

SANDS & CORAL

MMXXVI



VOLUME II

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FICTION

Sunshine through the Keyhole <i>by Rhenelyn Chanthavysouk</i>	5
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POETRY

Imitation <i>by Julia Arrienne Mantiza</i>	18
Sinner's Carress <i>by Raphaelle Marie Villaluz</i>	19
Battles within <i>by Jennylyn Emperado</i>	20
The Poet Soldier <i>by Lealina Evageline Reyes</i>	21
A Recipe for Healing the Soul <i>by Jude Wilter Trinidad Domen</i>	22
a cat looks outside my window <i>by J Jon Sy</i>	23
Lovelorn Letter <i>by Kyla Mae Bayarcal</i>	25
Parallax <i>by Seve Nigel Tuale</i>	27

CREATIVE NONFICTION

LOVE TIMES THREE <i>by Jennylyn Emperado</i>	30
The Waiting Room <i>by Alexa Tiu</i>	37

FICTION

Edited by Katinka Visitacion & Rhenelyn Chanthavysouk

Sunlight through the Keyhole

Rhenelyn Chanthavysouk

Do you remember the name you used to call me? Sun. The gorgeous, warm speck of light in the vast universe that we so happened to orbit around. I can't seem to remember why, but I know that you described me to be a lot of things. You said I sounded like the voice you'd hear on the radio, when you drove back to your place from mine every Wednesday. According to you, the DJ's voice resembled the late afternoon and warm tea, just like I did. I didn't believe you then, even after I sat in your car while we belted off-key to a song that spoke of angels and distance. Now, I think I would have spent every lifetime gifted to me learning how to believe you.

"Just like the orange sun past the city skyline. I'll take you to see it one day so you'll know what I mean." You'd insist, like the words that tumbled from your lips didn't already build mountains we'd climb just to watch the sun set together – tied tight by the fraying ropes of someday and soon.

There's a specific passage I highlighted in the book on your nightstand, that names are one of the very first self inflicted cages of humanity. I wondered why you call me that, why you called me anything but my real name.

"And when is one day?" I'd joke.

"Soon, Sun, I promise." Somehow, your coffee colored irises seemed to glimmer every time you whispered that. Mischief rimmed the crooked corners of your lips, like I could see the secret between the gaps in your teeth and pick it out.

Promises, then, should be kept like the old bottle caps from all the soda we shared together; wedged deep between the pockets of weathered denim jeans that you'd thumb the surface of for good luck. A key made of rusty iron and chipper red paint.

Perhaps to reminisce itself is yet another cage left unwritten by that author—quieter traps that are sweeter, and harder to ignore. Early mornings when you'd drop me off the gate of my house just before my mother stirred from slumber, and in an adorably rare act of courage, you'd scatter splinters of light across my cheek; kisses that felt like the genesis and ending of a manuscript left untitled. I hope you know I held every planet of your affection in the gravity of my orbit. I swore to you once that I'd remember everything for the both of us. I still do.

Memories, I confer, are another set of iron bars that wrap around the fragile actuality of being human. When I say that I remember, I do in vivid detail. How you'd lay beside me on the old, rickety bunk bed of your childhood room—adoration as the white of your teeth and reverence as the cracks in your sentences. You'd bump your head on the wood of the top bunk, and through our harmonies of laughter, I'd reach out to kiss the crown of your head—as an apology, a prayer, and a gift. I'd file away the softness of your hair and the breathlessness in your voice to the deepest part of my mind. The air between your sonnets was jammed with something in between the thicket of knowing and loving, and the empty rooms of my heart were suddenly full of this. Full of you; you and the comets that streaked past the dark brown universes God had carved into your body.

Stars aren't special unless you're you and I'm me. But so are names, ordinary until you own it—because then you are everything it demands from you. Everything that it paints itself to be.

There were days on the beach we spent shrieking them out. There's a specific memory I kept as a conch shell in my bedroom. Maybe I thought that I could fit everything into the ravine deep into its shape, and press my ear into the entrance of its horn to hear you giggling against the low summer tide. You tossed me into the ocean and I could only laugh, crashing back and forth in waves that kissed my shoulder blades and enveloped your delicate palms. Names, in a way, are marks on our bodies. It is romantic to think that a couple of letters will define who we are—that we become both shorelines and cliff edges. But like the rest of what the world had hastily scrawled into sand that melts with the tides, we cannot exist unless we are uttered into it. Grand and intimate. Anchors in the form of letters on our birth certificates; tender bruises that never seem to heal.

It's here I realize that we really are trapped in cages we built for ourselves. That pain is all there is to us. No, not really. I realized it then.

The epiphany came to me with the lull of the drive back from the sea to concrete streets crowded with brightly colored tricycles and bodies that weaved through cracked sidewalks. Noon time, in that Chinese restaurant between the alleyways and the choke of the city you always ordered takeout from. Quaint yellow lights and black stools I nearly fell over on once. I can still hear your laugh when I couldn't figure out how to hold a dumpling between my chopsticks. We always joked that the shop smelled like a

fast food place, and how the disinfectant spray they used was the same one your family had back at home. Nostalgia is a terrifying thing, a mother in the way it's all you've ever known, and all you've ever ached for.

"Do you think we can manage?" I asked, mouth half full with a dumpling.

Your eyes stilled for a moment; gaze just right over my nose. A spoon hovered over your lips, gently set down into the black and red bowl. "Manage?"

"Well," I sighed, the poster on the wall with a strange looking noodle mascot frozen mid-laugh seemed more interesting now. Maybe it was because I didn't like eye contact. "One of us is leaving this city. It's just a matter of who goes first."

Boiled beef. Dumpling wrappers. Spice. Soy sauce. I think I could make the same kind of food in my kitchen. My eyes turned back to you, and I could picture it clearly. A home where we dance around the floorboards of concrete walls—ours because of the potted plants on the shelves, the weighted blankets on the couch, and the two mugs of coffee by the wooden dining table we'd have dragged from your parents' place. Black, and the other two parts cream and one part sugar. In a distant universe, maybe that would have become our reality.

Steam curled around your glasses. You looked like the overcast sky after heavy rain, the kind of weather that told you to close your umbrellas and listen to the way the wind sighed in relief.

"We don't know when either, Sun."

I smiled. You told me once that you didn't know how to, only to lift one of the corners of your lips upwards into what you hoped wouldn't scare people away. I'd have

photographed every attempt at a smile and hung them on my wall if I could. “Right. We have time.”

Your hand froze over wooden chopsticks. The buzzing in my ears nearly swallowed the hesitation in your voice. “Are you sure?”

A tremor in my hand; my knuckles wrapped around the fabric of my pants. I never told you, but I hated those three words more than anything. My voice was as weak as my resolve. I didn’t even know if I believed myself. “Today can be enough time.”

You returned to your soup; you didn’t say anything afterwards. Unceremoniously, and yet ironically in silence, the mountains of half-baked dreams and promises of one day crashed louder than an anvil through sheets of glass.

Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything at all.

There, against the hum of the construction tools as men worked to repair the blinking LED sign, over a bowl of noodles and soup dumplings, I learned how bitter it was to be mourning. Not of the dead, no—at least the dead would be sent away with love, but the living. The cruel, heart shattering departure of the living. If the heart kept the dead alive, it killed the living in return. In memories that preserved; in memories that defaced.

What I mean is that it is unforgiving. Grief is deaf to your suffering. Deaf to the open wound in between your ribs that you never seem to patch up the right way. Even while I dipped my dumplings into the soup over and over again, the quiet unraveling of everything I had built so tenderly in my mind persisted with a weight that sunk

between the cavity of my chest. Morning sunlight poured into the building from the wide, open windows of the entrance. A minute passed, then two. Regret was the cheap soy milk I left untouched on the table that day, curdling on the flat of my tongue even after we left. The clock on the wall just kept ticking—as loud as the heartbeat that drummed in my ears. I didn't know what to say then, and frankly I don't think I ever could.

But when can we win the war we've waged upon ourselves? When can we stomach the bitterness of everything we promised each other?

We spend most of our lives one foot inside a cage we built with our bare hands, and one out the other side. It's a delicate balance, but it's lonely—terribly so. Cages and keyholes, silver and gold melted into shapes of little escapes wrapped around our belts. We tell each other that it is our love that sets us free, but really, I don't know if it is the case anymore. I do not know if having your arms around me would have saved me from something I couldn't bear to name.

Love, then-maybe, is just as confusing as the rest of our existence is. Paradoxes like this, purgatories that rest between black holes and newly born cosmos, exist in all the spaces our loudness could not fit. Like how you call me anything but my name, and how I cannot say yours out loud.

We always seemed to travel around that limbo. Silence and understanding; Loudness and sincerity. There was no absence of fondness, but it existed on a pedestal our own hands had denied creating. Even then, when we sat under a tree the day I

turned eighteen, on a picnic blanket crowded with a small cake and a stupidly thoughtful bouquet of sunflowers. You and I wore hesitance as another layer of armor.

“Are we okay?”

A group of children shrieked from the other side of the grassy field, launching themselves into patches of dried leaves by the sidewalk. You pulled yourself away from where your head had rested over mine, with all your dark constellations and the red of Mars on your lips.

I wondered very briefly, if anything good ever came out of my mouth.

“I’m sorry.” Incorporeal scales ached under the weight of the tear between our bodies and the lingering resignation in your eyes. Guilt, all I felt was guilt. “I shouldn’t have asked —”

“We’re okay, Sun.” There was something distinctly ‘you’ that I could never forget even if I wanted to; an unreadable look in your eye, and a canyon that grew in size every time you said my name. “Silence doesn’t always have to be wrong.”

I remember reaching for your hand then, though I had already forgotten how warm it was to hold you. One squeeze, then four, and then three. You’d squeeze back once. I always took it as acceptance — maybe even reciprocation.

One, four, three. Maybe if I had held your hand tightly enough, you wouldn’t have seen me as a child to scold. “I’m sorry, it’s supposed to be a good day.”

“Don’t do that.” Was your soft reply, with the wind rushing past us. You reached out to tuck a few unruly strands behind my ear, with a tenderness I thought had only existed in old, grainy *teleseryes* I used to watch as a child. “Stars don’t apologize.”

“Fine.” I huffed, eyes watching the early afternoon sun wave at us from the cloud dotted sky. “Will you stay a little longer?”

That was all I could ask, really, without having to name a future we weren’t sure of. I think that was enough confinement as it was. Had love been kind to us then, I would have asked something different. A question that sat in the pockets of my jacket and in every moment ruined by time, asking to be yours in a way that didn’t need us to tiptoe over broken glass shards and make promises to each other we weren’t sure we’d keep.

All you did was nod. “No questions asked.”

But half-true vows were enough. At least back then, it had to be.

You didn’t mean to shackle me; I had hope that you wouldn’t. But this funeral—this dying ocean filled with shipwrecks and falling stars, had to be crossed if we were to let go of everything we were to each other. I could not bear the injury of loving you if I could walk every road and forget that you walked through them beside me. I could not lament your absence if I do not see you everywhere—if I didn’t remember you. Grief is the only thing I may offer to you. The quiet knowledge that I am mourning you under the same sky you wake up to.

Object permanence. Knowing the moon exists at ten in the morning; remembering that a photo strip of us lives in the pages of my notebook.

You once told me that you preferred the intervals of quiet between early dawn and twilight. How you’d nurse a mug of black coffee in between your hands and stare out into the distance, just before the war of today or tomorrow came rumbling through

your front door. You would exist between the limbo of astral dimensions in your tiny apartment by the highway, and still breathe in the yawn of sunlight peeking through the *sari-sari* stores and bridges. Object permanence; I wonder if you'd realize how the shape of my body would have been standing across the street from your spot in the apartment's balcony, even while a pedicab sputtered by. That I'd wait for you to call me, and that I would not carry any anger if all that was reflected in your eyes was the picture of a stranger.

A stranger is an easier role to play than a phantom that lives to remind you.

Somewhere on the internet, I collected a quote that said no man could be peaceful from the start—that to breathe, you must know how to choke. Floating to the center of the universe rather than letting yourself disappear to star dust. You never noticed I had been watching you drift, plunging into the indigo of heavenly bodies and gas giants, inches further than you.

Peace was something you kept under the gold crucifix slung around your neck; I have seen firsthand the war you waged across the no-man's land of your years. With every pulse of uneasiness, you'd reach out to let your thumb dance over the grooves carved into the metal, close to your chest and closer to God. A map of every dip and rise of indents of simple, golden jewelry that you devotedly turned back to. Rituals are just keyholes for comfort—though I'd never tell you that.

I never told you either that I fought with my mom, many months ago, about a scholarship to Berlin; I could not cradle this in my arms without any damage, nine thousand and eight hundred seventy six kilometers away from you. The documents live

in my drawer, right next to my visa and a sticky note you wrote for me once. Would it have made a difference if I had said no in the end? Time is poison with a sweetened aftertaste; it gave you to me, and it took you away from me. I never told you that the moment you crossed the threshold of iron gates, the door to my prison cell had already slammed shut.

There was no more time left between us to tell you that I have always wanted to be like you. The kind of person who knew how to surface for air, who didn't submerge themselves in deep black hair and pale skin littered with nature's dark kiss marks, like I did; someone who knew how to let go without clawing into everything.

How do you do it? Step out of the cage of grief with wounds that would heal if you commanded them to?

Unanswered questions, prayers, and a distance between our feet neither of us will cross—perhaps that's all we'll have left of each other. If I raise my hands and wave them over my eyes, you linger like beams of light that reach out to intertwine my fingers. Makeshift iron bars made by the surface of my tanned hands and the bones of it too.

But the thing about tethering yourself to me despite its interim means that the traced imprints of your touch remain drawn on my skin. It lingers when I stare at my reflection in the mirror—all of it. Sometimes, on the days where recollection comes easy to me, I see you standing right behind me. You, with your near-perfect posture and dreams buried in an exhaustion you rarely ever spoke of. Me, with all my melancholy and the keys of all the cages I've wandered into strapped to my side.

There is a timelessness to this clouded sky, despite our youth. With that permanence comes the cost of sorrow—something I pray I carry alone for us both. I would like to tell you that I am sorry, but I doubt that my voice can reach over the glittering azure between our islands, and the trench we’ve both dug to keep ourselves away. Two hundred and ten kilometers had a tender sound to it, an easier way to promise that we’d see each other again. But you and I know that the landscape between us could only allow us to chase each other’s shadows like the deities of dawn and evening do.

I wonder if it really is that easy; loving, letting go, and loving again. To traverse skylines that change in color as you drive past plains and mountains, never really knowing if you’re just there for a few months or for the rest of your life. Loss has a funny way of influencing muscle memory. It becomes easier to let wounds be. It becomes safer to disappear than to risk seeing silhouettes you didn’t mean to memorize. Healing, in its most insignificant form.

Sunlight can mean more than what casts direction if we allow it to—only if I stand a little taller, and a little less afraid to let go of you. Keys that fit in mechanisms meant to set us free; reaching to graze my hand over the parts of our star system where I am liberated from the fragments of iridescent, stained glass bathed in radiance. It was every laugh we shared, and every moment that truly mattered. Unspoken things, the abundance and the absence of it; its magnitude. We had time. Not nearly enough, but time nonetheless.

When I finally begin to fade into the afternoon sympathy of farewells, remember that the sun is the bright morning star our earth tilts its axis towards.

It is not my name, and neither is it the reflection of something beautifully shattered.

POETRY

Edited by Julia Arriane Mantiza

Imitation

Julia Arrianne Mantiza

Likeness is a work in progress
molded, formed, and scraped,
painted with brush on canvas,
with swirling lines, colors, and shape.

Likeness sits in the gallery
and hides among the cluster
of vibrant colors glazed with mastery,
and diamond-like luster.

Likeness, left unnoticed, fades,
and its canvas frays at the seams.
a tattered, discolored mural,
victim to counterfeit dreams.

Sinner's Caress

Raphaelle Marie Villaluz

I appear together – spotless,
Yet mutely remain unquiet
As the murmurs promise an embrace
It thirsts for my vincible succumb

To weigh upon the plain sailing,
Resistance fumbles over the ruin
The surge of momentary bliss –
Delicate, insidious, and dissolute

Lulling a steady, spent, slump,
Beneath sackcloth and ashes,
A depraved errant lies barren:
Repentant, craven, and trembling.

Battles within

For Carlie Jo Johnson

Jennylyn Emperado

The depth of my being. A silent war brews.
Cells divided. Then multiply like never before.

Days of uncertainty, nights filled with fear.
Through it all, a sliver of hope drew near.
The enemy within. Unseen, yet felt.
It is a battle I fight with every ounce of zeal.

Chemicals. Treatments.
A bitter pill to swallow.

It holds a promise that I will make it to tomorrow.
Hair falls like leaves of a tree. Autumn's turn.
But my heart, my spirit. Holds firm.
In the steadfast clasp of His unending promise.

The Poet Soldier

Lealina Evangeline A. Reyes

Curiosity begs me
 to undress you from your Veil.
To lay down my Sword before a Maiden
 whose beauty turns a Soldier into a Poet

I am devoured by devotion,
 taken whole by the Sea of Love.
Stripped of my misery,
 save for the silence that greets
 each profession of blind loyalty

Oh, what a terrible thing it is!
 to abandon my Vows of Shield and Sword.
To replace with Rhymes and Odes
 whispered in the intertwine of fingers,
 sewn between unspoken words I long to scream.

But I tuck them inside my Armor
 for when your eyes are set on mine,
 no passion burns
You would wound yourself in my name,
 as a friend would break skin to pledge a vow.

But I would bleed myself
 as a butcher carving a piece of my Heart
 and offer it on a silver platter.

A Recipe for Healing the Soul

Jude Wilter Domen

The recipe calls for gentle reheating:
two boxes of close but delicate contact,
one tablespoon of conversation
once in a while to sate the buds.
A little pinch from words,
but caramelised over
by the sweetness of a bond mending.
Then I recall —
A full cup of earned wisdom,
and a sprinkle of newness.
It's all the flavours coming back.
The old scent of yesterday,
tinged with the spice of a new broth.
All of this, served in a bowl of love,
at a table for two, just old friends,
me and you.

a cat looks outside my window

J Jon Sy

what does he see?

can he see my neighbour's red scarf

that flies eastward where the wind blows?

or the bright green lights

that tell drivers when to go?

can he see the leaves

dancing and falling as the breeze

leads them to a child's head?

or the red wine

my sweet neighbour swirls around

in her glass at 2pm?

can he see the bottom hald of our flag

as the cloth waves him hello,

or the wet grass below it

that dampens the ends of a boy's shorts

as he chases his father

their pet retriever in tow?

can he see the bright red paint
on the young girl's sign
as she and her sisters
march to where blue
blocks them in line?

can he see the sirens
as they wail in the february sun,
and the fire that breaks out
when the cops hold up their shields
and pull out their guns?

can he see the green handkerchief
that a father dons on his daughter,
his eyes glistening in the sun
as he tells her to run?

can he see the blood splattered,
the teeth knocked out,
the hands of a woman
thrown behind her back,
the pigs who mock
the strength that she lacks?

Lovelorn Letter

Kyla Mae Lopez Bayarcal

Sometimes I,
in my darling mind,
am driven into wanderlust
thinking, wondering
how it feels to be kept,
to be held,
to feel comfort.
kept—
kept, like wild daises
in a lovers book,
resting between a favorite chapter
lingering in the ever so drowning words
of daring brewing romance
held—
held, like a soft woven silk mattress
lying on your bed,
brought out only when it matters,
being lost in the comfort of promises
whispered by your lullaby of woe

comfort —

comfort in the way a soft song

caresses a weary soul

gone astray — yet found.

In quiet beams I rest,

for it is in the most unexpected corners

that a story unfolds.

Parallax

Seve Nigel Tuale

I walk toward a horizon
that steps back with careful grace.
It knows my name
but never turns when called.

There is a silhouette ahead of me —
a figure still negotiating its final shape:
sometimes a hospital,
sometimes a vast estate,
sometimes only scaffolding
around an unnamed height.
I measure its distance in tomorrows
that collapse when I lean too hard on them.

The clocks here are peculiar things.
They tick in verbs I have not learned,
conjugating me into futures
I cannot pronounce.

Sometimes I wonder
if the pursuit is a corridor without a door,
if I am a letter forever addressed
but never sent,
if the tide inside my ribs
mistook longing for direction.

Yet the sky, extravagant in its silences,
keeps rehearsing sunrise.
And somewhere beneath my unriveted footsteps,
roots are practicing the language of trees.

So I keep walking —
not because the horizon is faithful,
but because the light keeps scattering constellations

only visible to those still willing
to be lost.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Edited by Colleen Dugan

LOVE TIMES THREE

Jennylyn Emperado

Love doesn't always announce itself grandly. Sometimes, it arrives quietly, folded in laundry, whispered in the quiet of dawn, or baked into warm cookies waiting for tired children. I've come to know love in the most unexpected ways—through three women who mothered me not out of obligation, but out of grace.

I am a woman shaped by maternal multiplicity. Raised not by one mother, but by three. Each gave me something unique: a sense of order, a well of kindness, and an origin steeped in sacrifice. And together, they transformed my life into a testimony of abundance, not absence.

Long before I understood what it meant to be loved, I was already living in the rhythm of it, thanks to my yaya, Ate Neneng. She entered our household when I was small, barely grown herself, studying to become a midwife when my parents met her nearly 28 years ago. But despite her youth, she carried herself with a kind of gentle wisdom that wrapped around us like a warm blanket.

She became our compass, our constant. My siblings and I were drawn to her like morning to the sun. She was the one who taught me the everyday rituals that stitched the fabric of my childhood: folding laundry, tidying up without being asked, and learning to be accountable not just for chores, but for my actions.

And then there was the food. The edible love letters she baked with love. After school, especially post-swimming lessons at Montebello, we'd return home to ice

candies wrapped in plastic, chewy tortillas with bubbling cheese dip, and freshly baked cookies with that perfect, soft center. She knew what comfort tasted like and prepared it faithfully.

But more than treats, she offered something even sweeter—her guidance. *“Always do what is best for others, no matter how you feel. Don’t worry, ha. God will provide.”* That line shaped my moral compass, especially during seasons when giving felt harder than taking.

She taught me resilience not through lectures, but through example. Her selflessness was neither performative nor conditional. It was rooted in faith, expressed in silence, and unwavering in consistency.

Later, she married and had three handsome boys of her own. Yet, I never stopped being one of hers. I still consider her sons my younger brothers. Her legacy lives on in the way I care for others, in the discipline I bring to my writing, and in the quiet moments when I hear her voice gently reminding me that it’s okay to cry — because that means you care.

While Ate gave me rhythm, *Becky*, my adopted mother, gave me structure—foundation. She met my twin sister and me while working at the Good News Medical Clinic in Mandaue, Cebu. We were just 18 months old, severely malnourished, riddled with parasites and scabies, and weighed less than six kilos. I was fading. My eyes were hollow. My body- too weak to hold itself up.

I don’t remember the pain, but Becky does. She recalls the moment when the doctor shaved my head to clean my wounds. She cried as I cried. And when she handed

me a lollipop after the torture was over and the nurses left, I smiled. That smile opened something in her. And she never looked away again.

Becky and her husband, Richard, invited my birth mother to stay for three months so they could help us recover. Helen had five older children she couldn't bring with her, and soon it became clear that my sister and I had TB. The prognosis was grim. Doctors feared we'd never walk, never speak, never thrive. Knowing she couldn't care for us and her other children, she turned to Becky and pleaded with her to take us as their own.

Becky said yes. Without hesitation. Without any guarantees.

Though she didn't carry me in her womb, she raised me in every other way that matters. She taught me how to show up when I'd rather disappear, how to stand tall even when my heart ached, and how to honor myself in appearance and intention. Her mantra, *"Always look better than you feel,"* wasn't about vanity—it was about dignity. It became my shield during seasons of internal war.

She was there for my first heartbreak. For every private meltdown. She endured my dramatic teenage monologues, introduced me to reading, and double chocolate chip cookies—which remain my emotional coping mechanism to this day. Her home became the sanctuary where my imagination bloomed, where my softness was never treated like weakness, and where discipline and delight danced in quiet tandem.

Becky's love was deliberate. A steady flame. Her grace built the bones of my identity.

One night, I recall, when I was eleven, I asked her, “Mom, do you ever regret adopting us?”

She looked up from her book, eyebrows raised in disbelief. “Regret? Never.”

“But we were so... sick.”

She closed her book and touched my cheek.

“Sweetheart, you were sick. But you were mine. And I loved you long before you knew how to love yourself. You are my greatest blessings from God. Without you and your sister, there wouldn’t be so much laughter in our home.”

Her words cemented something in me—a sense of belonging that didn’t depend on blood, but on choice.

Becky gave me structure and sanctuary. She built the bones of who I am. Because of her, I know what intentional motherhood looks like. What kindness forged in strength feels like. What it means to show up for someone again and again, even when it’s difficult

And then there is Helen—my birth mother. The first to cradle me, the first to let me go. Her absence once felt like abandonment, like a blank space in my story. But time, reflection, and healing have taught me that sometimes love is not in the act of holding on, but it’s in the letting go. And letting go, I now believe, may be the most painful form of devotion.

Helen passed away a year ago—before I could meet her, bond with her, or ask her the questions that echo quietly through my days:

- Did she tell stories the way I do?

- Did she know how to read?
- Would she have wanted to read my novels?
- Do I laugh like her? Think like her? Write like her?
- Would she be proud?

I will never know. And that ache—the silence of unanswered questions—sits quietly beneath everything I create. Yet in that silence, I've discovered something sacred: a truth that her love, though invisible, was never absent.

I know only fragments. She gave birth to my twin sister and me. She stayed with Becky and Richard for three months, trying to help us recover. At that time, we were dangerously sick, malnourished, infected, and diagnosed with tuberculosis. Doctors feared we might never walk, never speak, never survive. Already caring for five older children, Helen faced an impossible choice. So, she made the hardest decision a mother could make: she let us go.

Not because she didn't care—but because she did.

There was no celebration, no goodbye wrapped in poetry—just the quiet, holy surrender of a mother choosing her children's survival over her comfort. She entrusted us to the people who had already begun to love us. In doing so, she gave us not just life—but a chance to thrive. Her absence, in all its quiet magnitude, has shaped me just as deeply as her brief presence.

For years, I held that absence like a wound. But healing reframes memory. And I now see her decision for what it truly was: a deeply human, sacrificial act of love.

She did not mother me in the traditional sense. She didn't see my first steps or hear my first words. She didn't tie my hair or read me bedtime stories. But she gave me something just as lasting – a life I could grow into with grace.

Her legacy lives in my resilience. Her love lives in the hollow spaces I've slowly filled with strength, faith, and tenderness. She lives in my curiosity, in my longing, and in the emotional DNA of every story I write.

Now, I choose to believe that somewhere beyond this life, she sees me. That she's proud—not necessarily of what I've accomplished, but of how fiercely I've chosen to live. And maybe, just maybe, she smiles each time I sit down to write.

This is how I carry her – with reverence, curiosity, and quiet gratitude.

To be raised by three women is to grow in directions not easily explained by tradition. My life is not one of loss—it is one of layered blessings. One that began in uncertainty and bloomed into brilliance.

- *Ate Neneng* gave me rhythm and faith.
- *Becky* gave me structure and sanctuary.
- *Helen* gave me life – and the freedom to survive.

And so through them, I move through the dark void, carrying pieces of each of them, woven into the fabric of who I am. Ate Neneng's rhythm reminds me to find grace in the ordinary, to move with patience and love. Becky's structure teaches me that care can be deliberate, that strength and tenderness are not opposites but companions. Helen's sacrifice whispers that love sometimes requires us to let go, and that courage

can live in absence as much as presence. Sometimes, when the quiet of night settles in, I imagine all three of them around me—Ate laughing as she folds a basket of laundry, Becky reading softly by the window with a tray of cookies at her side, and Helen watching with a gentle, proud smile from somewhere not seen but felt. In these moments, their voices echo together, a chorus of guidance, discipline, and devotion. They have shaped not just my body or my mind, but my heart—my capacity to love, to create, and to endure. I am their legacy, their story told in my own voice, their love multiplied in the life I have been given. Three mothers. One life. Infinite love.

The Waiting Room

Alexa Tiu

I learned how to wait the day I learned how to be afraid. Everyone here is waiting for news that could change their lives. A mother pleading for her child, an elderly couple waiting for their routine check results, a son beside her ailing mother, or a granddaughter fearing her grandmother's last breath.

Numbers get called slowly, as if it's a challenge that every second of patience shall be tested. After all, the world is turning with every strike of the clock and we don't feel a thing. What we feel are the cold metal chairs, the bustle of hospital staff running around us, the hot air from the door that opens and closes as a constant stream of people come and go. Way too many people have been in the same situation, waiting for test results, for doctor's appointments, for loved ones to wake up, for family to come home.

The waiting room is not like regular rooms; it's like a room of mirrors that show you who is really there for you. To wait is to hope. To wait is to refuse to leave. To wait is a form of devotion you have for someone. A person carries their own burden in this world, but the person with you in the waiting room is more than willing to share the heavy load, or at least keep your mind thinking of anything else. "I'm glad you're here," comes out of your mouth and it sounds so simple but behind your smile is a million other emotions of gratitude you have for that person. Love doesn't always look like speeches; it looks like staying. It looks like waking up early to cook breakfast, it

looks like trips to the pharmacy, it looks like a hand leading you through the darkest places of your life.

They stay until the minutes turn to hours, where every patient ahead of you gets called, and you raise your head abruptly thinking it's you they are calling, but you have to wait for your turn. Staying until the TV that you hyperfixated on doesn't make sense because your brain is playing a different channel. A scene of events that might happen in the next few moments of your life as a result of the next few minutes beyond this waiting room. You stay until you've studied each corner, each light, each face, and each movement, not because you want to, but because you yearn for another source of stimulation, away from the fear that you had been carrying since you came here.

Fear of something makes a miniature thing feel like a giant, like a cabin becoming a high-rise building, a papercut becoming an infected necrosis, or a lump becoming a monster like cancer. Fear, when given power, becomes a heavy rock on top of you, pinning you to the ground, unmoving and you are forced to freeze in place. Fear is like a waterfall that threatens to pull you down when all you're trying to do is swim and keep yourself afloat. Giving in to it will have you spiral down a deep trench, struggling to breathe, because the only rope that you can pull and can bring you to the surface is called hope, but your eyes are shut by that fear.

You open your eyes and the next thing you know, the waiting room looks different now, it has a mechanical adjustable bed, a small refrigerator with half-eaten fruits, and doctors and nurses come and go at a clockwork schedule. You may be connected by lines to beeping machines, and attachments arise from your body, limiting

your movement around the room, and certainly holding you captive in the premises of the hospital. Day merges with the night, you can't tell how many days you've been here. The food served is cold, and it seems like you only stand up to visit the toilet. Your room's view is just a concrete wall, you dream of the open sky, the fresh breeze, and the sand beneath your feet, not this tiled cold floor. You feel the air is unmoving, just like you.

Grief is just love with nowhere to go. Love with nowhere to land, no person to receive it anymore. You are reminded of the amount of love that once poured out of your bursting heart. You also remember the first time you had felt the clouds; it was when that one love was reciprocated, and nothing else mattered in the world. It's just the game we play, wherein time is the gamemaster, and the person you had spent so much of your life and love with, must go. Like losing a parent or a grandparent, the love shared was so massive, it still continues to flow. But that body has fallen, gone cold, and has ceased to exist, and you are left wondering where all this love must go.

There are moments in life that change you, the day you see your father wheeled to the operating room, or the early morning you wake up and see your mother's single tear falling down before she is changing into a gown for surgery, or your grandmother's shallow breaths before the last one, those are the days that change your perspective on the longevity of life. Before this realization, we think we only need to survive day to day. Then it becomes years, we jump from one birthday to the next, we move through

school and then work, without realizing our parents are getting older too. They are aging just as we are, but at the speed of light because we did not see it coming.

When we were born, we opened our eyes for the first time, theirs were the faces we glimpsed. Theirs were the voices that soothed us when we ached, and scolded us when we stepped out of line. Then every day after that they were always there, graduations, birthdays, all the meals we had shared. But when we are young, we don't realize the inevitable. That there would come a day when they would close their eyes for the last time, never to be opened again.

I was once a child who had no sense of time, who didn't stop swimming in the ocean, frolicking in the sand until my hair turned a shade lighter and my skin a few shades darker. Mornings turned to noon, and all I knew were the laughter with friends, climbing boats then jumping from them, the splash before the silence of being underwater, then breaking the surface for a gasp of air. Even when the sun was right on top of my head, my sense of time only appeared when I would hear my father's call, that's when I knew I should emerge from the water and go home. Back then, I didn't know that those were the golden days, scenes in our lives we would never get back, because as a kid all I knew was just one summer after the next, naive to the fact that those summers would soon look so different.

I can't pinpoint the time when that kid turned from feeling the sand to feeling that fear when she waited for her mother's surgery to finish, those nine hours felt like nine years. Time was too slow during that day, the stark contrast of when she was at the beach. That child also became her father's helper when he too couldn't stand after

surgery, and when he couldn't eat due to the internal organ issues. That child was now all grown, and with growing up comes the knowledge that those days of pruning fingers and salty hair were over.

Now we face our own lives, the people at work, the patients we treat, the grocery trips, the new hobbies, the document deadlines, and try to figure out how we will survive in this world. At the same time, we become our parent's aides when they ache, when they are confused, and when they need us in the waiting room. We become their compass in a fast-changing world. The roles have totally shifted, so we trust that what we've learned enough throughout the time we spent running around campuses and dorms to help us in this reverse alternate reality where parents lean on children much like how we leaned on them when we were born.

There comes a point when children who say what they want to be when they grow up realize that it's the circumstances that choose who they become. It is in the frenzy of life where the stop signs, the detours, the speed limits, and the new roads, will swerve you into multiple directions. You reach a destination that you had worked for, you had survived, then suddenly it isn't the place you used to think it to be, but you live with it anyway. You make the best out of it; you find beauty in it every day.

The waiting room tells you to slow down when all you want to do is jump from one achievement to the next, from one country to another, or from the job ladder you'd like to climb. This room smells of antiseptic and a heavy humidity, mirroring what you feel inside. There is a feeling that where you are right now is the last place you want to

be, yet it is the only place that matters. Because without this, you will not be able to go back to that life, never catch that flight, never take a step on that ladder.

However defeated you may feel, you look at the person who is with you and you realize the amount of devotion they have for you. To be waiting here with you, for them to stand up with you when your name is called. You realize how beautiful it is that out of the billions of people on this planet, there is a single soul whose life is intertwined with yours. That even in this time of despair, they are present and ready to offer help while giving you precious time they can't take back. For them to hold you when all you want to do is slip through the cracks. This devotion is love that can withstand the test of the waiting room, the diagnosis, the procedures, and the long silence of hopelessness. It is what sparks hope because when you are not alone to face impending doom, you feel like the battle isn't only yours to face.

The waiting room is still; it is unmoving yet it is fast-paced. It holds a volume of emotions as vast as the colors of the world, yet its walls look like black and white. There are people here with cold hands, tiny hands, shaking hands, and hands that can't yet let go. People of all walks of life are in the waiting room, to each their own levels of insurmountable grief, and overflow of love. You can leave, but a certain invisible string tethers you to the chair, threatening to take over your life if things go unplanned. A diagnosis that can change how you wake up each day, so you summon a greeted being in your mind and you pray. Pray for a diagnosis that can be managed by medicine, better than with the slice of a scalpel, and you hold on to the hope that it is not an incurable disease, and that you are not the one-in-a-million epidemiologic figure.

We can never really choose how our lives unfold; there is a myriad of directions that we flow through in the very circumstances we face. The outcomes we could not change, the plans that went sideways, it is what it is, and that is the very spine of life. Every redirection, every obstacle, it was meant to put you in places you didn't know existed. You are meant to take that path and prove you survived.

Finally, your name gets called, you exit the waiting room, and you make your way to the other side of the door.

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 junior 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

Blaise Marjellah Arbon is a Business Economics student with a deep appreciation for the arts, finding beauty in details that often go unnoticed. Beyond academics, she finds inspiration in the rhythm of a bass guitar, the lens of a camera, the cultural world of theatre, and the art pieces found in museums and galleries. Photography, in particular, allows her to capture the world from her own perspective. Her passion for it has led her to participate in photo contests, including Silliman PEPstival 2024-2025, where she placed 2nd and had her work featured in a PEP workbook. She hopes to travel beyond the familiar and collect moments that become stories worth carrying home.

ABOUT THE COVER

A photo of the Dumaguete Belltower during its restoration. Though surrounded by scaffolding, its foundation remains steadfast, serving as a reminder that progress does not erase the past but builds upon it. The restoration symbolizes a community's commitment to preserving its heritage, ensuring that its history continues to shape future generations. Scaffolds may conceal its face, but never its story. Every beam raised today stands upon a foundation that refuses to be forgotten.

CONTRIBUTORS

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.

Alexa Tiu, hailing 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. She is also a clinician at the IRS Free PT Clinic, serving the indigent and low-income population of Negros Oriental. 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. An active researcher, volunteer, and member of various organizations or community engagements, she nurtures her love for the arts through reading novels and writing literary pieces.

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.



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.