

# Word Tonic

## Anthology Volume XI

# AT HOME



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Wish you were **HERE!**



**Word  
Tonic**

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# Preface by Roos van der Velden

I've worked on the past eleven editions of the anthology from many places. The very first edition was edited on a long-distance bus in Norway. A lot of anthologies were edited in secret, while I was in class, or sometimes even on a slow day during my internship. Yet, most of the work still happened from the place I at that point called home. From the hard-wooden table in my parents living room. On the couch in my student dorm at 1 A.M., because I really, really wanted it to be able to go out the next day. For anthologies three and four I carved out time to work on them while I was living in Cologne on exchange.

The anthology has been at home home where I was at home at that moment. Yet, of course, my computer is not the only home this anthology has. The home of this anthology is on all the computers of the WordTonic anthology participants, where they worked hard on their stories, poems, essays, articles, illustrations and many other art projects that have appeared in the anthology. The home of the anthology is also WordTonic, where it has been proudly displayed on the website for almost three years now!

Yet, most importantly, the anthology has become a home itself, to all the contributors' wonderful creations over the years. And, if I may say, WordTonic itself is also a home, to a lot of wonderful copyrighters and creatives, who have managed to unfold themselves into amazing, professional, colourful, skilled writers, who help each other, care for each other, and who managed to make yet another wonderful anthology together.

Go there where you are home, open up the anthology and let yourself be moved by yet another series of wonderful, charming, emotional, and hilarious tales of Home.

# Preface by reux z. qualm

Kindred spirit, before you turn these pages, pause for a moment and ask yourself: *what is home for me?*

It may arrive as a place: a doorway you've crossed a thousand times, a kitchen filled with familiar scents, a bed that remembers the shape of your rest. Or perhaps it isn't a place at all, but a feeling: a fatherly presence, a soft voice, a memory of an imaginary backyard adventure that settles quietly in your chest. Home can be loud with laughter or softened by silence. It can be shared among many or held carefully within one.

Across cultures and histories, the idea of home has never stayed still. It shifts with us, shaped by the families we're born into or the ones we choose, by distance and return, by loss and discovery. For some, home is rooted in tradition: the steady glow of the hearth and the subtle beating of the heart. For others, it's something rebuilt again and again, wherever life carries them.

In ancient Greece, the goddess Hestia tended the sacred flame, the quiet center of the household. She didn't roam or conquer; she remained. Her presence was not in grandeur, but in warmth, in continuity, in the unseen thread that binds people together. Perhaps home, then, is like that flame: sometimes flickering, sometimes steady, but always capable of being rekindled.

This anthology is an invitation. Within these pages, you'll encounter many versions of home: some familiar, others unexpected. Let them meet you where you are. Let them unsettle, comfort, or expand your understanding.

As you read, you may find yourself remembering, questioning, even redefining. That's part of the journey. Because home is not only where we begin—it's something we're always learning how to carry with us.

# Shelter Abandoned

Written by: Aliza Nini  
Outside editor

He was tired. He craved a spot to rest. Walking for ages, no end in sight, no signs of civilisation. The world was a lonely place, almost entirely devoid of human society. Just overgrown trees, brambly bushes and a growing sinister feeling, like there was something alive. He needed shelter. That's when he saw it. A house.

But this house was... off. A silent towering structure. Cracked windows barely hanging on, and vines were creeping up the edges of the house. He could hear noises. Creaking. Groaning. Nothing human. He ignored the beating against his chest and went inside.

He thought the exterior was intimidating to look at, clearly inside was worse. Paint was peeling off the walls. Slanted doors about to fall off their hinges. The croaking sound from the pipes, rusty from disuse. It was a place he could reside, but that did not calm the uneasy feeling inside him. The feeling of something watching.

Bang. A loud noise from upstairs. The man had barely entered, and he was already tense. He considered his situation. To venture into the unforgiving world or to explore a possible shelter? No choice.

He cautiously wandered past the doorway, finding what was once a living room. The sight that awaited him was unimaginable. Cobwebs dangled from the ceiling, and disgusting amounts of mould tainted the walls. He coughed. There was an awful stench; he was unsure of what it was, but it permeated the room... It seemed to be coming from one of the walls. He would think about that later.

Thump. Thump. Thump. The noise was getting louder, and he was on edge. What could be up there? Was he going crazy? Was shelter worth it? He ignored it, or at least tried to do so. He couldn't go back to the outside world; he needed to be inside.

He distracted himself by exploring the ground floor. Nothing special, what would have been a normal house if it weren't for the endless amounts of decay.

He noticed something on the ground. It looked like a crumpled-up piece of

paper. No, a photo. He picked it up and looked at it; whatever it was had been scribbled out. It seems that it was impossible to learn anything about the former residents. There were no signs to indicate who had lived here, or even if anyone had lived here at all. A stage house, abandoned when no one wanted it. Shown to numerous families, eager to find their dream home, and stopping short at this one. No one wanted a cursed house after all. But that was all speculation, of course. He had no idea why this house had ended up in its current state, which could have been for a number of completely normal reasons.

The tension was getting to him. He needed to get out, get out, get out— He needed to stay calm. There was nowhere to go. He needed to face the mystery of the house and accept it as his new residence. There was no other choice.

He took steps deeper and deeper into the house, trembling all the way. He was next to the stairs. The thumping was louder. Something was up there. If he were to stay here, he would need to confront it. This was his shelter, his place, his home—He needed to see what was upstairs.

Treading carefully, he went up uneasily, not knowing what would await him.

Nothing.

There was nothing up here. He looked everywhere. All three (disarrayed) bedrooms, the bathrooms and what seemed to be a kid's playroom. Nothing. But that didn't mean there wasn't something making a noise.

The door to the first bedroom was swinging back and forth, the wind blasting tempestuously through the broken window. That was the reason for the noise. It was not a problem then. What could he expect from such an old house? Something still seemed off, though. Like there was something... alive.

He decided to sleep for the night, on a torn-up mattress in the biggest bedroom. Uncomfortable and covered in dust, this was the best place he had slept in years. He could deal with the house in the morning. He would not go outside again.

\*

A scream. He jolted up from his position. It was pitch-dark and freezing, with a strong wind numbing his body. The screeching sound was just the wind, he reasoned. Another scream. No, it wasn't. It was coming from

downstairs. He didn't want to go down. He didn't want to deal with this. He didn't want to leave.

He went down. He couldn't see anyone. The screams were getting louder, filled with agony. Slowly creeping towards the noise, he realised where it was coming from. The wall with that awful stench was enveloping his senses all over again. Dizzy with the noise and the scent, he stumbled onto the ground. The screaming wouldn't stop. Was someone trapped?

He knocked on the wall. The screaming stopped. He put his ear against it, ignoring the alarms ringing in his head. Silence. Like, there was no one there at all. He must have imagined it. The house was getting to his head. It was too quiet, too dark. He went back to sleep.

\*

The next time he woke, light blinded him through the shattered windows. No sounds of birds chattering, honking cars or children playing; there was no one here but him. At least that's what he kept telling himself. His stomach rumbled. He had no access to food, and it was unlikely this house had anything. Even if it did, it would be unsalvageable. He decided to check the kitchen anyway.

Layers of dust, the same as every other area of the house. A horrible smell of rotten food and flies buzzing. He coughed and held back vomit.

There was a chance of something in the cupboards. He checked, nothing but dusty surfaces, almost like there had been no food to begin with. The fridge was off, but there was something inside, carrying that awful aroma. Against his better judgment, he opened it.

Piles and piles of spoiled meat, covered in congealed blood. The smell from before had increased, blinding all his senses. He could barely breathe. He couldn't even tell what animal the meat was, just that it needed to be gone from here. But that was not possible, not in his situation. He could only ignore it, like everything else in this house.

The man was out of options. This house was cursed, with strange noises and pungent smells. Could he really stay here? Would he be able to survive?

Something bad happened here. And he didn't want to be next. With great sadness in his heart, he left, gave the house one last yearning glance and ventured into the cruel world. Still better than this accursed house.

\*

The house was not always like this. Once it was filled with warmth, joy and laughter, everything that made a 'home'. A happy family, with happy people and their happy lives. The house was so thrilled to have such positive beings bringing light that the doors gently shut and stayed upright, the windows were strong and resolute, even against the strongest winds. No electrical faults or faulty pipes, it was the perfect place to live. But then tragedy struck.

The house could not understand exactly what happened, but remembers thundering yells and loud sobbing. After that, the atmosphere was tense, so thick the house felt suffocated. The man, the woman, and their child could not stand each other. Plates smashed into the house's walls, and doors slammed shut, causing immense sadness to what was once called a home. They left. Didn't clear up their suffering and left their memories everywhere, only the house could remember what once was.

A sign was attached to the front of the house. It couldn't see it, but sensed that it labelled the house as abandoned. No longer a home. Empty. Wasted space.

But it didn't stop there. Someone else entered the house. It was abrupt. This person was stumbling carelessly, bumping into random objects and smashing things. They scratched and painted the walls, and they brought food and spilled it everywhere. The house was in agony.

By the time they left, many years later, the house was in chaos. Garbage scattered everywhere, spoiled meat in the fridge, and dust lining everything, along with mould. They had placed something rotten and sinister inside one of its walls, tainting the dwelling to its core. The house was no longer that perfect home but a curse, a place where no being could reside.

Other humans attempted to enter the house, but they left after hearing the odd noises inside. That building was cursed, and anyone who resided there would face the consequences. The house was elated, finally, its endless torture at the hands of humans could end.

When that unassuming man arrived aeons later, the house rebelled. It distrusted living beings, so it would scare anyone who dared to enter it. This was not a 'home', but an enraged dwelling.

The house would persist. Alone.

# Fleeting Joys

Written by: Antonia Zatrok

Edited by: Samantha Acker

The unmovable object until moved.  
The puppet to the string master,  
The powerless, the oppressed,  
The one that scarred the living room floor.  
It is the centre of our life.  
A constant, an assurance of stability  
How can man dismiss its value?

The unmovable object until moved.  
The spiral and mixture brought to life,  
By the hand of man.  
The disposable, yet the necessary,  
Its lovelorn existence should be admired  
Why can't the man be brought by fire?  
Like the laughter and indulgence of a child licking it clean.

Those objects bring flavour and power,  
The warmth and love of a mother  
To bring joy,  
Comfort,  
Safety.  
Like the blanket of a baby.

Those things make a house, a home  
Because who wouldn't want this forgiving virtue?

These unmovable objects until  
Moved.

# At Home

Written by: Ashley Catelyn Olivier

Edited by: Star Faeastrea

The coffee table is barren, and my shoelaces are too tight for my numb fingers to undo. So, when I collapse onto the couch and the springs dig into the scrape on my thigh, I burst into tears.

Normally, by now, a cup of coffee would be warming my palms, a grating, jazzy tune would be blasting from down the hall, and the smell of tomato soup would be wafting in from the kitchen. I'd set my laptop on the counter and attempt to edit the open document but be unable to get even a line in because 'absolutely no work is to be done when the time is nigh!' (Code for when an old action film was soon to grace our eyes from the television screen — or a devastating love story, if it was my turn to choose). The last rays of the evening sun would filter through the window and slant across the tiles, and we'd set up camp in a mound of cushions on the couch. They'd be piled high, so precariously balanced that to get up to go to the bathroom would result in a domino effect—and endless cursing—as they'd collapse to the floor and, just once, knock over a lego R2-D2 figure from Star Wars that took a month to build. (A single piece of it would, unfortunately, never be recovered). This was our sacred ritual. It was a chaotic mess, and so were we.

Jasper William Fitz was my world, my home, my haven; without him, I am wandering blindly, stumbling over roots and weathering cuts on my cheeks from sharp branches in the wild jungle that is the outside world. I am crying on the couch instead of getting work done or making dinner or relaxing to watch one of his favourite films, or even my own. I am one half of a whole, and every time I get to our apartment, the ghost of him chases me through the halls, reminding me that I will never be whole, or at home, again.

# Life of the Turtle

Written by: Samantha Acker

Edited by: Antonia Zatrok

The endlessness of a dreary existence  
tugs on her soul,  
in a world much too small for her.  
Reverie her only solace,  
she forces herself forward—  
away from here.  
Timid steps,  
deep breaths, darting eyes.  
Only then does she  
begin to grasp the improbability of her existence  
like fog cleared from her mind,  
the world suddenly much too big.

Twenty-four hours  
is how long it takes for her to realize  
she's been starving her entire life.  
Now she finds herself insatiable.  
The world at her fingertips,  
a feast before her to devour.

She cannot decipher if home is where  
she hangs her hat  
or where her heart is.  
So she builds one on her back,  
taking a piece of each place  
in exchange for all the pieces  
of her heart she left behind.

She chews on a romance language until  
*Ceceo* becomes a familiar sensation between her teeth.  
She pockets a recipe for *barszcz*,

jars the sounds of fado and a warm ocean breeze.  
She captures an illusion,  
a holy view too close between the orange trees.  
And at the end of it all,  
she drags her lovelorn self to the  
golden eagles perched on pillars,  
extracts the gold to mend what's left of the  
mangled mural her heart has become.

Many ask if she has caught this  
ailment they call  
homesickness.  
Shallow breaths, gaze distant,  
she drags her feet to where she started,  
because freedom has a price.  
And that is when she answers,  
“Yes. Something of the sort.”

# New Skin

Written by: Kiera Hammersley

Edited by: Antonia Zatrok

One threshold to the next. The gate to the house is rusty under the palm of your hand. Tricky latch, peeling paint splinters into a jagged barb under your nails. You move on from the gate and up the path, past the souring plants littering the front garden. Rust clings to your skin, but as it's all that remains before you entered, you don't have the heart to wipe it on your trousers.

There are many trees in this part of the country, you notice. Kaleidoscopic verdure. Unlike the city which is baked in greys, its slate concrete pavements, buildings, people; even the noise is grey with its mucid fuzz of agitated traffic, the crush of business suits on the trains, and nondescript, muttering chatter at each turn – relentless buzzing pollution. The city will keep living without you. Here, there are only leaves sighing against each other, a breathless dance. There are birds too, though you can't make out which kind. The countryside doesn't oppress or stifle, instead it blossoms and roams whether it wishes. Morbid recklessness, your mother would say.

The door of the cottage is blue. Soft blue. Baby blue. It reminds you of all the picture books sitting in your online shopping baskets, the nursery rhymes with the cartoon animals on the front cover. They won't be there now, of course. Baskets nor picture books. Any spontaneous purchase, any search history, any financial, geographical, biological record of self – pretty, punctual lines of code – has been snuffed from the vast expanse of virtual existence.

Just like a potato. But a person is not a potato, your mother said when you moved in with him; you can't be scrubbed away to be made anew. Yet, you have scrubbed away everything that she once commented on; the admirations and annoyances that comprise a person, like unknowingly scrunching your nose from bitter tastes and tutting your tongue when carrying out inane tasks.

To be made anew for you consists of an unflattering haircut, disobedient fringe curled over newly shaped eyebrows, custom fitted teeth, adjusted nose bridge, bunching fat underneath morose-coloured trousers. You have stopped biting your nails. You've formed new mannerisms, new speaking

habits. You speak with a lisp now, words broken down, contorted, moulded to the lilt of a new accent. The first you was not a half-hearted person so you dedicated yourself fully.

If you could, your thoughts too would be stripped back to the first primitive needs: eat, drink, shit, and all else follows. Morality; philosophies; politics; interests; compulsions; biological preferences like tastes, colours, sounds, materials, people, all laid bare, as if your genetic code was scrambled and rewritten. There would be nothing left of what he loved or what your mother knew. But there is a limit to possibility, so you'll make do.

The you of the past no longer exists. Now, the future, the components that make it possible, are all you have. Your new name, new personhood, is seed to a new life, and will be planted in what stands before you. Your new home is small and withered, one of those old money type of places, upkeep too expensive to have been worthwhile. In its prime, you can imagine that ivy used to overspread itself and climb ramshackle up the walls.

It's the antithesis of everything you were raised to know, that aged flat in the city, your mother's austere pride in spite of the drunken spats above, below, and outside, along with the notion that everything had their place: your schoolwork kept only in your folders, no scribblings on the fridge; your toys out of sight when your mother's friends came by, intrusive and stifling; your meals dictated by the supermarket discounts, the clinical plate sectioned into Petri dish meat, vegetables, potatoes; and the weekends of cleaning and polishing and quiet with the self-same childish injustice broiling inwardly, that things were wrong but not knowing the state of right.

The drone of perpetual construction, the city's perfected brutalism; the guttural chorus rupturing from the pubs when a sports team won or lost; ram-packed streets of commuters, of shoppers, of common pickpockets indistinguishable from the opulently wealthy; being smothered within thousands upon thousands of people.

Now the silence is eerie. There is nothing but suspension, the dreadful awareness of self and no one else. No one to lose yourself in. You find yourself within being lost, was what your mother always said to you. Liar, liar, tongue on fire.

There is grime wedged in the corners of the door and the handle is blackened. The key is scalding against your leg. You reach into your pocket yet the key feels chill in your grip. The sun pools sweat over your skin. You

should get inside, you tell yourself, it'll be cooler in there. You do not move. He won't be there, you know this, but the fear roots. What if, what if, if, if you opened the door, and there he was.

He would be sitting on the doorstep of the flat, reading a well-thumbed copy of a vintage novel, the kind he refused to buy new – 'void of life', he said – and liked the yellow tinge of paper, flimsy and weak, how it yielded under his fingers. On the doorstep, he would be waiting as soon as he heard footsteps outside. Flattering even towards the end, a dizzy admiration for your soft-hearted protector. You understand that habit of his now, why he blew up your phone whenever he deemed you were out too late, and why you felt surveyed even when he went away for weeks on end for business.

Your mother was right about the first you being naïve, taken in too easily, but she was wrong about the short-lived happiness.

Happiness in bursts, his laugh a shy unfurling of vibrato when brushing shoulders in that café, the blustered mix-up of an identical order; his hand, delicate fingers, around the coffee cup, then the pen, scribbling digits; eyes softened, tipsy allure of pupils, the unspoken question.

Happiness in torrents, his rumpled voice fluttering between your chests, then chasing you even to the corners of sleep, his stories, past, present, future, constructing the architecture of a being; his hot palm over your pimpled skin in the dark beneath sheets and in the splaying day, two bodies soldered, patchwork flesh and emotion; his eyes sputtering pleasure, delight, anger.

Happiness in ebbs, laughter punctured with acid, his vitriolic sarcasm; his hands coiled at the sides, and yours empty and aching; eyes probing, striking down to the naked essence of your being, finding what was unknown even to you. Happiness in astringent words, degradations, and accusations. That someone could care so much for you.

Home and happiness had been inextricable with him. Another aged flat, but worn with care; the nicks in the walls, the marble splinters of the kitchen counters, the uneven plaster between the argyle tiles in the bathroom, evidence of a lived life rather than a sterile existence. You had built a home brimming with life, the both of you, your shoes traipsing over each other in the entryway, your books chock-a-block on precarious shelves, your clothes stuffed together in the shared wardrobe. All aspects of your being had intermingled with his, and there had been nothing more to want.

You had desired to be loved, to be held, to tear away from those constrictive nights of facing your future, an aged mirror in that rocking chair cast grey in the dull TV glow – your mother who once loved and held you, knowing the intricate knots of your nature, how to pick them apart, to disassemble you into nothing. You're too steadfast, she said, you cling onto all the wrong things because you don't know yourself at all.

What is there to know? What is there to know about yourself that someone else could know better? You asked and asked, and you thought you found answers. New love, new home, new job, new self. You learnt that happiness was not clothing to fit snugly until otherwise removed. Happiness was fragments, piecing to make a whole.

Happiness now has a different shape; one you'll learn to mould. It's achievable. He won't find you once he's free; he won't know where to look, and even if by some impossible chance he does, he wouldn't even recognise you. You don't look like yourself because you are not yourself, not anymore.

They told you so after the remodelling: even your mother couldn't have recognised you now, had she lived long enough to give such a testimony. Scrubbed away to be made anew. A person is not a potato. Liar, liar.

You insert the key into the lock, and twist. The door unlocks, and you push it open with a resounding groan of its hinges. The smell is musty, and it wafts over you as you stand before the doorway.

You have yet to cross its border, a reluctant intruder. But this cottage belongs to the second you, now the first and only. Besides the key and the clothes on your back, this is your next possession. Home as another essential facet of self, proof of existence. A new skin fixing itself.

You inch your foot past the border of old and new, death and life. You step inside.

# Home

Written by: Claris Lam

the smell of freshly baked bread for the next morning,  
a familiar fridge with frosty contents greeting me,  
a reminder that all is well in this little world  
even as dreaded news creeps about outside and on our screens.

it gifts me with warm smiles, encouragement and advice to carry on  
even as the news spirals, droning and about better days now gone  
Despite despair, hope and calm lie here in this place,  
residing in every room, corner, and space.

a neatened space where I can rest, a steady roof,  
private corners transformed into nooks for new opportunities  
far way from fear and discouragement  
they offer rest from the world's discontentment.

now I lie in bed, awaiting the small pleasures  
of a home that I'll adore forever.

# The Long Road

Written by: Niamh Friel

Edited by: reux z. qualm

I once heard a woman talk about how she believed we are a tapestry of all our lived experiences. She loved yellow because of the daffodils she picked with her gran during spring as a child, the way she applied her makeup is the way her cousin taught her in high school and her favourite song is the one her college best friend introduced her to. In the same way, I am a tapestry of all the places I have ever been.

\*

“When are you home, love?” my mum asked from the other end of the line.

“September,” I replied, which felt like three years away, never mind three months.

The roar of children’s laughter from the other room signalled that my break was over.

“Sorry mum, I’ve got to get back to work now. I’ll call again when I can.”

As I hid the phone in my bag, I returned to the chaos that awaited me in girls junior lodge six. My first summer as a camp counsellor had been an enlightening one to say the least. Not only had I learned how to manage a bunk full of enthusiastic 10 year olds, but I became acutely aware that the 21 year old burnt out graduate who flew out from Edinburgh airport was never coming home.

Not in the literal sense, but in the way that I had changed so much inside I knew I could never return to my old life.

In the two weeks since arriving a world away in Hancock, New York—the first time travelling on my own and stepping into the vast unknown—I had undergone an expansion of sorts. A visceral realisation that I had been dimming my light, shrinking myself to fit the mould of small town life. Now, amidst the white wooden huts and towering trees of French Woods Theatre Camp, I had found what I didn’t know I was looking for. As I turned my head towards the crystal clear sky, I saw a soaring eagle spread its wings and take flight. I saw myself.

If home is where you lay your head at night then I have a home in every corner of this earth. In truth, I have never felt 'at home' anywhere. As a child, I was filled with a burning desire to consume the cultures of every country we visited on holiday, to steep myself in their way of life; their language, their music, their beliefs. I would return to the bleak scenes of Glasgow and occupy my thoughts with vivid daydreams of Mediterranean landscapes. Little did I know, this drive to immerse myself in these worlds would stay with me, and suppressing it in pursuit of 'adult' life would have dire consequences. The mere thought of spending the rest of my days in one place, with the same faces and the same routine, hearing the same news and the same jokes, filled me with unrequited horror.

Despite thinking I was incredibly cultured for someone in their twenties, it wasn't until I broke the mould of my old life that I realised just how small I had been playing it. Fuelled by this newfound life force I had acquired by taking the biggest leap of my life so far, I was determined to never turn back. If this is who I could become in three months, who could I become in 6 months? A year? What if I just never went home?

When the idea of working at a summer camp was first pitched to me, my stomach churned. How could I live three months away from home? What if something went wrong? What about homesickness? Still drowning under the weight of my degree, there was no room to even consider it as a real possibility. Though, there was one small part of me that got swept up in daydreams, imagining the infinite possibilities that might await me and wondering if the idyllic life of the camp vlogger was anything close to the truth. Each time I shut it down, there was also a quiet voice inside of me that I ignored.

Towards the end of my undergrad, my life was a cocktail of experiences I had wished to forget and the idea of separating myself by a few thousand miles across the Atlantic ocean started to sound sweeter and sweeter. And so too did that small voice— once routinely dismissed, now roaring with the hunger to bask under a new sun.

In the weeks that passed from June-September, I barely thought about Glasgow or my time at uni or anything that once signified 'home.' Nestled away in the quiet safety of French Woods, surrounded by hundreds of strangers who had become my family, I felt more welcome and more celebrated than I ever had before. Although upon returning to Glasgow, the

infamous post-camp blues swallowed me whole.

The months that followed were dominated by the unscratchable itch to take off again, though my bank account disagreed. As the winter months faded and camp '24 closed in, I felt rejuvenated at this second chance to spread my wings once more, to return home. But not all that glitters is gold. There is something about your first year at summer camp that can never be replicated and even though this trip wasn't awful. It just...wasn't the same.

I had resolved that perhaps twice was enough and it was time to move on, which once again affirmed my inability to put roots down anywhere. That winter consisted of working and saving tirelessly; stacking shelves, scanning tickets, seating guests— anything that might pay for my next trip. And it worked. Tuscany... here I come!

For some reason, jumping on a plane to America and living in the sticks for three months didn't bother me, but skipping over to Europe for a few weeks in February on my own was by far the scariest thing I've ever done. In part because the safety net of meeting others before you left home wasn't an option but also because of the profound self-awareness that I gained. It was this trip that redefined everything.

A quaint comune by the name of Rapolano Terme in the Province of Siena was my home for a month. Rolling hills with vineyards, olive fields and old buildings made of Travertine and evenings filled with laughter and home made, authentic Italian cuisine. What more could I want? It was a welcome reprieve from an arduous winter that never seemed to end, and as I grew to learn more about the other travellers that I lived with, I had begun to notice something about myself.

Solo travel is not for the faint of heart. I had always intended to do it with a friend or a partner but I would still be waiting for that opportunity to come along. Those who I lived with had been more fortunate and arrived with their partners. If I'm being perfectly honest, the reason I would still be waiting to travel with another is because I have spent much of my life alone. I do not say that to invite sympathy, it is simply what I had grown to prefer, after accepting at a young age that my peers did not always share the same passions or worldly aspirations as me. Small towns will do that to you.

As the weeks passed slowly in the hills of Rapolano, I had time to reflect on my life. I thought at length about how I had finally saved enough money to realise my dream of seeing the world. I reminisced about my summers in

Hancock and wondered what everyone was doing now. Did they still think about me? Would I ever see any of them again? What was next for me? I wondered about all the steps in my life that had led me to this point and I asked myself: why am I here?

It dawned on me then. I had graduated two years ago with a degree I didn't even want and had no intention of using. I could count on one hand anyone I might call a friend, and I hadn't yet faced the fallout of the heartbreak that consumed me a week into my first summer in New York. I realised that I had been running.

Up until that point, travelling had been a means of escape. The younger version of me who was delighted by foreign lands had become hardened and detached from herself, from her truth. The reason that first summer in New York was electric is because it was exactly what my soul had craved after years of academia and dissociation from purpose. This realisation came like clouds clearing to reveal the north star and the synergy I had used as a guidepost for my heart to follow had returned.

'Home' has never been a fixed place for me. There are houses that hold my possessions and memories, there are places that I may return to when I seek a sense of familiarity or peace. But after searching for myself in other people and other countries, and finding little more than the promise of salvation, I return to myself and I am home.

# vignette

Written by: Claire Marie Anderson

Edited by: reux z. qualm

when you get dementia  
remember me softly  
in sickness & in health,  
the nights you stood at my doorway  
& gestured to the window.

remember my love,  
what I had for you before I knew anything.

everything you taught me  
you'll forget

even the day you closed the book sharply,  
hitting your head against the words  
in the middle of a sentence

you'll forget  
the color of my tennis racket  
and the way plastic tastes,  
what pasta is  
and that coffee tastes bad.

you'll still let me stare at your hands  
without knowing what I tell you  
and picture me as your ex-girlfriend  
from the 70s

think of me  
so you know I was there for you  
even if I am no longer myself

# For Friends Who Feel Like Home

Written by: Jolanda Zweers

Edited by: Star Faeastrea

They say home is where the heart is, but where is home when my heart is spread out all over the world?

At first 'home' was an easy concept. It was tractors, stampot, and no mountains in sight. Visiting grandparents on a Sunday. Eating dinner every day with my parents and older brother. The same routine every week. Growing up in the countryside of the Netherlands was a simple life, filled with simple pleasures. It only got complicated when I moved.

My university was located in Groningen, a city in the northeastern part of the country, therefore I had to move otherwise the daily transit would be a nightmare. Suddenly, I was living in a student city in a different part of the country. I can hear you say: "Well, how different can it be when it's only an hour away?", but those not familiar with the Netherlands don't know that travelling for mere 20 minutes can change a lot. Different dialects, different norms, different atmospheres.

Groningen is a young city, with lots of international people. Not young as in recently built, because the city dates back to 800 AD and there are still excavations happening frequently, but young as in the people living there. Lots of students from around the world go to this remote city to study and begin their adult lives, just like I did. Because it's still in the Netherlands, it didn't take long for me to adjust. Still had my stampot, and didn't need to travel far to see a tractor. The Martini tower and the grass of the Noorderplantsoen quickly became familiar to me. But it didn't feel like home, not yet.

My life in Groningen truly started after the pandemic, when I could actually meet people face-to-face. My housemates were lovely girls, and my classmates were also nice, but I became the closest with the people from my student organisation.

Monthly drinks where we danced on sticky beer-soaked floors, meetings where we discussed writing while sipping on way too expensive coffees, and trauma-bonding over certain horrible classes and people. In these three years of socialisation I became close friends with a handful of classmates.

After a while you get invited over to their place, for a party or just for a cup of tea, and their room starts to feel like an extension of yours.

That's when I realised how true the saying was: home is where the heart is. And my heart is wherever I am surrounded with the people I love dearly. That's why I loved my own room, because of my kind housemates, but also why the rooms of my friends felt like home.

In the last year there was one friend where me and 3 other girls gathered weekly for reading nights. Just us with our fantasy books, tea and cookies on the table, and soft music filling the space. Usually we got the spritzes from Jumbo, those crumbly cookies half dipped in chocolate. Occasionally we also had dinner before a reading night, cooked by our lovely Italian host while the rest of us stood by for emotional support while she worked her magic. This, I remember thinking on those nights, is what home should feel like.

All good things come to an end, and so did this part of our lives in Groningen. We all graduated, and moved away to our next adventure. No birthday parties. No reading nights. Not anymore. It became harder to plan meetups because everyone was either busy or living on the other side of the world.

Currently I am writing this while I'm living with my parents, a little bit more than a year now, but home doesn't feel the same anymore. I can't see those chocolate spritzes in the Jumbo without feeling a strange version of grief. It's not like our friendship is lost, because we still keep in contact, but it's different when you can't spontaneously come over for a hug and a cup of tea.

One day I'll find my home again, hopefully. For now, my heart is with each person that made me feel at home, no matter where you are.

# the ceiling you call a floor

Written by: reux z. qualm

Edited by: Janyne Langlois & Claire Marie Anderson

my mother expects so much from me  
and my sister is a liar and a thief,  
so the weight of this motherly love  
i carry belongs to me and only me

my burden to bare,  
no love to share, *except—*  
we share the same moon sign.  
*like mother, like daughter*

and my panic attacks put me  
at her doorstep:  
passed down through the gene pool  
i once swam in

my mother does not understand  
***i am not my sister***  
we may look the same,  
but my heart is pure—

patchouli burns in my home  
and lavender diffuses this  
aching feeling i get in my bones  
when i remember:

*my mother expects so much from me.*

this weight of motherly love  
i carry on my lonesome  
is so heavy that  
i cannot possibly continue to lift

outside my body:  
whether dissociating or daydreaming,  
once my mind begins to drift  
i remember:

*my mother expects so much from me.*

if only she knew how fond  
of her i once was:  
it was she i wanted to be,  
but now that feeling is numb

the exhaustion hangs  
beneath my eyes;  
if only she knew how *tired*  
i am from remembering:

*my mother expects so much from me.*

# Fallen Kingdom

Written by: Patrick Szpila

In the world of Dunterra, high above the ground, there's a kingdom held aloft by a gravity crystal—the kingdom of the white-eyed warriors. Their job is to protect the land from the Apathys: demon creatures that hunt for negative emotions and eat them. A lonely introvert named Gabe sits all by himself watching the other kids practice their skills. Being treated like an outcast due to viewing life differently, Gabe is a pacifist and not a big fan of using his eyes as a cheat code to kill all living things—Apathys or otherwise.

Suddenly, Gabe was forced into a group of other children to practice their magic. They all use Gabe is partnered up with some gal named Pearl, who listens to authority well (think teacher's pet). They walk around in pairs to find some flowers for their collection—to study its functions and learn the importance of its uses. As Pearl gets distracted finding the rare pink and white rose, Gabe walks away to look for something else to study.

Gabe stumbles across a family of Apathys that mean no threat to him—they just want to get out, unseen by anyone. So, Gabe secretly guides them across the forest to their freedom, all while Pearl is searching for her partner on her lonesome. As Pearl looks around, she feels like someone—or something—is watching her. And it's the adult Apathys.

As Gabe finished getting the family across, he heard Pearl screaming. He assumes the worst: *she's getting attacked by the Apathys*. Everyone, including the teacher, rushes to find and save her. However, they too are surrounded by Apathys. All of them fight them off. Pearl becomes overwhelmed by the amount of them and feels both her physical and mental strength weaken from getting scratched one after the other each time as she stresses out on surviving. Gabe returns to her but is surrounded by too many Apathys. He climbs up a tall tree and tries to use his power to save her, but it is too late. Pearl is already gone. The group hurries to her body as they fight off the Apathys. The teacher checks her injuries and realizes it's too late.

Gabe jumps down and the teacher questions him, wanting answers as to what happened. Gabe confesses to what happened, feeling guilty for not doing more to help her. He gets taken by the teacher to fly him back to the

kingdom and explains to the queen and king about it for his punishment. He gets expelled and locked up in a cell.

The king came to Gabe's cell late one night to say, "I get where you are coming from, child, but you have a responsibility and a purpose. Even though you don't like it, and it is going to be hard for you, you have to try and do it for us."

A couple of months later, the king has died, and the queen is tasked to look after Gabe. Gabe is finally allowed out of his cell, and he just sits on the bench all by himself hating the kingdom's rules of duty. Everyone is afraid and still dislikes Gabe for what happened to Pearl. All the people in the kingdom despise him. All but one. Ashy.

Ashy is an optimistic and open-minded gal. After seeing Gabe many times without any eye contact, she wants to know why people don't like him. Since she's homeschooled in her room, she is unaware of what happened.

Gabe told her that he is against using his magic. Which makes him have a common ground with her, because she too is not a big fan of using her magic for killing or protecting just because she has the power to do so like the rest of the kingdom.

Gabe one day walks by the dungeon to see the night light better. But he hears a cry further down the dungeon, a cry of suffering and agony. A cry of some living being. Gabe sneaks toward the sound to find a dragon Apathy being held captive and tortured. Gabe tries to help it, but the creature is too scared and angry that he can't trust him. So, Gabe helps gain his trust by feeding him, day by day until he is relaxed by him whenever the guards are off duty. But Gabe is not only feeding the dragon, he is also communicating with him by sneaking inside his cell to release his chains for a couple of hours to bond with the creature.

While Ashy and Gabe study together in the halls to catch up on all the lessons he missed, their bond also slowly grows. During the last 8 months, he finally forms a bond with the creature and gets the chains off of him. The creature wants Gabe to get on him to leave this place for good. But he insists, "Not yet, I will tell you when I'm ready." Gabe decides to tell Ashy and convinces her that not all Apathys are bad. He explains they are like any other animal, only a lot bigger. She realizes Gabe is actually onto something. Ashy tells Gabe that he should tell the queen about this discovery—that this could change everything. Ashy decided to vouch for Gabe on this, and

instead of him living in his cell forever, he could have a straightforward conversation with the queen about the rights for the creatures. As Gabe and Ashy talk to the queen about it, Gabe told her half-truths since he doesn't really trust her with a finding like the one he has.

Gabe is accepted, and finally has a fresh place to stay, since he “changed” for the better. The creature grows worried and is curious as to where Gabe went, since it has been a couple of days since they last saw each other. He then broke out and started looking for him. As Gabe made a deal with the queen that since he is old enough, he can go anywhere he wants to go if he wants with Ashy. But as they prepared to leave, the Apathy dragon approached them and they were spotted. Causing a scene and getting people hurt, Gabe tells the creature to leave. And as the creature left, both Gabe and Ashy are in big trouble with the queen and are being punished for betrayal. As Gabe returns to his cell once again, the creature awaits him in the night. Gabe settled with the creature that now is the time he'll go with him.

The creature summons all his friends to help take them, causing a whole invasion. Killing left and right, Gabe quickly ran to find the right way to go. He found a good exit to leave this place for good. But then he heard Ashy's voice. Gabe sees Ashy has lost her eyes and cannot see since they were taken as punishment. Ashy begs Gabe to stay with her to sort things out and fix this for good. Gabe sees it as impossible and declines the offer before the others find him. Gabe left Ashy to be with the creature and to be gone for good. Gabe now lives with the creatures and makes sure he protects them no matter what.

# A Taxonomy of Brooklyn Neighbors

Written by: Sasha Paris-Carter

Edited by: Star Faeastrea

I am very proud to call Brooklyn, New York my home. We Brooklynites come from all walks of life but stick together, be it flooding prospect park on a snow day or opening fire hydrants for summer block parties. To give you a complete picture, I'd like to introduce you to some of the characters in my building.

## *The boy with the trampoline*

Some folks' upstairs neighbors buy their kids small, in-home trampolines so they can burn energy and learn spatial awareness, or whatever. The kid with the trampoline will bounce, and bounce, and bounce all afternoon; humming little songs and demanding whatever snacks or television he's planning for the evening. He never says please, he never says hi in the halls, all he knows is bouncing. Personally, I moved my bed because of my apartment's trampoline boy; to a location where I would not be impaled by its supports were it to bust through my ceiling, and down my floors, to the center of the earth.

## *The chainsmoker*

This neighbor is quite possibly the kindest, most conversational person, or they will laser-stare you with cold indifference as you come and go about your life. The chainsmokers dwell in the liminal space between being big enough assholes to endanger the asthmatics in the building, yet kind enough to engage with you in passing, as they greet you out front of the building. Today, I sing in praise of the chainsmoker, yet all ye beware the smell.

## *The Small dog*

Every building in New York City has at least one small furry fucker who wakes up the whole building whenever you open the front door after a late night. She thinks you're an intruder on the pack. You love her, because she's

damn cute, but that love is not reciprocated. This poochie hates your human guts and wants the world to know.

### *The Laundry Hogs*

Our building laundry unit is sometimes overtaken by non-residents doing their industrial kitchen laundry in *every single machine*, grinding folks' weekly routines to a halt. I couldn't tell you which restaurant they own, but we'd better all get free burgers or something for the trouble they put us through. I know they can't be too far, or move too fast. Their linens weigh them down, you see.

### *The humpers*

Not to be confused with the boy with a trampoline. However, the Humpers in my building happen to \*live\* with the boy with the trampoline; and while they're not jumpin' trickshots, they are certainly bouncin' backshots- see what I did there? The key difference is the pacing. Eventually you notice a certain overhead thumping that's consistent... and building... then sharply slowing down... and then suddenly done; and you realize that it's really mommy and daddy who have been breaking your ceiling, this time.

### *The property brothers*

The humpers are also meticulously sculpting their shangri-la directly above me: hammering and drilling in a far more literal sense than usual. The noise is unbearable, but that's the price of living in NYC. As Jeff Daniels' character said in *The Newsroom*: "this will be a great city when they finish BUILDING IT!!" In other words, our great-depression era apartment will never be perfect, and I wish the Property Brothers would give up and devolve back to being the Humpers.

### *The pests*

The pests exist in three major categories: roaches, flies, and mice. If Brooklyn were a tropical climate, abound with lizards, I would praise these neighbors for their role in the ecosystem. But the pests in my building simply reproduce, carry fecal bacteria, and LEARN. They learn to avoid traps; the holes in the walls through which to escape; the times when they can explore the kitchen sink without fear of being sprayed. The pests are grad students in

the school of life. No function, no stakes, just purely causing chaos. I believe they have been quashed from the Property Brothers' apartment and forced to live in mine.

### *The DJs*

These across-the-street neighbors will do more to introduce you to the bangingest songs from Cumbia to Reggae to mumble rap better than Spotify's algorithm ever could. But I say this keeping in mind that more often than not, they'll choose to play bullshit. And it will test your psyche, this bullshit, but I say do not be tempted to slip in earbuds and pray your juicy playlist will compete with the architectural thundering around the block. This balcony speaker is the voice of god. Shazam her, hear her wisdom, discover something new. *Or why else live in Brooklyn?*

# This Is Not My Home

Written by: Naema Choudhury

It comes in flashes. Blue. White. Gold. My eyelids automatically squeeze together. My retinas feel scarred, like directly hit by a white hot flame.

“You really do not get ceiling features like this anymore” the sweaty estate agent had boomed. “It’s handcarved of course, from what we know it was an original installation with the house when it was built in the 1700s and included some religious allegory, however, sometime in the 20th century the house was occupied by secular owners so they opted to modernise, which I’m sure you both would appreciate”, he said this pointedly to the pair of us.

Under the ornate turquoise and gold gilding, the embedded jewels linking together to form patterns I couldn't decipher, I felt it. Fleeting. So fleeting I hadn't the chance to dwell on it. Didn't think to investigate it before signing the sweat dampened contracts on the sodden back of the estate agent. Maybe if I had, if I hadn't ignored it, hadn't dismissed it as nerves, then maybe this all could have been avoided.

But I hadn't acknowledged it at that moment and why would I? But with time the feeling strengthened, it screamed until it was heard, and now I know.

I don't belong here.

The novelty of waking up underneath all this decadence wore off for me quickly. I had never been a morning person and the daily blinding was worse than an alarm. The only thing that made it worse was when I would turn to the left, blink through the sleep crust and white spots and I'd see him there. Staring directly at the ceiling. Not being blinded by the light but absorbing it. Soaking it in. Like he was mining the jewels and the opulence for all he could get. A dopey smile on his face. The same one he had in the playground when he kissed me for the first time in the kissing bush. The same one he had after I said yes when he bent down on one knee in Blackpool with a plastic ring he won on the penny machines. I loved that smile so much, because it was meant just for me, but now it's being shared.

Our mornings once consisted of watching trash TV in bed, slurping pot noodles and further staining our long abused stale bedsheets. When we'd

finally get out of bed, I'd climb atop Sean's shoulders, armed with mould spray and a sponge that had seen much better days and get to work attacking the black mould creeping across our flaky popcorned ceiling. Sean would pretend to tip me over and his laugh would vibrate through me as I'd shout and swear at him to stop, even though I'd be laughing too. We laughed a lot back then.

Now, every morning, we lie in silence, Sean's eyes fixated on the dazzling sight above him, unable to look away, like a child discovering ice cream for the first time. Never bored. Never secretly longing for the flaky, mouldy popcorn ceilings because, "why settle for less when we can have more?" He'd say, his hand on my knee over the silk sheets.

"No, not just silk, darling, mulberry silk, the finest kind." He'd correct me

And of course we wouldn't dream of eating chicken and mushroom pot noodles in bed anymore, now that we have mulberry silk sheets. Sean had lectured me for an hour the last time he caught me eating in bed. I had argued back, I tried to cast his mind back to the days of us having feasts while tucked up in our sheets. All the messy, sloppy food we'd consume, not caring one bit when we'd slobber his Mum's leftover jerk chicken on the sheets, staining them and causing the room to smell heavily for the next week.

I had hoped that reminding him of those moments, those insignificant but precious moments, would make him realise that it shouldn't be staining those stupid sheets that he worries about but the fact that we don't have moments like those anymore, and moments like those are what made us, us.

Instead, he told me nothing we owned before meant anything, none of it mattered, but now it does.

My head hurts as I stare at the dented but unoccupied pillow to my left.

"100% Hungarian goose down pillows!" he'd exclaim "Darling, we're sleeping on £400 pillows!"

I hate our 100% Hungarian goose down pillows. I hate how soft they are. I hate the daily plumping they require. One time, Sean and I were in the middle of our daily pillow-plumping routine when, as a joke, I asked him what the point of being filthy rich was if we still had to plump our own pillows. Old Sean would have laughed at that. I keep forgetting that I'm not dealing with old Sean anymore.

New Sean didn't laugh. He sighed deeply, finished plumping his pillow to

perfection, then walked into our ensuite, the one with his and her sinks and his and her bidets, then he locked the door. We never used to lock the bathroom door.

Sean doesn't think we should make jokes or complain about our new situation, like joking about it will suddenly make it all disappear.

"We should be grateful, because it wasn't always like this, darling."

I roll my head over onto Sean's empty pillow, nuzzle my face deep into it and inhale his lingering scent. His natural musk mixed with the distinctive scent of Dior Sauvage which he had begun to make a point of dousing himself in before bed, just because he can.

Poor Sean, if only he knew my plans for his precious pillows.

I lay there for some time just breathing in the remainder of Sean's scent until I can't smell it anymore and I take the pillows with me to Reception Room 2, with all its vintage artefacts owned by rich, dead, mostly white, historical figures.

I reach for a pair of scissors, which I'm sure cost a million billion pounds and were probably used to trim Marie Antoinette's hair and I plunge them right into the belly of the best - or belly of the goose, I guess you'd say. Feathers everywhere, feathers floating up and resting atop the vintage chandelier. Feathers on the mantelpiece of the French Renaissance fireplace. Feathers on the brow of the bust of the second Earl Grey, the one connection to our home town.

Don't worry, Sean, your feathers won't go to waste. I need them. See, I know that the problem is me. I haven't been making the effort. I haven't made this house-

"Estate, darling!"

I haven't made this estate, my home. I haven't tried to make a mark of my own here. I've been stalking the hallways dissociated, like a ghost of our old selves. Nodding numbly as Sean holds up paint swatches, all a different shade of yellow. Yes, Sean. Yes, I do think we should paint Reception Room 1 yellow. Yes it is sophisticated. Yes. Yellow. Yellow. Yellow. I love yellow. Let's paint the entire house yellow.

I've let him dictate it all; any decision, every decision, I've let Sean decide. Which he's been fine with because this place gives him so much joy. Which is why it's unfair. It is so unfair that I've been dampening his joy by not embracing this place, by dreaming of a life that doesn't exist for us anymore.

A life of popcorn ceilings and pot noodles. So unfair to my Sean, who only ever wants the best for me. My Sean, who wants ornate ceilings and expensive silks, for me.

I bundle together the mess of goose down and feathers, now loose from its mesh casing back into the silk pillowcase and make my way into the wine cellar. It's cold down here, so the best place to store my project while I prepare the area outside. Its final resting place.

I haven't made this place my own yet, but today I will.

Mine and Sean's lives have always been entwined. The same council estate, the same schools, throughout our entire lives we've barely been apart, aside from one year. I had decided to go to university to study art. At university, with the absence of Sean, I developed a strange talent for taxidermy, working part time at a museum for a short period stuffing small furry creatures.

I ended up dropping out of university after my first year, I had felt out of place there from the first day. All my new flatmates had fancy kitchen appliances, milk frothers and Le Creuset's and spiralizers. They spoke about ski holidays and were aghast to learn I had never been skiing or had ever even been on holiday. They took great joy in my regional accent and my stories of growing up on a council estate, like I was something exotic to them.

And I knew then, I don't belong here. Especially without Sean.

So I returned to him, like I always do, but I still enjoyed practicing my new skill. Last year, I made Sean a pair of faux taxidermy lovebirds. Us. That was a couple of months after we moved here. Our anniversary. He got me a baby pink La Perla nightdress with matching bra and panties. I could see he was excited to see my reaction, so I made sure to squeal and smile and jump on him, smothering him in hugs and kisses, so he knew how happy he made me, but really, I was just thinking about the little faux lovebirds. The little faux lovebirds he looked at briefly before kissing me on the nose, thanking me, and then passing me the lingerie. Of course. Of course he wouldn't want stupid stuffed birds now. Not when we can afford luxury pajamas.

This project is going to be more elaborate than birds. This may take me all day, but it's worth it, for Sean, it's worth it.

I make my way through the French glass doors that lead out into the gardens which stretch out for miles, leading into an orchard on the far left and then equestrian fields and stables on the far right.

All ours. How lucky we are.

In the very distance, you can see the village, the closest community we have to us. Sean visits often, but I've only been a handful of times, always with Sean as you have to drive to the village.

One Friday night, a lifetime ago, Holly and I were sitting in the rundown park of our council estate, selling pirated DVDs and weed to teenagers. It was our Friday night tradition to drum up extra funds for the night ahead. Holly still had her rollers in, and I was applying mascara on the swings when we heard the screech of tires around the estate. No one drove on our estate. We didn't need to. Sean always dreamt big, though. I poked my eye with the mascara wand when I saw it was him hurtling towards us in a beat-up Fiat Panda, being chased by a dozen estate kids begging for a drive around the block.

Sean dutifully gave each kid a turn in the car before whisking me up bridal style from the swing and chucking me in the car, Holly and all the kids giggling and looking at me in awe. The luckiest girl on the council estate.

"This is for you, you know? Anywhere you want to go, I'm going to take you there."

And so, I never did learn how to drive myself. Why would I?

At least here I have the gardens, all this space and all this air, and it's all mine. Some days, when the gaudy yellow wallpaper and cold marble tiling of the house threaten to chew me up till I'm nothing but a macerated, brainless blob going "Yes Sean, yes I love yellow wallpaper", I'll take myself out here. I'll sit up here at the top of the stone steps where I can see across all the grounds for hours. Sometimes I'll fall asleep out here. I prefer sleeping out here sometimes, or at least I would if it wasn't for the screaming.

I have no time to sit today. It's nearly noon and I've barely started. I want there to still be some light when I'm finished. It'll look so beautiful in the golden hour.

I pick up the sledgehammer I left ready by the stairs and make my way down towards the circular path that surrounds a decayed 3 tier stone fountain bearing the statue of a baby angel on the third tier. This is perfect. I knew it would be from the moment I conceived the idea for this project. Perfectly on display and surrounded by all of Sean's favourite flowers. Lavender, snapdragons, yellow roses.

Sean knows so much about flowers. That's how it started, really. Sean and me. Flowers.

He was president of the nature club in year 6, with me as his vice president. It was a 2-person club, but I was still so proud to be his vice president. That's when I knew I'd always want to be his vice. Our school's playfield would turn into what felt like vast, lush forests, and we'd spend the hour of lunch exploring. I'd follow him, ticking off all the different flowers and creepy crawlies we could find. We found foxgloves and baby's breath and all types of flowers that 10-year-old me wouldn't have been able to name before meeting Sean. We found all different types of bugs as well. Millipedes, rose chafer beetles, cabbage butterflies, and even a blue damselfly once, which I found particularly exciting as I had never seen one before, but Sean told me they are everywhere, if only you pay attention.

He would say, "You'd be surprised by the things you'd notice once you start looking out for them." Of course, he was talking about the damselflies. He was right. I see damselflies everywhere now.

I climb onto the fountain; I've always liked this fountain. It's worn away and falling apart and wonky; it's one less thing on this estate that I have to compete with for Sean's attention. Sean doesn't like imperfect things anymore.

I'm standing, one foot in the main basin and one foot balancing on the first tier, my sledgehammer still in hand. Eye to eye with the angel.

I've never cared much for the angel, and I don't think it's ever cared much for me. The angel wasn't always here; it's new. Sean's contribution, meant to elevate the fountain.

"We may as well upgrade it, darling, it's just so... common looking, don't you think?"

No angel, I'm sorry, but it's time to go. I have plans. Of course, I agree with Sean – I always do in the end – this fountain needs a centrepiece and what a centrepiece I have planned for it. Do not worry, my dear Sean, it's not tacky or common. It's going to look classic and elegant. Most of all, I think, I hope, it'll help this place feel a little more like home. My home. Our home.

I raise the sledgehammer, raise it right up to the angel and for the first time since being out here in the garden, I notice how warm it is today. My hair is sticking to the back of my neck, sticking to my forehead, standing up at the ends, making my ears prickle. I close my eyes for a second, absorbing the warmth. Now I know. This is confirmation. This warmth. The heat on my scalp. The glow on my skin. I am doing the right thing; I know I'm doing the

right thing because the sun has told me so.

The angel is staring at me with its empty stone eyes, and I am staring back so awake and alive with the sun and with Sean's flowers. The sledgehammer connects with the angel, and the empty eyes crumble into nothing.

I look at the orchard and the stream and the stables and everything in between. At 10 years old, this is all Sean and I could have dreamt of, not the house, but this, nature, and us together, that's all we wanted back then, for it to be just us and the trees. President and vice-president of the nature club. Naively, I thought it would be like that when we first moved here.

The sledgehammer connects again, and the angel's face disintegrates. There are little bits of angel in my hair.

For the first month here, we spent all our time running around the grounds for miles like giddy little kids again. Wading through the stream fully dressed, splashing and dunking each other under. Clambering out of the water, soaking wet, caked in mud, barefoot and hand in hand, before moving to the orchard where he'd press me against the trunk of the tree and reach up and pick the fruit and place it to his lips before taking a bite, holding the bite between his fuller bottom lip and more curved top lip, waiting for me to bite it too. Then we'd kiss until our shared fruit bite was gone. Then we'd move on from the orchard into the stables and fuck there, in each paddock, there's not much else to do with the space we'd say to each other through laughs in the hay.

Smash. The angel's torso falls apart. There's angel dust in my eyes. In my throat.

Now Sean wouldn't dream of wading through the stream with me fully dressed, not when our clothes cost so much. Now, he would chide me for picking any fruit in the orchard.

"Darling, the fruit isn't for us, there's a lot of money to be made out of an orchard, you know?"

Another swing. The little angel's feet crumble. A soft breeze blows, and they fly away with it.

Goodbye feet. Goodbye angel.

There it is again—the screaming. I've said to Sean countless times. I've told him there's something not right about this place. I hear screaming in the night, I'd tell him. I think there might be foxes on the grounds, I'd say ... or maybe not foxes, but something, Sean, there's something out there. I'd plead

with him to check or at least acknowledge my concerns as I sit anxiously curled up on the window seat in our room, but he'll just keep ruffling his hair in the diamond-shaped gilded mirror on our piss-yellow walls. He'd ruffle and ruffle his raven feather-like hair, standing in his monogrammed silk pyjamas, then he'd catch my eye in the reflection and say "Darling, the only thing that will be screaming tonight will be you."

He never used to call me darling in our real life.

Back in our real life, if he had said something like that while stood ruffling his hair in front of the rusted sink with the cracked mirror above it, wearing his Primark boxers and white vest stained yellow from chicken and mushroom pot noodles, I'd giggle and melt straight in him, I'd melt straight into him and straight into our council rented mattress.

Now, when he would say something like that to me, I'd find myself seizing up.

Now, when he says romantic things like that to me, all I want to do is scream back at him. Scream, why aren't you listening to me? Scream, can't you see I don't want to be romanced and seduced, I want you to hear me, I want you to agree, yes, yes babe you're right, something isn't right here, yes I can see you're not happy here, yes let's go back, let's go back to our old life, where we were happy.

Why can't you see I'm screaming? I'm screaming because this isn't me. It isn't us.

Something isn't right.

All I want is for Sean and me to be Sean and me again. So, I'd let him brush my concerns away as he brushes my hair out of my face and brushes the strap of my nightie down my shoulders, then down my waist, then down my hips, till it's a pool of silk at my feet. A pool of silk. I wear silk nighties to bed now. This is who we are.

And I am screaming.

A bird.

A bird has just landed on the rubble. The remains of the angel. It's only a small bird. I'm not sure what kind. A robin? Or a swallow, perhaps. Sean would know.

There's a woman in the village who owns a little shop where she sells wooden sculptures of birds. Dinky cute carvings of little birds like the one atop the angel dust, not like the unnerving taxidermy ones I make.

She's a bird. The woman. A rose finch. Yes. A rose finch. That's what she is. Beautiful and colourful and lush.

Sean likes her. I know he does. I see it in the little bird carvings he brings home each weekend, the ones he places on the mantelpiece in front of my faux taxidermy birds. I see it in the way he doesn't want to run around the estate with me anymore fucking in every possible location. I see it in the way he doesn't try to sell the estate to me anymore or try to reassure me when I complain about the screaming and the emptiness and how much I feel like this just is not my home.

And perhaps it's because he doesn't want to sell it to me anymore, perhaps he doesn't care. He's just waiting, biding his time till I've had enough, and I decide to pack it in for good and leave, then he and his rose finch will be free to flutter about together. Flutter to the orchard and the stables and all the places that were ours once, and they will be free. They will be safe. Safe from predators. Safe from foxes.

Safe from me.

Another cloud of dust flies back up at me, another layer on my arms and the exposed parts of my legs, except the layer of angel dust isn't grey this time. It's red.

The little bird. Was that me? It didn't feel like me. It must have been the sun. Yes, the sun must have swung the sledgehammer that time, and if it was the sun, then it's ok because the sun has been telling me all this time – this is right. I am doing the right thing. This will be my home.

I shovel the rubble away. The angel is gone, and the space is clear, and it is time. It's time to finish my project, and yes, Sean and I will be ok, and no, little bird, you will not ruin my plans. Little bird, you are part of the angel dust.

I go back into the wine cellar, and it is so cold in here. Is this the right thing? Am I doing the right thing? No, I can't let the coldness and darkness of this cellar change my mind. It's too late for that.

I take Marie Antoinette's scissors and plunge them deep into the casing. I create a deep slash right down the middle, and I feel my heart leap as if someone's just cut me down the middle, and I'm going to be sick. I'm most definitely going to be sick, but I can't; I need to stay focused. For Sean. This is for us. I'm doing this for us. It's just hard to remember that down here in the dark.

I pull out the organs, and the smell is so intense, and my eyes stream, I can taste bile and the feeling, the sensation, it's like nothing I've felt before. I've done this before with smaller animals but nothing on this scale.

I take a deep breath; my fingers tangle their way into the soft tufts of raven feather hair, and through the smell of guts and decay, I can still detect the faint scent of Dior Sauvage, and I'm centred again. I chuck the slimy, cold organs into a metal bucket by my feet, until the casing is hollow. Completely hollow. I take the loose goose feathers from the mulberry silk pillowcase and stuff them into the hollowed-out chest cavity until every crevice is filled. I sew the slash down the middle back up with the finest thread, and it's done.

And it's beautiful. Yes. So beautiful. Yes, Sean would be so proud.

I seal it up with resin. Taking special care around the details, making sure it doesn't clump on the curved cupid bow or those doe-like eyelashes or the hair. One gloopy clump of resin on those precious raven feathers could ruin it all.

But no, no, there's no clumps. I've made sure of that. The final layer is smooth, shiny, and unblemished. It's done. My *pièce de résistance*. Now all that is left is to display it, in our favourite place, around all his favourite flowers.

I carry it out of the wine cellar, out of the cold and dark. It's feather-light now, so it's light work carrying it through the many hallways and staircases until I'm back at the fountain, propping it up at the top where the angel once lived. Plastering and sealing the feet, still in their monogrammed cashmere slippers, to the very top tier of the fountain.

Yes. I warned Sean. I begged him to listen to my concerns about moving here. I was screaming. It was me all this time, I see that now, I was the fox. I was screaming and screaming every night, but he wouldn't listen.

This isn't my home, I'd scream. I don't have a life here, I'd scream. I don't belong here, I'd scream. I'm not happy, I'd scream.

Sometimes he would acknowledge these screams. One time when I asked him what I would do for a career out here, he said, "Darling, you'll have no time for a job, there's so much to do around the estate."

Sean wasn't an idiot, but he said some pretty fucking stupid things sometimes. He knew I didn't marry him so I could sit around this horrible big house all day, sitting pretty in expensive silk lingerie on the polished kitchen countertop with a basket of freshly baked muffins next to me,

waiting for him to come home and fuck me on the marble, which he would then expect me to re-polish and prepare him dinner on afterwards.

Sean knew I didn't marry a man with jewels dripping out of his eyes and £400 pillows and silk on his mind and rose finches on his dick.

No. If Sean were the smart man I thought he was, he would have known that's not the man I would have married. I married the president of the nature club. I married dirty white vests and Primark boxers. I married popcorn ceilings with black mold in the corner. I married everything that this new Sean would look down on now.

I'm done, it's fully secured in place, and it's not going anywhere. I climb down from the fountain and stand amongst the flowers to admire my work, and wow. How beautiful it looks up there.

How beautiful he looks.

The sun has begun to set. It's a golden pink ribbon wrapping around the entire estate. Wrapping around me like a reassuring hug. Yes. Yes, you have done good. Yes. Yes, you have done the right thing.

In this light, perhaps, maybe... Yes. This estate is beautiful. I never saw it before, but right now, in this golden hour embrace, I think I see it for the first time. It is beautiful.

The French windows. I've always wanted French windows, haven't I? Yes, it is wonderful waking up to ornate turquoise and gold gilding. Yes, mulberry silk does feel sensational on the skin, and oh God, how could I ever sleep on anything other than 100% Hungarian goose-down pillows? I'm sorry I was ever ungrateful, Sean. I see it now. I think it just took adding my own personal touch to recognise the beauty of this place.

I gather up all my supplies and take one last look at the piece. At you. Sean. My wonderful Sean.

You really were the most beautiful man. My beautiful boy with your raven feather hair.

I hope you appreciate the placement, Sean. I know how much you love these flowers, and from up there, you get the view of the entire estate. The orchard. The stables. The stream. If you squint, then maybe you might even see the village way back in the distance.

You might even see your rose finch there. Your little whore bird.

I wonder how long it'll take her to notice, perhaps she'll assume you just lost interest, moved on to a new little bird, one younger and prettier. It's been

known to happen.

Perhaps I'll take a shower now, in our wonderful rainfall shower, and a sauna afterwards. God, how lucky we are to have such wonderful amenities. My darling Sean, you were so right all this time. The possibilities here are endless, and yes, actually, I think I do belong in this house, and no, I didn't know what my problem was with this house originally, but I think I do now.

It was you. My beautiful boy. It was you. At least now we both get to enjoy this place together, united, for the first time.

I do belong in this house. No, not house. You were right, Sean. This isn't just a house or even just an estate.

This is our home.

This is my home.

# Elegy for a Broken Home

Written by: Reina Dwyer

What was once a fiery, burning furnace  
Now sparks icy chills to the bone;  
Shattered glass from a broken picture frame  
Reflects back my shattered soul.  
Hinges on doorframes creak with uncertainty,  
A home that you broke, “inadvertantly”.

The laughter has been leeches  
From every wall in this place,  
Leaving cobwebs and a cloud of gloom  
Behind in its wake.  
The air now stands still, unmoved by giggles  
And water slowly drips, like the tears that trickle.

I watch a queen with her kittens,  
So pure and full of love,  
And a chick guided by her  
Mother mourning dove.  
Their bonds are strong and built on instincts alone,  
So why must ours be extinct in this home?

I managed to find the comfort of home  
Secluded, elsewhere,  
After many nights spent thinking  
That you never cared.  
I found it hidden in music, art, the blade-  
Tucked away in the simple comforts of yesterday.

I found my sun, stars and galaxy-  
I found a whole band of people who are proud of me.  
Irises and daisies now bloom where I dance,

The entire world now feels like an autumn late night trance.  
Now, I find solace in a moonlit embrace,  
I built a home and you aren't welcome in this place.

What once felt like a flood is now a spring rain,  
And now I know blood is no more than a name.  
They always said that it takes a village  
And here I made one, a collage of my emotional spillage.  
Every broken promise has been tied into a bouquet  
While I can safely put all of my focus on today.

I drape silk and pearls around virgin bonds unbroken;  
Here, we can be free, proud, and outspoken.  
We drowned all of our woes out there, in the flood  
And we built a community that has no care for blood.  
Our peace of mind was once a ritualistic sacrifice-  
But here, in this home, simply our love will suffice.

I found a new soundtrack as the mourning dove sings  
And the ravens drop feathers as they spread their wings.  
I left it all and carved my new name in stone,  
I now feel safe upon my very own throne.  
The frame has been fixed, yet the photo is new-  
My brand new home; complete without you.

# Of Lemon Water and Tumeric

Written by: McKenzie Clarke

*This piece is the first chapter of PRIMROSE: A Life Lived in Seats*

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My earliest memories are of my time in the hospital. I was essentially “born dead;” it is no exaggeration to say that I am a miracle, by account of most.

I was a premature birth, approximately 10 weeks before I was expected. I did not perceive what was happening whatsoever, as my body was innately focused on survival. Only now, in my memory, do I witness masked strangers monitoring me under something large. I now recognize the large thing I was perched under as an oxygen tank.

My parents tell me that the doctors were perplexed at my odd behavior compared to the vast majority of newborns. I did not cry even after I was treated with oxygen and red blood cells. I was immobile most hours of the day. It was not very exciting for me but certainly distressing for my parents.

Most of my infancy, I spent in the hospital. Though I did regularly see my parents so as to not grow unfamiliar, my doctors were my primary caregivers for what was my entire life at the time. Red blood cell transfusions were and continue to be essential for my survival. I was fed through a tube, and occasionally I was allowed to chew. As easy as it was to die, my sense of self-preservation was remarkable.

For the majority of my first years, I was unconscious. When I was awake, I never cared to see what I looked like. My parents spoke to me in elementary English and Mandarin. I long assumed that my skin was warm-toned as that was a trait my parents and doctors had. Only when I reached three years old did I process that my skin was blue. My young mind thought this was odd.

I became a skeptic of sorts from that moment. I asked questions the moment I could speak; not long after I was born. First words for most would be something similar to “mama,” or “dog.” My first word was “why.” This innate skepticism melted to curiosity, then to observation, then to analysis. This continues to be a large part of my leisure.

My childhood was mostly spent inside an old house on the suburban streets of Montreal, Canada. It had two floors, an attic, a basement, and a chimney. I had to live on the ground floor. I was forbidden from climbing steps and travelled in a wheelchair.

The wooden doors and floorboards always groaned a bit with each passing step. Consequently, testing my timing by counting down the seconds before my father or mother reached me became habitual. I usually started the estimation process by mumbling “four-Mississippi” to myself. Anything greater or lesser, I assessed, would be a parameter either too large or too small in estimating elapsed time. Before five years old, I was always one Mississippi short.

My room seemed like a separate house entirely, that of which my parents would visit from time to time. I was mostly left alone, sat with my homework, books, and thoughts. There was not much for me to do inside a small children's room, and the cardiovascular exercise I could not do... did not help, to say the least.

Historical novels were of particular interest to my four-year-old self. *If Not Now, When?* by Primo Levi immersed me. Other titles that come to mind are *Octavian Nothing: The Traitor to the Nation*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Measuring the World*, just to name a few. I found myself exhausted of things to do, so after I got through these books in no more than a day, I would reread them. Even that grew dull.

I would resort to writing. My writing was elementary. For most, that would seem obvious for a child. Except, at this time, I was not a child. I was an infant.

My most common practice was writing proofs based on what I pondered. I would observe that I was on wheels, yet when I would go to my desk and do my homework, I would not roll elsewhere. Based on prior observation, wheels are designed to roll for easier transport. Despite this common origin, some wheels are designed differently, with less or more smoothness. A toy car's wheels are far more susceptible to roll than a real car's. The word for this, I know now, is friction.

I was always encouraged to eat with my family at the dinner table, but my body's inefficiency in maintaining oxygen made it difficult. In the one instance when I attempted to get up and walk a few steps without assistance, vertigo quickly did its work. The room seemed to spin. My breathing was

shallow as I gasped for air akin to a fish out of water. Human instinct told a young Aspen to breathe as quickly as possible to ensure survival. That seemed logical at the time.

When instinct did not work, I would have panicked if I were a normal human. My body only allowed me to analyze; experiment. Increased breathing speed was not working, so perhaps the opposite would be successful. Slowly, I manually breathed. Inhale oxygen. My thoughts seemed to speak aloud, and I followed suit. Exhale carbon dioxide. Father told me this when I was four years old. My father's (quite literally) life-saving advice created a mantra of sorts that I still use. This process repeated a few times until I could distinguish the objects in my surroundings.

Though I was not aware at the time, I looked similarly to how I did before I learned that; like a fish out of water. However, the difference is that according to Father, I looked like "a distinguished fish out of water." Thank you, Father. It was amusing but my body did not respond.

Mother eventually titled this habit "热饭," pronounced "rè fàn." This brilliant title translates to... hot rice. Thank you, Mother.

It was decided that my parents would bring the dinner table to me. My version of a "dinner table" was a metal tray with foods such as red meats cooked rare, liver, spinach, turmeric, avocados, beetroot, and carrots. These foods were specifically chosen to aid my body's oxygen levels. Aside from this, my parents always had rice as my main starch, considering I am of Chinese descent. Anyone of this ethnicity will eat rice almost daily; that is why the character for rice, "饭," is also the word for meal.

These meals were quite large, but I was mandated to eat in tiny increments. Eating too quickly with excess food in my mouth would obstruct my oxygen flow. This would risk death. I could not have that. My parents could not have that. I learned to eat a few rice grains at a time. My father cut my food into tiny pieces and sat beside me. If I was still hungry, I would request more food and he would promptly supply it. Father would cut it again, watching me closely as I took minute bites.

My beverage was lemon water, which was also prescribed for my oxygen levels. The first flavor type anyone gets a taste for is sweetness; thus, my adolescent palette disliked its tartness. Fortunately, I was only permitted to take sips at a time. I doubt I would have learned to like it otherwise; and, I would have likely complained. (Neither my parents nor I are very fond of

complaining.) I now add lemons to my water from both habit and preference.

This routine taught a nine-year-old Aspen Primrose Bell patience, whether or not intentionally. Despite my being my own obstacle, I recognize that I am strong-willed and inherently impatient. My temperament was manageable, yes, but I am also male. It is not unfounded that if one is male, they may also be impatient. I imagine that if my blood ran red, I would be a very different man. The vast majority of people fail to take advantage of the gift they have: time. After 41 years of training, I have gotten very good at waiting. I continue to waste away most of my life in wait. In spite of this, at times, I wonder if this trait of mine is for the better or worse.

The average evening for a young Aspen would look something like this: I would arrive home around 2:30 P.M. or 14:30. My muscles were not yet atrophied, so I would travel alone. I would ring the doorbell and my parents would always answer the door. If they did not, I would let myself in. I was and am always allowed to enter their house at any given moment, even if I do not live under their roof anymore.

I would greet my parents, go to my room, and begin my studies. Homework was quite easy, even for my child mind. I would be done between 3:00 and 3:30 P.M., and by then I would have a very slow lunch. I would finish eating around 5:00. My parents would conduct my routine Mandarin and ASL (“American Sign Language”) lessons from 5:30 to 8:00 P.M. They used to end earlier, at 7:00 P.M., but I asked for an extension as I enjoyed them, even if I stumbled at first. That extra hour over three decades contributes to my level of fluency in both.

After these lessons, I would have dinner at 9:00 P.M. in a similar fashion to lunch. This portion of the arrangement was not always difficult. The tedious nature of mealtime bothered me for a short time, but I adapted with the knowledge that this would not cease for a lifetime. I do not doubt they felt the same.

On weekends, I would visit my physical therapist. My parents wished to prevent early onset muscle atrophy. While their efforts were appreciated, somewhere in my mind, I knew it was only a matter of time before I would lose the function in my legs. These appointments certainly slowed its development, but it fully settled around ten years old.

Though my body does not allow me to experience strong emotion, I was and am always aware of the time and effort it takes for them to keep me

breathing. Having a small human to take care of is one thing. Having a small human in my condition is another. It has always been in my best interest to do as they say, even if it is sometimes tedious, painful, or both.

All things considered, they have done wonderfully. They have the greatest of my respect and love. I do not doubt I would be six feet under if I was less fortunate at birth. I am not one for superstition or astrology but I am not afraid to admit that upon my birth, the stars truly did align.

# Borrowed Spaces

Written by: Meg Evans  
Edited by: Jolanda Zweers

There is this particular type of quiet and a sense of ease which lives within borrowed spaces. It isn't just the stillness of your own room (or, indeed the old bedroom) which isn't quite your bedroom anymore, where everything holds a memory you've chosen to keep. It is something much thinner, more temporary, like the echo of a life paused in mid-sentence. A pause, that you need to now fill in the gaps for.

It is a suitcase that is half unpacked on the floor, the unbearable nature of not fully occupying that said space. It is a toothbrush placed carefully in a sink of yet another hotel room, not your own, but certainly not a permanent place.

I have learnt to accept that home is now part of an 'in-between' space. It isn't fully arriving, but also not entirely leaving. If you will, it is just hovering somewhere in the middle. It is like accepting an invitation to a half-made plan with a friend - not quite saying yes, or no.

Existing in these two types of spaces has been learnt through the art of working away for long periods of time. It is building a version of yourself that fits into cabins, shared rooms and cities that aren't yours anymore, but ones that hold you up for a while. You learn how to properly shrink your life down to the bare minimum and bare essentials, to fold it neatly in between full to bursting schedules, to make something that resembles 'home' out of a somewhat routine.

And then as quickly as you are gone, the space you have chosen to forget hasn't even left an imprint. Coming back home after a long period of time is like stepping into a photograph that has been quietly edited whilst you are away. The streets are the same, but not quite. Your favourite shop last year just disappeared. A cafe changed its name, inside decor, and rhythm. There's a new street full of new neighbours. There's unfamiliarity within a familiar space that once consumed your mind.

People speak about things that happened to you, whilst you were somewhere else entirely, and you just nod along, piecing together a timeline you were not a part of. Home is the borrowed space - somewhere all too

familiar, but not entirely yours.

There are then the places that live somewhere deeper. The old university city, for example. The one that held a younger version of you, walking the streets with a different kind of certainty, who believed in permanence in a way that you no longer can. Returning feels like walking alongside a ghost of yourself. The meaning has shifted, even if the old block of flats remain untouched. When you sat on those steps crying your eyes out after yet another argument with a past relationship, when you drank in a bar around the corner from your old work place talking about people who once held such significance to your life. Now you get an update 6 months later, or an unexpected appearance in a dream, reminding you of who you used to socialise with.

Life doesn't unfold in a straight line. It never does.

The memory of belonging is stronger than the new form of reality. Old routes, out of old habits, your body remembering a feeling before the mind can catch up. The past sits beneath the surface, close enough to touch, but so impossible to step back into.

I am slowly learning to accept that existing into two worlds, is how everyone is experiencing the formality of life. The spaces are able to hold you, shape you, mould you and then become left behind. It feels like grief, a soft lingering sensation that time has moved on without asking for permission. We are all transiting to the next destination, between the places you've been and the places you are going. The sense of home follows you and scatters fragments and leaves a sentimental piece in each part of the new places you are about to discover.

My new sense of home is now travelling across the world to visit my partner's home city. It is so far away from my real home, but we can carry the parts we call home, and sprinkle them every time we experience something new, be it a museum trip, a beach day, drinking with karaoke in a remote bar, and that hotel room with the big window, glowing bright sunrises in the Philippine sun.

Now I release it's not a borrowed space anymore, but an occupied one.

# The People We Call Home

Written by: Grace R.  
Outside Editor

## *Age 4*

The first thing I ever remember is tripping on the sidewalk and losing my grasp of Mom's hand as I fell.

"Oh, no, Rosie!" she exclaimed behind me as I started to become aware of the searing pain in my knee. She blotted some of the blood off with a tissue. "Let's get you home and get a bandage."

But I was insistent on staying put and crying loudly enough for the entire neighborhood to hear. Mom mumbled something to herself. My scraped up knee was the end of the world.

"Rose, come here." She wrapped her arms around me. "It's okay, love."

I gripped onto her tighter. The air felt warmer and the wind started to recede. I never realized when my tears had stopped. I only remember feeling at home in her arms. I never wanted to let go.

## *Age 7*

"Hi, I'm Alina," the girl on the swing said.

"Hi." I looked over at the empty swing next to her. "I'm Rose. I'm gonna swing too."

Okay." She smiled brightly.

For the next few minutes, I focused my energy on building up enough momentum to take myself to the moon. I was able to wind the swing far back enough to cause the entire structure to shake.

"Hey, don't fall!" Alina cried.

"I won't. Probably." I shrugged.

I propelled myself so high up that I momentarily jumped out of the seat. Then an image flashed in my mind of concrete, blood, and neosporin, and I brought myself back down to earth.

"That was cool," Alina said.

"Thanks!" I beamed.

“Let’s be friends.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Alina continued to swing back and forth. I grinned from ear to ear. Wait until I told Mom I made a new friend at school. At least for the rest of the year, I was with her, and she was with me.

*Age 12*

“Hey, can we hang out tonight?”

“Sorry, Rose, I’m busy.”

I had heard that from Alina numerous times in the past few weeks. I understood. She had a lot going on with accelerated classes, lacrosse practice, and guitar lessons. Her parents kept her schedule booked.

“Maybe next weekend then?” I asked.

She paused on the other end of the line. “I’ll let you know.”

“Okay,” I said.

We said our goodbyes, and she hung up the phone.

The next day at school, we met up for our usual walk to fourth period together.

“Hey, look!” I pointed to a flyer clumsily taped to the cinderblock wall.

“There’s a seventh grade dance in a couple weeks.”

“Oh, cool,” Alina said distractedly.

“We should go! It would be really fun.”

“Yeah, I mean...” she tapered off. “I’m not sure I can go. Hold on.” She checked the flyer closely. “Oh, no. I have a game that night. Sorry, I can’t.”

“Oh.” I smiled at her gently. “It’s okay. I’ll see if a couple other people might want to go.”

“Yeah... I mean, wouldn’t you rather go with a date anyway?” She raised an eyebrow.

“A date?” My face furrowed. “Aren’t we too young for that?”

“My cousin is thirteen and she goes on dates.”

“Well, that’s your cousin’s issue.”

Alina frowned. “I’m just saying. I’m gonna go to class.”

Later when I got home from school, Mom asked me how my day was.

“Fine.”

“Just fine?” she inquired. “What did you learn?”

“Uh, about the solar system and stuff.” I shuffled through the kitchen, my backpack weighing me down.

“Anything noteworthy?”

“Yeah, there’s, like, a lot of planets. I’m gonna go upstairs.”

“Rose.” She got up from the kitchen table and stood face to face with me.

“Are you okay? Did something happen?”

“I told you, I’m fine.” I pouted and started making my way up the first couple steps. “I just have a lot of homework.”

Mom sighed, her eyebrows furrowed. “Okay, love. Let me know if you need help.”

A couple hours’ worth of not doing homework later, I heard a soft knock on my door. “Hey, Rosie? Can I come in?”

I didn’t even get to respond before she cracked the door open. “Mom-”

“Listen, I know you kids like your alone time. But I thought maybe we could watch your favorite show together. Superhero Action Ponies!” She grinned.

“Sounds totally cool, huh?”

“Mom, that’s kind of a kids’ show.” I looked down at my feet. Her face fell.

“Buuut...” I continued. “Maybe just for old time’s sake.”

“Yay!” she exclaimed. “I’ll go get the popcorn.”

For the next two hours, as we sat on my bed together watching reruns of magical pony adventures, I thought of how the kids at school would react if they knew I was watching such a baby show. How Alina would react. But right now, this was exactly what I needed.

*age 16*

“So... is this your first date?” Bryan asked on the other side of the booth.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Cool. Heh heh.” He played with a tortilla chip on his plate, and it cracked in half. I glanced in the waiter’s direction hoping my quesadillas would come out soon.

“So, Rose. Do you like indie rock?”

“Not rea-”

“Cause I’m in a band. Yeah, it’s not even a big deal, but it’s super cool. Me and the guys were thinking when we graduate we could tour and stuff.”

“Oh, wow. So you guys are, like, popular?”

“Yeah, I mean, we’ve played some local venues. Like the school cafeteria and stuff. You know, every great artist has to start somewhere, but I feel like we’re gonna blow up soon and totally take over the scene.”

“Cool... oh, look, the food is here.”

Over our quesadillas, we made small talk about school and Bryan’s band and annoying teachers and Bryan’s interests and our classmates and the artists that Bryan liked to listen to. I hoped he wouldn’t try to kiss me on the way out. Then I felt bad for having the thought. Maybe I could say my food had onions. Even though it didn’t. And what would Mom think if I lied to people about something as trivial as onions? Was I a bad person?

“Hey, Rose”, he said, and I snapped back to attention. “I’m really glad you’re here.”

I paused a few moments before smiling at him tactfully. “Thank you.”

At least in the next twenty minutes while we finished our food, I could just enjoy the moment in front of me.

### *Age 18*

“Alright, graduates, throw those caps in three, two, one... Now!”

The crowd erupted as blue caps and tassels flew everywhere.

“Congratulations,” the principal was saying over the loudspeaker, but the noise drowned him out. I tried to find the general direction of where Mom was sitting.

When the crowd dispersed, I spotted her on the bleachers. “Congrats, my Rosie”, she exclaimed, running to me, tears welling in her eyes. She embraced me. “I’m so excited for you to do great things.”

As we headed away from the football field, some of the chatter around us turned to college. Mom squeezed my shoulders. “Oh, Rose, I’m so proud that you got into a good school! You must be looking forward to it.”

“Yeah, I am.” I mean, I totally was. I was looking forward to a new start and new friends and living on my own with a complete stranger and not being in my childhood bedroom and more difficult classes and finding my way around campus and not having my mom and-

“Are you okay?” She brought her hand down on my shoulder. “You have that look on your face.”

“Mom, I’m fi- I’m just happy to be here with you.” I smiled at her.

“Aww.” She brought me into another hug. “Daddy is so proud of you right now.” She glanced up at the sky. “Wherever he is.”

Tears stung at my eyes. I hugged her tighter, not caring who saw.

### *Age 21*

“Birthday shots for the birthday girl!” I heard Kate yell as she came back with another round of tequila shots.

“Ay, ay!” A couple people shouted around me, almost falling off their stools. “Happy birthdaaaaay!”

Liv shook me and screamed. “Omigod we have to live it up tonight! Come on, girl!” They both pulled me closer to the dance floor. The flashing rainbow lights were almost blinding.

“Alright, alright, I hear there’s a birthday in the house tonight! Everybody give it up for Roooose!” the DJ screamed into the mic.

“Aaaaah!” the two of them screamed. “We did that! We made him say that! More shots!”

“Oh, I don’t really-”

“Come on, girl,” Liv jeered. “Don’t tell me you’ve had enough already. You’re in college. You have to go hard! You’re, like, a real adult now!”

Considering I had spent my entire time at college thus far thinking about being back at home, I didn’t feel very grown up, but I wasn’t quite able to articulate this at the moment. I just mumbled “Mmkay” as Kate handed me another glass. I could feel the music physically reverberating throughout my body. I started dancing clumsily and made eye contact with a girl across the bar. I think I smiled and waved. I think she smiled and waved back.

About two or maybe three hours into the night, I proclaimed “I don’t feel too good”, ran outside, and proceeded to throw up into a bush.

I have a foggy recollection of someone saying “Hey, are you okay?” I looked up. It was the girl I had seen at the bar.

I squinted up at her. “Uhhhhyeah.”

“I don’t think so, dude.” She grimaced. “You just violated that poor bush.”

“Oh, damn.” I held my head and frowned.

“I saw you with two other girls earlier. Did they just leave you out here?” she asked with concern.

I shrugged.

“I’m gonna wait here with you a second.”

“It’s fiiiiine.” I waved her off.

“I’m gonna wait here,” she repeated firmly. It sounded like something Mom would say. I believed her.

When she retold the story later, Jasmine would say that she called campus security to help walk me home, and that I was putting extreme effort into keeping my feet on the sidewalk. Well, more importantly, I remember her entering her name into my phone with a caring smile and saying “Maybe we could hang out soon. Without alcohol.”

For the first time since I had started school, I felt at home.

### *Age 25*

“Mom, I have great news. Jasmine and I signed the lease on our new apartment!” I beamed.

“Oh, Rose, that’s awesome!” she said from the other end of the phone.

“Yeah, it will be nice to live together and not with roommates. It feels like we’re really starting our lives, you know?”

“Good for you kiddos.” I could visualize her cheesy smile. It was like she was ruffling my hair and pulling me into a hug from miles away. “I’m so proud.”

“Thank you, Mom.” Despite the stress of planning for the move, her words took a weight off my shoulders. “I haven’t really had time to buy stuff for the apartment, though. Work has been crazy. Oh, and total subject change, but you know who I saw on Facebook?”

“Who, love?”

“Alina. That’s a blast from the past.” I adjusted in my seat. “I scrolled through her page and she posts a lot about ‘mom life’ and how the kids are a handful. She always juggled a lot, even when we were young. But I guess she enjoys it. Anyway, I sent a message asking how she had been, but I’m not sure if she’ll respond.”

“I hope so. That would be nice,” she said quietly.

“But yeah, enough about me. How have you been, Mom?”

“I’ve been...” There was a long pause on the other end.

“Mom? You still there?”

“I’m still here. Rose, I have to tell you something, but I don’t know how.

“Okay.” I sat up more, feeling a bit sick to my stomach. “Is everything okay?”

She sighed. “No.”

My heart dropped to my feet. “Would it help to talk about something else first? Ease into it?”

“I think so.”

“Okay, well, there was this funny thing that happened at work where-”  
I have cancer.”

Static filled my ears. “W-what?”

“I’m sorry for blurting that out. But it’s bad, Rose.”

I could barely hear her quietly crying on the other end over the ringing in my eardrums. “I’m sorry, love”, she choked out in a muffled whisper. “The doctors say it’s too late.”

*Too late too late too late* echoed and imprinted in my brain. I kept my composure long enough to say “Mom, I don’t work tomorrow. I can visit you. First thing in the morning I can drive down.”

“Okay, Rosie,” she sniffled. “I’ll be so glad to see you. That’s all I want in this whole world right now.”

That night, I tried to get some sleep, but my bed felt like a monster that was swallowing me whole.

*Age 27*

Jasmine squeezed my hand tight as they lowered Mom into the ground. I have a hard time remembering this one.

*Age 34*

“Delilah, don’t run on that sidewalk! It’s all jagged! Good lord,” I exclaimed.

She disregarded my warnings, laughing as she sprawled her arms out in front of her. Jasmine tried to corral her, but it was no use. She weaved in and out of her legs. Since we had adopted her, our daughter had been a bit unpredictable. She seemed to have skipped the terrible twos and graduated to the ferocious fours.

“Delilah, I’m serious. You’re going to get yourself hurt.”

“You sound like your mom,” Jasmine joked.

“Oh, please.” I playfully stuck my tongue out at her.

“Nooooo, I wanna run!” Delilah proclaimed. “I’m having fun-” She could barely get the sentence out before tripping on an uneven edge of the sidewalk and falling onto her knees. I cringed as I heard the scraping of the concrete against her skin.

“Oh, love. Come here,” I sighed, trying to stand her up, but she fought my grasp and obstinately plopped down harder on the sidewalk, wailing.

“Good thing I have neosporin in my bag,” Jasmine said. “I was worried something like this might happen.”

“No!” Delilah shouted through tears. “I don’t want nee-yo-sporn!”

“You get what you get and you don’t get upset,” Jasmine proclaimed, rifling through the kit for neosporin and gauze.

“Now you sound like my mom,” I told her.

“Yeah, yeah. Alright, come here, little one.” As Jasmine gently held Delilah’s leg, I scooped her into my lap. “It’s okay to cry,” Jasmine told her. “But we need to patch up that cut.”

“Oooooooow”, she wailed as Jasmine bandaged the wound.

“See, much better,” I nodded. “Do you want a hug, Delilah?”

“Yeeeeeeeees”, she cried.

I squeezed her tight. “Guess what?” I asked, rocking her back and forth. “How about when we get home, we can all watch Superhero Action Ponies Deluxe together?”

She sniffled and pouted. “Maybe. But I still want a hug now.”

“That’s okay, love. We have all the time in the world.”

I held my daughter firmly in my arms. Jasmine brought both of us into a group hug. It felt like a warm and loving home.

I don’t remember exactly when Delilah stopped crying. Just that for a while, none of us let go.

# Cherry Tree Driveway

Written by: Madeleine Jopson  
Outside editor

Soft petals gently falling,  
raining steadily down on the driveway.  
A carpet of blossom settling  
in April, before giving way to sun.

As girls we would run circles around it  
then take a flower inside to place in our room,  
in crystallised vases that distorted the stems.  
I would look down the hill  
and beam with pride that our tree was the  
only cherry blossom on the whole street.

Makeshift snow angels in pink,  
blossoms following us as we walked.  
The view of it from our parent's bedroom window  
immortalised on our DS cameras.

I carved names into the trunk, using  
the compass from my One Direction pencil case.  
Names from my favourite books,  
*Rainbow Magic*, *Little Women*, then *The Hunger Games*,  
and our own. Weather attacked the marks like it tore  
down the strongest branch  
Dad once attached a swing to.  
A tired arm, it dropped,  
and the carvings faded away  
like our footprints in the grass.

It was trimmed down last winter,  
branches reduced to bare twigs.  
Neater. Smarter. Ready for the sign

sticking out of the garden. 'For sale'.

And when we said goodbye,  
blue and red cars pulling out of the cherry tree  
driveway one last time,  
it wasn't to my childhood home  
steeped in memories of two small children  
chasing each other up the staircase.  
It was to a house. Sitting at number 63 on a  
steep hill  
that I used to fall down on my way to school.

# Acid House

Written by: Hollis Peterson  
Outside editor

“...we’re excited to talk about the new Priscilla Danvers film coming out later this year. Can you believe parts of it were shot here, right in Delta?”

“Absolutely not, I am so excited.” Lauren Casey’s lips are pink as a grocery-store rose. She smiles a little too wide. “I can’t believe—”

“She’s gotten older.”

Dylan doesn’t even turn to look at the one sitting there and slouches a bit more. “Yeah?” she says, more than asks. There’s a bit of lipstick on the corner of the newscaster’s incisor.

“You can tell. Her hair on top, it’s getting brittle the way mine did, after dyeing it so much. I bet she uses box dye.” The thing on the couch grunted. The couch-occupier continued, “And the wrinkles. I’m betting she didn’t moisturize a day in her life. Speaking of, did you ever use the one I gave you?”

“Oh, yeah. I just forgot to put it on this morning,” Dylan lied. Her back curled even more, practically squatting on the chair. It smelled; old tobacco, older perfume. A stale sour scent that betrayed the spilling of probably dozens of beers that weren’t fully cleaned out. Though, that could be the carpet too.

The house was a small GI-bill miracle; brick, split-level, and completely paid off. One main and two small bedrooms that initially fit her grandmother, her husband, and Dylan’s father with a game room to spare back in the seventies. Now, the game room is filled with boxes and the dart board is obscured by a large folding table that used to service family gatherings, dingy, and cracked in a few spots. Dylan’s room is closest to the door; Her mom has the room right next to the kitchen, just in case her grandmother gets up and falls in the middle of the night. It’s happened twice. One time she was getting up for a cigarette. The second was when she was trying to throw a cigarette away, when Dylan’s mom woke up to the smoke and panicked.

The living room is small. Wood paneled walls soak up any scent that’s hesitated to leave the room, same with the thick carpet. The couch is pale

blue, the chairs a similarly anemic yellow (were they ever white? Dylan asked her mom once, and she couldn't remember the answer now). Aged photographs curl and crumple against their confines of the frames, washed out faces with smiles barely visible if the head is distinguishable at all. The massive silver box of the TV has been the point of many arguments: Dylan's mom patiently attempting to explain how the newer TV in her own room worked, whenever the other one in the house tried to get one in her own room.

"Mom, the system is pretty simple but this is the third time I've explained it. If it's still—"

"I'm not demented, you know. "

"I'm just being honest with you. There's nothing wrong with it, but you don't use half of the apps on your pho—"

"But I want it. Dylan even has one in her room. I didn't have one."

That's because they weren't invented yet, Dylan thought from her room. The argument taking place next door may as well have been on the ancient stereo. A red haired actress screamed as the masked killer of the movie staggered towards her. Dylan dug her toes into the fabric of the comforter. It crinkled.

"And she uses it to watch those ugly things. She'll never get a husband, they don't like those things."

Dylan's mom sighed. "The times are different, mom. People are interested in all sorts."

"Not any good man. And same goes for her chopped up hair. Why do you let her cut it herself?"

Dylan grabbed the remote and turned up the movie. At that moment, the protagonist let out a particularly piercing scream-- her eyes rolling back, tongue flapping like a worm in the ground. She couldn't help but look at it, and every inch of her ugly, twisted expression.

Now, she leans forward, one elbow on her knee and cheek in her hand. Her leg jitters. It was only 3:14. It would be about an hour and a half before her mom got home.

"Did you? I can't smell it. It's a very feminine fragrance."

"I did. Maybe it's the coffee smell."

"Hm. I'm not senile," she rasps, her voice choked out from the choices of the last decades. She smacks her lips just slightly. On top of the couch, it

takes a moment to notice that she isn't just a pile of flannel blankets, up to the folds of her face-- the small, dark beads of her eyes are set just carefully above her sunken nose. Wispy gray hair curls around her cheeks and presses into the pillow.

Dylan waits a few seconds, then her shoulders un-tense. The TV continues to buzz.

Salt and vinegar chips. Sour straws. A Coke? Nah, too much sugar. A hand curls around a crumpled bill in her pocket. Oh, that was almost too perfect. The world was begging her to go to the station.

She looks over at the woman on the couch. It took fifteen seconds to get to the candy aisle, then five to the chips, and probably two minutes to check out. If Jacob was at the counter, it would take thirty seconds, but if Crystal was there it would take more like two minutes-- minutes she wished she could take. Pair that with a thirty-ish minute walk round trip... that should... be fine.

Her chest squeezes. Thirty minutes. That's the length of the damn news program. And her grandmother's eyes were magnetized to it. In the yellowed whites, a faint reflection of a woman with too much makeup lingers. The hardness in her eyes seems to soften; the corners of the lids droop down. Dylan stands.

"Where are you going?" the older lady asks. Her focus doesn't leave the screen.

"I'm going to go on a short walk. I'll be back in about a half hour," the younger one says, in a practiced calm. "It's pretty nice weather outside."

"Is it? I thought it was going to rain."

"I think it will when mom gets home. Anyways, I won't be long." Dylan pats her shoulder.

"Don't dilly dally too long. It's still a little before your mom gets home." Her voice raises as Dylan walks past her to the screen porch door. "You can't let anything happen. I'm your only grandmother, you know. Love you."

"Love you too." But it's pressing a button on a doll; and Dylan slips through the door and into the humid air, gulping it down greedily and immediately launching into a long stride towards the road.

\*

Tinny little chimes play a comforting, discordant melody. It's not refined like the chain stations are; it's probably something that was bought for cheap a long time ago, Dylan thinks, and turns to the candy section.

"Yo, Dylan!"

Her heart tugs. Over at the counter, Crystal waves with a wide smile that shows off the pink gem in her tooth. Dylan smiles, waves.

"Hey, Crystal! I'm sorry I have to be quick."

"All good! It's been a minute," she remarks, setting a case of beer into a bag for the taller woman that's standing at the counter. Counting out change, she continues, following Dylan as she darts to the candy aisle, "You usually try to come visit every two weeks, or Jacob says so at least. I can't believe my shift was just about to end."

"I didn't think Jacob knew my name," Dylan thinks aloud. There's a moment's hesitation where she can't help but be a little happy, but the instant she remembers the extra second's time, she scoops up the sour straws-- thankfully in the same spot they always are-- and then pivots around to the chips.

"You kidding?"

Fifteen seconds. There would be a few more minutes unfortunately added to the time. Unfortunately... but Dylan couldn't help but smile the more Crystal said. It warmed her a little. The chips and candy are set on the counter. Crystal's tanned skin and dirty blond hair are awkwardly dulled by the dirty counter separator, but her beaming smile is more than comforting.

"No, I can imagine it gets boring in the gaps. No one is usually in when I am."

"Mm yeah. Your classes start back up in the fall, right? Are you going to try to work too?"

"Y-yeah, probably." Dylan tapped her foot. Crystal still hadn't scanned her first item.

"Then you may as well lounge around while you can. Half the time I wish I was home, when I was here."

"No, I get that." How many minutes had it been?

Crystal's eyes flicker to her hands, and the smile on her face wanes as she scans the bag of chips. "Hey, do you mind if I ask something personal?"

"Huh?" Dylan blinked. The sudden change in her tone threw off her counting.

“Y-yeah, sure.”

Crystal scanned the sour candy, and set it in the bag. “Did Jacob say something offputting?”

“What? No, no.”

“Well, you’re always in a rush to leave. I guess I was just wondering if you were uncomfortable here, or something like that?” Crystal tilts her head. As her hair falls out of the way, four studs are visible crawling up her ear. “I know I can talk a lot, but I really like your style. There’s not a lot of people around here with a taste like that, you know?”

A lump grows in Dylan’s throat.

“And like, I just wanted to check on you, since you always come alone.”

“No, it’s... it’s nothing like that.” The smile she forces out tastes sour on the inside of her cheeks; it hurts. Her eyes are stinging, a little. “It’s, um... uh...”

Come on, why couldn’t she think of an excuse? The longer she stood there, the more seconds she was wasting, the more likely... the prone figure of her grandmother on the couch, her needling, high pitched voice... sweat beaded in her armpits. Why couldn’t she just... no, she hadn’t even paid yet either. The ten dollar bill in her pocket crumples in her grip. But she can’t make herself pull it out of the pocket.

Thank God that there was no one else in line.

A hand with baby-pink and teal flowered nails settles in her line of view. When Dylan looks up, there’s an expression on Crystal’s face that she can’t quite decipher. Part of it sparks anger. But the other part is drowning.

“I’m sorry, I pried.”

“No, I— It’s not that big of a deal,” Dylan forces out, and practically throws the bill at her. Her ears are hot; swallowing, she rubs her fist into her eye.

This was taking way too long. It wasn’t long enough. The money lays like a dead thing on the counter.

“You have somewhere to be,” Crystal says simply, taking the bill and opening the cash register with a notably analog clang. “That’s all good with me, I know I’ll see you again.”

Dylan’s shoulders relax. “Ah... yeah, of course,” she says, laughing weakly and accepting the bag and change. A penny falls into the bag; the door chime goes off, and Dylan turns to leave.

“Ope, don’t forget your receipt! Just in case there’s an issue,” the cashier teases and thrusts a thin, curled piece of paper into Dylan’s sweaty hand. She

almost drops it as she fumbles to stick it in her pocket. Another uneasy laugh leaves her lips.

“Yeah, I’ll be sure to return them if there’s anything. It was good to see you.”

“Yeah. Good to see you too.”

And there it is. Excused to go, but her feet are glued to the floor. Not only that, but she’s pretty sure she’s the one that put it there, that traitorous, tired part of her that can’t help but want to linger. Grit cakes into the corners that hide spider webs every summer, the one wire shelf whose lacquer has worn off and exposed leopard-like rust spots, a squeaking linoleum floor, waxed or not--- under the neon observation of the lights, Dylan could fall asleep here.

But the person who walked in is hovering by the counter, about a foot and a half away, with a bag of chips in his hand and an awkward expression. Dylan blinks. Then slowly, raises a hand in a wave of goodbye.

Crystal does the same motion back. Her eyes seem a little dimmer.

With a lukewarm chime, Dylan steps out.

\*

Outside the white clapboard station in the gravel drive, the cool of the air sinks in. The clouds bubble gray across the sky. Brown curls fall in her eyes. It’s already been too long.

The receipt feels greasy in her grasp. Excitement over candy and chips melts like cotton in the rain. Speaking of, a drop of water lines the side of her face-- now she really needed to start walking, but each foot is heavy as an anvil.

She starts to walk fast as she can, eyes blurring against the gray sky, the blue and red of cars on the horizon, and toes picking up every single dip in the concrete.

\*

The door to the back of the house looms like a locked gate, even though she didn’t lock it when she left. Dylan grips the plastic bag tightly. From here, with her hand on the handle, she can still hear the TV going off. That had to be a good thing, right?

Her hand trembles on the chipping metal. A deep inhale does little to steady her.

The door opens.

The impact is so light, yet somehow positioned just perfectly that the grained lines of the sole of the slipper scratch just so against the top of her cheekbone. It's not even enough to wince, but it burns just a little bit.

"That was a long walk. Where did you go? You really scared me, you know."

Her grandmother's voice crackles. The tobacco stink is more pronounced, and in front of the TV, a small glass ash tray that Dylan had never seen holds a half smoked cigarette. A butt is stubbed out in the lower right corner of it.

"The corner store. I just wanted a snack quickly," Dylan says in a measured tone. She doesn't even walk towards the couch. Her grandmother is still laying down, facing the TV, or at the very least Dylan assumes so; she can't see her face. On the counter, Dylan sets the bag down and pulls out the sour straws.

"Why didn't you tell me when you went? I need more smokes."

"Grammy, they raised the age to twenty-one. I couldn't buy them for you even if I wanted some for myself."

She scoffs. "That's not right. You're lying."

"No, Grammy, I'm not. There was a piece on the news just recently about it."

Another annoyed little sound came out of the frail woman on the sofa. "I don't remember."

"That's okay, Grammy."

There's a pause. Carefully, Dylan picks up the bag again, and starts walking slowly, soundless save for the crinkle of the plastic. Only ten more feet or so, and she could eat in peace.

"Were you sneaking out to see a boy?"

Bile rises in Dylan's throat. "No, I wasn't."

"Don't lie."

"I was only gone forty minutes."

"Yes, but I could have fallen in those forty minutes. Sometimes I can't tell if you want me to live or die," her grandmother says. "You don't seem to care about much of anything nowadays."

Despite herself, a pain just like a pinch throbs in the middle of her chest. Dylan says, "That's not... true, Grammy."

"But it is, you don't have a boyfriend. Do you still sew even? You haven't shown me anything new in a while. And you don't have a job either. You—"

“—because of you.”

Neither woman really hears what Dylan said. The words slipped out like drool. And now her mouth is hot and salty, like she’s about to throw up.

“What was that?”

Where just under an hour ago, she was chilled by the prospect of oncoming rain, sweat is breaking out now under her armpits and on her forehead. “You just said I need to be home,” Dylan repeats tightly. “How can I get a job then?”

There’s a pause. For a moment, Dylan believes she’ll hear the impossible.

And then her grandmother replies. “You know better than me. There’s those remote jobs. It’s no excuse.”

With each word, it’s as if she’s molting, rotten feathers falling off, exasperation sliding off her shoulders. “I... I’m already in my room for classes, and you knock at all hours of the day asking if I could buy you cigarettes or get your meds! And I can’t... I’m not—”

“I don’t remember that. And experience can be gained, just go get something.”

“And that’s—” Dylan lets out a low hiss of breath, “That’s fine, Grammy, I don’t care if you do or not. You know Mom suggested bringing someone to the house too—”

“So you don’t even want to spend time with me?”

“No, that’s not it—”

“Well, that’s what it sounds like. In the roof I put over your head.”

The damn roof. The damn house. Always hot, near eighty degrees even in the summer, air permanently heavy with smoke despite how many times Dylan’s mom had said that she would burn the house down one of these days, humid, the water stains melting down the wall starting to look like blood. A belly. Yes, the suffocating air of a stomach is what it feels like. Years had been swallowed by this house. Death by a slow digestion. Incendiary as an ulcer.

Do you want to spend time with me?

And despite the thundering pressure of blood in her ears, each movement is mechanical, perfectly spaced. She barely sees the actual contents; the inherited bed and mattress with the blanket she bought with her allowance one day, that controversial TV, the old framed pictures the yellowed lace curtains like long abandoned cobwebs all blur as she tears out an old

backpack from the closet and shoves first her laptop, then three shirts and three pairs of shorts and underwear in there, swiping the old piggybank off the desk too and swaddling all of around a hundred thirty dollars into the bag. still moving as if she were wearing blinders, Dylan finally feels the cold metal of the doorknob to outside.

“What are you doing? Where are you going?”

No answer would satisfy either of them. Still, her grandmother is starting to yell.

“Dylan, where are you going? Answer me! How long will you be gone?”

The metal and glass clang behind her, after a falling step. Her ankle jolts a little on the concrete.

Putting a hand in her pocket, the knuckles brush against something filmy. The receipt from earlier falls out of its crumpled state just slightly, the ink of the printer must have just been replaced. There’s a stain to the side.

No... the stain is red. A papercut, maybe, but the smear was too concentrated. Plus the color was much more like...

Dylan flips over the receipt. In a loopy, feminine font is written:

If you need a place to go.

There’s an address below. Slowly, the young woman taps it into her phone.

Behind her, there’s still faint yelling. Leaves and gravel are already crunching beneath her feet, her head strangely light and vision still a little blurred. The map app speaks in a monotone, polite woman’s voice, and wordlessly, blankly, Dylan walks, the sound and sight of that familiar beast fading to a low howl.

\*

“Hello?”

The door at the front of the house has a wreath on it. Red, orange, and tawny leaves braided in with wheat stalks, artificial and faded with the light of many sunny days. It swings back into the foyer.

Wide eyed surprise turns to awkward sympathy, to a composed acceptance. Not yet old enough for smile lines, but with a grin like she’d been doing it for decades. Out of work, Crystal wears a faded blue tee shirt with *Freidburgh Gym* on it and a graphic of a muscly girl wearing a sports bra and shorts. On her uncovered legs, a few tattoos of birds, flowers, and eyes in a traditional

Americana style crawl up.

“Hey! I didn’t expect you so soon.”

Now that she’s here, Dylan’s mouth is completely dry. The backpack on her back weighs a hundred more pounds. Crystal steps back more, opening a space for Dylan to step in.

“Come on in. I actually just got home, I’m working on dinner-- guess it’s kind of early for that though, yeah?” The blond girl remarks, and starts walking down a short hall: the pale walls are postered and pictured up, photos of Crystal and a few other girls with different piercings and colored hair, all with howling-laughter smiles at different events-- somewhere in another room, cinnamon incense is burning. Soft rock music playing. There’s cobwebs in the corners and one of the windows is open in the yellow-painted kitchen.

“I tend to just eat around my work schedule, so it gets all wonky. Are you hungry?”

“Uh... A little,” Dylan murmurs. Her head is strangely light, but the smell of something meaty and hearty brings her back down. “What do you like to cook?” she asks.

“Oh, all sorts of stuff, my roommates thankfully don’t have any allergies-- well, Bree has celiac, but that doesn’t count, really, she takes care of it. We’re just doing a chicken and wild rice soup tonight.” Crystal pauses. “You don’t have any dietary restrictions, right?”

Dylan shakes her head and the other girl relaxes.

“Oh thank god, scared me for a second. But yeah, if we can make a big batch for the house we do, we really just swapped out noodles for rice for Bree. Carrots, celery, all that stuff.”

“It sounds good no matter what.”

The kitchen has a glass sliding door right behind the dining table, littered with mail and the random items one keeps about; a watch, two credit cards, a pack of gum, a key with a pink circle keychain, three hairbands, and a business card with a name and number scribbled on it. The walls in here are similarly covered as the hall, with the exception of a dried bouquet of flowers. None of the wooden chairs at the chipped table match.

On the stove top, a large pot bubbles away. A rice cooker next to a coffee pot beeps.

“Feel free to say you don’t like anything. I have a subscription to one of the

big box spots so we have a crap ton to snack on,” the blond says and gives the pot a few stirs. Her short haired counterpart looks down at her feet.

“I...”

Her voice is quiet, and full of shame; why bother coming here? It wasn't fair to them. Crystal was working every day--

“Hey, hey.”

A gentle shake makes Dylan blink. Embarrassed, she shakes her head and steps back.

“I'm sorry, I, um...”

“You're okay,” the older girl affirms.

Pausing, Crystal looks at Dylan with a terribly gentle expression. It's not anything overly sympathetic, but just kind enough, just pityingly enough to make her feel awful. As if she were a puppy found left out in the rain. It's almost worse than the lecturing and nitpicking she faced if she dared to go home.

“Did you text someone else that you got here?”

“I...” Dylan swallows thickly. Nodding, she says, “I told my mom I was staying at a friend's house for a little bit.”

Crystal relaxes a little bit. “Okay, that's good. Do you want to talk about it at all?”

Her hands shake. It would be easy to go home, her mom wouldn't be mad, it would just be her grandmother, and she'd been mad before. She could close her mouth and go home; she should. It would be so easy, to say “Sorry, I have to leave after dinner” and then go back.

And yet...

As she speaks, her tongue feels thick. “My, um... my grandma. I had to stop going to school in person in my high school senior year so I could be around to help. She smokes in the house, throws things, and is always so mean, then begs for me to stay around. My mom... is always at work. It's a nice house, I really should be grateful, I just...”

Her voice ups in pitch, breaks towards the end. Tears and bile take turns burning her throat and eyes.

Crystal says nothing to the younger girl sitting and almost dropping to the place in front of her, laying on her folded arms. Drips turn to sobbing. Her whole body shakes as she cries, heaving up and ebbing back down in trembles. Instead, Dylan's hair is delicately dusted to the side with fingertips

that are careful not to linger too long.

After a moment, the music down the hall turns off.

“That’s okay. You know, you don’t have to tell me you’re grateful,” Crystal says softly.

Hysteria cracks Dylan’s voice. “But—”

“But, nothing. It’s okay. You’re okay.” She hums.

“You know, the gas station is hiring. Jacob said he needs to take more hours off for classes and the community college is starting up some shorter classes soon. Bet you could get a scholarship if you let Ananaia proofread your essay.”

Raising her puffy, snotty face, Dylan looks at Crystal incredulously.

“You...”

“Up-bup-bup. You’re not causing us any more trouble than Bree’s lazy ass ex boyfriend who ate all of our bagels and cream cheese thereby fucking me out of being on time for an interview.” Crystal swears under her breath, then composes herself again. “As long as you flush and wipe the counter, you can make this a home as long as you need to. I’ll help with job crap.”

“I don’t—”

“Did I stutter?” Crystal cuts her off. After brushing some of Dylan’s curls out of her sticky eyes, she straightens and heads back towards the stove. “At least for dinner. At least until you clear your head. You just rest for a minute.”

The rock music starts up again. Dylan relaxes. As the food smell gets stronger, there’s the clink of plates and Crystal begins to call for other people. Dylan’s eyes are heavy though. She slides her silenced phone out of her pocket.

There’s not too many notifications, but two stand out: a long text from her mom, and a bank notification.

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she opens the app. There’s the clink of china behind her.

*Hey sweetie, I hope you have a good time. Is it a friend I know? If not, please let me know who.*

*I don’t know how long you’re staying, but Grammy said you packed a bag and left really quick. She had some other choice words, but you know her.*

*I want to say just a few things. 1, I love you. 2, I’m very grateful for how you have been there for Grammy and me over the last few years. And*

*because of that, I'm very sorry.*

*I've been putting a little bit aside for you whenever you wanted to start going on your way. Remember when you wanted to go into nursing? I understand if you don't want to anymore. I don't know when you're coming home, but I could read the writing on the wall.*

*I'm moving out to another apartment. Your grammy is going to get a full time care aid to help her out, her social security and inheritance from your gramps will cover it until I can sell her house.*

*I hope you can forgive me for keeping you. Please talk to me when you have the chance.*

*Love, Mom*

Like a balloon deflated, Dylan settles back on her folded arms. Fatigue almost wipes the other notification from her mind, but a bank notification was rare. Peeking over the corner of her elbow, she swipes in.

In her bank account, a humble, but sizable deposit of just under four thousand dollars had just been made, with the note:

*Make good choices. You're always welcome home.*

Home. It rattles around Dylan's head, clanging, echoing loudly and slowly fading back down to silence. The quiet lingers.

Yet, when she lays her head back down on her arms and succumbs to an exhaustion nap, the last image that floats in her eyes is one of the photos of Crystal and her friends at a pool, one with a bag of the same chips she had just bought, grinning in a mish mash of different styles of swimsuits, arms around each other as if they had been sisters their whole life.

# Ground Control

Written by: Kylie Robinson  
Edited by: Kiera Hammersley

Earth will always be my home but I cannot stay.  
The sound of windchimes and the soft thrum of hummingbirds,  
pine trees and grass, the thick smell of blackberries simmering in the sun.  
Yellow and red splashed across the walls, brightening up each corner.  
Even in the gloom and rain, warmth lingers in every room.  
Scattered stacks of mail and magazines clutter every surface,  
dog beds stacked one on top of the other, reminding of what once was two.  
Echoes of laughter and tears, dark stormy days at odds with sunny rays.

Here is where I grew, but it's time to be plucked.

I lay in my bed staring at the sunlight dripping down my wall and I feel the  
Earth spin beneath me.  
Impossibly fast and slow all the same.  
Leaving the stratosphere, the weight holding me here slips away,  
but free-floating was never meant for me.  
I cup these memories in my hand and hold them close to my chest.  
Wherever I go I carry a piece of home,  
to plant where my feet land next.

# Empty Floors and Cold Parathas

Written by: Deepika Rani

“Open your mouth.”

“Mom please --”

“Just open it, Oreya.”

I open it. She tips a small spoon of plain sugar onto my tongue the way she has done every time I have ever left anywhere: first day of kindergarten, first day of university, the morning of my behind-the-wheel test. She’s always stood at the door making sure I left sweet. Sweet mouth, safe journey. That’s the kind of logic I was born into. The oldest logic I know.

The sugar dissolves, the granules rubbing against the surface of my tongue. I’ll have to add another ten minutes on the stairmaster for that.

“Did you pack a plastic bag?”

“Yes, mother.”

“Make sure to chew on some bubblegum if you feel nauseous.”

“Okay.” I snort derisively, already knowing this is useless advice given I’ve inherited my mother’s motion sickness, apparently the one family trait that refuses to skip a generation.

“Because you always think you won’t need it and then you always need it.” She is already moving towards the kitchen, folding a stack of salted parathas neatly in a roll of aluminum foil. She holds it out. I take it without arguing because we’ve had this argument before and the parathas always win.

My dad is standing in the doorway the way he has always stood in my doorway. Sneakily taking a peak, pretending to be doing something else, looking for some excuse to come in - closing my curtains or making my bed. He’s been watching me my whole life from doorways, from corners, making sure I’m still there, making sure I’m still his. I did not know until this moment that I would ever miss it. That I would miss it so dearly that I can’t bear to look him in the eye.

He follows me to the car to arrange my heavy suitcases in the trunk in a precise way I never could. I don’t know how I’ll manage to haul them inside. I don’t want to think about it but I know I’ll end up doing it somehow.

We say our goodbyes. He places his hand on my head in a way to tell me

he'll always be here.

I start the engine and catch them waving in the corner of my eye. The car feels cold like a room after everyone has left.

I sit in the driver's seat for a moment and do nothing. The street is ordinary. The day is ordinary. I am leaving and the world hasn't noticed and I am somehow both grateful and wrecked by it.

I close my eyes. Take a deep breath. You know, the kind that's supposed to compensate for all the shallow breathing I've been doing for the past week. Then I hit the gas.

Everything is a blur at 70 miles an hour. Less like my life, more like a movie about it.

I've always been better at watching than living anyway.

\*

I finally arrive at my new apartment.

It's like coming home to nothing after a long day. No wafting smell of food, no sound of television, no one to have an argument with.

But let me not romanticize it too much.

Home was the place I was most known and least free. They knew every version of me that existed: the child I was, the child they needed me to be, and somehow that knowing made it harder, not easier, to become someone new.

It was surveillance with a loving face - a place where I couldn't get a glass of water from the kitchen without feeling watched. Where I could not wear shorts on a hot day, bare-legged and unbothered, the way girls in movies always seemed to be. A night out meant a jacket before I left and back on when I came home. It meant coming home and becoming someone else at the front door. Heels off. The long tiptoed walk of shame down the hallway.

And yet.

I feel homesick. I am homesick in a way that embarrasses me, that I would not admit to anyone who asked, that sits in my throat like something I accidentally swallowed.

I am five years old again. I remember it the way you remember things that shaped you before you had words for it. The particular cruelty of a classroom full of children who had already learned how to be in a room. And the

teacher, with the practiced patience of someone who has better things to do, moves me to the corner away from the others. So I don't disturb them with the inconvenience of my feelings.

I learned something that day that I have been unlearning ever since. That my sadness is a disruption. That my need is a nuisance. That the appropriate response to falling apart is to do it quietly, do it alone, do it somewhere the others wouldn't have to see.

I'll unpack the boxes in a bit.

But first I need to cry.

So here I am. Thirty years later. On the floor of an empty apartment. Falling apart in a corner I chose for myself this time, which I suppose is progress, which I suppose is something, even if it doesn't feel like something right now.

You are not supposed to miss a place that kept you small. I know that. I have read enough, lived enough, cried many times on enough bathroom floors to know that. But familiarity is a weird kind of love.

And sometimes, when you have never known anything else, that feels like enough.

It's not enough.

But it feels like it. For a long time, it'll feel like it.

I look around. Someone lived here before me. Several someones, probably. I think about them the way you think about people you will never meet but whose entire existence you've invented and somehow still miss.

Their lives happened in these exact rooms before me. Red hair dye stains on the bathroom tiles. Someone needed to change, I think, dramatically and suddenly. The Sylvia Plath kind of change. You know the whole "I've got red hair and eat men like air" kind of thing. And then there's the hole in the drywall. Their rage must've crescendoed here. I don't even think they were an angry person. Just someone life drove to the edge. Someone like me.

I think about their giggles. The old sex they must have had. The unglamorous, raw, and human kind that nobody writes about. The one you have in moments where all you want to do is just shatter like glass in someone's arms just to feel like you matter. It's like loneliness masked in intimacy but it doesn't even matter because their arms are the only thing keeping you from ceasing to make sense to yourself.

Did they ever feel this way, I wonder. Standing in the middle of something

that is technically a home but feeling like they're nowhere. Homeless in a home? I hope they did. I hope they felt this nameless feeling and this grey static that feels like it's going to gnaw you alive. And then I hope they lived out of it too. Because if they did, then so can I.

\*

I clean before I unpack. I don't know why exactly. I tell myself it's about the people who lived here before me. I have to scrub away their microscopic leftovers, whatever grief or heartbreak that consumed them and materialized in these walls. I want to un-haunt this place as much as possible before I make it my own.

I want so badly for this to be the beginning of a different story. One where I'm not so predictable to myself. But what I'm really doing is buying myself a few hours before the quiet gets loud. A moment of reprieve where I can tell myself that I left the old version of me behind in the cocoon of my childhood home. That this loss has alchemized into the woman I've always wanted to be. Someone who's a little feared, a little magnetic, and who people turn to look at and can't quite say why.

But the hard truth is that I packed all the old versions of myself as I always do, that thin-skinned girl who just wants to be loved. Who feels everything like a body of water with bones of glass. I've tried to kill her so many times, but I learned somewhere in a classroom I don't remember that, matter cannot be created nor destroyed. I don't understand physics but I've tried every equation to make her nothing, and have never once succeeded. The carbon in her bones was forged in the core of a dying star. When you've already survived an annihilation so ancient, you realize how foolish you are to think you could finish what the universe has not.

It's time to set the rag down. Just like how there are things you cannot scrub off of walls, I'll never be able to scrub her out of me.

It's time to build my nest from scratch, the way I've always wanted to.

\*

The library comes first. It always will. Ever since I was a little girl, I wanted those enchanted forest type of libraries that make you feel like the rest of the

world has moved very far away. My dad's not here to build it for me today. So I gather the Bubinga wood shelves and start assembling them on my own with tools spread haphazardously on the floor and a Youtube video I keep replaying on my laptop. I get it wrong ten times before I get it right. Of course, I won't include the innumerable times I gave up and walked away. I line the shelves with books I've been collecting my whole life, which is to say I've been building this room my whole life without knowing it. The ones with colorful pages and feisty female characters with daggers sheathed up their thighs. They've risen from a life of insignificance to being so completely terrifying themselves that the world has no choice but to reorganize and usher in a new order.

After the shelves, come the vines. I wind the thin tendrils around the uprights and over the corners of the shelves, dotted here and there with tiny blush-pink blossoms, baby's breath or jasmine. The lights take the longest to get right. I want them to look like something between stars and fireflies. I string them through the vines, along the shelves, and up over the window arch. I step back and take a look at the completed room, my gaze traveling magnetically to the books again.

I trace the gilded letters along their spines, the way you touch things you love and miss simultaneously. There's a corner in the shelf that I leave empty. It's not empty like a hollow feeling but more of a reservation. A silent promise to myself that I will sit in this very library one day and write the book that goes there. I envision the ghost of my future self standing where I am currently, placing her hand on my shoulder saying "Hey, you. Look, we made it. We're not the girl in the corner anymore." I let myself feel her warmth. I deserve that much.

The kitchen comes next. I paint it turquoise and nude pink, my two favorite colors. The mismatched ceramic bowls sit alongside older plastic bowls we've had forever; they may as well be heirlooms. I cook the dishes my mother taught me but never cared to make before this moment. Because a part of me always believed she'd be here to make them for me, forever. But I'm all alone now.

Except maybe I'm not. The books. The kitchen. They're all mine. I'm just... finally and terrifyingly in my own company.

\*

And there's *him*. There's always a "him." Or a "them." Or a "the-feeling-of." I've always been better at homes than houses, building them inside people. I love him the way I love everything: completely, and a little recklessly, like opening a window in peak winter because the air feels worth it.

I'm so good at making a person feel like the sun, and I, the moon. I know him like a home I've lived in for so long that I know exactly where to put my hand on the wall to find the switch without looking. The way his handwriting, half-print, half-cursive, and a little rushed looks on a sticky-note he'll never look at again. The way my name sounds half-mumbled in his mouth during a nap. I know which silences mean he's fine and which mean "don't ask yet." The tiny hairs from his beard in the sink I always give him an earful for. The back of his neck and the way his hands gracefully circle the steering wheel when he reverses. All of his black shirts. The way he puts his hand on open cupboard doors so I don't hit my stupid head. When he reads the menu out loud because he knows I've forgotten my glasses. The way he lifts me up high and lets me be the tallest thing for a moment like he knows how much I hate feeling small and wants me to feel my power. When he sits spread across the hammock in my library like he owns it, holding open a book with one hand and the other behind his neck and a sly grin on his face like he gets what I feel in these pages. I know he thinks it's ridiculous but loves it anyway, loves it because I love it. And I watch him from the doorway, making sure he's still there, making sure he's still mine.

I don't notice that I'm orbiting again. That's the thing about being a moon, you don't feel yourself moving. You only feel the pull of the thing that you're circling and it feels like gravity, like love, like home. But the fear seeps in quickly. The moon is never the center and that's a tragedy of its own. You pour your light towards something or someone but nobody ever turns the telescope around. That orbit quickly tightens and spirals and I'm left thinking what would become of my home without my sun, what would this moon do with all this darkness?

\*

It's a cold Thursday morning when it happens. The sun hasn't come out and he's not there. And then that gray static comes alive again.

I drag myself out of bed onto the floor of my library. I unwrap the cold

parathas from aluminum foil. They're cold but comforting. With every bite, I wait for the feeling of having arrived. Of mattering. I've built everything I've ever wanted and I'm sitting in the middle of it waiting for it to be enough and I'm not sure it is.

Is it foolishness? Is this just who I am? What if it's not the home? What if this hollow is mine? What if I carry it everywhere, through every city, into every person, and there's no apartment and no lover and no library that can fill something that lives this deep?

I'm sitting on the floor. I'm 5 and 17 and 30 all over again. No.

I take another bite of the paratha. It sits in the middle of my throat alongside all these thoughts.

\*

The library is quiet except for the bird fluttering outside my window. My gaze flickers to it without meaning to. It's an ordinary thing but it stops me the way true ordinary things sometimes do. She leaves and returns. Leaves and returns. Sometimes she brings back a thread, a couple of twigs, or something she found along the way that turned out to be useful.

She doesn't build her nest all at once, she couldn't even if she wanted to. She just keeps returning and pressing her body into it until it takes the shape of her. Until they've made each other. That's what home is, I think. Not the place that keeps you safe, or the things you build inside of it, or the life you narrated to yourself as a little girl. It's the shape you leave in something and the shape it leaves in you.

My mother would call it *danna pani* which translates to "seed and water" in Punjabi. It's another one of those hackneyed sayings that are so old they sound irritating. But your seed and water are scattered wherever they are and you're here to gather them. It's not something you choose. It calls to you and you follow and it was always meant to be yours. Some things are just written into you before you arrive.

And if I've learned anything about home then it's that you've got to stay. Press into it until it fits you. Let yourself grow until you outgrow it and it's time to fly elsewhere. The people you meet or don't meet, the experiences you have and don't have - meet them fully, let them know you, not the performed you. The thin-skinned girl with bones of glass who was forged in a

star and is somehow improbably still here.

I have been here before and I will be here again.

I am a speck inside a speck inside a speck. Yet, I am also, somehow the whole thing.

I look down at the last piece of paratha in my hand and hold it out to the window. The bird takes it along with the cold of this Thursday morning.

# Author Biographies



Roos van der Velden  
Editor-in-chief

Roos van der Velden is a young writer from the Netherlands who just finished her degree and is looking for work. In her home country, she has been published in *Fantastische Vertellingen* and *Vonk fantasy*. Across the pond, she has gotten published in *Talk Vomit* and *Sinister Wisdom*. In this anthology, she hasn't written herself, yet just like with the previous issues she is still the editor-in-chief.



reux z. qualm  
Author & Editor

reux z. qualm (@marshfaerie) is an empathic and versatile artist who writes with a quirky but poignant tone emblematic of a DIY basement venue fantasia. they've published some blog posts and shared zines with friends & community members. reux has worked as an educator, organized with local coalitions for justice for marginalized folks, and is pursuing their second master's degree in english rhetoric.



Kenn Nimaga  
Cover Designer

Kenn Nimaga is a former scientist and current author and librarian located in the American Midwest. While she waits for science funding in the US to return, she fills the academic void writing fiction rather than research papers. When not writing, she can often be found with her beloved corgi.

# Author Biographies



Aliza Nini  
Author

Aliza Nini is a writer and editor who enjoys fantasy and mystery fiction. After recently completing a Masters' in English Literature, who plans to write full-time both creative and copywriting. She specialises in literature critiques, and exploring surreal themes. You can find some of her writings on her Substack (<https://substack.com/@lizwritingjournal>).



Antonia Zatrok  
Author & editor

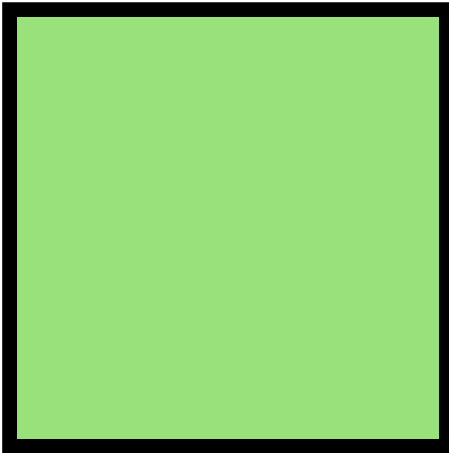
Antonia Zatrok is a cat, literature and cheese lover. She often debates the absurdity of humanity and life itself, usually expressed and personified in her poems. She loves dystopia and taking the simplicity of objects and giving them deeper meanings. She also likes to delve into the technical side of things, currently doing a CyberSecurity Undergraduate Degree.



Ashley Catelyn Olivier  
Author

Ashley Catelyn Olivier is an aspiring novelist and recent Creative Writing graduate from the University of Chichester. She most enjoys writing flash fiction and short stories in the fantasy and horror genres, but will dabble in anything really. She is a voracious reader who, when not writing, can be found devouring fantasy novels or trying her best not to faceplant at her taekwondo classes.

# Author Biographies



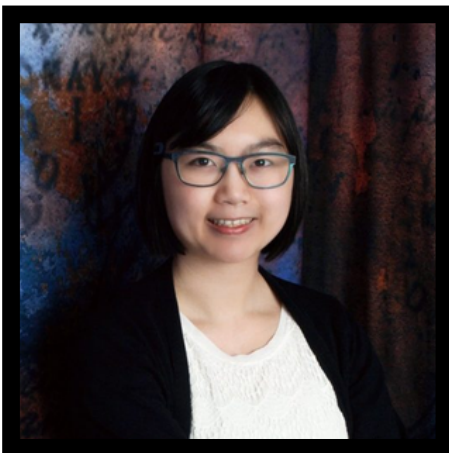
Samantha Acker  
Author & Editor

Samantha Acker is an avid solo traveler who incorporates her love of different cultures into her work. Her ideal night is in a little café in Spain with a poetry book and a “cappuccino de mocha”. She foresees her future taking her back to Europe with a potential career in the pastry world. For now, she’s practicing her global recipes, her language learning, and writing introspective pieces on her travels.



Kiera Hammersley  
Author & Editor

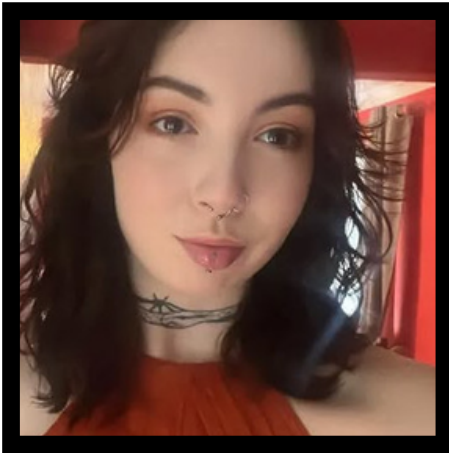
Kiera Hammersley is a UK-based writer who indulges in the dark, gritty, and morally grey. She is particularly interested in strange, off-putting characters, gothic fiction, and stories about the queer experience. A Royal Holloway Creative Writing graduate, she dabbles in creative fiction, copywriting, freeform essays, and screenplays. She is currently working on a screenplay about feuding clowns.



Claris Lam  
Author

Claris Lam (she/her) is a Chinese Canadian author & poet writing to inspire readers with hope, perseverance, creativity, and happy endings. She adores mixing up typical fantasy plots and tropes with unexpected surprises when she’s writing. When she’s not writing, Claris is providing music as a church organist, working in digital marketing, or rewatching the fantasy gameshow Raven and its spinoff shows.

# Author Biographies



Niamh Friel  
Author

Niamh Friel is a Scottish poetry and fiction writer born in Glasgow, living in Ireland, who is currently completing her MSc in Creative Industries and Cultural Policy at the University of Glasgow. Upon completing her BDes with Honors at the Glasgow School of Art in 2023, Niamh pursued a freelance career in writing spanning poetry, music journalism and copywriting.



Claire Marie Anderson  
Author & Editor

Claire Marie Anderson is a poet and copywriter whose work explores the tragicomedy of existence and non-existence. Some of her Best of the Net-nominated publications can be found in *Alchemy*, *The Decadent Review*, *Unfortunately*, *Literary Magazine*, *Odessa Collective*, and *BarBar Literary Magazine*, among other digital and print places.



Jolanda Zweers  
Author & Editor

Jolanda Zweers is a Dutch freelance writer and journalist. She completed her BA in Media Studies at the University of Groningen, and has not stopped rambling about books, movies, and games ever since. Jolanda loves to write fantasy fiction, but also likes to express her strong opinion in a juicy column. Check out her work on her website: [jolandazweers.com](http://jolandazweers.com)

# Author Biographies



Patrick Szpila  
Author

Patrick Szpila is a passionate writing student dedicated to the art of storytelling, specializing in fantasy and horror genres. Proficient in creating compelling characters, intricate plots, and immersive worlds. Seeking opportunities to contribute to narrative writing projects and further develop skills in the field.



Sasha Paris-Carter  
Author

I'm Sasha Paris-Carter! I specialize in copy for musicians and music organizations. I currently work as a staff writer for music blog EveryDejaVu, a grant writer for Show Brain, and I am the PR manager at Voiceworks Audio. I previously managed social media for Liberty Scrap at Culture Lab LIC.



Naema Choudhury  
Author

Naema Choudhury is an aspiring writer currently based in Cardiff, Wales. She graduated with a Drama and Creative Writing degree from Bristol UWE and has been going where the wind takes her ever since, which has so far been a costume shop and currently a law firm. She dreams of one day living in a hut in the woods brewing up potions and making friends with the trees.

# Author Biographies



Reina Dwyer  
Author

Reina Dwyer (she/they) is a poet based just outside of Atlanta, Georgia. Her work focuses on intense emotions, channeling the dark and macabre into works of literary art. She is inspired by authors such as Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, Ray Bradbury and Ethan Jewell. You can find more of her work on her Substack (@reinadwyer).



McKenzie Clarke  
Author

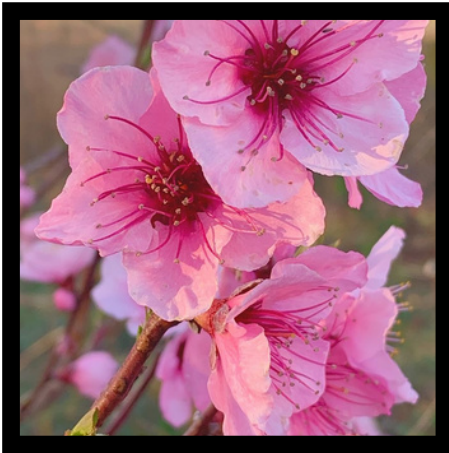
I'm McKenzie Clarke. I like to call myself a "Doer of Things." Just one of these things is writing, which most often covers the silly characters in my head that I watch like pizza in the microwave. I do other things, like character design, screenwriting, and a healthy amount of math & science. And lots more. Check out @mx\_steelofficial on Instagram.



Meg Evans  
Author

Meg Evans is a part-time writer and a full-time Disney cast member, with a constant suitcase that's never quite unpacked. When she's not weaving stories for the happiest place on earth, she's chasing new adventures across the globe—collecting moments, mishaps, and a little bit of chaos along the way. Her writing blends wanderlust with honesty, drawing from the beautiful messiness of real life.

# Author Biographies



Grace R.  
Author

Grace R. holds a degree in English Literature and has previously been published in her alma mater's pop culture magazine, as well as serving as a paid editor for a member of the faculty. Her favorite genre to write and read is realistic fiction. In her spare time, she loves to spend time with her beloved dog and touch grass (at the local park).



Madeleine Jopson  
Author

Madeleine Jopson is a recent English graduate and an aspiring writer. During her time at university, she experimented with writing techniques, and her article on life in first-year accommodation was published on the student news website The Tab. Residing in a small Yorkshire town where lived experiences inspire her writing, she can also be found at the theatre, walking in nature, or rewatching her favourite series.



Hollis Peterson  
Author

Hollis Peterson is a transmasculine writer based in Richmond, VA telling stories that someone can hopefully relate to (and he's sorry if you do). He is a little rusty at writing short stories due to extended work on a fantasy novel that he hopes to bring out in early 2027. His current writing partners include Depeche Mode and French press coffee.

# Author Biographies



Kylie Robinson  
Author

Kylie Robinson is an artist from the West Coast who expresses her impressions of life through language and visual design. She currently works in digital marketing, but aspires to do creative work in games. When not working she enjoys spending time with friends, painting, and getting scared playing video games.



Deepika Rani  
Author

Deepika Rani is a writer whose name means “a little light,” and that’s exactly what she’s chasing even in the darkest corners of her stories. When she’s not fawning over high fae warlords or crafting copy, you’ll find her mid-sitcom spiral or blasting y2k pop bangers. Basically: a hopeless romantic, a hot mess, and always reaching for the light.



Star Faeastrea  
Editor

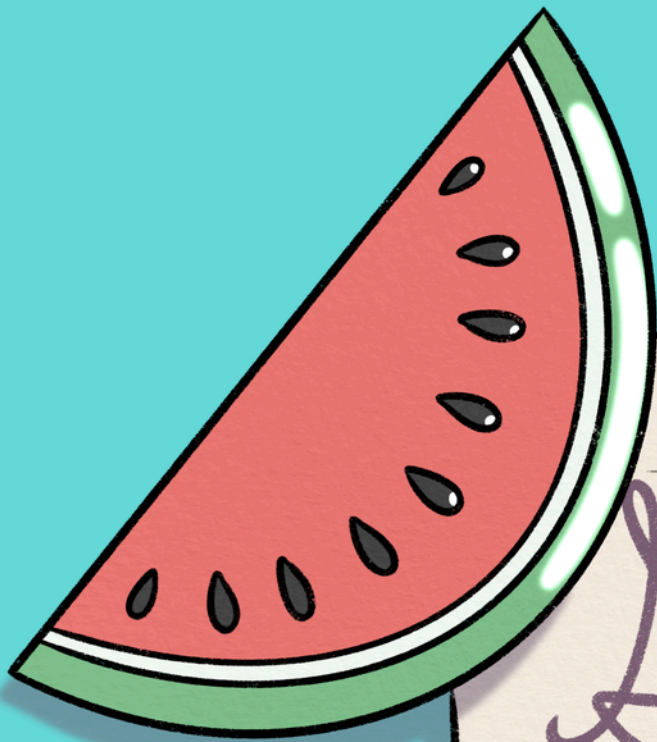
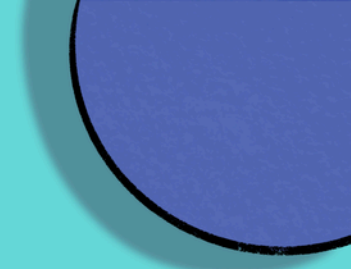
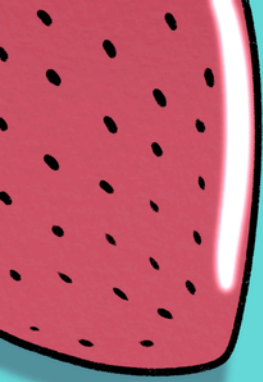
Star Faeastrea is a girl, a fire hazard, and occasionally a writer from North Carolina who can be found loitering, talking too loudly, and writing on napkins at work. She is late to everything.

# Author Biographies



Janyne Langlois  
Editor

Janyne Langlois is a Florida based writer known for an enormous imagination that runs on overdrive. Her creativity stems from watching films like *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Sailor Moon*. Her love of writing was fostered by her college English professor, who always encouraged her to keep going. When she isn't writing she's watching anime, listening to cinematic music, or screaming with her friends about characters they love.



See you  
next time! ♥

