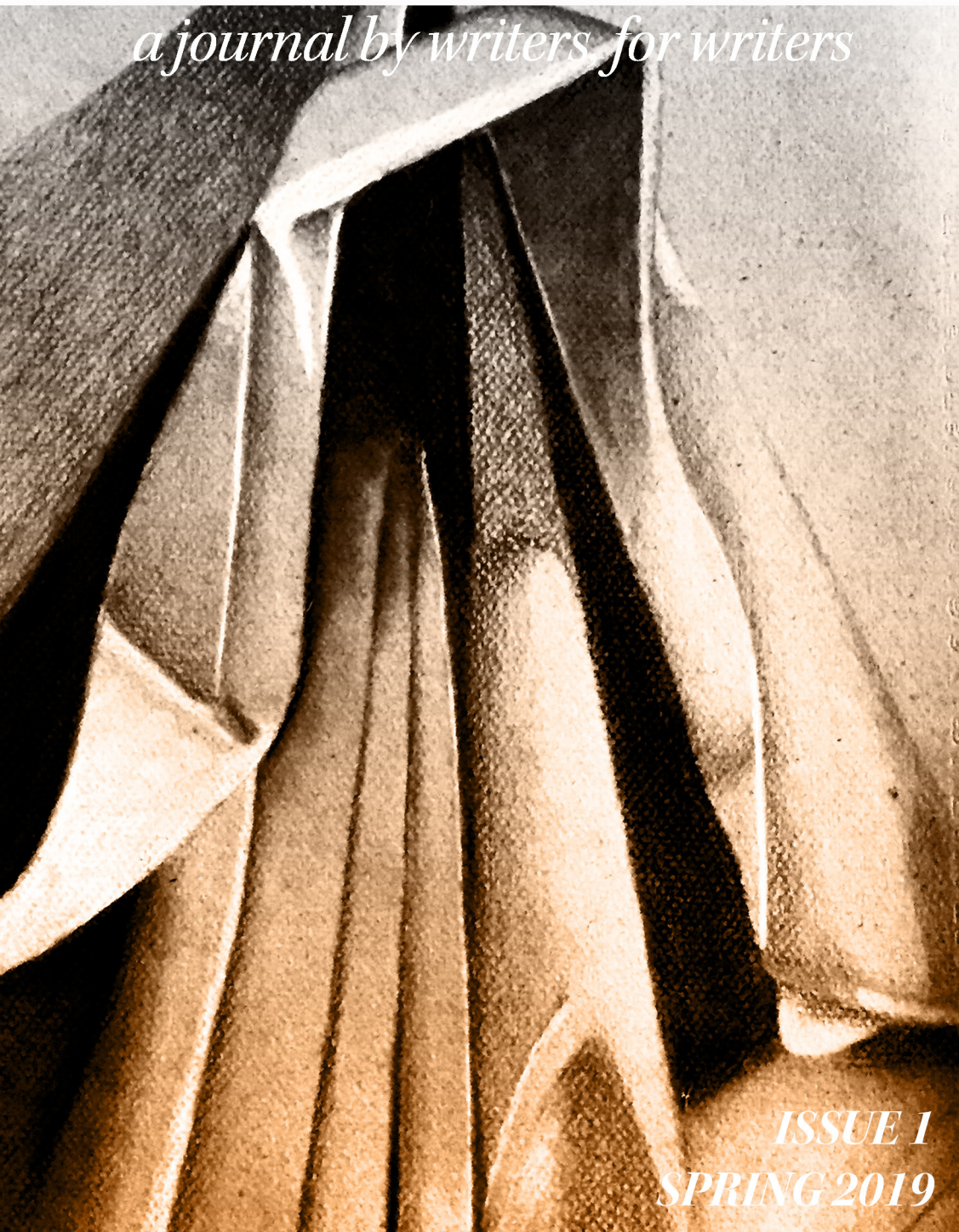


# Writer *to* Writer

*a journal by writers for writers*



*ISSUE 1*  
*SPRING 2019*



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## Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the first edition of *Writer to Writer*, a literary journal collaboration between University of Michigan Minor in Writing students and the Sweetland Center for Writing. Our journal fosters interdisciplinary creativity by showcasing the literary work of University of Michigan students in a variety of modes, mediums, and genres. For the past 6 months, we have had an open call for submissions of literary work from fellow undergraduate students. These submissions have been carefully curated, edited, and now published in this inaugural edition.

*Writer to Writer* is entirely student lead. From meetings to the procurement, editing, and publishing of materials, University of Michigan students are the content creators and curators of this written art. In order to broaden the diversity of the content within the journal, we offer the opportunity for all undergraduate students to submit their work, no matter their area of study. This journal provides a means for members of the University of Michigan and Ann Arbor communities to further understand the lives, struggles, and ideas of those that surround them on a daily basis.

This journal focuses not only on the work itself, but also on the process behind the work. Each piece we have selected for this publication includes a brief section about the writer and what inspired them to create their piece. This can be found in 'The Final Word' appendix. In this way, we hope to encourage collaboration and learning not just from the pieces themselves, but also from the creative processes that brought the pieces to life.

Writing has the ability to bring people together, and through our inaugural publication, we hope to share the perspectives of a wide

variety of student writers. We also aspire to encourage readers to reflect upon the selected pieces in order to grow as an individual and as a writer.

Finally, while multiple members of the Sweetland staff contributed to the inception of this journal, we must sincerely extend a heartfelt thank you to Dr. Shelly Manis of the University of Michigan. Without her guidance, wisdom, and willingness to invest her valuable time, this journal surely would not exist. To Shelley, the rest of our staff at *Writer to Writer*, and of course, you, we say thank you for your hard work and support.

Sincerely,

Jacob Stropes & Nia Vrana  
Editors in Chief  
*Writer to Writer*

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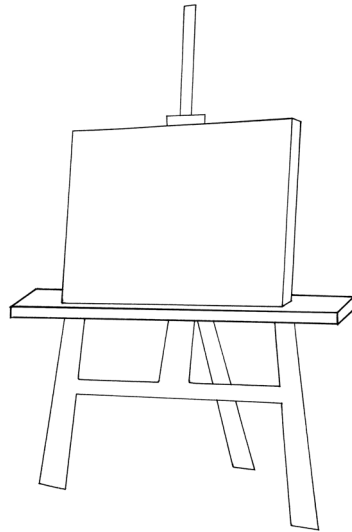




# Cinematic Art

*by Rusi Li*

On this canvas, a scene comes into view:  
Its intricacies crafted by movement  
That awakens the dim senses anew  
The threshold of sight and screen translucent.  
Its portrait transcends the edge of the frame  
The soul entranced, the memory exhumed  
As life entwines with art in its grand aim  
As instances toward infinity bloom.  
Yet its deepened grasp of thought and feeling  
Fuse the threads of reality and dream  
The tensions of being and nonbeing  
Extending consciousness beyond the seams.  
One touch could tear the tapestry apart:  
What suspends belief animates the heart.



# Accepting Average

*by Mikayla Easley*

“I don’t understand why you waste \$5 on this every time we’re here.”

Kyle decidedly ignores my comment as he hands me the can of Budweiser he bought just moments before, citing that he “needs to stretch” when I roll my eyes. We’re waiting in one of the many exhaustive lines at Busch Stadium. I should stop being surprised at his persistence; the pitching radar booth is always our first stop during our annual St. Louis Cardinals game.

Despite the fact he’s one of 15 guys waiting, Kyle somehow manages to stand out as he begins making slow, wide circles with his arm. Freshly 21, he carries the confidence of someone who’s just won millions on a lucky hand of poker at the MGM Grand, not \$100 in his friend’s garage in the suburbs of St. Louis. He towers at six foot four and there’s a slight stubble on his cheeks, intense facial hair reserved only for playoff months. His words come out loud and sharp, often muddled by the pack of Copenhagen Wintergreen chew resting in his lower lip. If he’s not wearing a jersey, like today, he dons whatever combination of khakis, polo, and baseball cap he’s pulled from his laundry that he never bothers to fold. I mean at this point, he should just wear a sign that reads: “I’m an athlete.”

Over the speakers, I hear the cheers from the crowd as the game begins, but Kyle doesn’t seem to be as eager to get to our seats as me. One-by-one, people stand on the neon green stretch of turf that is supposed to resemble a mound and home plate to throw a pitch at a speed gun. Pitch-by-pitch, a red number indicating its speed flashes on the screen above the mound. Number-by-number, Kyle watches and mumbles some complaint about the throw. “What a shitty follow through.” “Your balance was off, moron.” “58.8? Did he throw or roll the ball?” I stay quiet as always, and watch him roll

his shoulders as we creep forward. After what feels like a lifetime of waiting, stretches, and insults, Kyle's finally handing the employee a crisp \$5 bill in exchange for one dusty baseball and stepping up to the mound.

Instantly, his shroud of certainty slips. He's biting his lip, absentmindedly rubbing his right collar bone, looking back towards me and the crowd of people only half paying attention. I watch him take a deep breath, line two fingers along the ball's red seams, and set his sights on the fake batter standing at home plate. Front leg up, hips loose. Back straight, shoulders relaxed. Lunge forward, release. The sequence happens so fast that if you blinked you might have missed it. When the crack of Kyle's two-seam fastball hitting the wall is heard, the conversations halt and all eyes are on the screen. Three seconds feels like eternity waiting for the speed to show: 92.6 MPH.

From behind me, I hardly notice the whistles and claps. What I do notice is the swear Kyle lets out as the number disappears, and way his face grimaces as he cradles his right arm from its extended position back to his side, and the hard kick he gives the trash can that sends it toppling over. As he exits the booth and huffs towards the general direction of our seats, I follow behind him. He yanks back the beer from me on the way, taking a long gulp and tossing it. Before I can ask him how bad his elbow or collarbone are hurting, a question I already know the answer to, he lets out a low chuckle.

"Why did you let me waste \$5 on that? I could've used that money to buy another beer!"

For the first six years of our lives, Kyle and I were convinced we were siblings. No one could blame us; both of our parents were divorced, always working, and we practically grew up in our grandmother's antique living room. There isn't a moment of our childhood either of us can remember where the other isn't there too. Imagine our teacher's surprise on the first day of kindergarten when I introduced myself as "Kyle Johnson's sister," and the confusion that followed. At

our dismay, we learned we were actually cousins, and the story of our epic temper tantrum afterwards is told at every family holiday. Despite this revelation, Kyle and I never stopped acting like siblings. How could we? We were both lonely kids, products of divorce. Albeit, I can remember a time that mine were together. Kyle never had that opportunity.

My aunt Carrie met Chris Johnson when she was 25 years old. She was a secretary at a financial firm, he was an advisor who worked upstairs. A month later, they were married. Three weeks later, she was pregnant. Five days later, they filed for divorce. And Kyle came into the world in the midst of a messy custody battle. "Carrie and Chris never wanted him, but they were so spiteful of each other that they didn't want the other to have him," my mom tells me one night over the phone. I remember noticing as a kid that if Carrie was at Kyle's baseball game, Chris wasn't. If he bought him a new bat, she would buy him a new pair of ice skates. If Carrie threw him a birthday party, Chris threw a bigger one next year. "He grew up their pawn, that's why he spent so much time playing baseball. I think he wanted their attention, but also to get away from them."

The reason Kyle's only memories from childhood involve baseball is simple: that's all he ever did. He joined his first tee-ball team when he was six years old, but it was short lived after Chris Carpenter became his hero during Game 3 of the World Series in 2006. The two of us sat with my dad in new Busch Stadium and watched the Cardinals starting pitcher throw eight perfect, scoreless innings against the Detroit Tigers. Kyle liked how everyone kept saying Chris Carpenter's name and that without him the Cardinals would not have won that World Series. That was the day he knew he wanted to be a pitcher. His father signed him up for a select travelling team, and from then on, Kyle Johnson lived and breathed baseball. His time was spent in baseball fields across the country and his school work was forgotten in the place of extra practice during the offseason months, but his parents didn't mind letting him leave thirty minutes early every day so he could make it on time. Before he

even had a driver's permit, Kyle had earned six state championships, two national championships, and three MVP titles. Sure, some of the success was from natural talent. But the only time Carrie and Chris would stand near each other without fighting was when he was playing good baseball. If that meant training like a pro at thirteen, then Kyle would do it.

If there's one way to catch the attention of a small town, it's breaking 90 MPH while you're a freshman in high school. The first time it happened, Kyle went from just another student athlete to living like the star of a Disney movie overnight. He became the varsity team's top relief pitcher, breaking 90 MPH nearly every game. When he walked through the halls of school, he carried so much confidence that it was impossible not to gravitate towards him. He held his head high, always surveying the room, unconsciously looking for the attention he thrived on. One hand would grip the left strap of his backpack, the other would be reaching out to high-five someone complimenting his latest win (that is, if it wasn't already holding the hand of the girl he was dating that month). Kyle's presence was infectious, even for me. People starting coming just to watch him pitch the last two, maybe three, innings of a game. At every throw, the crowd would watch the radar gun and wait for the speed to appear. If he broke 90 MPH, the cheers and yells could be heard all throughout town.

No matter how many supporters he had, there were two people Kyle's eyes searched for in the stands when he pitched. His efforts finally paid off during the last game of his freshman season when, for the first time in Kyle's life, he saw his mom and dad sit next to one another. That game he pitched five perfect, scoreless innings. He was on top of the world, until he wasn't.

Kyle watches baseball like he's sitting in church watching a pastor give his sermon. He hunches forward, elbows resting on his knees and hands clasped against his chin as he's chewing on some sunflower seeds. His eyes never leave Cardinals pitcher Dakota Hudson, who's

throwing sinker after sinker to the Milwaukee Brewers' offense. At every release, he leans impossibly closer, waiting. The Brewers' batter makes contact with the ball and Kyle stands. After a quick double play, the Cardinals have three outs. Kyle's clapping and cheering with the people around us, just tipsy enough to high five the pretty blonde sitting behind us. As the seventh inning stretch begins, Kyle shakes his arms, wincing from his earlier attempts to show off. "Beer," he barks at me, and starts shuffling his way to the aisle.

We're weaving our way through the vast sea of baseball fans when someone shouts our names and two guys I vaguely recognize from highschool come barreling towards us. If this were four years ago, Kyle would have relished at being recognized. But now, the tension in his body is hard to ignore. His jaw clenches as the two guys get closer. One of them, whose name I remember is Ben, gives Kyle a quick pat on the shoulder and he gives a restricted nod in return. The conversation between the four of us is friendly but quick. I do most of the talking while Kyle stays silent, until the other guy—Collin—asks him the dreaded question.

"What about you, man, you're pitching at Ole Miss, right? You headed to the draft soon?"

The hesitation on Kyle's face shows. He bites his lip, crosses his arms, and looks out towards the crowd as he answers, "Nah, I'm in Tennessee next season."

"Oh, UT? That's great! The SEC is great at producing prospects."

Before Kyle can mumble out a response, a loud cheer is heard from inside the stadium signalling the start of the bottom of the seventh inning. I nudge his shoulder and complain that I don't want to miss the game, ending the awkward interaction and saving him from the torturous explanation with a polite good-bye. No, he's not at University of Tennessee. Or Ole Miss. Or any Division I school. He's not entering the draft any time soon, but about to start his third year at a community college. And if he's lucky, his elbow won't flare up and he'll make it through an entire season without being placed on the injury list.

We're walking back to our seats when Kyle tells me to stop for a second and heads towards the bar. When I narrow my eyes at him, he says "What? I still need to buy another beer!"

During his sophomore year, Kyle decided to play hockey during the off-season. His parents protested, his baseball coaches protested, even I protested. But he wanted to expand his resume: "Mick, the only thing better than a varsity athlete is a two-sport varsity athlete." So despite the risks, Kyle joined. He was a natural, of course. By his senior year, stardom in two successful sports set his ego on fire. His quick witted personality turned stubborn and volatile if he didn't get his way. Signing a contract to play baseball at Ole Miss, the best baseball program in the SEC, set his sights on the major league and elevated his ego so that almost nothing could bring him down to earth.

After signing, Ole Miss advised Kyle to sit on the sidelines for the rest of hockey season and start getting serious about training for baseball. He listened, for the most part. But after three seasons in the spotlight, two news editorials, and being named MVP, he had to finish out the season. The perfect opportunity for a heroic farewell came in the form of a rival game between two high schools fighting for the top spot in the playoffs. The game was going to be insanely close, bound to draw a massive crowd, and there was no way in hell Kyle Johnson would miss a second of it.

His parents didn't know Kyle was playing, but I wouldn't be his only fan in the crowd that night. I remember the moment he walked into the rink, wearing his best suit and dragging his gear behind him. He parted a cheering crowd like the Red Sea and practically floated towards the locker rooms. As he retreated, I wished him luck, told him to be smart, and that if he didn't at least score three goals this was all a waste. He gave me one last genuine smile, told me he'd score four for good measure, and walked away.

Kyle didn't score four goals that night. He didn't even score one. Because about ten minutes into the first period, a hard check

from the opposing team sent him flying in the air and crashing onto the ice. Then came the madness. I ran onto the ice in my tennis shoes, dodging the other players who were now throwing punches in retaliation. The crowd was screaming in anger, but all I could focus on was Kyle. Tears gathered in his eyes, his left hand clutched his other elbow. His arm was bent in such a way that made me realize this was all very real.

After hours spent in the emergency room, Kyle finally received the news. He had an epicondylar fracture to his elbow, common for pitchers who overuse and weaken the bone. He also broke his collarbone and would need surgery and screws within the next 24 hours. As the doctor relays the information, the options for treatment, and timeframes for recovery, I make sure to pay close attention because the moment Kyle heard the words “broken elbow” he shut down. He stared up at the ceiling in shock, not letting any facial expression give away his devastation. His only contribution to the discussion comes after the doctor asks if he want them to call his parents. The answer was a emotionless “no.” I nod my head in agreement when the doctor looks at me questioningly. Later, I called them while Kyle was in surgery to break the news.

The years that have followed Kyle’s accident have been a downward spiral into depression, alcoholism, and a lot of anger. His scholarship to Ole Miss was good for the year he needed to take off school in order to go through rehab, but a DUI the summer after his surgery caused him to lose it completely. Instead, he played at a community college for a year until he was kicked out when it was discovered he was taking steroids. His current team with another small college between two cornfields in Tennessee currently has him suspended for fighting with his coach after he didn’t start him for poor academics. If he’s not yelling at someone for wronging him, he sits alone in his unkempt room decorated with dirty dishes and crushed empty cans of beer. His friends have moved on, pushed away by Kyle’s explosive behavior and self-destructiveness when he drinks too much. He’s supposed to go to therapy, but the sessions are always



in the morning, and he doesn't feel it's necessary to wake up before noon.

It's no surprise that his relationship with his parents became even more strained. At first, they seemed supportive at the beginning of rehab. But it's hard to maintain a relationship when its foundation is swept out from under you. They didn't understand why Kyle wasn't getting better, why he hadn't started pitching above 90 over a year since his surgery, why he was just accepting average. Kyle didn't know how to tell them about his constant pain, how to show them he could be something else besides a major league pitcher, how to prove that he wasn't accepting average—average was forced onto him. After one argument that led him getting kicked out of both parents' homes, he stayed with me for a while. "They finally found something they have in common," he said that night between sips of beer. "It's hating me."

I instinctively start to refute his statements and assure him that they're just worried—that I'm worried—but the look on his face as he stares up at the baseball game on TV stops me. He watches with such focus, yet I can tell his mind is elsewhere being flogged with nostalgic moments from the field, from our childhood. It's moments like those I'm reminded I'm the only person who he's ever let his guard down around—the only person who's seen the real Kyle Johnson. Everyone knew Kyle the athlete, and a lot of people know Kyle the angry failed athlete, but no one knows the average Kyle who plays video games, who likes to cook, who rescued two golden retrievers last year. No one knows that he's really good at building things, or that he'll remember something you said years ago, or that he cried the first time he watched *Titanic*. Kyle isn't the one who needs to accept average; everyone else just needs to accept an average him.

So instead, I sat back and continued to watch the game with him in our comfortable silence.

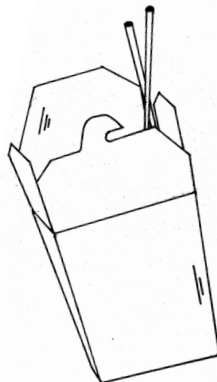
The car ride home is quiet save for the soft noise of the radio station. The Cardinals won the game with an easy groundout ball in the top

# Chinese Takeout

*by Briana Johnson*

I let him take me home, carried me neatly in takeout boxes.  
Cheaply made plastic spoons and forks tied sloppily to crinkled  
chopstick  
wrappers rub against my skin and chafe my thighs.  
When the door to his home swung open, nobody  
greeted him, but their mouths salivated at the scent of me.  
He placed my body on the dining room table, spread  
like Chinese takeout.  
His family gnawed and smacked on my bones  
as if they never feasted before.  
His father would never get to know me, only pieces of me,  
in glimpses of leaky paper boxes and plastic tubs.  
Afterwards, his mother would wonder what stained their white  
tablecloth.

She'll pause, but continue to clean around it and make  
an appointment at the dry cleaners.  
He'll never have the nerve to call the number and order out again.  
He carries the leftovers of me around with him.  
On lazy afternoons, when his mind wanders, he takes a piece of me  
out of the plastic, removes bits from the boxes,  
and chews on my being.  
Until I am once again just,  
meat and  
bone and  
blood.



# Pastoral

*by Macy Goller*

It was the road to Nowhere. That's what Nobody called it. Nobody and I had been wandering along it for months now, only keeping track of where we were with various landmarks. A week back we had passed Nothing. Assuming that we hadn't undergone a significant pace change since then, that meant we were on course to arrive Nowhere in No-time. Nobody said he had gone Nowhere last year and was completely and spiritually transmuted. I couldn't be more excited.

Months ago, when Nobody asked me to accompany him on his trip to Nowhere I immediately obliged. I dropped Everything and we left the next morning. Lately, I'd had this horrible feeling inside me, growing and festering, and eating at me. I had an imminent feeling of internal catastrophe. I needed to get away from Everything.

But time has passed slowly and Nobody says hardly anything. I can gaze at all of the Nothingness surrounding us on our trek to Nowhere but that only occupies one's mind and interest for so long. My hope was that this trip would get me away from my feeling, but it's only brought me closer to it. I couldn't distract myself with Anything, or Someone and, like I said, I had dropped Everything when I agreed to come. All of the things I used to keep my mind off that feeling inside me were Anywhere but here. The feeling was stronger than ever.

It felt like a vast hole in the pit of my stomach expanding inside of me. It felt like a painful hunger, starved and pleading for nourishment. It felt like an ocean without water, empty and void of all movement or life. I stopped dead in my tracks and let out a small involuntary cry. Nobody seemed to notice. He continued to walk and then stopped ten feet ahead of me and looked up.

I looked up following his line of sight and saw it. At last we were Nowhere. There were mountains piercing the sky, and there were trees; large trees with strong brown trunks and delicate branches decorated with leaves that seemed to grasp the sky. There was water all around, but no vast, void, vat of ocean. Rather it moved in streams and brooks with direction and purpose and glee, trickling and bubbling. Singing like wind chimes the wind whistled and danced with the breeze that swayed the fruit on the branches of trees. Plentiful nourishment waited to satisfy No One. Compared to Nowhere, Everywhere was Nothing, and I wasn't alone.

## Writer Spotlight

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*“Pastoral” was one of those writing things where it wasn’t hard to get the words out—the words came out really fast. I remember being really proud of that story, and then I reread it recently and it was just insane of run-on sentences, super clunky wording, and it didn’t make a lot of sense. But the idea was there. The process was mostly just refining the initial draft to something more legible, and just fine tuning the idea of feeling like you’re not someone but being around something that makes you feel like you’re something. You’re nobody, with no one, nowhere. Then suddenly it becomes a more tangible experience.*

*I can see myself coming back to similar ideas in the future, but I think I like this draft as it is. I don’t like going back to works and changing them too much because I think it’s kind of like a time capsule that shows who you were as a writer then.*

— Macy Goller

# Growing Pains: From Passion to Business

*by Kirsty McInnes*

Brandi was awake until one a.m. and up again at four a.m., working. Countless hours go into the prep, design, and creation of something that will only be enjoyed for a short time. The life of a florist is not always rosy.

The stairs to Brandi's makeshift "floral shop" had changed. It was the first thing I noticed as I arrived at her house at 9 a.m. on a chilly, December morning. The "shop" was her basement. It was remarkably well suited to the task. A run-down kitchen was tucked into the back corner, with a small bar attached. A pool table, some beat-up, old couches and a simple round table made up the rest of the room. If her basement was featured on an episode of HGTV, buyers would undoubtedly call it a "great space for entertaining." Used for entertaining, it was not.

On that particular morning, there were buckets of seeded eucalyptus, red and white roses, light blue hydrangeas and, due to the time of year, evergreen branches scattered across the floor. The pool table was being used to hold finished bouquets, the bar had been turned into a craft table, and the sink in the kitchen (which had no running water) was full of the wax that I had spent my morning scrapping out of candle holders. The A.C. unit was kept to a cool sixty degrees, an expense that was not taken lightly by Brandi and her boyfriend.

"People don't realize how much time and money actually goes into this."

Brandi has spent no shortage of time around flowers. For many, high school jobs are necessary evils; they are usually low paying, bottom-of-the-barrel jobs that no one wants. The only good thing about them is that is all they are: high school jobs. They end.

At sixteen, she didn't think she would work at Kroger for eleven years. After starting as a "Courtesy Clerk"—the glorified title for "bagger"—she moved over to the floral department and ultimately became the "Floral Lead," or, head of the floral department. She remained in that position until July 2017.

I first met Brandi while I was working at Kroger as a bagger in 2014. I longingly watched her in the floral department, perfectly creating floral arrangements. People drove for miles to have her create arrangements for their baby showers, graduation parties, weddings, and funerals. The best thing that came out of her job at Kroger was the eleven years of floral experience and amazing skill that she gained.

I longingly watch her work now, as she makes the bridal bouquet for her last wedding of the year. Her first year as the owner of Lee Floral Design.

"My middle name and the name of my father."

Her father passed away before she was ten. Lee Floral Design is, and always will be, a sentimental company for Brandi. From how it began, to how she runs it now, she surrounds herself with family and her closest friends.

Once she had really developed her experience and skill of working with flowers, friends and family began asking her to help them design the flowers for their weddings. She willingly helped, for free.

"I used to do it as a 'gift' sort of thing."

That worked for a while, but putting so much time and effort into something with little reward slowly stopped being worthwhile for her.

"I ended up saying 'fuck this' because it was so much more work than I ever anticipated, and that is kind of how Lee Floral Design started."

Making a business out of something you once did for free—for fun—seems like it would be every person's dream.

Yet, as time goes by on that early December morning, the stress in Brandi's face becomes increasingly apparent. We each nervously check the time on our phones as we chat, our hands working quickly

on our respective projects, mine much less skill-oriented than hers.

The bridal bouquet that she's creating is gripped tightly by left hand, while her right grabs flowers from all sides of the room. Her gaze never leaves the bouquet as she twists and turns it to slide stems perfectly into gaps, slightly frowning as she does so. Some flowers come out, some more go in. She designs the bouquet with the ease and expertise of someone who has been working with them for at least ten years.

Once it's finished, she allows herself a small smile.

"I think this is my favorite bridal bouquet ever."

You wouldn't be able to tell by the expression on her face. Plus, she says that about every bouquet she makes. Pivoting on her heel, she places the main bouquet onto the pool table and gets started on the next one. She glances at the bouquet from time to time as she's working on other things, as if to make sure it's still there.

There's no chance it gets out of the house in the same way it was when she set it on that table. Changes are almost always made.

The phone rings. It's her friend Kelsey.

"I need your help picking out what color rug to get for my house," I hear her say as Brandi puts her phone on speaker. There isn't much time to take a break and talk. Regardless, Kelsey talks our ears off about rugs, bed frames and mattresses. Brandi raises her eyebrows at me. The conversation goes on for thirty minutes.

Eventually, Brandi tells Kelsey she has to go.

Starting a business is hard, and sometimes you have to learn things the hard way. In her first year, Brandi had brides cancel their orders last minute, had suppliers run out of flowers and substitute them with different ones, and had shipping companies break the vases and candle holders she had ordered. Arguably, however, the biggest challenge she faced was having to break her contract with Lee Floral Design's co-owner, and her best friend, Kelsey.

As a physical therapist with a full-time job, Kelsey was never going to be able to dedicate as much time to Lee Floral Design as Brandi. In the beginning, she tried to; she helped Brandi with the designs of the



bouquets (she herself had quite an extensive floral background from Kroger) and with the delivery and set up of arrangements. She sat in on consultations with brides, listening to their needs and desires for their special day. But the blissful partnership was not destined to last.

“She was writing really unprofessional emails, getting orders confused. I was trying to set a standard for the company, and that type of behavior wasn’t living up to it.”

Slowly, Kelsey stopped assisting with the design and delivery of the flowers.

In the end, the break was amicable. Kelsey knew she didn’t have enough time to dedicate to the company, and she withdrew her share. Brandi changed the contract to make her the sole owner of Lee Floral Design.

Somehow, they managed to make the best of it. The two are still friends, with Kelsey calling Brandi about the important things in life such as which rugs to put in her house.

What really came from the growing pains of starting a new business was Brandi’s finding a new business partner.

“I should have just done this with Brent from the beginning.”

Brandi’s boyfriend Brent walks down the stairs with their dog about an hour after I arrive. He’s polite and smiles as he looks over everything she’s made.

“Everything looks great, do you need anything?” He hovers around the pool table, eager to help. We need it.

Brandi instructs him to start covering the arrangements in plastic bags. Cold weather will affect the flowers in a negative way, and it’s definitely cold out.

Everything done in this basement is an exact science. I fill up plastic containers with water to transport the bouquets to the wedding venue. Brandi peers over at me as I start to put the lids on.

“You probably need a little less water in those.” I pour some water out and hold it up for her to see.

“A little less.” I pour out a little more, stick the lid on and plop each of the bouquets into the containers.

In this profession, you need to be exactly the type of person that Brandi is. Brides come to her, sometimes almost a year in advance of their wedding, and give her pictures, colors, specific flowers, and their budget. She takes their vision and turns it into a reality. There isn't much room for error; there are no do-overs.

But being a perfectionist does not imply things will run smoothly, and the nature of floral design does not lend a hand to this. Even if Brandi starts the bouquets the night before, there is a strong chance that the flowers will look wilted by the next morning. This isn't uncommon, and she is always trying to finish things the morning of. On this day in particular, however, things could have gone better.

We're really rushing now. Brandi texts the bride to let her know that we'll be running late. Brent and I carry the flowers to the cars, walking up the no longer precariously crooked steps from the basement to the impeccably organized kitchen.

This room could be featured on a show on HGTV. A stretch from the wildly unorganized basement, Brandi's kitchen features shinning subway tile, new cabinets, and cliché signs about drinking wine. The cozy living room is adorned with plants, a sight one would expect to see in the home of a florist.

Brandi runs to her room to change and emerges from the bathroom in a clean pair of dark-wash jeans, a camo sweater, and heavy-duty sorrel boots. She throws her jacket on with a trendy, plaid scarf and moves to help carry stuff to the car. She has put makeup on, her slightly red face diluted by a layer of foundation.

We have enough stuff to fill up two midsize SUV's. Brandi tells me to turn the heat all the way up in my car; I do it. Brent is coming with us, and he's probably the calmest one here, not saying much but methodically loading things into the cars and making sure everything is wedged in safely. His silence is most likely exactly what Brandi needs.

He makes sure everything is accounted for, taking simple instructions from Brandi. The only difference is when they walk out the front door, certain everything is in order, and he tilts her face up

to place a gentle kiss on her lips. Brandi's small smile appears; the reassurance was what she needed.

They are the perfect mixture of professionalism and affection. This might be due to the way they met.

"I gave Brent my phone number over email one day; I could have gotten into so much trouble."

Kroger is the root of a lot of things in Brandi's life, including her relationship.

"He kind of looks like Brad Pitt," was the first thing Brandi's coworker said to her when she saw him.

Her first impression of her new boss was off to a good start. Their relationship, strictly forbidden within the corporate setting of Kroger, was put on hold (kept a secret) until Brent left the store to work on a special assignment and ultimately went to work at a different company.

Five years later, they're climbing into the car sitting in the driveway of the house they now share. Neither of them are working at Kroger any longer; a job which mainly served to bring them together.

For Brandi, it was meant to be a job that she used to pay her way through college, in her overall trek to becoming a teacher. She had dreams of attending Eastern Michigan University and earning a teaching certificate to lead a fairly stable life that's miles away from what she does today. Her dream is not out of the picture, but after dropping out of community college for the second time this year, it seems somewhat out of grasp at the moment.

Yet, Kroger also ironically provided her with every tool necessary to launch her career as a florist. It provided her with the flowers, vases, and utensils necessary to learn by doing, while also paying for classes to become a certified designer. Her time there paid off.

We pull up, or rather, careen up the driveway of the Inn at St. John's, the venue for the wedding. I almost miss the grand entryway, its old and majestic exterior juxtaposed with the shiny tile floors and black leather couches on the interior. Brandi runs through the front door, the bridal bouquets aligned neatly in a long box in her hands,

and disappears into the hotel, presumably to deliver the florals to the wedding party. I doubt she noticed the architecture of the building at all.

Brent and I head into the ballroom where the reception is being held to set up the table arrangements. Brandi doesn't return for almost thirty minutes.

After almost thirty weddings, it seems that Brandi has received nothing but praise for the work that she's done. As I wait for her to return from giving the bride her bouquet, I can't help but think this might end up being her first slip up. People are running to and fro in the ballroom setting up tables, covering them with long white table cloths and an unfathomable number of forks, knives, and spoons, and sticking champagne flutes in the top corner of every place. There are tables on the exterior of the room being adorned with cake stands, picture frames and cutesy signs telling you what's what. A wedding video is being played, and the technicians are continually replaying it until they get the sound perfectly right. I start to think that I'll never get the words of the song out of my head.

Brent and I are filling ginormous vases with water to place floating candles on top. It's the first time I've ever interacted with him without Brandi there. He's a lot less quiet when she's not around, joking with me about the wedding and his time in college. I get the sense that he really enjoys helping out at the weddings, whether it be as a support for Brandi or because he just thinks it's fun.

We're standing in a huge ballroom with chandeliers larger than me, draperies hung from floor to ceiling, and a huge marble dance floor. I periodically take in my surroundings; I think the room is gorgeous. Brent doesn't much care for it.

Brent and Brandi have been dating for over five years now. She's waiting for him to pop the question. After being around weddings for so long, she knows exactly what she wants from the dress to the ring to the food. What does she not want? A classic, large, and extravagant wedding in a room like this one.

"I want to get married in Brent's parents' backyard. It's really

beautiful, and then, afterwards, everyone can just pitch a tent and stay the night.”

Judging from Brent’s reaction to the ballroom, I think they might be on the same page. Finally, Brandi walks back into the ballroom. Her face gives nothing away, the look of determination and focus is still there, as we have yet to finish decorating the ballroom.

“Well, did she like them?” I finally ask her.

“She said it was everything she dreamed of, but just couldn’t put into words. She loved them.” She says it quickly, somewhat out of breath. She gets back to work cutting up evergreen branches to place on tables.

She never gives herself much credit. To her, this is just another wedding, another bride, another bouquet. But to the bride upstairs who is getting into her flowy, white gown with her bridesmaids standing around her and gushing at her every move, it’s a once in a lifetime day. The flowers that Brandi made will be cradled in the bride’s hand all night, adjacent to her recently passed father’s wedding band. They will be in wedding pictures, albums, and on social media for the rest of that woman’s life. Daughters, sons, and grandkids alike will look at the pictures and see Brandi’s handiwork for years to come.

While she may downplay the expertise of her work, society does not. Although they’ve been an official company for only six months, Lee Floral Design has already been awarded the 2018 “Couples’ Choice Award” by WeddingWire and has made The Knot’s “Best of Weddings” list for 2017 and 2018.

As Brandi prepares for the thirty-six weddings she has coming up within the next year, she will surely continue to learn and grow, most likely with Brent by her side for all of it. Maybe one of the weddings in her future will be her own.



# Piano Keys

*by Monica Kim*

Her fingers trailed the now-dusty keys, leaving traces of her touch against the black and white surface. She wiped her hand against her jeans, fighting the urge to grab her hand sanitizer from her bag and scrub her fingers profusely.

The stand that had once held books of music overlapping one another—from Bach to Han Tong-il, to Le Chevalier de Saint-Georges—was now empty. There was dust on it, too, and if she wiped it off, it might be just as it had been before.

She let her left pointer finger settle gently on a C key, then hesitated, lifting her finger slightly, shaking above the piano. Then it came crashing down, the sound of it out of tune but just as brilliant as it once was when hearing her mother play.

The girl runs down the street to her home, the small backpack slapping against her back. It was once her older brother's, worn, and dirty, torn so often that her mother gave up on sewing it all together; he needed a bigger backpack now, apparently.

She bursts into her home, greeting her mother with a bow and the formal hello to an adult, before giving her a quick hug. She sets her backpack on the floor as she sits and with haste scarfs down the bowl of rice set before her on the squat wooden table. Wiping her mouth of any rice crumbs, and making sure she has no food in her mouth before she starts speaking, she says to her mother, demurely, what every person says after a meal has been finished to express their gratitude: I've eaten well.

She then grabs her piano books sitting on top of her parents' dresser in the room that they all share—her mother, father, brother, and herself—and bows once again to her mother with the formal

goodbye, heading out the door.

The piano teacher's home is not too far of a walk, only twenty minutes away. In the rain and snow and unbearable summer humidity it can feel like hours, but the thought of the piano waiting for her carries her feet forward. Besides, where else would she find a piano teacher so close to home?

Today is not so bad; there's still a little bit of that winter chill, but spring is fast approaching. Already she can see some of the tree's buds beginning to show, and breathing in the air, she feels just a little bit lighter.

She knocks on her teacher's door, opened by his wife, who smiles at her. She greets her with the formal hello and a bow, too, before she is ushered in and taken to the piano room, where the last student is just about to leave. Standing awkwardly by the door, she gives a faint informal hi to the boy, who also replies with an informal hi and leaves, with no backward glances, although she continues to stare at his back until he has left the house.

Once the door is shut, though, the sound of it brings her back to the piano, and her teacher; she bows, says the formal hello, and sits down immediately, setting her books on the stand in front of her and tucking the strands of her short hair behind her ears.

She scoots her chair in closer, sitting up straighter as her mother has always chastised her to do. For some reason, her back cannot straighten unless she is in a chair, playing piano.

The girl starts off with the warmup scales as usual, DEFGABCD. But her mind is already wandering to Beethoven, and Bach, and Mozart.

Focus, her teacher says in a stern voice, and she returns to her scales. DEFGABCD, DEFGABCD, DEFGABCD.

They begin with a piece they have been working on for the past week, a title that she cannot pronounce by a name she also cannot pronounce. Debussy's "Reflets dans l'eau." Her mind ventures back to the piano in front of her, jumping from keys cautiously at first, then more confidently, fingers deftly moving from key to key, head slightly

bent over the piano.

They work on that for the rest of the hour, her teacher correcting her mistakes here and there, making suggestions. When the girl gets up to leave, her body already in a half-bow and the formal goodbye on her lips, her teacher speaks before she does. Nods at her, smiling, for once. I suspect you'll go to Germany one day.

She took her finger off the key abruptly. Closing her eyes, she remembered how her mother had tried to teach her with this exact piano.

She would shift in her seat, squirming in the wooden chair. Sighing, she would play through her daily warm-up scales, just like her mother once did. Most days it was CDEFGABC, CDEFGABC, CDEFGABC, CDEFGABC. Every week would be another technique to learn, until one day she would give up in exasperation, throwing her hands in the air.

That day would be the day she was learning how to play different notes with her two hands at the same time. She could never quite get the sounds to string together in one single harmonious melody the same as her mother could.

"Can't I do something else?" she would whine, dragging her hands from the keys to her lap, slouching.

"You only get better when you practice," her mother would tell her in Korean.

"But I'm not getting better." She would reply in English.

"You will. One day, you will go to Germany to learn at the best schools and play the best pianos."

"But I don't want to go to Germany. I want to go to Paris!"

"You can play piano in Paris."

"But I don't want to play piano!" She would shout, and she would almost wish that she could take it back, seeing the look of shock on her mother's face and then the thin-lipped line of disappointment. Yet something about yelling her frustration at her mother would be



cathartic, and she would not—at least, for the most part—regret it.

“You say that now, but when you are older, you will wish you could be able to play music.”

“No I won’t, I don’t even like playing the piano. It’s boring! Just because you love it so much and are good at it doesn’t mean that I do! I’m tired of it. I don’t want to play. Ever ever ever again.”

Her mother would sigh, the wrinkles of fatigue around her eyes deepening; this would be one of the only times of the week that they would spend time together, the other days filled with her mother cleaning rich people’s homes while she would be at school and after-school programs.

“Okay. You do not have to keep playing anymore, if you do not want to. But you will be missing out on something. When you are older, you will know.”

She opened her eyes, returning her gaze to the piano. Fingers hovering over the keys, again. She bit her lip, trying to remember even the simplest melody that she learned as a child, her mother always standing to the side of her. She tried to picture where her fingers would go for “Chopsticks.”

She tapped a key, then another—but no no no, that wasn’t right. She was sure it was the one right next to it, or maybe two keys over? She balled her hands into fists and in frustration, jammed them over the keys, wincing at the sound they made.

She removed her hands quickly away from the piano, as if they were on fire. Wiped both of them on her jeans. Grabbed the hand sanitizer this time from her bag, scrubbing her hands together furiously.

Taking one last look at the piano, she covered it back up with the cream-colored sheet and bounded down the stairs from the attic, not looking back.

Her mother never did end up going to Germany.

# Out of America's League: When Free Speech Meets the "Towelhead"

*by Tahani Almujaheed*

"Are you "ayrab" or "Mozlim?"  
Does it matter? she's a God damn "Mozlim!" "Ayraab." "Towelhead."  
"She's a terrorist just like the rest of them!"  
Rip to shreds  
Rip to shreds  
These tears I've shed  
I need to find a place within myself  
To carry the weight and the shame  
The strong nylon, the twisted braids  
Often I wonder, who is it to blame?  
I look around in an auditorium of hundreds  
And wonder why there are two empty seats beside me  
Is it because of my hijab  
Is it because of me  
Am I just that unlikeable  
Or is it because of how my people are perceived?  
They say I should be grateful to be American  
For the power to form opinions with little restrictions  
The stimulation of free expression  
How I can take a stand and speak up for my beliefs  
How my "real" country could never have such free speech  
Assimilating to American society  
Knowing that I will always be the minority  
Knowing that no one wants to sit next to me.  
Because of preconceived notions of what my religion means, what it  
makes me out to be  
They hate my people, and they want to bring us down  
I hope to pray to Allah without being looked down upon  
They don't understand my religion, and they don't even care

No attempt to educate themselves  
They only know fear  
The Hate Hate Hate  
I can hear it in their tones  
Their cruel words ringing in my ears  
The endless torment, the endless tears  
My religion stuck to my head  
Supposedly protected under the same document as them  
The same document that's protecting these words that sting  
That bring only self-hate and never-ending suffering  
Why am I the terrorist  
Why am I the towel-head?  
I mean, I actually prefer chiffon over cotton, so why am I  
Why am I  
Why am I stuck to these words that claw at my identities  
Why am I not allowed to just be me?  
In the place thought of so highly as a dream  
Where people of all faiths can practice peacefully  
But this has never been my reality.  
Perhaps I'd find my sense of security  
if my religion wasn't too radical  
Or skin too dark  
Equating religion to race and both to Americanism  
I am not American enough  
because I am too brown for them  
Not Christian so I lose by default  
Equating religion to race and both to terrorism  
I am ISIS before I am Muslim,  
I am ISIS before I am Brown  
I am ISIS before I even get to speak  
I am everything else before I am me.  
Yet the KKK is left in the past  
But my brown skin and hijab made to be harassed  
Like my life isn't worth living  
The sin of being Muslim in America clearly unforgiving

When I can't even pray at a park without having rocks thrown at me  
When my religion is the joke on national TV  
When my only representation in film is about how Islam oppresses me  
The cold cold words protected as free speech  
The Hate Hate Hate unleashed  
Ayraab. Terrorist. Towel-head. ISIS.  
And the  
Shouts  
Shouts  
Shouts  
"Go back to your country!"  
"You don't belong here!"  
"Muhammad is a pedophile!"  
"screw Allah!"  
Can someone please make it end?  
The fight continues, the fear extends  
What else is there to do  
Scream and yell and hope life becomes better  
but does it ever?  
Am I as free to practice Islam as America makes it seem?  
Little the value of my life they deem  
They can never accept me  
They only do as they please  
But I can commend their creativity  
How they can think of vile things to say so easily  
Holding me from practicing my faith equally  
Because their words have broken me completely  
Infringing on my very being, infringing on what it means to be me  
Religion too radical, skin too dark  
Painful words protected under the constitution  
Wrapped to my head, I can never escape  
Rope wrapped to my neck, I'm ready to go  
Rope wrapped to my neck, I'm finally free  
And still, two empty seats beside me.

# I Remember

*by Allie Re*

On the first day of classes this semester, I received an email from one of my professors offering me a slot to perform in one of our masterclasses. I've never been asked to do a masterclass. They are a hot commodity, of course, among the group of eighty-or-so eager beavers, but I am unaware as to how they go about choosing individuals. Nonetheless, I accepted the offer and sent in a short list of potential material.

On the list was a song I first heard during my freshman year at the university. A lot of time has passed since then, and a lot has changed with each passing day, but I still remembered hearing this one song for the first time as a fearful freshman being introduced to a whole new world.

It has an incredibly catchy tune. Not catchy like a Cardi B song; it lingers in more of a haunting way. But it isn't sad, which is why I refrain from using the word haunting. It has haunted me for the past three years though, and, on a whim, I added it to my list.

A week before the masterclass I was informed that I would be singing the piece, chosen by a professor, over two more vocally challenging and contemporary songs.

In the buzz of the first few days of classes I ignored a small worry in my head: perhaps I did not choose the most impressive material. I prepared it with an old, familiar tentativeness and decided to lower the key.

The first two-plus-years of my college career were filled with self-doubt fueled equally by my intense surroundings and an even more intense pressure to impress—impress my peers, impress my social circle, impress myself. I'd compare that heaviness with a persistent case of heartburn; you can live with it, but you just hurt all the time.

I didn't always used to think like that. When I was a kid, I knew I wanted to do something fantastic. Something big.

I lived in the pages of *Seventeen* and *Vogue*, fawning over the fierce women with stories and pictures worth four-page-spreads. I dreamed of moving to New York City, of traveling to new places—like Paris during fashion week, villages in the hills of Tuscany, castles in the gloomy and green hills of the English countryside.

I didn't even want to “be an actor” at the time. Theatre was fun and I enjoyed doing it. Before high school, I never would have thought I'd pursue it as a degree. But, nonetheless, here I was.

My professor and I scheduled to meet a few days prior to the masterclass to iron out any kinks.

“I took it down a bit,” I said, referring to the key.

“Oh, okay—” he responded, seating himself on the piano bench.

“Just because it sits, you know when it sits right in that spot...”

“What are you doing, I forget what you are doing...”

“I Remember.”

“I Remember”? Oh great!”

“I'm curious, I mean I know I put it on my list, but I am curious to know why you chose it from the other ones.”

“Cause it's one of my favorite songs,” a large guttural laugh, equal parts confession and gush, “that's why!”

“I feel that way too.” (This was true; our mutual liking is a testament to the captivating beauty of this song... but I digress.) “And actually, I remember we found this in y—... wait this isn't the right one.” I flip through the next few songs in my binder as it sits in front of him on the piano. I had printed out three different keys in an effort to find the perfect match. At the time, that key was B flat. I continue on to the next thought.

“I feel like the sing is not the hard part, it's the...” I make a vague gesture that somehow captures exactly what I mean. Acting, emotion, complexity and all that vaguely specific nonsense. He nods with an entire half of his body; we are on the same page in spite of the lack of words used. “Yea.” I give a knowing nod back.

“Exactly.” He begins to play the piece. Quite slowly and expressively. A pulse of deeply interwoven chords, a floating melody. Singer and accompanist in sync.

*“I remember sky. It was blue as ink. Or at least, I think I remember sky...”* I sing the piece as I have prepared it only hours before. A whole step lower, perhaps lack-luster but well-intentioned.

I am three feet away from a busy shelf on a busy wall. A picture of a man at a piano, autographed. A handmade Father’s Day card made of crayon on printer paper. A stack of envelopes, torn open and shoved aside on the nearest open space.

I hear the clear tone of my voice, but what is it that I am saying? The song ends uneventfully.

“Nice, Allie.” He shifts gears, off into the next thought. “Where was the original of this?”

“It was...” I flip pages back to the original key, “I have it here, it’s all torn up, but... it is in C.”

“It is in C,” he acknowledges. “Can I hear that? Just for fun?”

“Absolutely.” I rearrange the torn out sheet—I hole punched it on the wrong side earlier that day—and took my position in front of the shelf.

He begins to play the introduction.

Although he is playing the same song, and I singing the same tune, the different key sounds both as if it were floating and weighing someone down at the same time. A brighter melody, a devastatingly persistent and rich undercurrent below. All of these qualities that I missed in the lower key.

*“I remember sky. It was blue as ink. Or at least, I think I remember sky.”*

I take a moment to adjust to singing in the new key. It lives in a different place in my voice, not unfamiliar but somehow a foreign place for these particular words and the movement itself. But I lean into it with conviction and suddenly I am soaring with the melody. I am enveloped in a world of remembering.

*“Light and noise and bees and boys and days. I remember days, or at*

*least I try. But as years go by, there's a sort of haze. And the bluest ink isn't really sky..."*

And then, in letting a dual consciousness re-enter, I forgot the lyric.

"And uh, sma, I, hmmmmmmmm," I sing with constriction.

I forgot the lyric. I had drilled them, tried tying my own images to each lyric to make them personal and memorable and unforgettable for myself and others. In making this new discovery, facilitated by the original key, my brain turned to mush.

Irreverent as it may be, I move out of the mistake with a peaceful serenity.

One year ago, I wouldn't have even chosen a song like this for myself. I would have used a mistake like one little line flub to grant myself permission to throw in the towel and throw out the song in exchange for something more vocally challenging, something distracting, for the right song.

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At the beginning of this year, fed up with the cyclical unhappiness, I challenged my present self to check one of the boxes off twelve-year-old-Allie's wish-list. I went to Paris. This decision was truly a challenge. I felt that I was making the wrong decision for my career by leaving. These original dreams to travel were made back before I had decided to attend an intensive conservatory training, before I ever wanted to act for a living; would I be shooting myself in the foot leaving the university, missing opportunities to perform? Was the aching unhappiness that I sat in for the past year and a half going to follow me wherever I went? The decision was spur of the moment, fueled equally by disdain and adventure-seeking. But I soon found out that my younger self had the right idea.

So I ended up in Paris in the Spring.

The sun didn't come out often during that spring season, which is hard for my California-raised body to get used to. I walked around



a lot to try and see as much as I could in the short amount of time that I had, but often ended up sitting in a beautiful park or garden to actively soak up the sun. I wanted everything—the bottom of my chin and the skin between my fingers—to feel the warmth.

On a rather sunny Sunday, my friends and I went to the Champ de Mars, a park in the 7th arrondissement, right under the Eiffel Tower. Usually a huge open park, the construction barriers that surrounded provided a sort of sanctuary for us and a few others on a large section of green grass. We sat without a blanket to the right of this little section of the park, eating bread and cheese and apples and drinking cheap wine.

There was a man, clearly a regular around these parts, who had a massive speaker on wheels on the side of the grass opposite us. He was playing some absurdly erratic EDM, probably of his own making. It was killing our vibe with a vengeance, so we decided to put in a request. “La Vie En Rose” sung by Édith Piaf for a couple of American girls spending the week in Paris.

I threw off my jacket to run across the length of the grass to put in the request. He kindly obliged, him speaking just enough English and I just enough French.

I ran back with giddy excitement to my friends, the three of us having half expected a rude denial, and proceeded to dance.

*“Il me parle tout bas. Je vois la vie en rose...”*

Spinning around under a setting sun, surrounded by tourists and those locals that try to sell you beer and wine and cigarettes from their buckets. But I didn’t really feel like any of them were there. It was me, my two friends, and that massively iconic tower twirling with bellies full of wine and cheese.

The man came over to us after the song was over, inspired by our readiness to have a good time. He told us, through a thick French accent, that he would play anything we wanted. We took him up on the offer and soon we had half of the park dancing to all sorts of music.

There was a couple from Estonia that kept buying champagne

from the men with the buckets and passing it around. I danced and floated and shared cigarettes with new friends from France and Greece and Canada (a lot of poor French and over annunciated English accompanied by large hand motions occurred). And for that evening I simply forgot about everything that came before: my studies, the keys I sing my songs in, the fact that I was leaving for America in just a few weeks. It was a release. I was twelve years old again.

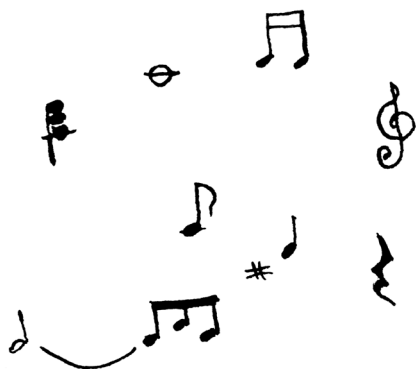
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My professor and I agreed that this key, the original key, was much more suitable for my voice and also had much more to offer for all that vague nonsensical stuff—acting, complexity, and emotion.

The masterclass went better than I would have imagined. I was nervous, sure, as anyone would be performing in front of eighty-plus peers and faculty. I put the energy into the song, into getting lost in the world, into the childlike freedom of remembering the sky above your childhood home and spinning around under the Eiffel Tower without a care in the world.

I keep pictures of my time in Paris posted above my desk so I remember that killer night. I think: if all else fails I can find happiness in a park along the Seine on a Sunday night with complete strangers. That happiness is also nestled in the last lyric of a beautiful song, if I am in the right mind to see it.

As Édith Piaf sings, “*Non, je ne regrette rien.*”



## Writer Spotlight

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*When I started writing “I Remember,” I first transcribed all of the audio that I was given. That was so much fun because that specific professor happens to speak in broken sentences all the time... The piece that I was actually singing and working on that day inspired the rest of it. It was a piece that I had worked on my freshman year, and now it’s my senior year—I thought, what’s the difference between freshman year me and senior year me?*

*This was a bit of an exploration for myself...my imagined audience is young people who are kind of “stuck.” I think [this piece] is for anyone who’s coming to the end of a process of finding themselves or finding happiness: to come out on the other side and see, oh, things are better than they used to be.*

— Allie Rae

# Wish

*by Annie Ning*

I'd like to take you to someplace,  
Or *places*, I should say.  
I don't know what you'll think of it,  
I don't mind, either way.  
We'll travel to the edge of things.  
A place nobody knows.  
A place you think you've been before,  
Where flowers grow in rows.  
It looks a bit like Europe and  
you turn to me to say:  
This is no place anew you've shown,  
I've been before today.  
I know it seems familiar,  
But look around and see—  
There are no tulips here, my dear,  
This place, it is for me.  
I built it once upon a time,  
And you have done the same.  
You made your world some years ago—  
And then forgot its name.  
There's nothing strange about it though,  
We're just children, you see.  
We're just the fools that fools before  
have always tried to be.  
There's nothing wrong with thinking up  
A place only you know.  
Discover and explore these lands  
So hand in hand, we go.

We find ourselves a rainforest,  
The first of any kind.  
No humans have been here before,  
Nobody but your mind.  
So listen to the underbrush,  
And look and look around.  
The noise of birds and leaves and life—  
I know you know the sound.  
I know you know the way it hums,  
Like bees within a hive.  
Yet louder, and with voices  
Undeniably alive.  
Who knew that it could sound this way,  
Buried inside this crowd.  
Who knew it could feel calm yet  
Simultaneously loud.  
Like twenty stories told at once,  
Let them run through your mind.  
Don't think too much, don't think at all,  
And then, open your eyes.  
You see them now, the city lights,  
The docks, the streets, the port,  
The people hurrying around,  
'Cause life is just too short.  
It looks a bit more like home now,  
Through clouded window panes.  
It's been so long since you've returned,  
To dusty window frames.  
Is it the same for you as well,  
Looking inside this room?  
You didn't think you'd say goodbye,  
And honestly—me too.  
Back then I didn't know because  
I thought that I was right.

I turned around, walked out the door,  
And then turned off the lights.  
I thought that I was moving up,  
Away from aging halls.  
Away from recess, birthday cakes,  
And crayon-ridden walls.  
Yet now I think I understand  
This place down by the tracks.  
And despite what the adults want,  
I'd, every time, come back.  
It makes a little more sense since  
I'm older than before.  
Come on inside, take off your shoes,  
Make sure to close the door.  
And while you're here, there's just one thing  
I've got a request for.  
If I may ask, these walls before us  
Are they mine or yours?  
What color is the paint in here—  
Blue, orange, green, or grey?  
Don't ask me for *my* answer because  
*I* would never say.  
If you can't tell, then that's alright;  
It's just my privacy.  
But if you know without my words,  
I might give you the key.  
You may get mad and start to think  
Then why'd you bring me here?  
If not for me then think of who  
It was all for, my dear.  
These walls, these desks, these window panes,  
The chairs all left askew,  
These things, they are not mine, you see—  
This room was made by you.

It's unfamiliar for now,  
But you'll remember soon.  
I promise that you won't regret  
Returning to this room.  
Returning to the rainforest,  
Returning to the skies,  
Returning to the Europes and  
The places left behind.  
So take this room and let it grow  
Your thoughts like trees and vines.  
'Cause after that could you imagine  
What you'll see outside?  
The adult world, it's loud and mean,  
So lock it when you need.  
And every time you come and go,  
Do not forget your keys.  
It's all yours now, it's all yours now—  
It's yours to let it be.  
I wonder what you'll do with it,  
But wait—you can't tell me.  
It's not my place to influence,  
Step in, go on, be free.  
I've done my job, I've shown you it,  
So with that, I will leave.

Goodbye, my dear, I wish you luck,  
Let your ideas grow wild.  
And I hope that one day I'll see  
That you're, once more, a child.

## Duality

*by Kate Bishop*

Switch from forests  
of birch to concrete.  
Replace Orion with his  
fluorescent shadow; cover the  
sun with robes of smog.  
There are no beaches here—

Switch back.

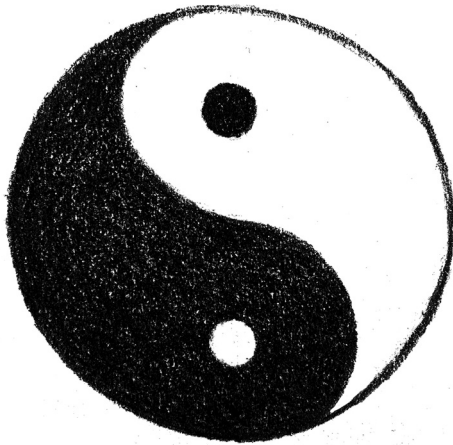
There are only a couple places  
offering half-decent lattes, and  
none are within walking distance...  
nothing is within  
walking distance, actually.  
My sand-covered shoes dwell  
on the porch.  
We sit and watch the storms together  
sometimes.

Toward rolling gravel  
dancing woodsmoke  
the ambivalent harbor  
I'm beckoned. I yearn  
to stay. Something tugs  
at my sleeve—incessantly  
backwards, insisting on  
duality.



I can do  
both: birch, highway, clocktower;  
bustle, highway, tranquil;  
home, highway, home—  
duality—

Switch back.



## Writer Spotlight

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*“Duality” isn’t really a peaceful poem, for me. Especially the ending—you’re left in a situation where you have to do both types of things and it’s not necessarily like you’ve found your peace between the two. Take it with a grain of salt.*

*Writing is more of a hobby so when it happens it’s not really a process. I typically go towards poetry—I feel like I write a lot of essays for school, and poetry is less school. I used to do a lot of little nature poems but it started to feel a bit cliché, so I stopped. What draws me to write is like what draws me to photography—I can capture the moment as I see it. I struggle to not ramble when I communicate and be concise, so I feel like this is a way for me to do that.*

— Kate Bishop

## Art in the City

*by Eva Antebi-Lerman*

Walking down Gratiot with a few raindrops marking my glasses, I saw a black and white mural of a goat and ram to my right. Each wore a suit jacket while holding a fork that pierced a stack of dollar bills. The political mural—directly targeting ideas of politics and money—didn't need an artist's statement to convey the message pairing greed with animalistic nature.

My dad and I popped into 1464 Gratiot, an open, airy café and gallery space called Trinosophes where I ordered their cardamom chai with almond milk and he got a mug of hot water. They sadly didn't have a show in the gallery the day we went. As I sat and thought and wrote about art, about money, about the way that we send messages, he sat across from me at the wooden table reading an article by the society for addiction medicine.

We were visiting art galleries that Saturday: The Inner State Gallery, Wasserman Projects, the Simone DeSousa Gallery, Galerie Camille. It is one of our rituals. As an artist I've spent a lifetime bringing my dad with me to art exhibits, galleries, and museums. He never fails to say yes when I ask him to come exploring with me, but spending time in Detroit together is special. He was born in the city and grew up at 18330 Parkside Avenue. I was born in Detroit at Sinai-Grace Hospital, but was quickly moved out to the suburbs two days post-arrival. I may have been born in Detroit, but I am a visitor—connected only through my birth certificate and the way that Detroit flows through my father's veins.

After finishing our beverages, we stepped through the glass door and back into the wind. Crossing over the bridge above the fisher freeway, we walked through a plastic covered tent of street vendors selling incense and jewelry. Vigorous wind pulling too much incense

into my nose, I held my breath. Finally inhaling at the end of the small tunnel, we continued our passage to the Inner State Gallery. Nearing the other side of the freeway we heard the jazz before we saw the musicians—so naturally my dad began his dancing strut. I quietly cringed. As we approached the trombone, tuba, and flugelhorn players, I didn't expect my father to take out his wallet and drop a dollar into their bucket—he usually won't. He doesn't believe in giving “charity” to people on the street. Growing up in the city if he gave money to someone on the street, others would have seen him as weak.

A woman passed us and looking at my dad remarked, “Makes you wanna dance.”

He grinned, “Just can't help it.”

My dad sees himself as a Detroiter born and bred. One might argue that he sold his membership with his apartment when he moved and left the city, but he seems more at home in the city than in his house in Bloomfield Hills. He has never stopped loving Detroit or jazz—the music of the city.

Unlike my father, Marcus Belgrave, a renowned Detroit trumpet player, chose to stay in Detroit and teach music in the Detroit school system. My dad watched Belgrave play trumpet in his final days with the help of an oxygen tank propped next to him. Belgrave passed his love of music and teaching onto his protégé, Marion Hayden. She was born in Detroit and is now on faculty at the Department of Jazz and Contemporary Improvisational Studies at the University of Michigan (Yohn and Holubik). As a prominent woman in a field overwhelmed by men, one cannot deny her competence or passion for her work. Besides teaching at the University of Michigan, Hayden regularly returns to play jazz in Detroit. This year she will play at the Detroit Jazz Festival with her old band mates from when she played in the Detroit-based all female jazz group Straight Away (Detroit Jazz Festival).

The Detroit Jazz Festival has taken place annually for almost 40 years and wouldn't be possible without continued support of corporate sponsors like DTE Energy, J.P. Morgan, and Ford (Detroit

Jazz Festival). In fact, the festival would have died out in 2003 if it hadn't been for the generous support of one woman. Gretchen Valade—a jazz lover and an heir of the Carhartt Clothing fortune (Benedetti). Valade donated 15 million dollars to the Detroit Jazz Festival after it almost went broke in 2003 and has also given 7.5 million to Wayne State's jazz program (Benedetti). She opened up the Dirty Dog Jazz Café in the city and continues to support the Detroit Jazz Festival annually. What would the music scene be without affluent philanthropists and corporate sponsorship? How would musicians make a living? What would happen to the music?

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Despite my father's familiarity with Detroit and its jazz scene, he is less familiar with the fine art scene, my area of expertise. So, our day trip oscillated between each of us leading. Having visited the Red Bull House of Art and Inner State Gallery a few years before, I misremembered the two galleries as being across the street from one another. Despite the fact that the Red Bull House of Art didn't have a show at the time, my dad stubbornly led us there using Google Maps as a guide because he couldn't figure out how to type "Inner State."

On our way, we walked through alleys and alleys. We passed pieces of street art from colorful thread swirling through an agonized wolf to a pattern of repeating duck heads in white and yellow. The Red Bull House of Art funded these murals and also hosts artists in a cycling live-in residency program. I have heard a mix of opinions on the artwork that Red Bull funds. As a massive corporation, many question the validity of using the artists they fund as advertising. Responding to Red Bull's graffiti murals in eastern market, Rebecca Mazzei, one of Trinosophes' two owners, has said "Art that is used as advertising represents the very absence of culture and civilization" (Rebecca Mazzei: Detroit Speaks). She then proceeded to share another's perspective, "Whether or not you enjoy the murals, as Moss

notes, ‘it’s important to keep in mind that there might be a hidden subtext—that they are in fact a cog in the wheel of the big machine’” (Rebecca Mazzei: Detroit Speaks). I don’t know if I agree. I’m torn as to whether art funded by a corporation is tarnished by that money even if it doesn’t impact the content of the art that is created. If Red Bull gave me ten grand and a place to sleep, would the art I produced suddenly lack individuality and culture? Would it lose all emotional salience?

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Upon our arrival at the Red Bull House of Art, I didn’t see the Inner State Gallery as I remembered it. Grabbing my phone to reroute us there, I realized that the address listed was just three doors down from Trinosophes—the coffee shop we had just left. We circled back around through the rainy city only to find that the Inner State Gallery had closed and moved—new address unpublished and phone number leading nowhere.

We briefly returned to Trinosophes to ask if they knew the new location of the gallery and began talking to one of the baristas behind the counter. My dad began schmoozing and eventually we realized that this man we labeled as a barista was actually one of the owners of the shop. His name was Joel, and his partner who we didn’t meet is named Rebecca. My dad, being a chatty guy, asked him about Detroit, “So what do you think of the renaissance—blessing or curse?”

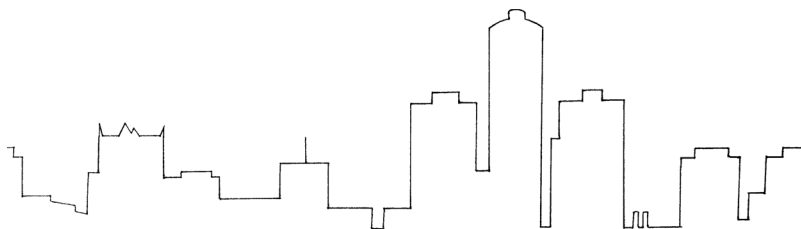
He said, “Curse.”

My dad asked, “Can you elaborate on that?”

I think Joel recognized us from when we were in there before. He might have even remembered that my dad just ordered hot water. Unlike me, my father would never waste four dollars on a cup of coffee. He experiences no shame in using a café without making a purchase, inconveniencing the store owners who are trying to make a living. “You know there’s a lot of really entitled people coming here.” Joel said that when he first moved there he lived on the corner four doors down, and that he was paying 850 dollars per month for his

place and splitting that cost with a couple roommates. “It was sold and overnight rent went from 850 to 950 to 4,000.”

Joel and Rebecca were lucky to own their apartment and café before the city’s gentrification picked up speed. They have made a lot of money on the young and the wealthy moving to the city and asking for almond milk in their cup of cardamom chai, but he regrets the change. He regrets how “Young progressives, who think they are adding to the city, place the city’s natives out of their homes.” Parts of Detroit like Midtown and Downtown have become aesthetically appealing cool places to live. In one generation Detroit began struggling financially, the rich left, and once it became “niche” and “cool” to move back, the children of those who had left began returning. The city went from declaring financial bankruptcy to a controlled boom in the whitest neighborhoods. Detroit’s “rebirth” is a reintroduction of wealth through the pockets of the wealthy, as they buy pieces of paper that mark off *their* space in the city.



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## Madrina // Abuelita

*by Aldo Pando Girard*

Mi Abuelita es un Madrina  
Mother of mothers adorned for Santería  
Azul como Yemaya

I still look up Santería on the internet  
But mostly what I know is from Mi Abuelita  
The Place and Gods that raised her  
Goat heads in small pots  
Looking up, mute offerings  
Ebo

I walk in the roomful of color y santos  
Un niño vestido como Changó  
Red like a dancing ame  
Like the flowers floating in the ocean  
Eso es Santería mijo  
Color of goat tongues & Sacrificial blood  
Hay verde y amarillo también para santos que no me conozco  
The raw sun teaching the world to sweat is yellow  
The leaves that draw the shade are green  
Los Santos are the first Gods I met that look like mi Abuelita or her children

Santo next to the TV  
Coconuts resting under a tree that did not grow them but calls to them  
& shelters them with its leaves  
Eso también es Santería



A man in all white down to the sombrilla  
Clothed purity, faith, confirmation  
Skin black as tio Maurice

The whole island is drenched in this faith that steadies her hands  
Like oil through platanos maduros  
Arroz moro con picadillo thankfully devoured  
Her gentle hands stir, chop, season, clean, teach, hold  
Pull me close as we cross the street

Wave goodbye through the window



# *The Final Word*

*writers writing about writing*

**Tahani Almujaheed**, author of “Out of America’s League”

“I write to unleash the thoughts I have within me that I think should be heard to the world. I am the voice of myself only, but I can’t help but hope that I can reach others with similar situations, or simply allow others to understand my perspective through my deepest emotions. Sometimes, I see I have a lot of anger in me—anger about the world and how it perceives people who look and pray like me. So, I hope to channel that anger and make it into something beautiful.”

**Eva Antebi-Lerman**, author of “Art in the City”

“The ways in which people share artistic content powerfully illuminates societal problems. This piece uses the art scene in Detroit as a lens for what gentrification means for the city.”

**Kate Bishop**, author of “duality”

“I write because I’m interested in the way that poetry can capture the essence of something. The duality of having more than one home during my college career has emphasized my need for grounding myself, and poetry is often how I accomplish that.”

**Mikayla Easley**, author of “Accepting Average”

“I like to write about things that don’t seem quite right. My subjects are ones that confused and bothered me—like an itch I couldn’t scratch. In this piece about my cousin, I could never really understand why he continuously failed to accept that his failure was not entirely his fault. I like to think I write for discovery; I start with an initial question and see where my work takes me. In both pieces, the result was most definitely not expected.”

**Aldo Pando Girard**, author of “Madrina // Abuelita”

“I write in order to process my experiences, and the ways that I relate to the word. I expand questions, moments, and emotions into poems in order to better understand myself in public, understanding that not filtering myself is radical and political.”

**Macy Goller**, author of “Pastoral”

“I write because I love the process, but once you finish a piece it feels less like something that was worked on and more like something that was just meant to be.”

**Briana Johnson**, author of “Chinese Takout”

“In high school, I had just gotten over my first relationship. Immediately afterwards, I dove into a highly toxic, verbally abusive, and extremely secret relationship that basically broke my entire existence. Our relationship was hidden from his parents, as he made it blatantly obvious that it was because of my race. I never got to meet his parents, but I often thought about what it would be like. Our relationship ended abruptly, but I often fantasized about the day he’d tell them about us and how they may disapprove of me.”

**Monica Kim**, author of “Piano Keys”

“My process often begins with an image or line in my head and slowly forms into the structure of a story. In this case, it began with the image of two fingers on a piano key. Often I will write down these random lines in my notebook, or type it in the ‘Notes’ app of my phone. From then, I write the whole story on Word. The inspiration for my submitted work began with a scene from Louise Erdrich’s *The Plague of Doves*, where a character is playing the violin. It got me thinking about the value and beauty of music and how that plays in our lives. This story has partial elements from my mother’s relationship with piano and my own—but it is entirely fictional.”

**Ruth Li**, author of “Cinematic Art”

“My process often begins with an image or line in my head and slowly forms into This sonnet is a meditation upon an aesthetic experience—of immersion in a work of art. As life turns into art and back again, I write to capture the interstitial instances that coalesce into coherence.”

### **Kirsty McInnes, author of “Growing Pains”**

“I wrote about a profile about a small business owner from just outside Ann Arbor. The piece weaves in and out of past and present and covers things from failure and love to hard work and passion. Along the way, I stumbled upon the irony of a woman who works almost every weekend at other people’s weddings, but who is also desperate to have one of her own.”

### **Annie Ning, author of “19/01/16”**

“I write because it’d be a shame to forget the worlds I’ve built in my head. And I make those worlds out of deficit for them or their stories in already existing works. Not everything must be about true love and grand ideals. I want to write about the stories that have never been deemed entertaining enough to tell.”

### **Allie Re, author of “I Remember”**

“I was provided the prompt to transcribe an audio recording of my choosing and form an essay around that transcription. Having procrastinated the actual recording of an audio—partly a result of a hectic schedule and partly a result of the fear of a conversation becoming inauthentic the moment I knew I was recording—I ended up using a recording of a rehearsal with one of my professors.

I soon found myself writing an essay that both captured my interdisciplinary interests as well as my shifting perspective on those interests (and the creation of art in general). It was a treat to reflect on the past year while recognizing my growth as an individual. It also made me think about the complexity of what an actor/singer does (and, of course, what we do as writers!); I suppose that’s exactly why I enjoyed writing this piece.”

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*...and you!*



*The tensions of being and nonbeing  
Extending consciousness beyond the seams.  
One touch could tear the tapestry apart:  
What suspends belief animates the heart.*

— Rusi Li, “Cinematic Art”



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