how the characters didn't die of frostbite; none of their clothes seemed thick enough for the technicolor flurries on-screen. She checked her phone, and felt the Reaper back up a bit, trying to get away from her sheer joy and relief: there were Covid vaccines, and they would be available to the public in a matter of months. She would have jumped for joy in that moment, but was afraid she would bump her head on the low apartment ceiling which could lead to a concussion which untreated could lead to death. Spring came back around like a dog hiding its tail between its legs. She got her vaccine early April, and slumped onto her sofa in utter relief. She glanced up, wondering if the Grim Reaper would leave her alone now; there was almost no chance she was going to die of Covid. And yet, there it was, floating as menacingly as it had the last April it first appeared. She groaned, more annoyed than afraid at that point.

For Jona, fear had become a familiar fixture of her life. Fear lived in her heart, but the raw wound of that fear had scabbed over. She thought about the many ways she could die every moment of the day, but it had become a normal mental checklist to go over while making her breakfast of mashed boiled eggs. The fear hadn't changed in the last year; she had. She hosted Zooms while thinking about death by electrocution. She watched people go out into the spring afternoon, laughing, and thought about death by allergic reaction from bee-stings. Summer came, and she slathered her skin in sunscreen, thinking about sunburn and melanoma. When she went into clients' homes to fix their computers, she didn't speak to them; she kept her lips sealed as tightly as her mask.

Fall came and left, winter blew in with cold wind, snow, and coughs from every direction. Her family was hosting a gathering for the holidays for the first time since the pandemic began, but Jona declined attending. She thought about choking on turkey legs or getting frostbite from a snowball thrown by a younger cousin or getting electrocuted from a faulty TV she was asked to fix even though she was a computer programmer and not a TV technician. She instead opted for a Christmas spent alone with the single gift she'd bought for herself: a toy Grim Reaper statue. She thought the specter might appreciate some company, but felt too afraid to look backward and find out.

New Year's Eve arrived. Jona sat on the couch with a cup of sparkling water, sipped through a straw to prevent choking. She left a half-filled glass on the side table, in the event that Grim Reapers liked sparkling water as a New Year's Eve treat. She had taken to talking to the thing; she had no one else to talk to anymore.

“So, happy new year, huh? I mean, is it so happy though? It’s just another year full of chances to die, isn’t it?” The Grim Reaper didn’t respond; he never did. She drank her water in silence, and watched the ball drop in Times Square on her TV screen. She looked and saw happy, masked people celebrating. A feeling bubbled inside her, different from fear but not far from it. She tried to pin it down: Despair? Loneliness? A thought came from the feeling: touch the Reaper. Touch it. There’s no point not to. You won’t be afraid of dying anymore.

Jona turned around, and stared at the Reaper. She felt like she’d had wine rather than bubbly water; the room seemed to spin, and then float away. She was surrounded by darkness. There was a swirling vortex at the heart of the Reaper, a black hole where a person’s heart would be. She placed her finger just above it; it felt warm, inviting. Irresistible. Then, a mistake on her part: she looked up at the Grim Reaper’s face. She saw the same grotesque smile she’d seen that long ago night in April of 2020. She realized what she was about to do; she screamed. The darkness abated, the room came back into focus, Jona panted on the sofa. Auld Lang Syne played in the background as she started to sob.

She woke up the next morning on the couch, her whole body aching. She looked around, and saw the Grim Reaper floating nearby as always. Jona had come to disregard its presence; it had become background buzz in her life. But in the morning light of a new year, it once again seemed as monstrous as it had during the quarantine spring. She decided that morning she was going to have boiled eggs. She still placed the eggs into the water with care, but tried to not worry about what would happen if she got boiling water on her hands. When the eggs were done, she set them on a plate, and ate them one exquisite, unmashed bite at a time. The gush of yolk in her mouth felt like an awakening; how had she stopped doing this? She still made sure to not take huge bites, but she took bites. She watched a nature documentary, and marveled at the landscapes instead of wondering what lethal viruses lurked amid the trees. She spent a whole day trying not to worry, and she felt...happier. It surprised Jona how much nicer a day could be without thinking about death. She’d nearly forgotten.

That night, when she opened her phone to scroll the news, she clicked on an article about a recent medical advancement; it filled her with hope. Then, without her consent, she felt herself click out of that article, and look at coronavirus death counts. She hadn’t meant to do that...but knew what did. She glared at the Grim Reaper, floating behind her in the dark. Jona felt tired of the worry, tired of the fear, tired of what death was doing to her. She knew she was going to die. But right now?



Right now, Jona wanted to live. Without thinking, she punched the Grim Reaper in the face. Rather than cause her instantaneous death, the punch connected with the Reaper, and made it disappear in a small, black cloud of smoke. Jona blinked in shock, and said: "That was easier than I thought..." Her whole body relaxed as she fell into a dreamless sleep.

The next morning, after breakfast, Jona rummaged through her closet to find her old running shoes. They were dusty from disuse, but still wearable. Jona swore they'd never be dusty again. She pulled them on, laced them up, adjusted her mask, and walked out the door. She walked to a local park she hadn't visited in years. She found a spot far away from other people, and took off her mask. She lay down in the snow and listened to the sound of families playing together. She listened, and she breathed, her lungs whooshing in and out. She breathed, and basked in the feeling of being alive.

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## Editor's Comment – Claire Beeli

This piece exemplifies why I love magical realism so much. It captures the fantastic and leaves it like a trapped bird in the reader's hands—dark, alive, and utterly at odds with everything we're used to. Jona's characterization is emblematic of COVID-19's elusive, frightening consequences becomes both subtly terrifying and, as the story blossoms, hopeful. A stellar example of COVID-19-based literature done well.

# Labor Day Weekend

**ILA PROUTY / NEW YORK, UNITED STATES**

The last strand of summer clings like a bead of saliva to my lip before snapping. Warm days course through skinned palms like the river upstate where we hunched in the mud, clay-smothered fingers cupping thrashing tadpoles, the earth indented with our weight.

August is a wine-red scab torn off too early. I stain September through a gaffed hole in my chest, grasping seconds like handfuls of melting snow.

There's a universe out there where I followed them off the breakwall, where the Atlantic swallowed me up like a rain droplet, where the oscillating cold met my bones like a traffic collision & my ribcage unclenched for the first time in five years.

But in this universe I baked alone on the rocks. I held my tongue & my breath like my mother's riesling as the speedbumps pummeled my carnival goldfish like a body in the surf. I fed it pellets too big for its throat & watched it slam into the glass knowing I could never give it a good life.

A wasted summer lingers in the charred tops of my hands, burrowed in my mosquito bites. It ends the way the sun sets behind the trees. You don't realize it's

night until the pines are black silhouettes & his eyes are dark holes gouged out by moonlight. I cling to a sliver of waning sun, white-knuckled and begging.

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## Editor's Comment – Neda Ravandi

Prouty writes with an undeniable vibrancy that evokes potent summer time feeling: hot and fresh and bittersweet. The poem's use metaphor and symbolism was beautiful in its specificity: summer like a strand of saliva, august like a wine-red scab. Each phrase is crafted with a keen beauty and sharpness, and I felt fully pulled into her summery, labor-day world, the last sentence stealing my breath.

# Love in the Universe

**CLAUDIA WYSOCKY / NEW YORK, UNITED  
STATES**

Love is a fissure in the universe;  
It eats at the fabric that holds the parts  
In any form together. It shatters them in two.

It is a Peculiar Sin, what destroys.  
The love said to be true is found in our own fear of ourselves,  
which uses us up and empties out our worlds.  
Things are not at all how they appear,  
and where were we before we were?  
Love and Death—a pair of strange and dazzling lights.

Though we have split, none but my eyes see it—  
For if we once were one, must each be dead.  
An unparalleled, brand-new chemistry that  
reaches out from the night and clings to me,  
And as long as I am here, I feel it say—  
return to me. Return to me.  
I am not entirely, yet consumed by you.

I have survived you, have escaped you—  
continually.

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## Editor's Comment – Michelle Li

A poem with a treasure of an ending! Wysocky's "Love in the Universe" stands out as a powerful exploration of life and death, offering solace amidst tragedy. The descriptions of love and loss are poignant, and Wysocky's use of repetition proves powerful, ultimately, calling upon readers to change their perspective and find love within themselves.

# Summer Reborn

**AVA MARIBELLE / PHILIPPINES**

I gather stores of seasons into attic rooms  
Spring rains and winter glooms  
And dusty, choked remains of leaves pockmarked by fall.  
If you loved me at all  
(And I loved you, though that can be assumed)  
I'd send to you exhumed  
The nectar of that summer you remember sweet,  
To run with wet, bare feet  
Among the dewy gardens of the universe  
Before our Eden's curse.  
A flutter, too, of geese and their inconstant wings,  
The change that autumn brings,  
Alone among the winds, the pumpkins bursting up.  
This brimming, blessed cup  
Of earth's eternal circle I would hand to you—  
Each purple, each sky's blue,  
Each hill that clothes itself in white, then gold and green,  
Each raindrop's glowing sheen—  
All this and more I'd give you over time, just slow  
Enough for us to know

That in the winter of our lives a summer could  
Remain untouched. We would  
Unwrap it slow and lose our wrinkles in its light  
Until life left our sight.

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## Editor's Comment – Lucy Pupolo

Maribelle's *Summer Reborn* masterfully depicts the delicate interplay between external transitions and the internal constant. The reader is entrenched in paradisiacal descriptions that transcend the page, yet simultaneously grounded in this all too real sense of bittersweet devotion. It's a work through which all readers can find themselves — or, if they so wish, get lost in.

# CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

## **Claudia Wysocky**

Claudia Wysocky, a Polish poet based now in New York, is known for her ability to capture the beauty of life through rich descriptions in her writing. She firmly believes that art has the potential to inspire positive change. With over five years of experience in fiction writing, Claudia has had her poems published in local newspapers and magazines. For her, writing is an endless journey and a powerful source of motivation.

## **Oskar Leonard**

Oskar Leonard is a trans author and poet from the UK. He has written fourteen books: six novels, five poetry collections, two novellas and a short story collection. His short works have been featured in publications such as *The Meadowlark Review*, *The Bibliopunk Lit Zine* and *Juven*. He is studying a BA in English Literature with Creative Writing at Edge Hill University.

## **Cailey Tin**

Cailey Tin is a columnist, poetry editor, and/or podcast host for multiple publications. Also working (or procrastinating) on pieces in piano, journalism, and debate speeches, she earned a Pushcart nomination at 13 and recognition from *Ice Lolly Review*, *Fairfield Scribes*, and more. Find her publications on Instagram @itscaileynotkylie.



## **Aigerim Bibol**

Aigerim Bibol is a high school junior from the DC area. She edits for Polyphony Lit Magazine, BreakBread Magazine, and more. Her work is published in Iris Youth Magazine, SeaGlass Literary, and TeenInk Magazine, among others. When she's not reading or writing, she can be found singing along to Taylor Swift, binge-watching Gilmore Girls, and drinking copious amounts of coffee.

## **Maya S.**

Maya is a seventeen year old aspiring journalist and writer from India. She studies in grade twelve and has a passion for reading books which range from obscure Russian literature to contemporary YA novels. She enjoys receiving constructive criticism and is constantly aiming to create a better version of herself and her work.

## **Abigail Rose**

Abigail Rose is an 18 year old writer whose work has been featured in multiple poetry anthologies. Her first independent collection of poetry, *Poem for a Stranger*, is available on Amazon. She hopes to bring light to the parts of mental health that are infrequently spoken about, and to connect with others.

## **Faith Talamantez**

Faith Talamantez is in their third year at UC Santa Barbara, where she studies Writing and Literature. She specializes in poetry and satire, and is currently working on writing a play titled, "How to Say Bowl in Spanish". Their writing can be found in the satire section of the Daily Nexus, where she works as an editor.

## **Gabriella Lopes,**

Gabriella Lopes is a 17-year-old student in her final year of High School. She dedicates a substantial amount of her time to studying literature, poetry and music. She plays the flute and thoroughly enjoys writing. She also dabbles a bit in photography, design and video editing. She has also assisted in working as a backstage and tech crew for drama productions. Some of her favourite music artists are Mazzy Star, The Cure, Alice Phoebe Lou and Kendrick Lamar.

## **Yale Coopersmith**

Yale Coopersmith, a sophomore at Bard College's Written Arts program, is the founder of two campus literary magazines, Doorstep Magazine and Fantastic Tales. She has won awards for her writing through NYCMidnight's Short Story Contest and won the International Thespian Society's California Playworks Contest. For more of her writing, go to @yalecoopersmithwrites on Tumblr.com.

## **Ila Prouty**

Ila Prouty is a high school student and creative writer from New York City who enjoys knitting, science fiction novels, classical music, and baking.

## **Ava Pardue**

Ava Pardue is a poet currently living in Manila, Philippines. She has been published in Ekstasis Magazine, received an honorable mention from Black Fox Literary Magazine, and has a musical collaboration forthcoming with Dr. J.D. Frizzel. Her writing focuses on themes of hope and victory over darkness.