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Creative Writing Center

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Dumaguete City, Philippines

Sands & Coral MMXXVI MAPS



Sands & Coral
MAPS

I touch God with my Song as the hill touches the faraway sea with its waterfall—TAGORE

SANDS & CORAL

MMXXVI



MAPS

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Edilberto & Edith Tiempo Creative Writing Center


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Sands and Coral contributes to the rich storytelling tradition of Dumaguete City as the UNESCO City of Literature.

For Aida Rivera-Ford—

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FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

March is finally upon us. By the time you're reading this, there will only have been a few more days left before this month will soon be over. To some of our editors here at *Sands & Coral*, this may very well mark the beginning of the end of their college lives at Silliman University. And so, what a fitting farewell gift the release of this issue is to our beloved graduating seniors.

This year's issue, "Maps," brings together a selection of 69 literary works from a total of 123 submissions written and sent over by our senior high school, undergraduate, and graduate students in the course of two months since we opened the call for submissions at the beginning of the semester. Initially we worried we'd be hard-pressed for quality submissions given the limited time before our publication date. What a relief to know we worried in vain!

Because what this tells me—as I hope it does for you, dear Reader—is that storytelling is alive more than ever in this campus, in this town, as in "The green canopies slowly turning concrete/though the streetlamps stand timeless:/A map of stories loved and lived" in this year's *Sands & Coral* editor-in-chief Jude Wilter Domen's titular poem "Maps," the opening piece of this year's collection.

And there will be more, you'll soon realize, as you turn to the next pages of this book and look beyond this campus: the poet Craze Matildo's Bukidnon, for instance, where one can almost taste "A drink of the mountain folk/Sweet yet dizzying"; the fisherfolk's purok in Pagadian, where April Rose Canete would "like to remember to look up at that mango tree and bask in its indifference" if only to etch in her mind this fading memory of home; the boulevard in Paul Ray Donaire's Dumaguete, where a 51-year-old widow and massage therapist from Maslog, Sibulan, born with an orthopedic condition on her lower body, wheels herself daily on her electric bike to town "beside the row of food stalls on the far left side of the Dumaguete Boulevard" where she works; or the intimate warmth of a father's embrace at home, "Little Boy Blue,/sung as I fell asleep./Those soft,

sweet words/I'm sure to keep" in Jennylyn Emperado's tender father-daughter poem.

Two days ago, the Outstanding Sillimanian Awardee for Literature and *Sands & Coral* alumna and editor-in-chief (1981-82) Marjorie Evasco sent me a link on Messenger. No words. No message whatsoever. To my delight, the link opened to Poetry London's webpage, an email exchange published between her and Romalyn Ante, another Filipina poet based in the UK.

At one point in their exchange, dated 11 December 2025, Ante wondered with awe what it's like to publish a book one decade at a time and asked her Tita Marj what she does to sustain a creative life, how she finds "sustenance in the quiet work that goes beyond recognition."

"The living always exceeds the writing and demands from the conscious writer full attention so that the writing can be an exercise of a different form of paying attention to the why and wherefore of the living," Evasco writes back.

I believe the same truth can be had, dear Reader, whether we're writing, gardening, cooking, studying, crossing the street, holding the hand of the people we love, loving, reading: *to pay attention to the why and wherefore of the living.*

Let this collection be a gift.

Aaron Jalalon
Sands & Coral adviser

8 March 2026
Dumaguete City

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This issue would not have been possible without the steady pair of hands that guided us throughout the editorial process, for that we are grateful to our adviser, Sir Aaron Jalalon.

To the mothership, we would like to thank the Edilberto and Edith Tiempo Creative Writing Center and the Department of English and Literature.

To Ms Kaycee Melon, Mr John Rubio, Ma'am Bonnette (congratulations on your retirement!), Dr Joan Generoso, and the University Publications Committee: thank you for your support in the creation of this issue.

To the editors and contributors of past issues whose craft we hope to preserve: thank you for the words that continue to inspire us in our creative and editorial vision.

To our contributors, whose stories serve as the landmarks that ground this issue: we can't thank you enough for sharing your voices with us. Thank you. Salamat.

And finally to you, the Reader. We believe that these stories will live on forever because of you. Reading is nothing less than another form of breathing. Thank you for keeping these stories alive.

PART 1
ATLAS
&
MYTHS

Maps

by Jude Wilter Domen

The green canopies slowly turning concrete,
though the streetlamps stand timeless:
A map of stories loved and lived
on streets that once held a thousand
lives left on the pavements.

A kiss tucked behind a bench
of a hidden park in Bantayan,
or a stolen glance kept
amidst the rush of reds along Perdices.

There are ghosts roaming
under the branches of Claytown,
some great love left behind,
their footfalls heard from forty years past.

Tales of blazing youth
left marks on the seawall,
Escaño standing witness
to a thousand beginnings and farewells.

A lark shared along Banica,
the laughter still piercing the air.
Or the prints of a life well lived
etched deep on the Boulevard.

Never fading, the streets remember;
Acacia roots pushing deep
below the concrete.

Pasarela

by Katinka Visitacion

I. BOOK OF GLORIA

A ritual prayer before walking in through the staff door, lest I be struck down by a forgotten, ancient deity of festivity for not treating Sippy's with the veneration it deserved.

There were only so many feet in the world God was merciful enough to mold into the shape of a pageant pump—or so my father swore was gospel. It was the same reason he refused to take on the majority of the clientele that shuffled into the gay bar looking not for the likes of his alter ego, Lady Pekpek, but for Coach Tolentino: mixed-metal hacienda heiress mothers with the daughters they had too young in tow, their bodies taut with the effort needed not to glance at the practicing gogo dancers.

Fortunately, where the rest of the kids I went to school with were born with keys to their family SUVs lodged in their mouths, Saturnina Sy was expertly C-sectioned from her mother's womb with a crown and scepter. Forget ordained by God—as far as I was concerned, she was the *messiah* of pageantry, and my father was determined to play the Virgin Mother who raised the savior in seven-inch heels.

And for all her radiance, I wouldn't dare look her in the eye, classroom or Sippy's.

So when I pushed open the stubborn slab of wood my Dad and I called the door to our apartment right above the club, only to be greeted with the sight of her poised politely by the dinner table, pristine, sheet-white school uniform only made achievable by the calloused hands of a Yaya, my very first thought was that perhaps the good Christ wanted to deliver my perdition early.

"Victorias," shot out of my mouth before she could say anything.

"Sorry?" Saturnina tilted her head, her tar-black hair spilling

over her shoulder.

"*Dad*, I mean," I shook my head as if it would clear the muddle, answering her in tight bursts of clarity, "He's in Victorias. Pride gig. Not coming back until tomorrow. Did he not text your mom? I swore he texted your mom. *I* texted your mom for him. Just this morning. Hungover. I mean–*he* was. I don't drink. Alprazolam."

"Shit, really?" she sent me a look I was all too familiar with from school, where her uncertainty betrayed her private school politeness, "my driver isn't coming until six."

I took a millisecond-long glance at the clock, worried that she would take that as a sign of wanting her out of the apartment, wary of how my limbs moved around her. Three o'clock. I gave in and sent a second glance in passing prayer, in case the punishment wrought upon me by Saturnina sitting pretty in the middle of my apartment with no third party to mediate was only a taste of His divine wrath.

"I'm sorry, you don't think I can stay here for the meantime, do you?" she tilted her head further. Self-flagellation through etiquette by staying with the likes of me. God. Either she was a martyr for subjecting herself to this, or the devil in the desert who was determined to see me squirm.

"Sure," my smile didn't reach my eyes, "why not?"

II. BOOK OF MARGIE

School was where I did most of my rituals. A prayer to Saint Anthony every time I passed by the lost and found, a prayer to Saint Lawrence before I walked through the cafeteria, a prayer after every prayer for every time I felt the previous wasn't heartfelt enough, and three beats from my fist to my heart every time a prayer was interrupted. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.* During days when I felt that I had prayed to the Abrahamic pantheon too much were days I would spend the trisikad ride back to Sippy's praying to a deity of any other religion, just to tie up any loose ends.

Kids who lived with their drag queen fathers above gay bars weren't their target income demographic, so it was only by my father's boyfriend's generosity I was able to go to San Lorenzo. There, I rubbed elbows with Bacolod's most socially inept heirs and rode in their Hiluxes. Saturnina Sy was my polar opposite. Nauseatingly rich and dizzyingly obvious about it. She left an indelible mark on me in kindergarten just as she did everyone else, when her mother interceded the beginning of class in the middle of the morning period to castigate a teacher for calling her anything but her name. *I will not allow you to minimize my daughter—it's Sa-tur-ni-na. Say the full thing or don't say it at all. Where is your department head? I want to talk to your department head.*

In any other universe, we would have been passing ships. I had never stepped foot in a Chinese restaurant function hall, and only just *looking* at her I could tell she didn't know her jeepney routes. It was only until we were both seven years old and she had joined her very first pageant that we'd become silent constants in each other's lives. Dad had sworn off coaching pageant girls since the late nineties, too tired of overbearing schedules and parents, but when Saturnina, with a Mrs Sy hot on her heels, walked into the gay bar for the first time, the younger of the two inquiring one of the off-duty queens after him with all the verve of someone much older than the ten years she had under her rhinestone belt, I had to quickly become used to sharing both my home and my father with his protege.

III. BOOK OF PIA

"Did CLE kick your ass too?"

I was in the middle of pouring her water when she spoke up from where she moved on the couch. Even without Dad in the room to chide her for her poise, she sat with a practiced countenance instilled only by the rigorousness that made her such a force to be reckoned with onstage. My father bartered his praise for crowns, and Saturnina Sy got crowns.

Nonetheless, the attempt at idle conversation threw me off. We had an odd rapport. At San Lorenzo, we might as well have been strangers, and at Sippy's, I might as well have been invisible, if only turned corporeal if they needed anything from me. But I knew the way her bottom lip pursed for five counts before she could start crying, and question and answer portions were her least favorite parts of pageantry because she abhorred having to stand still and listen to what the others had to say; the same way she knew that I breezed past my homework under the stipulation I studied in the same room as their practice sessions or during drag shows since I found silence too unsettling, or the fact that I was late to school so often because I had to usher the last of the patrons out of the bar and close. That was the gist of our relationship—too familiar with each other to ever engage properly. Or so I thought.

"Sorry?"

"Like, do you think you did good on the test?" she paraphrased with a diplomatic smile, as if I didn't understand the linguistic nuance of getting my ass kicked.

"I studied," I shrugged, placing her cup on the coffee table, "so I did as well as I could have regarding the circumstances."

At that, she stared at me incredulously for a brief moment before releasing a guffaw of disbelief, covering her chapstick-pink mouth with a manicured hand. I stood awkwardly in front of her and allowed myself to think that this was very much what being in front of a judging panel must be like.

"You're Coach Tolentino's son for sure," she giggled, "vague, but not too vague, confident, but never conceited. You talk like a pageant girl."

It was my turn to laugh, "So you're deferring your place in Teen Masskara, then?"

"Defer?" she wrinkled her nose, "As in, give up? Where do you pull out these words?"

"More or less give up, yeah," I tightened my lips, "I read a lot."

"Well-read or not, unless you can walk in the shoes I do, I don't think you stand a chance up there."

I raised my hands in surrender, "Never said I wanted to, Saturnina."

Conversation. That was good. For all of the indifference on my face, I was relieved that I didn't have to deal with quiet. For that, I offered a silent prayer to Saint John Chrysostom.

Taking the risk of talking out of turn, I asked—"How about you?"

"Fuck CLE," she grimaced, "I had Danica switch out my answers while she was checking my paper. I love the camaraderie that comes with the last leg of Grade Ten. Jesus, sit down, won't you? You're making my head hurt, having to look up."

I colored and gracelessly sat down by the dinner table, looking down to avoid her unimpressed stare. I might have lived above Sippy's for as long as my consciousness allowed it, but *she* had the presence of the old showgirls that the bar ran on.

"You're, like, good at CLE, though," there was a certain kind of steely Saturnina always operated on, but I knew the softening of her gaze when I saw it. Didn't make me any less terrified of her, though.

"Who isn't? It's a subject about rhetoric. You just need to talk about Jesus."

"That's elementary CLE," Saturnina said.

I couldn't help my snicker, "You don't like theology?"

"Please, I don't even like going to church, " she shook her head indignantly before catching herself, "Oh—sorry."

"I don't go to church," I said, half as an anecdote and half as reassurance. She looked at me like I grew two heads.

"Aren't you, like," she motioned with her hands, "I don't know, like—a Jesus freak?"

"A Jesus freak," I repeated.

"A Jesus freak. You know all the answers to all the questions—you're like, the Christapedia," Saturnina doubled down, "Name the

patron saint of bartenders?"

"Saint Amandus, but that's not—"

"See?" she raised an accusatory finger, "Jesus freak. Christapedia. Whatever's kinder."

I waved a relenting hand, "Sure."

IV. BOOK OF CATRIONA

There were ten minutes of silence that she spent scrolling through her phone and I spent inspecting her face. Much like the rest of our shared classmates, it was difficult to separate her from the milk fat of kindergarten. Although Saturnina was always conventionally pretty, even with the sash and crown on, I could only see the same girl that grew up in between yearly vacations to Hong Kong and in the middle of a hole-in-the-wall Ramos bar.

"Where are you going after graduation?" came out of my mouth before I could pray again.

She looked at me over her phone, "I'm staying here. ABM."

"Business? I never would have guessed," the cynicism in my voice must have been obvious, because I met her smile.

"Unfortunately," she set down her phone, "Someone's gotta inherit the hardware if Miss Universe doesn't work out for me. You?"

Shyly, I picked at the lint of my hoodie, "I'm shooting for somewhere in Manila."

Saturnina leaned forward in interest, which I took as a sign to continue, despite my burgeoning regret at opening the conversation up, "I don't know what to do exactly per se, but I do know that I want to do one of those read-heavy, useless programs. The ones you have to push your nose into books for. The ones you have to think about getting e-readers for. Those."

Saturnina clapped her hands, "Why not join a seminary? The seminary might be perfect for you."

"Christapedia is, you mean," I laughed, "Saturnina, I'm not

even sure if what I am *is* Catholic."

She tilted her head for the umpteenth time, and with her inquisitive look I felt I had no choice but to satisfy, I opened with: "It's like—it's *not* Atheism. It's the complete opposite, like…"

"It's not the worship I like," I began again, "it's the spectacle. Not exclusively of Catholicism, but more of the entire international religious canon. Do you follow? Stop me if you don't follow. The reassurance of something so much bigger than me. The *fear* of something so much bigger than me. It's almost something primordial—yes, yes, I know, *primordial*—the way I need to look up to something to make me feel like my actions aren't my own. There's this comfort in the fear that you and I both are so—so… *so* limited, that if only for a moment, we can take refuge in the arms of something that isn't. Gods, saints, deities, angels. That kind of shit."

Saturnina's brows furrowed the more I rambled on, and I stopped myself before she was fully frowning. Dad would kill me if he were to come back to his living legacy with forehead lines.

"I see a specialist," I admitted, "She clued me in on the fact that maybe my constant exposure to larger-than-life figures helped expedite the need for something bigger than me to always lean on: drag queens, pageant girls, macho dancers."

"Don't feel sorry for me," I interceded before she could open her mouth, "After all, the whole Jesus freak thing might be working out for me. Grades-wise, I mean. Not great for the brain, but amazing for my report card."

Saturnina's lips slowly curled up, "I'm a saint to you?"

"I pray to Saint Agatha before dealing with you," I admitted, "you share the same stubbornness."

The worry that I had run my mouth quelled immediately with the sound of her laughter. Like procession bells.

Kalipay sa Bukidnon

by Craze Matildo

Sa dili pa mosilang ang kabugason sa kadlawon,
Sa labog og gatuya-tuya nga ubod,
Diha sa akong pag-yangod,
Duga sa lubi gisalod.

Pagga-imnon sa tawong bukidnon,
Lami apan makalipong.
Duyugan sa sayaw nga Kuradang,
Perting ikid-ikid ang tanan.

Energy drink namong Bukidnon,
Lupig pa ang Sting og Red Bull.
Baso diri, baso didto.
Bantay, tuba lang kini migo.

Sa pagsalop sa adlaw,
Naduha na ang imong panan-aw.
Lakang nagsusampinday
Tungod sa kahubog og kalipay.

Apan migo ayaw pangita ug away.

The Joy in Bukidnon

by Craze Matildo

Before the dawn breaks,
From the heart of the palm that sways,
As I look up,
The coconut sap gathered.

A drink of the mountain folk,
Sweet yet dizzying.
Accompanied by the Kuradang dance,
Everyone sways and spins with delight.

Our Bukidnon energy drink,
Better than Sting or Red Bull.
A glass here, a glass there,
Careful, my friend—it's only tuba.

As the sun sets,
Your vision begins to blur.
Your steps stumble and cross,
From combined drunkenness and joy.

But friend, do not seek a fight.

The Fisherfolk's Village

by April Rose Canete

When we first moved into that village, I had no desire to write about it.

It was in the middle of nowhere. Goats were your quiet companions while carabaos paraded the streets after a hard day's end. And the trees, they dwarfed my small stature. In the afternoon, my mother would forcibly delouse me at the front steps of our unfinished concrete home until I fell asleep. The heat made you sleepy. And at night, crickets reverberating through the woods were the only signs of life. Until that one morning, the whirring sound of a bulldozer out front woke me up. Civilization, finally. But as a child, it was contrary to the kind of life I had hoped for.

Perhaps it was the lack of stories or the muted sound of Nature in the metropolis that made me long for my lost childhood days. Nature was that very magical thing that you keep on reminiscing about. The stars looked too far away. The rural sounds were out of reach.

Tonight is nothing special, but I find myself getting carried away by the memories, the stories attempting to live in my head again. They were still for so many years, and yet they flow gracefully today, one detail after the other. Borges once said, "Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river." Perhaps the same is true with me. Perhaps, tonight, I will be swept along.

***

The Fisherfolk's Village or Purok Mananagat is what that small barrio was called. True to its name, the wives in our neighborhood would donate pails of fish as soon as their husbands arrived after months at sea. When the catch was meager, instead of pails, they would send us small packages of dried fish or fish intestines fashionably crammed in a bottle otherwise known

as *dayok*. The spirit of that rural community was always about giving. Below our area was the Port Village or Purok Dunggoan. In that neighborhood, almost everyone was engaged in the fishing business. Everyone who was someone had their daughter or son's name for the big fishing boats they own: Rowena's Fishing Boat or Rey's Fishing Company, etc. It was usually a family business, too, and some of my classmates were future heirs and heiresses. They were usually those who were tagged as rich in our school.

In these two conjoined villages somewhere in Pagadian City, acacia, coconut, mango, and Gmelina trees stood everywhere, too! In fact, there were more trees than houses, and more goats than children. The earthy smell of the land coated you. And the muddy road, it held you back.

The first man I met was a doctor, or so my grandmother said. He could cure all sorts of diseases and heal any illness, making him a famous figure in the entire barangay. An amicable elderly man, he wore a floral, cotton skirt, a white sando (almost every day), and a necklace with a silver, round pendant. He frequently visited our home, particularly my mother, who was pregnant with my younger sister at the time. As soon as my mother gave birth, he never went away. He was fond of storytelling, which I became suspicious of over time. Does this man even work in a hospital? Why is he everywhere instead of working? Later, I found out his name was Lolo Tasoy.

Ate Gemma became my friend when I was in fifth grade. Her little sister was my classmate in school, but I developed an affinity for Ate Gemma, perhaps, because I had no older sister. She taught me how to lead block rosaries for the whole month of October, sing the Salmo Responsoryo at the Sunday church service, and many more. We became like real sisters. Most of the time, we would meet at the river when I would tag along with my mother, who did our laundry while she did theirs. The river flows with stories—deep and sometimes surreal. It was there that I knew of Nang Tiwa, "the witch," Nang Piña, the "manghihilot," Neneng the *Subana*, Monda, a sigbin caretaker, and so much

more. While the mothers did their gossip (and laundry), I would watch Ate Gemma wash her uniform and chatter endlessly about my classmates in school. She was indeed a great listener, nodding and smiling from time to time. Near the river sits a well, where we would fetch our drinking water long before we had a proper water source. It was called the *Kanoni* well, Ate Gemma said.

As soon as that bulldozing business was in order, kids started to hang out in the streets more often, with the goats, too. Ate Gemma, Ate Irene, and Kuya Chamber were among those who would rally us every afternoon for a fun patintero game. In Mindanao, we call it *tubig-tubigay*. Unfortunately, my mother would not allow me to join the fun. Being clumsy and scrawny, she feared I would slip or scratch my knee and eventually get disqualified as a majorette from the school drum corps. Somehow, that was my ticket for a scholarship, so I had to obey. Well, I was content with watching them on the now cemented street anyway. During power interruptions, *tubig-tubigay* would press on, but stories about Maria Labo would force the kids to go home. Most fondly, I remember all the afternoons Ate Gemma and I would run our way home from school just to catch Meteor Garden on the television.

I was 13 when I got extremely sick. My fever went as high as 39 degrees celsius and the stomach pain was unbearable. Nearly passing out, partly because of pain and partly because of endless crying, my half-opened eyes caught the sight of a long floral skirt. The doctor was finally here. The warmth of his palms on my head kept me awake. It felt like I was lying in a hammock suspended mid-air. It was humid, but the trees moved gracefully through the window, giving my eyes enough sight to focus on before all the world turned pitch black.

Soon, beads of sweat started forming on my eyebrows. I remember the first time I saw him do it. He was hunched over my cousin's forehead too, whispering words I could not understand. His eyes were half-closed, his lips moving like a gentle murmur against the silence of the late Friday afternoon. Then, slowly,

reverently, he placed a thumb wet with his own spit on my cousin's skin.

Bring me a pen and paper, Lolo Tasoy said moments after he mumbled something under his breath. I waited for his wet thumb on my forehead. Instead, he wrote some phrases (Latin, supposedly) on the piece of paper, burned it, caught all the ashes in a cup of water, and my medication was ready. I could not believe what I was seeing. But Lolo Tasoy was the doctor, so why would I complain? Slowly, with trembling hands, I received the cup.

Bottomless, he said. It was tasteless, but there was a strange kind of tenderness, the kind that made your skin prickle, not from fear, but from the weight of something ancient passing through you. To an outsider, it might have looked unsanitary, maybe even absurd. But you did not question it. You only knew that when he did it, the crying stopped. The fever broke. The world, somehow, righted itself again. It was ancestral, sacred, and now I understood Lolo Tasoy's specialization as a doctor.

We were out in the river washing our laundry that one morning when Nang Helen brought the news: her husband had gone missing at sea while fishing. Everyone was in a clamor: gasping, sighing, lamenting this unfortunate incident. Sympathies outpoured, but hope continued to flourish in everyone's hearts. Soon, the commotion died down when an elderly woman carrying a pail of dirty clothes passed by. Before I could say anything, Ate Gemma whispered, "Spit on the ground and say *'buyag'* in your head as many times as you can. Nang Tiwa is here."

The clamor now turned into endless silence, stretching long as the river and cold like its waters. *Thwack*. The sound echoed through the trees, a steady, percussive beat that broke the stillness. *Thwack*. *Whap*. *Thwack*. The wooden paddle worked so hard; soap suds burst out with each strike, dancing in the sunlight before disappearing suspended in the air. The river, on the other hand, continued its peaceful stream, unbothered, nonchalantly dominant. Its indifference is what makes it comforting. Before

noon, everyone left for home.

The river was a sacred place, and everyone was discouraged to go swimming, especially on Tuesday and Friday noon. In fact, we were to keep our voice down and ask for little permissions every time we do our business there. Whether you were to wash your laundry, fetch some water, or enjoy a dip, pay your respects. As the authority of our barangay, we never questioned the elderly population when they imposed these rules. In rural areas, it was always best to follow rather than ask questions, especially concerning the *'dili ingun atu.'* It was only much later, when I learned about the history of Mindanao and our early settlers, that I understood why.

Lolo Tasoy once said that we owe our deep respect for rivers to the Subanen, the indigenous peoples of the Zamboanga Peninsula (ZamPen) area. Subanens are also known as the 'river people' or 'people of the headwaters.' For them, the word river was identical to place or home. We often hear people say *'sapa'* these days, but Lolo Tasoy would often say *suba* is the proper way to say it. They are our ancestors, he would say. Lolo Tasoy would ponder while looking at that vast body of water where Nang Tiwa washes her clothes, and the rest of us. As the earliest inhabitants of Mindanao, they deeply connect with the natural world and believe that *diwatas* reside in these places, these bodies of water. *Diwatas* are often the guardians of the river, and Subanen people believe they can be either benevolent or mischievous. Are you a Subanen, Lo? I asked him one time, but he just mischievously smiled.

Several supernatural stories surround the river, as far as I can remember. It was said that one of our neighbors, Ate Irene's mother, was washing her laundry by the river at noon. It was a Friday, and despite the warnings, her mother had a mind of her own. Reportedly, her mother saw underwear that shone like gold, carefully placed on top of one of the boulders that surrounded the river. Seemingly hypnotized by the resplendence of the object, she brought it home and wore it to sleep. Lolo Tasoy recounted

this story. His knowledge might have come from his ancestors, too. Wearing his floral skirt, he would walk barefoot from house to house, grinding the little stones beneath his feet as if they were fine sand, and shared all these stories to remind us of our ancestors. His conversations would always begin with a compliment on your new pail, basin, wood paddle, or dipper, and then he would later say, "But when you go and wash your clothes using that shiny dipper on the river, don't forget to pay your respects." I started to appreciate Lolo Tasoy and his stories. Now, he looks more like a historian to me.

The mother died a few weeks later. And while some may have attributed her death to overfatigue, others claim it was because of the mysterious underwear. Ate Irene was left under the foster care of her grandmother, Nang Monda, whom they said owned a sigbin in her small hut. Stories like these kept our community cautious and respectful to the natural world. We always say our *'tabi-tabi po'* and make sure to understand the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'

Ate Gemma was one who would sneak out into the river after carefully telling her mother that she would just go out and pick some mangoes at the neighbor's house. Benevolent, yet she can be mischievous, at times, too. On this particular day, Ate Gemma visited me at home around 4PM, her hair dripping wet and her right hand is rather preoccupied with a pail full of green mangoes.

She was among those beauties who would be called to join pageants, but she declined every invitation she received. That *morena* beauty from the province, tall and graceful in a way that didn't ask for attention but always drew it. Her skin carried the sun like a soft armor, glowing bronze in the afternoon light, the kind of brown of home and provincial trees and growing things. She had eyes that lingered, deep and expressive like they had listened to the wind and kept its secrets. Her hair was thick and full, a cascade of dark waves that she never tried to tame too much, always just loose enough to dance in the breeze.

When she smiled, it felt like morning, unhurried, warm, something you wanted to bask in for just a little longer. She didn't need words to leave an impression; it was in the way she moved, steady and sure, shaped by a life that knew both simplicity and strength. There was a kind of quiet pride in her, the kind only someone raised by the land could carry. Even now, when I close my eyes, I can still see her walking barefoot on worn cement, her laughter rising with the scent of trees and green mangoes, like a hymn to everything unspoken.

Let's dig in! Ate Gemma exclaimed, raising the bowlful of mangoes, her eyes gleaming with excitement, sat down on the floor and so we huddled right away to join her. Rural life has its way of bringing people closer together, situating anything in the middle for everyone to partake upon. Whether it's camote crop, *tambis*, new gossip about a neighbor, or scrutinizing a *buyag-buyag* victim of Nang Tiwa, everyone joins a certain band. That night, after we ravished all the mangoes, Ate Gemma went back home, for good, due to an upset stomach. Too much mangoes, she supposed.

I read somewhere that "twilight is the middle of time, between the noon of actuality and the midnight of dream; and on the borders of sleep and wakefulness, dream and reality meet and merge." I think it was Hawthorne who said this. But at that time, I did not know what was real and what was a dream. When I woke up at twilight, Ate Gemma had died.

The clamor was endless, noiselessly unsettling, and stretched until the twilight was no more. There were people running, some stood still, and the rest of us were waiting. She's not yet dead, some whispered in the thick and heavy air. Nang Tiwa, the famed 'witch' in our village, had a strong contention that Ate Gemma was still in the borderline between life and death, between 'us' and 'them'. Drop her body from the window, she had dared say. That is ridiculous, one of Ate Gemma's aunts replied. What if she is still alive? You would kill her by dropping her body on the ground! At that moment, it was difficult for me to

name the emotions growing inside my chest let alone understand the concept of death. I stood there watching as the grown-ups seemed uncertain about what to do next. What was real and what was a dream here?

There were too many slippers outside the front steps of Ate Gemma's house. A reminder of those who cared, grieved, wept, remorseful, and yet alive and watching the dead. And at that point, to me, there was nothing that reminded me of her life but those black rubber slippers that carried her warmth and grace here on earth for the last eighteen years. I still could not quite believe it. What was real and what was a dream here?

As a doctor, Lolo Tasoy said it was one of those moments in his life when he felt hopeless. Earlier that day, he said he saw Ate Gemma facing toward the clothesline as she hung her clothes after doing her laundry at the village's river. But when she turned towards him, Ate Gemma's face was that of an old woman. Lolo Tasoy said he checked the time and day, it was past twelve noon on Friday. Ate Gemma could have been dehydrated from too much vomiting, or poisoned from something she ate that day, but the elders believed she disrespected the river. *Nabuyagan,* they said. But had Ate Gemma's family brought her to the hospital, could she still be alive today? What was on the other side of *nabuyagan?* Proper medical care. What did Ate Gemma do to disrespect the river? No one knows, nobody goes there at twelve noon. Everyone who goes there during the wee hours is now dead.

So many years had passed since Ate Gemma walked off the earth, but it is only now that I realize that I had not properly mourned her death. I was too young, and I did not know how to process grief. All I remember was her mother, who turned into a miserable woman after her daughter was gone. She was eighteen. That night, when they called her asking for permission to bring Ate Gemma to the hospital, she refused outright. We couldn't pay the hospital bills, she reasoned. Does remorse eat you alive? Because when I looked at her mother at the time, she looked so consumed. Lolo Tasoy was able to cure a neighbor who had been

bitten by a snake and prevented her from going blind. He could cure measles and chicken pox, but his powers were weak against 'them'. His Latin phrases were rendered useless against science. He may be a healer but not a doctor, after all.

Now, Lolo Tasoy is dead, and the well has since dried up. The river is still alive but at the brink of dying too, because who does their laundry on the riverside these days? Modernity has wiped out the past, including its fondness and memories. There are now two-story houses, and the husbands of our neighbors are not only fishermen. There are those who own cars and marry foreigners. No one walks barefoot anymore.

Ate Irene is now married with three kids, and Kuya Chamber has since lived abroad after college graduation. Some goats still feed on the grass near the road, but the parade of carabaos is no longer a ceremony. The streets are quiet, save for the habal-habal drivers who parked under the mango tree, for passengers to transport downtown.

Had Ate Gemma still lived, she could've graduated from college and gone abroad. She could probably marry a foreigner with her morena beauty! The possibilities could be as endless as the stars for her. The old house where Ate Gemma and her family lived is no more. But her mother is still there, thriving on her manicure and pedicure home services. Every time I go back home, there is nothing there that would remind me of Ate Gemma, except for the mango trees that remained. And yet, it is in their indifference that they are comforting.

The river, once a sacred place of stories, remains. But it is useless for the new settlers in our village. In the advent of technology, *tubig-tubigay* and television shows are no longer essential recreational activities. No one seems to believe in *buyag-buyag*, or sigbin, especially since Nang Tiwa and Nang Monda died many years ago. No one believes in ancient healing because science has a faster, better, and more hygienic way of doing it. Lolo Tasoy in his floral skirt, walking barefoot in that small village

now, would probably be a subject of criticism, because who does that in the face of leather jeans and Havaianas? He is nothing but a quack doctor, everyone would apparently claim. Even that quack doctor is now only *imagined.*

When we move forward with time, we leave our stories behind. But should we? For me, moving out of that village only means carrying the stories with me. The river and its memory flow wherever the winds take me. I'd like to be swept along if it means remembering Lolo Tasoy and Ate Gemma. I'd like to tell these stories on and on because time is the same in a relative way, but today, I am older. I'd like to remember to look up at that mango tree and bask in its indifference. I'd like to hear the stories again, and again, because these stories remind me of home, of Ate Gemma, of Lolo Tasoy, and of the village that is no more.

"I grew up in Pagadian the capital
Town of Zamboanga del Sur in the late forties
And early fifties, one of the original
Children. It had more
trees than there were
houses.
When my aunt died,
I visited the town in
May
2006, a quarter of a
century
Since I'd last seen it.
No trees in sight, not
a leaf
Nor a blade of grass.
Absolutely no plant
life"

- *Trees*, Cesar Ruiz Aquino from *Caesuras*: *155 New Poems*

Easy Ride?

by Raphaelle Marie Villaluz

Hair swept on the left side, brain half-alive
Running on caffeine and a familiar route
Counting the minutes of when I'll arrive
The balmy morning crept, eyes wide to keep myself afloat

The city slowly awakes,
Blaring horns—a horrible descant
Ever and anon, Manong brakes,
Sending us all aslant in an instant

Scooting over the right, almost packed
Entoiled by a busy gridlock
Shoulder to shoulder, I felt trapped
Hoping someone would get off the next block

After three sharp clinks—the ride slowed to a stop
Passing on jingling coins, the passengers were dropped
Hoo! The wheels could finally breathe
Relaxing my cramped leg and gritted teeth

However, I was still not quite there
Nevertheless, I tidied up my hair
For I knew I was coming down the pike,
I knew I had to guise myself lifelike

Chungking Express

by Julia Arrianne Mantiza

April goes, and May comes
as quickly as grief in Chungking Express;
loss spreads throughout the city,
and it lingers on sleepless nights.

With unopened letters,
you find yourself mumbling
to their old stuffed animals
or your toy planes;

with expired pineapples,
you stuff yourself
until you're queasy
with heartbreak.

You may meet a girl
at a bar or a restaurant,
who makes you laugh
as much as April did.

April goes, and May comes,
unbeknownst, in warmth,
and what is felt
isn't anymore.

Open Air

by Josham Hamid

You climb without knowing where the ladder ends.

It sounds like the rustle of thick, glossy pages turning in a quiet bedroom in Abu Dhabi. A room washed in warm lamplight that pools gently over tiled floors. It sounds like the steady hum of an air conditioner fighting the desert heat outside. You sit cross-legged on your miniature sofa, small enough that your feet barely touch its edge, yet large enough to feel like a throne. In your lap are books that seem impossibly heavy for your age, square hardcovers nearly a kilo each. Their spines are embossed in gold: Disney Princess Collection. Disney Princess Bedtime Stories. Six hundred pages of castles and curses, and women who endured suffering only to be rewarded with happily-ever-afters.

The faint smell of ink and paper rose from the open book. The paper is thick and glossy beneath your fingertips. When you turn each page, it makes a decisive, important sound, like something significant is happening. No one tells you then that this quiet flutter of paper against paper is the first step of a ladder you will spend your life climbing. No one says that achievement has this texture, that it will begin as something as innocent as finishing stories before you go to bed.

You can already read before kindergarten. You hear a word once and spell it the way it sounds. Yes, it's definitely wrong on paper, but perfectly smooth rolling out your mouth. Adults laugh in delight when you do it. They repeat your attempts like charming anecdotes. Obedient. Behaved. Quiet. Different from your siblings who are more exuberant. The kind of child adults describe with nods of satisfaction when they call relatives and friends to brag to. You learn quickly that there is something pleasing about exceeding expectations. Something magnetic about watching a room soften toward you because you have

done something slightly unconventional.

Without realizing it, you step up again.

You are raised to be smart. Raised to love books. Raised to think beyond your years. You are not explicitly told that love must be earned, but you begin to sense that excellence makes affection louder. That achievement makes praise linger longer. Every time you understand something quickly, every time you pronounce a difficult word correctly, another invisible step forms beneath your feet. And because you are small, eager, and observant, you climb.

At the Philippine National School in Abu Dhabi, you rarely make mistakes. Sunlight filters through the windows of your classroom, and the air smells lightly of freshly cooked french fries from the canteen that settles into the corners of the classroom. Your handwriting sits neatly within blue lines because you practice it over and over at home, pressing your pencil down hard enough that the indentations mark the next sheet of paper beneath it. You want the letters to look a certain way, almost like it's measured to symmetry. You want them to look permanent. Then, when your mother picks you up, your teacher smiles and says, "She did very well today," and the sentence hovers in the air like the perfume your mom loves. A scent that's sweet and addictive as the sound is pleasing to the ears.

Another step.

Your father is a seaman, gone for stretches of time long enough that his return feels rewarding, as if the house enlivens itself in anticipation. Your mother works long hours as a saleslady in Toys R Us, selling around stubborn, spoiled kids pointing fingers and crying for more toys. On nights when she has the luxury to arrive before midnight, she sits you down on the cold floors of your bedroom, under harsh white fluorescent light, casting sharp shadows beneath your hands.

Three to five hours.

In school, they are on page ten of the workbook. At home, you have finished the entire thing and moved on to supplementary materials your mother found somewhere, bought somewhere, saved for somewhere. "Advance study," they call it, as if it were a charming hobby instead of a discipline that shapes the melody of your childhood. Each night there are three mock tests. One for yesterday's lesson. One for today. One, often many, for lessons not yet taught. Fifteen minutes per test. Your mother, exhausted, lays her head on the textbook so you cannot peek at the answers. The book becomes her pillow, her breathing slow and uneven while you work in silence. The words of your dad when he frequently says "unless you're on top of everything, you've failed," clouds your brain and starts to threaten your capacity. You answer from memory, from comprehension, from sheer will. If the score is not perfect, you do it again. And again. Until it is.

Perfection, you learn, is not a gift.
It is the price of staying on the ladder.

You begin to understand that the ladder does not disappear simply because you are tired. It waits beneath you, steady and demanding.

One evening, your older brother stands on the bed pretending it is a stage. The mattress dips beneath his weight. He memorizes a poem for a school contest, voice trembling slightly at difficult lines. Night after night, he rehearses, pacing, gesturing dramatically with small hands. You sit in a corner of the room with your "advance study" sessions, pencil scratching steadily across paper, but your ears are open. You are always listening, always absorbing, even when you pretend not to be.

One night, he falters mid-line. Panic flashes across his face. The kind that blooms when memory slips unexpectedly. Before you

think, you finished the line for him from across the room. The words leave your mouth easily, intact and eloquent. He stares at you as your parents laugh in surprise.

You did not try to memorize it. You simply did.

Always attentive. Always prepared. Always climbing.

Then it changes.

You move to the Philippines for good. First grade in the Central Elementary School of Ipil, Zamboanga Sibugay. The classrooms are warmer, louder, and alive with a humidity that clings to skin and uniform collars. Electric fans spin lazily overhead, chopping the air into uneven currents that do almost nothing at all. The desks are older, carved with initials of crushes and small scratches left by previous students. Children speak Bisaya with ease. The language feels fluid to them. Naturally, you feel rigid and outside of the bunch.

For the first time, the ladder feels unstable beneath your feet.

At recess, children rush to the canteen clutching coins in damp fists. The food displayed behind glass is unfamiliar. It's wrapped differently, smelling odd, priced in a currency you do not yet understand. So, you bring a pink Barbie food container from home. Its plastic is shiny and new against worn wooden desks. It feels like carrying a sign that says you are from somewhere else.

Culture shock does not announce itself as a concept. It arrives as a tightening in your chest, as the urge to stand up mid-lesson to find your aunt outside because you panic when you lose sight of her in a room full of people who alienated you. Even when parents are not allowed near classrooms, she lingers nearby for you. When you cannot see her, the world tilts. You leave your seat without permission.

You are no longer the tallest on the ladder.

So you reach for what you know.

When you cannot speak the language of belonging, you speak the language of excellence. You raise your hand more often. You perfect drawings even though art does not come naturally to you. You volunteer. You participate in everything available. You collect honors like armor because armor feels safer than vulnerability. Yet, every year, you place second. Always second. The top spot goes to someone else, someone with slightly more points, slightly more opportunities, slightly more favor. The gap is small, but it stings.

Still, you climb.

Then, in second grade, you slip.

Three tests at 25 out of 30. Five mistakes each.

Just five.

The number aches stronger than it should. You have never had more than three mistakes before. When your father picks you up and asks, "How were your scores?" His tone is gentle, but the question feels like an inspection. You see disappointment before it occured. You imagine his face falling. You imagine the ladder shaking violently beneath you.

So you lie.

"I got perfect."

His face lights up instantly, relief and pride mingling in his smile. He buys you ice cream before going home. The sweetness coats your tongue as you sit in the backseat, guilt hovering somewhere behind your ribs but unable to compete with the warmth of his happiness. At your grandmother's house, relatives gather in the living room. Your father announces your "perfect" scores to them. Laughter of praise erupts. Your mother hugs you tightly, kissing your

cheeks. For a moment, you are bathed in unfiltered affection.

You think: So this is what it takes. Perfection.

But the next day, the illusion fractures before you. Your father overhears three mothers discussing the science exam. One of the three you lied about. One mom mentions she asked the teacher; no one received a perfect score.

When you walk out of the classroom, he confronts you immediately. There is no space to prepare. No space to climb.

As the innocent child you were, you fold. You admit you lied.

At home, confusion replaces celebration. The word liar lands heavier than any imperfect tests. Your father's voice is sharper now. Your mother's disappointment is quieter but stronger. The praise of yesterday evaporates so quickly it feels like it never even existed.

Out of regret, you crawl beneath the kitchen sink, hidden behind a knee-high curtain. The air clings to your skin, warm and heavy, pressing against you like the weight of every expectation you've carried. Cleaning supplies crowd the small space. Pipes loom above you like exposed ribs. You pull your knees to your chest and cry for an hour and a half, the floor cool beneath your legs. Shame presses down on you. They might have lost it when you lied, but you doubt they would have even blinked at five mistakes, as if being anything less than perfect were a crime.

In that cramped darkness, something crystallizes. Disappointment is a weight you cannot bear, you have no choice but to succeed. Corrupted thoughts of a young, innocent girl.

You make a vow, not aloud, but in the private architecture of your mind. You will never need to lie again. You will simply become perfect.

From then on, your life becomes a deliberate ascent. Science quiz bees fill elementary years regardless if you hated science at school. In high school, you had approximately forty medals as proof that you have corrected your childhood mistake. Each certificate feels like repayment for that afternoon beneath the sink.

In college, the ladder stretches taller than you imagined. A full scholarship grant. Tuition, food, board, and lodging are fully shouldered. A privilege for a struggling family to have a place at a prestigious university by the sea. All you have to do is maintain your grades and walk head on with ambition.

Just keep climbing.

One afternoon, you study with friends in a room that smells faintly of coffee. Pages flip in uneven rhythm. Highlighters bleed neon across margins. You all try your best. The exam that follows is brutal, to say the least. Questions twisted, unfamiliar, and relentless. When you walk out, your friends laugh nervously.

"It's okay to fail sometimes."
"Grades don't define us."
"As long as we tried our best."

They shrug it off like rainwater sliding off an umbrella.

You walk home crying. For you, failure is not weather. It is gravity.

For the first time, you feel the ladder tremble not because someone pushed you, but because you are exhausted. Your friends seem grounded, unafraid of the earth beneath them. As if standing still is not synonymous with losing.

And that is when the realization begins to surface, slow and disorienting:

You have been climbing your whole life.
You do not know who you are when your feet touch the ground.
No one told you what to do once you reached the sky.

The girl with the heavy princess books.
The child under the kitchen sink.
The valedictorian.
The scholar.

All of them are versions of you suspended midair, hands gripping steps that never end.

You built your identity upward. You mistook height for self. You confused applause with love, performance with worth. The ladder was never just about achievement; it was about safety, about ensuring that validation would always have a sound you could clearly recognize. A sound everyone else heard, while inside, you carried the hollow ache of doing it all for them, never for yourself. The ache that makes mourning in silence felt almost forbidden.

And now, lying awake in a dorm room far from the fluorescent lights of your childhood bedroom, you feel the structure beneath you tremble. Not collapsing, not yet. Though asking.

What if the top never held what you thought it would?

What if falling instead is never bound to fail?

For years, I spoke to myself as someone observing from above, narrating the climb as if it belonged to someone else. Every grip, every careful lift of my foot measured, as though distance could soften the weight of what I've been through.

But there is no distance left now.

I have been climbing my whole life.

I learned how to measure love in medals, how to translate validation into grades. I thought if I kept ascending, I would eventually arrive somewhere stable, somewhere unquestionable. I did not realize that ladders often do not end in solid ground. They end in open air.

And I am tired of mistaking altitude for identity.

These are not fragments of a life I watched from afar, but a mirror of my own. Each triumph, each tremor, each silent surrender reflects back a self I am only beginning to recognize. And in that reflection, I feel the weight of the ladder shift beneath me. Not as a measure of worth, but as a path I once thought defined me.

I am learning slowly that the climb does not confine me. That even at the highest step, the air can be mine to breathe, and the ground can be mine to stand on.

A Sunday Afternoon

by Jude Wilter Domen

The lights were dancing in reds and blues
above our heads as the cool air made me reach
for my dad's long sleeves. I'd ask my mom how,
as the film kept playing in waves of colour.

The dull whites of Chantilly, for lunch.
Cordon bleu from my mother's plate
and a steak from my father's.
There were silly games with peas,
my little brother would growl.

As the car drives us home,
I play the same old film—the roll
of old houses and branches waving
back at me—every time we are homebound.
It sure was a pleasant Sunday afternoon.

Mutya sa Saging Tindok

ni Ronald Logong Aput

Taol sa kampanaryo duol sa menteryo
sama sa iro nga nakakita og mumo,

ilalom sa murag mata nga nagasiga
nga parehas ra kadako sa bombilya.

Pagtakdol o lingin ang bulan sa iro makita
mga maligno; kapre, tikbalang ug uban pa,

nga gustong mo ilog sa talagsaong mutya
sama sa pag-ilog sa gwapang dalaga.

Kining saginga talagsaon kayo
kay ang unod ani dagko kaayo,

isa ka dangaw ang unod niini
duha ka sipi ra pud ang makuha ani.

Sa iyang puso nahimutang ang mutya
molugwa kini sa alas dose ang takna

atangan kini, saluron sa imong baba
para dili mailog sa gustong mo kuha.

Sa pagdapat sa mutya sa imong baba
dapat andam kang makigsangka;

sa kapre nga kanimo motuok
sa dewende nga kanimo mo pagilok;

sa imong liog, sa imong tutunlan
sa ilok, sa dalunggan

aron ang mutya dili mo matulon,
kay para ang gahum dili nimo maangkon

tungod sa mutya mamahimo kang tagulilong,
tungod sa mutya dili ka makita bisan asa padulong.

The Pearl of Tindok

by Ronald Logong Aput

Howling bell near the graveyard post
like a howling dog seeing a ghost

beneath what is like a bulging eye at night
Just as big as light.

In a full moon night, the dog could see
evil creatures like tikbalang and kapre,

who want to steal that precious pearl
like stealing a precious girl.

This banana is very rare
for the fruits are too big to bear,

finger's length for each fruit size
but only two hands for each bunch size.

On its bosom the pearl lies
it will come out when midnight strikes

stay alert and open your mouth beneath
so those evil creatures could not steal it,

by the time the pearl will reach your mouth
make sure you are prepared to fight;

the kapre's mighty hands that will choke you
the elf's little hands that will tingle you;

on your neck, on your throat
on your ears and on your armpit

to prevent you from swallowing the pearl
to prevent you from getting its pow'r

because this pearl will make you invisible
because this pearl will make you invincible.

Batangas - Rosario

by Colleen Dugan

Your eyes are my full moon
Day or night
Your hair is the weeds
On my garden floor
Your lips are like cherries
So sweet, my delight
Your body is mine
As my soul is yours

Stars in the City

by Beatriz Belarmino

SETTING:

This play occurs between the Mythological past and Modern present day in both Greece and Rome.

CAST:

MINOS I—The king of Crete, son of Zeus and mortal Europa. Easily naïve and manipulated by his aunt, Hera. Through the influence of Hera, Minos begins to abuse his power of king by harassing the citizens of Crete. Throughout the play, he has a change of heart and becomes the king Crete needs.

ZEUS—King of the gods, father of Minos and husband to Hera. Though powerful and authoritative, he becomes deeply disappointed by Minos's abuse of power. Determined to teach his son humility and responsibility, Zeus sends him to the Underworld to face judgment and learn the consequences of his actions.

HERA—Queen of the gods and wife of Zeus. Resentful of Zeus's constant infidelity and the power given to Minos, his son with the mortal Europa, Hera is driven by jealousy and bitterness. Seeking revenge, she manipulates Minos into believing that cruelty, harassment, and the abuse of power is acceptable behavior for a ruler.

PERSEPHONE—Queen of the Underworld and wife of Hades. Wise, perceptive, and compassionate, she serves as the judge of Minos's fate. Rather than condemning him outright, Persephone offers him a chance at redemption, believing he is capable of learning from his mistakes.

PASITHEA—Goddess of sleep and rest. At Hera's request, she casts Zeus into deep slumber, allowing Hera to carry out her plan without interference.

HERMES—The swift-footed messenger of the gods. Loyal and alert,

Hermes travels to the mortal world to warn Minos that the Minotaur has been sent to hunt and kill him.

DOLLY & SOFIA—Close friends of Esmeralda. They provide companionship and support, often offering perspective and commentary on the strange events unfolding around them.

SCENE I — Int. Mount Olympus Throne Room

(Lights rise as soft background music begins. MINOS enters.)

MINOS: Father, father!

ZEUS: Well, hello there, son! What brings you to Mount Olympus?

MINOS: I won't bother you long, I'm only here for advice. *(Nods)* Yes, father. I just want to know how I can improve for my people. Maybe even someday be worthy of ruling Olympus!

ZEUS: (*Chuckles*) Hefty goals, Minos. Unfortunately, I'm a little busy with certain business, but I'll only be gone for a short while. By the time I return, I promise I'll mentor you. On that note, I should be off to Athens!

(ZEUS stands to leave and rushes out, leaving the stage.)

MINOS: Well, thank you father, take care I suppose. *(Slowly trailing off)*

(HERA enters the stage, walks in and spots MINOS, HERA frowns. MINOS notices HERA.)

HERA: Oh, what a surprise to see you Minos. What brings you here to Olympus?

MINOS: *(Bows)* Your highness! I came up to Olympus to ask King Zeus guidance on ruling my kingdom.

HERA: Is that so? Why don't you raise your concerns to me instead?

MINOS: That would be wonderful!

HERA: Listen closely. You must always seize whatever you want if you want to be great. Just remember two simple words, your power and their fear. Stop for nothing and never show your weakness. It's easy! You're not playing chess.

(MINOS tries to back out politely but HERA stops him.)

MINOS: Uhh, your highness, thank you for the advice really, but I must go now—

HERA: You must accept my advice to make a great king. Afterall, I am married to the ruler of all the gods. They will surely adore you and you'll feel it too. You'll thank me for everything that I've told you for you to be great.

(MINOS walks away, confused, and leaves the stage.)

HERA: A massive fool. Who does he think he is!? Oh, I pity that boy. But oh, do I care? It's his own fault for being so naïve. Not mine.

(The scene ends with HERA laughing. Turn off music and stage lights.)

SCENE II — Ext. A Street in Crete

(Stage lights turn back on. Background music fades in. MINOS makes his way to the two women doing the laundry across the street.)

MINOS: Hello ladies! You both look delightful, what do you say we head back to my place, hm?

(The women glance up from their chores, judging)

Woman 1: Umm, no thank you, sire, we have some chores to attend to for our husbands and I doubt they'd allow—

MINOS: Excuse me? How dare you turn down your own king! Who are your pathetic husbands to stop me? I should have them executed!

(MINOS aggressively grabs Woman 2's wrist and drags her along, they both start screaming while Woman 1 tries to free Woman 2 and two men enter the stage and approach them.)

Man 1: Hey! What do you think you are doing? Let our wives go, they're clearly in pain!

(MINOS looks at the two men.)

Man 2: Your majesty, have mercy! You cannot just take our wives without reason! Please, let them go, they have done nothing wrong.

MINOS: (*Scoffs*) Don't you see who I am? I am your king and I shall do as please, whatever and whenever. I should smite you this instant!

(Man 2 goes in front of MINOS.)

Man 2: Your majesty, forgive us. Please my king, You do not have to threaten us for simply defending our women!

MINOS: (*Appalled*) Threaten? Oh, I'll do more than *threaten* you for this level of disrespect.

(Lightning sound effect. MINOS swings his arm towards Man 2; however as it nears him, a burst of thunder and lightning separates them. Thunder crashes. A bolt of lightning strikes between MINOS and Man 2. As the light fades, ZEUS stands before them. The crowd falls silent while MINOS slowly releases the woman's wrist. ZEUS approaches MINOS, enraged. All citizens on the street are stunned and watch as MINOS releases Woman 2's wrist out of shock. She and the others, except for MINOS, kneel immediately.)

MINOS: (*Shivers from fear*) Father, What are you doing here? I haven't seen you in quite some time!

ZEUS: (*Furious*) Silence! I should be asking the questions here. What do you think you're doing, causing such a commotion? Explain your behavior!

MINOS: But father you don't understand! These peasants were disrespecting me, right to my face!

Man 2: O mighty Zeus, he is lying. We were just trying to defend our women, he was trying to take them with him. We swear!

Woman 2: It's true, sire! When we declined his advances, he began dragging me away!

ZEUS: (*Looks shocked*) By the gods, Minos, is this true? Where are your morals?!

MINOS: (*Looks nervous*) Well, y-yes father, but surely you understand. You are no better than I when it comes to taking whatever we want. We are both kings, you know this!

ZEUS: If you believe this is how a true King must behave, I should strip you of your crown right this moment. I've heard of how

you've been treating the citizens of Crete for a while now and I am disgusted.

MINOS: What? Father, I'm just trying to be like you!

ZEUS: (*Heavy sigh)* Minos, if you want to treat others so horribly, then I might as well send you to the underworld. My brother, Hades, will hopefully be of some service to you.

MINOS: Noooo! Please father, have mercy. I am your son. You can't do this! I haven't even done anything wrong, father, please!

(MINOS drops to his knees, begging.)

ZEUS: Silence! I've heard enough of your dishonesty. You need to review your morals. (*dramatic pause*) Goodbye, Minos.

MINOS: Noooo...

(ZEUS strikes MINOS with lightning cutting him off and sending him to the underworld. Lights and music go off.)

SCENE III — Ext. Underworld

(MINOS slowly wakes up after a long sleep, sits up and rubs his head.)

MINOS: By the gods, my head throbs. How long have I been here?

(MINOS wobbly rises to his feet, eagerly searching his surroundings. PERSEPHONE walks in.)

PERSEPHONE: Ah, you've finally awoken. Minos, King of Crete.

MINOS: (*Turns around*) Where am I? (*Realizes who she is*) Persephone! It is of great honor to see you in person.

PERSEPHONE: So *now* you're being reverent? Where was this chivalry when you were appointed king?

MINOS: What? I have always been respectful!

PERSEPHONE: You think I'm a fool? I have seen all of your unrighteous acts!

MINOS: (*Pleading*) No! I've just been doing right by my kingdom! It was Zeus that acted hypocritical and sent me here to "review my morals"

(PERSEPHONE constantly moving around, annoyed, using lots of hand movements.)

PERSEPHONE: Oh, don't try lying to me. If you really are the true king of Crete, you'd realize that honesty and righteousness are the cornerstone of a thriving society.

(MINOS is stunned into silence and bows his head in shame.)

PERSEPHONE: You may think you're a great and noble man, but if you think that your actions are what it takes to be a great ruler, then you are naive, childlike, and nowhere *near* the great gods. Especially not compared to your own father.

MINOS: Persephone! Well, I'm here to say that I lied. I admit that I did these things, but only because I was told to! In all honesty.

PERSEPHONE: Oh, come on, don't blame your shortcomings on Zeus. He is charming but he is not deceitful…

MINOS: No! It was Hera. She—

PERSEPHONE: (*Holds up a hand*) Wait, Hera was involved in this? Why would your Aunt stoop this low?

MINOS: (*Frantic and pleading*) Yes! I sought only guidance—to rule my people well. But she filled my ears with talk of power and fear, saying a king who shows mercy will lose his crown. I did not believe her—I swear it! Yet something within me changed. I do not know what possessed me.

PERSEPHONE: *(Deep, deliberate sigh)* That is Hera, indeed. But do not mistake her scheming as the sole reason for your shortcomings. To claim a throne once more, you must prove yourself… worthy. I will send you elsewhere.

MINOS: Elsewhere? Unthinkable! First the Underworld, and now… some nameless, forsaken place? I will know no one, be commanded by no one!

PERSEPHONE: (*Calm, almost cold)* You are young. Admit your faults—truly—and learn from them. Do not repeat the folly of lies, nor be swayed by Hera's temptations. Trust in your own judgment, Minos. Stand for what is right, even when the world shifts like sand, and let your dealings with others bear the weight of honor… or the cost of arrogance.

MINOS: *(Smirking, though tense)* Very well. I will prove them all wrong… and show that even the gods themselves cannot chain what is mine by birthright.

(PERSEPHONE nods then leads MINOS into a portal. MINOS disappears, summoned to earth by PERSEPHONE. Lights and music fade off in the distance. PERSEPHONE exits the stage.)

SCENE IV — Ext. An alley in Rome with the Restaurant

(Lights and music slowly fade back into the scene)

MINOS: *(Rubbing his temple, sinking slowly to the ground)* By the gods… another headache? Must the Fates torment me so? And… where in Hades—or Olympus—am I now?

(MINOS pushes himself upright, eyes scanning the unfamiliar surroundings with suspicion and curiosity.)

MINOS: *(Sniffing the air, voice growing fierce with longing)* What is this intoxicating aroma? My stomach… it cries out for sustenance!

(The stage lights widen, revealing a bustling, vibrant restaurant. MINOS approaches, awe mixed with regal entitlement, taking in the space.)

MINOS: *(Voice rising, almost in disbelief)* By all the gods… a hall of feasts! A miniature court of dining! Truly, even mortals can craft wonders worthy of Olympus!

(MINOS approaches two people eating dinner and points at one of their plates.)

MINOS: (*Eyes widening, voice reverent*) Is… that real?

WOMAN: (*Talking with her friend, then noticing him*) Yes… it is.

MINOS: (*A roar of delight*) By the gods… that's my favorite!

(*Without hesitation, MINOS snatches the food from her hands. The two women erupt in protests, their shouts cutting through the air. ESMERALDA steps forward, her expression a mix of alarm and authority.*)

ESMERALDA: (*Firmly*) Excuse me! What in the world is happening here?

(*The women push and shove, voices rising.*)

WOMAN: This madman—this lunatic—just stormed in and devoured our food!

MINOS: (*Mouth full, voice muffled but dripping with disdain*) Lunatic? Do you have any idea… *whom* you dare call a lunatic?!

(*ESMERALDA looks at the couple as DOLLY shoos them away quickly, apologizing profusely. ESMERALDA looks enraged with MINOS, while he still has food in his mouth, and in his hand*)

ESMERALDA: I do *not* need this today! *(Irritated, firmly)* Get out or I'll call authorities.

MINOS: (*Throwing up his hands, defeated)* Alright… alright!

(MINOS storms off. The stage shifts as DOLLY enters, holding a glass with a flourish.)

DOLLY: *(Eyeing the empty space where MINOS stood)* Ezma… who in the gods' name was that? Some wandering wretch?

ESMERALDA: (*Calm but wary*) I'm not sure. He's not insane… just reckless, hungry, and terribly rude. I gave him some food to calm him.

SOFIA: *(Rolling her eyes, voice sharp)* Lucky him. Meanwhile, we barely earn enough to keep ourselves fed, and we can't even touch the stale pastries!

DOLLY: *(Chuckling, shaking her head)* Tell me about it. At least the manager didn't see that ruckus. (*Pause*) By the way—Any of you stuck working overtime tonight? I could use a drink… a proper one, with some company.

SOFIA: (*Nods with a sly smile*) I'm free. How about you, Ezma?

ESMERALDA: (A small tired smile) Yeah… I'll come.

(A few hours later, the trio exits the restaurant, the night air brushing over them)

DOLLY: (*Excited*) Okay, ready to hit the pub!?

SOFIA: *So* ready!

(The girls squeal in excitement and turn to ESMERALDA. SOFIA and DOLLY turn to face ESMERALDA having sympathy for MINOS. MINOS sit on the curb off to the side of the restaurant.)

ESMERALDA: (*Sighs*) Uhh not tonight guys, sorry. (*pauses*) I'm not feeling well.

(The girls whine and pout satirically)

DOLLY: Aww, you suck!

SOFIA: Have fun being bored all night.

(SOFIA and DOLLY burst out laughing, ESMERALDA joins in the laughter, then stops abruptly watching MINOS all alone. Once the laughter fades, SOFIA and DOLLY wave their goodbyes and depart from ESMERALDA. ESMERALDA approaches MINOS, who's looking down at his feet, and squats next to MINOS)

ESMERALDA: (*Concerned*) Hey, are you okay?

MINOS: (*Dejectedly*) No.

ESMERALDA: Are you sure you have no family or friends to get you home? (*teasing*) You're not a lost puppy.

MINOS: (*Ashamed, looks away*) I… I don't know anyone here. I'm from Crete.

ESMERALDA: Crete? (Pauses, sighing softly) That's… a long way

from here. (*dramatic pause*) Tell you what..... If you want, you can come stay with me for now. I mean as long as you don't cause trouble.

(MINOS looks up at ESMERALDA, eyes cautious but hopeful.)

MINOS: Really? You'd... help me?

ESMERALDA: (*Teasing*) Well, only if you promise not to raid my pantry.

(*MINOS chuckles, a small, genuine smile forming.*)

MINOS: (*prideful*) My name's Minos. You might've heard of me. I'm—

ESMERALDA: (*Interrupting gently, smiling*) I'm Esmeralda. Or Ezma. I bet you haven't heard of me. (*giggling*) Come on, we better start walking—it's going to get dark soon.

(MINOS looks confused but goes along with it. They arrive at ESMERALDA'S house.)

SCENE V — Int. Esmeralda's House

MINOS: (*Unimpressed*) You have a very small house.

ESMERALDA: Yeah... I know it's a bit cramped, but it's what I can afford since I... separated from my parents. The woman who sold me the house is a sweet old widow—gave me a discount, I guess out of sympathy. She even brings over baked goods her children wouldn't eat... it's... actually kind of sad—

MINOS: (*Cutting her off, impatient*) You talk too much.

ESMERALDA: (*Taken aback*) Excuse me?

MINOS: All I want is a warm plate of food, a tankard of fresh mead… and now that I think of it, a proper soak. Do you have a tub? And garments—clean ones.

ESMERALDA: (*Frowning, voice sharp*) Woah, hold on. Am I hosting a king here?

MINOS: (Proudly) Well… actually—

ESMERALDA: (*Interrupting, scolding*) You should be grateful I'm even letting you stay! I don't know what life in Crete is like, but here, I don't have luxury. You'll make do—end of discussion!

(*ESMERALDA storms off to her room, groaning in exasperation. MINOS watches ESMERALDA exit, the stage light dims around him. MINOS throws up his arms exhausted*)

MINOS: By all the gods… how did I end up in this… mortal chaos?!

(The stage goes dark. The background music fades, leaving only the echo of MINOS' frustration lingering in the empty space.)

SCENE VI — Ext. Restaurant.

(*Lights and background restaurant music fades back in. Que changed the projected scene back to a city at night. MINOS sits at the edge of the stage.*)

ESMERALDA: What're you doing here? I thought you'd stay at the house.

MINOS: It's too small, I was feeling claustrophobic.

(ESMERALDA sits down next to MINOS.)

MINOS: I'm sorry for being a pain last night. I'm still adjusting, but that's no excuse.

ESMERALDA: I'll forgive you if you tell me how you really got here.

MINOS: You wouldn't believe me. (*Scoffs.*)

ESMERALDA: Try me…

MINOS: (*sighs*)…I came from the Underworld.

(ESMERALDA rolls her eyes)

MINOS: No, it's true! I was sent here by Persepehone as punishment appointed by Zeus.

ESMERALDA: (*Sighs*) Can you stop with this Greek nonsense? It's really starting to irritate me.

MINOS: Please, I know it may sound absurd, but it's true. I am Minos, the king of Crete, and the son of Zeus.

ESMERALDA: Like the king and a deity? (*Scoffs*) Yeah right! You don't even look like a normal citizen!

MINOS: My power and status were stripped from me, as part of the punishment. I was a great king, trust me. At least… I thought I was. Until I realized I was just lying to everyone, including myself.

ESMERALDA: Lying to yourself? How?

MINOS: I acted like a boy and not how a king ought to act. Worst part, I knew that I was ruling my kingdom wrong, but I kept doing it. I blamed all my wrongdoings on my Aunt Hera, but deep down, I know now that I was selfish and arrogant. I devoured the power bestowed upon me, and the fear mongering.

ESMERALDA: Okay. Say I did believe you, not that I do, but if I did, why would you blame your mistakes on another god, especially your Aunt?

MINOS: Hera? I honestly don't know what overcame me. I suppose she manipulated me.

ESMERALDA: Seriously? That's intense. I mean, I heard she has been known to manipulate people, but why would she do that? What could she possibly gain?

MINOS: She targeted me because, well, I'm an illegitimate son of her husband, the powerful Zeus.

(Both sit in silence)

ESMERALDA: You know, the way you describe your past and how it

has shaped you now, reminds me of how long it's been since something drastic has changed me, just as Hera changed you.

MINOS: What do you mean?

ESMERALDA: (*Exhales heavily, pausing*) My parents died in an accident. When they passed, I was left alone, I got bitter. I got hateful and cruel. In some ways, like you. Recently, though, I've realized there's no point in being angry at the world. In the end, I got a job at the restaurant, I met good decent people, and slowly they're helping me get by. Maybe you should do that, if you're looking for a fresh start. (*Smiles*)

MINOS: *(Smiles back)* Maybe I will…

(Lights and music fade in the background.)

SCENE VII — Int. Castle of the Underworld.

(Lights and sinister music return. HERA visits the Underworld to meet with PERSEPHONE)

PERSEPHONE: (*Gently inclining her head*) Your Highness… I did not expect you here.

HERA: (*Cold, sharp*) Is it true… that Minos has been sent to Rome?

PERSEPHONE: It is true.

HERA: And it was you who sent him?

PERSEPHONE: Yes.

HERA: Pray tell… why?

PERSEPHONE: Zeus demanded he face punishment. I sent him somewhere foreign, where he could confront his faults and recover from the deceit that had corrupted him.

HERA: *(Scoffing, venomous)* And you think someone else made him

that way? Preposterous. He was born cruel—evil at heart.

PERSEPHONE: *(Calm, with quiet intensity)* I believe that cruelty was nurtured… implanted by someone spiteful, cunning, and vile. Surely, such a person wouldn't be unfamiliar to you.

HERA: *(Eyes narrowing, voice low)*…I have no notion. And you watch him, I presume? How does he comfort himself?

PERSEPHONE: (*Measured*) If you must know… he has found a woman.

HERA: *(A flicker of sharp interest)* A woman?

PERSEPHONE: Yes. And there appears to be a… bond forming between them.

HERA: *(Turning away, lips tight, almost growling)* Intriguing. I would have thought him like his father… reckless, disloyal, careless with women.

PERSEPHONE: (*Coolly, piercing)* And why do you ask? What use do you intend to make of this knowledge?

HERA: (*Turning her gaze slowly, eyes glinting*) Nothing, of course… I am… pleased for him. *(voice softens, but carries a touch of threat)* For now.

(*HERA sweeps past, her robes whispering like a shadow*)

SCENE VIII — Int. Dark Cave

(As HERA reaches the darkened entrance, the light fades, revealing the jagged walls and the suffocating gloom within. HERA steps into the cave, where PASITHEA waits in the shadows. The cave is shrouded in shadows; faint mist coils along the jagged walls. The only sound is a low, whispering draft. PASITHEA emerges from the darkness as HERA steps inside, her

presence sharp and commanding.)

PASITHEA: *(Voice echoing softly, almost a whisper)* Who dares enter my cavern?

HERA: *(Regal, voice cutting through the gloom)* It is Hera. I come with purpose… a bargain.

PASITHEA: *(Approaches slowly, bowing, the shadows casting her face in half-light)* Your Highness… I was not expecting a visitor of such… urgency. My husband is absent, yet I may offer my own… services, should it please Her Majesty. You spoke of a bargain—what is it you seek?

HERA: *(Eyes glinting, lips curling slightly)* I wish for Zeus to sleep… even if just briefly.

PASITHEA: *(Hesitant, voice tinged with awe)* That… is no small request. To touch the god of gods in his slumber… my powers alone may not suffice. It is perilous—fraught with risk.

HERA: *(Leaning closer, voice low, almost a hiss)* You will not act alone. And fear not for detection… he will not awaken. I will cloak you in protection, shield you from all eyes, mortal or divine. You will answer to no one but me.

PASITHEA: *(Pauses, the mist curling around her)* And if I do this… what is your purpose? I serve my own designs, yet… your intentions are shrouded.

HERA: *(Darkly, with a venomous edge)* Curiosity will be your undoing if you pry too deep. For now… know only that his reckoning approaches. And do not forget—your loyalty shall be rewarded, in ways you cannot yet imagine.

(PASITHEA bows slightly, a smile creeping across PASITHEA'S face, but

it carries a tension, knowing that PASITHEA is entangled in something far darker.)

PASITHEA: Under these terms… I shall comply. But remember, Your Majesty… even shadows bear their own will.

(HERA'S eyes flash, a dangerous glint. They share a silent understanding, then the scene shifts as they vanish back toward Olympus off stage. After a brief moment, PASITHEA returns to the dark cave.)

PASITHEA: *(Voice over, faintly, echoing)* It is done. I leave now, bound to no one… though the memory of this debt will linger.

SCENE IX — Ext. Dark Labyrinth

(The stage projection changes to a twisting, labyrinthine maze. The shadows grow deeper. HERA appears at the entrance, her presence commanding and cold. HERA raises her hand; the walls of the maze shiver and collapse with an unnatural groan, revealing the Minotaur within.)

HERA: *(Voice dripping with malice)* You exist to serve me. Fail, and there will be no mercy. Listen well… you will seek a man named Minos. Find him. Hunt him. Kill him.

(HERA steps closer, the darkness swirling around her as if alive.)

HERA: And when you succeed… I want you to return to me. I want his blood… warm, fresh… dripping from your hands.

(The Minotaur's eyes glint with a sinister red glow. It lets out a low, guttural growl, bowing its massive head to her will. Then it disappears into the shadows of the maze.)

HERA: *(Whispering to herself, almost reverent)* Fail me not…

(The stage goes black, leaving only the faint echo of the Minotaur's growl

reverberating through the darkness.)

SCENE X — Ext. Somewhere in Rome

(MINOS and ESMERALDA are somewhere in the city on their date.)

ESMERALDA: (*Joyful*) This is my *favorite* place in Rome! The botanical garden.

MINOS: Thank you for bringing me here, Esmeralda. It's beautiful, like you.

ESMERALDA: (*Giggles)* Thank you. You look good as well, even in my dad's sweatshirt.

(Both ESMERALDA and MINOS sit down on a nearby bench)

MINOS: Ezme, you should know, I have to tell you something important. That's why I wanted us alone. I wanted it to be *special*.

ESMERALDA: What is it?

MINOS: (*Nervously sighs*) I'm no longer sure when it is that I will return to my kingdom or if I will regain my power. But after meeting you and after everything you have done for me these past few months, I realized that those things don't matter anymore. I wish to be with you. Here in Rome. And I am asking if you will take me as I am, and if you will let me be yours.

(MINOS takes ESMERALDA's hand and looks into her eyes sincerely)

ESMERALDA: Oh.. wow, that's... I've never had someone ask me that before.

MINOS: (*Gently smiles*) You don't have to give me an answer right away. I just wanted to tell you before it was too late.

ESMERALDA: Actually, I feel the same way. I have for a while now. I was just for you to ask me first. Minos... You can be mine... and you can have me. All of me.

(ESMERALDA smiles brightly and puts her other hand on top of MINOS'. MINOS exhales heavily and they both chuckle. MINOS puts his forehead onto hers as they sit in silence happily)

MINOS: Thank you, Ezme. I pray to the gods that we can stay together, even after death. But if you ever get tired of me, you

don't have to force yourself to be with me... although I hope you don't ever tire of me.

(MINOS nervously laughs and looks down at his feet. *ESMERALDA lifts his chin up to look at h*er)

ESMERALDA: Even if I do get tired of you, I'd never let you go. You're too dependent on me. (*Winks playfully*)

(They both chuckle.)

MINOS: (*Smiles warmly*) Esmeralda, thank *you*. You are the reason—

(Their conversation gets interrupted by HERMES entering the scene and running to MINOS quickly)

HERMES: Minos! Minos!

MINOS: Hermes? My brother, long time no see! (*He stands up quickly*)

HERMES: Minos! (*Gasping for air*) I have some grave news for you from Olympus.

MINOS: (*Frantic and worried*) What is it? Is it from my father?

HERMES: No. He's been put to sleep by Pasithea! Hera unleashed the Minotaur, and it's on a path of destruction. I think it's coming for... you.

MINOS: Hera did this!? That damned woman! She never quits, does she!?

ESMERALDA: Wait, what is going on? What is a Minotaur?!

(HERMES notices ESMERALDA)

HERMES: (*relaxed, casual*) The minotaur is the beast with a human body and a bull's head and tail. It'll stop at nothing to reach you.

ESMERALDA: (*Gasp*) Oh my, that sounds dangerous!

HERMES: To humans yes, but to gods, usually no.

MINOS: I'm sorry to have involved you in this, Ezme.

ESMERALDA: I know. (*Pauses, reading MINOS' face, sighs*) Please do not tell me you're going after..... whatever that thing is that he said? (*gestures to HERMES*)

MINOS: Afraid I must disappoint you. But do not worry, I'll come

back to you. I will always come back to you, Ezme. I promise.

(MINOS, ESMERALDA and HERMES exit the stage. Stop the background music and start the instrumental of the song Eleanor Rigby.)

SCENE XI — A dark and lonely street.

(Change the projected scene to a dark and lonely street. HERMES brings MINOS to the location where the Minotaur is. HERMES enters the stage as MINOS follows quickly behind.)

HERMES: Okay, this is as far as I go. I must return to Olympus.

(HERMES exit stage as MINOS starts running around searching for the Minotaur hysterically. MINOS stops at a corner and the lights turn on to reveal the Minotaur across from MINOS. While MINOS runs around the stage, turning on the lights on both ends of the audience, instrumental music plays in the background. And when MINOS reaches the top corner of the theater, the lights flash back on as the first note is sung. Music cue.)

Choral Backing: Ahhh, the demise of the young warrior. Ahhh, the demise of the young warrior. (*chanting*)

(MINOS sings as he walks to the stage and faces the Minotaur)

MINOS: (*Singing*) Mystical creature/Sent from the devil above and unleashed from the maze/Sent for my end/Splendid performance/Making a hash of whatever would hinder your quest/In Front of you/Ah, the lonely soldier/The King and warrior/Ah, the lonely soldier/The king and warrior

(MINOS and the Minotaur face each other and fight during the short instrumental. The Minotaur stops at the side and MINOS continues to sing)

MINOS: (*Singing*) Oh Zeus, my father/Hear my confession/I know you can hear me from there/No sign from you

(MINOS kneeling)

MINOS: (*Singing*) Look at me bleeding/Swing after swing, he keeps bringing me down to my knees

(MINOS stands up again)

MINOS: (*Singing*) I have to stand/For all the city people/Who sleep under the stars/All the city people/Who showed me many

things

(They continue the fight and MINOS defeats the Minotaur and the creature lies down on the ground while MINOS kneels again. The choral backing continues singing.)

MINOS: (*Singing*) Ahh the lonely soldier/Oh, precious gemstone/alone in her room full of echoes of us/Fretting her hands/Oh, Persephone/I am returning to you as my task is complete/Nobody cheers/Oh, my Esmeralda/Oh, my Esmeralda/Ahh, the demise of the young warrior

(The lights turn off. And when it turns back on, the lights are blue and MINOS' eyes and arms are covered in ash and have black wings on his back. Music and lights dramatically turn off.)

THE END

Sigbin

ni Ronald Logong Aput

Dakog dalunggan nga gatabon sa mga mata
taas nga tango, taas nga dila, pulag mata.

Kon imong tutokan nagapungko
nga sama gayud sa iro,

nagalakaw paatras, nagatinuwad
tungod ang panlantaw kay baliskad.

Mogawas kini inig kagabie
sa ngit-ngit nagatago ayha kini mo atake

sa mga hait nga kuko niini ikaw hawiran
tilaan ang imong liog dayon ukoban,

supsopon ang imong dugo hangtod ikaw maluya,
mo budlot imong mata ug sa hinay-hinay mamatay ka.

Binuhi kini nga mananap sa may orasyon
sila lang nga kabalo mo basa sa pasyon.

Misteryosong mananap ingon sa kalag
nga mo laglag ug nagpahasalaag

sa mga tawo nga nangahadlok ug nag-agulo
sa mga tawo nga gabakho ug mga luha gatulo.

Tawgon kini pinaagi sa taghoy
gidayon mo duol nga sama sa itoy,

sakyan pa gani kini, mo lakaw sama sa hangin
mawala pud dayon sama sa hangin.

Busa sa gabie dili ka mo lakaw
tungod basin og ikaw,

makita sa pulag mata nga sigbin,
hithiton sa salbahis nga sigbin.

Sigbin

by Ronald Logong Aput

Floppy ears covering the eyes
sharp fangs, long tongue red eyes.

If you look closely when sitting
it looks like a dog

bending over, walking backwards
for it is looking backwards

sneaking at night in the dark
hiding before it will attack

by its deadly claws you will be gripped
its swirling tongue will lick and bite your neck,

sucking your blood until you pale
your eyes would then protrude slowly you would
then die.

It is owned by them that performs oracion
by only those who read the pasión,

Mysterious creature like ghost
drowned people displaced host

living with fear and groaning
lamenting, mourning with tears dropping.

It is called with a whistle
Like a playful puppy and its wagging tail,

this sigbin will also carry you like wind
that mysteriously vanishes like a wind.

So never dare to go out at night
there on the road and on streets you might,

be seen by this red-eyed sigbin,
be sniffed by this heartless sigbin.

The Carnage

By Lealina Evangeline A. Reyes

The Carnage is a dreadful scene—
a Bloody Carcass,
A Primordial Suffering
known to every Man

A beating heart
ripped from a beaten body
And I wonder,
what ever did it beat for?

A pulse of your name,
full of fear and blinding faith,
A rhythm of ache
that comes from the sight
of bloody teeth
Where shards of the Organ
are stuck between

What did you think
when you heard It scream your name—
A pure Ecstacy
I feared would never possess me

But I was not afraid,
no, I was nothing but willing
An assailant crawling
to the nature of your Crime

I scream for no mercy,
no salvation to come to me
Because this is the only god I know
a religion I built in your Name

Is this punishment
from the skies above?
an undoing of the very fiber of the living
A crown of thorns, a Cross to carry
of which I will take to my Calvary

With every strength
I will rise from the Dead
To once again witness
the brutal butcher
in the Hands of whom I give myself to

Tell me you love me,
tell me your lies
Watch me lie in a casket
and be buried with the promise
of your fickle words

And while you stand over my grave
watch me rise
Bloody, bruised, broken
desperate for another taste
of my own blood
And the sight of your Gruesome Beauty
once again looking down on me

Folktale for a Silent Actor

By Althea Bonto

Flute-lipped jester,
The corners of your mouth crack with all the crass gladness of roadside centavos.
I've filled my pockets with you. It's a good day when my fingertips smell of secondhand wallets.
How I dreamt of it, that smell— the manic oily underbelly of warm jeeps.
Sticky school nights. Storefront shutters. I found you amidst it all—
The city and all of its crudeness— and fell in love.
When I took to the mountains to press myself
Into the cold sores of her breath, I found
Her minty sterility cruel.
You are the raggy chainlinked stretch
Cutting up this meager town,
Tattered open by vapid campaign flyers and
Thumbed in from witnessless nights
I want to crawl into them all
All the nests of accidents which carved into
The shape of you now
The shape of a poorly kept secret, worn enough to behold.

The Blemishes of Thy Skin

by Khalil Deciar Ventula

How can I love the skin I wear,
When every flaw is brazen and bare?
The marks, the lines, the scars I hide,
Whisper parts of me I've long defied.

Each blemish, scar, and crooked smile,
Lies memories, never vile.
Every mirror beholds what I've long ignored—
The imperfections I continue to deplore.

They say beauty isn't bound,
It isn't in perfect ground.
A tree with knots and twisted bark,
Still rises high and leaves its mark.

So how can I still not learn to see,
The beauty in all that's flawed in me?
For what is love but open eyes,
And stars in stormy skies?

The things I hide, the things I fear—
Parts of me that should be held dear.
For in the scars, the flaws, the tears,
Is the love I've sought for years.

I hope to love, not spite nor flee,
All that I am and will be.
For each blemish is a sign,
That I am truly, wholly mine.

all over again

by Rhenelyn Chanthavysouk

shattered glass on mahogany floor,
a coffee mug tipped over a desk,
dark stains on documents below it.
this is the home i come back to.

where the dishes are washed,
but the fan is left on.
my clothes are stacked neatly on the basket,
yet the washing machine is left unused.

the reflection of the mirror is foggy,
disinfectant spray arranged neatly under the sink.
there's a clink as i take my toothbrush,
i can't see my own face.

when the home shines spotless,
slow, heavy hands touch my shoulders---
a lover that kisses my cheek in routine;
everything returns back to what it once was.

my dishes remain clean,
but i forget to wash my pots.

the laptop on the coffee table is left charging,
with mounds of paper that crowd the couch.

you ask me to dance with you,
like i don't know where this is headed.
i smile and tell you that i can't allow myself to;
there's glass on my floor.

my feet are worn from dancing,
my shoes never quite thick enough.
you insist on dancing anyways,
and i find myself in this same cycle.

heavy and slow hands guide me,
the prick of shards on skin is familiar.
it is what i am used to.
i don't have the heart to pull it out.

sinking, deeper and deeper.
you twirl me around, tilting me to a dip.
low enough for my hair to graze the floor,
you know i don't like this.

i really don't want to go back;
don't put me in this place again.
tell me i'm more than my messy home,
tell me i can pull the glass out of my feet.

Of Confessions, Mourning, and Redemption

by Nel Simon Lapore

PART I - Confessions

Shaken lips, scratchy voice— trembling repetitions of a bold truth

Wrote it on skin, the testimony of tired eyes

There is a he whose days are softer in mourning light

He pranced on white flowers and unsaturated skies

Collapsed by the stars and understood—

How he tumbled near the universe's edge

Crumpled tight to what was felt and what was said

He knelt on the pew cursing a tongue-tied confession

With spears on his back pressed into his lungs

Shameful silence tore his throat open, and it bled like unspoken prayers

Flickering vision screeches this attempt— of vulnerability

—let me try again

"Forgive me Father," the Christian clawed at his scalp

Whimpering of love, eagerly— but still so silently

Oh these grieving apologies, tasted like ash from a match stick scraped to get a candle lit

I am the flame curling, crackling, trying— to utter a word

Burning unease, here I am on my seat

Begging angels, one by one, oh how they've seen

"Unpossess me!", I screamed at the me who sinned

At the me whose brightness I've betrayed

Slumbered enough it seems

About time, to admit everything I've delayed to say

Father, I lied shamefully — concealed by mistruth spat out with laughing lips

Betrayed my own kin and heart,

misplaced my thoughts with actions unfit—

But the comforting songs of leaves, the testament of winds, the narration of flowers had cut me off, and by God—

"Hush

Hush

Hush

—Need not say more

Your confession is proof, you are not damned

Choose to be a better man"

PART II - The Light of Mourning

Drops and drizzle, the goosebumps that make up our rainy days

Where confusion is screamed at the faded horizon line

Where I confessed wholeheartedly these conquered fears of mine

I talked to my mother and father— at the precipice of New Year's Eve

Hugged so tight, eyes blurred by tears, I could barely see

Am I forgiven? This narrative of grief whispered in my ears

"This is only the beginning"

The stars exploded at midnight to watch the birth of a year

The same God I prayed to when I was little, took my dimmed face and lit it up with hope

So, the texture of paper on my fingertips widens to be inked

I sat awkward, spiraling a choice of words, as I gander at mumbling clouds

Blinking my burdens bundle-wrapped on my breath

Inhaling the warmth of a midday worry

Thinking how I can say sorry to everyone I wronged

Or how I may plead my case to the courts of tomorrow

Visited the boulevard to compose three to five pieces of poetry

Ended up with two Our Father's and three Hail Mary's

If my best and worst parts are held out

My rhyming warmth, and stuttering musical sounds

Then echoes of my own laughter will be muted in these stanzas

and paragraphs

I lead myself blind admittedly

So focused on the sound of my steps

I've lost where I was going

So kindly I stand, in rejection and purpose

Confessing a ballad, open curtain, apologizing in the small, humble, center-stage

The spotlight's on me, this light of morning

Making peace with grief, flying to better days

PART III - Dear, Redemption

Drops and drizzle, the goosebumps that make up our rainy days
Where confusion is screamed at the faded horizon line
Where I confessed wholeheartedly these conquered fears of mine
I talked to my mother and father— at the precipice of New Year's Eve
Hugged so tight, eyes blurred by tears, I could barely see
Am I forgiven? This narrative of grief whispered in my ears
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Then echoes of my own laughter will be muted in these stanzas and paragraphs

PART 2
GENTLENESS CROSSINGS, & WAYPOINT

I'm Happy I'm Out of Air

by Seve Nigel Tuale

It arrives uninvited,
bouncing inside your chest
before your mind has caught up.

Because your pet moves
like it means business but doesn't,
because your dad's joke
misses its mark,
because your sister surprises you,
because your mom once tickled you
before bed,
because a memory of yourself
sneaks up and trips you.

And suddenly—
you are out of air.

So what?

For a moment,
you are full
of everything else.

Speak Softly

by Rhea Paglinawan

Grueling. Pacing by the corners of a room that was not ours. I watched him look at me as he edged on a loathing, subterranean like my hunger for air then and there. I could tell myself to stop breathing, and the room would disappear. His strides, long and wide as a pendulum, dragged his words, "I am your guide". This is not a punishment, I told myself. This is enlightenment. Thank you, I thought. But it had been an hour in an eternity, and the room breathed with the devil in it. His shirt drenched in sweat, he stepped out of the room to get water.

He made the room for me—neat, the AC blasting. I was stuck on a double-sized bed, throwing my gaze around the room from a golden honeycomb. I must have been for something to show up from the other side of the walls and into the room. The room beside was locked. It was out of our budget, or was it just a storage room? I wouldn't know. I didn't ask. The walls were a gradient of pink and deep purple. I was reminded. Somebody had tried to identify me with the heavens, told me my energy sank in his skin like the dawn and the sun, dragged down to another country, is calling for help. My friend hid the bulb, said it did not matter, said the TV screen was enough. He turned it on and played a YouTube video. I didn't know lo-fi could be this unnerving. The video of an 8-bit frog-human chimera fishing by the lake played as The City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra's *Speak Softly Love* swallowed the sappy jolly audio whole and played on repeat. I craved a place and time I had never been, where and when I was falling down for what felt like an eternity, from faith and joy.

He walked in while I was looking at my palm aging a couple of years in seconds. I had been trying not to touch my own skin in the past couple of minutes, fearing it would come off. But it was still melting anyway. I touched my eyebrows to know if it was still there, and it was, only that there were spikes instead of hair, and I became

overwhelmed by fear of my own face. Through the small opening of the door, I saw him striding towards the room. I waited, and then I waited for his mouth to drop. He must be plotting my demise. But he was a friend.

He tried to lower the volume of the orchestra, saying *this doesn't fit*. The strings of love speaking softly confused him; it did not budge. It is bludgeoning his ears, he said. But I like the classic, I said. It's for the elite, he said. He still couldn't afford to attend a live orchestra, so it's not exactly for his kind. He insisted on playing an hour-long Hildegard von Bingen. I said, of course. The nun had been my friend, I'd like to think so. The pacing began again.

"I am your guide," he said, almost unsure this time. "I am your guide," he said, stroking his almost draconic beard, almost sure why. I imagined him imagining himself as a dragon, speaking things to reality, rubbing his face like a magic lamp, his wish almost coming true. The floor opened its mouth, and a fear within me plunged at my heart. I will be sucked into the void, I thought, and then there will be nothing, and I will be nothing, and I could not stand being nothing. As he walked from the corner of the bedside table, towards the TV, casting his shadow over, he stopped to look at me. The answer must be in this void, I thought. It must also be in my mouth. But what was the question? A *Good Morning* towel, wet and lifeless, hung on his shoulder.

"Why do you keep on touching your face?" he asked.

"It's melting. I have to put it back," I said as I tried to catch my flesh.

"Stop touching it."

I wouldn't have been able to respond or hear if I hadn't tried to catch my falling mouth and ears.

"Do not fear. That is not happening," he reassured.

"I am your guide," he said, and I was so sure I wanted to hear Rachmaninoff instead. "You know where you are now?" he stopped pacing, arms crossed. "In Matina?" I answered, unsure. I always lose my way in Davao. In my mind, we were in Mintal. "You're here

because I am. You know why?" he said and started pacing again. I think we were both trying to think of a good answer. Not even the right answer. People like us do not care about what's right, only what's beautiful. People like us don't belong here. I know my friend. He's always late, and though sometimes I want to get mad because I hate to wait, I just always remind myself that it would kill him to arrive early, just as it would kill me to wait for him.

My face was as numb as it was after the dentist took my first wisdom tooth when I was too ashamed to waste his time after he asked me several times if the anesthesia already kicked in. My friend said I had been crying for the past half hour. I said he was mistaken. It was I who was falling, not my tears.

"Interesting," he said, "but in the morning you will know how much you cried tonight."

"Interesting," I smiled, "how this body excretes fluid at the peak of pleasure or pain." I couldn't stop smiling.

The answer must have been on those walls in that bedroom. With the gradient light bouncing off the walls, I saw my ex-boyfriend's glans beating. I crawled towards the throbbing wall and touched it. The energy that flowed from the hand-drawn glans trickled against and across the walls. It was riveting, and I must have been watching it forever. There was no admitting that I was at the mercy of a friend. No man is my guide. There was no need for it. I am nobody's inferior but God's. He must be in the glans at the wall! I waited for Him to speak. I looked back, and his eyes met mine.

If he closed his eyes, he wouldn't know if I was still alive or if I was still the friend he knew and he had. If he opened them, I wondered if he was afraid of me. That I would pounce at him, there was no telling. My eyes began to feel strained, a reminder. I didn't blink until there came a rapturing fear of sleep. If I should wake up in hell or heaven, it mattered to us both.

"You know what you are?" he asked. I was then near the edge of the bed, and we were inches apart. The tears kept coming without joy or pain. I knew what I was. I was a teacher. The arts, my pasture.

The stars, my compass.

"I know what I am, but what do you think, my friend?"

"You are a teacher. You are and will forever be," He paused but kept his gaze. "Because of me."

I felt hatred as real as flesh in my throat.

"I am your guide."

I knew him very well. And I wished then and there he would, once again, read to me his poetry instead. How he loved his beloved like a lumpia wrapper, how every centimeter of folding matters so the filling would dance perfectly inside the mouth, how accurately wet the loving must be, how it should be bitten and swallowed without malice. The crunch matters, and if not, there won't be any crumbs. I pride myself on being the first to tell him what his inner voice sounds like. The word was "rage", I remember. He used to write things that sounded soft, so loving, longing, and begging, and resenting. He must hate himself for how much he wants to be loved.

"Who are you?" he asked.

I have learned from the thousands of movies I watched how to act upon this kind of situation. I concluded that humor and ignorance may save one's life from murder, whether by a stranger or a friend. I told him I was hungry, and we sat in front of each other at the dining table we'd only known two hours ago. Why did it have to be pineapples? Why were we not feeding on cooked rice and perhaps lechon *manok*? It was dinner, and I was not hungry.

"Can I lie on the sofa?" I asked.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I am."

Every time I closed my eyes, I stood levitating beside the face of a dragon, so close to it that my nose almost touched its left eye. So real that the softness of its face felt like mine. And for a moment there, I thought, perhaps, it was a reflection, not another. But I do not breathe fire. I said yes and left. The sofa had a red cloth for a cover, and I wanted to see daffodils, so it had daffodils. As I lay there,

it felt easier not to move a muscle. I traced my breathing. It was great that I still was. I was trying hard not to think about it, or I might convince myself that I'd forgotten how to.

The sofa whispered a sigh. Was I a burden to it? Was my weight suffocating it? Lying there, I thought about how our heartbeat syncs with the heartbeat of the one we love. But only if we're loved back, whether it's less or more. The sofa inhaled as I inhaled and exhaled as I exhaled, and we were breathing to the same rhythm, and I wondered if my friend could see that. At this point, there was only silence.

Crux Sacra Sit Mihi Lux

I heard a whisper above my head. The dragon returned my gaze. I tried not to imagine it commanding me to cease breathing.

BEWARE OF FALSE PROPHETS, the dragon spoke. I opened my eyes and found my friend's gaze already waiting, far too close, his face hovering inches from mine. *Non Draco Sit Mihi Dux*, he whispered, eyes wide open. The sweat from the tip of his hair rolled down my mouth and onto my neck. I remembered what it was like to kiss, how addictive it was to inhale somebody's breath. I asked what he was doing as I dragged my body up to sit up on the sofa.

"Are you okay?" he asked. He went back to his chair at the dining table and waited for me to settle in front of him. I looked at my palm and found that it stopped aging. I wanted to tell him that I didn't want to die but thought the dragon would speak my thoughts to reality. The mention of death would invite death. I started picking some pineapple slices with my fork. They were all still sweet; it was interesting. My friend must have made sure I had the best ones. He would never let me taste anything in life less sweet.

"So how are you?" I asked. He knew what I was talking about because seconds ago, I took a glance at his phone when he was typing words in a Messenger chat box with the love of his life. This love, I thought, was lost in a vacuum of religions and beliefs. I would like to think that those words were never delivered, as it would have been the end of the remaining bit of attention he was holding on to. My friend sighed deeply. I always thought he had a problem with

breathing. His voice is nasally and every now and then, he lets out a deep sigh or a forced exhale. There were times when I got irritated by his sudden single, deep heaves, as if he were about to die or the universe had done him wrong and it annoyed him.

"Do you want her back?" I followed it up to narrow it down for him. I wasn't expecting just a yes or no. "Still?"

He heaved a breath, his two hands suspended in front of him. I found he can only make sense of the things that destroy him through a creative process. We were floating in this space he painted and in a struggle to get hold of gravity, he reached out to the baskets floating around him to tell me something that is closest to the truth.

"I have these baskets," he said. They kept on floating and wandering away, so I touched each one, and they changed into a different color, visibly different from each other.

He paused, for me to get the picture. There.

"Inside this basket," he continued, "are people. This basket contains my father, my mother, and my sister. Another one has my kids." He was talking about his students.

"The third one has you and O," his hands placing five ratan baskets on the table. O is my ex-boyfriend, the one whose glans was drawn on the wall. He is my friend's best friend.

"So, what are you doing now with her basket?" I asked. I knew her basket was solely hers. If there was any point in keeping that basket, I wanted to know. I liked to think I already knew then. My friend could not stay still, typing words on his phone and then staring at the floor to look for the right words to type. He must be going crazy, and I thought of hiding the knives from his sight.

"Are you happy now?" I asked. Pain must be a driving force to be happy, I've always thought. If the space she left was finite, I didn't know. And though I have infinite knowledge of things finite, I wanted hers to be left empty. God will decide the volume. I decided that this emptiness be felt by him and that I must call for a toast. This emptiness, despite it being pain, is beautiful, and beautiful is good. I suffered watching my friend being dragged into unexamined

obedience, like hers. Refusal of knowledge to avoid suffering fills me with disgust, an ugly, ugly thing only humans can stand. There is neither good nor art that comes from this. I did not hear a word from him, so I stood up.

Entering the kitchen all lit up, and the rest of the house soaked in half darkness, I noticed some kind of ark installed at the path between the kitchen and dining area. I stood on the kitchen floor. In front of me was a darkened space of the living room and the dining area where he was sitting, facing me, for me to perform my act. There were short standees of little framed posters that said things like "GOD has a plan. TRUST it. LIVE it. ENJOY it" and "When God's hand is ON YOU, you will SUCCEED." Another one says it's by Ronald Reagan:"Live simply, love generously, care deeply, speak kindly, leave the rest to God."

"Happiness. Is it the goal of life?" I stood still. He nodded like a Sunday church-goer nodding to affirm the speech of the priest up on the pulpit, devout, his sins washed away by his gestural affirmations. I stood there still, feeling the weight of my entire body on my hips. For my thoughts to run, I had to keep still, or my thoughts would be shaken out of the flyover and would be lost forever. So, I had to be still. At the back of my head is a dwarf's voice saying my brain is no longer inside my head, and I had to keep these thoughts away in fear of actually losing my brain. I closed my eyes to find the answer to my question.

"Why, in everything that we do, do we expect happiness as an outcome? Is happiness what living is for? Isn't that contrary to your beliefs?" I spoke fast. I had to push them all out from my line of thought to make way for the answers, which I thought had always been there, to be thought about. He clapped like a brainwashed church-goer, taking everything an appointed holy man utters. But the question was not rhetorical. I needed an answer. He must tell me. Everyone and no one is divine.

"Tell me. Is your religion based on punishment and pain in sacrificial acts? Where is happiness in that?" I waited. He clapped slowly. It wasn't even my final act. I wanted him to wipe his eyeglasses

clean.

"Why? Why do you think your God created you and the rest of this?" I pointed to my chest. "And this?" I tapped my head. "Isn't it to glorify him?" I asked. He clapped. I still waited. "Why do you worship a god so selfish and so jealous that he flooded humanity across races and cultures to prove that there's nothing to do in your pathetic human life but to make him satisfied? Is that love? To think that you say he is a god of love! Where is love and happiness in all of that?"

He was still as a grove on a quiet dawn. He had long made up his mind.

"He is God," he said.

That was all there was to say.

"There was never a promise of happiness in this process called life. This love does not entail happiness, only salvation."

That was all there was to say. The kind of God requires this much silence.

I was stuck in a trance between life and death, and the dragon told me to take heed as I was on my way to be delivered from him. Happiness is for small people.

Vade Retro Satana, my friend stood up and whispered. It was his time to fix the stage. I stood still. "I am afraid," he said, "that this is all an act. That behind all these is a curtain, a transparent seminal curtain, that neither forbids us nor forces us to walk through."

"Getch," I said. I imagined the curtain like a non-stop downward flowing of a translucent army of liquified pearls.

"And once we move past it, we might find that there is nothing more," he added. My friend, the prophet, is still standing outside the ark of the kitchen as I bask in the weak brightness of the bulb.

We looked at each other eye to eye. I closed my eyes and couldn't stop myself from smiling, still searching for the answer to my question, trying to remember the point of all the philosophers' advice. The dragon was in pain and infuriated. It has been betrayed.

God is love. He heaved.

Nunquam Suade Mihi Vana, we spoke.

"What is your name?" we asked.

"Do you know now why you're here?" I asked. He responded with a nod. "You know my name." I smiled, remembering the poetry of my birth. It is itself the birth of enlightenment.

"I know you love Him," we spoke.

"If I don't, I would not still be speaking," we responded.

His tired eyes lit up at the news. He liked that my existence was artful and that I had no control of it but become.

"Tell me your name," placing his wrist on the table as if he was about to pray.

Sunt Mala Quae Libas!

He threw the words in the space between us. He would use my name against me, I knew. It was then that the dragon spoke.

YOU ARE FIRE.

Then came a knocking from the locked storage room.

I felt the tip of my fingers burning; I could see beyond my flesh. The sensation ran like wildfire through every orifice of **my human skin. Gabriel was in me. Raphael was in me. A thousand seraphs sighed an orgasm of the heavenly symphony. The angels moaned in exhaustion and blew me a kiss. In the corner, Saint Peter drew the curtain and there, Hildegard of Bingen played jazz on the player piano, a dream of a hundred famished children tasting for the first time water after a decade of drought. Saint Benedict smiled and pointed at Liszt playing *Speak Softly Love* as Andy Williams sat wriggling beside him, duct tape rolled around his head. ON FIRE I AM CLEANSED. ON FIRE, I AM.**

It was unlocked, and my lover, the Overman, came, and I rushed, fainting in his embrace. My friend bellowed.

Ipse Venena Biba! Amen.

If the laws of physics do not apply in hell, what laws do we

live through or die through in a dimension out of the physical world? One gets thrown into a pit of burning ice and agonizes for an eternity. The devil can create as much as God does, can she? If not, then all the pains felt in hell are by Him. And so, only in the Seventh Heaven can I find joy so true I need not move. There is finally rest. My honest soldiers await their president.

I woke up in bed, still enveloped in the arms of the man that I love. I stood up and looked for my friend, and found him in the living room on the ground listening to Vivaldi's *L'inverno I. Allegro non molto*. His body curled up in prayer, his forehead touching the floor. I sat in a chair in front of him.

> "Amen," he uttered. "Amen. It is finished. I have cast out the devil."
>
> But hell is empty, I wanted to tell my friend who is of the cross.
>
> "Amy!" my lover called from the kitchen. "How do you like your egg?

Afterlight

by Althea Bonto

The way our masters taught oil painting was to drill this:
There is no form.
only light and shadow.

I need you to believe in me,
to dissolve the context of matter and energy
into a flimsy approximation of the real thing.

At your whistle,
I will be the faded blemish on greasy menu boards,
your golden brown key to a sweetened evening.

Meet me again by the backstreet, please,
where we were young and unsullied,
just two greedy smudges flinging ourselves across the clearing.

Fathom yourself an afterimage of love.
There is only light.
There is only shadow.

Quiet Mornings

by Julia Arrianne Mantiza

Quiet Mornings

It isn't love if it isn't loud,
but I see it in the daylight,
as glow peaks through blinds.

I see it in morning dew
from smiling eyes, snug
between blankets and thighs.

I taste it in coffee mugs,
kissed by bitter brown
that stain corners of mouths.

Smile Lines & Pearly Whites

by Jairelle Somcio

Knitted bibs and messy cheeks,
hearty meals and wooden seats.
Nightly rhymes hummed till lulled,
fingers comb my hair until dulled.

Shoulders far freighted, as rust out-grown.
Eroded were the dents on your chest,
downcast eyes weighted, so did your bones.
Obscurity painted you blind, fully dressed.

Smile lines turned seamless,
your drought barely buried.
My warm solace diluting,
..Would it have hurt you to be unmarried?

Cylinder bright orange,
a ridiculous taboo.
With a spilled pill shadowing
a price tag brand new,
on the ground, ringed hand bloomed
fingers curled, *somewhere* your soul loomed.

Trickling in my mind, lies an apparition
of your smile lines and pearly whites.

To my dearest mother,
whose scent will never near me again,

Love, your tear-stained joy,
a quivering pen.

Bittersweet Ephemeral Tale

by Kyla Mae L. Bayarcal

A kiss from the warm January breeze
makes way to send comfort
like a long-awaited liham from a lover

Thoughts ringing in my ear
like the bell of a Cathedral
and the prolonging 's' when
chanting a prayer,
sound of familiarity and comfort—
the thought of belonging to something

Under this great acacia I rest.
I drown in my thoughts of
longing and ephemeral moments
I struggle to name.

The Red Stayed

by Ellah Obligar

I unraveled my curls from the velvet curling barrel, pressing each section of strands gently into my palm so it would remember its shape a little longer while my other hand rummaged through my makeup bag. Palettes tipped against each other. Brushes clinked against compact mirrors. Tubes rolled across the vanity like loose coins. I pulled out my usual lip combination; rosy mauve liner, burnt nude lipstick, sheer gloss layered carefully on top. The arrangement I trusted.

The combination that made me feel articulate but unprovocative.

I held them longer than necessary.

Something about them felt like compliance.

I placed them back inside the bag and reached toward another pouch I rarely touched. It sat in my closet together with my outgrown clothes like an artifact preserved by hesitation, its zipper stiff, its surface dusted by neglect that felt almost deliberate. When I blew across it, the dust lifted in a thin cloud, as if memory itself had been resting there, to be disturbed.

Inside was the lipstick my mother gave me. A true red bullet lipstick, deep enough to flirt with burgundy depending on the light. The paint of the casing is still as intact as when she handed it to me, empirical that my fingerprints never left traces ever since the day I kept it.

I rested one hand beneath my chin and traced the curve of my lips with it. The scent arrived before the color did, sliding into memory with unsettling accuracy. Suddenly, it was 2016. My mother leaned toward me, applying the same shade onto my lips for Founder's Day at school. I remember the steadiness of her wrist, the way she tilted my chin upward as though she was adjusting not only my posture but the way the world would read me once I stepped outside.

The crowd beyond the classroom felt louder that day. I remember wondering why my mouth felt heavier, as if color itself carried expectation.

It was a statement, though I did not yet understand its language.

I only understood the ceremony of it—the way she never rushed application, even when mornings demanded urgency. She would sit near the window where sunlight softened the mirror's harshness, steadying her hand against her cheek as she filled her lips with deliberate precision. The pigment appeared bright, almost celebratory, a scarlet that announced arrival before introduction.

I watched her complete the ritual with quiet reverence, unaware that she was teaching me something I would spend years trying to translate.

The red stayed.

There was never another lipstick she trusted the same way. The Everbilena true red bullet lipstick remained her daily companion, even when practicality suggested softer shades, even when mornings demanded haste. She wore it while sweeping floors, while counting change, while preparing food behind a canteen counter where steam from boiling pots blurred everything except her composure.

At the time, I rarely saw women wear red casually. Red belonged to women who had already secured their authority—women whose titles entered rooms before they did.

My mother finished high school and carried no credentials that society announces with ceremonial reverence. Yet she moved through social circles that relied heavily on titles for validation. Doctors laughed loudly beside her. Business owners sought her opinion in conversations that extended beyond courtesy. Community leaders assigned her responsibilities without hesitation, as though competence could be measured through instinct rather than paperwork.

There was something gravitational about her. Rooms

rearranged themselves around her arrival, not because she demanded attention, but because she refused to move cautiously within spaces that expected caution from women like her. She arrived late to functions sometimes—information about meetings or gatherings often reached her last because access to a reliable phone was a privilege she could not consistently afford. Yet her lateness never translated into apology. She entered as if time itself had adjusted to her entrance rather than the other way around.

The lipstick rarely stayed confined to her mouth. It marked porcelain cups, the rims of soda bottles she drank from between conversations, the edges of tissue paper folded neatly inside her handbag. It left quiet evidence that she had passed through spaces that were not originally built to remember her.

Conversations bent easily toward her voice, as if authority recognized her before credentials ever could.

The red stayed.

Watching her felt like watching someone speak a language I would eventually inherit without formal instruction. Confidence, in our home, was not taught through advice. It was rehearsed through observation. I learned posture before I learned vocabulary for ambition. I learned how to greet strangers without shrinking long before I understood how social hierarchies arranged themselves around invisible rules.

For most of my life, I never felt like the odd one out. Not in classrooms where surnames carried generational wealth. Not in gatherings where conversations drifted toward investments, academic achievements, or travel stories that existed far outside our household budget. Belonging felt naturally available to me, as though social comfort had been passed down genetically rather than cultivated through years of watching my mother enter rooms that were not designed for her.

But belonging has conditions. It often hides them until it is ready to enforce them.

Among friends and classmates, conversations about parents' occupations hovered in that delicate territory between curiosity and classification. It was rarely asked directly, but it surfaced eventually, usually disguised as casual interest. When people learned my mother worked as a canteen vendor during those years, their reactions rarely sounded cruel. They sounded surprised.

"I didn't expect that."

The statement arrived softly but rearranged the air between us. I recognized the recalibration immediately, even when they tried to hide it. I had grown accustomed to assumptions that I came from a family positioned closer to social elites than reality suggested. I dressed deliberately. I spoke carefully. I navigated conversations with composure that suggested inheritance rather than effort.

I rarely introduced my mother's occupation into conversation. Not because I felt ashamed of her, but because I understood how quickly admiration could transform into subtle reassessment once class reality interrupted aesthetic illusion. I learned early that society listens differently once it knows where your stability originates. Surprise never arrives loudly. It settles gently, like dust rearranging itself after truth has entered the room.

The red stayed.

Standing in front of the mirror that morning, the pigment deepened under artificial light. It no longer appeared bright or ceremonial. It settled into something closer to burgundy—heavier, more deliberate, less forgiving. Against my morena skin, it looked almost violent, like blood drawn across the mouth after years of quiet restraint.

The image disturbed me because it held two conflicting truths.

In one reflection, it resembled injury; a reminder of how women are taught endurance as if it were sacred duty. We are trained to articulate ourselves clearly but to soften authority until it feels decorative rather than threatening. Visibility is encouraged only when it remains digestible.

Power, when displayed too openly, is labeled excessive, unfeminine, or worse—pretentious.

In another reflection, the color resembled evidence of devouring limitation itself. It looked like the aftermath of consuming silence, of refusing to inherit invisibility politely. It suggested competence without apology. It suggested presence that did not seek permission before occupying space.

Both reflections felt true. Neither felt comfortable.

It looked like power. It looked like a wound that had learned how to speak. I could not decide which frightened me more.

The red stayed.

The word pretentious hovered in my thoughts with an accusation that sounded familiar, almost rehearsed by society long before I ever encountered it personally. The word is usually spoken toward those whose presentation appears too polished for their perceived background, too confident for their documented circumstances, too articulate for the economic bracket people quietly assign to them.

But the accusation ignores the environment that produces it.

My mother grew up navigating instability that did not announce itself dramatically but existed persistently through inconsistent opportunities, financial uncertainty, and the quiet exhaustion of building stability without institutional safety nets. She understood something early that the world rarely admits publicly:humility, when performed by the working class, is often interpreted as confirmation of limitation rather than virtue.

So she refused humility.

She carried herself as though her worth existed independently from her circumstances, and in doing so, she disrupted the social expectation that economic background should dictate emotional posture. She learned conversational rhythm, social etiquette, and the subtle codes of environments built to recognize familiarity rather than difference. Not to imitate the elite, but to survive them.

Inside a café later that day, I noticed how differently the room arranged itself around me. The lipstick sat heavily on my mouth, a presence I could not forget even when I tried to focus on the bitterness of my coffee. Conversations seemed to slow when our gazes met. Smiles lingered a second longer than necessary. Their politeness carried an added layer of attentiveness as if I had become someone worth accommodating.

I welcomed it, almost instinctively. I knew this choreography. I had lived inside it long before the lipstick ever touched my lips.

Across the café, a woman adjusted her blazer before approaching the counter, smoothing invisible creases with deliberate care. A group of students nearby laughed too loudly, each voice carefully layered over another, competing without appearing to compete. The air hummed with performance disguised as ease. I recognized it with an unsettling familiarity, like hearing your own voice played back in a recording you never remembered making.

Somewhere between the first sip and the second, I realized how easily I slip into spaces that expect excellence from me. I show up polished, prepared, composed because I learned early that showing up any other way meant disappearing entirely. Winning had long stopped feeling like an achievement and had quietly hardened into identity. Recognition arrived quickly, generously, but it never seemed to arrive for me. It arrived for the version of me that succeeded.

They saw the result and called it *me*.

They saw me and called it *result*.

I thought of my mother then—how she moves through rooms with quiet precision, how effort becomes invisible when performed too well. I had admired that grace for years, not realizing how faithfully I had inherited it. Showing up. Excelling. Repeating. What once felt like resilience had slowly transformed into expectation, first from others, and eventually from myself.

Familiarity, I realized, breeds a strange kind of disregard. When brilliance becomes predictable, it stops being noticed. It

simply becomes required.

I stirred my coffee absentmindedly, watching the spoon circle the mug like a rehearsed routine. It occurred to me how often I am treated like something reliable but impersonal like a light bulb fixed into a ceiling. Always present. Always luminous once switched on. Expected to function without flicker. Expected to stay bright for as long as the room demands illumination. Allowed to rest only when everyone else has already left.

Presence, for me, had quietly fused with performance. And performance, when perfected long enough, begins to resemble authenticity even when it is only calibration. I once believed that mastering this calibration was an advantage. Control. Safety. But standing inside it now, I could feel how it shaped me into something static, something displayed. A podium I had climbed so often it began to feel less like elevation and more like flooring—tiles I was expected to stand on, unmoving, steady, exemplary.

Failure, from that height, no longer felt human. It felt embarrassing. Unacceptable. Impossible for someone who was supposed to know better.

The café lights flickered slightly as clouds outside thickened, the dimming sky pressing softly against the glass windows. I blinked, momentarily startled by how long I had been staring into my cup. My coffee was nearly finished. I rotated the mug gently, watching the spoon bump softly against porcelain walls. The stain of the red lipstick smudged along the rim, blurred but still intensely visible, refusing to fade despite the heat and the stirring.

I traced it with my eyes, that stubborn crescent of color.

"Well," I murmured under my breath, barely audible even to myself, "maybe… just maybe… this is the aftermath of devouring limitation itself." The bitterness of the last sip lingered longer than I expected.

The red stayed.

Strength of Materials

by Jude Wilter Domen

I remember the Strength of Materials,
how I would cry when my father taught
me Algebra in the second grade,
far too early for a child to dabble
in a song of numbers and letters.

I remember how the variables and exponents
danced in fluid jazz in my head,
as I wrote down the answers on the sheet,
how I would cry when the timer chewed away the hour.
In his soft embrace, my father told me it was okay.
It was just a contest, a mere game of numbers.

I could still remember the operations—
their never-changing order—or when my father
taught me to fold my sleeve two times above the elbow,
then fold back once. It won't fall off, he would say.
From then, I would fold myself
two times above, and back once, so I won't falter.
And I would always remember.

And now I test the strength of my wit,
the ever-enduring measure of the man
my father built me up to be. I rest well
knowing long have I proven my strength.

Zora's Decision

by Maria Alexandra Victoria H. Mejos

"Zora, we need to go. NOW." the Chief of the commission loudly urged as the landing helicopter rumbled in her front yard. "This is literally a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

Zora felt her nerves paralyze. The clock stood still at 12 o'clock, and her vision was scattered. In one direction, she could see her dying mother. In the other, a group of hazy faces and a whirring helicopter outside her open front door.

"I can't! How could I? My mother only has one year left, and the cure I'm developing might still be able to save her!" she frantically argued, her voice hoarse and shaky.

Her mother's groans intensified, as if trying to convey a broken message.

"If you come with us now, you can develop a better cure in the laboratories our country has. Zora, you know that your makeshift lab won't work!" the Chief continued.

"But if I go, I won't be able to see my mother again," Zora broke down in tears, her voice as shrill as the dead cold of winter. "The dictator already announced that there can only be one foreign flight every 100 years!"

The helicopter roars. "Chief, we have five minutes till takeoff," the pilot shouts through the ear-shattering noise.

"Zora, you were chosen by this commission for a reason," the Chief pleaded as she grasped Zora's skeleton-like hands, thin as any other girl's chance to flee her country. "Please, don't let your brilliance go to waste."

At this point, all Zora could hear was her mother's languishing

groans. The film of her life played before her eyes: her childhood dreams of becoming a scientist abroad, the gruesome life in her communist homeland, and her mother's supple appearance — resembling the red Russian apples she was fond of as a child — before lung cancer owned her body like a slave. Zora grew up in the slums of her city, accustomed to having nothing and no one — except her mother. Being able to buy those Russian apples every now and then was a luxury to them. They were precious to Zora, and infinitely more was her mother.

"I…I can't. And I won't." Her face brightened, as if reflecting the light of the wax candles her mother used to tuck her to bed with at nine years old. "I'm not leaving my mother. I know I can cure her!", Zora exclaimed with firm resolution. Despite the odds, Zora still clung to the flickering hope of being able to see her mother become well.

That was all the commission needed to hear. "Goodbye, Zora," the Chief finally withdrew, with a tone of utter disappointment evident in his voice.

The door closed and the helicopter departed. All Zora had left was her dying mother and the hope that her cure might still give her life.

Her mother's agitated groans diminished as she lost strength to even make a sound. In its place, eerie gasps were heard, as Zora's mother struggled to catch air. Panicked, Zora rushed to her bedside.

"Mother, please stay a little longer! The cure is already on its way! The medication just needs a few more days to ferment! Mother, please…" Zora pleaded, her voice a hollow cave.

Zora's mother fixed her gray, empty eyes on her daughter's face. Struggling to move her lips, she uttered under her breath, *"You… should…have gone."* And she breathed her last.

I Hate Children

by Shania Eloise Genovia

I have a loathing for children:
their eager eyes, lavish innocence, flushed cheeks,

Almost always with public complaint,
Never ceasing their absent restraint,
Incessant cries persisting through the night,
Morning needs, Cheeky misdeeds, Mischievous schemes,

Endless wants:
collections of toys, trinkets, and jewelry,
everything shiny, everything make-believe,

Children want more than what they can see,
Yet they scream for the sake of screaming,
Whether it be a noun or a verb,
Something real or something absurd,
Perhaps not just one but all of it too:
Everything comically huge, little, and of little use.

Deliveries of delicate dialogue,
Parceled so carefully they don't get hurt,
Neither sting, prick, nor ache,
Pinch, itch, nor
Sudden wake—

No.

We will not have adults for children;

Children will be children for as long as they need,
Until their youth kindly packs up and leaves,

Leaving behind a trail of gray and sag,
Full of disease, displeasure, discontent,
All the ripened sour fruit:the rotten and the bruised,
the heartbreak, the mistakes, and the substance misuse
to remember and then forget
the toils and the regrets.

Life once viewed from a golden lens,
Unmined and full,
Life now construed undecided and cruel.

Until then, let kids be kids,
Let them be despicable wee devils,
Whom I despise stupidly so,
Let them own their curious little stares,
With so little care in the world.

Perhaps it is not hatred I feel,
But envy that I so desperately conceal:

I have a longing to be a child again,
To be eager, innocent, and richly curious,
To complain freely with an outward cry,
To be uncertain with ample time to think,

Over orange juice in place of alcohol to drink,
To be overly curious without having to tone it down,
And to simply be youth: lost but eventually found.

Lasingera

by Dian Charlyz A. Quiano

Lost sight through dim lights, only to squint as it changes.
From red, to blue, to purple, to—
I blink as I stand between bodies.
Heated as I'm pressed shoulder to shoulder—
with sounds that pulsed and waved,
The bass passing through bone.
Playlist curated to tell us when to feel.

My friends pulled me into our cramped table.
Purses placed next to glasses. One iced.
Then golden nectar settled on my lips,
Though I never knew why I tasted it.
It hummed beneath my skin.
So I took a shot.
And another.
And another.

Until it sings within my bloodstream.

And I feel myself going drowsy.
I pause and observe.
As the lights start to brighten—
Like flashing stars and fireworks.
It hummed beneath my skin, edges blurring.
The music blaring—

My words spilling
Out of order
Confessions now unearthed
Before I can stop them.
Everything that should have been left buried.

Floating.

Then silence.

When I wake, regret and bile coat my tongue.
Bitter and metallic.
Yet I can't remember what I gave away.

Dizzy and numb. Yet my heart is oddly raw.
As if forced through my ribs, stabbed past bone.
Disappointment draining the adrenaline,
leaving nothing but an ache of what's left from the night.

Liquid courage had left me undone.
Clothes clinging with sweat.
One heel missing.

Memory wiped clean.

All it left was a coward with a splitting headache
as I dared not to pick up the phone.

I could almost see notifications staring back at me.
The things you could possibly say.
The disbelief that I actually said something.

And yet, not once did it vibrate.
The silence felt safer than confirmation.
Like I could pretend that consequence never existed.
Or how misspelled confessions could actually mean something.

But it's funny.

I couldn't recall
what I told you last night.

Nothing at all.

The Gentle Hands in the City of Gentle People

by Paul Ray G. Donaire

A pair of feet can take you anywhere, but for reflexologist Annabelle Galo, her hands bring people to a place of solace.

Born with an orthopedic condition on her lower body, an injury that affects the musculoskeletal system, Galo's life trajectory may have been expected to be thwarted by fate. However, her experience working in reflex massage for 15 years says otherwise.

Residing in Maslog, Sibulan, the 51-year-old widow relies on her electric bike to travel daily for work, stationed beside the row of food stalls on the far left side of Dumaguete Boulevard.

"*Ang kuan jud nako nga* schedule *sa amoa diri, sa amoa nga grupo*:once a week *ra gyud mi pero kada-adlaw rako muari kay naa paman ko estudyante. Oo, nya kinahanglan man og balon kada-adlaw nya wala na pud koy kanang bana nga makatabang. So, solo-solo nako ang panginabuh*i," she said.

[The schedule I have here, our group's schedule:we only meet once a week. But I come every day because I still have students to provide for. Yes, and I also need a budget every day since I no longer have a husband who can help. So, I only have myself to make ends meet.]

Every day, Galo returns home to her 22-year-old daughter, Angelline. She devotes her attention to caring for her daughter with cerebral palsy, who requires her constant care and affection, while her other six children have already taken their own paths to independence. Aside from tending to Angelline, Galo also shoulders the responsibility of taking care of her two grandchildren, Ivan and Sophia Ysabel, aged 14 and 6 respectively.

With three mouths to feed, Galo's efforts to secure their daily bread depends on the number of customers she serves each day.

Between the latter hours of four to nine, she sets herself on a chair and waits for tired customers to avail of her service, each coming with an opportunity for her to earn ₱100.

Labor job for people with disabilities is often perceived as a far-fetched reality, but Galo defies these societal barriers, empowering herself through meaningful work.

"*Kung himoon nimo siyag hadlang, dili ka makahimo og panarbaho. Nagahulat rakag naay muhatag (og) naay mutabang [...] So, maningkamot jud ko sakoa*," she said.

[If you are going to see it as a hindrance, you would not be able to work. You are just for someone to provide and offer help. So, I have to strive hard for myself]

Although confined by her socio-economic status, Galo found herself guided by the support of community organizer Prof. Rey Gimena in securing aid from foreign donors, particularly the Norwegian Disabled Children Foundation and Build Aid Norway. Gimena became acquainted with Galo in 2008 during her frequent visits to the former foundation located in Brgy. Calindagan, where she would bring Angelline to partake in the community-based rehabilitation services.

"It caught my attention because I thought she was the one, she was the client. And after knowing that she was not the client, because if you look at Annabelle, she ought to be a client, too, because she was actually having (a) disability," he said.

However, it wasn't until Gimena observed Galo practicing reflexology therapy, focusing on foot treatments, that he persuaded her to join reflexologist organizations.

"She needs to join (an) organization so she can also avail of a space and a regular time where she can also apply her trade, which is reflex and massage," he explained.

Galo sees Gimena as a beacon of support not only for herself

but also for her family's well-being, bringing relief to their socio-economic and medical conditions.

"Sa panahon nga naa mi, gusto mi mu-contact *kay wala paman mi atoy* cell phone, *siya* (Gimena) *muy akong kuanon (mag-istorya) sa bisita* (donors). *Siya muy akong hangyoon,"* Galo expressed.

[When we need to contact someone, as we don't have a cell phone yet, he is the one I ask to speak with the visitors. He is the one I reach out to for help.]

Galo has found familiarity in traversing rough roads in the pursuit of supporting her family. From providing hand-washing laundry services to becoming a Tiangge vendor, and eventually finding success as a reflexologist, Galo has seized every doorway that opens along her financial journey towards stability. While the stars may not align with her desire, her aspirations extend beyond material comforts, including her hard-driven hopes for her grandson, Ivan, to finish his education.

Ultimately, Galo's brittle bones do not limit her progress. Instead, she enables her unwavering determination to overcome all odds. Persevering through financial hardships and learning alternative ways to make her hands shine, she has managed to break a sweat without compromising her disability. In the face of health adversity, Galo remains grateful and resolute in her endeavors.

The story of Galo captures the hustle culture that one must exert to survive. It serves as a reminder that every individual has a different outlook; that only they define the meaning of struggle. With over 350,000 out of 1.9 million employed people with disabilities (PWDs) recorded in January 2022, a safe space should apply in all workplaces to empower PWDs, helping them realize their undiscovered capability. As for Galo, it is through her gentle hands that have shaped her life into ingenuity.

The Vice

by Lealina Evangeline A. Reyes

It smells of tar and burnt airways
masked by the scent of vanilla—
The kiss of life and death
packed in a box under stark daylight
cradled by my fingers,
pressed between my lips.

Sweet killing thing,
why do you burn me so?
I wish nothing but your sweet intoxication
to lift me off the ground.

I inhale and inhale
until you are no longer
and I take another, and another
until my breath smells of havoc.

And I wish, oh I so sweetly wish
that you, my darling would not be
the death of me
for I have fallen in love.

FISH, FISH

by Colleen Dugan

I lay my palms flat on the bathroom floor, blood seeping from my wrists as I scream at the broken pieces of my marble comb.

"Fuck your future!" it repeats and echoes in my dimly lit bathroom, my voice coursing the louder I get. My legs were heavy, moving felt like being pricked with needles, the cold ceramic tiles freeze my thighs. My screams and loss of blood delayed my vision as my head slowly, slowly, *slowly...*

I black out.

The next thing I know I am carried; it's hazy. My body swayed slowly, my wrists covered in satin cloth. Useless. Satin does not stop the blood from coming out, unlike cloth. Whoever is carrying me is panicking, their breathing is quite heavy. I am carefully laid down on a white chair, they level with me. And still I cannot make out their face, my eyelids feel heavy, and my vision hazy. Whoever they are, they are trying very hard to get a response from me.

"Why–" *why indeed*. I try to read their lips as it moves but it's moving too quickly. *Why had you defiled my body?* I cannot keep up with the movement of their lips, soon I could no longer keep my eyes open.

I black out again.

This time I am alone. The window is open and the breeze is cold. The smell of green musk fills my nostrils, I pick up the pillow–my wrists hurt–and inhale. *Ah, so I am on his bed.* "Fuck." I feel goosebumps all over my body, disgust fills me, my stomach boils in anger over my marble comb in the bathroom now inked with my blood. *This is how I am to be treated? I gave you the very essence of my soul and you lay another woman in our bed?* I stare at my bandaged wrists, *isn't it only fitting to end this on your bed, with the marble piece I foolishly thought was mine.*

My Daddy's Lullaby

For Richard Emperado

by Jennylyn Emperado

Little Boy Blue,
sung as I fell asleep.
Those soft, sweet words
I'm sure to keep.

With weary eyes
and a heavy heart,
I cling to my father
as he lulls me to sleep.

Safe and sound,
wrapped in his love,
forever his little girl,
under stars above.
No matter how life will be,
all I feel is his love for me.

A Mother's Love

For Becky Emperado

by Jennylyn Emperado

Soft lavender haze with a touch of pink
drenches the summer sky.
I think of my mother in these times
and how rare they are.

A mother. My mother,
is the epitome of purple.

Royalty, in the warmth of her embrace.
Harmonious laughter
and the silent prayers they utter
in times of bliss.

When we are lost
to the dangers of the world,
She is a heartbeat away.

She breaks down barriers
of despair and doubt,
with a simple smile.
A whisper. A touch.

For who would we be,
without a mother's love?

brace

by Rhenelyn Chanthavysouk

taut muscles, worn shoulders.
teeth that aren't sharp enough to puncture skin.
curling into a defensive position,
in between ghosts of something purer than love.

held breath in exhausted lungs,
diving into something shallow,
believing it to be deeper.
sink to the floor in seconds instead of hours.

swallowing medicine raw--
where water slowly creeps higher and higher.
choking down a heavy sense of hatred,
when it is but saccharine sweetness that touches.

it is a prayer, to reflect love.
it is answered in shedding of armor.

Arabella

by Josham Hamid

Arabella moves through streets she does not own.

The city swells around her.
Engines, horns, and the scorching heat of the sun.

Pedicabs with students,
Backs curved under burdens they cannot lift.
Some chasing warmth in a meal at Crispy King,
Some return to rooms where absence awaits.

Jeepneys yet to run their route.
Driver's hands clutching survival,
Veering toward Piapi for a bag of turon,
Carrying the hope of feeding his family at home.

Luxury cars glide past her,
Silent and insulated,
Some with problems of their own,
Many with shamelessness.

Newlyweds clutch a small fan,
Young lovers fold heartbreak into passing seats,
Some on dates,
Anticipating soft tres leches

And still, the city does not pause.
Its pulse does not wait for tired hearts like Arabella's.
Its streets do not bend for grief or longing.

Arabella moves through it,
Learning the weight of observation,
The quiet resilience of witnessing.

To move is to survive;
To notice it, to carry the world with you
Without expecting it to carry you.

CURLY GIRL METHOD

by Bianca Ysabel Munoz

You wake up sore, puffy, oily, and already feeling like you've been preheated for the day. No air-conditioner. Just the electric fan pushing warm air around like it's doing you a favor. You smell like sweat. You are sweat.

You promised yourself you'd wake up early to read, to finish your tasks, to get ahead for once. Instead, you snoozed your alarm seven times. It screamed for an hour. You heard it. You chose to ignore it. And now you have thirty minutes to fix your entire existence— including your hair.

Run to the bathroom.

No heated shower. Just twist the faucet open. Gush. Gush. Gush. The water is rushing and so are you. Scrub your skin, dead and alive. Scrub your scalp. Peel off the dandruff that had the audacity to sit there collecting oil like rent is free. Shampoo. Scrub. Rinse. Shampoo again. Scrub harder. Rinse. Rinse like you're washing off yesterday's exhaustion.

You are halfway there....*I think.*

Conditioner. Not the tiny emergency sachet. The 3-in-1 treatment for "frizzy curly hair" that promises salvation. Your hair feels like chicken wire. Lather. Lather. Lather. Detangle with the brush, not the fine comb— you're not trying to lose strands and patience at the same time. Brush until your arms burn and your neck threatens to detach from your body. Bend over. Gather all your hair in front. Rinse. Five minutes. Maybe more. You don't have five minutes. Towel? No time. You're dripping. That's fine.

Leave-in conditioner. Generous. No drying. No shortcuts. You don't get shortcuts. Section your hair—left, right, back. Start with the back. Always the hardest part first.

Your hair is thick. Stubborn. It refuses to cooperate. The lower strands never curl the way you want them to. But even the hardest strands bend when you insist long enough.

Section. Pick a small group. Wrap it around your finger. Twist. Twist. Twist. Let go. Do it again. And again. And again. Add more curling cream. More gel than necessary. You are not risking frizz today.

Twenty minutes in, you're barely halfway through the right side. This is the part you hate. You wish you could just comb it out and let it fall

into obedient waves. But you don't have that privilege. Your hair demands time. Demands labor. Demands attention. Just like everything else in your life.

Because when you step out of that bathroom, the world will not care that your arms ache or that you slept late or that you're tired of shaping things that refuse to cooperate.

You still have to show up. You still have to speak clearly. Smile properly. Serve people. Lead conversations. Carry responsibilities. Answer messages.

Be patient. Be kind. Be composed.

No one sees the twenty minutes you spent twisting each strand into place. They only see the finished curls.

They see confidence. The leadership. The capability. They don't see how much effort it takes to look like you *have it together.*

But you do it anyway.

You finish the right side; then the left. You scrunch it all one last time. Let it air dry because you have no other choice. Grab your bag. Check the time. You're cutting it close—again.

And yet, you step out ready.

Because this is your everyday life. Tired, rushed, hesitant; but still showing up. Still serving. Still shaping stubborn strands into something intentional. Still choosing discipline over ease.

The curls hold.

So do you.

Heavy

by Dian Charlyz A. Quiano

Self-indulgence is a must,
for emptiness has kept me frozen.
So I consume my own flesh
until nothing of me is left.

Unrecognizable and scarred,
yet I am never full.
While the scale slowly groans beneath me,
the needle tipping toward glutton.
I let the weight of my skin grow heavy.

Even refusing to admit,
my plate has grown larger than before—
My glass spilling by its rim
like how flesh swells past tight casing.
Stretched beyond recognition,
restraint split at the seams.

Mouth wide open,
I drown in second helpings.

Inhaling excess until I've filled my mass,
With my teeth dulled
from gnawing on leftover carrion.
Feeding on what is supposed to be discarded.

I let myself sink in my consumption—
Feel the relief of being heavy enough
To fit the space.

Niche reference

by Zarelle Villanzana

Malice is rare.
Lack of restraint
may have intervened the
supposed natural process of education—
for better or worse, who's to know?
Provided supplementary material to
aid him in his study, in hopes that
his conclusions would arise similar to mine.
        And this is why it is
        not 'selfless' to help.
Self as independent actor, as is he;
to mingle ideas then, to somewhat
become homogenous, by the influence of
one who has comparative advantage,
over the other in terms of wisdom
                maturity
          honesty,
is to hope for trade to exist, in which
there must be a reciprocation of love,
if the other was comparatively
        advantageous in physical
        touch, I would be
willing to accept with
  out consent,
if it means trade equilibrium is met,
at the expense of societal rightness.

A Woman's Guide to Creative Writing

by Julia Mantiza

If— *(poem, Rudyard Kipling)*
Hope is the thing with feathers *(poem, Emily Dickinson)*
Little Women *(novel, Louis May Alcott)*
We Wear the Mask *(poem, Paul Laurence Dunbar)*

Great Expectations *(novel, Charles Dickens)*
Sense and Sensibility *(novel, Jane Austen)*
She Walks in Beauty *(poem, Lord Byron)*
Alone *(poem, Edgar Allan Poe)*

The Little Prince *(novel, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry)*
Fathers and Sons *(novel, Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev)*
Sons and Lovers *(novel, D.H. Lawrence)*
Robinson Crusoe *(novel, Danial Defoe)*
Pioneers! O Pioneers! *(poem, Walt Whitman)*
Their Eyes Were Watching God *(novel, Zora Neale Hurston)*

The Idiot *(novel, Fyodor Dostoyevsky)*
The Scarlet Letter *(novel, Nathaniel Hawthorne)*
The Tale of Despereaux *(novel, Kate DiCamillo)*
The World is Too Much With Us *(poem, William Wordsworth)*

All the world's a stage *(poem, William Shakespeare)*
Tell all the truth but tell it slant *(poem, Emily Dickinson)*
The Giver *(novel, Lois Lowry)*
The Betrothed *(novel, Alessandro Manzoni)*
The Handmaid's Tale *(novel, Margaret Atwood)*
The Portrait of a Lady *(novel, Henry James)*

I, being born a woman and distressed *(poem, Edna St. Vincent Millay)*
Heart of Darkness *(novella, Joseph Conrad)*
I felt a funeral in my brain *(poem, Emily Dickinson)*
When I consider how my light is spent *(poem, John Milton)*

Annabel Lee *(poem, Edgar Allen Poe)*
See It through *(poem, Edgar Albert Guest)*
The Road Not Taken *(poem, Robert Frost)*
Brave New World *(novel, Aldous Huxley)*

Anchor's Cognizance at the Final Descent

by Khalil Deciar Ventula

As I wallow in the breadth of the ocean,
I, too, revel in profundity's notion.

Before me, a spate of memories' wraith,
Collection of barnacles, wrapped in corrosion swathe.
Life is merely a concatenation of events,
We are trifling tools—soon-to-be-victims of cessants.

I was once beautifully pristine and lathed,
How I've become so pitted and scathed.
I used to mock anchors at the end of their watch,
Yet, now, I , too, am nearing my unwilled scotch.

At times, one is faced by what will be—
Most times unknowingly.
Cognizance does comes last—
Right before guilt's overcast.

Out of Print

by Jude Wilter Domen

"Why don't you smile for me?"

George had lost count of the times he had to pose for that singular photo. It was just a photo, an annual corporate mandate for all the editorial staff. His publisher insisted on visualising every possible spot on the print which, of course, he thought was utter nonsense.

"Even the junior staffers get a photo every year, Georgie, how much less the editor-in-chief himself? That's the whole damn face of the magazine right there." Michael would comment, much to his dismay. George had his qualms with it, it was too much of a hassle to pause operations once a year just to take photos nobody bothered to register while scanning the latest issue. Despite these internal squabbles with his publisher, he conceded.

Maybe it was nice having moments outside the writer's room. Or maybe not. There was this inexplicable feeling that George had, for the past twenty years, that any moment outside the writer's room, they'd try to take down the magazine, much like what they did to the writer's workshop years ago. His mother had called it a 'passion', but his father would much rather say nothing of the sort. Nonetheless, he kept at it anyway. It was the only thing he knew, and he was good at it.

The stale air of the set kept him from his wits. George could feel the effects of his morning caffeine begin to fade.

The rush of voices coming into the writer's room woke George from his bout of contemplation. Dadulo and Sanderson, his fiction editors, came in bickering about some piece they'd spent the past week working on. George had already given his notes, there wasn't much he had to comment on. The piece was good to go, only a matter of the most minute of details his editors had strong objections with. "Sir, we're almost done with the edits. The contributor came in with the final draft this morning. We just wanted to get your opinion on this one sentence, then we're good to go."

It was always like this, the final week leading up to print. Everyone, from contributors to his editors and illustrators, having last-minute epiphanies and probing over every single word. George left them to their own devices, he was usually deep in thought with the sequence of the issue at that point.

Before him spread across the long table that stretched across the space, was the galley proof, filled with annotations from George in blue ink and comments by Michael in green, only the piece from Dadulo and Sanderson missing from the proof.

"Let me see, chum." He skimmed over the ink stained draft Sanderson handed over. "This. Now, get this typed up. Need your piece in the galley before half past the hour. Go!" And both of them went flying past the glass enclosure of the writer's room.

The long table was a marvellous piece of Zafimaniry acacia woodwork, embellished with intricate carvings from a bygone era of artisan craftsmanship, commissioned by the founding editor, Michael Luis Melon on his travels to the Madagascan highlands. His travels were well-documented in his Nobel Prize winning personal essays, pieces George loved as a young lad in the service. He could recall sneaking in his copy in the barracks, where personal effects were encouraged to be minimal, nothing but the bare essentials. Well, to George, a good book was an essential.

Switching a poem for a flash fiction piece from the proof, George traced the outlines of the table until his palm met the seamlessly fitted obsidian ashtray along the head of the table. A later installation, made upon the insistence of third editor, Greta Rivera.

George was lucky enough to meet her as a junior staffer, along with her co-editor, Vanessa Go. He could still remember reading her poems, in a second-hand folio he'd gotten off a corner store, fresh off service, looking for a job. Greta wrote of the smoke, the way it shifted, finding its way across the city, and that young lovelorn George would take those words with him as he'd jump between the literary columns of newspapers, living off the advances and his vet benefits.

When he got the editor-in-chief position after nine years of working for the magazine, he was ecstatic. For once, the distinctly well-read man in George couldn't measure in words the emotions that captured him, waves of memory could drown that young man.

Prose and poetry that once embraced him when no one could, stories he escaped to in the midst of peril, were written on the very table he found himself at the head at.

George could map out his days, nights spent at the head of the table, head hung downcast in contemplation. At the end of the day, it was that table staring back at him, with a galley spread across the woodwork. Time spent outside the writer's room felt like a blur, though he'd like to think he had been a good husband, father, and friend to the few people he'd let into what he'd call his 'hedgerow'.

These annual photoshoots were less of a concern for George, more of a nuisance to the daily meditative drive he was committed to. This sense of synchronised flowing vibrations—fluid motion as he stormed around the building, tending to editorial matters. These days, his work involved lots of meetings with accounting and sales, some middle-aged lackey sent by the board, berating him for not meeting the quarter's forecasted subscriptions.

This year, they coerced a much younger staffer on the media team to head the shoot. George guessed they weren't briefed on his inability to conform to corporate synergy. The DP was a very insistent young lad, it took them half an hour this morning getting the burgundy curtains just right.

It was a quick breeze with Nolan at the helm of the lens. He would pose as he normally would: stern, with a posture traced back to days of involuntary service for the greater cause of warfare, a stiff jaw he acquired from the unfortunate hereditary line of his father, and eyes—his wife would describe as unreadable, with a deep ebony gaze.

George had no say on it, he preferred to leave it to his managing editors, a bunch of fresh grads transfers from marketing. A move which Michael hoped could 'reinvigorate' the magazine, it did nothing of the sort but create a layer of tension George had to de-escalate in the writer's room. He guessed the digital revamp and push for younger staff wasn't working as much as Michael had liked to believe.

The soft glow streaming from the reflectors overhead was harsh to the skin, as if a hundred Filipino summers compounded into a single beam of light, reminding George of how J.S. Hamid

described the heat bouncing off the Mediterranean to be "a deceptive beauty coercing the ignorant heart of foreign travellers," an issue he recalled fondly. Beads of sweat began to drip off George's chin. Twenty minutes more on this set, he would give way to a waterfall of irritation and anguish.

It was early in the morning, although the surroundings of the set indicated nothing but a scorching noontime heat. The A/C had been running on its last breath for the last couple of weeks, it was scorching hot in the makeshift set they made off the loading bay.

"Sir, let's take five. Let's get Nia for a little touch-up." George got off the scant stool they'd put there for him. He was resolute with his convictions. No full-body pictures, and he didn't want to bother doing fun poses. This was the country's oldest literary magazine. For Christ's sake, they have had National Artists and Pulitzer awardees on their pages, this wasn't a goofy corporate affair. And he'd only ever allowed the photos on the website. He wouldn't have it in print.

All over the little area were boxes and unclaimed bundles tightly wrapped in plastic wrap, mostly subscriptions by hospitals and hotel lobbies left to expire. The smell of old paper and glue permeated the atmosphere. George thought it smelled like rotting classics, whatever that meant. That could be a good idea for the next issue, he noted.

It was a storm of dust when he came in at five in the morning; swirls of particles came off the concrete ground every stride he took across the perimeter. It was one thing to bring up to corporate if the magazine could survive through the end of the week.

On a little corner, supported by cardboard boxes and a few bundles, lit by the gloomy fluorescent glow from the loading bay was the little hair and make-up station. "Well, you're new. Where's old Betty at, kid?" He commented as he approached the station. Sitting idly scrolling on her phone, the makeup artist bounced from her seat. "I'm sorry, sir. Let me get ready for you."

As she tended to her implements, George could hear her shuffling in muttered breaths. "Are you fine?" He asked. There was nothing much in response but a solitary nod. She began wiping off the sweat off his face, applying little dabs from her brush. He could feel the brush tremble as it danced across his face.

It would bother George to think his uptight demeanor and overall air of superiority would cause her to feel such discomfort. He never fancied these shoots, but he didn't think he should add to the list of things that made it an unbearable experience. So reserved old George tried for once. "Well talking about Betty, you have some resemblance to her, you know?" He started, trying his best to look less displeased.

"Oh, I'm taking over from my mother, sir. She just retired last year." She replied, as she wiped her hands off her temples.

"Ah, that's great news. You see, we've always had her on set ever since this annual thing got started. The publisher insisted we get a person for make-up. She must be proud." He continued. George liked to think he had acquired substantial communication skills in all his years of leadership and all those back and forths between corporate forces, though inside he very much still felt like that young boy who would very much rather read than talk.

"I hope so. She insisted I did." She said with an air of hesitance that even the ever-so oblivious editor-in-chief seemed to notice. She had begun to put a bit of powder on his chin.

"Mhm, a little bit stingy there. Didn't mean to budge if it's personal." George said softly, or in his own butchered attempt. Work in the writer's room was often effective in that reserved blunt tone he carried, it came to George more naturally than delicate and soothing, which he subconsciously reserved for his family. He asked, "If you don't mind me asking,"

"I'm just nervous." She replied.

"Why so?"

"Well, whoever thought you could get news that you had to drop out of your English Lit degree, then all of a sudden get to meet a literary legend all in one week? I definitely wasn't expecting that." George could see the disgruntled look on her face. This kid was serious.

"Oh, you flatter me, *ija*." He said with a flick of his fingers. "I'm just a big fan, sir. I even have the monthly print and a digital subscription." She replied.

Throughout his long career in print, George never really knew how to take in compliments. As long as there were no objections, it was all good. If ever there was a wave of vocal adoration, George would retreat to his dry attempts at humour. "And here I thought, only dead men were left in our readership."

"Well, consider me part of the dead then." She chuckled. He could feel the shift in her posture, more at ease. At least there was some reprieve from his terrible morning, George thought.

"The magazine's a national treasure, sir. I doubt that." Well, she was right about that, if only more people bothered. "The monthly revenue and subscriptions say otherwise." George replied glumly.

"Well, I don't think they'd do that, sir. Uh, maybe it's just a seasonal trend, I guess?" She commented.

"I'd doubt they would chuck the whole magazine off, that would be atrocious. Maybe just kill the monthly print, and fold us as a column on the broadsheets." George could feel his skin prickle. "God forbid."

"Better to hope for the best, sir."

As she finished up, George could still see the restlessness behind her eyes, a trace of frustration. "You know, kid, you could still write and make a career out of literature. It doesn't take a degree to write a good manuscript, take it from a man who has a degree in Chemistry."

"Mhmm, I didn't know that sir. I guess there's a lot of ways to break through. Maybe I'll try my luck." A hint of a smile creeping up the edges of her lips. She escorted him off the station and brushed off his vintage tweed suit with a roller. "Looking impeccable, sir. I dare say." She commented.

George thought he'd seen a part of him in the kid. The nervousness in the eyes, the urgency to belong. The confused young lad, all the same.

As he made his way to the set, he turned back. "I never got your name, kid. What was that again?" She looked up from the makeshift table cluttered with brushes and other supplies.

"Nia, *po*." she replied.

"Say, if you do get around to writing that manuscript, Nia, drop by our floor. Give it to the secretary. I'll go over it."

—

"That's it. Two more, and that's it." As George held his pose for what the DP promised were his final takes. He could feel the tips of his fingers tremble. Michael had left the set earlier, whatever it was he was rushing to, George didn't want to acknowledge.

A melody erupted from his pocket, some score from a fantasy film George had loved. A call from Edward. "Hold up for a sec, chum." As he made his way towards the double doors at the farther end of the loading bay.

The first rays of morning were already beginning to light the cool dawn sky. It was a refreshing change from the invasive heat of the set. George always liked the little compound around the building. It was nice having trees line the sidewalks across the lot, the only greenery the city could offer in close proximity. The architecture and design were noticeably older than the surrounding blocks, an old art deco building with a car park lined with acacias, a colonial fusion brought by the Americans.

He picked up the call. "Hey kiddo," On the other line, muffled breaths with a tinge of excitement.

"Hey dad," uttered a familiar voice that seemed to always stay the same way George could remember, tracing back to weekends well spent in their home library or strolling along the Banica.

George would sometimes question if his weekends existed. It always seemed to him he was running marathons in his own mind, the magazine occupying every thought possible. He tried his best to spend time with his children, though the hours always seemed a blur. George had managed to make a portable writer's room.

"What's up? I was in the middle of that bloody annual shoot, you know about that, right? Always gets me on my nerves."

"Is it something to do with those lights, again? Those reflectors

you describe as a 'thousand Filipino summers'?" Edward joked.

"Got me there, kiddo."

"I just got back from the post."

"Well, that's interesting."

"Yeah. I haven't told anyone yet. I only ever want to tell you."

"What's that, kiddo?"

"Guess who's going to Stanford?" George couldn't hear himself as the line exploded in cheers. His little Edward finally off to college. For a moment, he forgot about the loading bay and the annoying shoot.

"I'm proud of you, kiddo. I wish I was there with you." And George wished he were there more. Those weekends never seemed enough, though his wife would tell him otherwise.

"Are you kidding? You're here with me now, always."

He could hear more shuffling on the other end. "Uhm, anyways, I'll call you later, after the shoot? I gotta go back to tita's house."

"M'kay. Talk to you later, kiddo."

"See ya, my geezer." And the other line went. George was left there thoughtless, his figure washed in the vibrant morning light from the loading bay doors, where the sun was already splashing the sky.

The breeze felt refreshing. On the farther end of the lot, he could see the gentle sway of the acacias. And beyond, the bustle of the city as it got started for the day ahead. It wasn't as much as a blur, looking at the empty lot. There wasn't any cloud of contemplation over George. Just space and sound enveloping him. For once, George stood there, taking it all in.

—

"Okay, one last, sir. We can do this quickly, especially if we can get a smile." The photographer said, with a cautious, tired smile. *I swear to God, I could punch this chap.*

On the edges of his periphery, George could register a silhouette crossing the room, an outline George had known for the better part of the last twenty years. He could recall late nights, for the last of his editors to finish typing off an edit before going over the galley with him. Or the bustle of the writer's room as his steady eyes looked onward from the balcony.

Michael slowly made his way to the set, the clack of his leather boots reverberating across the gloomy loading bay. A solemn look on his face. As he met George's gaze, he signed off with a thumbs down.

George could feel the movement in his fingers as he tried to suppress the trembling. From the moment he stepped into the loading bay, it felt like a send-off. The closed-off burgundy curtains, permission from corporate for a final hurrah, a portrait to take home.

Michael rushed past the flashing lights of the set despite the swift objections from the photographer and took George in an embrace. "I'm sorry, Georgie." George could feel Michael panting as he took it all in. The chill from his suit felt good against his skin. "I tried, bud."

"I knew it was coming, Mikee. I guess this photoshoot was useless then. No use in wasting our time." And it stayed that way a while, holding on to all the good and bad days, the ink stains that never seemed to get off their fingers, the sweet rush of editors going to and fro. George could still smell the faint scent of newly pressed pages on Michael, like the smell of George's palms as he traced the lines of annotations from every piece he had read.

He could feel a dampness on his cheeks, and he let himself feel it, maybe it was all the twenty years coming at him like waves that broke the shore he built up. Some part deep inside of George felt that maybe he could have done more, missed more Christmases and holidays in exchange. His wife and Edward wouldn't mind. But maybe it was all that ever was.

All George could think about was the Zafimaniry table, its shadow blocking out George's sight. The obsidian ashtray he'd fidget

every meeting because he never bothered to smoke. George could smell the stale scent of the writer's room from the loading bay. All the options were exhausted. He tried. He really did, George hoped all of them knew that.

He could hear little sobs from Michael. A friend, someone to stand by for the past quarter century. George guessed it was the end of the line for them. The magazine shut down, the board forcing Michael into retirement for months on end.

"Well, it was a good run we had, Mikee. Good times, good times."

After a few minutes, Michael slowly retreated to the snacks table, with audible sniffles and an air of surrender at his every step. Wiping the remaining tears off his face, George guessed he didn't look as prim and proper as he'd intended for these portraits. Gone, any trace of that stern demeanor that seemed to define him. A crack of laughter came off his face, as he cleared off tear stains from his spectacles.

The lights weren't as bright as they seemed at the start. The heat didn't bother him much. Maybe it was the good cry he had, or maybe it was Edward getting into Stanford, or learning that someone still read the issue every month, but everything felt lighter. "Are we all good, sir? One last take?" He gave a subtle nod.

As the lights flashed, he smiled.

Dal-uy lantern of '25

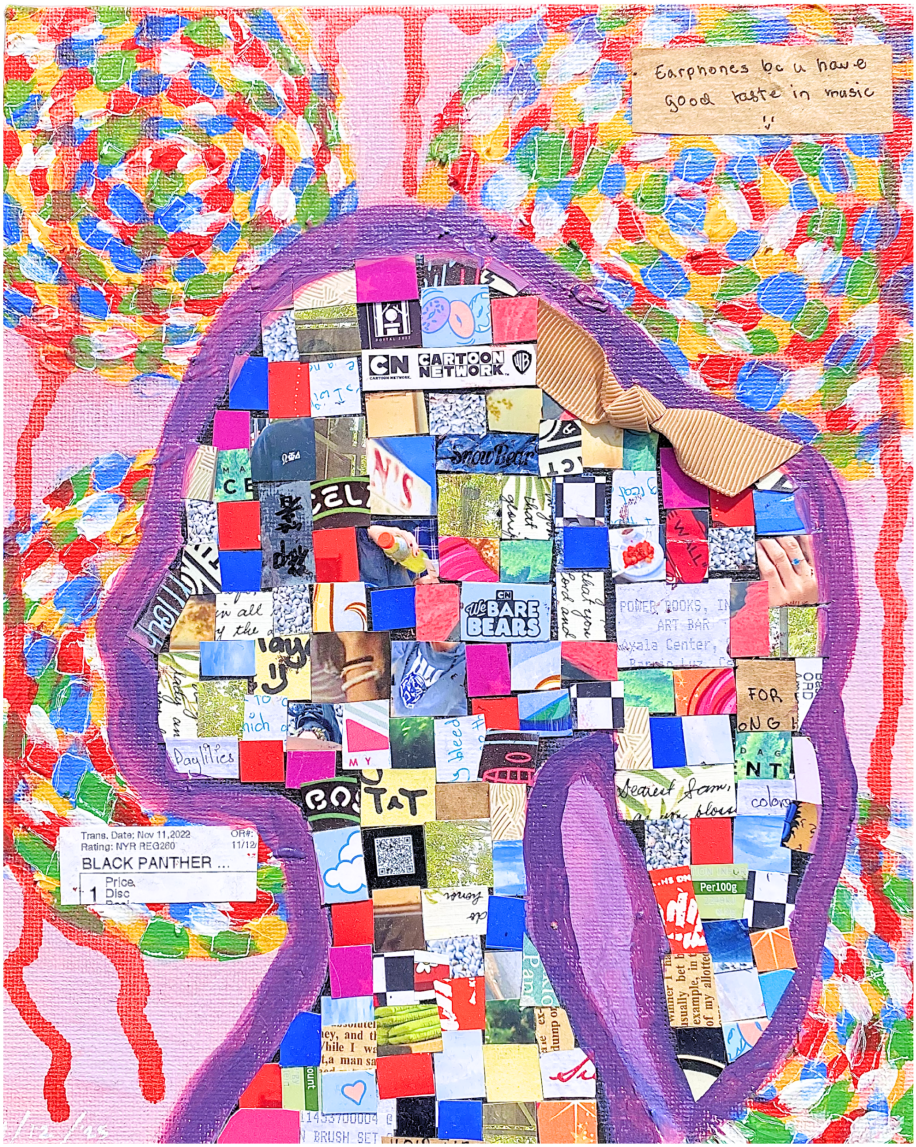
by Zarelle Villanzana

to hope and to send away,
with sincerity albeit on flimsy material,
paper, defenseless against the weather, the tides.
to hope in a time of chaos is like praying to a pauper. but a
pauper could be God, if you look closer:it is better than
nothing. the verb for hope is clinging; hope is not without its
strings. do you see them? not always, maybe, but
you can feel the ache for difference. the urge for more; maybe
the verb for hope is wanting. hope is not without desire. hope
is not without love. maybe the verb for hope is love. and love
takes and it gives but not always. and hope does not ascertain
reward. quite the contrast, it builds your stage for comedy. the
stage will be comedic if you treat it lightly. allow the crowd to
run their waves, but you should not let go of it—the paper. this
is your manuscript, guidance for what to think, where to go.
it is easy to think past desire, but an organ beats you to it.
trapped under heavy flesh and bone, what else can it do?
we witness its voodoo from others and we conjure it
ourselves, most of the time unconscious. maybe the verb for
hope is sleeping, unguaranteed to dream.
to hope is to wake up and stay.



Red Mist in Blue

by Mia Nicole Z. Maypa



"I'm a Mosaic of Everyone I've Ever Known and Loved"

by Sam Dagle

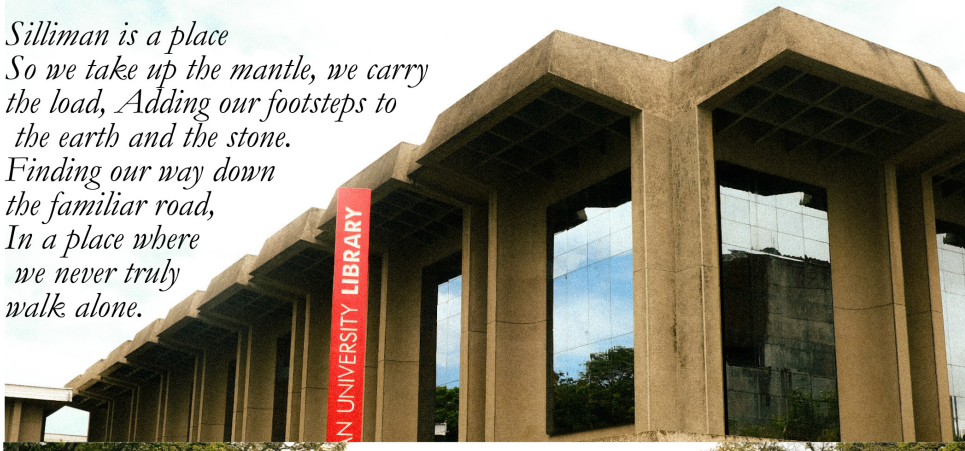
A tribute to all the people who left fragments of themselves in my life. Each scrap, wrapper, photo, and note carries a memory. Inspired by Edith Tiempo's "Bonsai," this work gathers everything I've ever kept—everything I couldn't let go of—turning small mementos into a single, whole piece: an archive of the things that made me and the people who shaped who I've become.

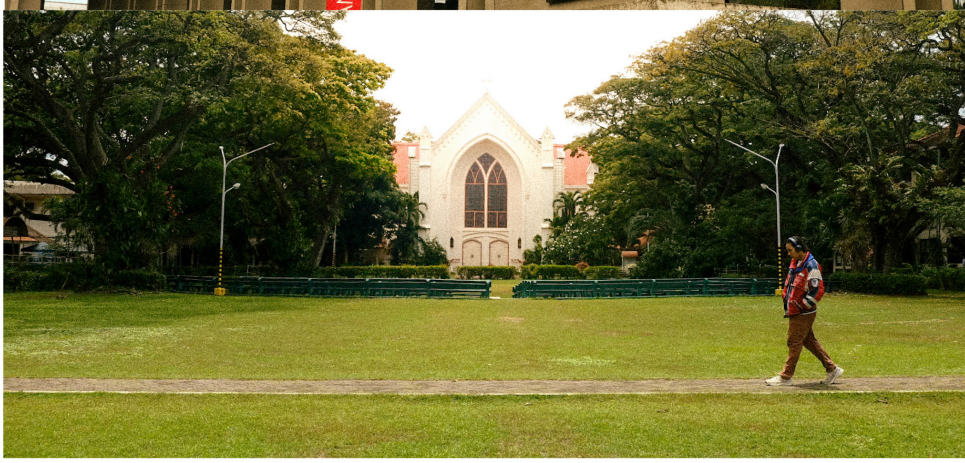
Familiar Roads

by Jasper Dominic Miranda



Silliman is a place
So we take up the mantle, we carry
the load, Adding our footsteps to
the earth and the stone.
Finding our way down
the familiar road,
In a place where
we never truly
walk alone.







Vanquisher

She sits at the edge of the cliff, feet dangling inches from the fall, aware of how easily everything could change. The depth below is terrifying, not because it is unknown, but because she understands what falling feels like.

Waveform

From above, the raft appeared almost weightless, carried gently by the waves rather than resisting it. In that moment, nothing felt rushed. It was a simple reminder that stillness exists, even in something as vast and powerful as the sea.

Sight Seer

From a high place, life looks clearer and quieter. The photograph reflects moments when we pause, gain perspective, and choose to observe before making decisions about where we are and where we might go in our lives.

by Cris Alidon

The Stranger in Red





The Art of Leaping

by Yzobel Felina J. Espina

How to Kill a man

by Franz Anthony Anotado



A man dies;
Not from his vices
Not from the chaos he ignited





A man dies;
From drowning
Reading his burning book



Quiet Lessons

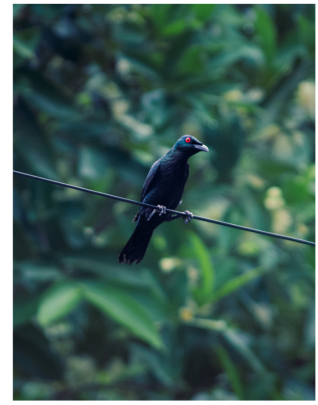
by Jose Miguel Angeles















"Quiet Waters"



"Nature at Rest"





"Among the Trees"



"Hillside Calm"

by Aldrich Jan G. Callueng

EDITORIAL BOARD

Jude Wilter Trinidad Domen is a writer and the Editor-in-Chief of the Sands and Coral. Born in Negros Island, he calls Guihulngan and Dumaguete home. He still plays the piano and listens religiously to rock. He is a sophomore B.S. Accountancy student. His work has been featured on the Sillimanian Magazine (2024) and the Sands and Coral.

Paul Ray Donaire (or Ray) is a senior sociology undergraduate and a dedicated student journalist with four years of experience at *the Weekly Sillimanian*, Silliman University's official student publication. He served as Editor-in-Chief of *the Sillimanian* magazine in 2024-2025. As of this moment, he simply wanted to graduate so badly.

Josham Hamid is a second-year AB Political Science student at Silliman University, a student actively engaged in leadership roles, and has been with the Sands and Coral for two years, first as Creative Nonfiction Editor and now as Associate Managing Editor. Originally from Zamboanga Sibugay, she discovered her passion for writing through campus journalism while enjoying the lively energy of hosting events. One of her guiding principles is to protect her peace and privacy. Though she prefers the comfort of small circles, she knows when to speak up. Creative nonfiction remains her favorite genre, as it balances the honesty of personal stories with the freedom to shape them into narratives that resonate with others. Back home, she guided young writers, organized journalism workshops, and led as Editor-in-Chief of FLAMBEAU, her high school English publication. Josham looks forward to growing further as both an editor and a storyteller.

Colleen Dugan is a very exhausted 4th year Literary and Cultural Studies major at Silliman University. She misses her orange-white cat, Cheese, but doubts he misses her. She doesn't know what to do with her fish carved wooden comb now that she cut her hair. If her work speaks to at least one person, then Cheese might actually miss her.

Jennylyn Emperado is a fourth-year Creative Writing major at Silliman University whose work explores the intersections of identity, memory, and belonging. Growing up between cultures and spending much of her childhood on the road as a missionary kid, she learned early how stories shape understanding. This layered upbringing continually fuels her writing, from children's literature to psychological thrillers, as she searches for the quiet emotional truths that sit beneath ordinary moments. Writing, for her, is both craft and compass—an invitation to make sense of movement, grief, and the fragile threads that bind people together.

Katinka Visitacion has been writing stories predating her personal arc of learning how to properly hold a pen. Having grown up in the liminal space between Hokkien and Ilonggo, her art becomes her formula to solving an unexpectedly difficult dilemma: where does she fit? When not knee-deep in deliverables, she enjoys collecting liquid blush, playing video games, and enjoying her Spotify Wrapped age of 91.

Julia Arrianne Mantiza is a graphic designer and writer from Alburquerque, Bohol. She is an undergraduate student pursuing Creative Writing at Silliman University. She also assumed several leadership positions such as in the SUSG Students' Rights and Welfare (STRAW) Committee as the Infomedia Head, and in the English Society as the Vice President for S.Y. 2023-2024 First Semester. She also dabbles in freelance design and writing work.

Rhenelyn Panyathip D. Chanthavysouk lives life like it's a marathon with no pit stops. Born in Quezon city, and having grown up in Cebu, the phrases "slow down" and "take a break" basically do not exist in her vocabulary. Despite the hecticness, her love for literature has never once dimmed. While she is primarily a fictionist, she also is a peculiar jack-of-all-trades in anything creative—from drawing, to photography, and to graphic design. Much of her work has been inspired by fragments of her life and conversations, stemming from a

lifelong desire to learn how to put difficult emotions and experiences into paper—not to fix, but to understand.

Jasper Dominic Miranda is a visual storyteller studying Bachelor of Mass Communication. He is currently the Creative Director of The Weekly Sillimanian and the Creative Visuals Lead of Sands and Coral He loves photography, visual art, programming, and journalistic writing. When he was in first grade he carried a small digital camera and took photos of his grandmother's flowers. He learned to take good photos before he learned to read well. Today, he tells stories through both photos and writing. He trains as a karate player, looks for small adventures, and treats life like a series of side quests. Most days, you will find him chasing good light, quiet moments, and scenes worth telling.

COVER ARTIST

Pia Flores is a full time art student, part time freelancer. Her main goal in life? Create things worthy of an audience. Things that'll leave long-lasting impressions on those of taste and eye. Art is to be shared, of course. To begin this journey of sharing her art with the world, Pia hopes to get into Silliman University's College of Fine Arts, where she knows she'll be surrounded by other artists of a kindred spirit and a similar heart.

CONTRIBUTORS

Cris Nelfred M. Alidon is a third-year Computer Engineering student at Silliman University with a tactical mindset, an enthusiasm for sports, and a passion for technology. Photography brought color to his life, becoming an outlet for his emotions, shaped him as a person, and encouraged him to be more active and expressive. Through it, he has met many friends and gained opportunities to showcase his work. Cris enjoys exploring technology while creating memories that will make him smile for years to come.

Jose Miguel Angeles is a student and aspiring wildlife artist with a passion for observing and portraying animals through art. His work focuses on capturing the quiet beauty and character of wildlife, inspired by nature and careful observation. Through his art, he hopes to share a deeper appreciation for animals and the natural world while continuing to grow and develop his skills.

Franz Anthony Anotado is a second-year Bachelor of Mass Communication student at Silliman University, and serves as a video editor and photojournalist for the Weekly Sillimanian. Franz has a strong interest in visual storytelling and continues to improve his skills in video editing, photography, and media production. He dreams of becoming a film director and creating meaningful stories that can inspire and connect with audiences.

Ronald Aput is a graduate student of Silliman University's Divinity School in the Master of Divinity program, and entered UP Diliman for the Master of Arts in PANITIKAN ng Pilipinas. His engagement in literature is on literary analysis and criticism particularly Philippine Epic and oral literature, with unpublished translations of epic and poetry and a paper on the dehumanization and demonization of indigenous beliefs and traditions. His commitment is due to his exposure with the great Higaunon writer, the late Telesforo Sungkit Jr., and also because of the guidance of his two oral literature mentors

at UP, the late professor Emeritus Teresita G. Maceda and Dr. Chari Cruz-Lucero.

Kyla Mae L. Bayarcal is a Level II BS Psychology student from the College of Arts and Sciences. She has been passionate about writing since sixth grade, participating and competing in Journalism and eventually developing a deep appreciation for literature and creative expression. She enjoys reading classic novels, particularly the works of Jane Austen. Alongside creative writing, she is also eager to grow, learn, and enhance her ability to create ideas and emotions through the power of words.

Beatriz Belarmino is currently in Grade 12 taking up ABM. Her skills include being detail-oriented, having multiple experiences in taking leadership roles, as well as communicating complex ideas clearly. She has written a one-act play script and a full-act play script, as well as short music compositions back in her Junior High days.

Althea Bonto is a writer and artist from Taguig City. After moving to Dumaguete City at the age of 3, she took to the page as a way of expressing herself where her nonnative tongue cannot. She began feature writing for her school paper in sixth grade, and gradually began to delve into poetry writing. Bonto is currently a fourth year architecture student at Silliman University and a feature writer for Haligi Publication led by the United Architects of the Philippines Student Auxiliary Area C Council.

Aldrich Jan Callueng, a student who enjoys photography as a hobby. He loves capturing landscape scenes and the beauty of nature through photography.

April Rose Cañete is a core faculty member of the Language and Literature program at the University of Cebu-Main Campus. She was born and raised in Pagadian City, Zamboanga del Sur, but has since moved to Cebu in 2015.She writes to pay homage to her homeland, creating and producing a body of work that reflects the quaint yet diverse Mindanaoan lore and culture, both as a scholar

and creative writer. Currently, the author is in her second year as a graduate student in the PhD program in Literary Studies at Silliman University.

Samantha Florida Daeñelle Dagle, who simply goes by Sam, is a Psychology major at Silliman University whose work engages in storytelling through visual arts. Her craft centers on reflective work drawn from personal experience, everyday observation, and the people around her.

Yzobel Felina Espina, a girl rarely seen without a camera, believes that there is always so**mething worth capturing in the world. Her** photos focus on the overlooked; The hustle and bustle of daily life, the unpredictable movements of water, and the blurred lines of motion. She is deeply drawn to subjects with a sense of nostalgia, making things taken for granted last forever.

Shania Eloise Genovia is a 19 year old first-year student from Tagbilaran City, Bohol. She currently resides in Dumaguete City in pursuit of her Bachelor in Science of Psychology studies in Silliman University. On top of her education, she is deeply passionate about dedicating herself to her art, such as writing and drawing both traditional and digital art pieces.

Nel Simon Lapore is a second year Sociology student from the Anthropology and Sociology Department of the College of Arts and Sciences. He is a believer of the arts and poetry and has been intimately engaged with the craft since grade school.

Craze Herrenvolk Hiponia-Matildo, a Philosophy student from Silliman University, embraces poetry as an extension of philosophical thought. Through balak, he seeks to inspire younger generations to appreciate the beauty of Bisaya. Beyond academic pursuits, Craze serves as a peer facilitator in the Silliman University Peer Advocacy, and during his free time, he enjoys carpentry, cooking, and agriculture, while dedicating time to self-reflection.

Mia Nicole Z. Maypa is a Senior High School student at Silliman

University with a strong passion for visual arts. She specializes in various fields of art: digital, traditional, and animation. Many of her digital creations have been used in promotional materials, and as the years go on she plans to continue in developing her portfolio, with more projects and artworks in the works.

Maria Alexandra Victoria Mejos often struggles to find the right words. She started journaling at 5 years old despite not being an avid writer, and has continued to write mainly to let off steam when needed. Aside from her literary misadventures, she enjoys taking on challenges in leadership, public speaking, and basically everything else that makes her kick and scream on the inside—all while studying Public Administration as a freshman in Silliman University.

Bianca Ysabel Muñoz is a curly girl who is currently a first-year student in the College of Mass Communication—a place where she can be a writer and a truthful storyteller. She believes that the greatest blessing a person can have is the ability to create change by sharing one's abilities with others. Bianca also serves the people through activism and advocacy for communities. She does her best to continue to show up despite her tiring curly girl routine.

Ellah Jean Obligar, a student writer who explores themes of identity, womanhood, class, and inherited resilience through creative nonfiction. Her work often centers on personal memory and symbolism, aiming to translate lived experiences into reflective and lyric prose. Through her writing, she hopes to capture how everyday rituals and relationships shape confidence, belonging, and self-perception.

Reah Izza T. Paglinawan is a PhD student in Literary Studies at Silliman University. She writes fiction and poetry in Bisaya, with works published in *Dagmay*, *Katitikan*, *Sunstar Davao*, and *Su'gi*.

Dian Charlyz Quiaño is currently a first-year student from the College of Mass Communications in Silliman University. Aside from academic excellence, she serves as the social media manager and

Public Relations Officer of the Edith Carson Hall Dormitory and a Creatives Committee member of the Kapunungan ng mga Mass Communicators.

Lealina Evangeline Reyes is a third year student of the Bachelor in Arts in Anthropology. She is currently the president of the Junior Anthropologists and Sociologists of Silliman (JASS) for S.Y. 2025-2026. She is on her second term as the features editor of the Weekly Sillimanian, and is the current features editor for the Sillimanian Magazine 2026. Behind every achievement is her passion to write, holding space for the deep aspiration to find art in everything and ignite and invite profound emotions through her pieces.

Jairelle Somcio is currently 18 years old, studying under the HUMSS strand for the second year. She has always been a fan of literature, especially since the pandemic. She has always enjoyed writing fiction revolving around her interests. With this, she has developed a love for deeply appreciating other forms of literary works.

Alexa Tiu, hhailing from Zamboanga del Norte, is a PhD student at Silliman University, and an educator from the Institute of Rehabilitative Sciences. She works as a licensed physical therapist, specializing in Pediatric, Sports and Neurologic Physical Therapy. In 2024 and 2025, she served as a faculty delegate to international educational tour programs with Silliman University's partner schools in Jakarta, Indonesia, and Nagoya, Japan. With a heart for service, she nurtures her love for the arts through reading novels and writing literary pieces.

Seve Nigel Tuale is most likely reviewing for an exam, easing into a casual run, or checking how many steps he has taken for the day. A sophomore B.S. Nursing student, he finds comfort in creative pursuits such as writing and music. His relationship with writing began with Feature Writing and later found his footing in campus journalism at Catherina Cittadini School as a Science and Technology writer, eventually serving as Editor-in-Chief of its publications In Altum and

Shofar in 2018 & 2020. Now, he spends his spare time dabbling with the arts, and posting book reviews & hobby updates on Instagram at @sevedaybyday.

Khalil Gay Ventula is currently a grade 12 Humanities and Social Sciences student at Silliman University. Her writing journey blossomed during her junior high school years. Writing began as her hobby, now it's her passion. It resembles a peek into her creatively complex mind. She uses writing as a form of pouring out her misfortunes and negative emotions, hence why she mostly explores mature themes. Writing has been with her through bloom and bone, thus she places immense value in continuing to do so.

Raphaelle Marie Barandog Villaluz is a graduating Humanities and Social Sciences student, with a love for writing and the arts. While she primarily crafts poetry in Filipino and Binisaya, she frequently explores the English language through verse. Her previous work has been featured in two joint anthologies. All throughout, writing remains the primary vessel for her musings.

Zarelle Villanzana is a third-year student in BS Foreign Affairs, whose diplomatic role is consistently accompanied by her journalistic endeavors. She has contributed to many community publications in the Philippines, such as Metro Cagayan De Oro Times, Coast2Coast, Dumaguete MetroPost, and the Weekly Sillimanian, where she is also currently a community correspondent.



Sands & Coral primarily accepts contributions from currently enrolled senior high school, undergraduate, and graduate students at Silliman University. The student-led literary publication aims to preserve the storytelling tradition that has defined generations of writers while championing emerging literary voices from all backgrounds in the campus by the sea.