

A photograph of a dirt path winding through a forest. The path is covered in fallen leaves and leads into the distance. The trees are covered in moss, and the foliage is dense with some yellowing leaves, suggesting an autumn setting. The overall tone is warm and natural.

LABYRINTH

COLLEGE OF SAN MATEO • THE WRITERS PROJECT

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The CSM Honors Project faculty, staff, and students, with special thanks to David Laderman, for their continued support of our club and our vision, our inspiring club advisors, Sarah Mangin and Keira Travis, the always encouraging ASCSM, and the students who submitted their work to be considered for this publication.

We want to thank you for reading our new issue of Labyrinth and hope that this publication continues to inspire you.

Keep writing. Keep learning. Keep creating.



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

When I think about my time spent in the Writers Project, what stands out is pure, unabashed passion. This magazine and all of its issues are created to honor the work of our students and pay tribute to their effort and creativity. This issue was difficult to make, all of it done from home and over zoom, and yet, it came together. I could not have been more lucky than to have such dedicated, passionate students on this team, their presence made me want to push myself further and give even more to this project. In the end, we created another beautiful issue.

I am filled with pride at all we accomplished in this issue and it clearly shows. With this, my time as Editor-In-Chief ends and I am off to my next school. I cannot overstate the honor I have had to run this club in my final year at CSM. It kept me going in more ways than one. With this, I pass the torch to Ümit and Brittany. I have no doubts they will lead this club faithfully and with vision. I am so excited to see where they go and how the next issues come out.

I encourage anyone reading to pursue your passions, no matter what.
Your creations are so much more meaningful than you give yourself credit for.

Thank you so much for reading.
Candela



Yesterday



Photograph by: Anna Mahoney

Sparks of Fireworks

By Kristal Lam

It's seven-fifteen at night when we heard the first "boom" echo in the sky. Yet, distracted by the crowd and my sheer exhaustion, My legs and feet begging for a rest, every second feeling like stepping on thousands of legos. I barely glanced at the fireworks once. I turned back around, Just focusing on standing up and not crashing down on the train.

It's seven-twenty when we exit the train station. And fireworks continue to blast in the sky. I look up, but quickly groan in dread, thinking about the long walk. Because its ninety-five degrees and there's not a single breeze; I might as well be walking into a burning oven- the heat might be more merciful there.

It's seven-thirty when we reached the bridge that we needed to cross. And people were sitting down and stopping to admire the fireworks. But I continued to walk on, just trying to reach the festival. By then, my skin was sticky from the endless sweat pouring all over. And my feet were swelling, blistering, and crying blood.

It's seven-forty when we realize we're almost there
And fireworks are still exploding in the sky seemingly
nonstop. Sound of gunshots quickly becoming cannons
blasting in a battle, I just cover my aching ears because
we're getting closer to the source of them. Also, I'm really
not a fan of loud noises and it's really, really, really loud.

It's seven-forty-five when we spot the entrance of the festival
And I stop at a stall to buy a chocolate banana as my friends
buy shaved ice. With our festival food, we waddle over to the
closest spot to sit. With feet throbbing from overexertion after
walking for miles after miles today. Finally, relief like the first
sip of water after getting lost in a desert came to us as we sat.

It's seven-forty-six when I finally truly open my eyes and see
A sight far more valuable than fifty chests filled with gold and
jewels. Beautiful sparks dancing in the air, vanishing as they
fall, another taking its place. Shining sparks of emeralds, rubies,
sapphires, diamonds, and gold become stars. They are easily the
most beautiful fireworks we've ever seen (and we've seen Disney
ones).

It's seven-fifty when we eat our festival food after taking pictures.
The scent of the chocolate banana wafted in the air as we snack on
it. While the strawberry taste of the shaved ice lingered as the ice
melted and cool us down. The snacks are passed around between
friends, sharing the sweet and the sight. Complaints and groans of
pain replaced by laughter and gasps of awe.

It's eight-ten when we sat down on the grassy fields to admire the fireworks. We passed through crowds and crowds of people (we've never seen so many people in one spot)

Just to stare at the beauty and size of the endless explosions of the hanabi. That night, thousands of people watched the fireworks, and we were just one spark. Thou sands of people joined together to illuminate the night like single sparks in a momentous firework.

It was August third when my friends and I went to the Itabashi Fireworks Festival And though some tears were shed and blood was bled from blistered feet,

We still laughed in joy as we joked together underneath the hanabi
We still grabbed onto each other with sweaty hands in joy every
time there was a particularly astonishing firework, Thousands of
strangers joined together that night to witness fireworks become
stars in the sky.



Photograph by: Mony Samneang

Cream- filled Geodes

By Sophia Breslin

Her lips bleed a bright
Twisted orange zest
Her skin is tilted and wrinkled
Glittery silk spun in high speed

She sways with the grass
To and fro,
a bedsheet dancing in the sky
tethered to a clothesline

I dream of vines,
Twisting and tilting
May they crack porcelain limbs
May they wrap around her feet
her arms and her heart

I dream of strings that suffocate
and cocoon her so completely
That I am her only light
I am the axis she spins around

An hourglass drops its last grain
She sleeps in a kaleidoscope bed
She plants a kiss upon my brow
I pour a glass of mulberry wine

So I may finally dine
on cream-filled geodes
with her, under the sun



Ode to My Family

By Hannah Hersey

My mother and I were driving around San Francisco. She pointed to a building that was apparently where my father used to live. He'd only lived there for the couple of years surrounding my parents' divorce, sixteen years ago. I think it was on 4th street.

When I'd walk out of his car to the apartment, I remember seeing the "Coca-Cola" billboard, hovering above us. In my youth, I don't remember if I saw it in its illuminated glory, but I recall being pleasantly surprised to see the sign during the day without it blinding my vision with its bright lights. Something about being able to see each bulb along with the red and white skeleton of the sign made me feel like I was in on some kind of secret,

like finding a hermit crab without its shell—a familiar subject without its recognizable object. A sign without bright lights. A family without a father.

Once we'd get out of the car and head to the complex, we'd have to climb a flight of stairs. Ascending the building, I'd grip the metal railing that would

always leave my hands chalky. Upon entering the apartment, there was a narrow hallway with a mural painted along its walls. Even as a child, it felt suffocating to walk through. With each exhale, my breath drifted up the narrow walls and disappeared into the high ceilings. These exhalations danced along a sea, a deep and vast underwater-scape stretching some-odd feet along the wall. With half a dozen whales romping above, I'd imagine myself as a calf among those large creatures, playing alongside them.

Through the hallway was a small living room with a hide-a-bed that let out a raspy scream each time it went through its weekly sofa-to-bed metamorphosis. The couch collapsed into its sleep-friendly form with the conviction of a guillotine, haphazardly cutting off the head of a pariah.

My mother never had a sweet tooth. Consequently, our kitchen cabinet rarely housed American confections. My father, on the other hand, basically fed us spoonfuls of sugar in an attempt to be adopted as the "better parent" and

the “cool dad.” I recall observing the cursive kimono of the geisha printed on cans of Arizona Green Tea with the lady obediently holding a plate with her own ceramic cup of tea, neatly perched on top. I was stranded on the Devil’s Slide Highway with my father, my sister, “Stinky C.” Stinky C was my father’s beloved Mitsubishi Lancer OZ with some kind of malfunction with the clutch, leading to a foul metallic odor, hence her name. She was exotic and high maintenance—her Black Pearl paint job glistened in the washed-out afternoon sun, almost as if she was giving us puppy-dog eyes, begging us to forgive her for her latest breakdown.

I think I was around five at the time. Much too young to be drinking the caffeine and sugar laden Arizona Green Tea. Much too young to be stranded along Devil’s Slide in the midst of a car malfunction, kindled by my father’s love for sports cars, street racing, and cocaine, all of which perhaps served as a symptom or result of Terminal Cool Dad Syndrome.

Gripping the waist of the green tea geisha in one hand and my father’s shaky hand in the other, we shuffled once more to cross the road, giving Stinky C her space. We made our way towards a bright blue sign:

SAN MATEO COUNTY

CALL BOX

To my right, cars flew by—too close for comfort. To my left, a laminated paper adhered to the metal railing flickered in the sunlight, begging for my attention. On it, a picture of a young boy with neatly cut hair and another of an older woman, presumably his mother. Both smiling, though it looked a bit forced, as the ends of their mouths curled in calculated angles. Placed on the ground was a bouquet of flowers, half bent and blown away by the persistent coastal wind. Farther to the left, the cliff’s edge—embossed with crumbling, pale limestone. A skosh farther, salty waves sloshed against the rocks, gradually subsiding to dimples of seawater along the horizon.

I’m afraid that I’m forgetting things about my father. At this point, the fabric and thread that serve as the foundations of my memories feel moth-eaten and derelict. I’m patching together what I can, but something is missing.

It was a Wednesday. I was a junior in high school and it was about a month into the school year. My sister and I shared a room at the time and while I was getting ready to leave, she suddenly looked over at me with a wide-eyed stare.

“Dad’s dead.”

It all felt like a dream. In alternating waves, my heart and mind oscillated as the ebb and flow of thought and emotions overtook me.

They did somersaults, flipping and changing positions as my head reeled and I felt myself go numb. I don't think I cried. Not there. I took my emotions outside of my home.

For the rest of the week, I wailed and wept in between or during my classes. I remember at one point, once one of my classes ended, I just sat in my seat, bawling. I tried to leave the room, but found myself just throwing my body against the closed door, pathetically slumping down to my knees, waiting for my storm of tears to finish making their daily rounds.

After that incident and others involving miscommunication with school counselors and misunderstandings between my friends, I put all of this to the back of my mind. I refused to talk about it with my family and ignored any internal cries for help.

Pretending like it didn't happen or acting like it didn't affect me was often times a lot easier than torturing myself with convoluted family dynamics and clashing personal opinions. Grief felt like a luxury. It felt expensive to cry only to worry others, as they did not know how I could be consoled. I receded into myself.

And my emotions surrounding his death ... my heart was made with the same ragged fabric as my memories, but was pulled taut in all directions with a spectrum of rapidly fluctuating mental states: despair, confusion, doubt, frustration ... relief. It took everything in me to ensure I wouldn't become a messy heap of scrap and thread.

As time went on, as I continued to suppress my feelings, I became volatile. The fabric continued to stretch with rising tension thinning the cloth.

Farther and farther. Thinner and thinner. Spreading out into a sheet of mere atoms, tightly bound by electromagnetic forces. Particles lightyears apart, isolated and marooned, thoughts and emotions orbiting the far periphery of my mindspace. Its existence is a faint blip on my radar. Still, farther and thinner—

To the quantum realm—a quark of a memory, a feeling where you know it's there—it surely exists, but every attempt to gaze upon it yields absence. A kind of void that settles in the primordial, postatomic gaps of sinewy thread of this godforsaken thinly stretched piece of goddamn fabric.

I often do worry that I forget too much. As if I live in one dissociation to the next, leaving cautionary breadcrumbs of my past, while making the trek toward some unknown destination. In the context of my father and of others that have faded from my mind, there's a reason why they've disappeared. And even without me being cognizant of this fact, like a well-oiled machine, the gears and various levers and pulleys in my mind spin and interlock to keep these people at bay, physically, mentally, and emotionally.

And while I do worry that I will forget them, on closer reflection, I don't think there's much to forget about my father. He left our home when I was five. Cocaine and his progressive bipolar symptoms took hold of him and he left, thinking he was chased by mobsters, or something like that. He moved to San Francisco with a friend of his, into an apartment on 4th street and he lived there for a couple years, until some other delusion sent his ass flying to Montreal, his hometown. My grandmother, his mother, is a full time Jewish Brooklynite who'd moved to Toronto in her later years. She was a retired elementary school teacher and one of those Canadian geese, a loon, who flies down to South Florida in the winter for the warmer weather.

It became a sort of a tradition to meet him there for a few weeks to celebrate Chanukah with the family. Before my father left, we'd have Chanukah

with my parents, my sister, and I, singing prayers as he lit the menorah with a new candle added each night. My father was a constant figure in my life until I was five.

I saw him on the weekends until I was seven, and then we were meeting anywhere from a total of a few weeks to a month each year until I was around fifteen or so. I believe this circumstance leaves little room for nostalgia. I could even say that I remember things quite well, relative to the little time we spent together.

My earliest memory I can recall was with him. I was two. We were living in Toronto at the time, and moved there from Japan a few months prior. On this occasion, we were visiting my great grandmother, Molly, in Montreal. She was a dusty, old woman, who I don't share many memories with. I was told she and my grandfather's side of the family were hatmakers of Ashkenazi descent. When I was a kid, I owned a blanket that she had knitted. It was knit in a loose braid with a sturdy, thick thread which was remarkably warm, despite it looking a bit like a spider's web. I'm assuming it was just the style of knit, but the pattern consisted of knotted squares tethered to each other like a quilt, looking haphazard, yet intentional.

It was most definitely a quintessential “grandma blanket” and its faint scent of mothballs completed the aesthetic. Whenever it was draped upon anyone besides my sister and I, it didn’t feel right. It’s not like anyone would take it away from me, and it really wasn’t used often, but when I’d see other people with it, something pulled on my soul and I felt like I was robbed of some kind of experience or emotion. Sometimes tears would well in my eyes and my cheeks would burn.

We were in front of a Jewish old folks’ home and it must have been winter because the gaps in between the roads and sidewalks were inflated with fresh snow. Growing up, my sister and I would wear clothes with designated colors—she was purple and I was pink. We were close in age, so perhaps it was to tell us apart, though we already looked quite different. Her wisps of curly hair and pale complexion evoked my father’s features.

On one occasion, my sister and I were visiting our father and he took us to his local grocery store. The woman at the register was apparently someone he was well-acquainted with as they exchanged polite hellos. “Is she your daughter?” She smiled at my sister kindly, and it seemed that he had mentioned us to her before.

However, I was paid no glance as perhaps my appearance led her to believe I belonged to someone else.

He reached over to me, gripping my shoulder and pulling the three of us into some assemblage of a family. “Her too. I have two daughters.”

I would always wear pink and she would always wear purple. I’m not sure how that was decided, but it was as such. Outside the old folks’ home that housed my pale, great grandmother Molly were three figures. My father, in one of those olive green bomber jackets with the inside fabric a bright orange, my sister, with a purple winter coat, and me, in a matching coat in pink.

Closer to the road were another two figures. A man with his black labrador walked by and I watched him make way through the wet sidewalk as he and the dog took turns leading the other on a winter stroll. We were waiting for something or someone, and perhaps I had nothing to do but to watch this stranger walk his dog. I remember hearing my father’s voice, and the shk shk of the synthetic, pink fabric of my jacket as I fidgeted in the cold snowscape. The winter air bit at the tip of my nose and the curl of my ears as I watched the dog hoist one leg in the air and piss on a mound of snow. That’s the only memory I have at that age, but I’m thinking I must have known that snow takes on different textures and colors.

Snow around dirt is brown. Snow around paved streets is grey. I most certainly knew that urine is yellow. But I think something about yellow snow surprised me. From the frame of my two-year-old mind, perhaps yellow was reserved for spring flowers, summer dresses, Big Bird, and those potty trainers shaped like ducklings. Snow wasn't supposed to be yellow; yet, right before my eyes, a caution-tape colored pool began to grow on a white canvas. It must have been impressive to me at the time as I remember thinking, I have to remember this for the rest of my life. And so far, I have. Throughout my life, I compulsively remind myself of this moment, backtracking through my forest of memories, following piss-yellow breadcrumbs back to this strange feeling that there's something I must remember.

About six months prior to my father's death, he'd moved from Montreal to Fremont. I'd only found out once he was over here, and was mortified. I liked having distance between my father and me. I thought he was erratic and desperate, and I barely knew him. I was most content when he was in my periphery, three thousand miles away, and as this distance reduced itself a hundredfold, my mind and vision were focused on his presence.

I hadn't seen him in about a year or so previous to this move, and despite his attempts to meet once he was close, I was adamant about keeping space between us.

I was angry that he was back in my life. He was scarcely present beforehand and I was frustrated that after everything he had put us through, it was like he wanted to waltz into our lives like nothing happened. Feelings of confusion and pain toward my father in preadolescence served as a totem for my teen angst, mutating into fear and paranoia. I thought he was after me.

Like he'd moved here just to stalk and harass me. He'd cruise around our neighborhood in his car. He'd follow me around when I'd walk to school. He'd get close. And when I wasn't paying attention, he'd snatch me right off the sidewalk.

And I'd be gone.

I'd play cruel fantasies like these over and over again, venturing deeper into irrational thought, to the point where I confined myself to my room, refusing to leave with the exception of school and familial obligations as this wretched fear took over my psyche; thus, when hearing of his death, a certain sense of relief and calmness washed over me as I felt these fears expire with his life.

I desperately wanted to overcome this period of my life and refused to thoroughly process my loss. On occasion, there'd be brief moments where I'd drown in a melange of misery and regret over failing to communicate with my father about my dread before his passing, but I dismissed these thoughts by reminding myself of my paranoia-induced anguish. I'd tell myself that numbing and justifying my pain outweighed experiencing the grief felt after the loss of a loved one. He's already dead, but I'm the one still traumatized.

I'm the one that's still suffering. I'd tell myself that his death wasn't fair to me and invalidate my own process of mourning, denying my own sorrow. I'd walk the fine line of contradictions between perceived self-preservation and self-indulgence, spiraling into existential despair. Years after, I still toil over ideas in this way. I fear I'm always wrong about things like this. Like there's no correct answer for overcoming grief, yet, my method, my thought process, was still wrong.

In darker moments of repentance, I'd cast a vast fabric of doubt over his death itself. His death was sudden. The cause was unclear. I hadn't seen the body. How do I know he's really dead? What if he shows up at the front door of the house and my thoughts once again become my enemy? As if at this point they haven't already.

There were points in my life where I'd

indulge in daydreams that revolved around investigating my father's death. I'd see myself interviewing the coroner, the sheriff that called my sister, my father's landlord. As if I were a detective on some tacky prime time television program where I'd go location by location, piecing some twisted puzzle to solve a murder.

I'd hoped these fantasies would push me to act upon his death, or at least fuel the fire that would combat my repressed frustrations. I'd feed it various scenarios, thinking it would help me overcome this grief. But at the end of it all, they were mere delusions, and only expanded the void that was created with the loss of a close relative, distorting my feelings into some superficial drama.

Through this introspection of the complexities surrounding death and the grief that follows, I start to think about what one could do with my body once I'm gone. I'm not hoping that such an occasion will present itself soon, but I think it's a valuable thing to think about. After all, we're not immortal. The concept of the processing of one's corpse is such a gruesome idea to think about. It feels like the final task. This task feels so concrete, yet in some way, we cannot livingly participate in the very final event we plan. In some ways, while we can individually or culturally make requests and specifications for what we truly desire to be the last resting place for us (where the ashes are

spread, which plot your grave is placed, or which ceramic jar is going to carry your bones, etc.), we cannot guarantee such liberties. However, these requests have been established and built around generations of information and communication, so we believe we can make the sound judgment to trust that they will be followed through. And with this trust, I think I'd like to express that I'd like my body cremated.

Two years ago, when my great-grandmother, Fusa, died, we left her body in the living room. The prefecture in Japan that I'm from is landlocked by mountains, so the winters stay around or generally below freezing. If a room didn't have a kerosene heater, it could get just as cold inside.

Leave her in an unheated part of the house and she'll be fine. If you want, my grandmother told me, you can visit her by yourself, and you'd talk to her about your grief, accomplishments, or frustrations. My grandmother's statement didn't make sense to me. Talking to a dead body was completely out of my comfort zone. I went to visit her in the back of the house by myself, but I don't think I said anything. In Japan, at least in the region where I'm from, while death can be a sorrowful occasion, I don't think it's as somber as it is in America. To my family, since my great-grandmother had just died and her body was still in our presence, she was still around. While her body was cold and lifeless, her spirit

remained and would hang around for the next 50 days, so there was some solace with the idea that she was here with us. Life was temporary anyway, and we'd meet her in heaven or we'd reincarnate and happily meet her in the next life.

In regards to having a casual conversation with a corpse, such an act seemed distant and foreign to what I saw on American media and it didn't feel right for me to participate. Casually talking to a corpse just didn't register for me as a death-time duty. I guess that's where I went wrong. It's too late to go face my great-grandmother's sunken, pale corpse, but being able to talk about grief to someone without feeling judged would have been cathartic for processing the loss of a loved one. If I bring this concept to a mirror, perhaps it would reflect my own self, being too judgemental of myself and others, being too afraid of what others think to fully open up about myself.

My great grandmother was in the smallest of coffins. One would have thought it was made for a child. When I last saw her, she was probably leaning to her hundreds and was barely 4'8". It should have been my mother attending her funeral, but her passport expired and I was sent last minute from the Bay Area to Nagano, Japan.

But now she was laid motionless before me, and they put all of her in a little box wearing a sheet-white kimono.

All our friends, neighbors, and relatives would come over like a typical funeral and say parting words or pay their respects to the deceased. I sat and listened and performed the culture like everyone else, but it didn't feel like I, too, was in on all of this. I'm only half Japanese, and my cultural references lie on the other side of the Pacific. I had difficulties adapting to their norm.

I feel ashamed that I'm not as connected and knowledgeable of my family's beliefs. As my Japanese is subpar, it's difficult to read Japanese sources on my background and culture, and those who run and write English sources are often Japanophiles who speak in obtuse and fetishistic tones that turn me off from pursuing any information beyond my own experiences and knowledge.

They burned her body too, at some large, formal facility. We drove up there, and there it was, my great-grandmother's corpse, resting soundly in a box and looking parched. She was laid onto a metal tray and then into a furnace. Once she came out, all that emerged were her bones. She was so small, so frail. What was left of her were large fragments of her skull, fractured femurs, bits and pieces of chalky bone, and bone dust. She was rolled into the middle of the room and we surrounded her, gazing at her remains. They handed us long, metal chopsticks, and one by one, we'd take turns delicately grasping pieces of bones to place in the white, ceramic urn.

Usually, all the bones go into a single urn that is placed in the family grave, but my great-grandmother was a Protestant-converted by my great aunt—so there was another urn. It was a smaller, black urn with a thin, white cross painted on it and we placed a few bones in there. I think there's a separate graveyard for the small percentage of local Christians, and that's where her bones went.

We picked out the largest and most intact bones first, from her feet all the way up to her head. We didn't want her to be laid upside-down in the urn. That would be uncomfortable. So, from the phalanges to the skull, we gingerly picked out what wasn't already ash, and the leftover particles were gently divided and swept into the two urns.

Embedded into one of the mountains of the Japanese Alps is my family's grave. There are several smooth stones on which are hundreds of engraved names. On my mother's father's side, my whole extended family lays to rest here. In the middle is a small monument with a boulder in the center, surrounded by more square stones with engravings.

I have fond memories of being surrounded by nature whenever I'd visit my mother's family in the Japanese countryside. My father would tell me I would catch an insect and run it over to him to see, only to find the guts and gore of a dead bug crushed within my

I'd chase crickets that twitched between the black vinyl covers that insulated the seedlings of tomatoes and cucumbers; spend an afternoon scavenging for mantises, reaching over to them, pinching them gently by the abdomen so I could take a closer look; waddle around a creek in front of our home, catching frogs. When I thought no one was looking, I'd kiss one, hoping that it would turn into a prince and whisk me away to its grand palace.

I'd miss these moments whenever I'd return to suburban California. Our home near the highway was plagued by buzzing cars instead of croaking toads, and a younger me did not think that being no more than a fifteen minute drive away from a Trader Joe's at any given time was in any way magical or appealing. We rented an old house on the base of a hill. Without any proper insulation, we lived in an oven in the summer and a freezer in the winter, and, year-round, our house had many crawling and flying creatures that made this dynamic climate their home as well.

What interested me, in particular, were the moths. I didn't see many butterflies around my neighborhood, so I decided moths were the next best thing. They weren't particularly colorful or grand like a monarch or a painted lady, but their small wings would make a habit of flapping around the garage and as I longed for my insect companions in the country, they always caught my attention.

We couldn't own any large pets in our home. I had a turtle once, but my father said it got lost.

I also had a parakeet, but my mother said it flew away. But turtles and parakeets would bite me and I couldn't play with them, so I didn't dwell too much on their statements. Thus, I'd make a habit of trying to befriend the insects living in my home. Sometimes I'd see a moth flying around the garage. I'd stalk my subject, cup hands and ready myself to strike. With a muffled clap I'd capture it, feeling its wings flutter and tickle my palms as I proudly marched to a small jewelry box.

As carefully as I could, I'd slide my hands so that I was holding the moth within one palm, pull out a drawer within the jewelry box, and quickly shove the moth inside. I don't remember if any of my family members saw me do this, but I had performed this procedure several times; each time, with the intention of opening the drawer at a later time so the moth and I could play, but alas, when I'd peek into the clear plastic of the drawer to check up on my little pet, it would be motionless, with its wings shut tightly against its body and its legs stuck out in a series of right angles. I'd pick it up with a sinking feeling in my stomach and its scales would stick to my fingers like powder.

Sometimes I'd put it back, hoping it was just sleeping, hoping that it would spring to life the next time I'd open that drawer.

Canvas

By Rita Kelada

Aqua...

Sunlight to moon to influence on

Waves who free flow to sand who follow

Softened sand like a soothed soul of sorrow that once wallowed

To your waves unfearful of my soul too shallow

Aqua...

Your colored grace, my canvas once hollow

Filled, of recent, but not quite too callow



Photograph by: Kanny Rai

Grounded in Reality



Photograph by: Tiffany Stebner

What is Happening

By Nomin Khurelchuluun

Many people have been hearing news about the coronavirus, COVID-19, pandemic, quarantine, closed schools and shelter-in-place since the beginning of 2020. Many people have been infected with the corona virus because this disease spreads from person to person so quickly.

That is why most countries in the world closed their borders, schools, services, and all human activities in order to stop the corona virus. Likewise, the status-quo of most countries is under quarantine, and the economy has been experiencing ups and downs due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a college student, I read news articles that explain how most colleges and universities switched their education system from face-to-face to online learning.

Furthermore, some of them announced their decision that the fall semester of 2020 will be online. Because of the current pandemic, researchers, experts and journalists pay attention to the controversial topic of how the online education system affects all levels of students during the pandemic. There are two useful and thoughtful topics that give two sides of online learning impact to readers.

One of them is about mostly positive aspects of online education such as that students are able to save their time and money now, and they have the ability to learn new skills while studying online; John Fry discusses this in his article “Pandemic brings online potential into sharp focus for colleges, universities.

Another topic is about negative aspects of distance learning such as a lack of social interaction, lack of school enrollment, and so on; Jo-Musulyn Banks discusses this in their article: “Studies reveal online learning is detrimental to learning.”

The first article seems more truthful and accurate even though both articles wrote the truth of the current situation of colleges and universities.

I believe online learning affects students positively because online education is more flexible than traditional education, and it resolves barriers that students

struggle with because of their living environment.

It is useful that students are not restricted by time and money while they are studying online. In terms of saving their time, students are able to learn in their comfortable environment and at their own progress (Fry, par.7). For example, my schedule during the quarantine has changed a lot.

Specifically, instead of dressing up and wearing my makeup to go to school, I started to exercise and do yoga for thirty minutes before I attend to my morning classes.

As a result, my back, that once hurt badly because of sitting for long periods of time, is getting better after this change.

Hence, studying online has been teaching us to manage our time effectively. Another positive aspect of online learning is saving money on books, board, transportation,

and other fees that are used on campuses (Fry, par.8).

For my middle-school-aged cousin, who lives in Mongolia, he needed to ask for transportation or lunch money five days a week, and he told me that he always felt uncomfortable and guilty. I explained to him that he does not need to feel that way. After the education system changed for a while, his uncomfortability lessened.

Thus, spending money on the above expenses was sometimes stressful for both students and their parents, especially.

Therefore, online learning mostly allows students to be flexible and less stressed in regards to money, and online education allows students to set their own schedule and gives us a chance to spend our time wisely.

The second reason I believe online learning has positive aspects for students is it helps to break down

barriers for those who live in rural or poor environments.

It is important that all levels of students study equally regardless of their background. For instance, a Yale University professor allows students who study in rural schools to teach AP physics by using video instructions, so that students are able to receive tutoring from a physics major at Yale University (Fry, par.10).

Thus, learning from Yale was once impossible for students in rural and poor schools, yet nowadays it is pretty possible for many students no matter where they study.

In addition, for those who study abroad and have language barriers, online learning is a great opportunity to improve their language because they are able to watch lecture recordings. Even though they might not understand live lectures well, pre-recorded lectures are more easily comprehended.

For example, watching recordings of computer science's lectures seems more useful than listening to a lecture face-to-face. Hence, listening to lectures again and again helps me to understand any concept of class well without thinking what professors said recently or stumbling over new words when I sit in class.

If all students had not been forced to shift their studies online because of the pandemic, they would have been left struggling with many difficulties that they cannot solve. All in all, the transition between traditional education and online education brings students positive ways to study such as having their preferred schedule and resolving their barriers that they struggled with before.

All students were not flexible enough before the transition of the education system. In my opinion, even though people in the world are going through difficult times, there are positive aspects of online learning which is one of changes now. Even if the corona virus outbreak lessens, people will probably prefer online classes more than usual. Thus, things are changing, and I think this might be the beginning of big changes in the future.



Photograph by Kelly Ng

Spirit of Adventurer

By QueenofSubtlety

TV switched on, pixelated colors wasting,
planted boredom within rises insidiously,
my eyes blinking the sleep away.
Been three days, my novel unread.

Left and right thumbs-gliding, tapping
ruthlessly across the screen of your Android
you throw your fist. Did you beat the boss stage?

Killing time, doing nothing- so
extremely frightening while
glued to our seats, stuck here in Dullsville

The mind, refusing to rot
I have a head too,
growing curiosity, so be it.

Impatience is the color
this contorted clock cackling makes,
flipping spirits over, high stakes.
Our free-spirit must be set free for sake.

Walls around us,
shrinking and shrinking.
We're robbed of our freedom.
Don't despair, we'll take it back.

But you must be thinking
what I'm thinking. That is
until you mention setbacks—

Rolling my eyes endearingly.
Drop it, we're going to
conquer these streets and beyond
horizons. Hidden alleyways or sketchy coves?

Cowardliness is a fragile ladder
in the wreckage.
Certainly, not as deadly as you'd think.

Potential is your rambunctiousness,
my heart is radiating rebelliousness.
Two choices: don't ditch or won't ditch.
Together, we kill procrastination.

Does that echo from the other side of the globe
call our names,
an invitation into the unknown?

If we get stuck, a trip we can't afford,
save the questions and doubts,
a hand-wringing problem to solve now.
Why cancel our ambitions, if?

Because a risk-taker has bravery,
an escape artist is clever and cunning,
we'll outsmart the impossibilities.

Stars in our eyes, dreams are the starting points.
Time to make a move, relentlessness won't waver
now. The mission to sneak out from society,
coming soon to be a controversial reality.

One of these days, we'll travel farther and
search for cotton candy clouds in the South
coral reefs breathing fire in the Indian Ocean,
an exotic oasis hidden in the mountains—

National Geographic worthy.
By the way, I made that all up.
But who knows? Wanderlust asking to be fed.
We're saving the purpose of exploration.

Our capabilities, which have gone through skepticism
and underestimation,
we'll prove them wrong
and they'll learn to appreciate.



Art by Lauren Lazalde

A Tale Ouroboros

By Nathan Berenstein

Although the martyrs fall a midst the drowning field,
The captains, standing tall with sword, helm and shield,
Seek not the foes behind, whose truth they might well yield
To face that cunning Dark within whom all is sealed.

And so the death does seem a beauty from a dream
As water, lacking life, moves with an older stream.
For though we see it true, as those enlightened do,
That pain must carry on for others to accrue

No matter where we hope to find the setting sun,
Even while we cope with the consequence of none,
Our hearts beat together as students of the one
Who faces Ouroboros to see this tale done.



Photograph by Anna Mahoney

A Letter from a Tropic Storm

By Kaela Wilson

Hello my dear friend,

My cousin and I are on our way
To the beautiful, roaring island of Hawai'i

I've been to O'ahu before
But how Americanized it now seems

Now that I can see,
The still wild and ruling flora
Now we descend
Into the Kona Airport

I've got by fairly easily on the island before
I have aunties and uncles that live here
Cousins that live here
Dark Filipino genes that have found new
islands

My I.D. reads from California
My middle name reads as
"Hokulani"
If I was local, I'd be kama'aina
And if I was a riddle, I'd be a haole

On the shuttle from the airport
The haole couple says
To another haole couple
"We've been island hopping...
This is our fifth island,"
And there were impressed gasps from

the audience.

"It has been beautiful,
But the locals don't act so friendly
towards us on the smaller islands."

We nudged our heads towards each other
But quickly refrained from making
obvious gestures
Instead our eyes
Read their comical floral button-downs

And pastel polyester sun hats
An outfit, somehow lasting this long
In middle America
As the suitable island vacation wear

Suddenly
That laughter shared
Boiled this disgust in me
Of the pasty wrinkles pulling up smiles

Less than an hour
Into this trip
Meant to call upon good doings,
Realities had soon become racially charged

Had these white travelers known
About devastations fought
Every day by every local
Or were these islands written off

As tourist checklists?
I did not speak up at the time
I scoffed under my breath instead
Surely this haole couple knew.

II.

In Hilo I saw the rains of flourish
Where the road was the rock
And our rooms draped in sweet smells
Of the fruits of the wind

Goats wildly grazed highway-sides
Damp sugarcane fields
Waves breaking on black, crinkled cliffs
Facing unforgiving Pacific storms

It was the 1960 tsunami
Leaving ruin on rainy Hilo
That first sent these telescopes
To better predict these posed threats

It was Mauna Kea they wanted.
Her peak rested in swamps of clouds
Gating heaven off

From our earthly curiosities

I found the concept rather exciting,
The late winter pillows of snow
Slowly melting towards
This tropic's cascading waterfalls

It takes half our day
To drive around half the island
Around half the brim
Of Mauna Kea's hat

Here we were,
In her breath,
To fight for her right
A protest for her life

I give thanks to my Kumu
As the active protester for Hawaii
With her words, her song
Her dance, her heart



To her I owe my own recognition
Of these TMT issues
Unfortunately, now
Only arriving on its last day

Two-months
Of government-ordered
Peaceful protest
All guardians of something

We find ourselves at the base
An intersection where the access road begins
Where the few camps have stayed
To the weary ends of this order

Conditions are far from ideal
Inaccessible roads
Iced-over roads
Temperatures below zero

The others have left
Or have blown over from strong winds
But there still remained
A beating pulse of rippling tarp

For the past two months
Three times a day
They gather and join in prayer
Despite disagreeable weather

We were blessed to be welcomed
To the prayer at 5pm
And with each visit to the island
I'm always left reflecting

In these strong native cultures
The devout, communal mindsets.
Today, as the ten or so bodies
That look upon the eastern face

Chanting for ancestors to stand with us
To keep Hawai'i standing upright
To keep the islands fed and quenched,
That we may keep Hawai'i at all

E ho mai ka 'ike
E ho mai ka ikaika
Grant us knowledge
Grant us strength



I give thanks to this
Inherited culture
Many a night in a studio
Watching graceful ladies of the Halau

But a first for these truths
Held real as the soil we danced on
Before this mountain
As tradition of culture shook my ground

The pulsing pedagogy of Hula
Where I have heard the
Sound of a single drum
Travel louder than thunder

I may have selfishly
Wanted to push my own limits
Of active goodness
Indirectly affected by subsequent out-
comes



Yet, now, in deeper honesty my friend
I wish I was more pleased
With what little I could do for them:
Washed a bin full of dishes

And as we said Aloha and Mahalo
To the remaining enduring
All the discomforts of passing storms
Still had greeted us with such warmth

The youth remained playful,
And the older resilient

But my sleeping eyes wondered over
Sharing these brief moments

I had let ignorance blind me
Of this effect
Direct acceptance
Be it myself or this world

As lights turned off,
Our body readily at rest
My mind found no quiet
At the silence of this tropical encounter.

III.

I write to you my friend
Because I did not speak up
before I did not spark the
conversation
In which we ask questions

Of how we may give back to the aina
When it is the aina that has
given to us
How do we give back the
aloha

That we stole so long ago

How is it that, where heat may live,
Snow can still share space?
I did not spark these then
But I trust I can spark them here with you.



WHY DID THE CHICKEN CROSS THE ROAD?

By Rachel Stennet

Why did the chicken cross the road?
Why did the little girl put on
her big yellow raincoat even though
the sun shines brightly?
Why does the dog bark incessantly at the
door even when no one is coming?
Why does the neighbor hum
the same melodic tune
while gardening day in and day out?

Why are the kitchen walls still stained
with the smell of cigarettes from the past?
Why isn't the little kid
who sells fruit on the corner,
in school like his brothers and sisters?
Why do I hear my neighbor's desperate
screams ring in my ears telling her husband
to hit her instead of her kid?

Why do we turn our heads away from those
in pain as if we haven't experienced the
same as well?

Why don't we ask the neighbor why he
hums so happily every day?

Why don't we ask why the little kid sells fruit?

Why don't we ask the little girl

Why is she wearing her raincoat?

We simply do not know

But each day someone will ask

Why did the chicken cross the road?



Photograph by: Kelly Ng

Living in Uncertainty

By Mari Managadze & Adrian Afif

(auto-ethnographic poetry performed at TEDxCSM)

Speaker 1

Covid. Five letters. A virus that
would consume everyone's days
That would encapsulate,
dehumanize, kill, display, the
greediness of the human conscience.
From toilet paper towers to hand
sanitizer pools,
To Karens and the
Presidential election we were
painted as fools
Just the average American,
panicked and angry and unintelligent

And as a senior in high school,

Speaker 2

As a senior in college

Speaker 1

I watched my school close
I watched as the world took notes
on what not to do. My own coun-
try, county, city had gone

under lock down so quickly
It felt overwhelming, I had no
control

We had Zoom calls and Skypes to
fill the holes in our hearts
Cooped up in my room
telling others to stay apart

Because I felt so anxious of the
outside, so proud of
myself staying home
When others were
disregarding it all

I became jaded.
Outsider, foreigner in my own
home.

Finding nooks I never knew even
existed.

I had new time to perfect my eye-
liner wing.

While others were crying
and thousands dying!

While others were crying and
thousands dying!
My school continued on, confusion
reigned
Driven apart, friends meeting up
virtually became the norm
In the eye of the storm, I felt
no misery or discontent
I just didn't know what they
were all up against.

Speaker 2

The virtual screens, there's no
one to see
Expect me to lead when there's
nowhere to be.
Funny how we only talk to agree.
Funny how it's never just you
and me.

Always joined by my anxiety.
Sometimes he'll even welcome
misery. I don't know what's get-
ting into me.

Filling my heart with dubiety.
Filling my mind with uncertainty.
Too much alkalinity in all this
masculinity.
Feel like I'm a failure to my
own society.

Feel like the impostor of my own
identity.
Feel like everything is wrong with
me.

Cause I'm not like the one on the
TV screens.

I met her through the distance, I
just wanna hold her.
Helping me carry all this weight
on my shoulders.

She's the only one I ever loved, I
think I told her. All I gotta do
is spread the love that she gives
me. All I gotta do is bring forth
the positivity.

All I gotta do is put a smile for
those around me
Put a smile on my face like it's
an accessory
It'll protect me like artillery.
It'll protect me from my anxiety.
It'll protect me from
everything I wanna be.
But couldn't be
Not defined by my ethnicity
Nor my masculinity
But who I strive to be
Now I spread positivity around
like it's witchery

I ain't winning if the whole team
didn't get the victory
I ain't winning till we all make
history.
I ain't winning till the day it's
just you and me.

I ain't winning.
Weight on my shoulders, I ain't
winning.

Why'd it take a pandemic for
change to arrive?
Why'd it take death around the
world for y'all to open your
eyes?
You say you're tired of the lies.
But you're ignoring the truth
What does that say to the youth?
What does that say to the genera-
tions coming from the womb? What
does that say about me and you?
What does it say
What does it do?
I don't know,
I don't know.
What about you?

Speaker 1

What about her?
What about you?
You and I became friends suddenly,
so quickly
Yet we've known each other longer
during quarantine than outside of

it
So strange to think about that
time
What's the downside? 6 feet
apart, stay alert, don't barter
with your life
Especially since she's
immunocompromised.

Movie nights with the friends I lost
The months before came slower
than I would have liked. Sitting
outside in the cold night

Shivering our asses off because
there's not enough blankets to
cover me,
I might have felt free but could
have felt freer. The thought of
her life outweighed me

Then polarity reigned supreme.
Inequality in our means to survive.
To live our fragile human lives.
Black Lives Matter?
No, ALL Lives Do.

How can All Lives Matter when
Black Lives accrue misjudgment
from people, the media, society
in a variety of improprieties
from the people meant to protect
them and us
It's a constant source of anxiety!

But not me, not this emigrant.
For my friends, my loved ones who
felt what they were up against
They came together in the light
and what felt like now the dead
of night

In the face of Covid, 5 letters,
a virus that would consume every-
one's days, display, kill, dehu-
manize, encapsulate.

Maybe signing this petition
will help
Maybe keeping going is a way
to rebel
Take a deep breath, relax,
don't stress
It's only your future success.

Speaker 2

Keep thinking 'bout the future.
Things changing
While the world's staring
How can we cure the world
When we can't cure ourselves?
Injustice and pain
Ain't going away
Till we confront the things
That we don't wanna say.
There ain't a reason for
closed doors
'Cause closed doors lead to
many corpses
On our doors.

On your feet.
On your lead.
On your lead.

You expect to lead us from a dif-
ferent room. I love you doesn't
mean the same on Zoom. I love
you doesn't mean the same without
your perfume. I love you doesn't
mean a flower's only pretty if
it blooms. We gotta wait for the
flower to bloom.

But I'm hopeful for those flowers.
That flower that you showed.
I'm hopeful that we're on the
right road.
I know it's too late to do a
U-turn.
But it ain't too late to learn.

Too late to love.
Too late to grow.
Too late to breathe.
Too late to be.
Too late to.
Too late.
Too.
Two.
Two..
Two..Zero Two One

Speaker 1

Two zero two one. It's almost
2021
People tell me my life has just
begun
Is this when I sparkle, twinkle
like a star
Do I begin to burn out, have I
gone that far already?
Something must change, I'm
incorrigible
A paragon of chaos, I'm trying to
fix me.
Attempting. To give up my tears
to the tide

Now is my time to rise
Maybe I'll fail. But chances are
I'll fly
Like a bird on the wind taking
flight for the first time.

I'll roll with the punches as
quarantine ends
Maybe one day I'll hug my new
friends
Delete my Zoom app
Take off my face mask
Go back to the days that felt
like they would last forever
When so many things felt better.
Remember the last time you hugged
someone dear to your heart?
No more standing 6 feet apart!

I know that the time will come

soon.

But now is the moment we need to
grasp
Tell each other the future will
come to pass
For now, I'll keep going to class
Good luck. Stay strong.
We're in this together.



Photograph by Lauren Lazalde

Awakening



Art by: Kemmy Rai

Did I Want Too Much

By Meredith Joelle Charlson

The sallow-faced tailor spotted the naked moon
under his desk of cut saplings, coiled and shivering through the night.
The moon had pleaded to the sun for thread
Something. Anything. To keep her warm.
He outsourced his love
To the lonely tailor who remembered to sing as he sews but who forgets to dance.

The sickly tailor, who had been sewing and singing while forgetting to dance,
Watched as she rose and braided her rays into her own solution. The moon,
once so paralyzed and weak at the betrayal of her love,
Steadied herself on the windowsill to shine her nakedness into the night.
Why must only the sun be warm?
So the moon asked the tailor for thread.

Please - she said to the merciful tailor - I want your thread
I don't want to shiver anymore. Lights tickle and dance
and puncture until I knot them into a garment that will keep me warm.
Compassionate tailor, I am the ailing Moon,
Queen of Night
in need of thread to connect myself to love.

The heroic tailor looked upon the Queen - did he feel affection, lust, or love
Awe or bewilderment as he passed her the thread?
Grey cotton swung through his needle, which glinted against a black night,
The cyclorama through which the stars pierce and dance.
She smiled as she stabbed herself. The needle and thread penetrated the belly of the moon
So that she, jilted by the sun, might bind together the ropes of light that keep her warm.

The moon waned and moaned as she seamed together the intrinsic warm
Interior of her belly, as robust and bright as the sun's love.
I didn't know how to help you, he cried to the moon.
An ear raised, but hair hung as she held steadfast to the thread.
The gentle tailor licked the salt and waited for the light to dance.
The finished product - fabric - sheltered the windowsill from night.

Then there was no Queen of Night.

A garment lay in her place to keep him warm

but the poor tailor still forgot to dance.

Like how the sun forgot to give his love

the only luxury she ever truly needed - a needle with cotton thread.

Did I want too much? asked the moon.

The tailor sheltered his body from night, adorned in fabric woven from love,

And he became warm under its thread

So that he might dance with his moon.



To My Unborn Child

By Marianne Lyon

What I want to tell you
is that you are enough
you do not have to
do anything to be loved
you do not have to perform
or achieve
or earn a merit badge
this needs to be repeated
over and over
be who you are
love what is before you

What I want to tell you
is be courageous
be your own hero
embrace friendships
release fear unworthiness
continue to laugh
even when you can't
remember why

What I want to tell you
is be a doggie hell-raiser
wiggling sniffing
inquisitive wordless
passionate for a rub
a treat a ball-catch
not worried
about next spring

What I want to tell you
is be awake a trailblazer
scoff illusions
that keep us believing
what we see
in the world is gospel
that keep us from recognizing
the truth that lies
underneath

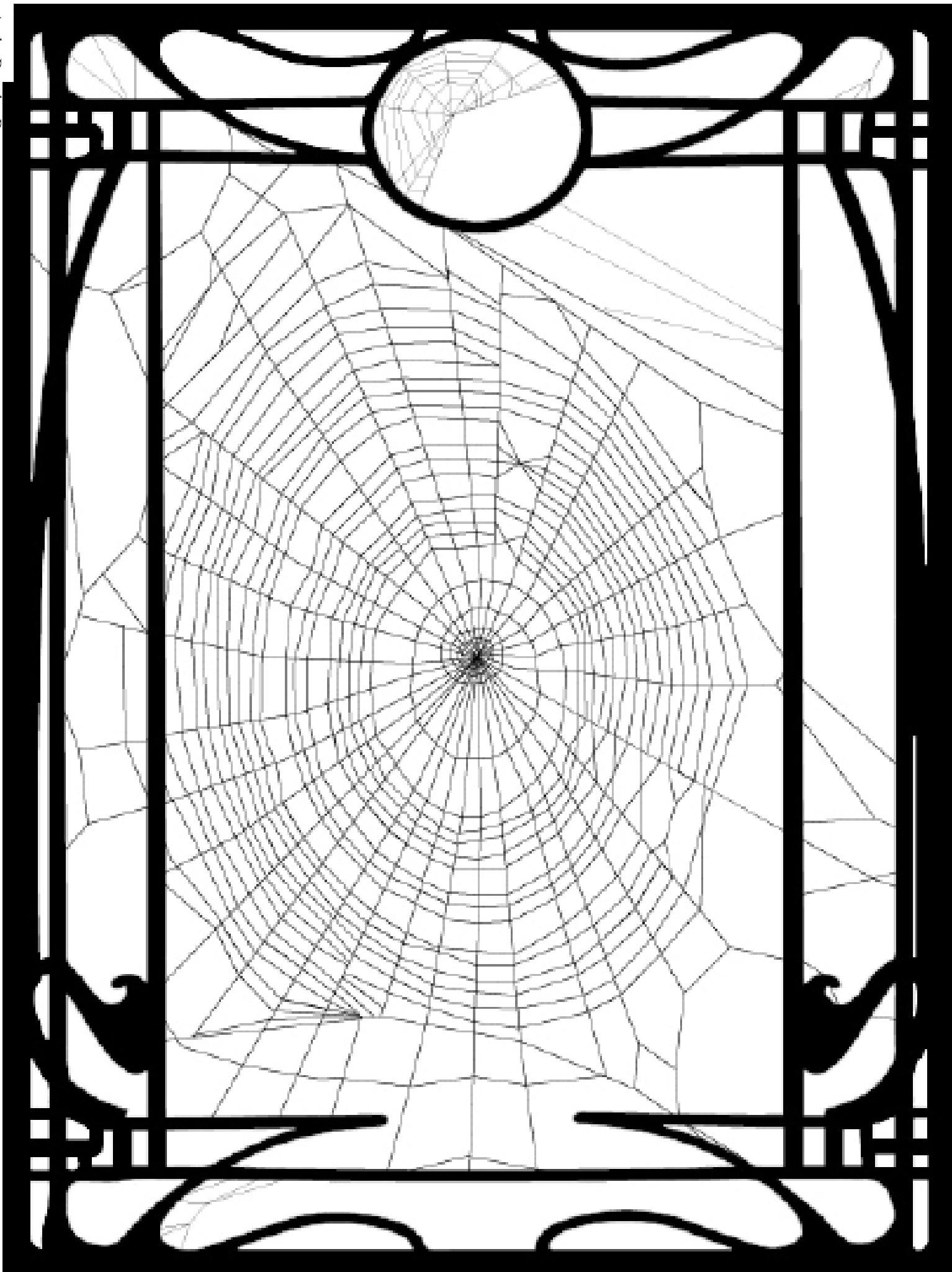


Forgiven

By Deniz I.

i drowned every sorry
i gave it to the world in my bathtub.
i stopped feeling it in my chest,
in my heart,
caught in the cage of my ribs.
the trapped canary stopped singing
and although the music would decorate
the silence,
i handed the questioning of my existence
like flowers to lovers
until i was only left with the empty.

there was nothing here
and that meant everything.
the vastness,
the hole,
the vacancy.
i taught myself to fill it in my
loneliness,
decorated in dried baby's breath
and stickers from old children's books
to mask the image of a rotting soul.
the sole soul.
alone, but i stopped saying sorry.
regret began to fill the cracks of the
crumbling fixture,
but i stopped saying sorry.



Epilogue of the Flat Man's Guide to the Galaxy

By Molly Liu

Robert:

That night he had a dream of Paul, as an adult, walking in the forest with him.

“Dad, I am going to move out. I found a guy. He is good.” Paul smiled at him. “... but I’ll still see you around. No worries.”

“I’ll never get to know you better,” he thought, but what came out was, “Great. I’ll see you then.”

And then the smell of bread woke him up. It was sweet, toasted, and sliced, powder mixed with a sense of air. He yawned. A large white breath fled out of his mouth. Some tears caused by sleep were smeared out of his eyes.

He tried to find his flip-flops using his big toes but failed. He sat up and brushed his hand through his oily hair. He could sense the food outside: eggs, bread, cereal

and something spicy.

His big toes bumped into something soft. His flip-flops. He yawned again, put on his flip-flops and clothes, pushed open the window, then walked out of the bedroom.

Through the window, the sun shined its bright light right in, along with the clean air.

This was his regular morning now: wake up under the sun, had a cup of black coffee, pushed open the window, then the bedroom door to see food in the pan. Something he would not dream of in the past. Julia was sleeping soundly in the other bedroom. He always felt touched by that.

He hugged Rebecca from the back as she was busy flipping the food in the pan. “Chinese food? You put way too many sweets in there.



Art by Lauren Lazalde

Julia is gonna hate it at lunch.”
Rebecca didn’t even blink, but
a curve of her lips proved that
she was smiling. “I thought you
caught the flu. Feeling any bet-
ter?”

“Not really,” he answered, want-
ing for her to come around, “oh,
the talent! You read my senses.
I didn’t know that mind readers
could do that.”

“Well, it is useful from time to
time.” He kissed her cheek, “I’ll
go out today. The businesses all
stopped because everyone was
praying anyway, so no need for
work.”

She tilted her head. She couldn’t
read minds but she still knew.
However, like two roles in a play,
they still present the speech ac-
cording to the script: “Cool. But,
eat your breakfast first.”

He glimpsed through the chan-
nels at breakfast. Red titles ev-
erywhere.
“How is Julia? Shouldn’t you
care more about her?” Her eyes
said.

IS THE WORLD A CRYSTAL
BALL

“You really think Paul disap-
peared for us?”

DR.CHOLE’S IDEAS ABOUT
PHILOSOPHY AFTER THIS
GREAT TRAUMA

“We believe all kinds of things
for the sake of avoiding the
pain.”

THE WORLD IS SLOPING,
IT’S DONE: THE SECRET OF
ALL IS REVEALED

“Or love, however you call it.”

THEY DIED FOR US: OUR
SINS CAN’T BE FORGIVEN
NOW

“Because we are suckers for
truth.”

IF THE HIGHER POWER IS
ALSO MADE OF ATOMS HOW
IS IT SPECIAL FROM US

“Truth is, he disappeared, and
nobody knows why.”

NO MORE INTELLIGENT DE-
SIGN: THE MYTH OF WORLD
IS SO SIMPLE

“And there isn’t a God who has
answers.”

BECAUSE WE HAVE FAITH
IN THE FLAT MAN, WE BE-
LIEVE THE WORLD IS GO-
ING TO BE

OKAY EVEN IF WE DON'T
YET KNOW HOW.

"As there isn't a God."

None was said out loud.
He thought back on Paul, and
how the truth was "revealed" by
a bunch of astronomers, which
led to this new religion.

"After the Fetus Rapture, scientists found out The Flat Man was merely a trigger of the universe, set up to eliminate light-matter before it grew too much for the dark matter and made the galaxy collapse. A few witches said that there were no signs of babies suffering when they're gone. Whether this recent event was caused by the fetuses, The Flat Man or any higher power remains unknown ..." The news was cut. He turned off the TV.

On the foot of the mountain,
everything seems short and low.
The banyan tree, the heather, the
sky. There were not any white
buildings around since the mountain was too high and steep, and was called dangerous.

If he was a professional mountain climber, he might be able to climb the higher mountain and get closer, or die fighting over the last bag of food at the darkest

and most exhausting hour, being
pushed off of the cliff.

But he would do that anyhow.
After the babies were gone and
the stars turned darker in the
sky, many prayed. They formed
new religions and prayers, but he
couldn't find peace in that. Having a worldview about where the babies had gone did not help with the pain he was going through.

And the scientific suggestions
about the universal truth had
nothing to do with the freshness,
vividness, and youthful hope he
sensed in Paul-- his lost child's
heart-- before he was gone.

He had only Julia now.
He started climbing. The leaves
of the wild shrub made his pores
fresh as red apples, and the
branches beat on him. The road
was covered in mud, so he sweated like a dog.

When reaching the middle, he
settled down and took a break.
Thinking back on how he had
wanted his family of four to go
hiking together after this,

after Paul was born and was able to, almost stings. He had pictured them having a camp underneath the blue stars and dark sky, in the freezing wind. It was his idea of love, on the downhill of the mountain, carrying Paul on his back, for his legs would be too short.

He stepped out of the mud, leaving his footprints behind.

The sun had been falling from the sky. The moon and stars have not come yet. There, under the jujube, he took another nap, where he dreamed:

He was in the dark night. He was so afraid, so terrified, looking for a shed of light through the high grass and thick tree. He knew he was looking for something, something that cannot be found.

“Dad,” a thin voice appeared from the back, “it’s okay. Look at me. I’m here.”

He turned back. There was nothing but the twinkling stars in the night sky.

When the sun went down and the stars shone, the children in the house started crying, Ursa Major found its place in the sky, he

watched the empty space where he had disappeared to in his dream. He thought of the son he never had, and he watched the Polar Bear in the sky.

Paul and The Flat Man, the brighter and darker star, both trying to be, trying to exist, trying to become a valuable part of existence.

In another universe, Paul would have been a normal child, who would have had the privilege to fight with his parents, the tragedy of losing house keys, the pain of having a first kiss stolen. All these would happen, just not now, not in this universe.

If not for his and Paul’s inter-linked bloodline, if not for the closeness of their relation, if not for Paul trying to be a part of The Flat Man now, he would never have been able to dare to do this, trying to climb high to read Paul. The lightness of love was nothing compared to the broadness of the universe, but if he was able to feel Paul--and Paul, struggling out of his bigger sense, must have been able to feel him, too.

When he was alone, he thought a lot. Mostly about fate, sometimes about loss. He thought of having Rebecca, having Julia, having Paul in his life, then losing Paul. He always thought Christians were scared of the idea of loss because they always believe they're sinners, so everything given to them is by grace. But what if everything given to him was by random chance, and the most powerful act to fight against loss was merely fear?

Rebecca had told him to accept what had happened. Once upon a time she had been fragile like he was now. She mixed the idea of talent with synesthesia and mental collapse. She was so afraid, and back then the way he comforted her was by saying that no matter which reality was real, accept it and go on. the same thing; but he just couldn't accept it, the truth that it was all over.

He would see his son's mind shortly after. He would see the broadness, beauty of it, and the talent:

space and time travel hence-foresee the future. This was the ultimate evolution humans had always craved for, but who knew it would turn out to be his son,

his baby.

He would feel the existence of his son. Some sense of joy, then apologies. And then after that, the love, the incoming and increasing love, covered him, surrounded him, and made him once again an existence in the universe.

He would feel the love he had for his son, growing and growing. He had felt it since his son was nothing but an egg, not yet existing; now it was something he could see and grasp in his heart, the amount of love he had. He never knew a man could love like this, so deep; or anyone could love like this--so early, yet so clear. He had had this experience twice, but this time, all he had to project it to was the hollowness.

He woke up. It was dusk now. The bats were leaving the mountain to fly. Birds went by. He climbed another hour, then another. Right when the stars came out, he reached the top.

This was the first time he did this, so he was terrified of if he was

going to succeed. He had climbed before, but never this height, and never for this purpose. He opened up his mind:

Cold in the big outer space, where all the stars were rotating beneath his eyes. The feeling of atoms rotating around him. The feeling of comfort and joy.

Time was but a dot there. He was living in the past, present, and future at the same time. Time was but a location, a map waiting for him to explore: summer in Egypt's palace, spring on the dragons' party. He witnessed the first angel transform and shed its wings high above the earth, a child's tears as mom left the house, the first fish died in front of the three gorges dam.

He saw falling stars, crushing on the earth, brightening up the whole universe, from the past. He saw lightning, going up and engaging together, from the present. He saw the beginning resembling the end, in which the universe restarted when mother earth decomposed and turned into a drop of tear, from the future.

He was Paul, he was every death, he was The Flat Man himself. He was there from the beginning until the next being replaced him and changed the names of theirs, until the next replaced them again. This time, his name is pronounced as Pauls. He is infinity, and he would not, and could not, feel for himself or anyone.

The rain fell down with lightning. Robert tried to grasp a sense of himself, but his tears wouldn't stop. The tears, like ashes, fell into hot water, and disappeared within seconds.

He was climbing again, flipping away from the leaves, stepping on the mud, crushing through the grass. A small figure on the high mountain, sweating, struggling, fighting. He stood upon the top, right beneath the sky. His shirt was soaked up, his arms opened big, his lips too, almost as yelling or as a kiss to the empty space. A few big tears dropped down along his red face. His jaw was twisted because of the crying. A while after, he pulled back his arms, touched his face, and wiped away the tears mixed with rain.

Behind him, a million stars shine.

Photograph by Anna Mahoney



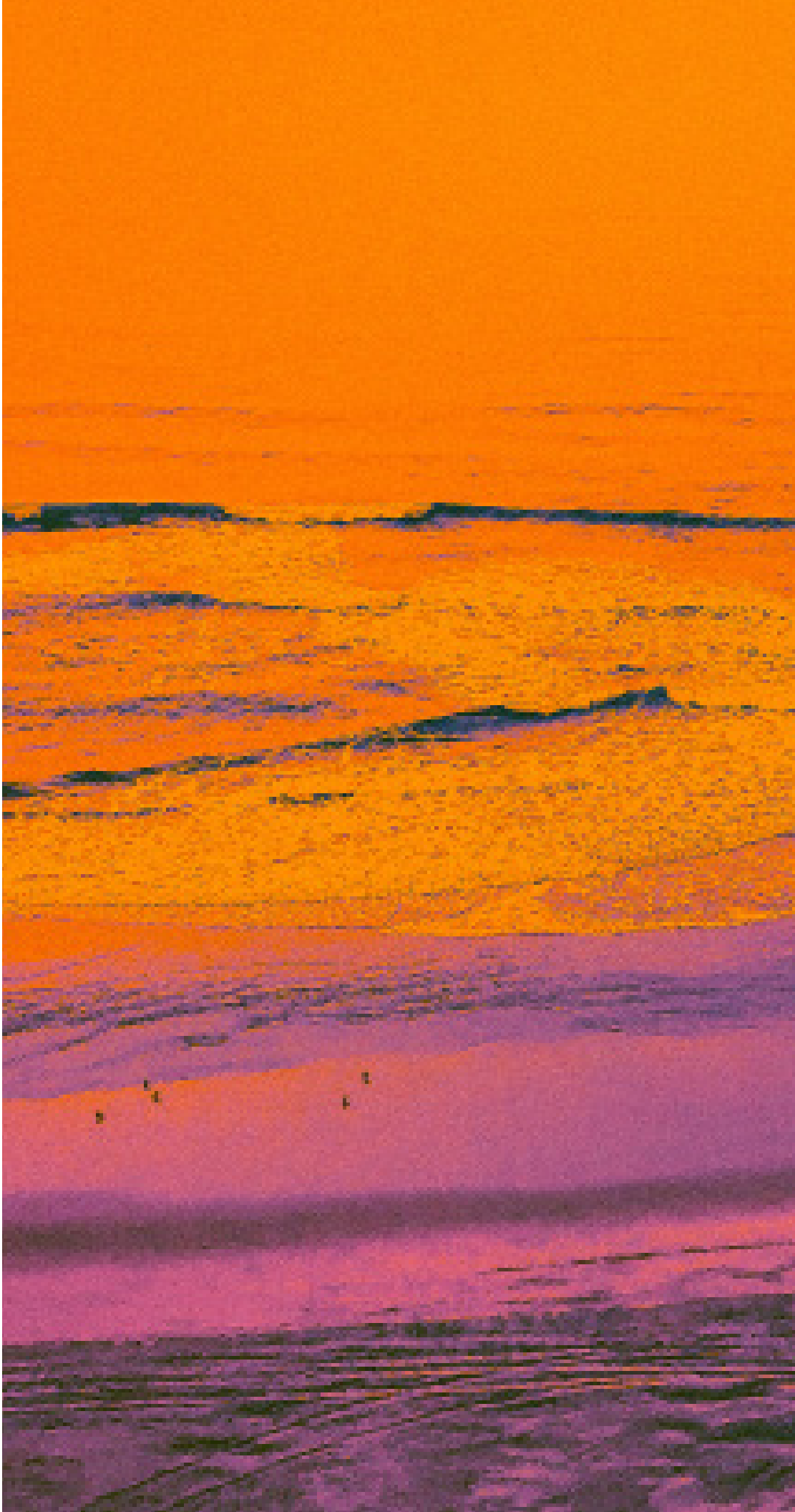






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Art by Kaela Wilson





the best years of our lives

written and directed by jose cancio



SUMMER 2020

SAVING PRIVATE RYAN PRESENTS A FILM BY JOSE CANCIO "THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES" CASTING BY JEFFREY M. ROSENBERG COSTUME DESIGNER JEFFREY M. ROSENBERG EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JEFFREY M. ROSENBERG AND JEFFREY M. ROSENBERG PRODUCED BY JEFFREY M. ROSENBERG AND JEFFREY M. ROSENBERG WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY JOSE CANCIO

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Art Glossary

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Page 13: Untitled by Kemmy Rai

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