



ISSUE SIX

Cover Art by Rachel
Turney

Fulcrum Review



Shire by Rachel Turney

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

What a journey it has been working on the Fulcrum Review for over two years now! As many of our editors go through a transitional period of their lives, fledging the home nest for greener pastures, it is poetic that the theme covered in Issue 6: *Thresholds* encompasses just that feeling. Constructing Issue 6 was a tall task for us, but we and the editors have collected pieces that we can proudly publish in this issue.

As always, thank you to the artists and creatives who have put in the work and effort to make this Issue as special as it is. Whenever we sit down and review the works you've submitted, we recognize that our job as editors comes with the privilege of reading many of these pieces for the first time. I am continually astonished at how many people have and keep supporting this magazine that I had only dreamt of doing just years prior.

I hope that as 2026 slowly becomes another year fallen into subconscious, we can embrace the spirit while it lasts, whether bookmarked in the history books by Artemis II or by this issue. Enjoy Issue 6!



David Wong

Founder, Editor-in-Chief

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Perhaps I'm On The Edge

Aditi Gaur

An abysmal darkness chokes my mind
I stand at the precipice, blindfolded;
Or perhaps just blind.

I can see the constellations, I spy my north star
I see the depth of the valley;
Or perhaps I'm just standing too far.

The edge of the cliff calls my name,
Echoes reverberate, tone filled with malice and abhor.
Or perhaps I can just feel the shame,
Creeping up from inside.
The roots are going deeper, constricting from behind
Breathing my oxygen, becoming a parasite in my mind;
Or perhaps I'm at the edge.

At the edge, they say, one crawls for life:
all fours, muddy knees, tears in the eyes,
Or perhaps at the edge there waits surprise.

New beginnings and an illusion of the delusion
A delusion, that is mortality; An illusion, that is happiness;
Or perhaps I'm just a tapestry of confusion.

One foot in the air, one on the ground,
Embracing half-life, reminiscing aloud;
I see those who loved me, whose shoulder I sat on
The hands that braided my hair, the finger that massaged.
The roots retreat, echoes so far gone, sun pries breaking the dawn
As I sit with my feet dangling in the air, palms on the ground;
And perhaps no step is the best step to take at the edge.

Aditi Gaur is a 20-year-old undergraduate student at the University of Delhi in India with a deep passion for poetry. She started her writing journey when she was 8 years old and learnt the magic of rhyming sentences. Since then, she fell in love with the art of poetry and is also a published poet. Her other interests include dancing, debating, reading novels, and sports. She aspires to become a healthcare entrepreneur and an author/poet.

Bite Your Own Feeding Hand

Nonbeaunary

Smears of headlights in the night

You wonder how they'd taste slammed against your front bumper

Call every void to you

Death flags since sixth grade

'I'm just tired'

('Of it')

You are the deer framed

In your own headlights

So hit the gas brake

Voided the warranty on your

Body when you banged it up

Can't return it

Just tired of wandering

Nights smeared

How would you taste in death?

The Last Champagne

Kanika Sharma

Because in my most humble overtone,
I whimper to find myself.
Hurt them and then fall in love
With my own shadows.
Perhaps when I stop, I fail, or do I?
It'll drag me into
Building a staircase leading elsewhere,
And it's not an expiration, it's a pause,
To lean in my own melody,
To play my own Symphony,
To celebrate,
That last champagne
And I shall gift myself
Another day.

Kanika Sharma is the author of a globally published poetry collection, "Unruly Epiphanies". Her poetic interest got wings when one of her poems was first published in her school magazine. Since then, she has dedicated her leisure time to penning and expressing her emotional experiences through poetry. The depth and understanding of life expressed in her poems mismatch her young age. Her blogs and other written works also contribute to her literary portfolio.



untitled by Papermelon

Seminal

Adam Breier

The rules
were written
in black ink
on black paper
posted
higher than he could see
so he reached
hard
to understand
that
for which he
vainly reached
stretched, and
pulled
his
muscle.

Adam Breier is a Yonkers, NY based poet and educator. He is the author of *Mumbled Promises*, his debut poetry full-collection forthcoming from The Poetry Lighthouse (2027) in which the poem included in this issue will also appear. Adam's poetry has appeared in: *Tension Literary*, *Poetry (in Brief) Magazine*, *Thorn & Bloom*, *The Orange Rose*, *Three Panels Press*, *The Northeast Coast*, *Azarão Literary Journal*, *Friends of Friends Zine*, *Mad Persona Magazine*, *Thistle and Thread Press*, and *So It Goes: The Kurt Vonnegut Library Literary Journal*, among others. You can follow Adam on Instagram @adam_breier_poetry or at adambreier.com.



Fantastyczne dni konia by Nasta Martyn

Nasta Martyn is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator, poet, and writer. She graduated from the Academy of Slavic Cultures and has a bachelor's degree in design. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in art history. In 2005, she created a series of graphics dedicated to the Chernobyl disaster, and in the same year, she wrote the series "The Red Book." In 2022, she participated in international exhibitions in China, Taiwan, and the United States. In 2024, she received the Jury's Special Prize for her poster in China.

I Have Been Thinking About Disgust

Keerthana P

Recently, I have been thinking about something small. It sounds small, but it is not leaving my mind.

Disgust.

Not big, dramatic disgust. Just that quiet feeling in the body when something is unpleasant. When we want to step back without thinking.

I started noticing it in small moments when something smells bad. When something feels unclean. When my body reacts before I have time to explain it to myself.

When I was a child, my mother cleaned me. When I was sick, when I vomited, when my nose was running, when I was messy in every possible way, she never made a face. Or maybe she did, but I never saw it. I never felt like I was something dirty. I never felt like she was tolerating me.

I was just her child.

I did not think about this at that time. I just existed. I was safe without knowing it. There was no awareness, no questioning. I did not wonder what it cost her. I did not wonder if it was difficult.

Now I am older. And sometimes I imagine something that makes me uncomfortable.

If one day she becomes weak. If she cannot walk properly. If she needs help with things she once did for me, without hesitation. If I have to clean her, carry her, take care of her body the way she once took care of mine.

I know I will do it.

I will not run away. I will not refuse. I will stay.

But I also know I will feel it.

I will notice the smell. I will notice the discomfort. I will notice the effort it takes in my body. And still, I will stay.

That is what is confusing me.

My mother's love felt automatic. Mine feels like a decision.

It does not mean I love her less. I know that. But it feels different. Hers looked like something that did not require thinking. Mine feels like something I will have to choose, again and again.

And this difference is sitting heavily inside me.

I keep asking myself, what is love then?

Is it when you don't feel disgust at all?

or is it when you feel it, and you stay anyway?

When I look at my own relationships, I notice small things. When I love someone, I ignore certain irritations. I move past inconvenience. I adjust myself in ways I don't even fully notice. Not because I am forced to, but because they matter to me.

But still, there is a quiet fear.

Sometimes I wonder when I am messy emotionally, when I cry too much, when I overthink, when I become difficult to understand, what does that feel like to others?

Are they loving me the way my mother loved me?

or are they choosing to tolerate me?

There is a difference, and I can feel it, even if I cannot fully explain it.

As a child, I was not aware of being unpleasant. I was not aware of the effort. I was not worried about being too much. I was just held, without question, without condition.

Now everything feels visible.

Effort is visible.

Discomfort is visible.

Choice is visible.

Nothing feels as automatic anymore.

Maybe this is what adult love is.

Maybe it is not the absence of discomfort, but the willingness to stay even when discomfort is there. Maybe love is not something that happens naturally all the time, but something that is chosen quietly, repeatedly, in moments that are not beautiful.

Maybe feeling disgust does not cancel love.

Maybe it reveals it.

I don't have a clear answer. I am not trying to define love perfectly. I am only trying to understand why this difference between instinct and decision feels so heavy inside me.

Maybe I am not missing a dependency.

Maybe I am missing the feeling of being loved without thinking about it.

And maybe love does not become smaller when it becomes aware.

Maybe it just becomes more human.

I am still thinking about this.

Uncoded Code

“Iraya” Tanishhkaa Mundhada

Everyone stood by
When the bright sun shone
And I stood alone
When the rough winds blown

Waiting for you
Waiting all these years
Waiting for one cue
For our little conversation

Trying to build a new relationship
From those same old strands
Where we left unknowingly
Barely known to each other's presence

The way you challenge me
No one ever does
And how I am falling
With your play of words

I wish I had the courage to ask you
All these years, the unresolved questions
The courage to tell you
Lying beneath my deep emotions

Do you even care?
But then why would you?
When we share no interests
Doesn't look like anything is due

But still, I choose to suffer
Leaving you with the choice
Wishing the words I need to hear,
Yours is the voice!

“Iraya” Tanishhkaa Mundhada, who writes under the pseudonym Iraya, is a poet and law student from India. Her work explores the subtleties of human emotion and the quiet beauty of everyday life through a stream-of-consciousness style. She has been published in Indian literary magazines and continues to experiment with poetry, prose, and narrative forms. Find her on Instagram at [@Iraya__23](#) for a quick chat about art, writing, or anything that stirs the soul!

The Workflow of a Prayer

Sara Taha Hajj Ahmad

Pious solitude invites angels with no delay
surrounding you like a breeze, a lifting kite
which patient hands prevent from floating away
and dexterous fingers manoeuvre to align

performing a palpably devoted dance
unchoreographed but orchestrated by the divine
emerging ethereal skies above recombine
and the ache in your neck is a telling sign

loosen your grip, let it fly with no doubts
your request has been received
and now in the manufacturing bouts
trust that you are relieved?

May your order pass the quality checks
with streamlined release and zero bottlenecks

Alongside her professional career in life sciences, Sara is a writer and a poet whose writing explores the intersections of science, nostalgia, culture, and spirituality. Through storytelling, she is drawn to documenting quiet moments, human connection, and the unseen threads that link memory, place, and time.



The Gardens by Rachel Turney

Rachel Turney, Ed.D. is an educator and artist located in Denver, Colorado. Rachel is on staff at *Bare Back Magazine* and is a reader for *The Los Angeles Review*. She runs the popular online reading series Poetry (in Brief). Her debut book, *Record Player Life (the b-side)*, is available with The Poetry Lighthouse. Website: turneytalks.com Instagram: @turneytalks

[untitled]

Cassandra Chintia

past the stream of consciousness
abstracted across canvases

past the realm of salted cuts
and untraced trails of abused lust

past the tangled fractures of
my vengeful heart and sleepless mind

past the air of pickled teeth
still thick behind these substances

past the irreversibles
in their long list of faithless crimes

past each fog-walled redemption, therein lies

the me before—sheltered, unveiled, whole
dipping hope in the lukewarm July

dancing past the undeserving, skipping

skipping

skipping

past

all the

brush fire

I can't

un
done

The Space Between

Anushree Singh

There is a word for the moment
before the door opens —
not anticipation,
not dread,
but the specific held-breath
of someone who knows
that whatever is on the other side
will require her
to become someone
she has not yet practised being.

I have been living in that word
for months now.

*

They ask me what I want to be
and I say design, I say writing,
I say something that matters —
and I watch their faces
do the calculation,
the quiet arithmetic
of risk versus respectability,
passion versus pension,
and I think:
I have already crossed something
just by saying it out loud.

*

There is a threshold in every house
that nobody notices anymore.
You step over it a thousand times
before you realise
it was always asking you something —
are you coming or going?
are you the same person

who left this morning?
will you remember
to look back?

*

My Class 12 results exist
somewhere in a server
I cannot access.
A number that will open
one door and close others,
that will be the first sentence
of a story I have not written yet.

I am standing outside that server.
I am standing outside myself.

*

This is what nobody tells you
about thresholds —
that the crossing is never
the hard part.
The hard part is the standing.
The not yet.
The still becoming.

The moment when you are
neither the person you were
nor the person you are about to be,
when you exist only
in the hyphen —

girl-woman,
student-dreamer,
Kanpur-and-everywhere,
known-and-unknown,
afraid-and-going-anyway.

*

My grandmother crossed thresholds
with her whole body —
left her village,
left her language,
left the version of herself
that had never seen a city.

She never talked about the crossing.
Only about what was on the other side.

I used to think that was forgetting.
Now I think it was
the only way to survive it —
to keep your eyes
on the far shore,
to trust your feet
to find the ground
even when you cannot
see it yet.

*

There is a moment in every threshold
that belongs only to you —
before the witness,
before the world reclaims you,
before you become
the version of yourself
that other people can see and name.

That moment is yours.

Hold it.

Not forever —
forever would make it a cage,
not a crossing.

Just long enough
to know
that you were here.
That you stood at the edge
and did not look away.
That you chose the other side
not because you were certain
but because standing still
was no longer
a place you could live.

*

I am writing this
at the threshold of everything.

Seventeen years old.
One foot in the life I know.
One foot in the life
I am building
out of nerve and stubbornness
and the particular hope
of someone who has
never had a reason
not to try.

The door is not open yet.

But I am already
leaning toward it.

Anushree Singh is a seventeen-year-old writer from Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India. A contributor to Write the World and the New York Times Open Letter initiative, she has participated in some of the world's most competitive writing competitions including the Queen's Commonwealth Essay Competition, Cambridge Rethink, and the World Historian Essay Competition. An ASISC-certified public speaker and declamation champion, Anushree writes at the intersection of personal experience and the universal — stories rooted in place, identity, and the quiet courage of becoming. LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/anushree-singh3](https://www.linkedin.com/in/anushree-singh3)

I Overthink My Fears

Eman Ozair

I always overthink my fears,
My thoughts scare me like a fool.
I hold on to people who smile at me,
Even when they don't love but wound.

Sometimes I overthink my fears,
I am told when I am not doing good enough,
But what if this is my full potential?
My failed efforts make me sentimental.

Once I overthought my fears,
When I got afraid of losing my two friends.
When they find each other's company better without me.
Deep in my heart, I feel they deserve better than I do.

At night, I overthink my fears,
When I see how far everyone has come,
How far behind am I compared to everyone else?
Even though I am running as fast as I can.

On my 30th birthday, I overthought my fears,
I saw how old I had become,
I see how little I have earned,
Not much have I won, not much have I learned.

Sometimes I overthink when it rains,
What if I fail yet again?
I have enough disappointments to remember
But not much joy to gain.

I always overthink my fears,
Overthink what I did, overthink what I didn't.
I fear all that which I am afraid of,
And it scares me how much it destroys my self-esteem.

Drinkable

Afra Ahmad

What a blatant lie to blurt:
I don't miss being moss-soft.
Because I bled,
I stabbed my tender innocence.
But I don't wish to be
that same person again.

I wonder
if all mothers gain clarity
in bone-deep sleeplessness,
once they start rocking their toddler to sleep,
but I have no shame in admitting this truth:
My body is incapable of second-guessing human theatrics.

I rest, satisfied, this way:
no one is permitted to snatch the strength from under
my sturdy feet,
or dare climb the boundaries I've set
to protect my sanity.

I insist on being clear, unpolluted water.

Kindness is a wretched thing
if it sets ablaze, or toys with, the chemical elements in your brain.
Kindness is only drinkable
if someone is decent enough to digest it with grace.



IMG_20260310_123300 by Nasta Martyn

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The Edge

Lilah Mel Anderson Vosper

I am scared of heights,
Terrified of falling,
Terrified that the bottom will be nothing,
But a cold hard dirt covered ground,
With no ladder to ever get back up,

So as I stand on the edge of something new,
I am scared,
Scared so much that I contemplate turning around,
Going home,
Staying in the safe known,

I have fell down before,
I have had to claw my way,
Digging with every nail,
Bleeding and bruised,
I made it back up,

What if I do not want to bleed again?
Is it so bad that I crave the safety I have carved out,

The fear holds me back,
But I take that step anyways,
And I am no longer on the edge.

The Tandoor

Siddiqi Abid

The man stacked the woods in Tandoor.

(Why are edges of life so fragile?

Bended.... Slanted.... Sloppy

Not ready to hold me)

The woods lighten up a little then fades.

(A fall is essential — a change is

necessary to survive on one)

The spark ignites the stack again —

fire burns.

(An abrupt change — that turns the world upside down)

Tandoor burns and dark flames rises.

(The upside down becomes the new normal)

Edges rise from dark and black to whiten grey.

(The change arrives slowly)

The man frowns while placing a

roti inside — moves his hand back.

(The discomfort settles slowly —

I frown at one)

The roti rises — slowly cooked

(I adjust with the new —

I become the new)

The leathery black shiny skin stacks

roti upon roti.

(Me becomes I. The change —

changed me for good)

liminal

Isabel Trafford

its been a while since the moon has deigned herself bored enough to peek from behind her shroud. tonight is not special. not bathed in silvered glow, nor lit up by the latest asterism. the bin looks up to the sky and finds it has things in common. still, the greyscale is haunted by flickering street lights and roadkill crosses safely. what lies on the other side? a sickly sun? if a ball of hot gas can be depressed, then surely it can swallow down the bitterly crunchy tablet that promises salvation.

a gps blinks forlornly from its sway in the waves. once again, nature abandons those it deems unworthy of its affection. or is it that we leave the ones who love us behind? unintentional or not, this is a cycle that is beginning to rust. old bike tyres line the path through the dune, they hope a pleasurable convenience can be gained from their corpses, as death's stretched shadow only wishes to mimic life. in fact, the lifeguard flags brag of safety, yet the sharks see only red

how does it feel to try and mine quicksand? the moon is laughing at you.

Necessity Breed Emergency Bleed

Nonbeaunary

Precipice after precipice

You keep putting yourself here

The numbness fades the minute you

Lean over

Then it slams down back into your heart

And you remember

How consequences work

And your brain shudders back to life

You live on haze and overdrive

Concentric circles

With the slightest of overlaps

Venn diagram with the slimmest margin

If you keep clamping your teeth shut

To the world

Until the edge

One day you won't catch the fall

And neither will anyone else.

Thresholds

Joanna Mahima

When your gaze is fixated
on the bleak strip of horizon ahead,
A little less concerned
with the happenings of the past
And narrowing on what could be—
Thresholds
They aren't markers of achievement
But the hours of life
momentarily suspended in the chasm—
the '*in-between*'

The fingers of a girl fidgeting
outside an interview room,
The walk up to the doorway
of a loved one's house,
Picking out clothes before an event,
Tying shoelaces before a run,
The few silenced seconds
as the crowd goes quiet before a performance,
Hearing the syllables of your name
spill out of their mouth for the first time

It isn't a report,
A result,
Or anticipated aftermath of incidents.
They are moments unnoticed;
lost in the rush of days.
Often encapsulated in seemingly ordinary ways—
Where life briefly pauses before becoming.
A different version of itself.



IMG_20260405_071048 by Nasta Martyn

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The Trial of Rome

Rupsa Basak

The air is heavy, lit only by a faint otherworldly glow, the ethereal realm of the Judgement Hall tainted with stillness. Before the threshold stands a prisoner of his own fate — one whose toga bleeds with the wounds of Rome, spirit heavy with the dust of Philippi. Upon the threshold sits **Minos**, the arbiter of Law, central. To his left, sits **Life** in graceful manner; his left loomed by silent **Death**.

Acheron's collective sigh looks upon the, now powerless, **Brutus**, and brushes against the shore with murmurs of pity. Brutus does not weep like the ordinary; he does not plead; instead he holds his stoic dignity above all as he awaits his trial.

"Marcus Junius Brutus," Minos's voice echoes, devoid of any warmth . "You have violated the most ancient of all mortal prohibitions : **Thou Shalt Not Murder**. You drove the dagger to the heart of your kin. Your idealism has served both your greatest virtue and your deadliest flaw. For this act of utmost hypocrisy, I condemn you a Traitor to the Law."

"He killed Caesar, who was Tyranny himself—not Julius!" cries Life, her ever flowing, vibrant energy lighting up the corners, "Could the Republic be traded for one man's ambition? I believe Brutus has upheld the greatest law of Freedom—his hands are stained with an act of Liberty. He has been nothing but an honourable man."

"An idealistic word!," the sharp voice of the arbiter rises above the flames, "We speak not of honour, but of Law! His honour required the cost of a sacred trust! How could this restless act of such a man be considered Noble?"

"But his end was an act of ignorance." speaks Death, an epitome of profound coldness, towering high like a silent shadow, "Did he not defy his destined hour? His will to choose his own finality portrays him as a coward."

"A coward? He took the blade to his own heart rather than live as a trophy for tyrants! I believe that is not cowardice, Death—he chose to come to *you*." Life's words echo through the Hall.

"Belief is, but an illusion in this realm of being" argues Death—his voice agitated—against Life.

“He was the beginning of Progress—

“He ceased Progress,” Minos rebuked, slamming his sceptre down,
 “Caesar did all he could for Rome; he brought to Rome many captives,
 whose countrymen had to pay their ransoms, thus filling Rome’s coffers.
 He extended the Roman world beyond measure. Brutus did not kill
 tyranny, he killed Progress!”

“If you condemn him, you condemn every choice made out of impossible
 duty!—

“He is a soul that cannot be resolved, Life.”

Life rouses from her seat; all blazing fire, she gazes at Minos, “I shape the
 soul, imbue it with passion. It was I who shaped his fire for the Republic
 that made him lift the dagger! You cannot dismiss my influence as mere
 circumstance.”

“You give the mortal the capacity to sin and soar but you cannot control
 the consequence. You are the creator, I am the arbiter of final verdict.”
 Roars Minos.

Death finally speaks, his austere resonance silencing the room. He judges
 not the law, not for justice; his judgement speaks of what *became*,

“Minos, you see the law broken.

Life, you see the injustice prevailing.

I see a broken man.”

Death turns his gaze to Brutus, “You claim to have acted out of your love
 for Rome, yet you allowed Mark Antony to speak, argued with Cassius,
 betrayed your nobility for fatal vanity and ego. Your greatest failure was
 your ignorance of consequences.”

“He believed his sacrifice would nourish the Republic” says Life.

“ His act was self-defeating; he murdered a Tyrant to save the Republic
 and yet he ensured that it be ruled by Augustus. You, Brutus, stand not on
 grounds of Liberty but of Irony!”

Silence prevailed as Minos and Life acknowledged Death’s verdict.

“Marcus Junius Brutus,” Minos declared, “Your sentence is not Tartarus,
 for your intentions were not malicious. Nor is your sentence the Elysium
 for your consequences were not destructive. But your fate sentences you to
 the Asphodel Fields where all failure of consequences wander.”

“But you shall wait,” says Life.

Death added, “You will wait till the very last Roman, the final soul who

bore the weight of your Republic, has passed into the Halls of Judgement. Only when the ghost of your Republic is fully extinguished will your judgement be re-evaluated.”

The Hall goes silent.

A dry desolate field surrounds the columns and Brutus disappears. The three return to the threshold. The momentary stillness of the Hall is disrupted when the echo of shackles dragged across the dim columns sounds.

“Prepare the scrolls. The greatest architect of Rome now approaches. Gaius Julius Caesar is here.”

The Ghost in Our Oven

Aarushi Yadav

A ghost lives in our oven. My mother would chide you if you said it to her, my father would roll his eyes and give the rehearsed response, “Thank you very much for the concern, but as long as my lungs have air, no spirit can enter this house of mine.” The servants would shake their heads and attest to their master’s and mistress’s word.

But I tell you the truth. I knew it since I was four. Those were the days only the rich lads went to school, and not one of them appreciated it. They scrounged for ways they could slack lessons, offering to water the teacher’s flowers or swim in the nearby river instead. To this day I do not understand what pleasure they found. It was a cavernous river, and merely seeing it passed chills in me.

Not like I had any other pursuits to pass time in, however. I was the quietest, gentlest child you could’ve laid eyes on. Coupled with my plump, rosy cheeks and dark hair, I was the perfect target of teasing from these imps. It was a frigid day of December, just before our holidays began, when one of them came up to my desk. His frame was tall and smile was eerie. “Where’s your prince, princess?” he jeered at me. I ducked under a book, but could not hide myself from the laughs of my classmates.

The teacher shouted to shut them up, but I had enough. I got up from my desk and fled the building, thick tears flying from my eyes. There was hardly any sun that day. It was so cold that I thought my tears would freeze on the ground and become pearls.

I ran and ran. My house jutted out on the street ahead. I put my hands upon my knees, panting for air. Merely breathing gave me shivers. What was between me and the house was the river. As always, I took the roundabout.

I did not want to look at the river. It had turned into ice; colourless ice. From the side of my eye I could glance at the reflection of the trees, and of the school, and of a man.

Was it a man? I stood puzzled. Yes, it was a man. His hair was golden, glowing disheveled in the form of streaks above his face, which had gone pale. His eyes were closed and mouth open, as if he were still gasping for

oxygen when the life left his body. His arms were flung overhead in futile resistance. It was a most frightening scene.

A scream left my mouth as I ran to my house. My father was sitting on his chair when I lunged in and told what I saw. Angry, he told me to get in my senses before he set out to investigate the matter. I clung to my mother tightly, who sent me to the maid, who in turn sent me to my bedroom. I heard my parents arguing. The police was called.

Nobody let me know of what became of the whole thing. But when everyone was outside, I stayed up and listened to the wails. My ears pressed onto the door of the basement. Father said that I could singe myself from the oven, but I knew that was not the reason I wasn't allowed there. Because that night, the wails went on till dawn. They belonged to a woman, more like, a girl. That must have been the tenth time I heard them.

One Christmas, they opened the lowest floor to prepare the feast. I was downstairs. Father was joyous, saying something about how our house always had the best holiday dinner, and no other can come close to it, while my gaze danced around and caught a glimpse of her. She was standing beside the oven in a white laced frock, dark hair and rosy cheeks, just like me.

When Father and Mother talked to the servants, I walked toward her, curious. The faintest smile graced her lips as she bent to reach my level. I asked her whether she lived here in the oven. She shrugged her shoulders. I asked why she lived in there and not in the house. Her face became sad.

And then Mother called me back. When I asked her about the girl, she said I must have seen a ghost, for nobody lived there. Turning around, I saw her climbing into the oven, before shutting its door.

Then another day, I found her in the gardens, walking gloomily. Her frock had turned cream now instead of pure white. I called out to her, but perhaps she could not understand me, for she seldom answered. Her eyes alone spoke of a pain that perhaps only she could comprehend.

One day, I even gifted her a ball. I'd sneaked it inside the basement when the servants were cleaning. I did not see her there taking it, but sometimes at night, I could feel the ball bouncing on the floor underneath, and that was all the sign I needed.

Even besides me, not many went to the oven, and I figured that must've been the reason we bought cakes more often than baking them. Sometimes Mother went there, but usually Father brought her out. Maybe he wanted to protect her from the ghost. Maybe he was trying to get rid of it, for oftentimes I saw Father go to the oven too. Those were usually the times the wails came. They were slow and long, sometimes full of sorrow,

sometimes terror, and sometimes, rage.

The night I saw that man in the river, they were of rage. Perhaps that is why I remember them so vividly.

Father had to go there again to quieten her. I opened my bedroom door to peek, and saw him gesturing wildly at her, asking her to shut up or he'll make her. I heard some more sounds of him yelling and her crying. He then left, warning her to not create a scene.

This time, though, I saw two pale hands reach out like claws to grab his shirt, followed by a fierce cry that made the hair on my neck stand up. I could only imagine the fear Father experienced, for his face went as white the ghost's hands. He threw them off him and shut the door, quavering back to his room. The next morning, he caught a fever.

I tell you this story only because you insist upon visiting the house. I do not understand what about that mansion appeals you so, Lucy. It is all but ruined, and I do not want its melancholy to seep into your cheery disposition. But we are to marry, and perhaps it is right to face the past before starting on a journey anew.

I know Father is going to adore you. How could he not? I chose a bride with care, for it is not an easy task to meet his expectations. After all, he was an official in the government. We partied with the blue bloods of the neighbourhood. When I was an infant, a waiter once spilled wine on a mayor's clothes in a celebration. Father rebuked him before the whole party and called him 'feeble' to stain the clothes of a mayor.

Unfortunately, the waiter possessed a rather rebellious streak, for he hit back, calling Father feeble enough to father a feeble-minded child.

You see, I used to have an elder sister. I do not know her name, but she was said to have been delayed developmentally. She could not speak beyond crying and babbling, neither could she make friends easily.

They had tolerated keeping her for many years, but that comment made in public was the final straw. Since then, rarely anybody saw her. She was kept in her room, which made our neighbour's son upset. Rumour was that he was in love with my sister! Such a shame that Father could not allow this romance to take its shape. From time to time the boy kept coming to check for her, and each time he was sent back.

Isolation and grief made her sick and eventually pass. Till the time I gained consciousness, she was long forgotten. I never even saw a photograph of her. I heard that her lover died too.

But between you and me; I always thought that she'd never truly left. Think of it. Our house had no history of ghosts until that spirit appeared in the oven. Even then, Father and Mother never realised there was a spirit.

Only I did. Who else could it have been but her, taking revenge upon our father from the dead?

And maybe her efforts were successful, for Mother passed soon after I left the town, and Father gradually lost his mind. Oh Lucy, do feel free to laugh. I do not mind. Father was a stern man, and while it does pain me to see his condition, it would not pain *him* if someone else were in his place!

Come, Lucy, this is my house! This is the devil's lair you so longed to see. Here is that wretched river young me was frightened of. Look! The maid whom I spent my childhood with. Where is Father? I must have you meet Father!

Do you want to visit the oven? You shall have a jolly time seeing it. Madam, open the doors to the basement! I'm not a child no more to be forbidden. Speaking of the oven, where *is* Father?

Am I the only one smelling a stench? No, Lucy, stop. I feel scared. Not because of the ghost. It is warm. Too warm for this weather. Madam, did anyone by chance leave the oven burning? Call Father. Do not go there, Lucy! Stay. Someone has to turn that damn thing off!

It is not warm, but hot, searing *hot*. And that awful stench. Is it the ghost playing malicious tricks to scare us away? I must find out. But it frightens me. What if I find her hiding inside, like I did years ago?

That oven is burning. For the first time in my life, I see it burning. Do not come, it's dangerous! Red flames are encroaching the floor. My ball is there, only it's turned into a black rock. I can hardly breathe. Something is in there...*someone* is in there.

Alas, there's no ghost around. This is no more her prison. Oh Lucy, it is Father for whom that oven burns!

I hunted down *purpose* and woke up at a funeral

Cassandra Chintia

The boy 4 houses down fell off his bed and never woke up.

I've known him my whole life but can't recall the last time we spoke or crossed paths.

The boy's last request was a cup of coffee, black. His little brother said "no, you're still sick. Get some rest, and I'm buying you one when you feel better in the morning."

On the same morning he was supposed to get better, I woke up cursing my purposeless existence. The hunt had lasted for years, and I was ready to end it.

I was at work when the news broke. There was no coffee; none in the boy's stiffening body, none in my half-poisoned bloodstream.

I spent my lunch break digesting mortality's checkmate. How cruel to target an unsuspecting opponent. What a vicious attack, on both the defeated and the spectators.

My long way home was accompanied by the low humming of the bus. I did not sing along, scared sadness would spill itself recklessly across the baseline.

I was greeted home by the neighbor's porchlight, then soon my own. Three things waited faithfully for me: the knife, silence (both well-sharpened), and a surprise package: a blackhead removal machine.

The valley of dense collectibles (a fancy way of saying my disgusting blackhead compound) was stubborn. It only forfeited roughly half of its unguarded civilians. I wondered if that's how the boy's lungs came to a halt—a lost bargain.

I have no recollection on how I went to sleep, or how I woke up, yet again. But the following night, I attended the funeral.

The great difficulty of saying yes to life was tucked away neatly in the far corners of my mind, as I saw the boy's old favorites displayed around his perpendicular feet.

The funeral still flashes itself over the years:

The boy's charcoaled face, housing a white handkerchief in between parted lips. The boy laid in a suit, fingers orchestrated to cradle white lilies.

The boy's almost-fiancee, or never-bride (whichever you find less upsetting), weeping next to the brother. Still no coffee in sight.

The boy's final moments, reduced to speculations.

Compressed anecdotes and well-wishes for his father.

Dazed continents holding an impromptu group-therapy, bobbing heads fishing for the boy's brightness—now a captive frozen in bright screens.

The church youth song we sang at camps, "*b-o-s-c-o-n-i-a-n youth on the go...*"

The bereaved taking turns pouring fragrance, some bent motionless to the breathless image. How easy it is to lose a battle against gravity.

His friendship is now an outdated currency.

His love, an ancient language. Remembered and recited only by few left.

His body, nothing but ashes in the sea; weighing less than the incremental deaths of the ones left behind. Weighing less than the goodbye nobody could say or hear.

I showered, then did my neglected BDD ERP: to look in the mirror for as long as I could. I felt like I was staring at a girl with glass eyes, introspective in her muteness. I stared, with no resentment this time. I stared, and stared, and forgot what I was supposed to hate. All I could do was recognize the life behind each line, each fat pooled up, each blemish, and for once, I sighed with no contempt.

Stand down, soldier. Tonight, we celebrate life. Of the spared and the fallen. A voice, at last. A purpose in sight.



IMG_20260404_144116 by Nasta Martyn

Nasta Martyn is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator, poet, and writer. She graduated from the Academy of Slavic Cultures and has a bachelor's degree in design. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in art history. In 2005, she created a series of graphics dedicated to the Chernobyl disaster, and in the same year, she wrote the series "The Red Book." In 2022, she participated in international exhibitions in China, Taiwan, and the United States. In 2024, she received the Jury's Special Prize for her poster in China.

Best Friends Forever

Kate Hodges



Summer camp runs from mid-May to the end of June. There are four of us assigned to a cabin. Lily and I are at bunkmates. She's on top. She just came in in a whirlwind of make-up and perfume, dragging a purple suitcase and announced that we were sharing and that she had the top bunk, alright? It wasn't really a question though. I wonder what it's like to be that confident all the time? Lily knows how to make an entrance. I mumble, "I guess that'd be okay." I smile, but I think I may look like too stiff or creepy. (I practiced smiling for the inevitable camp group photo before I came here, but it kept coming out too weird and wide.) So I look down. She was wearing flip flops instead of the regulation required handbook sneakers. I feel like a dork.

I wake up early, tip-toe into the bathroom and try on all my t-shirts. But nothing is right. I thought my 'I ate Pi and it was delicious' shirt was cool when I bought it. What was I thinking? I settle on my plain green t-shirt. I sit on the edge of my bed, and flip through my book. We have to read "Little Women" for assigned summer reading. There will be a test on it the first week back at school.

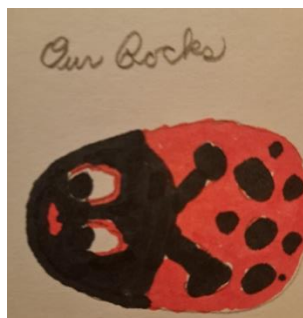
When Lily finally wakes up, she scrolls through her phone for a while. I remind her that we have archery in a half hour. She rushes to get ready. When she comes back, she stands in a towel while rummaging in her suitcase. She is unbothered when it slips down a bit. She isn't self-conscious at all.





She pulls on a blue kimono and belts it. She looks over at me, shakes her head and throws me a red striped sundress. "The t shirt is okay, but this will be cooler." I say I can't wear red because of my red hair. "What do they know? Jessica Rabbit did it. And she looked FAB." I put the dress on and shimmy out of my shorts. I hesitate, and then as quick as I can take off my t and pull up the dress straps. I have on a pink bra today, but I wasn't expecting anyone else to see it. Lily stares at me for a second and then pulls me in front of the mirror. "Just one thing." She takes a BFF necklace set out and hands me one. Just like that, she claims me. We put them on. "We look great!" She says, and I agree.

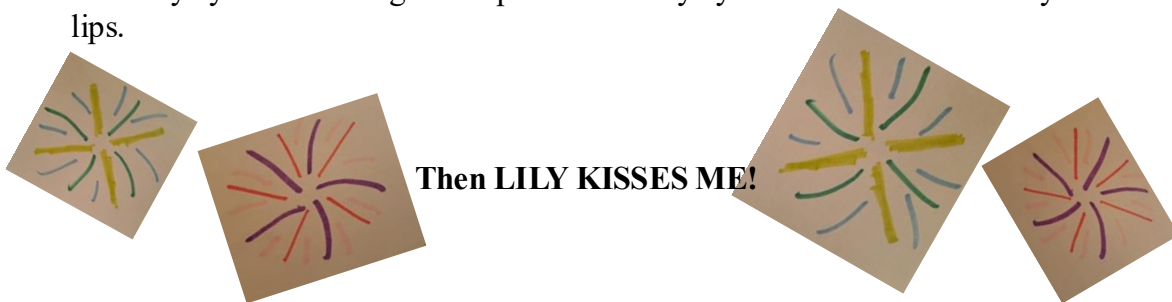
After that, Lily and I are inseparable. We paint silly faces on rocks in arts and crafts. I pretend to die in archery. She pretends to save me when our canoe capsizes (after re-enacting the classic Titanic pose). We laugh and laugh.



One day after swimming in the lake, I start to reapply my sunscreen. Lily has loaned me her sky-blue bathing suit. I feel like Malibu Barbie. Lily offers to do my back. I like the way it feels when she rubs the lotion in. I feel a bit funny and tingly and swirly.



I start to blush. “Oh, your face is burning too.” Lily gently puts it to my face. I close my eyes. I feel the gentlest pressure on my eyelids. Then she traces my lips.



Then LILY KISSES ME!

It's my first kiss! And she's everything! She tastes like salt and smells like Summer and Copper Tone 30. I want to stop time. I want to open my eyes to see her kissing me. I want to see what she sees when she looks at me. I instantly fall in love with her. I want to tell her, but I don't. That would be uncool.



We go on a nature walk. When the group stops to rest, we sit on the grass and make daisy chains, weaving them into bracelets and rings. I slide my bracelet onto her wrist. She puts the ring on my finger. I pretend it's a wedding ring, but I know not to say that part out loud.



It's the last week of camp. We have a summer solstice party to celebrate on the lawn. It's as hot as a jungle. I go get us some capri-suns to cool off. When I come back, Lily is dancing with a group of girls. She has kicked off her shoes and taken off her necklace. Whether it's Lily's betrayal or time's, I don't know. She looks like a fairy dancing on the lawn, a halo of sunlight all around her. I am devoted. I want to cry all of the sudden. The view is devastating. Lily sees me and smiles. She bows, puts out her arm, and pulls me in.

We spread picnic blankets on the grass and fall asleep to the steady hums and chirps of the crickets. I lay down next to Lily. She rests her head against my shoulder. Our two cabin mates are on either side. I can't settle. I watch the lightning bugs flicker and twinkle about. I try to memorize the feeling of her next to me before falling into a fitful sleep.

I wake up before Lily. I stroll along and see her necklace dangling from a tree. I put it in my pocket. Later, when she asks if I've seen it, I say no and offer to help her look. I can't explain why I took it; I just know that I need it. I still have both necklaces in a box somewhere.



I don't know how we go from best friends forever to just Instagram followers hearting the occasional photo. All I know is when Lily's posts pop up on my phone screen, my heart skips a beat. I am fourteen all over again, longing for summer.

Love With Conditions

Katie Mack

I grew up knowing a love that was skewed
All that mattered to you was what the church viewed
Be fruitful and multiply, whatever god said
All those chapters and verses, they messed with my head

My thoughts and feelings weren't important to you
You made me marry some guy I barely knew
He said the right words, so it wasn't a scam
Age gaps don't matter when he's a godly man

I'm a woman of virtue, it's the right thing to do
He went to our church, he sat in our pews
Our engagement went quick, he wanted to get married
But when we said I do, that man was buried

We went to church to sing and pray
Neither of you saw me slowly fading away
I came to you crying, he was getting mean
He got angry and yelled when the house wasn't clean

He blamed me for everything, it was always my fault
That's when I wondered if you were all in a cult
You both claimed to love me, but that was a lie
Your love made me sick, all I did was cry

I thought about death, maybe I could fake it
I prayed for an accident where he didn't make it
You took his side when I needed your help
You'll never know how awful that felt

I wanted to leave, thought you'd understand
But you told me to stay, it was all in god's plan
You cried to god when I finally left him
How embarrassing, your daughter, living in sin

Every second of marriage felt like a curse
If I took your advice it would have got worse

If I didn't call back, would you check on me?
Would you swing by my house, would you use the spare key?
His words stopped hurting so he finally got bold
You'd walk in and find my body, I'm cold

Though not what you wanted, I'm glad I left when I did
Because now I'm a mom to my own little kids
I love them through anything, it's my life's mission
I know how it feels to be loved with conditions

They're still little now, they make mistakes
I'm learning patience, it's hard, some days it aches
I don't dictate who they love or how they should feel
I won't be the reason they have to heal

For the first time in life, being loved isn't painful
When they reach for me, their touch isn't hateful
We don't go to church, I'm still scared of those people
They claimed to be godly, but all I knew was evil