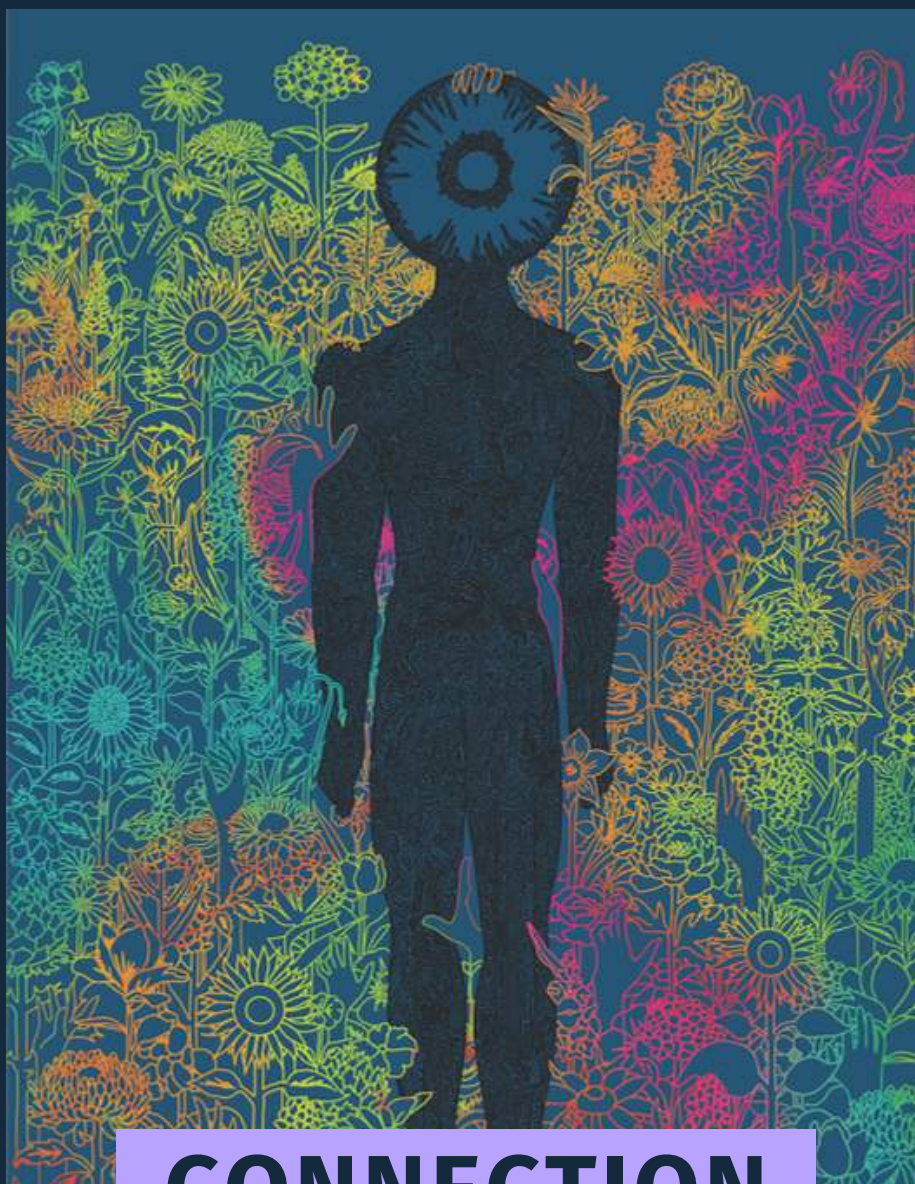


the
WORK
of **ART**



CONNECTION

Creating as an act of belonging

An jin kyeong • Samantha Bernard • Biankeye Studios • Nicole Chan • Pritidipa Das • Cathleen Davies • Eleanor Felix •
Darla Ferrara • Pat Fletcher • Oleksandra Fomchenko • Kimara Govender • Hamade • Jack Hansen • Jasmine Harrison •
Renee Hernandez • Yvonne Jayne • Lauren Ma • Marthé McCloud • James Mellor • N.A. Memela • Keely O'Brien •
Olivia Simonson • Maria Tsimafeeva Dmitrievna • Nicolás Uslé • Arya Utsa Varma • Katheryn Zacatenco

the
WORK
of **ART**

**A LITERARY & VISUAL ARTS QUARTERLY
FUNDED BY GENEROUS
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**CURATED AND PUBLISHED BY
BEE THE CHANGE FOUNDATION
A CALIFORNIA-BASED ARTS NONPROFIT**

THE WORK OF ART

The Work of Art Issue 2 • Connection • Summer 2026

ISSN 3143-3421 (print)

ISSN 3143-343X (online)

ISBN 979-8-9820564-1-2 (paperback)

ISBN 979-8-9820564-0-5 (ebook)

Published quarterly by Bee the Change Foundation, a California 501(c)(3) nonprofit, 1286 University Ave #1108, San Diego, CA 92103-3312.

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Cover: The Observer (detail) by Jack Hansen. Digital, 22.3 × 36.3 in. Back cover: Your Garden by Jack Hansen. Digital, 11 × 14 in.

The views expressed in this issue belong to the contributors.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Connection tends to live in small things: a porch light left on after the rest of the street has gone dark, a necklace that once belonged to someone you miss. Most days we walk past it without noticing. Then someone draws it, or writes it down, and we finally see it.

When we chose Connection as the theme for our second issue, we had a rough idea of what might arrive. Then more than 250 submissions came in, from artists and writers in Bangladesh, Ukraine, Argentina, South Africa, England, and across the United States, and many of them took the word somewhere we hadn't thought to look.

Eleanor Felix drew a neighborhood at night where the porch lights are the only thing still connecting the houses, with a red line running through the piece to hold that feeling. Pritidipa Das wrote about the objects their family carried across borders through the 1947 Partition of Bengal and the 1971 Liberation War, among them a rusted iron key and the red alta used to dye a bride's feet. Lauren Ma wrote about a jade necklace that brought her closer to the grandmother she misses. Over and over, connection turned up in the things people keep.

We also didn't expect how much of this issue would be about loss. Looking back, it makes sense. Some of the connections we hold onto hardest are the ones that outlast the person. The issue moves in three parts. It opens with Reaching, the pull toward someone or something. Holding is about the harder work of staying close. The last section, What Remains, sits with whatever we carry after someone is gone.

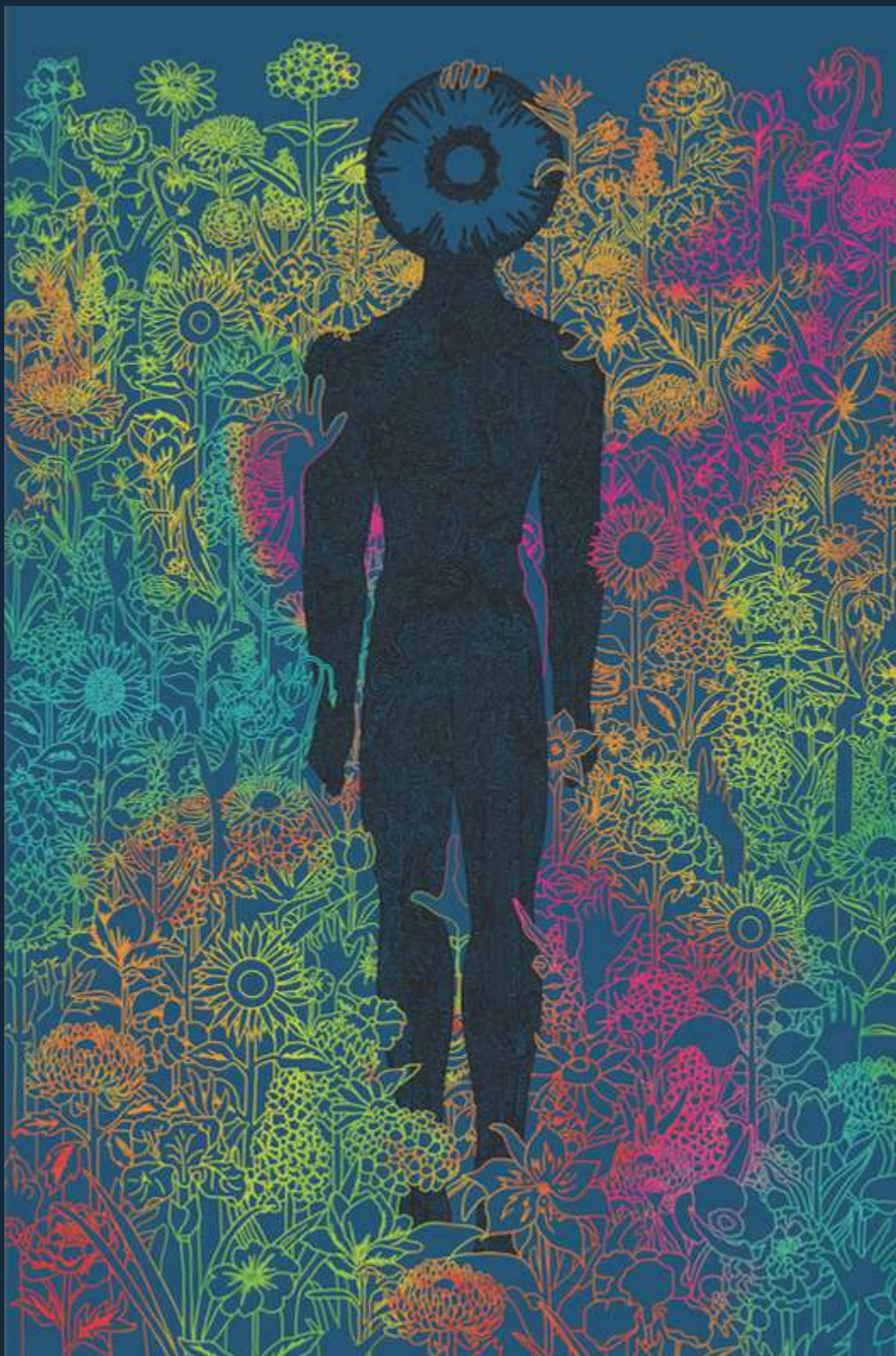
Our line for this issue is ***Creating as an Act of Belonging***. Every piece here began with one person alone with a blank page or an empty canvas, who then chose to send what they made to people they'd never met. A poem or a painting isn't finished until someone else spends time with it. That part is yours.

This is also the first issue of The Work of Art where every contributor was paid. The honorarium is modest, and we want to grow it, because making art is real work and should be treated that way. That belief is a big part of why Bee the Change Foundation exists.

Thank you for reading, whether this is your second issue or your first. Issue 1 was a beginning. Issue 2 is where we keep going, and we're glad you're here for it.



Nik Boivin
President, Bee the Change Foundation



THE OBSERVER

JACK HANSEN • DIGITAL, 22.3 × 36.3 IN • COVER ARTIST

WHO'S A SINNER?

ARYA UTSA VARMA • POETRY

I saw God in a dormitory bathroom,
Swimming in the bowl—
She looked me in the watery eye,
Kissed my temple with a sigh.
I took another shot to forget.

FIVE SECONDS

KIMARA GOVENDER • POETRY

I've started to learn the shape of the silence.
It's different now—
it doesn't break when the door opens,
and it doesn't look for me first.
I used to be the destination;
now I'm just the landmark.

I'm watching a movie through a window
I'm not allowed to open.
The screen glows with things
that aren't mine to know anymore—
new names, new voices,
a language you're learning without me.
I try to find a reason to hate the sound of it,
but my heart's a terribly loyal dog.
It just keeps sitting at the gate.

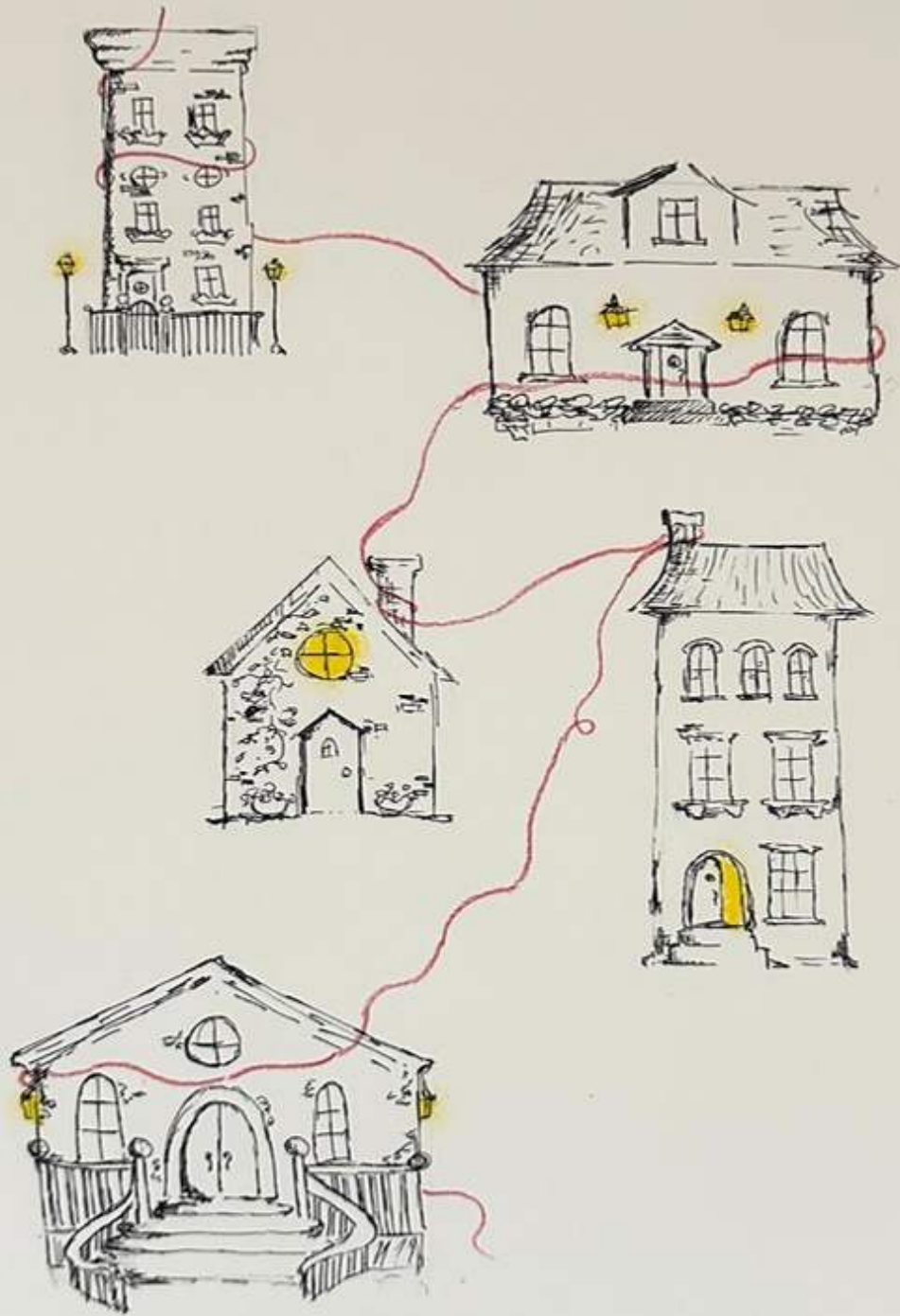
Then, for five seconds,
the world lies to me.

Your arms are a map back to the person I was—
the "us" that lived before the silence.
It's a cruel kind of healing;
it fixes the break just long enough
to make the next snap louder.

It's just skin and bone,
just a habit of arms,
but it feels like homecoming
in a house that's already been sold.

I've stopped trying to fill the space where you
were.
Now, I just carry a shadow beside me.
It's a permanent "no" to anyone who tries to
stand
where you stood.

I'm a collector of a version of you
that doesn't exist in the light anymore.
So I'll stay in the dark,
holding onto a five-second lie,
until it's the only truth I have left.



PORCH LIGHTS

ELEANOR FELIX • PEN, OIL PASTEL & COLORED PENCIL, 9 × 12 IN

THE FIRST SIGN

PAT FLETCHER · POETRY

centuries from now, they will run
their hands over the crack,
marvel at the evidence of age, of healing,
call this femur the first sign of civilisation.

for now, i know nothing
except that it hurts and i am still here.
even though i can no longer run
she brings me things to eat
i give her my smiles and my warmth in return

and that is enough.

AND HASTEN ON YOUR SECOND DEATH WITH GLADNESS

PAT FLETCHER · POETRY

are we all just racing the hourglass
seeking some ozymandian immortality?
no - i refuse to believe it
i do not wish to run
i shall plant my trees to make my own shade
no matter how feeble
no matter how few

take comfort
you will die one day
and you will be remembered a little while
and then you will not
and your children's children's children's children will live
a life so different from yours
that you will have no place in it

so sing your starlit songs
(if you wish to)
walk your fire-red carpets
write your brilliant word-constructions
no doubt you will be remembered longer than i
but all things end

and there shall be a day when enheduana's name is
forgotten
– do you think yours could survive half such a span?
it will not
others shall take up your titles
your works and ideas shall perish
as you have

peace – true peace – comes only then

from knowing
that there is no immortality
and turning from the twice-doomed chase
towards the shaded garden

where you may sit, for a little while,
may admire the fragrant flowers,
and, when it is your time,
may rise, and cede your seat to another

and go gently out from the walls of this place
to where what is within shall be no longer your concern
and we who are left shall weep
and we shall remember you until we do not

with that, be content
it is as it shall be
and you cannot change it for wishing
merely reach it the sooner
by chasing a stuffed hare
working for a fool's promise

come, sit with me here instead,
i shall pour you tea,
and listen to your story
and you may ask for mine,
and that fleeting intimacy
shall count, to me, as a thousand years' remembrance

such that i shall leave peaceful
happily unremarked by those who follow after,
who pass beneath the bending boughs
of trees they think were always there



GEESE WITH THEIR GOSLINGS

Keely O'Brien
Photography

THE GROSBEAK AND THE REDPOLL

KEELY O'BRIEN • POETRY

the bird feeder faces frequent scuffles and squabbles
hierarchy and competition
pillars of the feeder

not all birds are like that
some compassionately coexist
and this is the beginning of a late April tale...

evening grosbeaks shelter in thick branches of white
spruce
red polls hop and the newly revealed ground
they meet at the feeder

standing feathers grazing each other
like family posed
the larger yellow bird behind
leaning over gently
like a show of love
at least to my human eyes

red and gray the redpoll seems to nestle in
just a split second
they hop forward
and in the feeder is shared peacefully
each their own seeds and space

the bird feeder is frequently a shared space
peace and coexisting
are pillars of the feeder as well

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

N.A. MEMELA · POETRY

At first, I thought happiness lived far away
somewhere beyond the horizon
where the sky softens into evening
and the sun sinks slowly
as if it knows something we do not.

So, I began to chase it.

I followed quiet roads of hope,
carrying questions heavier than my pockets.
People spoke about happiness
as though it were a destination
a place where the air is lighter,
where the heart finally learns
how to breathe without remembering its wounds.

But the farther I walked,
the more the world revealed its quiet truths.

I saw happiness in ordinary places:
in the trembling hands of a grandmother
holding a child as though time itself were fragile.
In laughter that erupts suddenly
in rooms where sorrow once lived.

I saw it in strangers
who share kindness
without asking for proof
that goodness still matters.

And I began to understand.

Happiness does not live at the end of the journey.
It waits in the unnoticed moments
that pass quietly through our lives
like wind moving through tall grass.

Sometimes it arrives as stillness
a brief pause
when the mind stops searching
and the heart remembers
that it is already alive.

Sometimes it arrives as courage,
the quiet decision to rise again
after the world has asked too much of you.

The pursuit of happiness
is not the chase we were taught to believe in.

It is the slow unfolding
of a life that dares to feel everything
joy, grief, love, absence
without turning away.

It is learning that the human heart
is both the storm
and the shelter.

And perhaps the greatest discovery
is this:

the thing we have been running toward
has been walking beside us all along
soft as breath,
patient as morning light,
waiting for the moment
we finally stop searching

and simply notice.

ALMOST PERFECT

N.A. MEMELA · POETRY

In the shadows of what could have been
Lives the ghost of you and me,
A love that almost learned forever
But slipped into memory.
A melody we nearly finished,
A promise trembling on the air,
Two hearts standing at the doorway
Of a life we did not share.

We were moments just before completion,
Like dusk that lingers before night.
Your hand almost held mine forever,
Your eyes almost made it right.
But something fragile in the silence
Turned our golden days to dust,
And love that almost found its courage
Slowly unravelled into rust.

Moments linger just beyond my reach,
Like your voice in distant halls,
Echoing softly through the spaces
Where your shadow sometimes falls.
The sweetness of “almost” haunts me still,
A taste of something warm and true,
A bittersweet reminder
Of the life I almost had with you.

Perfection stood so close between us,
Close enough for hearts to see,
But fate, so quiet and uncertain
Wrote a different end for we.
Now the nights hold quiet questions,
And the mornings carry blame,
For paths not walked together
And a love without a name.

Yet even in this aching absence
There is beauty I can't deny,
For loving you, though incomplete,
Taught my restless heart to try.
And somewhere in the fragile distance
Where unfinished stories stay,

Our love remains almost perfect
Just one heartbeat away

ACROSS THE YEARS

N.A. MEMELA · POETRY

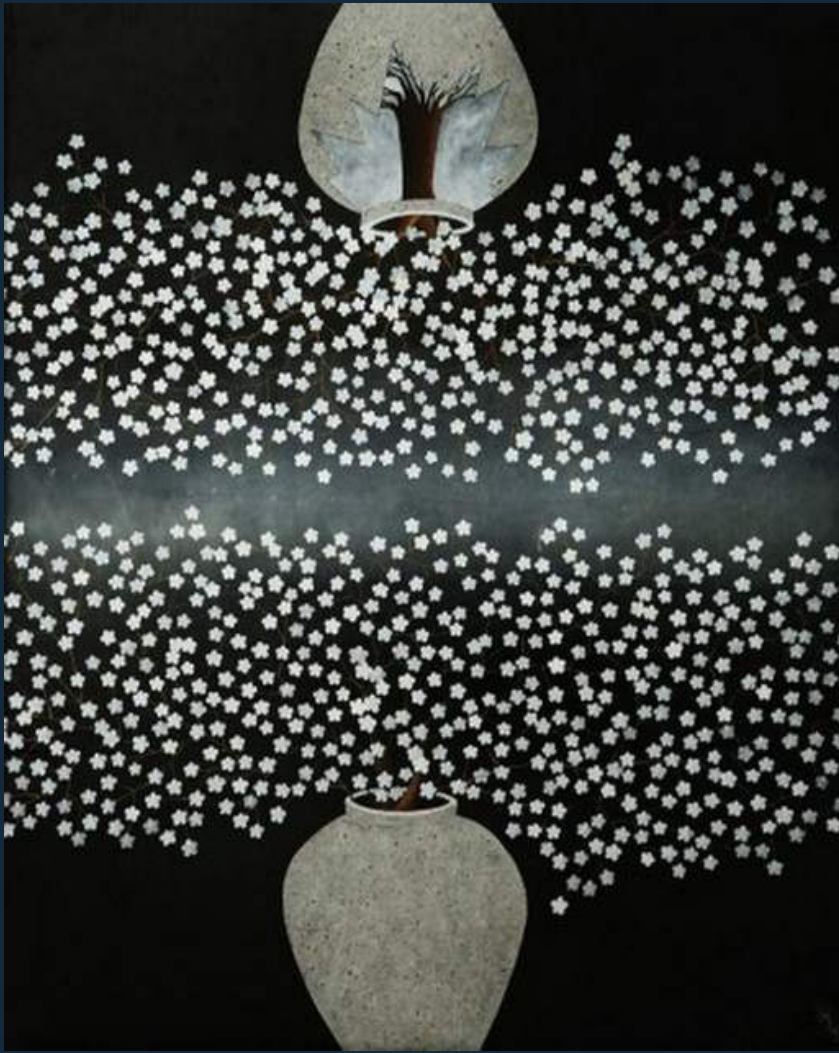
“Tell me,” You ask, with wonder in your eyes,
“Do dreams still live, or do they fade with time?
Do we still reach beyond familiar skies,
Or learn to settle somewhere less than climb?”

I smile a little, older in my way,
“We fall, we doubt, we wander and we bend,
But even when our colours start to grey,
We find new dreams we never learned to end.”

“Do we find love?” you ask, a quiet spark,
“Yes... not the kind that leaves us as we were,
It comes with light, but teaches through the dark,
And leaves behind a truth that still endures.”

“And are we happy?” soft, almost unsure,
“I’m still becoming you... and that is cure.”

AN JIN KYEONG



Above: The Outer and Inner World
Pigment on Korean paper, 100 x 80.3 cm

Right: Korea Sharon Flower
Pigment on Korean paper, 72.7 x 65.1 cm



TAKE FIVE: SENSORIUM

JASMINE HARRISON • POETRY

Inspired by Take Five in the album, Time Out, by The Dave Brubeck Quartet

I. Vision

here's a hot take: love
at first sight is fake;
it's in the second
glance, the double-take,
and in the third, the
fourth, the fifth, the gaze.
pupils dilate, lash-
es flit (*flit*) and flutter,
while color grad'ients
'company the wake.

II. Audition

i listen to you
hum (*hum*) and modulate,
sing sweet lyrics with
sweet little mistakes,
take measure of the
sound waves your rich voice makes.
rhythm takes root and
melody starts to play,
pitches harmonize
and breaths sync-o-pate.

III. Sensation

bodies bend back und-
er love's looming weight.
booming heartbeats *thump-*
thump at building rates.
an ache in my chest,
burning, biting, take
a breath, take a (heart)break,
if only for the sake
of staying whole... love, don't break.

IV. Gustation

kisses savor sweet(er)
after love's first spat,
bittersweet even-
oddness, delicious escape.
no more fancy din-
ners, just order take-
out, take time out to
sit and appreciate
the calm after storm
when hard tastes abate.

V. Olfaction

so, deeply breathing,
together we'll take
five minutes to stop
and smell the jazzmins—
the jazz-quint: copp'ry
horn and clean, deep bass.
through the honeyed air
the scent circulates,
and finally at
peace, ambrosial sleep
overtakes.

DARLA FERRARA

Clockwise from top left: A Journey Across the Desert, Profile in Azure, Industrial Resonance, Coastal Strata
Digital mixed media, made in Procreate



CRIMSON

YVONNE JAYNE • POETRY

With each stroke of your brush
I step into your fiery vision,
with each paint mixed on your palette
I slip under your heavy torso.

The tree on your canvas, firm and growing,
sends boughs reaching to the sun in bliss,
dappled by the brightness of youth
your blue baby-toned eyes gaze at me.

Later, you destroy my portrait when I
cannot sit still for you.
You knife my face on the canvas until
I bleed crimson from your enraged passion.

When you throw the canvas across the room
I land in a heap of hungry souls
soothing my crimson to sleep.

COMMUNITY SPLASHPAD

RENEE HERNANDEZ • POETRY

water splashed
and the waves rolled in my mind
transported
through laughter to
another place

another splash
cooling my face
the sun
shines even
through my eyelids

peace splashed over me
voices harmonizing
families
finding relief
from the same struggle
of the summer heat



THE PACIFIST

KATHERYN ZACATENCO • RELIEF WOODBLOCK PRINT, 24 × 18 IN



WE ARE UNITED

MARIA TSIMAFEEVA DMITRIEVNA • DIGITAL ART



FRIENDSHIP

NICOLÁS USLÉ · INK ON PAPER, 55 × 75 CM



NICOLÁS USLÉ

Clockwise from top left: Nest in the Air, Buddha, Symbol,
Own Light
Acrylic on canvas and mixed digital media

FACTS

OLIVIA SIMONSON • CREATIVE NONFICTION

It's Thursday again.

Thursday means therapy, and therapy means sitting on the same white couch, the polyester warm against the backs of my legs. The geometric black rug sits on the floor, and after countless sessions I've studied how every white line runs up and down and back again, creating diamonds and semi-circles and squares until they break off, leaving the middle a black abyss. Her chair is already facing me, the same white color now made with leather squeaking as she sits across from me, handing me the two controllers. They always remind me of modern Nintendo controls. I've always preferred the older version.

She has them already hooked to the machine, and she runs it once, the remotes vibrating left then right, the sensation stilling my bouncing knee just enough to focus.

"Let's begin."

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a psychotherapy technique used to help clients who have experienced trauma.

Fact.

This technique simulates rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, which opens up both hemispheres of the brain so the client can process trauma while conscious.

Fact.

EMDR uses a machine to do this, running in 15 second increments.

Fact.

The machine is then turned off, the remotes stop vibrating, and the client is asked to respond with what they were thinking about, any feelings that arose, where tension was felt through the body, etc. The clinician then selects a specific aspect from their response, and asks the client to focus on that aspect more in depth while the machine runs for another fifteen seconds.

Fact.

For an hour every week, my therapist and I use this technique in an effort to process a series of traumatic experiences that form a certain core belief about myself. She tells me that with time, this technique will help "rewire" my brain and change this core belief into a more positive one.

Fact.

The core belief is I am not good enough.

Fact.

I am good enough.

False.

"Is there a certain moment that still brings up strong feelings when you think about the fallout?"

I stare at the black rug on the floor, the lines running parallel with the couch I'm sitting on. It's easier to process when I stare at it, and I'm less likely to cry. I'm going to end up crying anyways.

"Um... I guess the message still bothers me."

Manipulative. Guilt-tripping. Victim Mentality.

Each word slices through me. I can feel my heartbeat in my ears.

"If you had to rate how it makes you feel, 1 being completely fine and 10 being I can't think about it, where would you put it?"

I process the question. "A seven? It's hard to think about and I feel really anxious thinking about it."

"Okay, let's start there."

I close my eyes, and the machine starts.

Manipulative. They called me manipulative. Am I really manipulative? I can't recall a single time I actively tried to manipulate a situation. Everyone manipulates situations, changing them based on how the conversation flows. But that requires conversation. And they refused to talk to me. I didn't get an explanation. They couldn't give me examples of my manipulation. I have to live the rest of my life without an explanation and it's not fair it's not fair it's not fair-

"What did you think about?"

I go back to staring at the carpet. It's creased in the corner.

"Um... I thought about the manipulative bit. How we all manipulate situations unconsciously, and how I never tried to do it on purpose, and how it's not fair that they couldn't give me an example."

"Okay, let's continue with that."

I close my eyes. The machine starts.

Guilt-tripping. Did I ever guilt trip them into doing things they didn't want to? The apartment situation was rough, sure, but I wasn't forcing them to live with me, and they had decided otherwise anyways. And they didn't tell me why they didn't want to live with me either. What if they never really wanted to go to events with me?

What if they were lying to me, and I was guilt-tripping them, and what if I'm really a horrible horrible person and they're right and I'm just-

"How about that time?"

I open my eyes. My shoulders are starting to hurt.

"I thought about the guilt-tripping bit. And maybe they just did things with me because they felt guilty, and maybe that really does make me an awful person."

"Okay, let's keep going with that."

I close my eyes. The machine starts.

Victim Mentality. They had violated my space without my knowledge. That made me the victim in this. They had kicked me out. But was I actually the victim? If I have a victim mentality, am I even allowed to call myself that? I didn't even know what I did wrong, why would they shut me out, I'd been trying for weeks to make things better and they wouldn't talk to me and doesn't that make me a victim but what if I'm a terrible person and just justifying my actions through calling myself a victim and-

"What were you thinking about or feeling that time?"

I swallow. My chest is starting to feel tight and there's a burning in my eyes.

"Um... my chest is starting to feel tight, and my eyes feel funny. I thought about the victim mentality part. And how I consider myself a victim, but what if they're right and I'm just making it up and I'm really the bad guy? I feel like a victim, since they violated my space, but they also think of themselves as victims, so maybe I'm just a terrible person."

I finally look at her. She's already looking at me. And there's no judgement in her face. I guess that's her job.

"It's okay to feel like that. You are a victim. And you're allowed to feel however you want to about that."

I nod. My eyes are burning.

She hands me a box of tissues.

"Let's focus on the terrible person part next. Where does your mind go when you hear that?"

I close my eyes. The machine starts.

Am I a terrible person? People always seem to walk away. I'm just too much, too aggressive, too temperamental, too... everything. They said they wouldn't leave, and they did anyway. They knew about my fear of losing people and they told me they would stand by me and then called me manipulative and guilt tripping and victim mentality and then said it was to make me better how does any of that make me better am I really a terrible person-

"What about that time?"

The burning has stopped, but the carpet lines have become blurry.

"Everyone leaves. I try so hard, and everyone still leaves. And they knew that and left anyway. And maybe that just shows how terrible I am, because they wouldn't leave if they thought I was a good person."

She's quiet for a minute. "Is there anyone who has stayed?"

I'm quiet.

She continues. "Let's go there this time."

Does anyone stay? My parents stay, but they're required to stay. My dance friends always stayed, and I still talk to them from time to time, so they aren't really gone, we've just moved away, but it feels like they're gone. B stayed. She even took my side and cut them off when she found out. But one day she'll leave too, and I'll be alone again with no friends and I'm going to die with no friends-

"How about now?"

I take a breath. The remote begins to feel slippery.

"Um... well, my parents always support me, and they stay. But they're kind of required to. And my teammates, they still talk to me, but not regularly. I can't blame them for that though, since we all moved to different places. And... B stayed, I guess."

"What about J?"

I blink. I'd forgotten about him.

"Yeah, I guess..."

"So does the evidence point to everyone leaving?"

I pause. "No."

"Right. Let's continue along that vein."

I close my eyes. The machine starts.

J. I'd completely forgotten about him. He'd stayed on the phone when I sat in silence, and now that I was home we were hanging out together, and he wouldn't hang out with me if he didn't like my company, and he's always happy to be on the same shifts as me, and we text all the time and maybe he really does like me. But what if he's pretending and he really hates me and-

"What about that time?"

My breaths are starting to come easier, and the carpet's lines are coming back into focus.

"I thought about J, and how he was there for me when everything happened, and how he stayed on the phone with me even when we didn't talk. And he's wanting to hang out with me now that I'm back home, so he probably likes me, but what if he doesn't?"

"Does any evidence point to that?"

"No..."

"So is that a fact then?"

"...No."

"Good. Let's keep going. Go back to the message."

Manipulative. Guilt Tripping. Victim mentality.

"Does it still hold the same emotional impact?"

I shake my head.

"Where does it fall on a scale of one to ten?"

"...About a four. It's still uncomfortable to think about, but it doesn't make me feel as upset as it did."

She nods. "Good. That's progress."

I nod too. It's progress.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a psychotherapy technique used to help clients who have experienced trauma.

Fact.

This technique has helped me, and it will continue to help me process my trauma, because what I experienced was a form of trauma.

Fact.

I have a core belief that I am not good enough, and I am working to rewrite this core belief about myself.

Fact.

I am good enough.

Less False.

BIANKI EYE STUDIOS

Left: Crow's Feet · Right: Footwork
Printed digital illustrations, 12 x 18 in



翡翠項鍊 (JADE NECKLACE)

LAUREN MA · CREATIVE NONFICTION

Words have a way of planting themselves like seeds. It takes us to cultivate them. To shower them with tears and feed them memories. So they can breathe life.

One evening, my dad came home with a necklace and five spoken words. *Clink*. The sound of metal dancing across the table. It landed in front of me. There was no fancy gift wrapping or box, just an unassuming plastic bag, the kind that would keep miscellaneous items like screws in. Curious, I pulled out a delicate gold chain attached to a jade pendant. Soft swirls of turquoise and green harmonized across smooth stone. Its shape was unlike anything I had ever seen before, forming something like an upside-down teardrop or a heart. At last my dad spoke. Five words, to be exact: It belonged to your grandma.

My grandma was a woman who had always fascinated me. She passed away when I was four, but I grew up with her name sprinkled in stories at the dinner table, stories of the Khmer Rouge, Thai refugee camps, and emigration to the United States. Never truly having known her, my grandma walked the line between legend and reality, vagueness and clarity, separation and connection. A woman I was still trying to understand.

Words hover aimlessly in the air. A seed begins to form; it drops into the cradle of your hands, but only for a second.

I did not have time to ruminate. As the end of the school year approached, more pressing matters, such as final exams, the dance, and summer plans with friends occupied my thoughts. I stashed the necklace away in a dusty jewelry box, burying those five words with it.

Deep beneath the surface, a seed is not alone. Memories of a woman also share the space. Like nutrients in the soil, a seed feeds off the memories, clings onto them for dear life. As roots grow thick and tangled, memories begin to rise.

There were some that were solely mine. Small aspects I remembered, like her telling me

xiǎoxīn (to be careful) and the plum candies she would store in her purse. But the real, most important parts I learned after she passed, in the form of conversations, photographs, and stories. Stitching the pieces together revealed a rich tapestry of survival and sacrifice, but not without holes. This was a woman whose life I learned of through conversations with family members, but never once with her.

One day, while flipping through an old album at my aunt's house, I discovered a photograph from my grandma's wedding. Then, a single, yellowing image of my grandma, grandpa, and their three young children. They are standing on a red dirt road in a Thai refugee camp. In the background are several closely packed houses with thatched roofs. Meeting my grandmother's tired, yet unwavering gaze, I remembered a necklace from many months ago.

From the depths of my closet, I pulled out the jade necklace. *Once hers, now mine*. It was a comforting thought, a lifeline connecting me and her. The swirls of vibrant stone glowed with her spirit.

A seedling braves the surface and is met with sunlight's warm embrace. Now it can flourish into something extraordinary.

I once knew of barren earth, memories buried so deep they never saw the sun or rain. Now, those patches are filled with beautiful green foliage.

When I put on this necklace, I can imagine her gentle, steady fingers clasping the chain many years before me. Her fingers are intertwined with mine. When I put on this necklace, the pendant rests right on my chest. And I can almost, almost feel her heartbeat drumming over mine, as if to soothe the ache of her absence. As if to remind me of what lives on.



THE SHATTERED IMPULSE NECKLACE

OLEKSANDRA FOMCHENKO

Optical resin, vintage lightbulb, ethically sourced wasps, glass,
rusted bolts • 10 × 3 cm

LOVE ANTHEM

CATHLEEN DAVIES • POETRY

Some days I forget to wake up
And count my loved ones on my fingers
Which is probably a good thing
'cause I'm running out of hands.
I wish I had elastic bones
To wrap my limbs round those I know
And press them to a heart, that I am training
To beat slow.
The world's a stage, the earth is huge
But actors still have dressing rooms
And we still have this blanket,
and our rooftop, and the moon.
Despite the flames, the bloody sand
The melting ice, the promised lands
I'm warm and safe tonight, my love,
Hair dancing round your hands.
Those hands, I'll ask, to please borrow
To count down everyone I know,
Or everyone I love, I guess,
But really, that's the same.
Together, we can make a list
Of every time we've ever kissed
A forehead, or a shoulder
Or a spirit or a brain.
When I forget just how to sleep
Thinking of all I'm grieving
It's probably a good thing
'cause it shows that I'm alive.
And when I turn to face you
Just to check that you're still breathing
I count out all my loved ones
And I pray that they survive.

PRITIDIPA DAS

POETRY

THE RED ALTA

(from Madhumati's pov)

The heavy Banarasi silk smells of the iron trunk and old cardamom.
My aunt pulls the gold wire through my left nostril until the flesh turns white.
The wet red alta on my heels catches gray lint from the jute mat.
I am sixteen today. They wrote nineteen on the registry with a dry quill.
My schoolbooks sit behind the flour bin where the dampness rots the glue.
My mother thinks I cry because of the smoke from the mango wood in the courtyard.
I am not. I watch the rust covered gate where the milkman's dog is licking an empty leaf cup.
The groom is forty — a small gray mole on the bridge of his nose
where his wire-rimmed glasses sit.
He smells of expensive jasmine oil and the damp leather of city shoes.

(from his pov)

The brick kiln smells of wet clay and the sulfur of low grade coal.
My father sat on the rusted axle of the tractor and told me to watch my shovel.
He said a man who crosses the dry canal in May leaves his boots for the crows.
I have thirty taka and a pocketknife with a handle of green fish scale.
I can hear the high, thin whine of the wedding clarinet carrying across the fields.
It sounds like a goat caught in a thorn bush where the dhobis wash the linen.
I didn't take the bicycle; the chain is rusted through the master link.
I stayed by the lime pit, watching white dust settle on my dark hands.
The watchman walked past, his silver rings catching the sun.
He looked at my shoes to see if there was red clay from the high-caste road.
Your brother's jeep is parked by the mango grove with two iron bars in the back.
The smoke from your father's kitchen is thin and gray against the white heat.
Why did you leave your blue plastic hair clip on the stone by the well
if you knew the water was theirs?

WHAT THE BASALT KEEPS

The Margin of the Scraped Leaf

The Shastri's jackfruit-wood desk stays on the lowest step of the veranda, right where the grey dirt path turns into the temple compound.
He does not use a high voice. He speaks with the small, dry precision of a man weighing coarse salt on a brass scale, his fingernails long and pared to points, yellowed at the rims from the daily turmeric of his noon meal.

My father has been in the river-clay five nights now; his wet fishing loincloth is still hanging on the hibiscus hedge, smelling of stagnant ditch-water.

The spade he used to clean the irrigation channel is leaning against our mud wall, the handle dark from the grease of his palms.

The Shastri brought out two sheets of thick, grey Calcutta paper when the clay on my father's burial shroud was still soft.

He didn't look at my mother. He looked at the small silver ring in her nose and the brass water-pot by her knee.

He said the flute-player came to his mat during the third watch of the night, before the crows started in the neem trees.

A swapna-adesh, he called it, a divine ledger entry written on the back of his eyelids by the god of the blue river.

He used his small horn-handled knife to scratch a new line into the margin of our three-generation family palm-leaf, turning the text into a cage, rewriting the old grammar so that an orphan girl becomes a permanent fixture of the sanctuary kitchen.

We both knew the ink was wet. I saw the black soot smudge onto his thumb when he closed the wooden binder.

But my father owed five maunds of winter seed-paddy from the season the lower dike gave way and the crop rotted in the ear.

The Shastri knows the Sanskrit roots well enough to turn an unpaid grain bill into a holy deed for a sixteen-year-old's skin.

The village headmen sat on their haunches along the drainage ditch and spat their red betel juice into the weeds, nodding their heads because they cannot read the marginal notes and they fear a scholar who can command the lineage of their cows.

They left our bamboo gate unlatched when they walked back to the bazaar.

My mother went into the dark corner behind the flour bin to scrape the floorboards for three grains of dropped rice, leaving me out on the porch to watch the ink dry into the grain of the leaf like a line of dead ants.

The Salt Wharf at Sunset

Gaurang is still down at the ferry-ghat, unloading the heavy cakes of grey sea-salt from the country boats that come from the south.

His left shoulder has a long, purple bruise from the timber load he carried on Monday, and his breath smells of bitter leaf-tobacco.

He is nineteen, a stupid, clumsy boy who thinks an iron oar can break a law written in a scholar's ledger.

He sent the oil-presser's youngest son to our back fence with a yellow melon hidden under a scrap of dirty jute wrap. The boy told me to meet Gaurang behind the abandoned brick kiln on Tuesday night when the moon goes thin like a fingernail clipping.

He thinks we can hide under the empty salt sacks on a cargo cart and get to the oil mills down in Hooghly where nobody knows our names.

He doesn't know about the three cousins the Shastri keeps in the high gatehouse by the road where the bullock carts turn.

He doesn't know they have three-inch iron rings fixed to the thick ends of their bamboo staffs to make them strike harder. They will split his wrists and break his collarbone before his left boot even clears the mud of the ferry landing.

And the Shastri told my mother that if I stepped across the temple boundary ditch, my father's spirit would turn into a blind dog,

forced to eat the ash and the charcoal off the burning-ghats for seven generations of the August heat.

The terror stays inside my ribs like a cold lump of unchewed rice that will not go down into my stomach.

I want the salt-boat. I want the smell of the river on his neck and the rough, hard skin of his palm against my collarbone, but my legs feel like wet clay because I can see the Shastri's scriptural lines stretching across the high road like hemp ropes.

How does a girl turn her back on the temple when she believes the sky will turn to fire if her foot touches the ferry hull?

The Shastri has all the ancient words, and Gaurang has nothing but an empty bench, a split thumb, and a leaking hull.

The Basalt and the Silver Foil

You stand there on your lotus pedestal with your head tilted toward the dark corner of the rafters, holding that hollow brass stick.

The silver foil they pasted over your eyes is peeling at the corners because the mustard oil-lamp smokes too much during the rains.

I scrub the grey stone between your feet until my knuckles leave pink streaks on the rough basalt base.

Listen to me, Madhava, I tell your shins when the head priest goes out to the lane to spit his tobacco into the dry ditch.

You have the whole sky when the monsoon hits, and you have the great rivers that never run dry in the months of drought.

You have the rich weavers from the western wards who bring you silk dhotis and tubs of fresh white curd every Sunday morning.

Why do you need an orphan girl from the mud-huts to clean your vinegar jars and trim your rancid grease-wicks?

The Shastri says you are the lord of the three worlds, but he uses your name like a bamboo whip to drive me into his storeroom.

You stay safe behind your yellow silk curtain while his brother counts our cooking pots and measures the depth of our rice chest.

Your silver eyes don't look down at my red hands; they look straight out over my head toward the iron rafters of the ceiling, indifferent to the way my knees shake when I wipe the spilled milk and the dead flies from your pedestal.

I love the old hymns my grandmother sang while she was washing the lentils by the masonry well before the fever took her lips.

I love the deep blue of the July clouds because the songs say it is the exact color of your skin when you dance by the water.

That is the grease-spot on my soul, Krishna: I am devout enough to fear your anger, yet I hate the room where your lamps are lit.

I feel a cold shame when I remember the glass bangles Gaurang hid for me in the rotted neem tree, as if the memory of a living boy were a defilement on your sacred floorboards.

You are beautiful in the poetry books, but your house in Navadwip is a trap built out of jackfruit wood and Sanskrit vowels, and your scholars are the ones who hold the big iron key after the evening bells go quiet.

The Keepers of the Mortar

The three old women who sleep in the thatch-shed behind the grain bins have skins like dried ginger roots left in the sun.

Their teeth are gone, and their heels are split into deep red cracks from forty years of walking the wet stone steps of the well.

They watched the Shastri's servant bring the yellow silk sari from the bazaar and they didn't say a single word to me; they only rubbed the selvedge between their thumbs to see if the thread was real silver or just cheap wire from the city.

The oldest one ~ the one whose left arm stays crooked because the supervisor hit her when the old king died—told me to stop looking at the gap in the bamboo fence where the salt-boats go past on their way to the mouth of the bay. She said the first winter is just a matter of keeping your teeth together until the bone in your jaw goes completely numb.

She said after the skin on your collarbone turns grey and the marks from the midday visits stop turning into scabs, the mind learns to stay under the mud like a pond-snail, and you don't even look up to see whose boots are by the door at midnight.

They went through this same gate when their hair was black, and now they use their old fingers to help the Shastri tie the next knot.

He comes to the dark storeroom at noon when the other Brahmins are sleeping on their mats during the heat, standing close to the rice bins while I measure out the sesame seeds for the evening offerings.

He smells of sour curd and the wet cloves he chews to keep his gums from smelling like the rot in the cellar.

He touches the small of my back under the pretense of checking the cleanliness of the copper ladles, his long, cool fingers sliding down inside my skirt where the cotton is thin from many washings.

I have to stand there like a wooden post, my eyes fixed on a dead moth caught in a spider web near the beam, knowing that if I make a sound, the village will say I am the one who tried to tempt the holy head of the town.

They call this Navadwip, the place where the saints danced until the dirt turned to sacred clay, but the walls are four feet thick and the only thing that ever leaves this kitchen is the ash from the tamarind wood.

The Liturgy of the Kusha Knot

The dark half of the moon is on Tuesday, and the ceremonial drum is already resting by the well under a piece of old sailcloth.

They are mashing the wild saffron in the stone mortar to make the yellow paste they will smear on my forehead before the prayer, and my mother has already spent the five silver rupees the Shastri gave her to buy the wood for my father's shradh ceremony.

I want to take the old iron sickle from the cattle-shed and cut my hair until the scalp is red and leaking, making myself into something so foul that even the temple bailiffs will turn away from our porch when they come for me. But the Shastri's brother is already sitting on our wooden bench with his ledger and his heavy bamboo staff, watching the front ditch to ensure that the piece of property they bought doesn't ruin itself before the Tuesday moon goes down.

Gaurang will be sitting by the high weeds where the salt-boats are tied, watching the lanterns on the bank, thinking I stayed behind because I wanted the silver rings and the sweet rice from the deity's copper plate.

He will never know that my ankles are already bound with the sacred kusha rope that takes the skin off every time I turn my head toward the window to hear the sound of the evening oars in the current. The Shastri will read the verses he forged with his split quill, and the crowd will throw the parched grain into the fire, praising the great virtue of a family that gave their child to keep the town safe from the autumn cholera. And the next morning, Krishna, you will still be standing there with your head tilted toward the dark wall, your brass flute cold and empty between your fingers while the flies crawl over the sugar cake. But the door to the inner pantry will be bolted from the outside with a new iron padlock, and the key will be hanging from the silver chain that sits on the Shastri's fat hip. The red alta on my heels is drying now, turning into a dark, stiff crust that looks like old blood on the floorboards. Why did my father build our kitchen so close to the temple road if he knew the shadow of the roof would kill his child? The clarinet is blowing its high, thin note through the bazaar, sounding like an animal caught in a thorn bush, and your stone eyes just watch the mustard oil burn down until the wick goes black in the grease.

THE HEAVY BRASS

The heavy brass mortar has three deep notches on the rim where my great-grandfather's chisel slipped in nineteen twenty. It smells of dried turmeric root, old cumin seeds, and the bitter oil of mustard crushed for a century of summers. The metal is cold against my knuckles, heavy enough to grind the small black peppercorns into an aromatic dust. My grandmother used to sit on the low wooden board, her bare heels cracked like the dry clay of an August riverbed. I felt a strange, sharp hit of pride when she showed me how to swing the iron pestle without bruising my thumb. The old house in the village had thirteen clay steps that washed away during the monsoon of nineteen seventy-eight. This cylinder of alloy was the only thing my mother carried inside her wet bundle when they crossed the canal road. She kept it in the bottom of the steel almirah next to her wedding registry and two silver fish-shaped coins. When I grind the ginger today I see the exact shape of her wide, flat fingernails repeated on my own left hand. It is an ancient geometry of bone and skin, passed down through five generations of women who never owned the land they tilled.

I don't feel a holy reverence for the past; I just know my wrists are strong because my aunts hauled water from the masonry well.

They used to sing a song about a black stallion that died of thirst while the zamindar was counting his gold rupees. The rhythm of the iron striking the brass makes a flat, bell-like ring that carries into the small apartment hallway. The neighbor's television is playing a loud car commercial, but the old metal notes stay clean and stubborn in the air. In nineteen forty-seven my grandfather left his silk loom behind in the district because the fires had reached the weaver's lane.

He carried nothing but a pocketful of wooden shuttles and a single brass key that didn't open anything anymore. He spent forty years working in a state railway yard, his lungs turning gray from the soot of the coal-fired engines. He used to tell a joke about a village scholar who drowned in a puddle because he was looking at the reflection of the moon.

I laughed when he told it, but his eyes remained flat and gray like the river before a thunderstorm hits the coast. The electricity bill for our two-room flat is twelve hundred rupees this month because the ceiling fan is old and ungreased.

I left the receipt on the counter next to a bundle of green coriander that is starting to turn yellow at the tips.

We are an accumulation of people who survived the bad water, the partition lines, and the tax collector's long ledger. My cousin in Chicago sent a digital photograph of her new kitchen with the marble counters and the stainless steel stove.

She wants to buy the mortar from my mother to keep as a decorative piece on her white floating shelf next to the cookbooks.

My mother refused; she said a vessel that has known the oil of funeral feasts should never be used to hold paperclips. The iron pestle is dark, polished smooth by eighty years of palms that have all gone into the ground or the river. Why do we keep the old copper water pot under the basin if the municipal tap only gives water for two hours on Sunday? The evening crows are landing on the television antenna outside, their black wings slick with the heavy monsoon humidity.

THE IRON KEY

The green vinyl chair has a three-inch patch of gray duct tape
that pulls the hair on her thighs.
It smells like old lard and the menthol rub
I buy in bulk at the dollar store down the road.
She thinks the television is a window
and waves at the man reading the evening farm report.
Yesterday I told her to shut up
because his voice was making my ears ring after my twelve-
hour shift.
She settled deeper into the torn grease,
her chin dropping down to her collarbone without a peep.
The Sears catalog from nineteen ninety-eight is still under the
short leg
to keep the frame level.
On page forty-two there is a water-stained photo of a riding
mower
she promised we would buy.
She hides chewed pieces of white bread inside her bra
because she thinks the nurses are coming to steal them.
When I wash her I find them molded into a gray paste against
her skin,
and I use a yellow plastic spoon to scrape it off.
I don't feel holy patience anymore;
I just want to finish the grease traps and smoke a cigarette on
the back step.
In nineteen seventy-four she won a three-pound tin of Danish
ham
at the Grace Lutheran bazaar.
She kept the little twisted iron opening key in her jewelry box
next to her wedding band.
Yesterday I found that key in her mouth,
rusting against her bottom teeth like a cold coin.
I had to stick my fingers down her throat,
tasting her sour tea,
hoping she would choke a little so she would open up.

The blue plastic bucket behind the kitchen door is for the
water
that leaks from the rusted pipe under the basin.
The water drops into the plastic with a flat,
bony sound every eleven seconds.
But last night the toilet overflowed
because she tried to flush an entire pair of heavy wool socks.
Now the blue bucket is what I use to carry her waste
out to the ditch behind the garage where the nettles grow.
The water company sent a second notice printed on bright
pink paper
so the mailman could see it.
I stole twelve dollars from her black vinyl pocketbook last
night
to buy three cans of High Life.
She watched me do it,
smiling because she thought I was her brother who died of
typhus in Leeds.
She is singing a song about a bicycle
but she only knows three words of the chorus now.
Her fingernails are long and yellow,
curled like the husks of those beetles I find dead in the attic
rafters.
I could clip them while she sleeps,
but I like the sound they make when she drums on the cold
radiator.
It sounds exactly like someone trying to scratch their way out
of a wooden box.
The iron key is in my pocket now,
pressing a small dent into my thigh whenever I sit down.
I remember the exact number of steps from the kitchen table
to the cellar door is fourteen.
If she fell down them,
the state would pay for the funeral and the county would take
the house anyway.
She points at my trousers and asks if I brought the tin,
but she doesn't remember what it opens.
Why are you looking at me like I stole your horse,
she says
and then she bites her own sleeve until it tears.



HAMADE

Above: Midnight Stare, 18 x 24 in

Right: Red Dancer, 18 x 15 in



JAMES MELLOR

Right: Butterfly Effect
Oil on black canvas, 30 × 30 cm
Below: Worth Saving For
Wire sculpture



IN HER HANDS

MARTHÉ McLOUD • POETRY

At every recess
she comes to fetch me —
the crying baby
of first grade.

She waits for me
on the porch —
the twelve-year-old
clucking mother-hen
from the special ed class.

I covet her grown-up shoes
with buckles,
more than my own
little lace-ups.

I am her doll.
She pushes me on the swing
and helps me
onto the merry-go-round.

I dare nothing,
but she watches closely
to make sure that I don't fall
from the jungle gym.

I still remember her
blonde hair with hair ties
pulled tight
beneath her ears,

and my five-year-old
shuffling little hand
inside her sturdy
jam-sticky hands.

FUNERAL FLASHES

MARTHÉ McLOUD • POETRY

We stand quiet and sombre at the grave.
I think if we were more intertwined
we might have woven a magic carpet together
on which Dad could fly away,
instead of being lowered into a hole.

My youngest sees the ritual
as a photo-op
and says, "Cheese" — in every single shot,
all her teeth flash.

At the church, the undertaker prays over us
before we file inside,
like a man oiling
every creaking hinge he finds.

My two cousins and I nibble
on funeral sandwiches, the conversation
slightly stiff — we have not seen each other
for years.

My mother's friend is wearing pointed shoes.
"If that witch-shoe hits you
in your butt crack, she'll kick you
all the way to the moon," one says.

We laugh until the tears run.

MY BREATH FLOWS AWAY

MARTHÉ McLOUD · POETRY

Will you still feed me berries
now that the ground gives way,
the calendar tears,
and my days hang in strips?

Will you still lie with me under a crescent moon
now that grey doves
nest in my hair,
and my varicose veins
are like skeleton leaves?

Will there still be blossoms in your hands
now that tree-rings
circle my mouth
and I walk with shuffling feet?

My breath flows away
like thin honey
from a jar.

When my eyes glaze and splinter,
I will lay myself down
in the scent
of withered flowers:

There, where you have waited for me
for years.

LAST DANCE

MARTHÉ McLOUD · POETRY

All through my life, girl, I'll stay by you – Peter Maffay

When I think of you,
it is always that all-night dance
in the school hall —
the scent of Blue Stratos,
the creak of hardwood floors
with dancing couples from our grade
folded into each other —
like the candle wax
dripping down beer bottles
on the tables.

In the ebb and flow
between sleep and waking
during our last dance
Peter Maffay's voice
sinks into my gut.

After all these years
the song still stings —
sharp as the bite
of your cigarette smoke.

Decades later we send
smoke signals across time zones
now and then — my old guilt
still hangs like smoke.

In the last one, you say:
One day when I go silent
you will know —
the song remains.

THREE PLATES

NICOLE CHAN • POETRY

I remember the day
as clear as the moon
when you left before the sun woke up
as I set three plates
on the kitchen table.

One for me,
one for you,
one for the words
that moved in after.

On that day,
mother reminded me
to wear a jacket.

Father laughed
because I tried to wear
his oversized shoes.

Today,
strangers stand in our kitchen
speaking with voices
that I have never heard before.

Someone covers the mirrors.

Someone removes the strings
mother would use to warp
my birthday presents.

Yet, no one asks
what I want done
with your toothbrushes.

Black.
Red.
Side by side in a white cup
whereas mine rested
in a cup of green.

Tonight,
I sleep in your bed.

Not because I am scared,
though maybe I am.

But because the pillows
still smell like shampoo
and both your favourite coffee
and the breakfast I made
many suns ago.

So I press my face deeper
into the fabric,
breathing until my lungs ache,
though it's worth it
if I can keep you here
for a second longer.

Father's sweater hangs
over the chair beside me,
one sleeve brushing the bed
as the other
falls listless on the ground.

Mother's scarf curls itself
around the bed post,
like a cat
turning in for the night.

I take it out
and drape it over my shoulders,
pulling the ends together
the way she used to
before leaving the house.

ALWAYS

NICOLE CHAN • POETRY

I woke up late today,
missed the bus by thirty seconds.
Saw it turned the corner,
leaving me behind.

We had a test today.
Though
I wasn't paying attention,
watching poppies danced in the yard.

At lunch, someone asked something I didn't catch,
for the purple hyacinths of their shirt held my gaze.
Truly beautiful patterns.
I nodded anyway.

After school I walked the long way home.
I always did.
Always stopping where I usually would.

There's wind here,
singing its secret song.
I think of the poppies once more,
small spots of paint, really,
things people leave
when they don't know what else to say.

I never knew what flowers you liked.
That still bothers me.
Always will.
I think about it more than I should:
how I never asked, not even once.

And so, I come here
because I owe you something I cannot return.

Maybe flowers. Maybe visits. Maybe words—
yet none feel enough.

Tulips of purple line along the trail.
I didn't notice them before.

Like always.

I didn't see it when it mattered.
That's on me.
Why would I see it now?

But,
you did.

You always did.
Always so perceptive.
Always so eager to help.

I stand there for a while
before I remember I brought something with me.

I don't even know why I picked them,
just that I froze when I saw.

Small flowers. Charming ones.
I place them down
and think that
you would like them.

I sit among them,
as they mocked of something
I should have known sooner.

Maybe that's what hurts.
Not that I never knew,
but that I never looked long enough
to see.

So I sit with them.
With you.

And I say thank you
because it's the only thing
I still know how to do.

SECOND-HAND SMOKE

SAMANTHA BERNARD · POETRY

Does it hurt you
To watch me scratch my own skin pink,
Shoveling the flakes of my life into your furnace
Just to prove I can burn?

Would my flawlessness weave a net
Tight enough to catch your weight,
To anchor you to a world
You keep trying to drop?

My love drafts frantic blueprints
For a home you already set aflame,
While I am left building a perfect cage
Hoping it can hold ghosts.

But the fault line of grief waits
Like roots splitting concrete
While I run toward your ledge
And away from my life
All at once.

Is my perfection,
Just a slower way
Of burying myself beside you.
Each trophy I receive
Reflecting my father
As I stare into his eyes again?

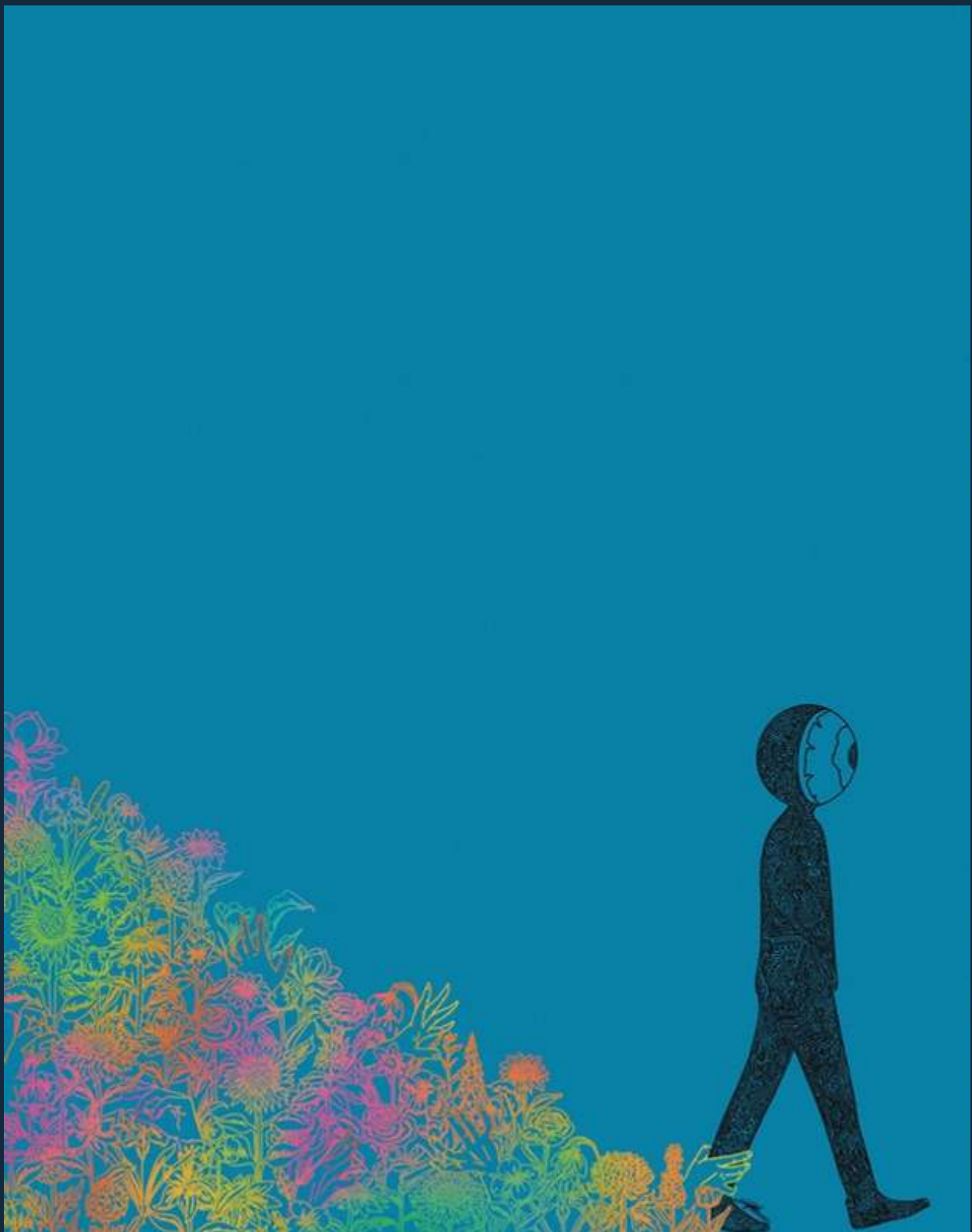
WHITE RAINBOW 2028

CATHLEEN DAVIES · FICTION

It snowed at Pride that year. The crisp, white flakes landed on shoulders like dandruff, and all the queers twirled round in their dresses to welcome it. They'd all known it was too cold for June, but the occasion called for strappy, rainbow dresses and high heeled boots, and leather vests, and fishnet stockings and all the sexy, swishy fabric one was wont to wear to scream out love. Of course, it wasn't magic. Already, they'd lost cities to the ocean. Already, there were famines, empty shelves in supermarkets where the fruit was bruised and bitter, but hey it kept them skinny, (a problematic consolation, but a consolation none-the-less).

And all who danced were bright enough to know that this was Not Good. There shouldn't be long, Indian summers well into November. We shouldn't be building bridges to the houses lost at sea. The woods should not be burning, and it shouldn't snow at Pride, but fuck it. It was their day. And when they'd glued themselves to roads, they'd been arrested, so instead the road became their glittering stage. And when they'd desecrated art, they'd been condemned, so now they were content to be the art themselves.

With neon wigs and orange skin and flags and floats and Kylie Minogue; with booty-shorts and Elvis quiffs and motorbikes and glitter bombs and love and love and love and love and love, and yes, it shouldn't snow at Pride, but darling, if our ancestors taught us anything, it is the art of dancing through disaster.



YOUR GARDEN

JACK HANSEN • DIGITAL, 11 × 14 IN

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS & ARTISTS

An jin kyeong

Born in 1990, I am a contemporary artist and designer dedicated to exploring the duality between the inner psychological world and the external environment. My work seeks to translate the invisible currents of the human subconscious into an abstract language.

As a child, I was influenced by my mother. She was not an artist, but she was really good at making things with her hands, and I inherited her craftsmanship. I decided to become a painter after traveling through Europe and Japan in 2007.

Driven by the philosophy that art should be lived, I founded the brand “Goods Art,” which turns fine art into fashion and lifestyle products, a movement I call “Wearable Art.” I am a Main Artist on Singulart, was the cover artist for the May 2026 issue of Quadro Magazine, and will take part in the XVI Florence Biennale in 2027.

Samantha Bernard (she/her)

Samantha Bernard is an advocacy scholar and the founder of the nonprofit journalism company Under the Sun.

Notes from the Author

“Second-Hand Smoke” explores the destructive intersection of perfectionism and codependency, where the speaker attempts to mend a loved one’s mental illness through unyielding control. The poem illustrates how the pursuit of self-sacrifice is a misguided defense against impending grief, resulting in self-destruction.

Biankeye Studios (she/her)

biankeye.com

Instagram & TikTok: @biankeye

Healing through color with Biankeye.

Aiding mental health with colors.

Nicole Chan

Nicole Chan is a high school writer who usually explores ideas of grief, memory, and human connection through stories and poetry. She often draws inspiration from folklore, everyday experiences, and questions about what makes people who they are. When she isn’t writing, she enjoys reading and coming up with new stories.

Pritidipa Das (she/they)

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A student and writer from Bangladesh, Priti has a keen eye for jotting down historic and emotional dynamics through vivid imagery in her poetry. They are drawn to poetry that lives in the quiet friction between history, memory, and the things one might observe in daily life. Cultural heritage and domestic displacement are subjects they often put to pen. In time away from writing, Priti can be found with their physics studies.

Notes from the Author

I’m obsessed with the heavy, useless junk my family carried across borders. I stick to the actual fortitude: wet alta, a rusted key, river basalt, stashed water drums, and sweating brass. It seems a little like soft nostalgia, but then we get to see grease, lint, and wet clay. I wanted to show how old survival panic doesn’t wash away. It follows you right onto your clean, modern floors.

These poems are specific, messy maps of survival across the 1947 Partition of Bengal and the 1971 Liberation War, histories that get flattened or missed entirely outside South Asia. Alta is a bright red fluid used to dye a bride’s feet for celebration, but letting it catch gray lint from a raw jute mat corrupts the ritual. With The Iron Key and The Heavy Brass, I wanted to move away from soft diaspora nostalgia. A tool or an alloy cylinder becomes a mechanical record of domestic secrets.

“Sometimes you feel everything could’ve been better and sometimes you feel everything could’ve been much worse. That’s the creation of magic.”

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS & ARTISTS

Cathleen Davies (she/they)

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Instagram: @scruffbucketragamuffin

Cathleen Davies is a writer, researcher, and adolescent mentor from East Yorkshire, England. Her work has appeared in a number of magazines and anthologies. Her four solo collections have been published by 4Horsemen Publications. She writes literary fiction for LGBTQ+ audiences.

"I think the connections we feel as queer people are radical and powerful, and I hope that my poetry accurately presents that."

Eleanor Felix (she/her)

This work is made with pen, oil pastel, and colored pencil. I wanted to capture the concept of a neighborhood at night. I was intrigued by the idea that even when the rest of the lights are off, the porch lights of each house connect the street. The red line throughout the piece represents that feeling of connection.

Darla Ferrara (she/her)

fdarlaus.myportfolio.com

Instagram: @ferrarastudiosne

Darla Ferrara is a Nebraska-based artist, author, and digital mixed-media creator whose work explores the textures of narrative and nature.

Notes from the Artist

I tend to explore the intersection of traditional texture and digital innovation. Utilizing heavy impasto effects, digital collage, and mixed-media layering, these works seek to bridge the gap between the tactile world of fine art and the limitless possibilities of digital creation.

Pat Fletcher (he/they)

Instagram & Tumblr: @patfletcherpoetry

Pat Fletcher is (among many other things) a writer who can be intermittently found on Tumblr and Instagram as @patfletcherpoetry.

Oleksandra Fomchenko (she/her)

alexartroomjewelry.com

Instagram: @alexartroom.jewelry

Oleksandra Fomchenko is a Ukrainian artist working with wearable art, sculpture, and resin-based contemporary objects. For more than five years, she has developed her own techniques for creating intricate handcrafted works that explore memory, transformation, identity, vulnerability, and feminine experience. Her recent practice focuses on symbolic artifacts that blur the boundaries between jewelry and contemporary art. Based in Ukraine, Oleksandra continues to develop a growing body of concept-driven work while building connections with international galleries, publications, and contemporary art communities.

Notes from the Artist

My work explores memory, transformation, vulnerability, and human connection through wearable art and sculptural objects. Using resin as my primary medium, I create symbolic artifacts that transform personal experiences into physical forms. Many of my works incorporate found objects and natural materials collected over time. Any insects used within the artworks were found already deceased and were never harmed for artistic purposes.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS & ARTISTS

Kimara Govender (she/her)

I'm someone who's outgoing and naturally drawn to humor. I like making jokes and keeping things light, especially around people. On the surface I can seem easygoing and confident, often laughing things off even when something bothers me. But I'm also someone who feels things deeply, just not always out loud. I value loyalty, real connections, and people who feel genuine rather than performative. I'm still figuring myself out, but I know I grow through experience and reflection. At the core, I'm just trying to become more grounded in who I am without losing the parts of me that feel real.

Notes from the Author

This poem explores the moment after everything has changed, but before the heart accepts it. I'm drawn to the quiet ways people carry absence, where memory briefly pretends nothing was lost. "Five Seconds" captures that fragile illusion of return, how familiarity can feel like home even when it's gone. My work lives in the tension between holding on and letting go.

Hamade (she/her)

hamadeathing@gmail.com

Instagram: @hamade_a_thing

A curious individual interested in any form of art available. Fan of everything new, strange, and confusing.

"My work revolves around oddity and what we see and feel when we deem ourselves or others as different."



Jack Hansen (he/they)

Cover Artist
The Observer

Instagram:

@jackhansen.illustration

I'm a recent graduate of the Savannah College of Art and Design and an artist who loves graphic and experimental work, because I feel that work shows and reflects how the world is today.

This work is based on me and my interaction with the world. I see myself as one who only observes the beauty and cruelty of society, and how it treats the people who feed it.

Jasmine Harrison (she/her)

Instagram: @jasmineharrison

My work aims to bridge the senses, primarily sound, sight, and sensation, in order to fully immerse the reader in an experience both grounded and transcendent.

Renee Hernandez (she/her)

Renee Hernandez lives in the southwest desert with her husband and children. As her family has grown, so has her love for poetry. She loves to chronicle her everyday life in the beauty of verse.

"I love musing on whatever the day brings, and this allows me to have a wide genre of poetry at all times."

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS & ARTISTS

Yvonne Jayne (she/her)

Yvonne Jayne lives and writes in Hawaii. Her poetry is published in “The Twisted Vine,” Western New Mexico University; “The Tipton Poetry Journal”; “The San Francisco Journal of Hope and Peace”; “The Monterey Poetry Review”; “Timberline Review”; and “The Sandy River Review,” University of Maine. She has recently completed her MFA at Concordia University, St. Paul.

Lauren Ma (she/her)

Lauren Ma is a Chinese-Cambodian high school student, children’s rights advocate, and writer based in Los Angeles. As a mentee at Girls Write Now, an award-winning nonprofit dedicated to amplifying underrepresented voices, she has had the opportunity to explore numerous creative outlets, including creative nonfiction, spoken word poetry, and podcasting. Two of her poems are soon to be published in anthologies by Girls Write Now and The Well. In her free time, Lauren enjoys going on walks and runs, painting, hosting potlucks, and reading any book she can get her hands on.

Notes from the Author

翡翠項鍊 (Jade Necklace) is a personal essay that explores the importance of my family’s history and how I came to realize it. Growing up, I always viewed the stories told about my grandma from a distance. This necklace became a catalyst for me to engage with this aspect of my identity and feel connected to a person I miss dearly. The italicized parts woven throughout serve as a metaphorical depiction of growth and discovery.

Marthé McLoud

Marthé McLoud is a retired social worker residing in Strand, South Africa. Several of her poems have been published on the literary website Versindaba and in the Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Anthology, as well as in the anthologies Nuwe Stemme 6, the lockdown anthology Maskers en Mure, the medical poetry collection Flikkergram, and Merang, one of the Afrikaans 100 projects. In 2025, she debuted with the poetry collection Ontbloot, published by Turksvy Publikasies.

“My debut poetry collection explores childhood trauma and its lasting effects in adult life.”

James Mellor (he)

Instagram: @jamesmellor06

James Mellor is a multidisciplinary artist working across mixed media, sculpture, and installation. Their practice explores mental health, transformation, and the complexities of the human psyche. Through layered visual narratives, vibrant contrasts, and intricate wire sculpture, Mellor reflects the tension between fragility and resilience, chaos and structure.

Their work often draws on personal experience and emotional states, using material and form as a language for introspection and healing. By translating inner landscapes into physical form, Mellor aims to challenge stigma around mental health and create space for reflection, empathy, and dialogue. Mellor has exhibited nationally and internationally, with recent work featured in exhibitions across the UK and Europe.

Notes from the Artist

My work explores mental health, transformation, and the fragile structures that connect inner and outer worlds. Using mixed media and wire sculpture, I build layered forms that reflect emotional complexity where chaos and order coexist. I am interested in how connection is formed, fractured, and reimagined through experience.

N.A. Memela (she/her)

Instagram: @miss_memela23

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS & ARTISTS

Keely O'Brien (she/her)

Keely O'Brien is a poet and artist. She aims to create strong visuals with words, and express those in her visual art. Emotionally expressive writing is important to her, especially telling stories of emotional processing. Keely has many passions in life, including but not limited to sewing, knitting, being in nature, and music. She believes art forms harmoniously work together. Her work has previously been featured in Pinetonezine, where she is the issue four cover artist, and on waxpoetryart.com.

Notes from the Artist

The Grosbeak and the Redpoll is a true story. I even have a poor-quality photo of the moment. Bird photography is something I enjoy. Learning the different behaviours and traits of birds is fascinating.

Olivia Simonson (she/her)

Instagram: @o_livi_18

Olivia Simonson is a recent graduate from St. Cloud State University with a degree in English Literature. She enjoys crafting both creative nonfiction and fiction pieces from her home in North Dakota. *Facts* is her debut, and she is honored to be sharing her story with you all.

Maria Tsimafeeva Dmitrievna (she/her)

All my life, I have loved finding connections between vastly different things. In my work, I wanted to reveal that almost imperceptible link between the human soul and the world surrounding it: between the ocean and the human soul, and between humanity and technology.

Nicolás Uslé (he/him)

nicolasusle.wixsite.com/arte

saatchiart.com/popppunk

Instagram: @nicolasusle

I'm a visual artist from Argentina. I've done animations, illustrations, paintings, drawings, graffiti, and album covers. I've participated in group and solo shows in Argentina, won prizes and contests, and also work as an art assistant.

My work talks about an inner path, walked on the outside.

Arya Utsa Varma (she/her)

The university experience is widely described as "living while you're young," but our haziest moments often show us who we truly are.

Katheryn Zacatenco (she/her)

Instagram: @kat.zaca

Katheryn Zacatenco (b. 2004) grew up traveling between New York City and Virginia with a sketchbook in hand to help navigate the world around her. Inspired by her love of animation, illustration, and her own crafty family, she developed a passion for all forms of art at a young age. Inheriting her mother's passion for teaching, Zacatenco decided to pursue art education at James Madison University. Her art focuses on self-reflection and the invisible ties that connect people, places, and objects.

Through her work as a pre-service teacher, she focuses on making art creation accessible to all so that the spark of creativity can be lit in everyone. Zacatenco believes the skills one learns through the discipline of art translate into many other disciplines.

THANK YOU FOR READING

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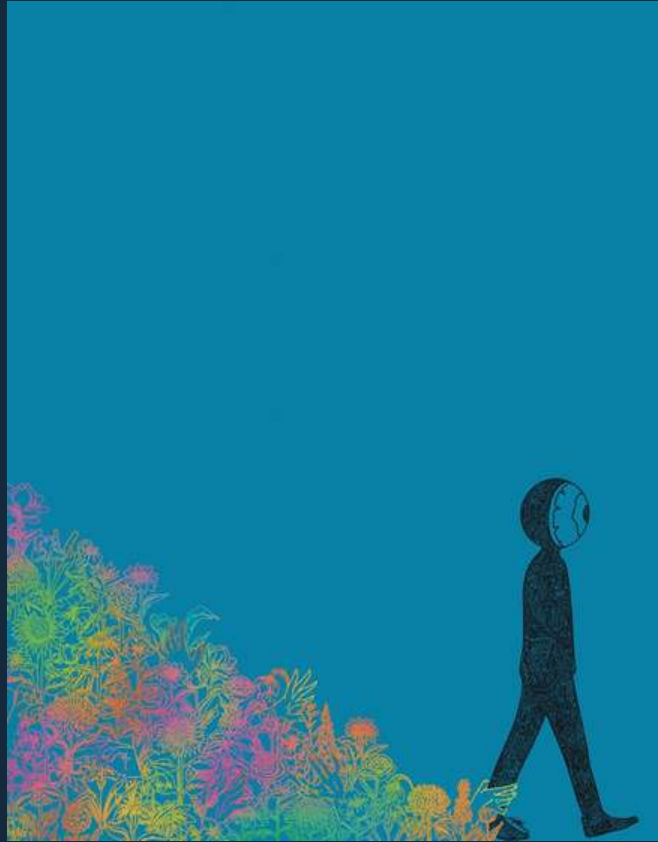
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ISSUE 2 • CONNECTION • SUMMER 2026

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PUBLISHED BY BEE THE CHANGE FOUNDATION • ISSN 3143-3421 (PRINT) • ISSN 3143-343X (ONLINE)