

SANDS & CORAL

BETWEEN THE BLUES

2024 ISSUE



Edilberto & Edith Tiempo  
Creative Writing Center

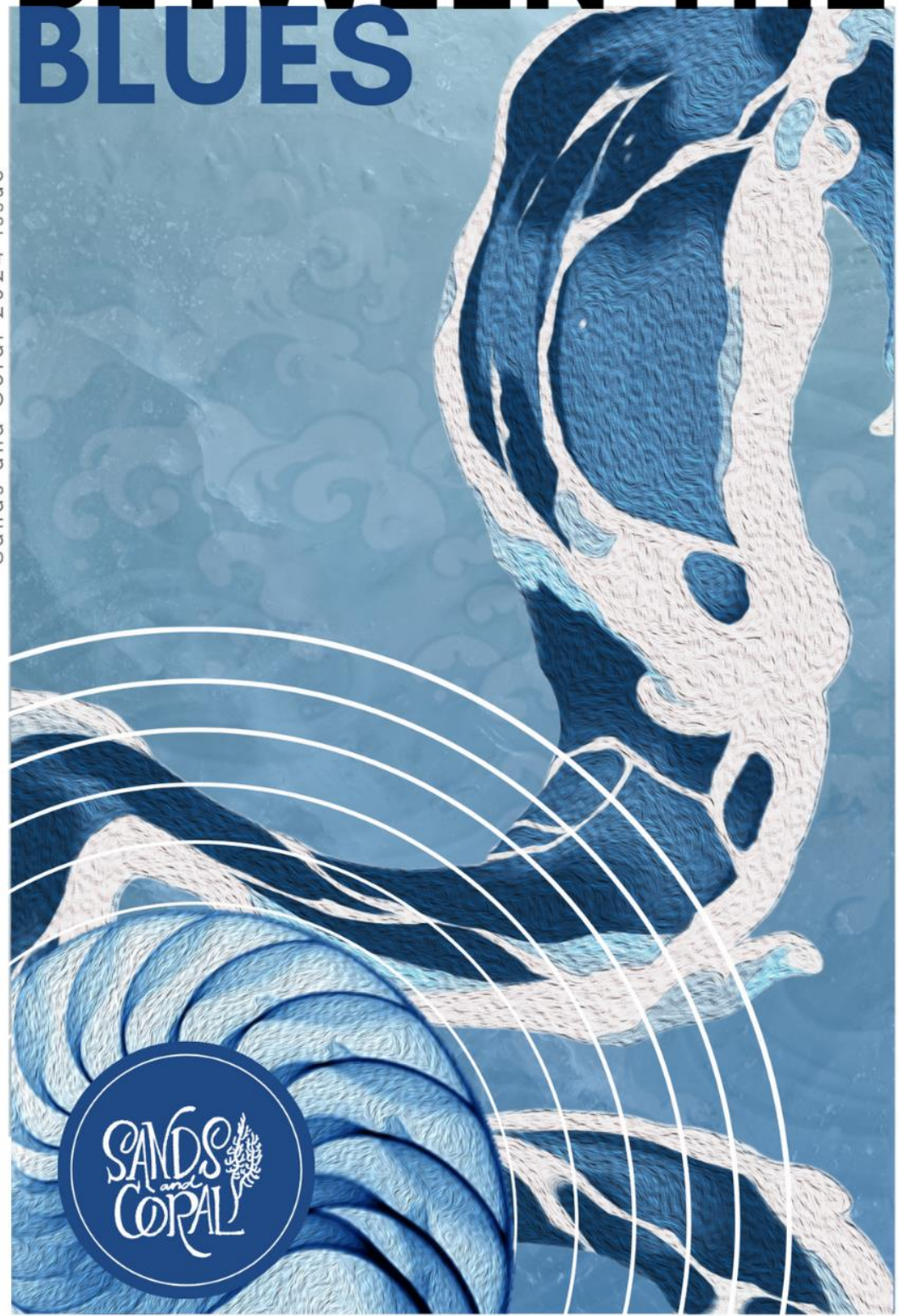
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Silliman University

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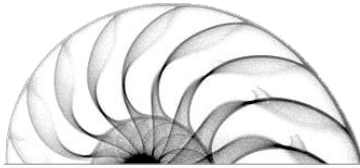
Editors: Alyana Aguja, Amiel Lopez, Nina Alolod,  
Jireh Catacutan, Reya Grace Hinaut



*Sands & Coral*

*2024*

# **BETWEEN THE BLUES**



Alyana Marie Aguja  
Nina Isabelle Alolod  
Jireh Catacutan  
Reya Grace Hinaut  
Mearck Amiel Lopez  
*Editors*

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Cover by Nina Isabelle Alolod  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	viii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	x
FICTION	1
The Man in Barangay San Miguel	3
Whispers between Souls	11
Lady of the Night	24
Beloved Stranger	35
Fiction	43
Michael's Tears are Red	47
Ebb and Flow	51
Children from Another World	65
i'll stay in this barren field, where i belong.	76
POETRY	85
The rain outside	87
Seashells	88
My Wildest Dream is to Wake Up to the Sound of Birds	89
Bodhisattva	90
(Your Name)	91
Notes on Genetics	92
a mimesis of a proletariat fashionista	93
Mosaic on the kitchen floor	94
I've forgotten the pears	95

White Flag	96
down the plateau	97
I've forgotten where I am	98
Untitled	99
Notes on Legacy	105
Mortal's Qualms	106
on the making of a signature	107
I've forgotten how to write	108
The Morning is Imminent	109
For a moment	110
Ang Pagbasol Nga Way Sama	111
One-to-One	112
A bouquet of two calves	113
The car is a teleportation machine	114
Bato Lata	115
CREATIVE NON-FICTION	117
The Wrong Kind of People	119
Grief for Things Unknown	123
Fragile, please handle with care	127
A Chapter of Unspoken Longing in My Seminary Life Confession	133
I Was Born Twice	136
ARTWORK AND PHOTOS	139
Photo 1	141
Buglasan	142
Ikaw!	142

Photo 2	143
Photo 3	143
Photo 4	144
tide over	145
Photo 5	146
Needy	147
Exit	148
Ravello on a Break	148
Ginhawa	149
CRITICAL ESSAYS	151
WTB/LFS: Cultural Paper on BNS; can PAYO PH	153
Self-Expression as Social Suicide	160
Family is Everything	165
CONTRIBUTORS	167
THE EDITORS	173
ABOUT THE COVER	175



# FOREWORD

This year's edition of the *Sands & Coral* marks its return to print. After three years of surviving the pandemic and producing three digital literary folios, *Sands & Coral* has stayed afloat the ebb and flow of the pandemic and its aftermath. Now it has come to shore, and we hope it remains on solid ground.

So, too, have this year's editors. In 2021, when the special project, "The Editors Issue," of the *Sands & Coral* (2019–2021) came out, as a tribute to the publication's past editors from the years 1948 to 2013 and in what would be the folio's 70th anniversary, edited by the English and Literature Department faculty members Rebecca de la Torre, Lady Flor Partosa, and Andre Gomez Soluta, the Dumaguete cum Silliman resident poet Cesar Ruiz Aquino, in his Foreword to the edition, described the milieu of its publication as "*a time when, as if indeed to echo the Second World War, a pandemic has cast a pall upon the planet.*"

It was in 2021 that this year's batch of editors—all five of them now in their senior year—witnessed in disbelief the pall of uncertainty hung over their heads as they made their way to Silliman University for the very first time—online. These students, caught as they were in a global shutdown, had to bide their time, survive on their own or with their families, beat themselves up writing drafts upon writing drafts, read writers dead and alive, write like writers dead or alive (or not), decide whether writing at such a time even makes sense or not, stay up in between what the Irish poet W.B. Yeats says, "*The blue and the dim and the dark cloths/Of night and light and the half-light,*" nurse the loneliness of isolation, the buzz of hangovers, or the cringe of terrible drafts. At least, that's how I imagined it to be. Others though took good courage, taking it upon themselves to contribute to the following year's issue, "Pandemonium" (2022), and the next, "Pagsubang" (2023).

This year's edition of the *Sands & Coral*, then, marks their return to shore, in print, as writers and, now, editors of the longest-running campus-based, student-led literary folio in Asia. Together with them, twenty-two (22) more writers from the university's different colleges, departments, and the high school bring us to worlds of the macabre, the other-worldly, the insane, the heartbreaking, the beautiful, and the good. They bring us back to the simple joys of curling up with a good book to a good story, a poem, or an essay, and back, more importantly, to ourselves and our times.



But the real joy as an educator lies in witnessing firsthand the magic and genius that students wield when, with a nudge, they go out of their way to collaborate, compile, and co-create a collection of literary works that has now come to fruition here, “Between the Blues,” that speaks of a generation, *their* generation, and with it their values, voices, desires, and dreams. In these pages, you’ll witness the imaginings of places and spaces and the liminalities where humanity lies and where the human condition forever hums the notes of the blues.

*“I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.”*

W.B. Yeats

So tread softly. Because you tread on their dreams.

**Aaron James D. Jalalon**

*Adviser*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our gratitude to the Edilberto and Edith Tiempo Creative Writing Center, the Silliman University Office of Information and Publications, and the Silliman University English and Literature Department for their perseverance in fostering the literary scene that laid the groundwork for *Sands & Coral*. As the oldest campus-based literary journal, the pressure to commit ourselves and emulate our esteemed forebears was daunting. But we have managed to elevate this year's edition to new heights—one that we, the current and future editors—will be proud of.

We want to extend our thanks to our literary mentor Mrs. Angela F. Flores for guiding us, albeit for only a short period of time. We also thank our adviser Mr. Aaron James D. Jalalon for his guidance while creating this issue. Those afternoons we spent hashing out the finer details to make this edition as perfect as possible was a fantastic learning experience.

And lastly, our sincere appreciation goes out to the talented contributors who have honored this year's issue of *Sands & Coral* by sharing their remarkable works. You are indeed the backbone of this issue. Without your valued creativity, it would not be possible.



# FICTION



# **The Man in Barangay San Miguel**

By Alyana Marie Aguja

The rain was pouring down heavily that night. There hasn't been rain as intense as this in months. So many of my lazy co-workers decided to pass down to me the responsibilities of being the beat cop for the night. I always hated this part of the job. Rarely anything happens here in Barangay San Miguel. This place is filled to the brim with snotty upper-middle-class wannabe politicians who couldn't even say anything like a thank you to us for keeping their neighborhood clean. You'd think that for people with great educational backgrounds, they'd be smarter than others to treat us with respect.

I took our station's brand-new Toyota Vios for a ride down the barangay. It was quiet that night, and I couldn't hear anything but the heavy drops of rain on the car's roof. I don't understand why they even let me do this tonight since I can barely see a thing anyway. All I could see were vague shapes of street lamps and signs. There weren't any people on the street. Who else but me has to be outside at half past ten in the evening in the pouring rain? I know I shouldn't be complaining. I got it easy. I don't have to run around chasing drug dealers and thieves. I can sit in the patrol car, get a warm cup of coffee, and listen to 'Digital Bath' from Deftones' White Pony album. It just gets me in such a good mood and is always perfect for nights like these.

Barangay San Miguel is a pretty big area, so I make sure to take my time patrolling. I can't exactly afford to miss any spots since I'd like to think that people's lives are on the line when I don't do my job right. It was pretty calm. A few people were here and there trying to get from one place to another, desperately trying to stay as dry as they could in this weather. I found it funny. Why couldn't they just wait for the rain to stop or at least be less strong before they go on about their lives? What's a couple of minutes, right? They look like ants when you flood them with water.

I liked to start at the left-most part of the barangay, combing my way through each street since the right-most part of the barangay is where it gets sketchier. Although significantly better than other parts of the city, it is where you'd usually find the 'bad elements' your parents often warn you about. Sleepless souls that scatter in the night, looking for a thrill. People that



you shouldn't look in the eye when you pass by. It usually takes me four hours to thoroughly examine the entire place. As usual, it was pretty quiet. The downpour slowed into a decent shower when I got to the right-most part of the barangay. I thought I was in the clear when I was in the last five streets but boy, was I wrong. I had gotten comfortable sitting in the airconditioned car, sipping on the last drops of my second coffee, when I saw a commotion on one of the big dumpsters near the basketball court. There was a man with ripped blue shorts with his body halfway in the dumpster. This was usually not a cause for alarm since these pesky beggars rummage through the trash frequently for something to eat or wear. They are usually harmless and just run away as soon as they see a cop car. This one though, was too busy to notice.

I watched him for far longer than the amount of time I should have. Something about his movement seemed different. When the usual beggars went dumpster diving, they would scurry around the bins quickly with much movement. They didn't care if they were being loud or rough as long as they got out of there fast. This one didn't move a lot. He was just there, partially suspended with his waist and above dipped into the garbage. I could tell his torso was moving but not a lot.

I switched my headlights to high beam, and when I did, the man diving in the dumpster looked at me with piercing eyes. His eyes were bloodshot and huge, and his hair was thin and black. He was wearing a white shirt plastered with the face of some politician from a few years ago. The shirt was dirty and was spackled with blood. As I realized this detail, I took a glance at his face and realized it was covered with blood. With the rain still showering, the blood was thinned out almost immediately. In the few seconds I had to react, I saw him chewing on something. When the seemingly slow-motion skill that cops are granted finally stopped, I immediately unlocked my car and stepped out in the rain to go after this man. Once he heard my door unlock, he sprinted. Thankfully, with my years of training behind me, I was able to catch up in no time. I pulled him by the back part of the collar of his shirt, causing him to stumble a little bit. Unlike most of them, he didn't resist much once I got ahold of him. I put him in cuffs and dragged him back to the car.

For the most part, I was just pissed that I had to go out in the rain. In the short moment that I had to run after him, my hair was already wet, my pants were moving strangely, and my

shoes were already caked with mud. Usually, during night patrols, you don't expect to go out of the car since nothing ever happens, but in moments like these, I have to breathe and remember that it's all part of the job. As I shoved the man into my backseat, something was telling me to check the dumpster. I've been a cop for more than ten years, and I've been saved by my instincts far too many times for me to know better than to question it. And so, when I was certain that he was securely locked in the backseat and not showing any signs of trying to escape, I walked over to the dumpster. I was already wet anyway, so I might as well.

When I got to the dumpster, it was a bit too high for me to see what was inside fully. So, I found a knocked-over paint can and used it as a step stool. When I pulled out my flashlight and pointed it at the dumpster, what I found would fuel my nightmares for the years to come. In the dumpster was the body of what looked to me like a twenty-something-year-old woman in a dress whose color I can no longer identify due to the blood, with huge chunks of skin bitten from her thigh. In my shock, I fell back and knocked over the can of paint I was standing on. I stumbled around, looking for my walkie-talkie.

"Come in, John" I radioed over, trying hard to keep my heart inside my chest. In the few seconds of silence, I felt as if no help would ever come. This was the first ever case of what I believe to be cannibalism. It couldn't be any clearer.

"Go for John," he said after a short static.

"Code eight. I repeat, code eight. I've got a ten fifty-four. Send back-up to East Barangay San Miguel. Over and out," I radioed as I stood up, trying to collect myself.

I was afraid—no, terrified, to come back to my car. The thought of having to sit in the same space with a beggar who ate people was not at all what I had in mind. I can't sit there and wait for him to lunge at my neck and bite me suddenly. I had so much to live for. It took about ten minutes for backup to arrive. All the while, I was leaning on the hood of the car, keeping a safe distance from the man in my backseat and the woman in the dumpster—well, parts of her. The red and blue lights of the incoming cop cars were blinding. I know, logically, things like these shouldn't bother me anymore, but I feel this was brought on by the fact that I did not expect this to be how my patrol would be tonight. I have heard the 'you always have to be prepared' monologue countless times, but it's not every day you see an actual case of

cannibalism. I haven't heard of a case since before I was even a cop. This is a one-in-a-thousand or even a hundred-thousand chance. I don't think there are even laws in the country that make this illegal.

As my fellow policemen circled around the scene of the crime, they had the same look on their faces. A mixture of disgust, surprise, and curiosity. I asked one of them to accompany me back to the station. Despite their number, I would still have to be the one to take and book this man. My compromise is to have somebody with me. As they wrapped up the investigations and carefully took the body out of the dumpster for further examination, it was a sign that I could finally go. I made sure Cris entered the car before I did. I felt like a person who is capable of eating human flesh once can surely do it again. When I heard the car door on the opposite side click, I opened the door to the driver's seat. There was a violent smell that coated the inside of the car. I immediately opened the windows as I realized that this man had been soaked in the rain, blood, and probably his own piss and shit for the hour that I'd left him inside the car. I could tell Cris was also getting queasy, so I had to take the fastest route to the station and get the car thoroughly cleaned as soon as possible.

On the ride back, I could hear the man in the back seat licking his lips, smacking them every few minutes. It sounded absolutely horrifying. He was humming a song I couldn't quite place when he wasn't doing things to his lips. Cris looked back at him a couple of times just to make sure everything was alright—as alright as it could get. Once we were close enough to the station, I felt like the man finally realized where he was being taken and started banging his head on the left side window, leaving a greyish-maroon mark. Cris had to pull him by the head forcefully to get him to lay his body on the entirety of the back seat. Once he was down, he barely made any noise or movement.

It was already around two in the morning when we got to the station. Apart from a few officers finishing their paperwork, the station was almost empty. In most cases, they just have to wait in the holding cell until they're processed, but I'm assuming this one is a little more delicate to handle. We've never had a case of cannibalism in the history of our precinct. It has been a topic of conversation one time when a couple of officers and I stayed late to do paperwork. These cases were rare; if and when they happened, they could not be handled by just

a police officer. We'd need a higher-up supervising us because, more often than not, cases like these have a much bigger reason behind them.

The man was sat down in the interrogation room. I could tell he was cold. Apart from being in the rain all night, our interrogation room always had the temperature at sixteen, hoping that the colder it is, the faster the confession. His hands were no longer tied behind his back but were chained to a steel bar on the table. I tried to look at him through the glass, but he was a bit too far for me to see what he looked like at that moment. Before I came in, I waited for my Senior Police Officer, Randy, who, luckily, only lived a few blocks away.

When he came in, we immediately went in. I could tell he was just as curious to meet the cannibal. The room was freezing. The aircon was on full blast; plus, it was still raining outside. I felt a little bad for the man. I was in full uniform and had enough time to dry myself, but he was there just sitting, taking all the cold in. The steel chairs creaked as we pulled it down to sit. For a while, there weren't any words. Because what do you even begin to say? I finally got a chance to look at his face properly. There were still traces of blood on his chin and his whitening mustache. He had deep eyes as if he hadn't slept for ages. His face was covered with sun spots from what I assume were years of exposure to the hot Philippine sun. He looked unkempt and dirty, and I could still smell him from where I was sitting despite the room being big and ventilated. His cheeks were sunken, and his face felt hollow, like there was nothing underneath the flesh but bone. He was in a worse condition than I had imagined.

"Get him water, please, and a towel," Randy told me. I was going to protest and tell him to get on with it, but he gave me a stern look that meant this wasn't up for discussion. I also didn't want to leave the room. My curiosity has reached an all-time high, and I wanted to know every single detail. I didn't want to miss anything. But I couldn't disobey direct orders so I got up and left the room. Once outside, I sprinted to get everything asked of me, not wasting another second outside. I grabbed a big cup of water from the dispenser and a blanket that doubled as kind of a blanket from our storage. By the time I was at the door, I was winded. I took a few seconds to catch my breath before I came in again. Surprisingly, they weren't talking. I handed the man the water and put the towel over his shoulders. As I sat down, he started to drink the

water, and Randy and I did not hide the fact that we were watching his every move, trying to make sense of what he did.

Randy broke the silence. “Can you state your name for the record?” he said in what I’ve known to be his calmest voice.

“Ruben...” he answered. His voice was hoarse as if a violent cough was trying to claw its way up his throat.

“Ruben, what?” he followed.

It took Ruben a few seconds to answer. “Espinosa.” His accent was unfamiliar. I was usually good at identifying where people come from originally, but I could not quite place him.

“And for the record, are you speaking to me voluntarily?” Randy added.

“Yes,” Ruben said in a quiet voice, almost inaudible.

“Where are you from, Ruben?” Randy proceeds with caution.

“I don’t remember. I’ve been here for so long. I don’t remember.” I could tell he was telling the truth.

“Do you know why you’re here, Ruben?” Randy asked, finally getting to the good part.

I leaned back on my chair, and it made a creaking sound, which made both of them look my way. Randy answered him while making direct eye contact.

“Yeah. I ate that woman,” he said, not even flinching. His answer shook me to my core. No, it was the way he said it that unnerved me. How could you do such a heinous crime and not feel a shred of remorse? I couldn’t stop myself from speaking.

“And you don’t even have it in you to feel sorry? That was another human being!” I controlled myself.

“Feel sorry for what? I’d been starving for weeks, and her body was going to decompose anyway. Might as well get something out of it,” he replied.

“Did you kill that woman?” Randy asked cautiously.

“Of course not! You pigs always look down on us and see us as murderers,” he said, with his tone rising with every word.

“I only ate her. She was dead when I found her. It must have been my lucky night,” he added as he slid back onto his seat.

I was fuming. I find it harder and harder to see this man as a human every time he opens his mouth. I wanted to shoot it off his face so he doesn't get to open it again.

“What? You want me to pass up an opportunity to get to live one more day in exchange for someone who's already dead?” he said as he took another sip of his water.

“Why didn't you go to a homeless shelter or any of those places that gave out free food once in a while?” Randy asked.

Ruben started laughing. Quietly at first and then it escalated into the type of laughter that has your body shaking. “Those fuckers? They haven't given me shit! Do you really think those people are going to help people like me? They pretend they do. For the pictures. But they always have the same disgusted look on their faces,” he continued to laugh. “No one is out there to help people like me! I saw the look in everyone's eyes when I was brought in. I've lived every single day getting used to that disgusted look. Especially this little cop here,” he said as he pointed at me. I could feel my cheeks turning red, and I could already imagine pulling the trigger right at his mouth. “You are afraid of us. Always assuming we'll eat, beat, or steal from you.”

“Well, isn't that true?” Randy chimed in. I was surprised at how he could remain calm in such a situation.

“Why do you think we have to do that? We don't get any help. We are left starving and freezing and covered in our own piss and shit, and you pass by in your fancy, airconditioned cars, not giving a fuck,” he said with a scoff.

“There are plenty of institutions built to help people like you, places that prioritize you,” Randy added.

“As if. I'd rather eat another human than be fed that dogshit-tasting thing you call food,” as he said these words, his stomach grumbled loudly.

Randy and I both knew he couldn't be charged with anything. He didn't kill the woman, he didn't fight back when I caught him, and he's been pretty much still the moment he sat down. To my surprise, Randy started to leave.

“Thank you for your time,” he said as he exited the room with me following him along.



We knew this was fruitless. As much as we wanted to put him behind bars, there's simply no grounds for it in the Constitution. Maybe we could get him something related to a mental illness, but for now, it would have to wait. It was three in the morning, and no one was available to make that call for him right now. Randy then went off to do more work somewhere, leaving me at the station with three other people. I sat on my desk and thought about the case over and over again. How could it possibly be our fault? If he wanted a better life, he could have done more to achieve it. No one will hand him an opportunity on a silver platter. It's not how life works.

I was lost in my thoughts for a good few hours as I was idly working on some remaining work before I remembered to check on him. When I entered the room, he was face flat on the table, with his left arm showing chunks of it bitten off, draining him of blood.

# Whispers between Souls

By Uriel Ansley Amistad

Beneath his schoolmates' smiles and laughter, Roy always knew what they were thinking deep down. He doesn't remember why or how, but for as long as he can remember, he has been able to hear them—the voices.

Their rageful thoughts, sorrowful ruminations, disgusting ideas—Roy heard them loud and clear, like multiple radios constantly fixed to his ear, whether he liked them or not. Socializing was difficult and uncomfortable.

One day, his aunt came to visit him and his family. She brought gifts for him, his mom, and his dad. Roy suddenly asked her a question while she and his mom were chatting over dinner.

"Auntie Christie, why do you hate my mom so much?"

"Uh..." the aunt awkwardly laughed as she looked at her sister. "Roy, what do you mean? I don't hate your mom."

"But you said you hate her just now... Because she stole Dad from you? And that she has the life that you've always wanted..."

His mother stood up slowly. "Christie, is that... true?"

That was the last time he had ever seen his aunt.

There were a lot of "last times" for Roy. Like the last time his uncle would visit, the last time they went to his grandfather's house, the last time they went to a McDonald's, and the last time he would be allowed in a police station.

Roy inadvertently destroyed many of his mother's relations and friendships with people. His father learned to gradually hate him as he grew older. But his mom loved him the most and believed that her gifted child saved her from many terrible situations.

On his thirteenth birthday, he celebrated with only his mom; she told him, "Listen, Roy. No matter how many people betray us, no matter how many people would rather have you dead. I love you. Because unlike them..."

She struggled to hold back her tears. "You have a heart of gold. You're true to yourself. And that's something that you must never change. You're... you're a good kid. One day, you'll find someone who loves you for who you are, like I do."

Months later, with no one to willingly lend her a hand, Roy's mother died due to an illness.

His father was not as kind as his mother. When she died, he blamed him. He told him that nothing would have happened if he knew how to keep his mouth shut.

"Shut up!" or "Shut it!" were the only things Roy ever heard from him in the house. For years, Roy followed his father's advice. He gave up on trying to look for the light in anybody. After all, the only thing inside people was darkness.

Roy would always find himself eating at a table by himself during lunch. He'd ask to sit at the back of the classroom. He'd go home immediately after school. He believed that this way, he would avoid destroying anything, and he wouldn't hurt anyone anymore. But later on, Roy would avoid people for a more selfish reason—because he hated them.

He hated that no one ever told the truth, that hatred and anger were beneath most of his classmates' smiles, that his teachers had secret affairs with the students, and most of all, he hated that he couldn't scream about this pain. He was alone.

One day, his lunch table was taken by a group of other students.

"Oh?" A boy sitting at his table turned to see him. "Was it... Uh, Roy? Wanna sit at this table with us? There's a seat over there."

*I don't really like this guy, but I have to be nice.*

*Ugh. James, why did you have to invite him?*

*Please say no. Please say no. Please say no.*

*This food is horrible. I hate my mother's cooking.*

*Just go find a different table, dork.*

"No, it's okay," Roy said as he walked away. He didn't know where to go, only that he had to keep walking. Maybe up the stairs, he would find some peace and quiet. And up even more stairs. And even more stairs.

He had heard that the topmost floor of the school had been closed for some reason related to urban legends. The usually closed gate barring anyone from walking up the stairs was a clear sign of this.

But, today, the gate was ajar.

Trying not to make any noticeable sound, he opened the gate and continued his journey of solitude up the stairs.

"Hello?" he said loudly as he walked through the hall. Not a single soul was there. It was perfect.

Every classroom door was locked, however. He turned every knob but to no avail. Seeing as he had no choice, he walked back to the stairs and ate there.

Creak.

A door had opened behind him. Room AB-139.

"Um, is anyone there?" he said, still in the hall, his voice echoing.

Silence.

He opened the classroom door wide. "Hello? Is anyone here?"

And he was once again met with silence. There were only arranged but dusty chairs and desks and massive cobwebs in the corners. He flicked a switch, but the lights didn't even turn on. It was like no one had been in this room for over twenty years. And, of course, there wasn't anyone in the room at the moment. Otherwise, he would've heard that person's inner voice before entering the room.

"Boo!"

Roy fell on his rear as he twisted his body to see whose voice that was. He didn't believe in ghosts but thought one had finally come for him. However, the very opaque girl wearing the school uniform was laughing like it was the greatest joke in the world.

"You should've seen..." she tried to speak in between her breaths. You should've seen the look on your face! Ahahaha!" She hit the tiled floor with her fist, still laughing and having difficulty catching her breath.

Roy was not very amused. He grabbed the lunch bag, dropped it on the floor, and started walking out without a word.

"Wait!" The girl grabbed his arm just as he was about to step out. "I'm sorry," she said, wiping the tears off her face. "That was very rude of me, I'm sorry."

"It sure as hell is. I thought you were some kind of ghost! I thought I was going to die."

"Oh, haha! Don't worry. I won't kill you or anything.."

"What are you even doing here? I thought this place was closed."

"What am I doing here? What are you doing here? No one's allowed to be up here, yet here you are!"

Roy groaned as he wiped his face with his hand. "I'm just..." Roy hesitated. "I'm just trying to eat alone. A bunch of people took my usual table, so I'm trying to find somewhere else to eat."

"Ohhh, funny you mention that because..." She took out a lunch box from the blue sling bag on her waist. "I'm here to eat alone, too."

Roy raised an eyebrow. She didn't look like the type of girl to want to eat alone, especially in such an isolated area.

"What?" She placed her hands on her hips. "Just because I'm so pretty and friendly, I shouldn't be eating alone?"

"Yeah."

"Geez, even I need some alone time. Being around people is exhausting, you know. And besides, I eat here every day! If anyone isn't supposed to be eating out here, it should be you," she said, ending her statement by pointing at his face.

Roy was annoyed, but he also felt relief in hearing those words. Everyone had always been deceptively nice and invited him even though deep in their hearts, they wanted him gone. But right before him was a girl telling him to go away, rudely pointing at him.

He ignored what she said and sat on a chair in front. He wiped away the dust on the desk with a handkerchief he brought and placed his lunchbox on it.

"Oh, did you change your mind?" she said, looking at him smugly.

"I think I can tolerate you," he replied, trying to keep a listless face.

The girl moved a desk and chair opposite Roy and placed down her lunch box.

"The name's Emily, by the way. Yours?"

"Roy."

He couldn't help but look at her curiously. Aside from the fact that the girl was really digging into her chicken leg, there was something about her that he couldn't shake off. Something was off. What was it? The room (and his mind) was so peaceful despite someone being there with him.

Where was her inner voice?

The girl noticed he had been staring at her and hadn't touched his food. With a playful smile, she raised her eyebrow. "What's the matter? Is there something you want to say to me?"

"Huh? What?" He snapped out of the trance. "Oh, it's just..."

"Yeah?"

"It feels like I'm at peace with you for some reason," he said, rubbing his chin. As he said this, he was lost deep in thought, trying to figure out why he wasn't hearing her voice. He was lost in so much thought that he didn't see the kind of face that she was making.

"Pfft! Hahaha!" She burst into laughter. "You may not look like it, but you sure have a way with words," she said, lightly swatting her hand, dainty-like. "Even though we've literally just met."

Roy hadn't realized it himself, but as they ate lunch together, he started to feel captivated by her. Her laugh, her smile. Everything felt genuine with her. When she had something mean to say, she would say it. She had a lot of things to say about the way he ate and the way he sat.

And he liked it.

For the first time since his mom died, he saw honesty in a person's eyes.

He could not hear her thoughts, so he was hanging on to her every word. He was actually listening to a conversation he was having.

The school bell rang.

"Oh, damn. Lunch is over already?" Roy said, looking in the direction of the ringing school bell that echoed all throughout the building.

"Ugh," Emily groaned. "I didn't even finish eating."



"Ah, darn. I have a quiz coming up next period. I gotta go," he said, hastily packing up his lunch box as he left the room. It was Science next period, and the teacher was strict about punctuality.

"Wait!"

Roy turned. "What? Also, are you not gonna go to your class or something?"

"I will. I just want to finish this meal first. But, uh, will you come to eat here tomorrow, too?"

Roy thought about her question for a moment. He had only come up here because his usual lonely table was taken. Walking up the stairs wasn't fun either, but the look in her eyes begged him to say yes.

"Yeah, sure."

Later that day, Roy almost failed his Science quiz. Not because he was late to class or because he didn't study. Usually, he'd be able to cheat by hearing his classmates' thoughts, yet he couldn't even hear them. He had been thinking about something else.

Lunch break came again like usual the next day. After walking up four flights of stairs through the long hall, he ate with Emily again. It was the same as yesterday. They were so talkative to each other that they forgot to eat their meals.

"I know this might sound weird, but do you, uh, watch anime?" Emily inserted it in the middle of a conversation about how Roy hated game shows.

"Yeah? Who doesn't?"

Emily stood up excitedly. "Have you seen Naruto?"

"It's a bit old, but I guess I saw a few episodes back when I was younger."

"Look at this shuriken I made out of paper!" she said as she handed him her creation.

This was the most excited Roy had ever seen Emily. It was like she had never talked about Japanese animation with anyone. And she was incredibly passionate talking about certain episodes and characters. Roy didn't really understand much of it, but he felt happy listening.

"I gotta go to class now," Roy said, handing Emily's origami shuriken back.

"Oh, you can keep it."

"Huh? Okay, then."

Roy would go on to eat with Emily at the abandoned classroom almost every day for the next few weeks. Each day, a new conversation. Because Roy never really went out, he only had retro games or old movies to discuss. Luckily, it was the only thing Emily ever talked about too. But sometimes, it didn't matter what they talked about. Roy had seen a genuine smile for the first time in a long time. And the way her bright brown eyes glittered in the light, he wondered if she was the sun in human form.

One lunch break, Emily asked Roy what he wanted to do in life before he died.

"Me?" Roy asked. "I guess... I want to find some peace and quiet. I want to live far away from any place that would have a lot of people. Maybe a house in the countryside or something."

"That's a nice dream," Emily said, leaning back in her chair. As for me, I..."

"What?"

"Don't laugh, okay?"

"Why would I laugh?"

"It's kinda embarrassing."

"Just say it."

Emily hesitated. She leaned into Roy's ear and whispered.

"I want to... dance with someone who doesn't care about where I came from or what I did. Someone who just likes me for who I am. Someone who just listens to my soul."

After telling him that, she seemed to have a distant gaze throughout their conversation. It threw Roy off, but he didn't know how to ask about it.

Snap. Snap. Snap.

The class president was snapping her fingers at Roy.

"Roy, are you listening?"

"Huh? What?"

"Ugh. Can't you just pay attention for five seconds? You're in charge of the music at prom."

"Oh, right. Prom is coming up. Wait, why does it have to be me?"

"Everyone else has their hands full. And besides, you get to be at, like, in a corner away from people. Isn't that just nice?"

"Oh, thanks."

The class president gave him a list of music to download along with instructions and yada yada yada. Play certain music at certain times.

*You better not mess up such an easy job.*

But wait. prom was coming up. Every year, he never danced with anyone, but this time, he wanted to go with someone: Emily.

On lunch break that day, he would ask Emily out for a dance at prom. His hands trembled, and his forehead was wet with sweat.

"Yeah, I'll dance with you," Emily said. Before Roy had even said anything. Somehow, she knew. Did she read his mind? Was it obvious from how nervous he was? Everyone knew prom was tomorrow night, after all.

And yet Roy still asked. "How'd you know?"

She took his trembling hand. With a smirk, she looked him in the eyes. "I was able to hear your heart."

Emily giggled as she let go of his hand. "And besides, I already told you, right? I wanted to dance with someone."

Later that night, Roy had a hard time falling asleep. He hugged his pillow as he repeatedly replayed today's lunch break in his mind: the softness of her hand, the playfulness in her eyes, and the calmness in her voice as she said, "I was able to hear your heart."

Who wouldn't have been over the moon?

But Roy was also anxious about another thing. How would he find the time to dance with her? Earlier today, the president approached him to assign him even more tasks. His hands would be filled, and he would have no time to dance with anyone. The rest of the students figured out how to give all the work to the guy who probably wouldn't be doing much at prom. They tried to hide that fact from him, but he could hear what they were thinking.

*I'm sorry, Roy, but you're the only one here who's free anyway.*

During prom, he ran back and forth around the school doing errands and tasks. When he finally found some free time, the dance and the prom were over. He looked for Emily everywhere to ask if she still wanted to dance, but he couldn't find her.

When everyone had gone home, he went to the abandoned classroom—not because he expected her to be waiting there, but because he wanted to sit in the darkness. He was full of hate after running around doing things for everyone without having the chance to do what he wanted. Dimly lit by the moonlight that came in through the opened door and window, he was sitting alone.

"What are you doing here?" Emily asked.

"I'm sulking. Everyone had me run errands, and I couldn't find time to dance with you. I'm sorry," Roy replied, still in his lonely trance.

And then it struck him; Emily was there. He stood up fast like a dog, hearing its food bowl.

"Emily, what are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? What are you doing here? No one's allowed to be up here, yet here you are!"

"Aha... Okay. Good one."

But instead of a school uniform, she was in a beautiful blue dress with intricate frills on the sleeves and at the ends of the skirt. The moonlight made her almost glow.

Now, she was in front of him. Based on the romantic movies he'd seen, he put out his hand rather nervously. "Would you like to dance?"

"I'd love to."

Roy put on Nocturne No. 2 in E flat Major on his phone and increased the volume as loud as possible. Though Emily gave herself an air of maturity and calmness, she too was inexperienced, even stepping on his foot several times.

"I'm sorry... This is really my first time dancing with anyone," Emily said, slightly sad.

"Me too."

The night continued as they played different songs, without even knowing how to dance to any of them and without caring about how late it had gotten at night. The moon was as bright as ever and shone on them like a spotlight.

About an hour later, they both fell to the floor in exhaustion.

"Ahaha, that was... amazing. Thank you for this." Emily held his hand.

Roy gripped her hand slightly tighter. "No, I should thank you. I was the one who didn't come on time. I made you stay out here so late at night. Your parents would probably kill you right now."

"Oh, don't worry. I'll be fine. I'm more worried about yours."

"My uncle doesn't really care, haha."

There was a long moment of silence between them. In the quietness and serenity of the moonlit classroom, they stared into each other's eyes. Roy had only one thought: "I wish I could be with her forever."

For the first time in his life, he wished he could hear the inner voice of the person next to him. Right now, he wanted to know if she was thinking the same thing. Before he realized it, they had fallen asleep on the floor in each other's embrace.

The first light of dawn caressed Roy's face. The morning had come, and he had still been in the abandoned classroom.

"Roy!" a voice called from the hallway. His father and a schoolguard entered the room. "There you are!"

That morning, there was a panic at the school over a boy who didn't return after the prom. Roy's father had to explain to them that he was a troublesome child who would often get lost. The school administrators were relieved that Roy was found.

But when Roy got home, his father gave him the hardest scolding he had ever received. Overwhelmed with a strange sadness in his heart, Roy stared at his palm, wondering why it felt like he was missing something.

"What were you even doing up there!?" His father's words finally reached him.

"Huh?" Roy looked up to answer, but he, too, was unsure. "I... I don't know."

The next day, he went to class as usual. He ate lunch at his lonely lunch table, avoiding people as much as possible. Despite this, a classmate approached him.

"Hey, man, you alright?" the boy asked. "I heard you were found at the top floor of this building."

"Yeah?"

"Did you see any ghosts? Haha."

"Ghosts?"

"What? You don't know? The top floor is said to be haunted by a girl or something. Did you see one?"

"No."

"Oh, really? Why were you up there, though? We thought you were ghost-hunting or something. Haha."

"I don't know. I don't believe in ghosts. And can you leave me alone? I'm trying to eat."

"...Sure, man. Sorry."

*Weirdo. I hope you can talk to ghosts with that attitude because you won't be making friends anytime soon.*

Roy tried not to show it, but he was pretty bothered. Everyone had been asking him how or why he ended up on the top floor, even if he didn't know. He finished his lunch, and as he recklessly packed it back in his bag, something fell out and onto the floor.

It was a shuriken made of paper.

Roy picked it up and wondered why it was in his bag. He brought it closer to his face and got a whiff of a strange scent. It smelled like the blue summer sky, calming but full of life. This feeling made him feel so warm that Roy wondered if it came from the sun.

Suddenly, a memory of a dance under the moonlight and a glowing dress came to him. His bag dropped with a loud thud and caught the attention of the cafeteria as he ran out and rushed up a flight of stairs.

Only one thought was going through his mind, louder than everyone else's: where was Emily?

However, the gate to the top floor was locked this time. He rushed down to get a janitor and pleaded to be taken to the top floor. After convincing him that he had left something in a classroom, the janitor escorted him upstairs.

Roy ran through the hall and burst through the abandoned classroom's door. He looked all around, but no one was there.

"Emily?" he called out but was met with silence.

He stood there for a minute, with a palm on his forehead, wondering if he had gone insane. Was he seeing a ghost this whole time? Did Emily even exist?

"Hey, kid! Hurry up!" the janitor yelled from the hallway. "This place gives me the creeps."

Roy let out a deep sigh. He turned around and started walking out. But he noticed a piece of paper on the chair that he remembered eating lunch on. Cautiously, he reached for it and began reading.

*Dear Roy,*

*I'm not really good at writing letters, and I was bad in English class, but I didn't want to leave without saying a word. For the past twenty years, I've wandered these halls, unseen and unheard, feared and avoided. Then you came along, and everything changed. Your presence brought warmth to the coldness of my afterlife, and your laughter brought light into my world of shadows.*

*As I prepare to leave this place, I want to thank you. Thank you for being a friend when I needed one the most. I don't know what it was with you, but you seemed to actually see me. That was something that I didn't have even when I was alive.*

*Our dance, though brief, meant more to me than you'll ever know. I hope we can dance again somewhere not covered in cobwebs and dust. And maybe we can watch those new movies and play those games you told me about.*

*Somewhere, someday, we'll meet each other in a field, theater, or neighborhood. And when we do, I hope you'll find me again like you found me here. I want to say, "I wish we had more time," but really, I wished we lived at the same time so that I could tell you I love you in person.*

*Love,*

*Emily*

*P.S. I hope you learn to smile more. You don't look good frowning all the time.*

Leaving the letter on the chair, Roy walked out of the classroom.

"You came out with nothing. Did you even find what you were looking for in there?"

Roy looked back at the classroom one last time before closing it.

"I did."



# Lady of the Night

By Calvin Castillo

Neon lights pierced through the dark alleyways, illuminating the queues of people outside the nightclubs compressed into the suffocating buildings near the river Pasig. The sky was blanketed by a thick layer of an amalgamation of smoke coming from the cigarettes and vapes of people who stepped out into the street to fill their blood with a short-lived rush of nicotine and maybe even a more potent substance. At night, Poblacion came to life.

Other places in the metropolis had the same amenities: booze, music, maybe even a cheap fuck, but Poblacion, or Pobla as it is affectionally called, immortalized in various songs, was different. Where has one ever seen an entire barangay solely dedicated to satisfying the pleasures of the sinful? A modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah, many have called it. To some, it was a safe haven, a paradise for the damned.

In the streets, countless partygoers waited endlessly in line to enter the clubs, their temples of sin. The very sin that they craved, like ecstasy, to free themselves from what is to be expected of them and simply be flawed, debauched mortals, even if only for a moment. The able-bodied of the less fortunate walked around peddling candies or cigarettes. In contrast, the older or invalid ones sat beside their carts selling boiled peanuts and balut, things that a drunk person would crave after spilling the contents of his bowels into an alley. Street children ran alongside cars, directing drivers to safe parking spots, extending their hands to the passengers and the driver after they had done this, expecting a small token as a reward for their vital work. Young men and women stood on street corners to whore themselves to the drunks who wanted a little warmth that night. Perhaps they'd get lucky and snag a rich foreigner seeking some exotic flesh.

Inside the clubs, the partygoers were packed like sardines into slightly larger or smaller spaces than a university's lecture hall. It didn't help that tables were lined up in the middle, the sides, or both. On the bright side, the tables had plenty of booze. Chairs and stools surrounded

the tables; conversations sparked lustful encounters among strangers within the confines of the haven of the wretched. In the darkest corners of every club, intoxicated men and women shared deep kisses with either a lover or some lost soul they wanted to get some friction from.

Enzo was one of the thousands of people partaking in the debauched nightly carnival in that godforsaken corner of Metro Manila. Clubbing here meant you had money to spend, which was not a problem for Enzo. His father was the Congressman of some poor, unfortunate province up north. Enzo didn't question where the money he spent came from. It was just there for as long as he could remember. It wasn't his place to ask about it, but he knew he was grateful to his father for it. Each shot, every table he rented, was practically a gift from his all-powerful father. He believed that his father wanted the best for him and the best he did have.

When Enzo was younger, he had the best toys, the latest smartphones and tablets, anything a child could ask for he had. A spoiled brat, some called him under their breath in fear of the all-powerful Congressman unleashing his wrath upon anyone who dared speak ill about his only begotten son. The people of their province knew better than to vex anyone with the surname of Maravillas. He knew what his father was capable of, and he knew very well how to put people in their place. He was a man who Enzo looked up to, a man who gave him damn near everything. Enzo knew that he was spoiled, but he liked it. He didn't care what people thought about him as long as he was comfortable, and he was very comfortable. Enzo couldn't remember a day that anything he wanted wasn't his. This was his life.

One of his friends, Cris, beckoned to the door. About time, thought Enzo. He was waiting for an excuse to step outside and smoke for a little while. His ears were just starting to ring due to the loud techno remix blasted on massive JBL speakers in a crowded club. They crossed the dance floor, with the fluorescent green exit sign illuminating their destination. Pushing and shoving through the sea of scantily clad people, Cris gripped the door handle and made it to the street outside. Enzo looked around, seeing a long queue of people waiting to get into Polaris, the club they were at. He pawed at his jacket pocket and pulled out a box of Marlboro reds. Enzo offered the pack to Cris, who declined since he preferred Camels. Enzo

gripped the pack lightly and bit the butt of a cigarette as he pulled the box away from his face. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a Zippo, his surname Marquez engraved on the surface. He flipped open the lighter and ignited it, lighting up the cigarette and sending nicotine rushing into his bloodstream. Bliss, he thought, glancing over at Cris while he was beginning to light his.

In the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a young girl, a half-finished cigarette clenched between her slender fingers. She was probably about the same age as him, and she was his type. Petite and curvy with a sharp jawline to match. *My god, she's hot, and a morena too*, thought Enzo. She was dressed in a skimpy blue negligee bespeckled with rhinestones and embroidered with gold thread covered ever so slightly by a large white blazer accented with scarlet. *A woman who can dress, I'm into that*, thought Enzo, slowly noticing that his eyes were locked on the girl's figure. Just then, the girl's cigarette went out. She rummaged through her white Versace handbag, only to pull out an empty, crumpled-up box of Winston blues. Enzo took this as his cue to approach her and introduce himself.

Enzo extended his arm to her, holding his pack of Marlboro reds. The girl looked at him from head to toe before reluctantly plucking a stick from the box. She gripped it firmly between her fingers, her lipstick staining it as she placed the filter between her lips. Enzo was midway through offering his Zippo when she pulled out a black Bic lighter, which she used to ignite her cigarette. She sighed as she took that first soothing puff. "I'm Enzo," said Enzo in a deep, low voice somewhat different from what his friends were accustomed to. He extended his free hand to her, which she accepted with a firm, uncommonly masculine grip. "Raya," she replied in a soft yet confident tone. "Are you here alone?" inquired Enzo. "How can you tell?" she asked slyly. "I know my way around places like this." She smirked at him. "Party boy, eh? I've had my fair share of guys like you." Perhaps this was an invitation of some kind, thought Enzo. Just then, Cris had burned through his pack of Camels and beckoned Enzo to reenter the club. "Shall we?" asked Enzo, offering his arm for her to hold on to. Raya gripped his arm as they made their way into the club.

The pair, led by Cris at the vanguard, traversed their way through the colorful mess of bodies and bottles scattered across the dance floor. They eventually reached their table in the VIP section of the club. Enzo motioned to Raya to take a seat and sat adjacent to her. Raya was met with stares around the table from the pompous companions that Enzo had brought along with him. "Who's this little dove, Enzo?" Raya looked up to see a tall, pale-skinned girl adorned with a diamond necklace around her long, thin neck. She was about to introduce herself when Enzo shifted his gaze across the table. "A friend," he replied. "Saw her outside, thought I'd bring her with me." Raya sat quietly, Enzo's arm around her waist. She wished he wouldn't do that but didn't bother to tell him. His friends whispered to one another as they glanced at her. She hoped that they wouldn't stare.

The night dragged on as the alcohol made its way into the bloodstream of every single person sitting at that table, or even Poblacion itself. More and more people started to lose their inhibitions as the minutes passed, leading to more debauched acts that would put Las Vegas itself to shame. The vibrant colors piercing Polaris' dark interior soon became blurred and distorted as the bottles on Enzo's table multiplied to an obscene amount. They could finish a bottle of Bacardi faster than the ice could melt. Raya was cautious, however. She did not partake as much as her newfound companions. Enzo noticed this and instructed Cris not to pass her the shot glass after every third round.

Eventually, most of the people sitting at that table, apart from those already too drunk, had made their way to the dance floor. The music was electric, captivating many people swaying to the beat of the bass drum. Enzo had started letting his body loose, moving along with everyone else. On the other hand, Raya watched him with a profound sense of interest and a smirk on her face. She turned around and found Cris with his arms around the tall girl, sharing a deep kiss on the dance floor as the shadows of the ones around them obscured their silhouettes from any prying eyes. Enzo moved closer as the music started to slow down. He put his hand on Raya's waist, nudged her closer, and stared into her eyes as he leaned his head closer to hers. Raya could smell the alcohol on his breath. She leaned closer but placed the tip of her index finger on his lips. Raya pulled his head close to hers and whispered in a sultry voice, "I'm not for free, darling."

Enzo stood up straight. He looked at Raya, bewildered at first, then his shock settled into a mischievous grin. When he met her, he wanted her; now, he could have her. Enzo's wallet would ensure him that this would be so.

The club announced that they would be closing soon, following their announcement with "Closing Time" by Semisonic, signaling the end of the night. Not to Enzo. To him, his night was only about to begin. He bid his friends farewell with Raya's arm around his. They made their way to the street where Enzo had parked his Mercedes, where people still swarmed the streets, many throwing up or lying on the sidewalk.

Raya climbed into the passenger's side while Enzo inserted his key into the ignition. They pulled out of the small street, barely missing some idiot who decided to cross the road at the last second. The bright neon lights around them started to turn white as they sped down Makati's streets in the dead of night. Enzo had decided to detour along Roxas Boulevard to catch a whiff of the sea breeze and initiate a conversation. That always seemed to work with the ladies. Streetlights illuminated the entire stretch of pavement, not a soul as far as the eye could see. The convertible's roof retracted as they sped down EDSA, their hair flowing in the cool, urban breeze. Enzo lifted his hand from the stick shift in the flickering light and placed it gently on Raya's thigh. Raya placed her hand on his, to which he gripped her thigh tighter than she had expected, prompting a reaction that Enzo had misinterpreted as lust. He glanced at her constantly, with a seemingly genuine affection that both of them knew was false and was only present for that night. Raya pleaded with him to keep his eyes on the road.

"Where are you from?" asked Enzo. Raya looked at him and then at the dark, cloudy sky. "I live in Santa Mesa, but my family's from Isabela." "No shit, I'm from Isabela too!" exclaimed Enzo excitedly. "*Tiga ayan na ka diay Isabela? Taga Santiago ak,*" asked Raya. Enzo blushed. He took his hand from her thigh and looked at the road before him, replying sheepishly, "I don't really speak Ilocano. I grew up with English around the house." Raya chuckled, "Rich kid, huh?" she remarked with a vicious sneer. "Well, that's what happens when your dad is the congressman," replied Enzo, seemingly regaining his bravado. The Mustang pulled into Roxas

Boulevard, the salty air blowing as they headed south. The lights of the hotels and casinos gave the seemingly slumbering city a burst of color and life. The car looked like some toy in the looming shadow of the ominous government buildings closed for the night. Enzo couldn't help but glance at Raya. Her red lipstick was accentuated by the bright streetlights overhead. Her slender frame was just barely visible through her loose, blue dress. She was an exceptional sort of beauty that Enzo couldn't explain. She had some eccentric charm that he rarely saw in the girls who frequented Polaris. *Too bad she's a whore; I would've dated her*, thought Enzo as the car pulled into the basement parking of his condominium building.

The pair burst through the door of Enzo's condominium unit, locked in each other's arms as they devoured each other's lips. He pushed her against the door once it had been shut, taking off her white blazer and throwing it haphazardly on the floor. Enzo ran his fingers down her back, placing his hands around her waist, and began to place soft, gentle kisses on her neck and shoulders, which he would occasionally substitute for a playful bite. Raya breathed heavily as she felt Enzo behind her, getting more and more excited with every kiss he planted on her. The ravenous display soon brought them to the bed, where Raya had begun unbuttoning Enzo's shirt as he simultaneously pulled off his jacket. Enzo kissed Raya again and pulled on a thin blue string on her back, unraveling her. Enzo's eyes widened as he slowly began to touch her soft, supple breast. Raya closed her eyes as he started to explore her. He placed his lips on her chest and began to caress it gently at first, but then she couldn't help but make a soft noise. He made his way down to her midsection, feasting on it as he did with the upper parts of her body. Enzo then hastily pulled off her lacy black underwear, placing the article of clothing onto the floor beside the bed. He split her legs apart and began to taste her. Raya arched her head back and savored the sensation of his tongue gliding gently yet firmly between her legs. He began to slip his finger into her, gently caressing her inner extremities. Raya started to get louder as he did so, biting her lip whenever he hit that sweet spot deep inside. A small puddle formed on the bed where Enzo's head was. Raya felt a jolt of something akin to electricity pierce through her skin as a gush flowed from her partition, creating a small stream that led right into Enzo's mouth.

Raya sighed in pleasure as she lay down, bullets of sweat forming on her forehead. It was her turn.

Raya sat up straight and tugged on Enzo's pants, revealing his pulsating manhood behind a layer of Egyptian cotton underwear. She slid it off of him, grasping his throbbing appendage, and started to caress it, similar to how she did with her. Raya kissed him gently on his midriff, making her way up toward his chest and back down again as though she was teasing him. Enzo sighed as he watched her taste him, taking him into her gaping maw. He shuddered as she tilted her head back and repeated the motion. Her tongue slid around the tip as she moved her head back and forth. Enzo closed his eyes as she continued this, his mouth wide open in ecstasy. He felt his head twitch as she raised his branch to devour the fruits underneath. Enzo started to moan, making Raya toy with him even more, prompting Enzo to beg her for mercy.

"Can I put it inside now?" he asked, exasperated. "Okay," she replied.

Enzo lay flat on the bed with Raya sitting next to him. She pulled out a condom from her purse. She bit the packaging to tear it open when Enzo sat up, pleading with her. "Can we do it raw *na lang*?" he asked. She looked up, revealing another smirk, this time more menacing, illuminated by the warm yellow lamp on Enzo's bedside table, "No," she replied sternly. "I'll pay extra, *siges na*. Let's do it raw, please?" "No, it's for safety." *Fair enough*, he thought, slumping back onto the bed, defeated. Raya held him upright as she slid the condom on his throbbing appendage. She straddled him, still holding on to his manhood. She slid it into her and slowly pushed the entire thing into her. Two strangers became one on that eventful night. She rocked her hips as she locked eyes on him. Enzo returned her gaze, grabbing her hips and thrusting as she moved with him. She took his hands and held onto him as the rocking became more violent. She moaned throughout the room; their silhouette was visible through the thin lily-white curtains that veiled Enzo's window. Raya moved faster and faster, her fingernails digging into his hands. Enzo groaned as a shot of white liquid shot out from him, caught by the latex lining of the prophylactic.

Raya got off and lay down beside him, reaching for his pack of Marlboro reds. Enzo got his Zippo and lit her cigarette. He took the pack in her hand and took one for himself. The pair lay there, watching the ashes crumble and fall as the burning ember crawled towards the filter. Enzo turned to face her, his head resting on his palm. "You were amazing, fuck, how long have you been doing this?" he asked. Raya smiled. She puffed her cigarette and replied, "Too long." Enzo stared out the window into the faint light coming from the surrounding metropolis, his cigarette between his lips.

"Don't get me wrong, I enjoy the sex. It just gets exhausting finding a client every night," said Raya, looking up at the ceiling. "After this, you won't have a problem with that. I'll definitely be a repeat client, and I could refer you to my friends!" exclaimed Enzo, turning again to face her. "Maybe, maybe not. We'll see," she replied, rolling her eyes. Enzo looked at her, her nude body blanketed under white linen. The cigarette between her fingers, the eyes carrying some unknown sorrow. He was enthralled by her. There was just something about her that he didn't quite understand. Enzo knows she's not the girl who would do this without reason. *What could it be?* He thought, stroking her hair.

They began once more. Raya was lying on the bed, and Enzo was atop her. He slid his manhood into her, her body reciprocating this as she took him in. He moved gently at first, reaching her deepest parts as slowly as possible. Then he began to thrust. He pushed deep into her as she held onto the bed, moaning helplessly as he thrust harder. Enzo moved his head toward her neck, leaving her neck covered in bruises. He leaned in to kiss her, sliding his tongue into her mouth. Reluctantly, she started to suck on his tongue, moaning as she felt him pulsing inside her. He kept thrusting, feeling the vibration of her erotic noise. He felt his hips move faster and faster and, eventually, shot out another load, still caught by the thin latex. He collapsed into an exhausted heap on the bed. Raya got up and went to the bathroom, her bare skin radiating in the warm yellow light. Enzo closed his eyes, waiting for Raya to invite him for another round.

Enzo woke up with a start. He looked around, not seeing Raya in the vicinity. He retrieved his wallet from his pants on the floor, pulling out ten crisp thousand-peso bills. He



placed them next to the lamp on his bedside table and shifted his position to face the bathroom, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his back. Then another. He felt his back with his fingertips, drawing in horror at the sight of his own blood. Raya emerged from behind him, clutching a knife. *Why?* Raya seemingly read his mind. "This is for my father," she said, her teeth clenched in anger. Her eyes were completely different from the ones he'd stared at a little while ago, the ones he had made love to. Enzo heaved as he struggled to speak, "Raya, why?" She stood there solemnly, her free hand balled up into a fist. Her demeanor shifted to one of victorious rage. "My name's not Raya. Get that fucking right. It's Clarissa. Clarissa Domingo." *Domingo*, he thought, *where have I heard that name before?*

"*Pendejadas!* Who does this bastard think he is, challenging me? *Hijos de puta!*" Randy Maravillas sat at the head of the marble dinner table, his fat, meaty fingers clutching a Cuban cigar. "Dear, not at the table. It's bad luck," replied Enzo's mother. Enzo sat on the other end, his eyes now on his father. "Who's a bastard, dad?" he asked jokingly. "This motherfucking labor leader, Dwight Domingo. The unions call him *Ka Dodong*," replied the Congressman. "What about him?" "He's bad for business, that's what! I don't know how, but he told the *hacienda* workers they were not obligated to work for me. Fuck him, that's what I have to say about that," retorted his father. "Dear, please," pleaded his mother. "This concerns all of us, Cecilia. If he becomes too powerful, he may gain the support of the masses and even rally the rebels from the mountains to his side. He is dangerous, you know. Pardon my French, but if I don't do something about him, we might as well be eating with our hands on the street," his father said between puffs of his cigar. Enzo sighed as his father extinguished his cigar on the crystal ashtray in the middle of the table. "Come here, anak," the Congressman motioned for Enzo to come to him. Enzo promptly stood up from his seat and marched towards his father. "When you're in a position of power, there will be people who want to bring you down. Look at me, son. It is your responsibility to protect your family no matter the cost. One day, you will understand when you inherit my position."

That night, Enzo stood outside the patio looking down on the city of Santiago, smoking a cigarette. He overheard his father on the phone. He cannot precisely recall his father's

words, but he remembered two words. “**End him.**” A week later, *Ka Dodong* was found dead after a supposed drunk driving accident. His widow swore that he never touched alcohol, and Enzo always found the bullet marks on the car strange. He knew that his father had enemies, but he remembered a lesson from him that resonated with him. *You will have enemies, but who are they to stop you when you have power?* With that same power, he had always gotten what he wanted and what he deserved. He knew he wasn't intelligent enough to get into that prestigious university in Manila, but he did anyway. This painted a target on his back, as well as on his family's. Armed guards followed them everywhere they went, even abroad, to their vacation home in Sweden. He didn't like that his father had so many enemies and wished he could have a peaceful life sometimes. His father gave so much for his family, however. He sacrificed a lot to be where he is. Why not reap the benefits? Again, who was he to question it all? When in such a precarious situation, will he fight?

*I will fight*, thought Enzo, mustering up all his strength to lunge at Clarissa. He struck her across the face, throwing her off-balance. She reacted quickly, slashing him once across his chest. This did not stop Enzo, who punched her squarely in the gut. He grabbed her wrist, wrested the knife from her grasp, and threw it across the room, pinning her to the bed. She kicked and screamed, scratching his back, hoping to hurt him, but it was no use; he had overpowered her. *She's helpless*, he thought. *She can't escape from this. I can't believe she thought she could kill me. There's nothing she can do to save herself. Too bad. She was cute. I had her tonight. What's the harm in having her again?*

Enzo split her legs apart, nudging his tip against her slit. He was drooling like a mad dog as if some demon had come over him. Tears welled up in Clarissa's eyes. Her mind was racing, looking for a way to escape this, but it was all in vain. Clarissa whispered a prayer in her heart as this evil was being carried out, accepting her fate; *I'm sorry, papa. I tried my best. Look away now.* Just then, she noticed one of her legs wasn't pinned down. She pretended to cry, tears streaming down her face as Enzo was watching her seemingly hopeless expression plead for mercy. She aimed a well-placed kick at his testicles and struck hard with all her might. Enzo howled in pain. He keeled over, clutching his groin while angrily yelling unintelligible words at

Clarissa. She grabbed the lamp on his bedside table. In a fit of rage, she began beating him. Over and over, screaming and crying as she did so. By the end of this brutal scene, Enzo was left in a pool of blood and excrement on both the floor and the bed.

Clarissa breathed a sigh of relief, a feeling she had not felt since before her father was murdered. She walked to the other end of the room and picked up the knife. She stood over Enzo, holding the blade ever so slightly. "This is for my papa," she said menacingly, sending a flurry of cuts and stabs onto Enzo's mangled body. Clarissa dropped the knife onto the ground. She knew he would not fight anymore. She entered the bathroom to wash his blood off of her body. Afterward, she picked up her articles of clothing from where they had been thrown earlier that night. The stench of blood began to fill the air as she picked up the half-empty pack of cigarettes, blood spattered over the white and red box. Clarissa looked behind her one final time as she opened the door to leave. She had made it outside the building, glancing at the window where she had just killed the son of her father's murderer. Clarissa lit a cigarette as she walked toward the street corner and into the darkness of a nearby alley. Inconspicuous, not one person would imagine otherwise, that she was just another lady of the night.

# **Beloved Stranger**

By Kirk Patrick C. Ganob

They say growing up is a consistent phase in life where everything thought right turns out wrong, and what you saw as wrong turns out right. The people you have kept, the ones that you have left. People come and go like there's no tomorrow without warning, but for a known fact, time would not care less what you are going through. Life is as painful as walking down an aisle of broken glass, but we try to make it bearable anyway. You learn how to live either with a support system or without needing anybody, leave it all behind, but look back shortly for once to see how far you have put yourself into. Along the way come many sacrifices and tough decisions that you try not to compromise because you feel like even the tiniest mishap can trigger a series of possible unfortunate events. The constant fear of giving everything but ending up with nothing haunts you like myriad hallucinations.

Back where I am from, there is no such thing as a silver lining. Not a single ray of hope shines through people's windows, saying that better days are ahead and the best is yet to come. We lived life like we were going through circles, and one thing that stood out the most was that everywhere and everywhere else was quiet, especially at night. Here, the silence is too loud; it is haunting. There was this strange feeling of contentment present that the people would not trade for any other, even if most days felt like crap.

Transitioning from the pubescent days of high school to young adult college life was all under pressure. The first and most challenging thing to do was temporarily leave the comfort of my own home until further notice. Settling down in the city turned out differently than I expected during the first few weeks. Sure, you get prominent levels of convenience in exchange for traffic, high humidity, and pollution. This was not the "city fantasy" my younger self had in mind. At home, I would not have to worry about crossing the road because cars were barely present, but here, even sidewalks can barely be walked on. One big city with big cars yet small streets. I tried to understand it, but my patience had always been short.

“This city will be the death of me for sure. If I didn’t die because of an accident, I died because I simply went outside.” I jokingly told my mother on the phone.

“Oh, you be quiet now! Have you got everything settled there?”

“I’m currently working on it, Mum. I’ll be fine. It’s not the first time I’ve been alone.”

“I’m just making sure. Things are a bit different now since your father passed away.”  
“And I’m sure Papa would be glad I’m finally figuring things out alone.” “If there’s anything you’d like, just call us.”

I started to miss everybody back home. I always felt homesick when I left for a couple of months, but coming home for the holidays and summer vacation was always rewarding.

School started. Left and right, everyone had an unfamiliar face. As much as I wanted to give in to my shallow judgment of each person who would pass by, I was more concerned about how to get to class. A few weeks later, I found myself belonging to a small group of “buddies” that made college bearable the least. I was curious to know if I was overwhelmed or stressed from all the work that had to be done in hours. I would find myself moving on autopilot most days. Backlogs were present left and right, and college department activities had me running up and down the ramp of the building like cardio, not to mention the succeeding exams as the cherry on top.

There was all that, and then... there was him.

He was a surprise, a routine breaker that cannot be helped. Like a breath of fresh air on a warm summer day with a daydream look that you cannot help but stare at. I could tell he was as nice as if he would not harm an ant if it bit him. He had brown eyes, deep enough for me to fall into with every gaze I would steal when he was not looking. He had a smile that would win the ladies’ hearts and was smart, too. Oh, this man was just something, and I loved the idea of wanting to be closer. Romance was always a hit-and-miss situation on my end, mainly because if you were out of the heterogeneous spectrum, unknowingly, the world would become twice

as hard. Coming to terms with your likings took a lot of work. It would even last a lifetime if you spent your days despising it.

Each day that passed by felt different. Usually, at the end of the day, I would complain I had to do everything all over again tomorrow, but now, there was something to look forward to. He did not even know my name yet, but I knew I wanted to see him walk by the halls of our department as he headed to his next class. I would usually spot him in the lobby or on the second floor. I sounded so desperate, wanting to see this man's presence, and I felt like a stalker because I got this sense of achievement if I did see him even just for a few seconds.

He indeed had this effect on me, but I liked it anyway.

School days passed quicker when the first semester was filled with events and non-working holidays. Exams came and went, and just like everybody else, I was relieved that the semester was ending. I would be home for the holidays, which means less work and more sleep if Mum would not nag me if I spent the whole day rotting in bed like a "señorito." I needed a break from the city, and no place was better to rest than home. But who knew that in those last days, something unexpected would pop in front of me.

"Hi."

That was strange. Was he talking to me? I did not know what to do. "Oh! Sorry. H-h-hey there." I laughed nervously.

How was I supposed to respond to a situation like this?

I was utterly starstruck by the idea that the man I had been trying to get close to was speaking before me, starting a conversation. I had my awkward stare plastered.

"Are we classmates here in PE?"

PE classes had many students per section, and it took a lot of work to remember many of our blockmates.

“I was just waiting for a friend. You are in the same section with her.

I lied. I knew my friend, and he was a block-mate in their PE classes. I took the opportunity to wait for her to finish PE because I had all the time, and I would have the chance to finally see him one last time.

“Oh! So, I assume you were the friend she told me about? Are we in the same course and year level?” “No kidding!”

“What a small world.”

At this point, I wanted to bury myself to the ground. I felt shame when there was an awkward silence after my response, and we just stared at each other for a few seconds.

Would you mind if I walked with you all on the way out? I parked my scooter in front of our college.”

“Not a problem at all,” I said with no hesitation.

“I think you should head back to your group now. More likely, your class is about to start.”

“Oh, right. I forgot about that one.” He chuckled softly. His smile radiated more when his smile creases showed.

“See you in a bit.”

I let out a smile before looking away to hide the situation on my face. I had been blushing from the start, and I thought it was just hot in the gym all along.

“So, you two got along then?” My friend said teasingly. “Oh, shut up. Let me be.”

“If you say so.” She laughed sarcastically.

Their PE class ended way earlier than usual. It was because it was their last meeting, and all final requirements were to be completed through online submission. Right, this was the

last day of the first semester. The thought of it just slipped away because I could not help gazing into his eyes. He was beyond what I expected him to be, and I was all over smitten.

“Walk behind me.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Just do what I say. You will thank me later.”

I did what my friend told me to do. I was still trying to understand why. “Hey.”

I knew the moment I heard that familiar voice, my head was quick enough to turn to see where it came from.

“Hi...again.” I let out a soft chuckle, trying not to make things awkward again. It was time for me to communicate adequately.

“PE was embarrassing.”

“No! Not at all. You did great with that dance move.”

“I did? I slipped and almost made my partner fall out of balance.” He said shyly.

“You did great. I am sure you will get a high grade. What is more embarrassing is failing PE.”

“Oh, that would definitely be embarrassing,”

We exchanged conversations on the way out as if we were two best friends catching up after so many years of not being together. We dropped our formalities since we were just the same age. I found it cute that we shared common things in a few minutes.

“I will go ahead of you both. I would not want to ruin your little date.” My friend giggled teasingly. “Oh, we are at the gate already. I did not notice.”

“Weren't we just at the gym a few minutes ago?”



“Tell me about it.”

“Where are you heading?”

“Just straight ahead. I live nearby.”

“I could give you a ride home if you want. I’m headed in the same direction, too.”

I accepted his offer and just went for it anyway. So much for a “date.” Traffic was not that surprising here in the city because even if it were not a rushing hour, it would still potentially increase. Once again, the awkward tension was present. I did not know what else to talk about when we overshared everything about ourselves, even just on the way out of school.

I peeked at the right-side mirror just to check if my hair was all out of composition or if there was something on my face. Old habits die hard, but insecurities die harder. I noticed he had all eyes on the road even though we were still stationary. This was such a petty and stupid move, but I was already that close to him; I could smell his vanilla perfume.

But maybe it was indeed stupid because I was caught off guard when I was met with his eyes.

“Like what you see?” He said teasingly.

“You mean the cute dog before us peeking at the car window? Yes, I like what I’m seeing.” That was an excellent save. Thank you, cute dog that I noticed just now!

He just smiled and nodded. Those smile creases went again, enough to make this silly old heart skip a beat. Have I ever mentioned that he also looked a bit sexy when driving? Thirty minutes of traffic were the best thirty minutes of my life so far.

“Thanks for the ride.” I flashed a smile as I gave back his spare helmet. “You’re into dogs, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am, good sir. I own a big ball of fur and sunshine way back home.”

“You should meet my little fluffball soon. I’m pretty sure she’ll be glad to meet a new friend like you.”

“I’d be happy too! So, see you around next semester?”

“I’ll look forward to that. Are you heading back to your hometown this week?”

“Not yet. Next week on Monday. I still have some packing to do.”

“Do you have...well...”

“Yes?” I said, trying to fill in the silence. He was trying to say something.

“Do you have any plans this weekend? I know this great place has amazing food and nice views. You know, before you go.”

“I do not have, and I wouldn’t mind at all going with you.”

Oh, how quick I was to respond to his offer. It was almost like he had just asked me out on a date. “Tomorrow afternoon? I’ll come pick you up.”

“Ah, you don’t have to! I’ll be fine commuting on my own. Just send me the location.”

“Oh.”

He let out a soft sigh. He clearly was not happy with my response, but his reaction was cute. He pouted like a kid asking for candy. Why was he like this?

“But if you insist, who am I to stop you?” For the last time, those smile creases disappear.

“Off you go, then.”

“See you!”

“See you.”

The universe sure was in favor of me today. Maybe those tarot card readings on TikTok do work, but whatever! This day was just fantastic for it to not feel real.

For now, let us follow the path of uncharted waters. I like him, but I want to make sure what we have in between as of now and what more could possibly come. Everything was just too early to tell. When everything is in its place, even for a split second, I dare take another step closer. Tell me, my beloved stranger. What's next for both of us?

## Fiction

By River Ketnirattana

“I figured I’d do whatever I can to make it by. You know?”

The question hung off her parted lips, leaving only the silence in the room to fill in the gaps. I’d watch the smoke rise every time she exhaled, how it traveled up the ceiling to fake clouds exiting a barely open window. You could smell the sea breeze past the cigarettes if you tried hard enough. I wanted to get a room with a nice view for Mariko. It was the least I could do for her.

“Hey, are you listening?”

Her voice was almost like a whisper. I always wondered if it used to be any louder.

“Right, where were we?” I cleared my throat, “You mentioned Soi Khao. A bar you used to work at?”

“No, not a bar. More like a street. A tiny one. Lots of bars lined up where you can search around to buy women, their bodies, their love, their time. I figured I’d do whatever. You know. To make it by. To make it work.”

“I get it. To make it work.”

A quietness crept in to fill in the blanks.

Under my arms, Mariko almost looked buried underneath. White sheets swallowed her small frame, and her hair splattered around like ink. It was always like this, listening to her for hours on end. Tangled in her story, I would listen to her forever if I could. But I had deadlines to meet.

“In the end, it wasn’t enough. I had a daughter to feed back home. She was only six when her father ran off.”

“Ran off?”

"After, I went looking for another man who bothered to listen."

"You cheated?"

"Only ever a problem when it's the wife." A long exhale dribbled out of her mouth.  
"That's our secret, now."

I observed as her dry lips parted to make room for the smoke. A mole on her neck, a little below her left earlobe—you don't notice unless you brush her hair away. I take note of this; the little details are the most important. Her knees were always colorful, bruised on either side, but it was a dull, healing yellow this time. I know only about a birthmark up the inner of her right thigh. A warmth pools in my stomach whenever I think about it.

"You remember how I talked about the sea back home?"

I'm interrupted by a wide-eyed Mariko, shifting her weight to face me. Her gaze is full of the untold, and I do more than listen.

"Of course, I remember. You mentioned the boats that would take you from one island to another."

"Maya loves the sea, so I could never find it in me to take it away from her. I left her back home where the skies were clear, and the birds sang every now and then."

"Do you regret it, leaving Maya behind?"

"Sometimes—but, well, the sea is right there. They wait for me. It will all be worth it one day."

Two wrinkles form around her mouth, the rare sight of a smile.

I don't know if I like it so much. She turns her head to face the window, exposing her small neck. All I can think about are the bruises on her knees.

"Do you think Maya will forgive you?"

Mariko looked at me, blank-eyed and a little confused. Her chirping had finally stopped. My question must have offended her. For a few seconds, her blank face was stunning—right until she cracked into an awkward grin, and her teeth weren't as yellow as I thought they'd be. They're a bright, pearly white I want to look away from. It's just not in her character.

“Among all the men who've bought my time, you're definitely one I don't understand.”

“What do you mean?” I asked impatiently.

“Why pay for me if not to have sex? If only to ask about the things I don't want to remember?”

“*Do you think Maya will forgive you?*” I ask her once more.

The laugh lines that creased, wrinkled, and ruined her face had come to a rest, and her brows eased to a solemn. That pained face she makes. *This* was the Mariko I was used to in our sessions; she was always so beautiful. I imagine her tears taste like saltwater. Her smile was made up, but her frown was no fiction—It was real and made for *real* stories.

“I think you should want Maya's forgiveness. I think that's how this story should go.”

Reaching for the cigarette in between her tiny fingers, I take a long drag out of where her mouth used to rest. The swift motion is enough to make her flinch, but Mariko only buries herself under my arms. She doesn't lift her head when she murmurs. Her voice is smaller than usual and so beautiful it turned my stomach inside out.

“You wouldn't enjoy a story like mine. It is not a happy one. Maybe I shouldn't talk.”

“I don't think that way of you at all. There's value in what you say.” “And what if I run out of stories to tell?”

“What do you mean?”

“Will you love me then?”

I search for the words, but the blanks don't fill.

Mariko doesn't reply.

The smoke kept to itself in every corner of the room, and the window was barely open. The whirring of the ceiling fan accompanied us until the silence was all that was left to linger, and the sea's waves washed over any of our words, hushing in an echo only heard by those still awake and barely dreaming.

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I woke up to a strange, harsh sunlight that morning. The dust gathered in the wake of Mariko's departure, for by the time I had woken up, she was no longer in my arms, and the window was left wide open. A morning sea breeze swooped in to take her place, but the indent of her figure remained present in the creases of our white bed sheets. She left the money I placed on the table and her footprints by the shore. It was a brief transaction, but a pit in my stomach had grown, for all the pages in my mind were left scattered with her departure.

If I were to end her story, I would write a good ending.

It's the least I could do for her.

A room with a nice view overlooking the sea. A stable job, a smile, Maya in her arms, and Mariko in mine. A good life, a good story. A good ending. But good endings don't sell.

If I were to love Mariko, I would not write.

I rubbed the sand out of my eyes.

I had fallen asleep so deeply that I had forgotten about my appointment that day. My editor wants to know what was taking so long with my upcoming book.

## Michael's Tears are Red

“Red ang Luha ni Michael” by Jimmy Alcantara

Translated into English by Mearck Amiel Lopez

Michael and I were meant to be together. We lived in the same community in Butuan, schoolmates from prep school until college, grew up with the same circle of friends, partners in every stick of cigarette and every piece of French bread, *pan de sal*, and *pan de coco*, and sometimes every bottle of rum and every bottle of gin. That was why nobody was shocked when one dark and humid August, we were together when we sought our “freedom” from the province of Agusan del Norte. Five thousand pesos, transcript of records and a sense of adventure was what we were carrying going to Manila.

After six years of different types of comedy, tragedy, and melodrama, we were still together. We lived in an apartment in Quezon City—two bedrooms worth three thousand five hundred pesos. We split everything together: rent, food, the water bill, the electricity, telephone. The *sala* set was mine, his was the bed; I owned the TV, he owned the refrigerator; this was mine, that was his. And when we break up, of course, we would carry off our respective belongings.

Our relationship with each other isn't clear—friends, married couples, lovers, acquaintances. That was probably why we never got married and had kids. But we weren't affected by the fact that we could not define our relationship.

Being a yuppie was Mike's gimmick. He worked in the personnel department of an ad agency in Vito Cruz. I didn't have a job. No, I lost my job. Let's not talk about what happened to me at the CCP. They said they didn't need a “crazy” production designer. They said I could ruin their plays and musicals. They also said that the colors I used were insane.

If it's like this that I don't have a job, I have the house and its chores all by myself. Cleaning, cooking, doing the laundry, and ironing clothes.

One annoyingly hot Monday morning, in front of my well-cooked omelet and freshly squeezed orange juice, Mike sighed and said, “It's so hot right now, my brain is getting fried, and if I remember, the ref is already rusty, if we have visitors, I wanna hide in the cabinet.”



I smiled. This was the opportunity to surprise Mike. No, I won't be buying a new ref. I am just going to paint it with a different color! Whites often get dirty really quick, and the color brown looks vile. Red! Right, scarlet red. He would definitely like it.

Red is dramatic and sexy. Sometimes morbid but often romantic. He will be happy. I am also going to be the one who'll paint it. I will turn the ref into a masterpiece.

At a store in Cubao, I bought a big can of Scarlet Aluminum Paint. I didn't know if it was okay to use on the ref, but I got it, nonetheless. And I also included a normal-sized paint brush, so that I could control the sweep.

When Mike went to work on Friday, I went to the ref. I scraped off its old paint. I opened the can of paint and mixed the blood-like liquid according to its directions. I went ahead and jumped on the task at hand.

The results were amazing. Perfect first coating. The color suited the ref really well. The grime from the ref's old paint was covered.

I was having so much fun with what I was doing, and I didn't wait for the first coating to dry, and I started painting it again. And to make sure that the paint won't crack, I painted it over once more. I now realized that the appearance of the kitchen was dry, with no appeal whatsoever. I started going over the cupboards with my brush. But the red paint dripped on the sink. Nevertheless, I painted it red, too. A few brush strokes here and there, and the kitchen looked new and intense.

I couldn't stop myself. When the kitchen floor was full of red polka dots, I decided to make them into little hearts. This was to relieve the monotonous squareness of the tiles, so to speak.

I figured that since my hands were dirty and the can of paint was already open, I searched the house for things that I could paint on. I immediately went looking for the stale-looking lampshade, a miniature model of the Eiffel Tower, the frame of a fake Monet painting, the peas and leaves of palm, airpot, including Mike's slippers inside the house.

I was addicted to what I was doing. But when I saw the appearance of our house door, I couldn't resist the temptation. The door's color was yellow, brown, and white. A few strokes of my brush and the ambiguity of the door's color was gone.

After painting the door, I thought: “I don’t want to paint anymore. That’s enough.” But I also thought that it wasn’t pleasing to look at one red picture frame, so I painted them all. I spent a few minutes painting the ceiling fan. The shower in the bathroom and the faucets were improved from their lackluster silver color.

While I was brushing over the sides of the TV, the paint brush fell onto my rubber shoes. I went ahead and painted it—on one shoe, like Tom Hanks in his movie “Man with One Red Shoe”.

After I brushed the radio, I was determined to stop—on the instance that I was going to put glamour on the throw pillows. But the rug was smeared with paint. I’m sure that you’ll be happy to know that the rug absorbed the paint very well. I didn’t know if it was the rug’s quality or the quality of the paint itself.

I went to the bedroom and faced the cabinets. I opened one. I brushed over the bags and Mike’s belt and some of my attache cases. I went down and out on the garden and I painted the pots, the leaves of *san francisco* and made the very first red *sampaguita*.

I was in the middle of painting the telephone when somebody knocked on the door. It’s Mike! I opened the door. It wasn’t Mike. “A letter from Butuan. Who is Mike Fernan? This is from someone named Joan.” I got the letter. The mailman looked pale and lifeless. I brushed over his face with a little paint so that he wouldn’t look so anemic. He probably didn’t understand what I was trying to do, and so he ran screaming.

While I was painting the walls of the living room to give the house a new personality, the door opened, and Mike went in.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I made a mistake. I thought this was my house and you’re my Ricky.”

“Mike, I’m your Ricky. Aren’t you surprised that your ref is different now?”

He wasn’t just surprised, he was shocked. He said that he was going to live with his friend in Fairview for a while. He was going to leave me his ref, his bed, his this, and his that. He was leaving and he wasn’t sure when he would be back—but at the moment he couldn’t yet because his luggage was still wet with paint. He didn’t know what to do, so his tear ducts gave up.

“It’s true that you’re going crazy. You told me you were all right. I’ll return you to the basement. I hope you get better. I just didn’t want to be alone.”

I couldn’t say anything and in one soft stroke, I painted his tears red. The can of paint was now empty.

# Ebb and Flow

By Darren Xavier Rodrigues

“Just my luck.”

William mutters to himself as thunder roars up above.

“Dad keels over and decides to finally acknowledge me as his son when passing down his gambling debt. Wish I’d get a do-over on life if I end up dying trying to pay for this.”

He looks up just in time for another flash of lightning, silently hoping that something out there could grant him his wish. Another giant wave slams against the ship, snapping him back to the present. His fellow fishermen scrambled around, trying to tie down their nets and fishing crates as large waves assailed their ship from the sides. When out on the ocean, it’s always wise to be prepared for the weather, but you couldn’t prepare for something like this. The sun was visible only a few seconds ago, and the waters were calm. But as if the ocean wished for their misfortune, dark, heavy clouds formed around them, blocking out the sun and bringing a torrential storm that would make any seasoned sailor retire for good.

Lightning flashed all around their trawler while waves sought to drag them and their ship into the murky depths of the Pacific.

“William! The crate!”

The husky voice of Mr. Briggs brings William’s attention to an entire crate of cod sliding across the deck and threatening to ruin their hard work. He stumbles through scrambling fishermen to get to the crate in time, dragging it back to the rest of the secured crates. That was close, even if in the middle of a storm, that catch is their livelihood.

“Alright, lad. Let’s head inside. We don’t want to be swept by a strong wave now, do we?”

With a quick nod, William follows the seasoned fisher into the superstructure for shelter. The rest of the crew were already inside as well. Hushed conversations echoed around the large room they were in. It wasn't lost to Williams what they might be talking about, the freak storm they currently find themselves in. It was a particularly deadly mystery akin to the urban legend of The Bermuda Triangle. That one place at sea where ships and planes disappear without a trace or explanation as if some supernatural or magical force was behind it. William thought such a phenomenon could be caused by supernatural forces, so he would like to believe that they were about to join the lost ships at the Bermuda Triangle, but they were nowhere near that area.

A heavy hand claps William on the back, returning him to a reality full of fishermen worried for their lives. All except one.

"I take that it's your first time getting caught up in a massive storm, eh, boy? Don't worry. These ships were built to weather any storm! HAHAAH!"

Mr. Briggs is the oldest in this merry crew of fishermen. He'd been going at this for over thirty years and was already in his sixties. The seasoned senior has done this type of work all over the world in many different ships. This current one William was in, which he hadn't gotten to memorize the name of, is Mr. Briggs' longest ship that he'd been working at. All the better, too; things were lively and cozy here with him around. He loved giving out advice to the newer additions to the crew, and whenever things get stale, or spirits were low, he'd always gather the crew together for a nice shanty led by him; it was as if you had an uncle or granddad working alongside you during these long trips into the open ocean. Something he never had.

A deep, loud rumbling from somewhere beneath the ship stirs the weary fishermen further. Their whispered conversations stop immediately as they strain their ears, preparing to hear the sound again to figure out what else will ruin their day aside from the storm. Silence befalls the room once more. A few minutes pass of deafening silence, and when nothing but the sounds of roaring wind and the harsh downpour on the superstructure reach their ears, it feels as if the entire room let out a sigh of relief. Mr. Briggs lets out another hearty laugh.

"Sorry about that, lads! Guess I'm hungrier than I—"

The same rumbling sound fills the air once more, only this time, much louder, seemingly closer than before. Before anyone can react, bright light explodes through the room's windows, followed by thunder cracking and ending with a large boom. William couldn't tell if he should be thankful or horrified that he managed to witness the events in what appeared to be slow motion. A bright light, the violent shaking of the ship, a deafening blast, then darkness.

A few more bolts of lightning strike around the slowly sinking ship, cracked in half. Their catch of the day is being returned to the sea as their iron coffin drags them down into the depths with it. As if to ensure nothing survives, lightning struck the same place twice, sending another barrage of wood and superheated metal shards into the air and down toward the depths.

It was dark for a few minutes or so. William, for sure, thought he was dead. Why wouldn't he be? Considering everything that has happened in his life so far. As far as he remembered, lightning struck their trawler right where they were all taking shelter. But the surge of cold that bathed him forced his eyes to open. His eyes stung from the seawater, but he had to force them open. He was underwater, that much he was sure of. Looking around him, he notes the unmoving bodies slowly sinking with him. Either they were all dead, or a few had yet to wake up. He wasn't sure. The surface looked so far away that he could still see bright flashes as lightning continued to strike. If he was to surface, what was he to do? Caught in the middle of a freak storm with nothing but wreckage and dead men. Go down with the ship; that's what any good sailor would do, right? It wasn't like he wished to go through the grueling task of job hunting if he survived this anyway.

Before William can resign himself to his fate, a surge of water from his left catches his attention. Whipping around as best as he can, he glimpses a humanoid figure. It wasn't any of his crew members. Whatever that thing was, it had a tail. The figure stops and stares at something down in the dark depths. William gasped upon seeing the figure's features a bit better: a humanoid body, a shark-like tail, fish-like coloring, and gills on the neck.

His little gasp grabs the creature's attention, and it turns to him. It approaches and stares at him, and William has nothing to do but stare back. The creature's human features were ordinary enough. Still, it was also inhuman enough to make him wonder if he was hallucinating. William began to feel lightheaded, and he needed to breathe. The creature seems to have noticed and makes an unusual gesture with its hands. A surge of water hits his face, and after a few seconds, William realizes that his head is considerably less wet than the rest of his body. He gasps for air instinctually and is baffled when he breathes in some. He could focus a bit more with oxygen circulating in his body again. William could see an air bubble surrounding his head, allowing him to breathe underwater.

The creature returns to staring below them, making the human question, among other things, what was down there. After another minute of nothing, the creature nods and turns back to him, making another gesture with its hands. Nothing immediate happens, and William wonders if this was just all a dream and his imagination was finally failing him. But that thought is disregarded when a voice echoes in his mind—a voice that clearly isn't his own thoughts.

“I would say that you're in an unfortunate situation, but I'd rather tell you how lucky you are.”

That voice echoing in his head sounded old—different from Mr. Briggs', old as in ancient. It carried a sort of power with it that felt as if whoever it belonged to witnessed the rise and fall of civilizations.

“In all my dreams or waking days, this opportunity has never presented itself to me. What is your name? You will give yours, and you will receive mine. So that we may converse and not squander such an occasion.”

“W-William, sir.” He replied meekly, whoever he was conversing with, he was going to bow his head down figuratively and literally.

“William, I will give you a choice. Join me and witness the ebb and flow of life, the renewal of the cycle of life and death, or perish and end the cycle of your life.”

William had even more questions running through his head. No amount of sorting will give him the most important question to ask right now. What does witnessing the 'ebb and flow of life' mean? Should he take the offer? The renewal of life sounds appealing, but who was talking to him? *What* exactly was talking to him?

“I can tell that you are confused; do not fret. My name is Syndrich, and I am one who washes away the Earth so that life may emerge anew.”

Another deep rumble, as if whoever this Syndrich is was speaking in William's mind and somewhere in the murky depths.

The way Syndrich spoke made it seem like they were the reaper. The other creature, which allowed him to breathe underwater, was in front of him again. It was waving at him with one hand and pointing below. Following the creature's finger, William looks down into the deep, just as an orange line appears in the darkness below. The line slowly expands, filling the entirety of his view with an orange glow. The growing line finally stops once it becomes an oval of orange, but something else happens. The oval closes rapidly and reopens just as fast. A dark circle descends from the fissure's edge into the middle, and the oval 'blinks' again. The circle moves to the center of William's view.

A horrible shiver runs down his spine and turns his blood ice cold. He realizes this is not some magical portal or whatever else he assumed it was. It was an eye. A gigantic eye that belongs to a creature whose actual size William can't fathom. Two more eyes open to the sides of the first one and focus on him as well.

“I believe you have questions to ask before you make your choice, William. Ask away. We may not have plenty of time.”

William thought this was insane. Here he was, underwater, talking to some gigantic creature about the cycle of life and death.

“What are you exactly?”



William asks Syndrich, who responds with a grumble. The humanoid, who was also with them, tilted its head in response.

“Perhaps what you should be asking about is the cycle I’ve mentioned.”

The cycle of life and death. As far as William was concerned, it meant that things are born and die. But having a cycle meant that it loops back, right? It meant that somehow, from being dead, there is a reincarnation? A new chance, he figures.

“Right, sorry. So, this cycle you mentioned, what do you mean by renewing it? If it’s a cycle, doesn’t that mean it goes on and on? Living beings get reincarnated into something else after death, right?”

There was another round of grumbling, and the humanoid creature swam closer to the human. It placed a webbed hand on his shoulder to comfort him. Did he ask the wrong question again? Was he going to get killed by Syndrich for wasting his time?

Thankfully, Syndrich responds, not angrily but in a tone that feels like he is helping a child with homework.

“You misunderstand, William. The renewal of the cycle simply means that life will be wiped out so that new life may rise in its place. The world has been stagnant for a while, and wounds and sickness litter our homes. With the renewal, the causes of such illnesses will be purged so the new generation can have a healing world for their own.”

If William had a right to get angry and shout at Syndrich, he would. But as it stands, he could do nothing about it except ask more questions.

“You’re going to kill all life on this planet? After the million years it took for things to be how they are? Isn’t that cruel? You’re prematurely killing everything.”

William couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Here he was, conversing with a powerful but malevolent creature. One that wishes to end all lives, human or otherwise, to bring ‘new life’

into the world and heal it. William isn't prideful enough to not admit that humans have done a lot of harm to the world, but this is just evil.

“Again, you misunderstand. I do not do the killing. Let me answer your question with a question of my own. What do you think I am?”

William wished that the humanoid creature with its hand on his shoulder could help him out a bit here. How was he to convince Syndrich not to end the world if he 'doesn't understand'?

“Are you a god? Or THE God?”

The hand on his shoulder begins to pat him. Does that mean he guessed correctly?

“Not exactly correct, William. I am a physical manifestation of life-giving waters. I do not control the weather or the oceans; I exist because of them. The storm that formed right next to your boat was because of my waking, as were the tsunamis and other storms that are already ravaging your lands.”

The latter revelation gave William more pause than the revelation that Syndrich was the ocean itself. Hundreds of thousands of people are suffering the wrath of the tides while he is here having a nice chat with the indirect cause of it.

“So, can't you just go back to sleep? Or do you actually believe that new life will be born if you drown out all life on land?”

The eyes beneath William begin to move, and the human realizes a little too late that Syndrich itself is moving. He catches a glimpse of a dark silhouette moving, or more accurately, the darkness of the depths below *was* the silhouette of Syndrich. It shifts, revealing another set of three eyes staring at him. The human was now face to face with Syndrich. Another profile moves into view, a massive claw rising from the depths. That singular claw, likely connected to a finger too far to be illuminated, moved closer to him.

For a moment, William assumes he'd finally angered Syndrich as the massive claw approaches him. He didn't expect the gentle touch of the enormous claw as the point rested on his head. There was another deep bellow from Syndrich speaking out loud and in his head.

“See, as I have seen.”

Not a second after the words are spoken, the world goes dark, and William feels himself pulled back, or was he pushed forward? For a time, William stumbles through darkness while he gets his bearings. Finally, he stabilizes, feeling as if he is floating in space. Then, a blinding light illuminates the darkness and moves across the vast emptiness. William watches as the light dims and fades as it moves, revealing a creature behind the display of light. A bird-like being flying through the darkness with him as its only witness, leaving a trail of glowing dust. The bird stops in its flight and curls up on itself, losing its glow and almost fading into the darkness once more, leaving nothing but a cloud of golden particles.

Before William could question what he was supposed to see, another blinding light flashed before him. Right where the bird stopped, a glowing ball was now in its place, golden dust swirling around it like a vortex. William watches in awe as the display continues. The ball of light grows bigger as more dust converges on it. A massive explosion erupts from the ball, sending dust flying everywhere. In a flash, some dust coalesces and forms spheres that circle around the ball of light.

A sudden realization hits William harder than the initial shock of meeting Syndrich. He was watching his solar system form right in front of his eyes. He was just your average Pacific angler, but he knew well enough to point out each planet and give it a name. Millions of years, he assumes, go by in seconds as the worlds continue to revolve.

“Amazing, is it not?”

William whips his head to his left and is taken aback by the full, massive form of Syndrich floating next to him. Syndrich was what William could only assume an ocean dragon

looks like. The creature had four limbs but had fins instead of wings; its tail was a bunch of tentacles bundled into a seemingly reptilian tail.

William doesn't respond to Syndrich. He is at a loss for words right now, which is why he was surprised his brain hasn't exploded from all of this information yet.

"Your loss of words is expected. It is not often that you get to witness the creation of your own solar system, as you humans would call it. All thanks to that."

Syndrich raises its arm to point right at the sun, or what was supposedly the sun. What was once thought to be a ball of gas was apparently something created from the death of whatever that bird was, or so William thought.

"The Cradle of Life. Fortunately, you humans have a good sense of imagination, which helps with explaining things. Think of it as a phoenix that travels the empty void in a never-ending journey. It will fly until it can no longer, then lay dormant, becoming your sun and showering the surroundings with the energy that provides life."

The Earth comes into view once more, and as if they were flying through space, the Earth draws closer. Oddly enough, the familiar blue planet was unfamiliar to William. None of the continents he knew were there, and not even Pangea, which he learned in geology, could be seen. Whenever this Earth was, it was in a time much before prehistory.

They move closer, and William finds himself on solid ground surrounded by plants and creatures far from those they said existed billions of years ago. What caught his attention, other than these fascinating creatures, was what could be described as a massive domed city over in the distance.

Seemingly sensing the coming questions, Syndrich speaks again.

"Indeed, this was life even before your recorded history, far older than your dinosaurs."

Syndrich chuckles and shakes his head. William is your average person. He isn't a scientist, but as far as he knows, everything here didn't exist in the past. There would've been discoveries about all of these things.

"While I do not actively bring about the renewal of the cycle, my counterpart does."

As Syndrich finishes his sentence, the ground rumbles, and massive cracks form, spanning for miles as far as his eyes can see. Magma erupts from the environment and the fissures, flooding the ground with waves of fire. In the distance, massive chunks of rocks and dust fly into the air as if something huge is right beneath them.

A trilling screech nearly deafens William, another loud rumble follows, and the ground explodes in the middle of the domed city. Bursting from the massive crater was a creature as large as a mountain range. It completely obliterates the large city as it emerges. It had a pointed head similar to a shark, but as it screeched again, its maw parted in four ways. It had two arms that ended in large rake-like claws. Large spines trailed down from the creature's head to its back, tapering off into a tail. If William had to describe the creature to someone who couldn't see what he was seeing, he would call it a cross between a worm, a shark, a dinosaur, and a jungle cat.

The creature dives back down into the Earth, breaking the crust and spilling more magma. It continues diving in and out of the Earth as if trying to reshape everything, all while dark storm clouds form above, which William only now notices.

"There's two of you?!"

"Indeed. My counterpart, Sevarathan, and I, the physical form of our planet, are the heralds of the natural cycle."

William's legs cave in under the weight of what he has seen. How long has this cycle been repeating? How much has happened that they didn't know about? If he witnesses his turn in the cycle, how many more cycles will happen?

William could do nothing but kneel, feeling all his energy drained trying to figure out the millions of questions he had swirling in his head. But there would be no respite for the human. The scenery shifts once more, showing a seascape of molten lava and hardening magma. Everything was going fast-forward; he watched as the oceans of magma hardened into new masses of lands and mountains, dark storm clouds forming and dissipating, showering the Earth with torrential rain occasionally.

Eventually, the magma cools, and the waters flood, creating oceans, continents, and islands again. He continues to watch as life emerges from the depths of the sea. He watches as creatures reclaim dry land as their own once more. The vision finally ends, and William finds himself under the ocean again.

“Do you understand now, William?”

William was snapped back to his senses, back to the present, where the awakening of Syndrich and Sevarathan brought the rest of humanity and all life to ruin, and, more importantly, back to the offer that Syndrich had for him.

“I think I do, but don’t you think it’s a waste? To not let things live on? To see what else our lives could offer if you let us continue existing?”

Syndrich chuckles again, an indication that he asked another foolish question.

“William, if you had a never-ending life, what would you do with it? How would you feel if you had to watch everything else around you end while you stayed?”

That question caught William off guard. He was never one to imagine a life that never ended.

“I guess it’s going to feel weird and empty. Boring even, at one point, even if I do wish for a new start, I’d have done everything I wanted to do, right?”

“That would be correct, William. As a witness to the cycle, I have come to understand that life is precious, not because of its inherent value, but because it ends.”

For once, William agrees with the ancient being. Despite the circumstances that led him here, he tried to enjoy the life that was dealt to him. His current job, despite being taken in desperation, was still chosen with some sort of enjoyment in mind. He always wanted to experience what being a Pacific angler was like.

“I think I get why this cycle exists now, but what happens when the Cradle of Life is reborn?”

Syndrich is silent for a while, and William feels dread creeping up on him due to Syndrich’s silence.

“I do not know, William. But when the Cradle of Life resumes its journey, it will travel the empty void again, leaving this place devoid of life-bringing energy. It will likely be the end of our existence and this world.”

There was a sense of satisfaction brewing within the human, knowing that even Syndrich, the half-cause of humanity’s extinction, would face its end, too. However, hopelessness overtook any good feeling he had. Everything is for nothing, then, if the Cradle of Life is reborn. But then again, the scientists already figured that out, right? The sun will explode in a few million years, or so they say.

“That is why Sevarathan and I have a plan. You see, I can show you the world before because we remember. The land and waters hold memories. Everything that was and everything that will be will be remembered by us. It might be difficult, impossible even, but we will try to send out a piece of ourselves, out into the vast nothingness, with the memory of everything that existed, so that we may live on, even if in memory.”

William thought that was noble of the ancient being. Even if he wasn’t precisely remembered, it was nice to think that human history, or just all life in this area of the universe, would be remembered.

“Well, I think there’s one obvious choice to make here. I’d still like to live, so what exactly happens if I agree to join you?”

“I will make you my first disciple, and I will grant you salvation from the destruction of your race. Your wish for your do-over will be granted, and you will awake in the new cycle. Your life will be entwined with the waters that began life time and time before, much like the fragments that help me see the world in my awakening and slumber.”

“Your fragments? Do you mean the thing that allowed me to breathe underwater a while ago? What exactly do they do?”

It was only now that William paused in his overworked train of thought. In his eagerness to start anew, he was on the verge of taking Syndrich up on his offer despite not knowing what would be asked of him.

“My fragments are responsible for experiencing the new world while I sleep, collecting memories for me to preserve. You, on the other hand, will be able to live as you see fit. Interact with new life, watch them grow and evolve, and experience the wonder of the renewed cycle—all without having to do anything. Your connections to the waters will bring your experiences to me. Decide quickly; the end is nigh.”

A shiver courses through William at the mention of the end.

It was time for him to decide. There was no choice, really. He gets his second chance and a role to play in helping Syndrich salvage the memory of life on this planet and send it out to the stars.

“Syndrich, I’ve made my choice. I will be your disciple and live my life to the fullest for all that came before and will be.”

Syndrich was silent. Fear slowly took hold of him as the waters around him suddenly churned rapidly. For a while, William thought he was tricked, but finally, Syndrich’s voice echoed in his head again.

“You have made your choice, William. Now sleep and escape as we ravage the world so you may awaken in the new one.”



William was about to question how he was expected to fall asleep in these conditions. Still, fatigue overcame his mind and body before he could speak. His best option now was to trust in the ancient being and close his eyes as the raging waters pushed and pulled his body in every direction.

When William opened his eyes again, he was greeted with calm waves and the bright blue sky above him. Surprised at his speed, he swims to the surface to catch a better view of the new Earth. He looks down to see webbed hands and feet instead of his human ones and a skin tone that's a gray-to-white gradient. He also spots a shark-like tail. Lastly, he brings a hand up to his neck to feel a set of gills. This was his new form. He'll have to find a way to see exactly what he looks like to satisfy his curiosity, but for now, he has to get his bearings.

Thankfully, one of Syndrich's fragments swims up to William and catches his attention.

"Welcome to the renewed cycle, William. Life is brimming again, and it is time for me to return to my slumber. We shall meet again soon, in your dreams or at the end of this cycle."

Syndrich's voice fades from William's head, and the fragment seemingly dissolves into water. Without even a second to register Syndrich's disappearance, something giant leaps out of the water behind William. It crashes down in a massive splash in front of him. William dives under, and his breath is taken away at the sight of a gigantic two-headed turtle. Acting quickly, he swims up next to the creature, grabs its shell, and lets himself be taken across the new world.

Thus, new life blooms, intelligent creatures emerge, and cultures appear and disappear. Cities rise and fall, with William as the witness. Time passes for William in the blink of an eye, and then the Earth rumbles while the skies darken again. Syndrich's voice rings in his head.

"Are you ready to do it again, William?"

"Always."

# Children from Another World

By Asherah Rojo

## MY LAST NOTE TO THE WORLD

The following pages are my story. They are a testament to what I have heard and seen. The predicament our world faces is *real*. It is something far more significant than humanity, far greater than what we regard as our plane of existence. Perhaps, even beyond *mine*.

I now understand why, for all these years, I have felt such a sense of void. Why, for all this time, I felt something was hiding beyond the skies. Something that hid beyond me. I understand now. Forgive me, for I am not myself. I no longer know who I am. I do not understand who I am. I do not understand what I am and what it is all for. Why me? Why *us*? I do not know. I do not know.

To whoever finds this journal, the secret to this world lies in your possession. I do not expect you to believe it. I even hope you do not. I know you will not take the last entry seriously, for you will ask, "Who can write when unconscious?" I do not know how, either, but I did. That is a statement of fact. In this journal, I sought to search for the legend of these children, only to find myself discovering a burden that I must now carry until I pass from this world once more.

Keep it, but do not burn it. This journal will, by fate, reach my reincarnated self. I am sure of that.

## ENTRY I

When I grew older, my mother told me that she could not comprehend me as a child. She told me that I was different from other children. I was a quiet little boy, too quiet even, that my mother had mistook me for a mute. She thought it terrifying that her little boy was so often fixated on something and refused to let go of his attention from it. When I became a little older, it was a relief to her that I was a curious child. Gradually, I grew interested in matters that should have been unfit for a child of five. "Why?" I would ask. My mother would say, "Because you cannot, Favi," and I would reply, "But why can I not? I thought we had freedom.

Why can I not steal?”. She taught me the universal truth that you must treat another person the same way you would treat yourself. If what you will do is not uncomfortable seeing others do, then it is good. At a young age, I was taught philosophy. But because of that, I bored the other children.

I do not remember such exchanges with my mother. Everything that occurred when I was young was seldom vivid memories to me. They were forgotten in time. Only the effect of such exchanges remains in me, but the content of the exchanges itself is blurred. This happens when you teach a child values or truths; they do not remember it completely, but they will remember how you said it or how it made them feel.

But not all was lost from my childhood. There was, in fact, one thing that I remember so vividly. I do not only remember how this story made me feel, but I knew it by heart. Word for word, I knew this legend my mother told me as a child. Even now that I am 20 and 7, if I were to recite this to my mother (had she been alive now), she would clasp her hands together and be overjoyed at the fact that I remembered after so many years. I don't know why it struck me then, but this legend struck a chord that I refused to forget. There was such a deep, inward tugging at my chest when my mother told me of this legend—a feeling that I cannot ascribe anything to and find difficulty articulating.

The legend goes like this,

*On a bright sunny day, the workers of a coal mine in the Southern Aeonian Mountains trudged against the muddy soil from yesterday's storm. With their empty sacks and iron pickaxes, they traversed into the darkness of the tunnels. Suddenly, one of their comrades screamed from the depths of the cavern.*

*"Come quick! Come quick! You all must see this!" He shouted from below. His comrades, frightened at the alarm in his tone, hurriedly scurried deep into the cave's depths. Following the panicked shouts of the miner. When they finally managed against the rough, pitch-black terrain, the faint light from their torch illuminated the faces of two odd children.*

*Their skin was tainted with a purplish hue.*

*The miners shrieked, their terror-filled gasps rolling across the caves' walls. Realizing that the two children were unconscious, the miners were unsure of what to do. Human empathy,*

*however, prompted them to carry the two odd children out of the cave. This was the account of the purple children.*

There was something peculiar about something that seemed human—a child just like me at the time but with purple skin. I knew humans took on different forms and colors, but not one that came from a spectrum so vivid and distinct, like purple. Perhaps that is why the memory stuck with me for a long time.

Similarly, and quite oddly, I had a dream concerning this legend when I turned 10 and 8. I remember it so well that I mistook it as a memory. But it seemed too surreal to be one. The dream went like this,

*I was in a vast valley. It was dark, and the moon shone brightly in the distance.*

*Something about this valley felt so oddly familiar to me, and I do not understand it. Still, I felt wistful as I gazed upon the plains that stretched beyond me. Some deep sadness pounded in my heart, and I could not quite get rid of it. It was perpetual, constant.*

*As I looked above, a lone evening star shone brightly in the dark night sky. All around me were mountains. Something about their similar silhouette induced a sinking feeling in my chest. I could not breathe well, and something crept up on me, a feeling...*

*Dread.*

*I stared at the star for quite some time, gazing at its otherworldly glow. It was so bright that it almost did not feel like a star but something else, something greater than that. The world shook beneath my feet when I lifted my hand to grasp it. That was when it started.*

*The skies began to bleach a deep purple. The entire world around me was drained of color, except for the sky. The evening star I stared at fell from the skies in one swift second. Then, the world around me cracked into pieces, whirling into an incoherent image. I was falling, and I felt hopeless. I felt myself change as my world started to divide. Then, in a flash so bright that I felt blinded, an image of a person stood before me. A child. A girl. She mouthed four words that confused me,*

*“I am sorry, Oriole.”*

*That was when I woke up in a flash of everything and nothing.*

At the time, the dream gave me nightmares. When I woke up from it, I would break into a cold sweat, and a wave of extreme sadness would wash over me. I could not sleep again, so I would stay awake and write about the dream. There were minute details that sometimes changed, but that was how it went. I did not know the girl, yet she felt so familiar. As if I have seen her plenty before. I did not understand why she apologized. What was it for? Who was Oriole? And why was she asking for their forgiveness? In some parts of me, when I remembered the legend my mother spoke to me, these two images seemed so invariably connected. Though I needed to figure out how to prove it.

That was when I finally took the liberty to trek to the valley between the Mirror Mountains. Where the legend originated, Vespera. It was a remote village in the valley, named after the evening star that they said only appeared in the valley, much like the one in my dream. For all these years, I have wondered what this dream meant. It did not even feel like a dream but rather a vision. Perhaps this dream was trying to tell me something. So, I took it upon myself to travel to Vespera for my answers. With the only coins I had left since I sold my childhood home, I took a caravan for the trip that was passing by Vespera. I am to leave most of my belongings here.

I feel anxious and nervous, all the words to describe one's dread. I feel dread, but I also feel excitement. I can finally put to rest this dread from hearing of that legend and having that nightmare. I am looking for answers and will do whatever it takes to find them.

## **Favian Cornelius**

### **ENTRY II**

A storm took over the trail, and the caravan stopped momentarily.

We managed to make shelter inside a nearby home of a quaint family that lived along the trail. Five people were in the caravan, so the space was quite tight. Nonetheless, they managed to sleep soundly. Well, I did not.

I had the nightmare again. But this time, it was different. As I write this, my hands tremble with fear. Something striking, something sinister, appeared in my dream. The valley, the

mountains, the fallen star, and the purple skies. But this time, instead of the girl that showed up in this dream, it was something. Something so monstrous but, at the same time, so otherworldly and majestic that I dared not look away, both in terror and awe. The thing that stood before me was not the girl but a tall, grand creature.

Its body was hidden by a pair of two majestic wings. Their colors illuminated that of a starry twilight. Its face was like a human, although its wings concealed most of it. Its skin was a mixture of blue and violet. The colors harmonized, but sometimes, they would separate and fight against each other. As if its two pairs of wings and odd colors did not render it inhuman enough, two tails extended from the creature's head, stretching to its body's length. At the end of each tail was a glowing, odd shape like a star and a bone.

But, as I looked at the creature, I realized its eyes were the most majestic of all its features. Two pairs of large eyes, shaped like leaves from an olive tree. Its iris was a glowing stone with all the colors the world could name. Its eyes shone so brightly that it felt like I was only a few strides away from the brightest star in the universe. I felt it stare into the depths of my soul as if it knew who I was right then and there. Then, in a voice so loud, it spoke.

*"I am sorry, Oriole."*

When I awoke from the dream, I was again drowning in a cold sweat. The palms of my hands even feel clammy as I write this. I am trembling. I do not know what I saw. What was it? How can my mind comprehend such a being? A being unknown to the entirety of mankind? How can I remember it so vividly? Perhaps it was because of how striking it looked. But how, tell me how, can someone manage to conjure such a sinister yet majestic image?

I am afraid I will not move on from that image. I am so scared that it is now engraved into the consciousness of my mind, forever to haunt me when it is least expected. But why is it that though I feel immense fear, I also feel tremendous sadness? Sadness. Why do I feel sad? Why do I feel like I lost something? Why? There are so many questions, but they are left unanswered. I know that this dream is a sign. It is telling me to move onward.

**Favian Cornelius.**

**ENTRY III**

I made it. I am alive.

I am sitting inside my subject's house as I write. It is quaint and tiny, made of wood with narrow, dusty windows. I am honored and beyond thrilled to finally meet someone who knows about this legend and can testify to it. But I am told that she is on an errand now, so I will tell you what happened when I arrived here.

When I arrived, I was welcomed warmly, much to my surprise. Perhaps they were apprehensive about my arrival, as I am sure researchers like me had come here before to impede their peace, but they greeted me warmly.

The town is quaint, with an abundance of resources. What struck me the most was the abundance of crops, notably a wheat field stretching around the village. They have a functioning market located in the center of the town, where they exchange goods. I noticed that they do not use coins here, but rather, they bartered. It was fascinating to observe them. Most of them wore pleasant expressions on their faces, meek and accepting. In the center square was a deep well, where men were assigned in rotations to get water. It seemed that everyone had a place and a role to play. When I asked them who leads the village, they said,

"Mother Cecilia takes care of us. She handles most of what happens through appointed leaders of our village. She is old, ancient." When they mentioned this old woman to me, I took the opportunity to ask. "How old is she, may I ask?"

"She is older than this tree here. This tree is around a hundred years old. Mother Cecilia is more than that."

"Oh, well, perhaps through her, I may find what I am looking for here?" "What exactly is it?"

"The legend, I'm sure you've heard of it."

"The legend..." The woman paused. "Yes, I know, wait here."

The woman went away for a while and came back right after. "Mother Cecilia would be delighted to see you. She is out in the field, though. But come, I shall lead you to her house. She will accept you there."

So here I am, writing this as I observe the household whom they call "*Mother*." This quaint, little space feels homely. The house is two floors high, the bottom with necessities such

as a kitchen, a dining table, and a place to accept guests. On the wall by the door were wooden frames. In each were hand-drawn portraits of the old woman and what seemed like her husband. In another, she was with a group of children. Another was an illustration of the village's wheat fields. I smiled as I gazed upon the house, which felt so lived. It felt like a loving home. As I write this, I feel nostalgic for home. My mother used to have photos of her family hanging on the wall by her door.

I sit here wondering what this woman is like. She sounded nice based on what the villager said earlier, but I wonder what she is like. Is she soft-spoken? Is she bold and assertive? Is she perhaps a youthful soul? Or a strict one? I excite myself with the possible stories she could tell of the legend. Maybe she was alive when the legend first came to be. Perhaps she lived and saw the purple children in the flesh. Maybe she was a friend to these children and even played with them during the day. The possibilities are endless.

## **Favian Cornelius.**

### **ENTRY IV**

*This entry was written in a dream. I do not know how I did it, but when I woke up, the table was cluttered with crumpled papers and splattered ink. I do not remember writing it. I do not understand how. I remember that I could not write that day, so I had no entry for the interview. You will not believe me, I know you will not. I did not think about it at first, either. But every detail was there, every nuance, every feeling, and everything was described so perfectly that I found it hard to believe that I had not written this. I did, and I am convinced of it.*

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As I dropped my pen into the pocket of my satchel, the door opened in front of me. I sat, pausing momentarily to watch who came in, and I saw her.

She was an old woman, indeed. Her strands of pearl white hair were braided into two. With her were two men, one who seemed of middle-age and another who seemed relatively young. She wore simple clothes, a dress that looked worn out from use that stretched to the



ankles of her feet. She walked barefoot as the two men assisted her by the arms. She was the first to acknowledge my presence, seemingly in haste as her head shot up to meet my eyes. Her eyes were a deep shade of brown, akin to the bark of an oak tree. I stood up from my seat, bowing my head low to maintain some tradition of respect. Still, since she was a figure that seemed to exude reverence akin to a queen, it was more so because of that than just simple respect for the elderly.

"Release me. I am good now. Please prepare the visitor a drink and some bread from the pantry," she said, her voice brittle and soft. The two men nodded, letting go of her as they went to the small kitchen of the house. I took a gulp. She stepped closer to me in slow, calculated strides.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Mother Cecilia," I said as I bowed again. "You need not to do that, young man. Might I know your name?"

"My name is Favian. Thank you for accepting an audience with me." She smiled. The wrinkles in her eyes showed how long she had lived. She took my hand and pressed her thumb gently. "Sit, please, sit." She gestured to me.

I sat back in my seat as she sat across from me. The two men from earlier brought us hot tea and a parcel of bread. They excused themselves as fast as they arrived. When they left, she took a sip of her cup before she spoke,

"Many researchers have come here to learn the truth. If that is what you seek, I shall waste you no time. I am one of the children in the legend you have heard. My brother was my other half." I stopped as my eyes widened. I did not expect her to be so blunt. Silence pursued for a while, and the image of the girl and the creature flashed before me.

"Then, may I ask, where are you really from?" I asked.

"I do not know." She simply answered, looking wistfully out the window. Something in her wrinkled eyes made my heart sink.

"What do you mean?"

She took a significant pause and simply stared at me. Her eyes glistened, but I could not tell if it was because she was about to cry.

"My brother and I came from a cave. We had no recollection of what happened before then. No matter how hard we try to conjure a memory, it is impossible to. All I know is that the both of us shared the same sentiments. We both felt like we did not belong here. We felt that there was something beyond us, far beyond us. Like a secret that intrinsically tied us together, one that no one, not even us ourselves, knew. But it held us together. We do not remember having a mother or a father like other children. We only knew each other."

Something about the way she said it made my heart sink further. I also felt the same way—that no one could understand me.

What was the name of your brother?

"*Oriole.*"

I froze.

"He died when he was 20 and 7. He could never get rid of his sickness..." She trailed off. "He was the only person I had in this world. For quite some time, I could not accept it. I grieved his death for many years. I have never been the same since that day." She looked at me. I was absent in thought. "Does his name stir something in you?" I was taken aback. She could tell, she *knew*.

"His name was in my dream, a dream that I had been haunted by all these years... The girl in my dream apologized to him. I do not know why, but... I am confused. Were you the one in my dream?" I asked, hoping to get an answer, but the old woman continued.

"I wish to show you something. I want to know how you feel about it." She says abruptly. I stopped. The dread washed over me again. I could not move. I felt like I could not breathe. I was on the brink of something. I felt a revelation coming to me. It was not quite there yet, but it was there.

I nodded.

She took her hand to my face, her thumb pressed onto my forehead when the world around me suddenly *shook*.

The picture before me cracked into fragments, caught in a whirlwind that swirled into a cacophony of matter. My body plunged from the sky until the walls around me caved into pitch darkness. When I closed my eyes, the feeling stopped. And I found myself sitting on a wet

rock, with a faint sound of rushing water fading away. When I opened my eyes, I could not speak or hear. I could only see. And what I saw was *frightening*.

In front of me was the same little girl from my dream. Her dark brown eyes looked curiously at the sight before her and *me*.

The same tall, grand creature stood before me.

The creature's eyes grew wide upon seeing this child, growing twice as large as they were. I saw the child's mouth open but could not hear the words she uttered. I saw the creature staring at her, its expression unreadable. For if a human's eyes bore witness to its soul, then the creature's eyes bore no witness. It glowed, but it was empty. It had no soul and no place in this world.

That was when the creature, in an unexpected motion, took out its hand and laid a finger on the child's head. Suddenly, a voice emerged from the back of my mind, so loud that—

*"Cur ego sum ita ad te ducta?"*

"Why am I so drawn to you?"

In a flash, my eyes shot open as I breathed in heavily. What had I just witnessed, and what had I heard? The old woman took her hand off me and looked at me with an odd stare.

"You understood what the *World Walker* said? Did you not?"

I could not answer for a while. I broke into a cold sweat. My heart jumped outside my chest as I held onto the armrests tightly. "I did." I finally said, but my words were slurred.

Her eyes gazed into mine deeply, and suddenly, everything returned to me. I know it now, the thing that once crept up to me, the thing that was so beyond me, the something that I felt hid beyond the skies. In a flash, I remember the cave, waking up to people gawking at us, learning how to read and write their language, and my sister and I alone in the forest amusing ourselves when the kids were afraid of us.

I understood what she was trying to tell me. Her eyes glistened with tears, and she engulfed me in a warm embrace. "Oh, thank you! At last, I have found you. I have found you, my dear brother..." she said, in exasperated breaths, with tears emerging from her eyes. It was at that moment that I saw the true glow of her purple eyes.

“*Orazia*.” The sound of her name uttered from my lips breathed her to life. It gave her face identity, meaning to her wrinkled smile, and life to her eyes.

“I have been waiting for you all my life. I have hoped and wondered that perhaps in some distant lifetime, we would meet again. My dear, dear *Oriole*.” She broke down in tears as she knelt in front of me. My hands trembled not from fear anymore but from sheer happiness. All those years of unexplained longing, dread, and sadness can now be closed into a bygone chapter. I am no longer alone.

“But how? How has this come to be? Why?”

It was my mistake, Oriole. I did it. I made us this way. It is not over; it will never be.” She gripped my shoulders frantically. Was she running out of time?

“Listen to me. This world that we live in, we do not belong here. The creature you saw was a *World Walker*. I made contact with it, and now, time is skewed. We will keep on being reborn. Again and again. We will lose each other and find each other again and again. I hold the *World Walker’s* consciousness. It has a twin, too, just like you and I. And that twin’s consciousness is in you.” She spoke in a frenzy, and I could not keep up. “Oriole, listen to me. This world is doomed. We cannot control it. We cannot control its fate. Destruction will reign, and we will be in the midst of it and have to solve it. We have to do something, Oriole, we have to, or else...”

“It will—what *Orazia*? Breathe in, calm yourself.”

“It will repeat. This will repeat. Me touching that *thing* will repeat. Your dying will repeat. Everything will. This world is doomed to a *samsara*. Birth, misery, and death. Everyone born into this world will forget and experience it over and over. This is not our first time, brother.” She coughed, and her breathing became unstable. I tried to help her, but she tumbled to the ground, gripping her chest as she coughed out blood. An extreme fear washed over me, and I realized it the moment I knelt to save her,

“*She will die. Just as I did.*”

Right before I could do anything, her body became limp, and I watched my whole world shatter. A *samsara*. The world is in a *samsara*.

## **i'll stay in this barren field, where i belong.**

By Angeni Gabrielli Trani

Near the edge of a forgotten forest, hidden deep inside, was Wildflower Meadow, a meadow teeming with various colorful blooms and creatures uncommon to the fae folk run amok, seeking shelter and sustenance among the dense foliage. These blooms, once vibrant in color, slowly lost their luster as the years went by. This meadow, once home to many faes, was now forgotten due to the horrible curse on the ground many years ago.

Many were aware of this curse, but no one knew the full extent of how or why the curse truly came to be. Only the Meadow Elders and a few of the older Guardians of Sacred Glades knew the truth, but they never spoke of it to any of the other nymphs for fear of spreading the curse despite it only having been done to one unfortunate nymph.

With great fear and contempt, they chose to isolate their cursed one in one of their sacred meadows, avoiding the possible consequences to come.

Hidden safely beneath a blanket of wildflowers, this is mainly why one of their dearest nymphs began losing their powers and identity as they slept for so long.

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A free spirit.

That's what his parents fondly called him. Their sweet, lovely, and kind Aquilo would never lift a finger to hurt anyone, even as a means to protect himself. Aquilo truly believed that there was good in every single being, no matter how cruel one may be.

But he hasn't felt free-spirited since he was cursed, his body forced to fall into a century-long slumber after he was cast out from his grove by the guardians and a few of the elders after the tragic death of his parents. The once leader of the nymphs was no longer recognized by the grove.

His mind was fully conscious despite being cursed to succumb in a long sleep. Aquilo was aware of almost everything that was happening around where he lay. It was pure agony not being able to see what went on since he felt that his body was carefully brought to a far place, farther away from the haven he grew accustomed to after the passing of his parents.

Aquilo couldn't fully recall everything that happened once the curse hit his body. Still, he knew the elders immediately wanted him to be sent away from them all, afraid of the consequences of having a cursed nymph near their grove.

But Aquilo knew why the elders and guardians were eager to 'dispose' of him.

A couple of elder nymphs were against his parents, from what he could recall, but he could never understand why their hatred was also aimed at him. His powers were not perceptible since he was just a young nymph. During his free time, Aquilo would visit the small huts of other young nymphs the same age as he was and would run out towards Wandering Creek Hollow, where everyone loved to gather with everyone in the village.

As their powers were still dormant, the younglings had nothing to do but spend their time outdoors exploring the endless grounds within their territory. Not only did this allow them to learn and discover new things, but it also allowed them to immerse themselves in nature, where, as nymphs, they are to harness their powers when they are of age.

During these moments with nature, each nymph has an inclination towards a particular flora or fauna, which becomes the essence of their blossom heart.

If a nymph's flora were to be destroyed, they would become vulnerable and weak and unable to perform even the simplest magic to protect themselves from harm. Nothing could reverse this once it happened unless one was able to carefully store and preserve an unbloomed bud as well as the flora's seeds.

Now, these special items were heavily safeguarded by the nymph's parents and the nymph themselves. No one knew what sort of flower a nymph would be connected to until they

underwent the Blossom Bonding Ritual, during which every of-age nymph could find and connect to their blossom in front of their entire village at the Elmwood Sanctuary.

This ritual was the most crucial part of a nymph's life, the pivotal essence of a nymph's being. Through this, a nymph's destined life began, equipping them with the magic and power that suited and reflected their most authentic self as they started their journey to find their place in the world.

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Aquilo slowly tried to re-orient himself as his body began to wake up from the prolonged sleep he was under. Aquilo remained lying on his back and carefully moved his head from side to side, taking in his current situation. He wasn't sure of what day it was or where he actually was; all he knew was that his flowers, which don't usually show themselves physically, had formed into a complete, life-sized bloom, sprouted all around where he lay, an even bigger one right beside him where its petals draped softly on his body as if protecting him from harm.

Mustering all his strength, Aquilo cautiously pushed himself upright amongst the giant petals, blanketing his frame. Deep inside, he knew that everything had changed, given how long he had been asleep, but nothing could prepare him for what he saw in front of him.

This meadow, once considered one of their sacred areas where not many could actually step foot in, used to be filled to the brim with different varieties of flora that were vibrant and just absolutely a sight for sore eyes. But now, the meadow had lost its shine, as the flora that naturally grew there became wilted and faded in color, somehow reflecting the unfortunate state of a cursed nymph laying on their ground and their isolation from their village.

It was indeed a wonder why Aquilo was laid to rest here of all places, knowing of the meadow's sanctity.

Alas, Aquilo knew that he couldn't do anything to change his situation. So he stopped asking the hows and whys, knowing nobody could answer his endless queries.

Instead, he began to take in his predicament fully. He saw the meadow's state and its unusual emptiness without the animals that usually roamed the meadow present.

Not only was the meadow losing its color and luster, but even his own flowers, once twinkling beautifully in a wonderful shade of indigo, were now dull and flat, indicating how much time had passed. At the same time, Aquilo slept on the bed of flowers. Carefully stepping down from the bloom bed, he took his time scanning the meadow, surveying his resting place, and trying to see if any other living creature lived alongside this hidden dwelling.

As he wandered about, Aquilo also tried to remember what happened before "the day," as he now called it, but to no avail. His continuous attempts at retrieving his memories not only caused him to experience excruciating headaches but also caused his already dulling flowers to lose even more of their remaining color. Aquilo didn't know what would happen to a nymph that lost its color and bloom, as he had never seen one subjected to such a plight. Their Elders rarely spoke of these nymphs, the Pallid nymphs, or the Faded as they were dubbed, so not many knew if these nymphs were real or just figments of imagination used to scare the younglings.

Willing away those thoughts, Aquilo continued his investigation, making sure that no leaf was left unturned.

After letting his inner flower bloom in his hand, which could be used to mark the meadow as his territory, he realized he couldn't use his magic. Saddened by the realization, he resigned himself to returning to the old ways when he was just a young nymph who didn't yet have access to his powers, not that he minded. Despite not being able to reconnect and use his magic, Aquilo did his best to make do with what he could despite his debility.

He always enjoyed using his hands, loved the feel of the earth whenever his fingers touched the soil, and rejoiced in being physically connected with nature. So, this situation wasn't that much of a hindrance to him, as he rarely had time to have moments with nature like this.

Being the lone nymph in the meadow, Aquilo took it upon himself to care for every flora that surrounded his new home, ensuring that all of these living and breathing beings



thrived and blossomed under his care. But before that could be achieved, Aquilo had to orient and familiarize himself with everything in his surroundings.

Walking towards dying plant patches, Aquilo removed the wilted sprouts and carefully uprooted those he knew could still grow back healthily. He continued to spot many dying patches that needed his attention and care. Aquilo spent the rest of the day doting on those plants, tending to them with utmost gentleness and love while delicately sprinkling their petals and leaves with clean water that he found in a spring deeply hidden behind a thicket of bushes. His mind quietened, and his thoughts of trying to push himself to recover his previous memories were forgotten. And so he spent his time in the meadow like this, tending to his now-growing garden in the secluded meadow while trying to reconnect to his blossom heart.

Unbeknownst to him, the hidden guardians and deities of the meadow had been silently observing his actions since he woke up from his curse. It was common knowledge to all nymphs that every sacred meadow or grove had deities and spiritual beings who watched over it, ensuring the area was protected and preserved for all the creatures who resided there.

So, when Aquilo was brought to the meadow, these guardians were already alert and assessing, able to tell who was innately good or inherently evil. Hence, they had no hesitancy in letting Aquilo's unconscious body be carried in.

Aquilo didn't know that immediately after he was laid on the bed of flowers, those nymphs that brought his figure to the meadow were instantly cast out as if an invisible force kicked them straight out of the vicinity. Not only that, but they were also banned from returning to the meadow, and their memories of how and *why* they were there were erased from their minds. The meadow became protective of the unknown nymph, swayed easily by the utmost gentleness and kindness that his aura brought out. Knowing Aquilo's curse, the meadow did its best to care for him while he was unconscious, gently tending to his needs and protecting him as he slept.

Thus began the silent and tender caring of the meadow towards Aquilo.

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Many seasons passed, and Aquilo continued slowly flourishing alongside the many plants and animals who lived in the meadow with him. But when Aquilo awoke, he didn't see or meet any other life forms during his daily tending to the plants or visiting the spring nearby.

Only when Aquilo finished his daily tasks did a lone hare suddenly approach where he stood, nose twitching as its huge and expressive eyes observed his every move. With every small step, Aquilo strained to hear even the slightest sound of its paws moving across the ground, seemingly moving gracefully as if walking on air. But as the creature inched closer, Aquilo noticed its fur was somehow luminescent, resembling moonlight shining on freshly fallen snow. Its ears were long and pointed, gracefully twitching with every minute noise it could hear, and on its body were unique markings that resembled celestial patterns that seemed to ripple with every movement.

*It's a lunar hare, Aquilo thought to himself. One of the rarest creatures known to the fae and nymphs, whose powers remained unknown even to that of the elders.*

The only thing they knew about it was its intricate connection to the moon and how it represents the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth—similar to the moon's cycles. This hare's appearance triggered Aquilo's heart to regain its usual power, slowly making Aquilo's inner flower regain its hue and vibrancy as each day passed.

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Alongside the hidden guardians and deities of the meadow, the lunar hare also silently aided Aquilo's recovery. At the same time, he busied himself tending to the meadow itself. After its initial appearance, the hare never left Aquilo's side, becoming similar to that of a pet and companion rather than a mystical creature. Whenever he started his day inside the little hut he made, the hare was already silently hopping inside, little nose twitching as it took in the many different smells emanating inside.

Fondly, Aquilo began to call the four-legged creature Moonsong; whenever dusk came, its fur would shine as if the moon physically manifested itself. He didn't know what Moonsong could do or what its powers were, but Aquilo didn't care. He was glad he had company, even if they couldn't communicate.

Quickly, Moonsong became his dear little helper who actually did nothing. When Aquilo would begin to dig through the dirt and get his hands dirty, Moonsong preferred to just lay around on the turf, basking in the warmth and serenity that the meadow had to offer, as if the air were alive with the scent of blooming wildflowers.

As the first light of dawn bathed the meadow, Aquilo began his daily routine. He stretched his delicate petals that still bore the faded hues of his isolation and gracefully stepped onto the dew-kissed turf. Beside him, Moonsong watched with keen, knowing eyes as he began by tending to the fragile blooms surrounding him, whispering words of encouragement to each one while he gently tended to their soil and watered their bodies.

Unbeknownst to the Aquilo, this routine was more than a daily ritual. It was a sacred dance with the meadow, a delicate harmony between his nymph presence and the Lunar Hare's celestial influence. But today was different. As he reached out to a wilted blossom, a tingling sensation coursed through him, and he turned to Moonsong for confirmation, who nodded silently.

The lunar hare, one of the guardians of the meadow's ancient secrets, began to guide Aquilo with subtle movements and gestures, its eyes gleaming with knowing wisdom. It encouraged him to delve deeper into their connection with the meadow, a bond that went beyond mere companionship.

With newfound determination, Aquilo resumed, focusing on each flower—a blade of grass, a petal, and a leaf. He nurtured the meadow's flora and sensed a growing connection, an exchange of vitality between himself and the very heart of the meadow.

Suddenly, the meadow came alive around him.

Colors began to return, and what were once faded petals of Aquilo's being now mirrored the vibrant wildflowers surrounding him. The dull hues of his petals transformed into a breathtaking symphony of colors, reflecting the beauty and vitality of the meadow while at the same time reflecting a beautiful representation of his blossom heart.

Aquilo's senses sharpened, and he could hear the meadow's melodies with newfound clarity. The wind whispered secrets in his ear, and the mystical spring nearby shared its stories. He felt the pulse of life beneath his feet as the meadow's heartbeat synced with his own.

The dance continued, Aquilo and Moonsong moving in unison as their connection grew stronger with every passing moment. Aquilo's very essence slowly began to intertwine with the meadow's magic, and he began to understand that his role as its guardian was not just a duty but a destiny.

As the meadow bloomed in response to his care and the lunar hare's guidance, the world around him became a living canvas of colors, scents, and harmonious sounds. With open arms, Aquilo embraced his newfound connection with the meadow and his identity as its guardian.

With each passing day, Aquilo's bond with the meadow grew stronger, his connection with Moonsong deeper. Together, they became the guardians of the secrets that lay hidden within the verdant expanse of the Wildflower Meadow and all of the forest's nearby landscape, ensuring its vitality and harmony for generations to come.

As Aquilo stood amidst the vibrant blooms that continued to grow and thrive alongside his returning powers, his heart swelled with gratitude for the lunar hare and the mystical forces that had guided him. With Moonsong by his side, he was no longer alone. Together, they would protect the meadow, sharing its beauty and magic for eternity.

And so, as dawn broke again, Aquilo and Moonsong stood united, their spirits intertwined with the very essence of the meadow. While the sun slowly began its rise, casting a golden glow over the tranquil landscape, Aquilo whispered a silent vow to cherish this newfound bond and honor the sacred duty entrusted to him.

With each gentle touch and whispered word, they continued their sacred dance, ensuring that the legacy of their love and devotion would endure forever in the heart of the meadow.

With a contented sigh and a gentle breeze rustling through the meadow, Aquilo looked out over the thriving expanse and spoke softly to Moonsong, "Our journey together has just

begun my friend, and I am grateful for every step we take side by side. Let us continue our dance, for in our unity lies the eternal beauty of this land."

# POETRY



# The rain outside

By Jecho Adrian Ponce

The rain doesn't smell the way it used to,

the warmth embracing the cool air, with fresh dust leaping from the soil, invading the nostrils the moment it touches the ground; the weather fit for a boot on the puddle as one kicks off the bubbles; fog on your glasses deep within sips of scalding tea and a bug between the pages of a book you've long kept dusty by the nightstand.

It was a gift like that.

Right now, as it pours outside the window, the rain

smells like broken pebbles skipping only once down the shore;  
like melting ice in a mild glass of milk;  
like watching the banknote fly off the book;  
like the warmth no longer kisses the cold wind by the cheek.

And it will be like this,

until it is the sun that we long for.



## Seashells

By Agnes Vida Lopez

You said,

if we wrote our names on the sand,

till the waves washed them away,

the sea would take them to craft

into seashells.

And if we're lucky, we find pieces of our new life

to hold again and let go. Years later, I never believed you

till I found a seashell washed up on the shore, dressed

in your favorite colors. I watched you drift away

for the last time.

# **My Wildest Dream is to Wake Up to the Sound of Birds**

By Juan Carlos Miguel Vasquez

I hear my alarm's shrill cry,  
Boom! It is a bomb's harsh wry.

Blood stains on the sidewalks sprawl,  
Reality distorts the innocent call.

If echoes of war replace finches' hum,  
My child, my failure is overcome.

Born where streets form my grave,  
A question echoes: my skin's hue, my fate?

Trials for mistakes unclear,  
Limbs of my friends linger.

Even with children's cries, the deaf may hear,  
Yet they heed not, out of fear.  
Gouged eyes, pain starkly laid bare,  
Watched by mocking eyes that don't care.

For our questions unresolved, it seems,  
Born underprivileged, haunting dreams.

Livelihood absent from industries' strife,  
In a prison born, a prison of life.

For those glamoring bullets, a twisted claim,  
Victors hold morals, we're pages of shame.

Desecrated graves, history's bitter play,  
Apologetic fifty years later, we shall say.

# **Bodhisattva**

By River Ketnirattana

I return to you in daydreams  
Resurrected—but not quite.  
Even in death,  
Do I not feel alive?  
The answer:  
I have abandoned my peace to remain  
In the iris of your eyes  
We stay here—*Samsara*,  
*Lopburi*,  
My home now yours, and forever,  
You, the seeker,  
and I, practicing deity,  
God only in mortal saliva,  
When I open my mouth,  
Watch out.

## **(Your Name)**

By Meagan Adrienne Villaruz

Your name  
was my most favorite word  
to hear. every letter has embedded  
within every part of me.  
my heart and soul  
breathes in and out—  
Your name.

i remember it always  
now i wish i didn't  
i tried to disremember,  
but what has been  
essential to me,  
the thing i always do  
that—  
i cannot undo.  
i cannot forget you.

## Notes on Genetics

By Jude Wilter Domen

You look like your father • The delicate stroke of your eyes • Tainted by your mother's love •  
You speak in plain tongue • Yet you have captured a young bard • The scar on your shoulders  
have roots deep as your cold gaze • Did you find that olivine • All for me? • A rock of deep earth  
• Alike our love as old as the ground we stand on • The mole on your neck • Etched by God for  
me and only me to touch with my lips • Your skin as white as summer clouds • I would drown  
in them if I could • In the sea of midnight • I see all of you • Clearly as all the times before • You  
look like your father • your voice and skin from your mother • You look like—

## **a mimesis of a proletariat fashionista**

By Meagan Adrienne Villaruz

an animal playground, a tableau in chambers golden  
the city is a massive pen. we consume our own cages  
built upon by crocs in black tuxedos with vacant oaths.  
time is paid in cents, the lives deemed unworthy  
the body is sold in agora, happiness is but a heavy sleep and a paycheck.

i wore my rainbow socks high up my knees, to cover my capital insecurity.  
my reflection is an army of dress forms from magazines and newspapers—  
a revolution of catalogues from fashion trends i pleasure with guilt.  
i am like the mimesis, twice detached yet  
humanly aware, a jar of cynicism in a denim skirt.

i was told that sewing is for women alone  
and my lover never fails to remind me of my duties,  
he pulls out the chair and puts me in my place—  
a monolith of aristocratic patriarchy clad in Stefano Ricci coat.  
he tells me i am naive. i believe him blindly.  
with trembling hands i sew his gaping mouth  
pierced the needle on his lips like soft velvet  
“i’m sorry,” i feigned my guilt, excusing female naivety.  
“i wasn’t sure what’s loose, your mouth or the cloth.”

fashion has been a pedagogy tied to Vicuna wool.  
i donned my pink hat and awkwardly sewn blouse inspired by.  
taste is a weapon by the bourgeoisie—  
a fleeting excitement of brand new,  
like a warm sweater on a rainy Sunday morning.

# Mosaic on the kitchen floor

By Reya Grace Hinaut

I find myself at midnight  
bare feet on gray cement.

I dance 'round my mother's mosaic  
and sweep the scattered tesserae:  
its bruise-blue tokens, mother's fine  
china dispersed among broken  
teeth, like they'd fallen  
from her own aching

gums. Tomorrow, mother  
will buy new dentures  
for the cabinet's empty  
mouth. Tomorrow, mother  
will strike new tile over swept  
canvas. And tomorrow, I  
will sweep the floor again,  
ignore the constant draining  
and filling of the kitchen  
cabinet.

## **I've forgotten the pears**

By Ysha Louise Danielle Bayotas

I told my sister I'd buy her some pears  
Down by the shop that sells them in pairs  
I promised I'd buy the biggest I could find  
But then the thought of pears completely left my mind.

When I got home, her eyes sparkled like starlight  
But when she saw me without pears, she cried the whole night  
"You said you'd buy pears, but all you did to me was lie!"  
I wanted to apologize but didn't have the courage to reply

Now, my sister won't talk to me, years after the pears.  
The more time had passed, the more smiles turned to glares.  
She still talks with my brothers and she laughs loudly with mom,  
But when I'm around, she blows up like a bomb.

In order to set our differences aside,  
I went to the market to buy all the gifts I could find.  
But when I got home, it was only then I had realized,  
I've forgotten the pears, just like the last time.



# White Flag

By Lealina Evangeline Reyes

White flag!

White flag!

Raised in a valley of Black

What lies beyond

such great mystery

A lying tongue

a scream for mercy

Blind eyes

blink twice

See nothing

but false lights

Fly high

fall low

Reach heaven

but live below

White flag!

White flag!

Surrender, fall back



# **I've forgotten where I am**

By Ysha Louise Danielle Bayotas

I've taken countless steps,  
But nothing seems any different.  
Still lost between four walls  
As windows stare, indifferent.

Forgetting how I got here,  
Wondering when I'll get out,  
I'll pace this corner to the next  
Again—again, all the same route

When the window's light fades,  
Walls near, they shrink closer,  
And the dwindling patience I foster  
Slips faster and faster.

I knew where I was  
Before walls swallowed my memory.  
Now I'm trapped, a caged lamb,  
I've forgotten where I am.

# Untitled

By Issachar Bacang

I.

We were alike, for a while  
We spoke the same tongue, for a while  
And when you were called out, so was I  
And as we both walked out  
We saw each other passing by

And for a minute—  
Or at least that's how long  
All those years felt—  
I could talk to you,  
Without seeing a scowl or a glare  
And you could talk to me,  
Without worry or care

Where is she now, I ask you-  
Where is she, who I used to talk to?  
She is nowhere when I see-  
When I ever see you at all  
You are not you, speak to me

Why do you look at me like that?  
Why do you look at me as if you didn't know,  
Who you spoke to so long ago?

I see it now...  
In the empty reflection  
Of you not being there

You don't talk to me now-  
Why would you?  
Why would I talk to myself...  
As I am doing right now

You were never there,  
The day you left has gone and past,  
Yet in my mind I thought I could-  
I hope I could have made it last

Now I don't know where you are

II.

I still see you in a place that  
I wish I could tell you to get out of  
And yet however much I holler and scream-  
And tell you that  
'you're no longer welcome here'

in reality-  
I hold on and beg you to stay,  
I hold on and hold you dear,  
Because what worth would it have been

Entire moons having come and gone,  
Without a wink of sleep,  
restlessness in some  
The holes I've burnt into the mirror,  
Hoping I'd been something else  
Hoping I'd be someone better

What worth would it have been  
To burn those votive offerings  
For the torment in my mind-  
In life, you'll never see  
In its place, I burn these things  
To an image of you and me

But now that idol's gone-  
Taken down and destroyed.  
And as our heads rolled to my feet  
Clearly I could see yours, but  
I could barely recognize me.

The holes I burnt into the mirror,  
The idol of self I prayed I'd be  
Resembled not myself  
But what I wanted you to want in me.

III.

I can now make words out of

The sad droll of the lazy guitar  
Whose strings drip red with the blood,  
Of the strummer who's heart  
He had to cut with them  
To bring his red misery to life

To let this misery dwell within you,  
To let it course through your veins,  
To let it soak all the way through,  
And over you, hold its reigns

A blood that is not blood,  
But red as if so, and maybe redder than  
Will fill you from the chest up,  
Slowly to your head and o'er your skull  
And in that, that's all you'll see  
Through that, all will be

A misery that will take you from you,  
And without you, you shall cease  
And when there no longer is you  
Tis you who this misery will be

There is reason to bring this monster to life,  
To tease him out you— to make him so  
In body and person, before you to know  
To make him here, to seize him there  
To assign him upon earth— to give him where

Lodge a spear of self, its blade in place  
On a side where the most blood, it can drink  
And soon another you will form to face you—who sees as you do, and thinks as you think

Seize him: with arm over his arm, throw!  
Grab hold of his belt, take his neck  
Give nary the chance this misery to grow  
Too long has it come to govern you,  
Too long this chain to your mistresses grown

Before you they stand to mock you,  
Bleed them out despite you

IV.

Have you ever seen the inside-  
Of a prison cell with no bars  
Bound not by concrete,  
But by cowardice of the heart

Have you ever happened upon  
A cage that has no lock to pick  
That lets you out everyday  
But doesn't let what you want in

The inmates of prisons commonly seen  
Are kept from what they want  
The freedom of the outside  
The inmate that is the person I see  
Is kept from living-  
And is kept on wishing-  
On seeing a scene he'll never see  
A scene never he, only others can see  
A state never his, only others can be  
From living a life  
That I wanted for me

That world where on pixelated vellum holds,  
Pictures of paradise unfold,  
Where the sky is painted with ultramarine  
A deeper more vibrant hue than is seen  
Why when the eyes pull away,  
From the light of pixelated vellum sun  
The hue that greets you in real day  
Is drab and muted- splendor undone  
And the lucid orchestra of sweet violin,  
And the cabaret of piano plays-  
Allow the limelight light to fry your foolishness in  
And the sudden realization to stay

V.

He shadows me, he lingers behind my me  
But unlike a specter, I catch him as I turn,  
But when he turns to me, he doesn't see  
He doesn't see  
The anguish and horror,

That had disfigured my face  
As I see him dance  
and make all the wrong moves,  
and all the wrongs steps,  
to his untimely disgrace

And yet he and his partner dance  
To the sonata composed to young love,  
While they trip over each other's toes,  
Fall into and away from each other,  
And struggle to follow the notes.

The man I know, I realize—  
But the woman I can hardly see.  
In cadence they fail to step into each other,  
The sonata composed to young love,  
Sings an aria of the moon's burning light,  
And in its haunting shrill whose burning notes,  
To understand, no one bothers—  
The sonata composed to foolish love  
Sings a harmony that sets them to ruin one another.

As to if it was his unbuckled shoe,  
Or the train of her long dress,  
They stumble and fall in the dance,  
As around them, continue the rest.  
And in the tumult of the waltz, for a second—  
Of each other's hand they let go,  
And return to their own.  
As they stood up in the tumult of the dance,  
They turned to each other,  
To find themselves alone.

Careless was he,  
To let the buckle of his shoe be-  
And let the pomp of his dress and suit,  
Take up more space than it should.

Careless was I, in hatred of me,  
Of all that I was who was unable to be,  
What I thought you wanted of me.



In humiliation, I sought my every step,  
Be perfectly in step to your every step.  
My every move, to move perfectly,  
With your every move.  
And when I tripped, and when we fell.  
In my heart I cursed you-  
And on my lips as well

And when I got up to dance with you again,  
I turned to you, as if turning to go home,  
Only to turn to you and find myself alone.

I see now the madness of dress,  
I regret how I could not see this madness then.  
I dance alone, and turn to you,  
As if you were there still,  
Alone in this hall, dancing as we did then.  
Alone in this hall, that we may dance again.

## Notes on Legacy

By Jude Wilter Domen

The great sequoias were overarching,  
too far to reach for a boy like me.  
That promise of a bright marigold  
Among a field of moss.  
A tiny white lie by plenty  
Turned into an enormous ghost  
Haunting my every step under the canopy  
It is a graveyard of yesteryear's battles.  
Amidst the clash of swords,  
scars of the ground fade as I tread onwards  
in search of promise.  
My path weathered by past visions of my kin,  
glooming over my every hope.  
No wonder my kin cut me down  
Before I could look up farther  
All to keep me rooted in a familial earth.  
Maybe we're all little lies, deceptions we show,  
To grow in a forest of abandoned promise.

## **Mortal's Qualms**

By Lealina Evangeline Reyes

I have lived incomplete,  
A chalice left half empty.  
Time pours wine  
That never meets  
The rim of my cup,  
A burden I unknowingly carry.  
Does my innocence equate naivety?  
If I possess no wisdom of completeness  
Will I find meaning  
In living uncertainly?  
My life,  
So far from wholeness!

## **on the making of a signature**

By Zarelle Glen Dorothy A. Villanzana

freehand writing, cursive.  
an attempt for the star symbol,  
the letter A; guiltless  
until repetition, again and  
again, time to settle  
on a standard; permanence.  
practice freehand to fit  
the mold to follow,  
the strokes to trace  
without structure;  
now pressure to  
perfect,  
to repeat, to  
perfect.

# **I've forgotten how to write**

By Ysha Louise Danielle Bayotas

These words are void,  
Quaking letters adorned on rough canvas.  
They speak with no voice, no tone, nor intonation.  
Just words and words and scribbles on paper.

These ideas are painted in black and white.  
Monotonous. bland. no color, no life  
shaking and shivering, barely hanging on  
stuck and waiting for meaning on the page

these lines are a birdsong with no tune  
widowed music for a soundless heart  
arrhythmic deafening grating and harsh  
a whisper of a melody that could've been more

can try my best to remember  
strong memories and thoughts back together  
but I've forgotten how to write

# **The Morning is Imminent**

By Arianne Anthonette Piñero

I have to wake up  
Sleep, I bid a warm adieu  
I'll come back to you

## **For a moment**

By Jecho Adrian Ponce

For a moment, I see you  
and a curious bubble slides  
across the room, then turns  
into air. A bouquet of sparks  
leaves the plug on the wall and  
voltage to the floor; a piece  
of concrete cracks a little  
to the left; and someone somewhere  
across the sea loses her  
hat to the breeze. In the middle  
of a forest out there,  
a tree falls to the earth  
and catches its breath  
to call the wind, who  
—for a moment—sees everything.

# Ang Pagbasol Nga Way Sama

By Craze Herrenvolk Matildo

Sa dihang pagkakita ko kanimo, ang tanan mihunong  
Kasing-kasing ko nagdahunog og ako wala masayod  
Nangandoy nianang maanyag mong mga mata og pahiyom nga way sama  
Diay to, ako nabalag-ong na sa imoha

Sa hamubo nga pagkaila ko kanimo ikaw dili na mawala sa akong huna-huna  
Mahadlok akong mopa ambit ning gibati ko  
Kay ako nagtoo nga kini ugma damlag mahanaw lang sama sa aso  
Wala ako mopagawas og unsang pulong sa gibati ko kanimo

Milabay ang pila ka anyo og sa wala damha kita nagka-abot pag usab  
Imo akong gisangpit sa ngalan ko  
Nagdahum ako na kadtong higayona mao na ang saktong panahon na ikaw makabalo  
Apan paglingi ko aduna kanay hinigugma mo

Luha ko nagdagayday, kasing-kasing ko naghapdos  
Kasakit og kangitngitan sa dughan ko hangtod karon wala ma ayo



## **One-to-One**

By Arianne Anthonette Piñero

Taking walks with you  
Is like the sky, clouds combined  
White and turquoise blue

# **A bouquet of two calves**

By Reya Grace Hinaut

*for Laura Gilpin*

With sticky fingers the farm boys wrap their first ever bouquet:  
Newspaper for the wrapping, twine for the ribbon  
twin buds the focal flowers  
heavy skulls over the edge of the dinner table.

But heavy things are not to be carried in the house  
when a dam gives birth to new life;  
she cannot pour her love with no hungry mouth  
cracking open to receive it.

Mother bereaved tucks weary legs under empty womb,  
bending her own heavy skull toward the hay,  
two-headed silhouette where a warm body  
should have been.

# The car is a teleportation machine

By Jecho Adrian Ponce

Much is magic to the innocent,  
like all places are to the child asleep in the car.  
She has met the night and shaken hands  
But only introduces herself to the morning.

She does not know how she teleported  
from her visit to her grandparents,  
to her own lilac mattress. It was magic,  
and time will not rob her of it.

She does not remember stopping  
by her favorite store,  
waiting with her mother inside the car.  
She does not smell two ramen cups  
and one shared plastic fork. She does recall,  
in her dream, swinging by a hammock,  
bobbing up and down, until she settles  
firm on the pile of lilac flowers she gathered.

And she wakes. "Hello morning," she says.  
Magic tucked in the creases of her smile.

## **Bato Lata**

By Agnes Vida Lopez

In my neighborhood, children crowd the streets  
unafraid. They play and laugh, taking  
in the hours of summer. Unburdened  
by heat when the game is on.  
I watch as they walk, armed with slippers,  
barefoot, like it's nothing.  
I listen to the clinking of tin cans now taken over  
by young ones racing. All are eager to win  
but I know, they already have.



# **CREATIVE NON-FICTION**



# The Wrong Kind of People

By Olivia Anne Cabral

For eight hours a day, five days a week, I smelled like sugar. It was unavoidable. I am not sure if it was because every day I wore a mask covering my nose and mouth or because I spent most of my time with baked goods under my nose, but I never noticed the smell until other people pointed it out.

Somedays, after a shift, on our routine boba “dates,” Emma would tell me that I smelled nice and lean in closer.

I loved the bakery before it opened in the morning. The sun has yet to rise and the front lights are off. The thick wall between the store and the back keeps the loud machinery from disrupting the peace. The morning dew fogged up the windows and the chill of the morning vacated as soon as you entered.

The Mazzetti’s like to call all their staff family. But it’s not our name that is painted on the sign on the front of the building. Their name is on all our checks. Their name is on every box, sticker and uniform.

In my first few months of this job, I was afraid to talk to any of the bakers and decorators. I asked them utilitarian questions and avoided them any other time. All of them were immigrants, except for Paul, but everyone only really tolerates Paul. Mexicans and Puerto Ricans and Chinese. They have been with the bakery for generations. The dishwashers came and went, but the bakers would always be here. I’ve heard from Tong, and Jesus has a similar story, he didn’t always want to be a baker. He immigrated because “China was horrible” and when he got work here, he simply never left. He couldn’t afford to.

From what I’ve heard, their pay wasn’t bad at all. I would think it was a reward for lasting so long in this bakery, if it wasn’t for the long hours. They have the bread prepared before I get there at five in the morning. The dough is ready for the oven. Claudia once told me she gets less than four hours of sleep each night.

I haven’t concluded whether it’s a fair exchange or not. I don’t like waking up at four in the morning to open, but at least I get a decent amount of sleep beforehand. I get weekends



off too. The bakers only get Mondays off and that is when the whole bakery is closed.

The cashiers in the front are composed of high school and college students fresh from graduation. We are all in need of work experience; Mazzetti's is more than happy to provide. The job interview usually goes like this: Nice to meet you! When can you start?

It was here that I met Emma again. Because in a small town where all the queers are gathered in one bakery, of course I would see her again.

It was a miracle how we managed to get anything done. In this group of White lesbians and Wasian bisexuals, rumors turned into situations and it got messy. I was the only non-white queer girl among them. I grew accustomed to this, being the odd one out. I couldn't bring up white feminism without insulting the lesbians, because God forbid Phoebe Bridgers isn't the peak of activism.

When I first got the job, I thought this is where I finally belong. There were people I could talk about girls with and not get weird looks. I could be Filipino with the Filams and everyone understood each other.

There was, at some point, a tear in the system. There was a disconnect. The White lesbians could do no wrong, they hid behind their queerness like a fortress. The Wasians clung to their whiteness; it was the closest thing they had to power at this mom and pop shop. We created all these boxes and now we were locked inside them.

Emma tried to listen. I thought she was listening, at least. Our boba dates consisted of us having a "deep talk" as she would put it. In reality it was me ranting about something frustrating and her repeating what I said back to me as if she knew what I was talking about from the beginning.

I didn't notice this at first. Or maybe I did, but I didn't want to acknowledge it. She was giving me attention, I wasn't going to question it. It was the first time someone wanted to actually get to know me. I wasn't being asked out as a joke and she didn't hang out with me out of pity.

For thirty minutes out of my eight hour shift, I sat on a questionable wooden stool and ate my chocolate glazed donut. I listened to my coworkers gossip. Natalie T. heard from Natalie C. who heard from Rosie that Matthew said... They mostly talked about relationships. Victoria

got back together with her ex. Donia is engaged at the ripe age of nineteen. AJ baby-trapped his girlfriend.

They came to me with their problems and I doled out advice like the bakery's own love doctor. I had my own problems with love: my love, other people's "love" for me. No one seemed to be listening, though.

Bailey has a little crush on me, despite her insistence that she's straight. I should have seen it coming, I was partially disappointed that I didn't. She was really into K-pop. I looked like the perfect gay awakening for an Asian-fetishizer. Pale skin. Eyes that disappeared when I smiled. My friends poked fun. They called her my "sugar mama," because she would bring me gifts every once in a while. I would accept them, because a gift is a gift, but just thinking about the meaning behind it made me want to crawl into a ditch.

Chris, our forty-five year old dishwasher, stared at me his entire shift like a little boy with a crush on his teacher. When I say his entire shift, I mean it. It was uncomfortable in the beginning. I reported him. I avoided him at every turn, but there was never a change. I had moved out of uncomfortable and into furious.

Mostly, I watched Emma. How good she was with customers. She had just gotten out of a long term relationship. That's why our boba "dates" weren't actually dates. She needed time to process and I was giving her that time. I thought all she needed was time.

Tuesdays were the slowest day of the week. Customers were few and far between. I took up a whole bench across from Tong. Every five minutes he'd tell me to "smile more" as if making cookie trays was something I should be excited about. If I made twenty four or one hundred, Matthew would still be dissatisfied.

There were too many people working in the front, it was getting crowded out there. Emma sought solace in the back making boxes next to me.

I kept track of all the things I still had to do and what little time I had to do them, but it was as if she was determined to distract me.

"Here is my question of the day." She had made a habit of asking an out-of-pocket question whenever we were scheduled together. It usually didn't lead to anything good.

I deadpanned, "Oh no."

“Do you have a type?”

“No, not really,” I shrugged.

“No, but like, from your past crushes have you noticed, like, a pattern?” She had a silly grin on her face. The same grin she always had when she thought she was onto something big.

“What do you mean?”

“Like, have they been mostly Asians? White people? Latino?”

I was taken back by the question. It didn’t sit right with me. Still, I humored her. “No, it doesn’t matter to me.” I shrugged. I didn’t take my eyes off the cookies.

Chris was staring at me again. I could feel it. I had built a wall between us out of boxed orders, but he always finds a way, always.

# Grief for Things Unknown

By Jireh Catacutan

The queer experience as a young boy is nowhere near as bright as the flags raised in June. Unlike other boys, I was lucky enough not to be forced to play with robots. Maybe the gods knew who I was before I did, so they let me play with animals, plus an affinity for books rather than remote-controlled cars. However, I still found it odd why my parents kept being in denial when our neighbors and relatives would continuously ask me to dance the infamous Spageti Song by The Sexbomb Girls at every gathering. The old ones cheered and laughed, but once I left the room I knew they snickered. *What a waste it would be for the youngest and only son to turn out gay.* At age six, my father's friends would ask me during parties if I had my eye out for girls, and if I said no, they'd ask me if I was gay. I was. No one told me it was wrong, but I figured it out myself by how they spoke about it. Something God forbid. Unnatural. Vile.

I wish I lived like the first few minutes of Lukas Dhont's *Close*, running freely in a field of peonies, oblivious to reality, unafraid to speak of love and show affection. There are many connections we build out of innocence and then severed for conformity, and unfortunately, this is how most male friendships work. There is a point in a boy's life where he expresses love without hesitance, the only years where a man could speak the truth. These moments are seen in Leo's eyes as he watched Remi sleeping in the same bed. His mouth widening into a smile as he watched his friend play the oboe or make a sketch. These moments soon fade when the boys step back into school, both a place of learning and a breeding ground for heteronormativity. When Leo and Remi step out of the comfort of their own space, the classroom becomes a place of questioning. There was a scene where two girls asked them a question about their relationship, asking if they were together. Moments like that are a canon event for every young gay boy. Everyone seems to know what you are before you do.

I remember in elementary being one out of the seven boys enrolled in a special section for children who were deemed "smart." In that section, the students would remain from the first grade until the sixth. I was in second grade when I transferred and for the rest of elementary, I

was in a class of thirty-two girls and seven boys. I knew I was different. I was always with girls rather than boys, always left out in conversations about basketball and Transformers. On days when there are no classes, they hang out in internet cafes or at someone else's house where they make inside jokes I never got to know. There were others like me in school not hiding. Flaunting their feminine wiles through high jumps in a game of Chinese garter or as they braided the hairs of their female classmates. Others never said anything about being gay but were still called names because their voices sounded different. I was one of them. I knew I was different. When girls asked me why I was the way I am, my heart would start to race. I get scared when people play truth or dare because whenever I pick the truth, I am always asked the same question.

When the world around you questions your being, especially at a young age, your only option is to prove them wrong. Most boys conform since it's the most viable option. Maybe if they liked the same things as the others, they'd forget about what their heart tells them to. In my case that wasn't my first choice, I studied to make myself look better. I had to prove that I was smart enough not to be called names. Although that was never enough. In *Close*, Leo looked for a space he could fit in, and it was ice hockey that made him feel normal.

I once admired the bond of male friendships, the rowdiness of it all, the inside jokes in locker rooms, and the secret handshakes. In fifth grade, I remember the boys in my class coming back from camp. I was too frail at that time so the teachers didn't allow me to come along. The boys talked about how they crawled through mud and walked in tightropes, everyone flocked to their seats and listened as if it was a fable told by their grandmothers. What's it like when people listen to you? They went on recounting the moments they spent in tents and I wanted that too. To be one of the boys. Like I said, working hard never compromises the feeling of being left out so I joined them the next year. Peter was the name of the guy I shared a tent with. He was one of those popular boys from the hetero section who would run across the school in his sweaty white sando looking for a fight every chance he got. We only shared the tent because our mothers knew each other and not solely based on the fact that the other six boys from my class shared a tent excluding me. Sleeping in flimsy tents under heavy rains, the pungent smell of NFA rice, and the lack of water in nearby bathrooms. The camp was five days of torture. Until on the last day, a scoutmaster found me shivering inside the tent. The rest was a blur and I woke up at

the hospital. The sweat drying on my back for days and sleeping against the cold ground only parted by the tent's fabric had caused pneumonia. When I went back to school, nothing new had happened. There was no memory of the boys and I bonding, no stories exchanged beside the campfire, no inside jokes formed by the river during the scout's morning bath. In a way, it felt like grief. I had lost the chance of becoming a man.

For half of the movie, Leo's grief was felt through the screen. There were no explicit explanations on why he grieved other than losing a friend. We never get to know if he was grieving because he never got the chance to tell Remi he was special one last time. Maybe he thought he shouldn't have pushed Remi in the schoolyard. Maybe he should've let his friend join the hockey team. But a dead person could never answer the questions inside our head, we are left to grieve and answer these ourselves. Unfortunately, grief does not only come after death. It can come after losing touch with a friend or saying no to an opportunity given. Most of us wanted to comfort Leo but it would be no use, grieving for things unknown becomes familiar in a queer man's life.

If *Close* had been rewritten and Remi stayed alive, would things have happened differently? Would they continue to share the same bed in closed doors and do their best to not touch bodies in the schoolyard? If we want to take the happier route, the boys could embrace their feelings and stay friends or become even more, but the world isn't like that. At that age, one is likely to conform and they would drift apart. For boys like Remi who is careful in nature, he would automatically be called names and people would start to either walk on eggshells or just throw eggs out of spite. Maybe in another world, there is a manuscript where Remi would see past thirteen. Sure, the script would sound hopeful but it would be another setup for grief. If the boys lived and entered the new world of high school treachery, things might still take a turn to the original script. High school is where every hormone in a teenager's body starts to act up, boys start to court girls, while the gays sit at the bleachers and watch everyone fall in love. Of course, you'd be happy for them but it always leaves the question of worth. Why do high school love stories only happen for straight boys and girls? If we ever do express love at a young age, why did it have to be in secret? Am I not meant to be loved in front of others? These questions from a teenage gay boy would soon turn into a different kind of grief. He is aware of the things

he wished to have, but grieving for the moments he could never know if someone loved him or at least showed him he was normal and worthy of love like the rest.

In this age, there is more liberation. Same-sex relationships among the youth are more common, unafraid to be themselves in this cruel world. However, there are those that remain like Leo and Remi, a generation continuously grieving for the moments they have lost or could never know for they were too scared to be themselves. It is heartbreaking to see how society could shape and ruin people's minds that other boys would rather choose to not exist than be themselves. They say that for a gay man, they start their lives in their late twenties. They spend their early years pretending to be someone else until they finally muster the courage to embrace themselves. But again, that is not the case for everyone, hence there are those who are partnered, engaged, and married with kids in hook-up apps looking for a twink to fuck. There is so much to unpack there, but clearly, it is a result of our vindictive heteronormative society. These men have missed their youth, forced to conform until it left them lurking behind empty profile pictures.

I have always wondered what would happen if I came out earlier. What would happen if I was like Remi and Leo behind closed doors, unafraid to embrace my identity? Would I have been bullied in elementary? Would I have experienced the sweet puppy love you only get in high school? I could never turn back time so instead I'll look at the world and see its slow turn for acceptance. I will grieve for the things I will never know, but I will continue to live not only for myself but to prove to young boys like Remi that despite the grief, there will always be love.

## **Fragile, please handle with care**

By Colleen Dugan

Ages one to four, all I remember is our dogs, Troy, Priscilla, and Dalmatian, and that we moved from Dumaguete to Manila. Age five was when I began to store important memories in boxes colorfully labeled as: stuff toys, books, firsts, but certain memories were labeled with a harsh DO NOT OPEN! and threw them so far back in my mind, it took nine years, and two persistent best friends later for me to start unpacking them. Maybe I shouldn't have, maybe I should've waited. But when we drove to the farm, seeing that Winnie the Pooh stuff toy in that dimly lit bodega kicked the boxes out of my subconscious mind. Fucking Winnie the Pooh, that honey addicted bear, can you believe it?

Opening boxes are like opening presents, your excitement is based on who gave it to you, and the size of the box it's wrapped in. Obviously. At age four my first box was labeled: dogs. I don't remember who gave it to me, but I can remember there were three boxes inside it. Troy was a jealous mixed Doberman who rather I play with him than with my plastic pony toys, which he broke with his teeth. Our floppy-eared Priscilla was a very motherly dog, her first litter had almost been a dozen, unfortunately many of her

pups died. Finally, Dalmatian. You guessed it, because she was a damn dalmatian. She'd always been shy, and stuck to herself. But she was kind, and loved to lick our palms. But as we left my hometown Dumaguete, it saddened me that that box of mine was soon taped up, and carefully placed away from the spotlight of my mind. Until fifteen years later my oldest brother drove me to pick up, surprise, surprise, this special box labeled in purple ink: Laoch, and boy was I thrilled. Another addition, I slowly cut the tape, placing Laoch on top of the three boxes that have long since passed. May they rest in doggy paradise. So, this first box I leave it open as long as I've got my Doberman who waits for me at the farm, there's no need to tape this box up.

From ages four to nineteen my family moved five times, and five times I had tearfully said goodbye to each box I labeled: home. Moving when I was four had been easy, leaving our



dogs was the only difficult part. I was excited, who wouldn't? I'd grown up with trees, wild animals, and my siblings as my only playmates; moving meant I got to see a different part of the world, the city side of the world. Home one was my hometown where I was born, which I was very eager to tape up. Home two was where I spent my childhood, met new playmates, and learned how to swim. I'd gotten so dark, my mom had to practically drag my ass out, and into our one room unit, which we shared with fucking cockroaches. Those shits stink, but thankfully they don't fly. Home three was fleeting but painful. Two years we lived in that small apartment that cost too much, and caused too much pain to my mother. It was the first-time we children were called to the local barangay because she was finally fed up with the maltreatment the landowners inflicted on her. She cried then, and I remember very vividly how in an alternative universe I'd gauge out the landowners fucking eyes out with my hands, her eyes were popping out of its own sockets, bulging eyed bitch. Home four was the happiest home I still, to this day, find it bullshit I had to say goodbye.

Six years ago we lived in our two-story apartment, which was a first for us. Six years I collected keychains, popsicle sticks, love letters, and gum wrappers. Six years I encountered people who held me for a single moment, but their memory lasted years. Six years since I first learned I was capable of being loved. It sounds fucking pathetic, but love familywise was drilled into me as a necessity, a responsibility one had for their blood relatives. It didn't matter shit what trauma they caused you over, and over again, so long as their blood ran through your veins, you had to love them. Of course, I grew to understand the hell they'd put me through, eventually loving them as how I learned what love meant over the years, but that love I felt six years ago? Nothing has come quite close to it. Maybe that's why it was so fucking hard to say goodbye.

Home five is the farm, where my family currently wrestles with the goats, fight off the scorching heat of the sun, and shout like crazy people who live mountains away from each other just to fondly announce, "Mga buang, kaon na!". Where I collected my father's gardenias to place them behind my mother's ear, and where my Laoch patiently waits for me, her mother, to come home. Moving homes moved things in perspective. I was able to let go of childish possessions that no longer meant as much, met people who changed the way I approached strangers, and stubbornly distract myself from reaching into dusty boxes that sat in the dimly lit

space at the back of my mind. Those whose labels were harshly written in black ink, all in capital letters, as if to ward me off from opening them ever again. Which I had no damn intention to open yet had not two of my persistent best friends chanting why, why, why, as if to bewitch me into handing the box to them only for them to carelessly rip open the tapes without considering reading the label just to feed their fucking curiosity. And they were fucking fed.

From ages six to thirteen my parents would occasionally let me sip alcohol. I didn't like it at first, hell no, it wasn't like mountain dew, or iced tea. My mother's rice wine was fucking terrible even when it was just a teaspoon worth. It tasted like shit.

Sorry, ma. But then my father introduced sparkling wine and champagne, they were so damn sweet. My sweet tooth ached for more, so what did I do? I started tiptoeing my way to the fridge, grabbing a plastic cup from the table, and almost emptied the bottles left unattended. Keeping quiet was extremely hard since we lived in a one room apartment, the only room separated with a door was the door to the hallway. But my then best friend taught me how to creep into the school's tiny storage room, taking small stuff out, "that's why our parents pay tuition," she reasoned hesitantly when I asked her once. Both times, I felt this exhilarating feeling of excitement and fear. Every time I succeed both times, I do it more often. Now only with alcohol, not the school stuff. Silly me, I never learned.

It was at age fourteen when my friends ripped the tapes of those warned off boxes. With each move my skill at tiptoeing increased, I felt like a fucking ninja. Silently creeping down the wooden stairs, not a creak heard, carefully opening the fridge to slowly take out the bottles just for me to chug them down my throat. They were in shock, I wasn't of course, I tried to explain how each bottle brought a different level of sweetness I silently began to realize I desperately craved. But one box was not enough. The question why came after each box they ripped open, like detectives trying to piece together the puzzle of what happened to me. As if they needed to fucking know that.

Each box they unceasingly dragged to the spotlight shut them up, for the most part. But you know who I so badly wanted to shut up? My mother.

For as long as I can remember, ages four to seventeen, my mother loved to run her mouth every chance she got, and what are the chances she's a stay at home mom. Her eyes were

like a hawk always seeing every spectacle of dust us kids weren't able to spot, the palm of her hand grabbing whatever available tool that was within reach every time one of us tried to explain ourselves, the constant nagging of focusing on our studies and refusing to allow us to play with our playmates because we wouldn't benefit from it. Because children didn't need to develop their social skills by playing, am I right? Every move chipped the relationship she and I had, straining, tainting, and choking it. Every move was tiring, but every move she started to show the same three lettered word my persistent friends questioned me with my every move. Only, it would be so much worse to let her see what those boxes contained than my friends just so I can shut her up, so much fucking worse. So tell me why I was dumb enough to think I was tight lipped enough to keep it between my friends and I even when I was drunk? It might not have been one of the heavier boxes, but it shut her up, and shook my family up. But did that stop me from drinking? Nope, with popping ps.

What makes someone alcoholic? From ages fourteen to nineteen I asked myself this question a thousand times a day, while drawing on my skin. The teachers were sometimes so damn boring to listen to, and there was never a day I didn't have ink on my skin. My mother always scolded me about it, "you're wasting ink." she'd firmly say. "And I'm wasting away." I wanted to reply. My mother began to shout at me less and less though, thank fuck for that, slippers and belts stopped flying around when I was twelve, so I was glad she started to scold me less each day. But when she did, I realized why my runaway older brother told me her mouth reminded him of an ak-47, because - aside from being a pretty gun - it fired 600 rounds per minute, given that its setting was fully automatic, which was also the type of car she drives, automatic. She couldn't handle manuals, that's why when we started going to our farm in Batangas more often, my siblings and I were taught by our father to drive a manual, all of my father's children were taught how to drive a manual, well, those of us who were old enough to anyway. No Bry, you're still twelve, wait till you turn seventeen.

I think that's why I was a difficult child to train. I wanted to learn how to drive a manual when my workaholic father had time to teach me how to steer the wheel.

Automatics were an easy thing to learn, but manuals? My mother confessed that the moment she slowly let go of the clutch, to start pressing on the gas scares the shit out of her. I

was- am a manual child. But with each move, she started to lose interest in learning how to drive a manual. Which somehow discouraged me, times are changing yet she still holds onto the past that frankly she doesn't even realize she's still holding.

Which was hypocritical, because every time I look into the rearview mirror, I can see the younger version of me staring out of the window wondering when will I be strong enough to open those boxes, and empty it out in the ocean?

The final time my boxes were opened without my consent was at age nineteen. It was ten days after I had just turned nineteen. The boxes I shoved, but carefully put away for my own safety, were hauled out, ripped open, and examined without considering its effect on its owner. An email was all it took to crumble the ground I stood on. Tell me why I called my best friend in the middle of the night with offensive tears, whispering in my brother's bathroom asking him that same bullshit question, why, but this time the context was out, everyone knew. Tell me why I cried to him, and not my sister who owned a Winnie the Pooh stuff toy herself. She would have understood the context of the email way more intimately than he would, she partially knows what I kept in those boxes. But still I cried till I couldn't fucking breathe. Yet he calmed me down, and lulled me to sleep.

Eighteen and nineteen were the ages I felt like the ocean was going to swallow me whole. I was trying to open the boxes, finally opening the fucking boxes everyone seems to try and coax me to open for myself. I was physically far from the ocean yet I felt the tidal waves crashing into me with every piece I picked up, every memory my finger touched, my lungs felt like they were filled with water and I couldn't take a second to breathe. When the box filled with slashes were opened, every stranger who was once a friend eyed me with curious disgust. Wondering and realizing how I could just be another careless child allowing my skin to scrape and bleed from random objects in different streets but covering it with a smile. Or rather, a nonchalant façade trying to keep it together, trying to keep her fucking self together. I forced myself to stop. I couldn't allow myself to open them the way they did, insensitive to its effects on me. So I took a year off because hell fucking no am I going to college with this pain anchoring me down, sinking me deeper into the ocean.

It's been a year since then. A year since everyone's knowing looks, pitiful words, and selfish curiosity. I feel like I'm not drowning as much as I used to. I take my time opening the boxes, caressing each memory before writing them on a piece of tissue then allowing the ocean to swallow them. I'm fucking twenty now, and I finally know what makes someone alcoholic. It's an uncontrollable desire to drink, drink, drink every second of every damn day away. To drink your problems, your demons, and yeah, to drink your painful fucking secrets away.

# **A Chapter of Unspoken Longing in My Seminary Life Confession**

By Jenifer Dumagal

In the quiet corridors of my seminary life, where prayers echoed and friendships blossomed, there unfolded a chapter that remains etched in the pages of my memory—a chapter of unspoken longing and a heart left in fragments.

In my seminary days, I was immersed in the study of theology, prayer, and the camaraderie of like-minded individuals. The seminary became not just a place of learning but a community where bonds were forged, and friendships held a holy ground in our journey toward spiritual growth.

Amidst the solemnity of the chapel bell and the rustle of academic pages, there existed a quiet corner of my heart where a different melody played. A melody born from the companionship of a fellow student, a friendship that evolved into something more profound, yet never finding its voice in spoken words.

Her name was Alpha, a fellow seminarian with a heart as earnest as her commitment to faith. We shared classes, theological debates, and the simple joys of seminary life. In the ordinary rhythm of our days, an extraordinary emotion began to stir within me—a feeling I dared not speak but couldn't ignore.

The bench beside the chapel, with its peaceful surroundings and the gentle rustling of leaves, became a witness to the silent conversations of my heart. As the seasons changed, so did the landscape of my emotions, yet the unspoken truth lingered like a quiet prayer. One dawn in the breeze of December, I found myself sitting face to face from Alpha, just sitting formally but hearts concealed. The dormitory's study room, usually a sanctuary of quiet study, transformed into a theater of emotions as I grappled with the decision to reveal the unspoken. The air was thick with the scent of fresh air in the new morning. In that moment, with a mix of nervousness

and determination, I decided to lay bare the sentiments that had silently woven themselves into the fabric of our friendship.

"Alpha," I began, my voice a hesitant whisper amid the hushed ambiance of the room. "There's something I need to tell you." Her eyes, usually warm and understanding, met mine with curiosity as I mustered the courage to continue.

"I've cherished our friendship deeply, and I never imagined it would evolve into something more, but it has," I confessed, each word carrying the weight of vulnerability. "I've come to realize that my emotions toward you extend beyond friendship, Alpha."

The moments that ensued stretched on endlessly as I anxiously awaited her reply, my heart thumping loudly in the serene study room. Her expression softened, briefly igniting a spark of hope within me. Yet, when she spoke, her gentle words shattered the delicate bubble of my anticipation.

"Thank you for being honest with me," she began, her tone kind but decisive. "I value our friendship a lot, but I don't feel the same way. I hope we can still be friends." I was speechless and tears poured out of my eyes. She added, "we can be friends but not like just before, respect the gap between us."

And with those words, the study room colder than I felt, it turned into a heavy burdened heart, and the sunlit pages of my seminary life was suddenly felt heavy. The unspoken longing, now spoken, hung in the air like an unresolved chord. In the aftermath of that confession, the seminary's routine continued, but the landscape of our friendship had changed. The bench beside the chapel, once a haven of shared laughter, seemed to echo with the remnants of my unrequited feelings. The unspoken now spoken had altered the dynamics, casting a shadow on what was once uncomplicated camaraderie.

Seminary classes became a balancing act of maintaining composure, and the chapel, once a source of solace, felt like a silent confessional for my wounded heart. The days turned

into weeks, and I grappled with the dichotomy of being in the same area yet feeling emotionally distant.

The seminary community, supportive and understanding, provided a backdrop to my healing process. Friends offered words of encouragement, and spiritual formators shared insights on navigating the complexities of emotions within seminary life. Yet, the ache persisted, a testament to the vulnerability of confessing unspoken feelings.

As the semesters unfolded, I sought solace in prayer and reflection, turning to the seminary's teachings for guidance on love, loss, and the resilience of the human spirit. Theology, once an academic pursuit, became a balm for my wounded soul as I delved into the wisdom of faith to make sense of my own journey. In the quietude of my seminary room, I grappled with questions of divine purpose and the meaning of love within the context of my own heartbreak. The sanctified texts became a source of solace, providing narratives of love, longing, and the transformative power of faith.

The seasons changed, and so did the landscape of my emotions. The bench beside the chapel, once a witness to unspoken confessions, became a space of personal renewal. In the gentle rustle of leaves, I found a metaphor for the shedding of old emotions, making way for the growth of resilience and understanding.

In the final chapters of my seminary life, I discovered that healing was a gradual process, much like the turning of pages in a sanctified text. The dormitory study room, once a witness to my vulnerability, became a place of quiet contemplation, and the chapel bell, though still poignant, now carried echoes of resilience.

As I stood on the threshold of covenanting, I reflected on the seminary chapter that had unfolded—a chapter marked by the courage to confess, the pain of unreciprocated feelings, and the gradual emergence of a healed heart. The seminary, with its lessons of theology and life, had become a crucible for personal growth.



# I Was Born Twice

By River Ketnirattana

I was born twice. First on a July afternoon, cradled in the arms of my mother where I had cried for the very first time in my life. I had cried until the city by the sea had become drenched in my tears. I cried as my mother held me, gave me the name River. I was born a second time, in the backseat of a Toyota, Lopburi, around eight in the evening. I cried just as plenty, enough to fill the Chao Phraya, “Liwah,” she said, my aunt. We call my aunt by her childhood nickname, Snow. “Liwah, you cry just like a baby.”

\* \* \*

My father never pronounced the letters R and V in my name, and for that reason I was pronounced Liwah in my home. When writing on old, elementary pad paper, the first attempts to write my name was in English, and so I did not write Liwah. My pencil strokes were weak, clumsy, a child’s best to stay in the boundary of red, white, and blue spaces. Each line that made up my name was too timid to meet another, and the letters always strayed out of the papered guidelines. I remember it here that I had a heart that needed belonging and an eye for betrayal. I remember drawing houses the same, unfamiliar way, with the lack of an open window, a chimney I’ve never seen before (the International school taught us so, the Westerners do so we must), the apple tree, tire swing, but this I know by heart, the yellow crayoned sun beaming at the top right corner. I remember it here that I had a love for coloring outside of the lines. I remember the shape of my father’s back (I always faced his back). I remember this the most: I remember that one day, the pillars of our house had given in. I remember the ceiling caving in on us both. My father stood tall to take the sun out of its corner, grasped it in his palms, and ate it, and left—and took with him Liwah. I took a good look at myself, and then I was River, who could write in cursive, and draw tall, strong houses.

\* \* \*

I was often in awe while watching my mother prepare breakfast. My mother had everything around the house named and labeled, typewriter paper stuck on each jar and container. It was a habit kept from a distant time; the kitchen bottles were named soy sauce, not *patis*, so that my father could not mistake it for anything else. This is how she could never mistake sugar for salt, or pepper for sand that she kept from a favorite shore. When she called my name after preparing a meal she did not say River, but *anak, bata, langga* instead. This is how I could never mistake her fondness for anything else.

When I was nineteen, I lived apart from my mom and no longer heard my name. In Tanjay, I listened to the birds, the cicadas, the roosters to fill in the spaces. I was furious with my mother, and so I silenced her. I gave her voice to those that could only murmur. I did my own sorting: If it was *langga* that I heard from the evening wind, I would then be a child again, swearing to never bite the hand that feeds me, my heart would be soft, and my fist small again. If it was *River* I heard, then I had shot up to be 5'7" tall; my pink, flowery bed sheets stained with blood, my back straightened to command some semblance of a respect, and I would never long for my mother again. This performance would last many years, as if almost a dance I had memorized and knew which foot to put forward, which hand to hold, which woman I would long to receive an applause so long as I heard my name.

\* \* \*

I was born a second time, in the backseat of a Toyota, Lopburi, around eight in the evening. My father was nowhere to be found; he had moved to Chiang Mai instead, a colder city north in Thailand. My aunt had been driving for an hour, and we arrived home after we had finished eating at a family restaurant. My aunt, we call her by her childhood nickname: Akho Snow. I had never seen snow in the city I was first born in, where it always sweltered with heat or rain, where I was too little to see above me. Snow, then, was only something I had seen on television, cold, white, unimaginable—she was never by my side, she did not exist until I had known of her, she did not have a face, yet here she was. Her back facing towards me. An avalanche of silence had flooded the windows as soon as Akho had turned the ignition off. All

four sides of our car had caged us, kept us still in what was half birth and half burial. My mother sat next to me but did not say a word, neither did she call my name. Instead, she lay her head on my shoulder (which would soon turn into an anchor). The world stood still, cold and heavy, as Snow drummed her heavy fingers on the steering wheel; my second life in her second hands. I was faced with the familiar shape of her back. It was here, in her deep voice, that she called out to me. Liwah had returned, a crying, little child, cradled in her mother's arms once more. If I looked closer, I could see the sun at

the corner of my window. If I listened close enough, I could hear water seeping out, how gently the snow had melted to trickle back to the ground.

\* \* \*

After a child is born, they must eventually learn how to write their name. I wrote my name in Thai, in the same clumsy strokes, on an old sticky note absent of red, white, blue spaces. How thrilled I was to write. Seated in the kitchen of my lost home, Ama had made us my father's favorite kind of *lugaw*. Akho Snow had taught me to write the characters, to engrave it as close to my heart as possible. The sun had risen high that day and I had grown tall enough to finally reach it. My mother had gone out earlier to find freshly bloomed flowers, to find *borapha* to plant back home. As we passed by the market, a monkey had kept watch over me from its temple, its arm on a smaller one. *Naam*, my Akho said. It is of water, and so it is River, and Liwah, of blood and of home. I was Naam when I crossed the sea, and I was Naam when I left Lopburi in a taxi. It rained twice as hard that day, enough to fill the Chao Prahya.

# **ARTWORK AND PHOTOS**





## Photo 1

By Myke Catilogo

Much like Neil Armstrong's unwavering dedication to exploring the cosmos and making the most of his limited time on Earth, there is a growing spirit of exploration and innovation in the world of oceanography and marine science. Recent achievements include breakthroughs in deep-sea exploration technology, which have enabled us to reach some of the most remote and mysterious parts of the ocean floor. Just as Armstrong's historic moonwalk expanded our understanding of space, these oceanic innovations are expanding our knowledge of the alien and fascinating ecosystems that exist beneath the waves, reminding us that the spirit of exploration knows no bounds, whether in space or beneath the sea.



## Buglasan

By Rainne Nocete

Performers give their all during the Buglasan 2023 Festival of Festivals Street Dance.



## Ikaw!

By Rainne Nocete

Buglasan performer singles out an audience member as part of the street dance.





## Photo 2

By Myke Catilogo

Our childhood is something we truly treasure. The times we lose grasp of our past are the times we need truly need it the most.



## Photo 3

By Myke Catilogo

No words can explain the rawness of crying children, especially one filled with hate towards one's brother. You just feel like going, "sumat ta ikaw kan mama."

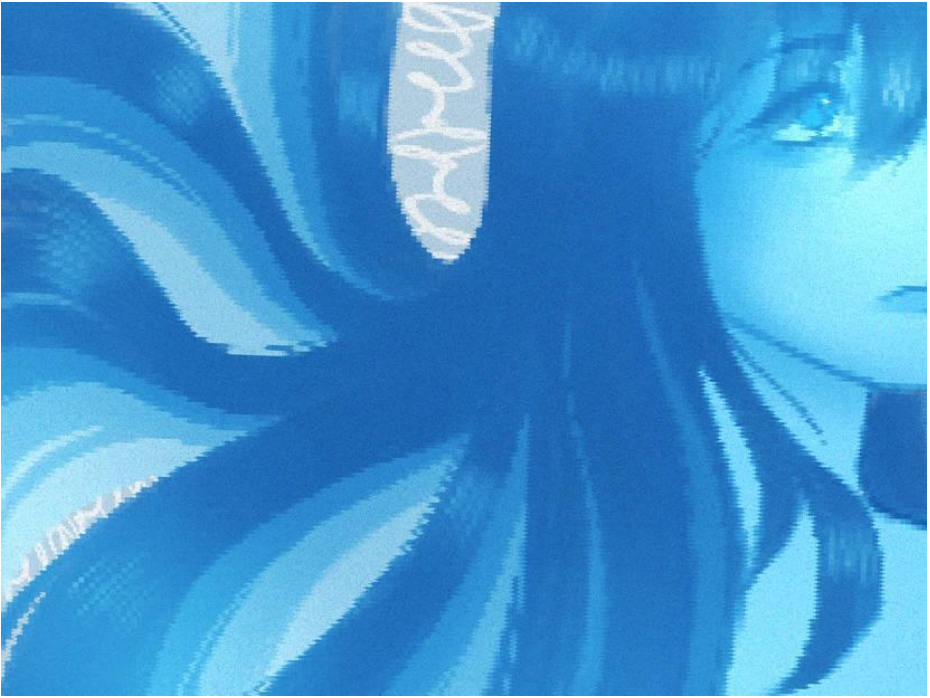




## **Photo 4**

By Myke Catilogo

Ballet is a magnificent art form that, with its delicate grace, captures the soul as well as the eyes. Every plié and pirouette are performed with meticulous accuracy, creating a movement symphony that turns the human body into a living canvas for artistic expression. Ballet is unique because of its intense passion, not just its physical prowess. Each performance is a labor of love for the dancers, who put everything they have into each move. Their passion shows through with intensity on stage, captivating audiences and sparking a sense of wonder and connection that is felt by all. Ballet is evidence of the powerful synthesis of artistry and passion, a dazzling fusion that makes an everlasting impression on those who are fortunate enough to experience it.



## **tide over**

By Nina Isabelle Alolod

A few days prior to the first semester of my last year in university, my parents came with my brother and I back to Dumaguete. My parents left the city on separate days but the night before remained consistent—there was a meal and then a walk by Rizal Boulevard. I continued to walk the same route I did with my family weeks after they were gone and I'd usually end up sitting on top of the sea wall that was on the farther end of the boulevard. I'd sit there for a long time just watching the waves, breathing in the salty air, and listening to music that made me feel like I was in a Studio Ghibli movie. Then, I'd watch the sunset and pretend my hometown was just on the horizon before walking back to my dormitory to rot in my bed.



## Photo 5

By Myke Catilogo

We might feel that our birthdays are just not it, it's a heavy day. We don't have the strength to get up and celebrate on our birthdays, and its completely valid. Birthdays are "important" but sometimes it's a chore to show yourself and get ready on your "big day".



## Needy

By Reya Grace Hinaut

There is a stray cat who sometimes visits my apartment. I feed him occasionally, but not always. So far, he has been given whole cans of sardines, restaurant takeout, expensive canned tuna, and Jollibee chicken. I have a photo album with 77 pictures of him. When I am missing everyone at home, six hours away, I go outside and I hope he is there. He is old and fat, and soft to the touch. He is everything to me, but I am nothing to him.





## **Exit**

By Rainne Nocete

The acacia trees bid you farewell after a long day in school.



## **Ravello on a Break**

By Rainne Nocete

Often packed Ravello Ball Field takes a breather from students on a weekend.



## **Ginhawa**

By Rainne Nocete

Wheel-bound elderly lady breathes in the sea.



# **CRITICAL ESSAYS**





## **WTB/LFS: Cultural Paper on BNS; can PAYO PH**

By Alyana Marie Aguja

I have been deep in this shit for so long now that this paper is finally my excuse to talk about all of this in a space where people are (literally required) going to listen to me ramble as I talk about the Buy and Sell culture, more specifically, K-pop BNS culture in the Philippines. However, before everything else, it is essential to talk about K-pop itself. The modern perception of “K-pop” with the image of idols started in the 1990s, which amassed enormous fandoms of teenagers and young adults. It became its own subculture. After a slump in early idol music, in 2003, TVXQ and BoA started a new generation of K-pop idols that broke the scene into the neighboring Japanese market and continue to popularize K-pop internationally today (of course, with the help of other artists). When the initial K-pop wave hit the Philippines with the likes of Wonder Girls with “Nobody,” 2ne1’s “Fire,” and Super Junior’s “Sorry, Sorry,” despite the extreme popularity, the people who subscribed to that kind of music were often shunned. The comments that were always along the lines of: “Do you even understand what you’re listening to?”, “Kingkoy kaayo’g mga sanina” and the timeless “Pang bayot man na uy” were prevalent towards those who liked the genre. The second wave of K-pop, which for me solidified the permanence of the genre in the international scene, was when PSY dropped his classic banger “Gangnam Style.” Now, that shook the world. It had people doing the dance that was later named after the song. People from different corners of the globe were dancing to it, and from then on, K-pop made a gradual and steady entry into people’s lives.

K-pop has evolved so much from the time when H.O.T<sup>1</sup> or S.E.S<sup>2</sup> were still the talk of the town. Fashion choices have since evolved with time; the genre has partially distanced itself from its black hip-hop origins, makeup choices have been more catered to follow Western standards of beauty, and fandom culture, linked with consumerist culture due to fast-

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<sup>1</sup> H.O.T. was a South Korean boy band that was created by SM Entertainment in 1996. They are considered to be the first K-pop idol group and their successful formula became the model for many K-pop groups that followed them.

<sup>2</sup> S.E.S. was a South Korean girl group formed in 1997 by SM Entertainment. Their debut album *I’m Your Girl* sold 650,000 copies, becoming the third best-selling album by a female group in South Korea.

paced release of merchandise, has gone on a steep incline that has no signs of stopping. And I am going to admit, I was part of that.

When the pandemic hit, and everybody was forced to stay in their homes, I spiraled deeper into the world of K-pop. I was up to date on so many different types of content, music show performances, variety show releases, reality shows, behind-the-scenes, and, of course, the music. I used to be the type to judge people for buying merch. I always thought to myself that it was wasteful. That these things didn't really serve a lot of purpose apart from being decoration. I used to just buy cheap Lomo cards and call it a day. It was feeding into a consumerist culture where people constantly purchased these items with no real purpose apart from satisfying their desires to consume and find that "thrill." And it was fun when things were... simpler. I got introduced to BNS Twitter by one of my friends who was also into K-pop. She was a K-pop stan<sup>3</sup> but for a different group. She taught me the strings and everything I had to know. I never thought Twitter BNS could be so systematic. There were keywords, codes, and specific processes that I had to learn. I didn't want to be called a bogus buyer when I entered that world. I mean, who does? I had to learn what WTS, LFB, WTB, LFS, PAYO, STBO, LF, ISF, LSF, DOP, MOP, MOD, OOS, POB, QS, GO, EBBG, SF, OP,<sup>4</sup> and so many other terms meant. And I had to know and understand these terms at a moment's notice so as not to seem like a total idiot (which is a big fear of mine and a cause for unending ridicule in the BNS world).

Trying to order one item at first is really how it gets you. I started with a single Seventeen<sup>5</sup> album. One. I ordered from a random seller that popped up first when I searched for the keywords. Looking back now, at that time, it was a big risk because I didn't exactly know how to spot seller red flags yet such as lack of reviews, an inactive account, newly created profile,

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<sup>3</sup> An enthusiastic and active fan of Korean pop music (stan means ardent fan)—often you'll see them on Twitter with their picture changed to one of their heroes.

<sup>4</sup> Willing to sell, Looking for buyers, Willing to buy, Looking for sellers, Pay as you order, Soon to be on hand, Looking for, International shipping fee, Local shipping fee, Date of payment, mode of payment, mode of delivery, out of stock, Pre-order benefit, Quitting sale, Group order, Extreme buying ban game, Shipping fee, Overpriced

<sup>5</sup> Seventeen is a South Korean boy band formed by Pledis Entertainment. The group consists of thirteen members.

and are rude or unresponsive in the DMs<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, I gave them my personal info such as my full name, number, home address, essentially all the information you'd need to commit a variety of crimes (I had no regard for internet safety). Fortunately, that went well and so, one album turned to a hundred and twenty more (and counting, unfortunately). And these were just albums. The BNS photocard scene was a whole other jungle. I unfortunately used to be (no comment) a template collector meaning I wanted to collect every single version available out there with no regard for my finances, just as long as it satisfied this desire to unnecessarily complete them all.

Things used to be simpler. You'd look up the member's name plus the specific album it came from plus the group name and that would lead you to different listings of the same item. But as the pandemic got longer and longer, I suppose people got more bored with the kind of robotic system of tagging items, and K-pop stans started giving the photocards nicknames. And this was something that was organic to the Philippines. Filipino humor permeates through every aspect of our lives and BNS was one of them. Some photocard's names were Jun Bali Leeg, Hoshi Mama Mary, Mina Lasing, Jaehyun Skusta Clee, Chanok, Wonyoung First Communion, and Uji Yakult, to name a few. This made looking for photocards more specific and if you weren't that deep into the world of BNS, it would be rather difficult to describe the photocards nor look for them. More and more of the listings used these unofficial nicknames for the photocards since the use of these already narrowed their audience/buyers down to the Philippines. Each fandom had inside jokes as to the given nicknames and it was a way for fans to have a laugh in the middle of such a capitalist driven hobby.

And that was only the beginning of it. Soon, people used to sell photocards worth 6.8 million pesos with a house and lot as a freebie. Photocards worth 30 thousand that came with a free iPhone. And although a lot of it were half meant and were supposed to be taken lightly, there came a wave of truly extremely expensive K-pop photocards that were deemed

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<sup>6</sup> A private message sent on social media (as on the Twitter online message service) to a specific individual or group.

“rare” and these would go up to about 15,000-90,000 pesos. NCT<sup>7</sup> became one of the most notorious groups for this. Their SYBC<sup>8</sup> photocards, especially for the more popular members, ranged from 5,000-80,000 pesos. People were trading these for parking passes, phones, plane tickets, concert tickets, and other expensive items. I know. It got wild. People understood how rare it was but didn’t appreciate how ridiculously expensive it was, totally forgetting that buying it isn’t necessary.

Apart from the photocards and albums, due to the increased saturation of the market and the shift of the fandom culture, companies then began shamelessly releasing merchandise that was absolutely ridiculous. For me, merch is supposed to say something. Sure, they’re collectibles but at least make an effort to relate it to the group’s album concept or the individual members’ public personas. And it wasn’t like these items were sold for cheap, they were more expensive than that of their “outside K-pop” alternatives. Some of these items were Ice Trays, specific Ramen, lawn chairs, shot glasses, EXO<sup>9</sup> flavored milk (??? I don’t know either), Body Pillows, and fish sticks. But people bought them nonetheless. And entertainment companies have long secured the formula to make all of the merch they put out irresistible to its target audience. The system, known to many but ignored anyway, is truly capitalist. Companies earn millions through the production of these merchandise, gaining them more and more profit. The more things put out, the more people get addicted to buying, and the more they earn. It is a repetitive cycle. And because this has been the norm for so long, there is always a steady demand for new merchandise. Almost like an unbreakable cycle of demand, production, and consumption.

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<sup>7</sup> NCT is a South Korean boy band formed and managed by SM Entertainment. Introduced in January 2016, the group currently consists of 26 members divided into six different sub-units: NCT U, NCT 127, NCT Dream, WayV, NCT DoJaeJung, and NCT New Team.

<sup>8</sup> SYBC or Special yearbook cards were part of the rare photocards found in NCT Resonance Part 1 album. Each member only had 500 copies of their SYBC printed, hence the rarity.

<sup>9</sup> Exo is a South Korean boy band based in Seoul formed by SM Entertainment in 2011 and debuted in 2012.

And then, on top of it all, because of social media, primarily the Filipino side of TikTok, there was suddenly a new culture of packaging items a certain way. People created “aesthetic packing videos” where they would wrap sold merch in cute packaging, decorate toploaders<sup>10</sup>, use excessive amounts of photocard sleeves and bubble wrap, spray it with perfume, use personalized thank you cards, and freebies that could go as far as appease the gods. It got so bad to the point that people were complaining when their packages didn’t come in aesthetic or cute packaging which resulted in sellers adding 10–50 pesos more as a packing fee. I wouldn’t deny the fact that I also did these. I designed my own personal thank you cards and got them printed, I also gave in to giving freebies (although I fully believe that me, not scamming them, is gift enough). I also bought pre-cut boards to secure my photocards, a special kind of tape to make the package cuter as well as easier to open, I even bought the industrial tape dispenser because using the normal one simply didn’t cut it anymore. It was honestly so exhausting having to keep up with the trends and demands of the masses. I was in it so deep, that I forgot how fun it was supposed to be. Sure, it was thrilling but for the most part it just stressed me out. Packing items became my form of therapy but at the same time, there was so much pressure to make each one perfect. Creating an excel sheet to track my expenses, purchases, and sold items, was also not my idea of a good time.

People might read this and be baffled by how big this world is and even question the sanity of the people who participate, but let me give some insight as to why this is prevalent especially in the local scene, based on my own understanding of it. First, it is thrilling. There is nothing more exciting than sealing a deal with a seller and sending out your payment followed by pictures of the items in different angles to confirm it’s not damaged. The rush of a purchase is addictive. Second, the community surrounding BNS is, for the most part, really friendly. These are likeminded people who do their best to make friends online in search of a community that’s accepting of their desire to purchase and purchase and purchase. Lastly, this is not something that can be found in our P-pop culture. In recent years, there have been attempts to

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<sup>10</sup> Toploaders are durable and rigid plastic card cases that are engineered to enclose trading cards in order to keep them clean while preventing damage.

copy the K-pop formula, but no one has really been successful. In a sense, I feel as though there is still an aversion to the local, searching for something that people can fearlessly enjoy without the accusation of consuming something that's "too western".

The community has always been put in a bad light but for the wrong reasons. Instead of everybody asking the participants of the community to lessen waste and try to keep reusing materials instead of buying new ones constantly, people often focused on getting mad at the community for them "wasting" their money. I've seen one too many arguments online saying that the money could have been used for someone's child's milk, to feed a starving family, to donate to a better cause. And maybe, that's partially true and other people could benefit off of that money but people who collect art, or wine, or cars, or cigars don't get the same amount of bullshit because they're not dealing with the collection of K-pop merchandise. The perception of people towards the K-pop community and all of its subcultures will always be regarded with a sense of aversion and judgement. I guess, to an extent, the majority has been more accepting of it since K-pop has become mainstream, but my point still stands. Although K-pop has become so present in our everyday, a lot of people still look at it as a very feminine/low brow form of entertainment. For the most part, it is true that the majority of K-pop stans are women but that is not an excuse to dismiss Korean pop as something not important or serious, just because of its demographic. And even though repeatedly, K-pop has proven itself worthy to be viewed as a high form of art, many people still don't see it that way. That's why merchandise regarding it are still viewed as less important than that of "the finer arts".

From the time I started buying and selling to how it is now, it has become totally different. Same systems, sure, but people now have Carrds<sup>11</sup>, have their own new twists in selling merch, new policies, terms and conditions, and new ways of packaging to appease their audiences. The scene is constantly changing, adapting to what's new, what's in, what's hip, what's socially correct. But despite the changes in the system, K-pop BNS will always fuel

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<sup>11</sup> Carrd is an easy-to-use no-code platform for building beautiful, responsive one-page websites for anything from personal sites and portfolios to company landing pages that capture leads.

consumerist culture and will be a cog in the capitalist system because buying merch is not a necessity. It will always depend on the fact that a person's well-being and happiness depend fundamentally on obtaining consumer goods and material possessions.



## Self-Expression as Social Suicide

By Jireh Catacutan

In my free time, I spend my days walking through the vast array of clothing hangers hung on metal rods in ukay-ukay stores. The musky scent of second hand-clothes, the warm glow of fluorescent lights, and the broken aircon that would leave you sweating have become all too familiar. Ukay-ukay or thrifting in general was originally meant for those who could not afford to buy new clothes from malls and other establishments, however, there has been an immense shift in thrift culture. Instagram resellers scour and gatekeep ukay-ukay establishments to look for hidden gems; a Gucci Bag, Levi's jeans, or Dior dresses left untouched from a pile of China-made knockoffs. A few of these pieces are sold starting at fifty pesos and would be sold on Instagram for around five hundred to a thousand pesos. This completely defeats the essence of thrifting. But I will not be diving into the context of thrifting culture, I merely thrift because I do not like spending clothes priced in four digits. I have been thrifting since I was in high school, half of my wardrobe comes from thrift stores. This pastime has gone to an extent where I receive messages from local thrift stores in Dumaguete, notifying me when there are new arrivals or having a 3 for 100 sale. But at the core of it, ukay-ukay offers more variety that subscribes to my personal style. I cannot simply find my floral printed polo shirts in stores like Oxygen or Uniqlo. But as I sift through the stacks of unwashed clothes, whenever I pick up a piece of clothing, one question immediately pops into my mind. *"Is this Jeje?"*

What do I mean by labeling a piece of clothing as jeje?

The Jejemon subculture sparked in early 2010. At that time, jejemon was used as a noun referring to a group of new-breed hipsters who have developed their own language through text. The term stems from the common mistake of typing "jeje" instead of "hehe" in text messages, plus "mon" serving as a suffix taken from the Japanese monster collecting game and cartoon show, Pokemon. Jejemon started as a text language as people attempted to shorten text messages from the hassle of constantly pressing numbers using phones with a numeric keypad. It then turned both Filipino and English into something more obscure, replacing letters with symbols and numbers, or sometimes just completely misspelling them. The common

greeting “hello po” becomes *eEoWphowsxz*, and the phrase “miss na kita” becomes *mm!sHZ nUh k!TuhH*, and so on. Although these translations are not entirely accurate, it is up to the user to curate their own style. But Jeje-mon text is commonly identified with the abundant presence of letters H, X, and Z, and the constant switch between upper and lowercase letters.

There were many discourses during that time that involved this new genre of text lingo. I vividly remember this phenomenon as it was featured in local weekend shows like *Rated K* and *Kapuso Mo: Jessica Soho*. There were debates on how this abundance of misspelled words might rot the minds of Filipino learners, that they might lose the grasp of learning the English language used in the academe. Although many argued that this phenomenon was nothing to worry about, it is a common language fad that will die over time. In some ways, they were both right and wrong. During the prevalent years of jeje culture, it had somehow found its way out of pocket-sized phones and infiltrated the world of Filipino fashion. For some reason, those who used jeje-mon in text had a distinct fashion sense. Most of them had side-swept bangs, oversized shirts, and sometimes even wrapping colored bandanas over their foreheads. At that time, this particular style seemed “fashionable” and even those who did not practice jeje-mon in text wore similar clothing. Even I was a personal victim of this trend. I was around fifth grade when this specific fashion trend came into view. Everyone wore silicone bracelets called ballers, printed with whatever fandom you were in, the girls had bags and wallets in the shape of a brown plush monster named Domo, and you were labeled as a cool kid when sporting flat brim caps, Hello Kitty eyeglasses, and of course, a varsity jacket. I remember begging my parents to purchase a varsity jacket for me to use for a Christmas party which left them confused as to why I would wear something so thick despite the country’s scorching weather. But the sweat trickling down your back while wearing a varsity jacket would never quantify the amount of attention you get once you enter a room in a two-toned jacket with leather sleeves, and a random letter patched into the chest area. It was also around the time when everyone developed an addiction to selfies. If you visit someone’s Facebook profile and stalk their photos, you will probably find an album that clearly portrays the jeje culture. As you swipe from one photo to another, you find yourself cringing at the overly filtered grainy photos, and the wacky poses like the duckface and the peace sign near the eyes.

Aside from fashion, for a short time, this new wave of street culture found its way even in music. There was a specific sound around the same year that was later dubbed as jeje. The songs under the so-called jeje music would often have a playful beat accompanied by rap verses that are meant to either degrade or dedicate a message to a special someone, clearly not too far from other kinds of music. Although these songs aren't commonly heard everywhere, you would often hear them in jeepneys or mostly in internet cafes. In the early days of the Philippine internet landscape, videos posted on Facebook didn't have a clear goal compared to today. Videos did not have any intent to go viral, most of them are just simply posted for self-expression, the idea of putting one's image was such a big deal at that time. These jeje songs were often played in the background on videos where a person showcases different poses like sticking their tongue out or a side smirk with their hands trying to tuck a lock of hair behind the ear. Like the other things associated with jejemon culture, it was seen at a lesser value. People often cringed when they would hear these songs on the radio, but fast forward to present day, many people are starting to acknowledge its playful beats and have come out that listening to songs like *Sulutera* by Gagong Rapper, *Classmate* by Hambog ng Sagpo Krew, and Aikee and Vanessa's urban classic *Dota o Ako?* have become one of their guilty pleasures.

The jejemon phenomenon was a defining moment in Philippine culture but a few years later, language experts have proven their statement that in a sense, the jeje culture did die. This then goes back to the question I posed when picking a piece of clothing, "Is this jeje?"

As time went on, new trends rose, and wearing varsity jackets became outdated. This is a turning point in how the word jejemon can no longer be used only as a noun but also as an adjective to describe something outdated or worse, tacky. In the context of culture being a hierarchy, the jeje culture does not follow a single direction. It starts from the bottom, a group of people who refused to conform to basic spelling in text, to the top, where their personal style was mimicked by the masses, and back to the bottom again where anything affiliated with the jejemon culture is deemed tacky.

However, there are still a number of people who dress like they were stuck in the 2010s, now commonly seen among the youth of lower status. It was as if this disdain for the jeje aesthetic was only exhibited among the upper middle class and above. Now everything that

looks outdated or far from the current fashion trend is described as jeje, and those who wear it are labeled as jejemons. I for one am guilty of this social ideology.

Between the years of 2017 to 2018, a new subgenre of jejemons came to fruition. They have revamped their image to something more street-like, embodying the fashion trends in Western cities such as Chicago or Brooklyn, they called themselves the “hypebeast.” But despite this new label, people who indulged in this fashion aesthetic on the internet were swarmed with comments calling them jeje. Originally, the term “hypebeast” came from an online store that sold limited edition sneakers that eventually involved other items such as belts and hoodies. These stores gained a heavy following among the rich people in the Philippines. Pinoy celebrities flaunted their Thrasher shirts, Air Jordans, and snapback caps in local shows. In contrast to the original jeje movement, this trend came from the elites down to the masses that led to a booming market of knockoff apparels in local markets. As I looked for commentaries on this phenomenon, many users from Reddit have labeled them as Jejemon 2.0. At that time, I also witnessed many Facebook posts making a caricature of these young Filipinos who tried to emulate the hypebeast aesthetic and caption them with statements like weirdos or cancer ng lipunan.

I admit I was one of those who ridiculed the hypebeast culture, especially since they infiltrated mall parking lots in groups with Bluetooth speakers on hand playing loud music. The revival of this niche street culture no longer dealt with language, only fashion and music. Those in the local music industry who dressed like in hypebeast fashion and mimicked the beats of Western urban music were again dubbed as jeje music. This was the hate train I involved myself with not only in the sense that I disliked how they dressed, there was just something wrong about Filipino artists like Skusta Clee, Flow G, and others who acted Black in their music videos. It was borderline cultural appropriation. But that’s a conversation for another day.

This resurgence of emulating a certain fashion style felt like a flashback. I was taken to the point in my life where I also tried to copy what was trendy, and posted photos that haunt me every year once a friend decides to poke fun and comment on them. The labeling of these individuals who embraced the Filipino twist of street style fashion as different has gone to the extent that it has become a theme in parties. In eleventh grade when the student council

announced the theme “hypebeast” everyone laughed and rushed to the markets and purchased knockoff apparels. It is safe to say that despite both jeje-mo and hypebeast culture contributing to the Philippine popular culture, to negate their identity and label them as lower class come from a place of elitism. People attack these communities for their Supreme shirts worth thousands no longer serve as a status symbol since the designs are now mass produced for the local market. Looking back at it, there was something odd about kids who were privileged enough to study at a university and mock a certain community. Was there something bad about individuals who felt a safe space with people who shared the same taste in clothing? As rowdy as they may seem, at least they know where they belong.

## Family is Everything

By Mearck Amiel Lopez

If you think about it, the family in *Dogtooth* is a typical one. You have the controlling father, the dutiful and obedient wife, the mature eldest, the insecure middle child, and the clueless youngest. It's the circumstance they are in which isn't. Living in a suburban-looking gated home with a well-trimmed lawn and a pool, the children (who are now adults) are kept in stunted growth by their parents, forbidding them to go out, teaching them things that are contrary to what they actually mean, and shielding them from anything related to the real world.

Now how could they have achieved such appalling feats to their children? Conditioning, or simply put, a mental response that occurs with increasing regularity in a well-specified and stable environment. How could a yellow flower be a zombie? How could the word pussy mean light? How did a bunch of Greek kids manage to think that Frank Sinatra is their grandfather, singing songs to them about family to the tune of *Fly Me to the Moon*? We don't exactly see these people grow up from infancy to adulthood, but we get the idea that they have been subjected to extreme amounts of conditioning as if their lives depended on it.

And it kind of does, so to speak. The movie made it clear that the parents made it clear that the outside world is an unsafe environment, making it a point to show them how perilous it is when the father had to use the car to pick up the toy plane a few inches away from the gate of their house when he could have just taken a single step to pick it, or doling out anti-cat propaganda as if the poor beings are the spawns of hell themselves after killing their imaginary brother who lives outside their gates. The world is not an oyster, but a suburban-looking gated home with a well-trimmed lawn and a pool.

But like any other set of parents, there are always loopholes. With regards to permitting their children to go out, the only way they could was if their "dogtooth" or fang, would fall off. And the only way they could ride a car was if it grew back. Convenient, isn't it? It's like making a prisoner believe that the warden will let them go if they ask nicely enough and give them money for a bus ride home. This makes the film work in the audiences' minds, that

even though we could not see their development, we get the idea that this has been going on for a long time and is showing no signs of slowing down.

Familiarity breeds contempt, but how could the children sow it if familiarity is all they have known? They are conditioned to take punishments with pride and importance the same way that they are conditioned to take rewards. It's the carrot and the stick dilemma, but the carrot is shaped like a stick. Doling them out is the father, a manipulative and controlling figure who goes out of his own way to either prove a point or to make the point hurt depending on the severity and the necessity of the situation. If the wife is the teacher, he is the police.

The conditioning is Pavlovian, in principle. Two and two makes a five. Yes means no. Sea means chair. And on and on it goes until the mature eldest daughter happens to come across *Jaws* and *Rocky IV* through a series of trade-offs by the woman who is employed by her father for the sole purpose of sexual fulfillment of the son. The illusion is shattered, a new window is opened, and a videotape gets taped on the palms of the father and bashes it on the skull of the errant firstborn, as if conditioning her to not let the movie get into her head, so to speak.

But not for long. The oppressed must fight back, even though she had no idea of what fighting back was, or oppression, for that matter. Being the most curious and battered, the eldest daughter takes it into extremes by taking a hammer and pounding it on her dogtooth, in the hopes of it loosening so that she can finally get out into the world she has never seen before. She had been conditioned to believe that anything beyond their house's gates is dangerous, and so she "prematurely" extracts the said tooth, for her to be ready. Vicious cycle indeed.

However, curiosity prevails. The eldest pounds her tooth, picks it up in astonishment, and decides that it is time for this doggy to be free. Her only way to get out unnoticed though, is to climb aboard the trunk of the father's car and wait for morning when he goes to work. Obviously, the family is distressed, particularly the father, who was so stressed out that he forgot to check the trunk. We are then forwarded to the scene where the father reports to work, with the daughter still in the trunk. She is finally free, she just has to wait for her tooth to grow so that she can escape the trunk and drive the car, whenever that will be.

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Uriel Ansley Amistad** is an aspiring writer who wishes to pursue a part time career in writing and storytelling. Ever since he was a child, he had an affinity for the English language and a fascination for how stories are crafted to captivate hearts and minds. Throughout his academic life in Sibulan Science High, Ansley often found himself thrust into linguistically demanding situations, such as speech competitions and writing contests. In his senior high years, he became the pioneering library president of his school. Currently taking Geology in Silliman, Ansley plans to travel the world as a geologist while collecting experiences and emotions to fuel his writing passions. And one day, he plans on opening up a publishing company for young Filipino writers.

**Issachar Uy Bacang** is a senior of the Silliman University Philosophy Department. He is primarily an essayist and polemicist concerned primarily with philosophy, mystical theology, political theology, and aesthetics. He was one of the first philosophy undergraduates to give the prestigious Horace B. Silliman Lectures. His poetic and literary influences include poets such as Rumi, Catherine Benincasa, Therese of Lisieux, John Henry Newman, GK. Chesterton, the Spanish mystical poets (Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross), Ancient Chinese poets (Anren, Song Yu, Li Bai), Jose Garcia Villa and authors such as Gene Wolfe, Lovecraft, Nick Joaquin, Flannery O'Connor, Frank Herbert, and Tom Clancy.

**Ysha Louise Danielle A. Bayotas** is a first-year student studying BS Psychology. She was born in Butuan City, Agusan del Norte and spent most of her childhood living there. She had won first place in the News Writing competition consecutively for two years at Ateneo de Davao University. In 11th grade, she joined the Creative Writing Club and had partaken in the various writing activities within the organization. Now, she is currently a member of the service fraternity and sorority Alpha Phi Omega, and has organized and participated in different community services with the organization. Aside from this, she helped as an editor for the podcast UnPSYCHika in her first semester. She is also a member of the Silliman Women's Ensemble. She continues to write Fiction and Poetry as a hobby alongside her other interests.

**Olivia Anne Cabral** is an aspiring writer currently a first year Creative Writing student at Silliman University. She was born and raised in the United States of America in the Bay Area of California. She loves animals, anything with Kuromi on it, and writing about her experience as a queer Filipina-American.



**Calvin Castillo.** Hailing from the main city of the island province of Palawan, Calvin Castillo is an 18-year-old writer who is currently based in Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental. He is currently in the 12<sup>th</sup> Grade, taking up the Humanities and Social Sciences strand at Silliman University Senior High School.

**Jude Wilter Domen** is a lovelorn wordsmith in search of great adventure. He is a senior Accounting and Business Management student finishing 11th Grade. Jude was born in the provincial town Guihulngan City, Negros Oriental. He graduated Salutatorian in junior high school and was a science and technology writer for his school paper, *Il Poverido*. Currently, he is the Finance Head of Renaissance Youth Leaders' Forum, Co-Head for the Silliman University Senior High School Student Council Logistics Committee, Campaign Head of Student Union for Reforms Party, and a Literary Writer for the 2024 edition of *The Silliman Magazine*. Aside from literary writing, Jude is an occasional songwriter, obsessed with the genre of rock music. Although he considers himself a fictionist, he mostly writes poetry these days, afraid of the commitment needed for longer literary forms. His works have been published in the previous edition of *Sands and Coral* in 2023.

**Colleen Dugan** has no idea how to start this, but she would like to start by saying, “I own a wooden comb carved like a fish. And I love it.”. Colleen is a 2nd year student majoring in Literary and Culture Studies. She misses the farm, and her Doberman named Laoch. She spends most of her time indoors, listening to music, watching, reading, and making sure her cat Cheese is filled with her kisses. She likes to watch concert videos, pretending she’s in the crowd but makes sure no one in her dorm knows what she’s up to—well, except Cheese whose eyes are always judging her every move, and when is fed up starts attacking her for food.

**Jenifer Dumagal.** In “A Chapter of Unspoken Longing in My Seminary Life Confession,” Jenifer weaves a narrative that transcends the boundaries of religious devotion and explores the universal terrain of human emotions. Jenifer’s narrative is a poignant reminder that within the folds of faith lies a profound, universal yearning—a chapter of unspoken longing that seeks expression and understanding. In this memoir, Jenifer doesn’t just share her story; she extends an invitation for others to explore the uncharted territories of their own hearts, to find solace in the resonance of shared experiences, and to discover the strength that emerges when the unspoken is finally spoken.

**Myke Kristoffer G. Catilogo** is currently a 1st Year student studying B.S. Psychology in Silliman University. Despite not acquiring a camera of his own, he has not let this deficiency hinder his passion to mastering and exploring his personal craft. With the

help of Silliman University's Camera Club, Myke has been given the opportunity to shine and let his work be shown. He has been accepted as an official member of SUCC or the Silliman University Camera Club with his photographs consistently ranked as part of the top 5 almost every week. His photograph has also been crowned as top 20 during the Garbo Sa Kabisay-an: A Buglasan Photography Competition held during the 20th of October 2023.

**Kirk Patrick C. Ganob**, better known as “Kirk,” is a 22-year-old junior student at Silliman University, in the College of Business Administration, majoring in Financial Management. He is passionate about finishing what he started through unwavering commitment and meaningful contributions not just for personal growth, but for society as well. He believes that even the smallest contribution is a big stepping stone towards a big solution. As Kirk continues with his academic journey, he promises to build a promising future where his skills, talents, and knowledge will flourish and be used in a field where he can grow successfully.

**River Ketnirattana** was born in Dumaguete City, where she is currently taking her second year of Literature and Cultural Studies at Silliman University. Her written work includes themes of home, grief, religion, identity, and community—matters of the heart from the Philippines all the way to Lopburi City, Thailand. In her spare time, she is a visual illustrator.

**Agnes Vida D. Lopez** was born and raised in the cool, mountainous city of Baguio for nine years before moving with her family to the coastal City of Gentle People. She is currently a 4th year student at Silliman University, taking up her Bachelor of Science in Psychology degree. Throughout her life, she had a passion for creating, whether it was drawing cartoons or writing short stories for her family to read. After reading through several poems for inspiration, two stood out to her: *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou and *Kissing in Vietnamese* by Ocean Vuong. Other inspirations come from singers, such as Leonard Cohen's and Bob Dylan. A sensitive artist by heart, she aspires to be an art therapist and a writer on the side, both of which she hopes will bring comfort and healing. Her poems evoke feelings of nostalgia and love, as she pulls inspiration from personal experiences from childhood all the way to young adulthood.

**Craze Herrenvolk H. Matildo** is from the municipality of Oslob, province of Cebu. He is 17 years old, currently a grade 11 student in Silliman University Senior High School taking up HUMSS. He is also a student assistant at the Guidance Office. He lives in a mountainous area and grew up with his mom, grandparents and great grandparents doing farm work. It was and has always been his passion to write poems

or anything with English, Filipino and most likely bisaya. He uses terms that most of the new generation are not familiar with and that's what gives it creativity.

**Arianne Anthonette Piñero** is an undergraduate student pursuing a degree in Elementary Education at Silliman University. As an education student, she is committed to teaching her future students with love and respect. She is deeply passionate in teaching elementary children with the basic skills they will need to use later in life when they become adults who'll serve the country. Beyond being a college education student, she enjoys reading novels or comics and drawing animations in her spare time and believes in the philosophy of minding one's own business wherever it may be.

**Jecho Adrian G. Ponce** started his writing journey at 15 years old through poems and short stories, which garnered him awards in his school programs and competitions, namely Buwan ng Wika Spoken Word Poetry Winner (2018) at DMC College Foundation, the RYLF "Tingog" Spoken Word Poetry 1st Runner-Up (2023) and SU Psychology Society Mental Illness Awareness Week Poetry Event Champion (2023) at Silliman University. Aside from joining competitions, he also regularly performed in various school events and gatherings. With this talent, he became a member of the locally popular spoken poetry and music art collective in Dipolog City, DIPAG INK (2020). Because of this, he was able to represent DIPAG INK in several art events headed by the local Dipolog City Tourism Office and other government organizations. His skills for writing and acting was further realized when he joined the Bahandi Collective (2023), a group of artists based on Dumaguete, and became the head writer of their launching event for their "Closer To Nature" art exhibit and original performance of "Haliya" (2024).

**Lealina Evangeline A. Reyes** is a 19-year-old aspiring writer and a level one Bachelor in Arts in Anthropology student of Silliman University. As a child, she wrote short stories and later explored the world of poetry and feature writing journalism at the age of 11. She has been competing in the schools press conferences since 2015 and won third and first place during the first two years of competing. In March 2023, she was part of Xavier Ateneo Senior High School's Collaborative Writing and Desktop Publishing team who won second place in the division level competition. Throughout her basic education, she was a writer in her schools' student-run publications. In 2020, she opened her poetry account on Instagram where she shares raw, authentic pieces of writing. Her passion lies in the words she reads and the words she writes with the deep aspiration to find art in everything and ignite profound emotions in her creative work.

**Darren Xavier Rodrigues** is currently undertaking his third year undergraduate studies in marine biology in Silliman University. Despite his studies having a scientific focus, he enjoys all things fiction and spends his free time experiencing fictional worlds through reading books and playing video games. His passion for writing started in high school when he encountered a lack of reading material about a particular video game series. He started writing fictional stories for himself after discovering the joy of writing and started writing as a hobby due to the support of his friends and family. He has a goal to write and publish a fictional book series complete with his own mythological creatures and characters. One that toys with the concept of existence and the mechanisms behind it. He uses his writing hobby to practice his craft in pursuit of his goals.

**Asherah Rojo** was born in Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental. A student of Silliman University under the Accountancy, Business, and Management (ABM) strand, she began her writing career during the pandemic after being introduced to Fyodor Dostoevsky. Her first short story entitled, “The Strange Man and His Mirror”, opened a gateway for her into creative writing. Currently, the author works toward fulfilling a novel of her own, whilst practicing her storyboarding skills through art. She writes of themes centered around internal dilemmas of identity, purpose, meaning, and freedom intertwined into supernatural, fictional settings. As an author, she hopes to write stories of characters with real, internal conflicts that reflect the nuances of social relationships and the battle between ambitions and the practical constraints of average life. She hopes to inspire those who struggle to find their own unique identities.

**Angeni Gabrielli Trani** is an enthusiastic and creative individual with a deep love for storytelling and a strong interest in sharing unique narratives with the world. Inspired by a love for literature that developed from her childhood from various forms of art and a fascination with the human experience, Angeni has set out on a journey to create pieces of literature that are heavily influenced by anything and everything under the sun. At a young age, she began writing poems and short stories to enhance her vivid imagination. Apart from reading and writing, she also enjoys dancing to further express her creativity and imagination, while at the same time focusing on her studies. She is currently taking her Bachelor’s degree in Nursing in Silliman University, and continues to improve her writing by creating stories and poems inspired by various forms of art such as music, paintings, and other pieces of literary works.

**Juan Carlos Miguel Vasquez** is a senior student studying Biology. He writes frequently as a hobby and a means to vent out his inner thoughts through prose and poetry. Drawing inspiration via a multitude of art forms, be it music, prose, poetry, visual arts, films, or even just random encounters, he often writes through an

introspective lens that he and others can and might relate to. In writing, he credits Stephen King and Agatha Christie for shaping his writing voice, which he believes are arguably the masters of their genres—Horror and Mystery respectively, and often employs a combination of both in many of his works. He wishes to partake in writing more as a side quest alongside his initial interest in Biology.

**Zarelle Glen Dorothy A. Villanzana** was born in the city of golden friendship, Cagayan De Oro City. At three years old, she was already capable of reading. In fourth grade, she kept a little Hello Kitty notebook where her stories, comics, and diary entries were hidden. Since then, she would buy a new notebook every year to sustain her literary pursuits in partial secrecy. When sixth grade came, she developed a great interest in poetry, particularly in spoken form. In ninth grade, she performed and won first place in a Filipino Spoken Word Poetry Competition for their Buwan ng Wika event at the Shekinah Glory Christian Academy. She also represented her school in the English Poetry Writing and English Poetry Recitation categories for the 2019 National Student Convention (NSC). As she entered Silliman University in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS) strand, she became a feature writer in the Weekly Sillimianian, for the school year 2021-2022. Currently, she is in her freshman year studying for a Bachelor of Science in Foreign Affairs degree. She is currently a Feature Editor of the Weekly Sillimianian and a member of the Silliman University Debate Society.

**Meagan Adrienne Villaruz** is a junior majoring in Creative Writing. She is from the home of the largest sugar mill and refinery in South East Asia, the sweet green city of Victorias. Meagan's work often explores themes of identity, introspection, and human experience. She considers herself a writer of so many things unfinished. In addition to her academic pursuits, Meagan is an avid gamer and reader, finding inspiration and solace in the immersive worlds of video games and literature. As a fan of historical fiction, one of her favorite series is Outlander. Meagan aspires to continue honing her craft and exploring new avenues of creative expression with her remaining years in the university.

# THE EDITORS

**Alyana Marie Aguja** is a budding writer originally from General Santos City. She spends most of her time watching movies and logging them right after on Letterboxd. Her love for film has shaped her literary voice. Alyana mainly writes speculative fiction that explores the themes of womanhood, social issues, and body horror. Her first self-published zine, *Imperfect Love* (2023), was sold out during the XXL Print Fair 2023 at the Ariniego Art Gallery. She is also a co-author in another self-published fiction anthology, *You Don't Want To Know* (2023), displayed and sold during UP Cebu Art Fair 2023. In these collections, you can find stories of the unconventional and macabre. Her stories are heavily influenced by her favorite director, Yorgos Lanthimos. Get to know her more with her witty one-liner reviews on Letterboxd @pinkfluffyana.

**Nina Isabelle Alolod**, a senior in Literature and Cultural Studies from General Santos City, is deeply passionate about RPG games, animation, and fantasy writing. Specializing in dialogue, character studies, and drawing, Nina's diverse talents extend across various genres and styles. With a strong command of the English language, she crafts compelling fantasy stories, insightful news pieces, and engaging feature articles. When not immersed in writing or drawing, Nina finds solace in online gaming, indulging in titles like Genshin Impact, Honkai Star Rail, and Stardew Valley. She also enjoys watching folk or psychological horror movies. Alongside her creative pursuits, she cherishes moments with her beloved dog, Sergy. Nina's journey exemplifies the fusion of imagination, storytelling, and digital adventure, creating an image of creativity and connection that transcends the boundaries of reality.

**Jireh Catacutan**, an enthusiast of all things pop culture and horror, forays into the literary world as an author exploring his identity and interests through poetry and creative non-fiction. From poems about the sacredness of the body to an essay about the haunted house of his childhood in Tanjay City, Jireh has amassed a diverse portfolio of works since he first picked up the pen. Some of his proudly-written poems include *The Toymaker's Sonnet* (2022), *Ode for the Voices Unheard* (2022), and *Invitation Through A Yellow Bubble* (2022); all three of which are included in his first published poetry collection *Malice and Desperation* (2023), which sold out at the 2023 XXL Print Fair. You can snag a copy by shooting a PM through his Facebook account. To find some of the works feeding into Jireh's voracity for writing, you can find his favorites and not-so-favorites on his goodreads, @jiiireads.

**Reya Grace Hinaut** is an artist with a diverse set of hobbies and skills. One can expect to find her spending hours upon hours on all kinds of games, constructing paper crafts of lizards that she sticks on her walls, drawing the stray cat she's unofficially adopted as her own, passionately talking about her favorite ocean creatures (sharks!), or spending all her money on making chicken pastel. Reya ventured into the world of creative writing unsure about where she's going and this still remains true. So far, she has written two poetry collections: *To Satisfy a Craving* (2022) and *Cycle of Striking Woman* (2023). Alongside this, she has accomplished numerous artworks including a commission for the 2023 *Sands & Coral* cover and the 2024 *Sands and Coral* logo. Art has consistently found a way to grip onto her like a petulant child and she suspects that's not going to change anytime soon. So, whether through her art pieces or her written pieces, she'll just have to see where this road takes her.

**Mearck Amiel Lopez**, hailing from the city of Malaybalay, is a writer within the genre of fiction and playwriting. His favorite authors are essayist George Orwell and novelist Margaret Atwood. His written works of fiction include *Oatmeal*, *Jesus in the Sky*, and *New Movies in a compilation titled "You Don't Wanna Know"* along with two other writers released in the Cebu Art Book Fair in 2023. Beyond the realms of writing, his interests range from watching movies, listening to music, staring into space for embarrassingly long periods of time, and playing video games. Uncover more of him with his movie reviews on Letterboxd @amieliore

# ABOUT THE COVER

Since this issue did not have a specific theme, it was initially difficult to conceptualize what the cover would look like. At the very least, it seemed like there had to be some pelagic motif due to the name of the literary journal as well as the university's proximity to the sea. The title came about by narrowing down what subjects were most prominent among the contributors' works which were along the lines of nostalgia, yearning, and rebuilding. In the end, the editors decided on *Between the Blues* as it best encapsulated the spectrum of emotions within the chosen pieces.

As for the process of creating the cover, I chose to draw a singular, flowing wave that would symbolize a sense of ebb and flow in regards to the issue. Apart from it appearing in an array of blues, waves are generally dynamic—occurring either gently or strongly depending on the circumstances. I thought it would be a good key point for the cover seeing as waves are also recurrent in the sea, which is analogous to the sentiments within the contributors' texts. Similarly, the chambers of the nautilus shell encircled by white lines meant to signify the stages each work passes in the writing process. The fluidity of both the wave and the spiral would then hopefully convey old and new sentiments reimagined between the blues.

**Nina Isabelle Alolod**  
*Editor for Artwork and Photos*  
*Cover designer*





The *Sands & Coral* primarily accepts contributions from students currently enrolled at Silliman University. The publication aims to maintain a higher literary standard among campus writers, to stimulate genuine creative thinking, and to develop a keener appreciation of the more serious creations of Silliman writers.