

# Pwatem

An anthology of literature and art

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# (pwa-tem)

- 1 A fictitious French province created by James Branch Cabell that serves as the setting of several of his fantasy novels.
- 2 Virginia Commonwealth University's anthology of literature and art.

# Masthead

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## Editor's Note

My second year of Pwatem and first year of being Editor-in-Chief is coming to a close and I am excited to present the 2023 yearly anthology! While our themed submissions are reserved for our Rabble chapbook, we decided to infuse this spring's collection with a textbook theme, with the art and literature sorted into school subject categories.

By "we" I am of course referring to myself and the amazing art director of Pwatem, Reese Cilley! Their dedication to the excellence of this publication is astounding, and this anthology would not exist without their tremendous efforts. I also want to thank our editors, illustrators, and other student staff who helped to create this wonderful edition.

The staff at Pwatem would like to give a special thanks to the VCU Student Media Center

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VCU Student Media Center

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Everything in this book was created with the blood, sweat, and tears of VCU students and faculty, and funded by student fees. We accept submissions year-round from VCU students only. All styles are welcome.

To submit your art and literature and to see our online-only content, visit [pwatem.com](http://pwatem.com).

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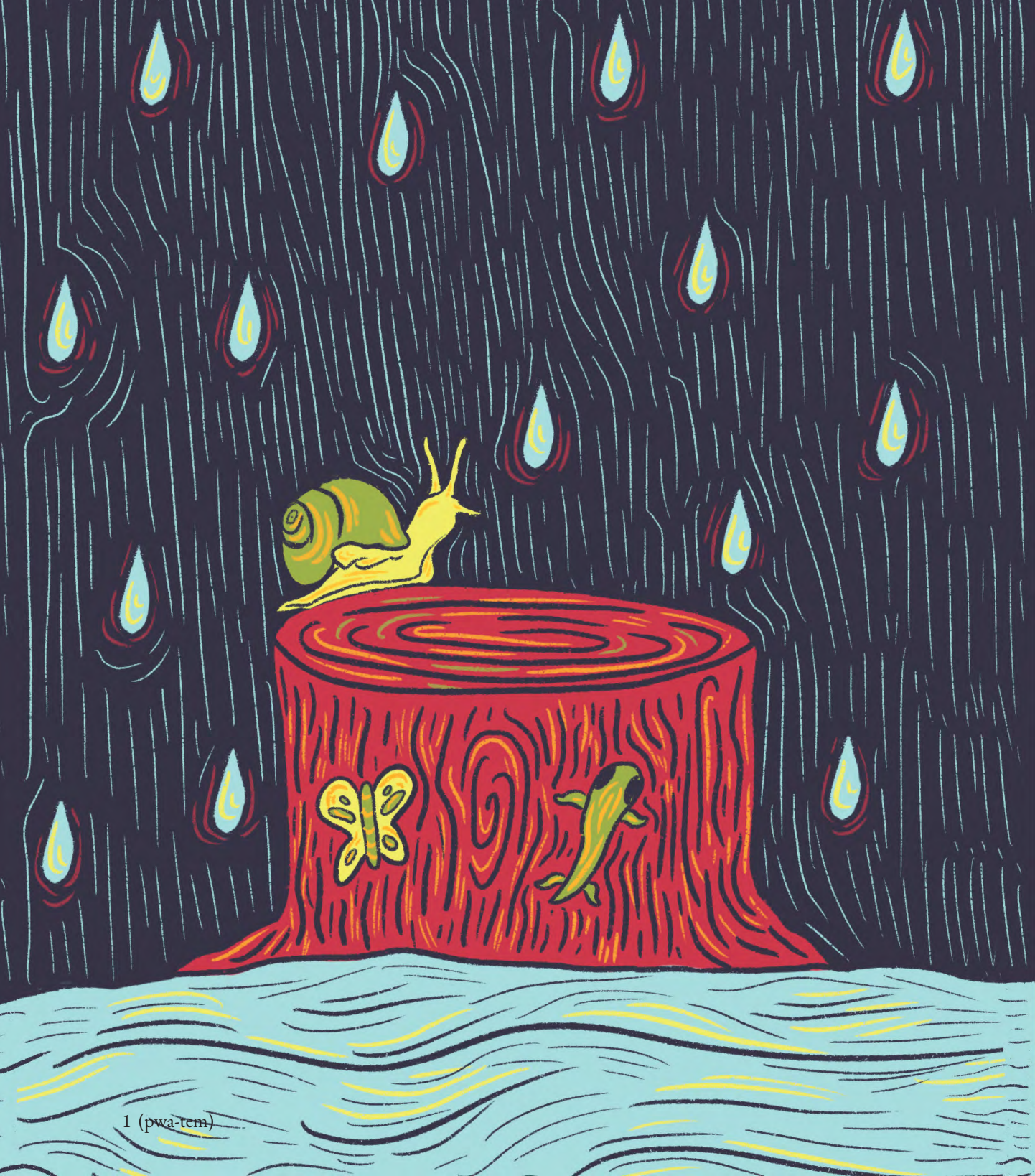
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# The Natural World



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*Chapter art by Reese Cilley*



# Approaching Everything

By Kirsten Sturgill  
*Digital painting*





# Cheeto Crow

By Olivia McCabe

*Digital painting*



# A Conversation With You

By Samah Elhassan

I sit on the edge  
Below lies the ocean.

Its waves clashing against each other  
Filled with hatred,

One fighting over the other  
Screaming to be heard.

Jagged rocks lay at the bottom  
Filled with painful memories.  
The sun sits above,  
Painting colors into the sky  
Bringing life and emotion.

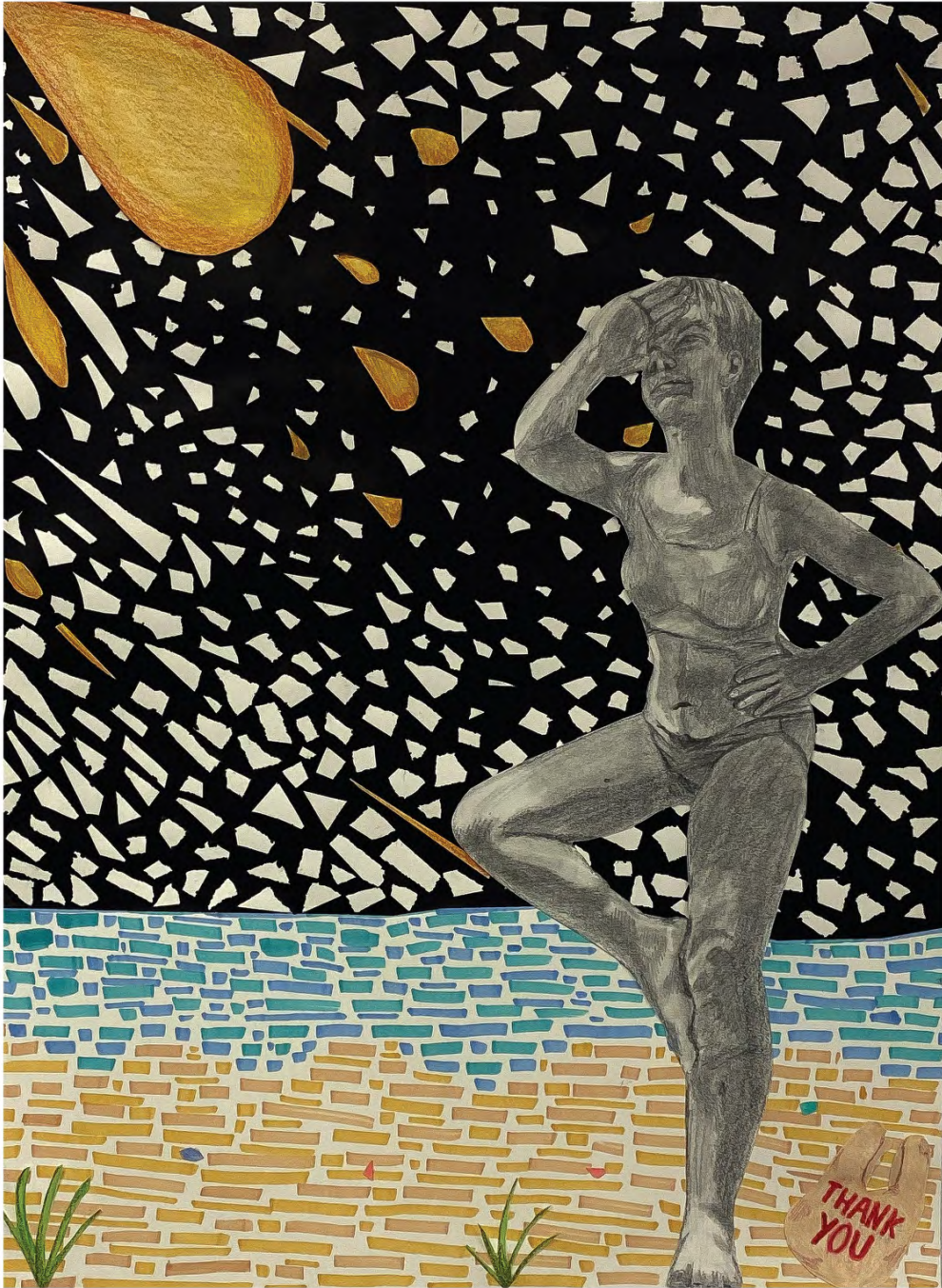
Thin clouds help decorate the scenery  
Playing like children,

They giggle while parents argue.

Although it's quiet  
The sky screams too.

# The Observer

By Reese Cilley  
*Mixed media collage*





# Three Days of Rain

By Madeline Wade

You stand below  
ethereal masses with their slow stir  
Sheets of mist  
                    confusing all sun

Layered ridges fade  
frame the bottom  
of your view  
                    but it's all sky.

The clock steady drips onto the floor  
Your thoughts puddle  
                    and wet your socks

You know, beyond the porch, each drop  
must face a destiny: roll off  
                    or saturate.  
By day three, most choose to saturate

But the oak's wide leaves gleam  
Its roots  
Soaking up this constant renewal.

You stare  
Beg those big clouds to come down  
Try to keep that impossible focus  
as the mist collects on your cheek  
but it's all heaven  
                    it's all heaven.



*Fig 1.1 by Melody Vang*

# Midnight, New England Coast

By Madeline Wade

You sit there for hours,  
letting the teal expanse soak into your skin,  
and your heart steady.

Furrowed brows match  
the cloud's smudged frustration,  
as burdened sighs are collected  
by slow salty winds.

You fix your gaze long on this end of earth,  
unwilling to look out to open sea,  
refusing its hypnotic swell. The land's  
dark shapes blend together as  
hot tears slip down your face  
into the cool air.

Each stroke of oil a passing  
thought. The hill's detail  
scratched away like an itch  
on this endless night.

The small moon's beam points  
deep into your chest  
revealing the cracks most do not  
stare long enough to see.

Your arms tight around your center  
holding together sea and sky,  
loosen  
as heaven's thread gives way.

Wander back now,  
to your bedroom door left open—

The moon shines there too,  
reflects off the floorboards.





*Fig 1.2 by Reese Cilley, modelled after Frederick Childe Hassam's painting of the same name*

# Meeting in Twilight

By Kirsten Sturgill  
*Digital painting*



# Quickstart Guide to Fall Pleasantry

By Madeline Wade

## "How are you?"

- a.) "I'm good!" ..... Go to 2  
b.) "I'm good." ..... Go to 1

1

The only thing connecting me to Earth's earnest rotation is my fingernails  
Their sudden length tells me days are gone.

Early dusk,  
the sun needs a nap.

I make myself sit  
collect  
all the golden beams  
that late October sky will give

Inside, a whirlpool  
Spinning  
& spinning

*The drain will never clear.*

2

I like short sleeves in October  
Warm sun pushing leaves around  
I like sitting here a while longer  
in summer's dying light  
Forgetting the world is spinning  
Tucking my cheek in the crook of her arm  
Resting my temple,  
Breathing out deep



# White Rabbit

By Emily Leary  
*Woodburn, basswood*



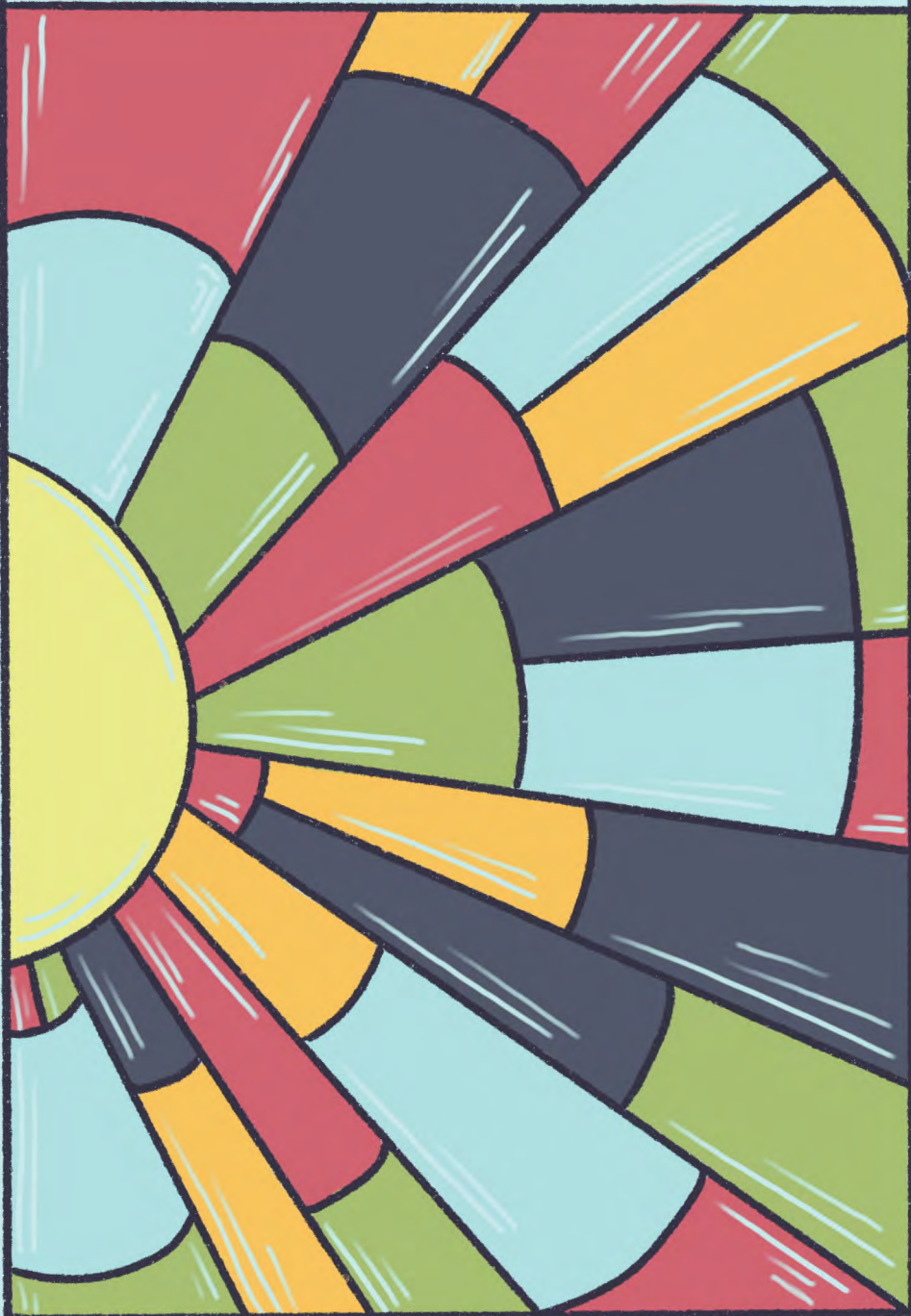
# Jambalaya

By Kirsten Sturgill  
*Digital painting*





# Theology





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*Chapter art by Reese Cilley*

★ Voted Best Art

## Away

By Adora Gamage  
*Digital painting*



# I used to think you were god

By Abby Lacuesta

For as long as I can remember, I've had this feeling of being watched. I used to give it a name - God. I used to go to church on Sundays, kneeling as incense smoke stung my eyes and snaked its way into my lungs. The priest would tell us that the smoke symbolized our prayers floating up to heaven. It seemed like it was more for us than for God - something visible to help us understand what we could not see, to delude us into believing that our petitions were actually being received. It never made sense to me - the incense always stopped at the ceiling.

I had my first Confession when I was seven. That's when the feeling solidified - that I was not only being watched but also judged. At the front of the church stood a tower of pamphlets, laying out list upon list of possible sins. I felt as though I was guilty of every one of them. God was watching me, after all, every time I made a mistake, and He expected me to apologize. As I sat down in the confessional line, my legs dangled off the chair, frilled socks and Mary-Janes barely scraping the tile beneath me. For a reason I could not fathom, I felt like a lamb being led to slaughter. But that was irrational - God was Patient, God was Kind, God was Good. When it was finally time, I poured my heart out to an opaque confessional screen, admitting my every misdeed (I was impatient. I was unkind. I was depraved, vile, wrong). The priest on the other side was one more thing I could not see.

A year later, I had my first Holy Communion. Dressed up like a tiny bride, I stood in a procession of other children all waiting to receive the Body of Christ. I was taught that God was something to be consumed. They told us that God was hidden within the wafer they fed to us, as if the bread they broke before us was anything more than wheat and water and dust. But I found myself trusting them. After all, what did I know about God, really? So I walked up to the altar, a veil obscuring my vision, and I consumed Him. Meanwhile, the feeling of being watched festered as I wondered how God could still be watching me now that He was supposed to be a part of me. Maybe something else was watching me instead.

As I grew, my faith disappeared but the feeling did not. It lingered, a shadow at the edge of my vision. I was left constantly chasing it, to no resolution. I tucked myself away in corners, my back against the wall. This did not stop the shadow from lurking over my shoulder. Nothing I did could shake the feeling, and eventually, the shadow began to speak. A second voice emerged in my head, crucifying my every thought. I remembered the days when I thought that this feeling was god. If this was god, his voice was awfully cruel.

Eventually, I became accustomed to this voice in my head, this shadow hovering over me. I was tired of resisting it, so I stopped hiding. As I stopped hiding, the shadow did too. It moved away from my periphery, slinking out to where I could see it. I no longer had to chase this shadow of mine, and it no longer had to run. Now I sit facing the shadow, my feet firmly planted on the ground. It tells me all the things I have done wrong, and I find myself laughing. You and I used to agree, you know, the shadow says. Well, I reply, I used to think you were god. The shadow does not respond. I can feel it watching me, but I am already looking back.

# The Fading of a Thousand Years

By Srimann Ramachandrani

She breathed her last on August 15th, 2082.

Alone.

Her life began, however, embraced in the arms of many people. They cherished her, doted on her, and believed her to be their hope. And as a result, she brought them together through joyful traditions, colorful festivals, and even devastating war.

As she grew older, the people who gave birth to her and loved her were no longer. But she did have her brothers, sisters, and nieces so she always felt like she had a family.

The size of that family, however, slowly with each passing generation, lessened and the people around her began to disappear. Some turned their eyes to the materialistic, some were not taught by their ancestors, and others did not care for her. In the end, they all had forgotten her, leaving her behind - her existence eventually reduced to nothing with no one beside her. If just one person had turned in her direction, it would've given her the strength to keep going. But left alone, how could she?

In a way, we are to blame for her death. We are to blame for the death of our Hindu culture.

I grew up in a pretty traditional, Indian household with both my parents being from Telangana. Not surprisingly, they exposed me to many of our Hindu traditions and values such as Diwali, truthfulness, and compassion. I even learned our native tongue Telugu just from my relatives' conversations before I learned the English language. But this exposure was superficial - it only touched the surface of our Hindu culture. I foolishly thought, however, that I had learned so much about my culture. And now that she's gone - there no longer being any memory of her - I'm left holding onto these superficial scraps.

One of those scraps is the Hindu rituals I observed when I was younger. Sometimes, they would take place in my own home or someone else's that we knew. Either way, I reluctantly woke up at 5 am on those days, got ready, and put on the heaviest kurta. Then the most painful five hours would ensue, during which I had to sit cross-legged while the priest recited his never-ending mantras. When every pooja ended, I got a rush of adrenaline and quite literally jumped onto my feet and briskly walked out of the room. There was nothing to be learned from the way I approached these poojas. Looking back on all of this now, I realize that those five hours of exposure wasn't enough. No matter how many rituals or poojas I sat through, I could never understand their essence or meaning so long as I kept wishing for the pooja to end quickly. It was like sitting there but not being present - not paying attention to the mantras of the priest, not asking questions about the purpose of the pooja, not asking why we needed to bring certain ingredients. I was simply going along with it so it could end faster. At these rituals, in the very face of my culture, I ignored it, and even in that small way, I am responsible for its death.

The second scrap is my mom's cooking. Paneer, samosas, chicken biryani, pappu, and bread halwa. I could go on forever about the exquisite dishes that my mom has made but come to an absolute silence when it comes to the ones I've made. I'd also have no answer to listing the main ingredients in a dish. Nor would I have the answer to what special occasions these foods are served on. Every time my



mom would put food in front of me, I would immediately start eating, rejoicing as every spoon entered my mouth until finally the plate was cleared. But what I wasn't getting was the answers to those questions - the connection between the food and my culture. Instead, I left those behind on the dinner table where I could've asked my parents if they could show me how to make it one day or what the special occasion was for all the food. At times, I felt like just a food connoisseur, simply enjoying the tastes of these foods but failing to realize the deeper past and history behind them. In that way, with her death, I am left behind with these scraps of which of my mom's dishes I loved but the lack of knowledge nor ability to recreate them. I can no longer even enjoy the paisam my mom would feed me with her hand. As my heart longs for my mother's cooking, I truly feel the absence of my Hindu culture and the pain of causing its death.

The third scrap is Carnatic music. My parents joined me in Carnatic music, a classical form of Hindu music, when I was seven years old. Over several years, I managed to get pretty far into the curriculum, having learned many of the sarali swaralu, janta swaralu, alankarams, and geethams. In spite of my progress, Carnatic was never something I was really excited about, and I was really only going because my mom wanted me to. I never inquired more about the songs I was learning - like who the composers were, what the lyrics meant, or the meaning behind the songs. In the end, whether I was at music class, practicing at home, or singing in the auditorium of a temple, I was simply reciting words to a tune - there was no expression, no felt meaning, no emotion. Now that she's no longer here, my knowledge of Carnatic music will forever stay that way - as empty words, just like the memory of my Hindu culture. By ignoring the history and the beauty behind the Carnatic lyrics, I feel like I pulled the very roots of my Hindu culture and tossed it away.

It's not just the rituals, food, or singing either. The special traditions and days that make up Hindu culture - I know only as much as their name. Every year, I would remind myself or ask my parents of why we even celebrate Diwali, of why we put a drop of oil on our hair before taking a shower on auspicious days, or why we don't eat meat on certain days. But the very next year, I would forget and the cycle would repeat again. Looking back on it now, it feels like my parents were holding my hand through all of these things, and I know that without them, I would be in the dark. With them gone, there is no one to guide me through all these things anymore - I'm still the same clueless kid that sat impatiently during the pooja, devoured his mom's food, and apathetically went to Carnatic classes. It seems like after all these years of eating delicious Indian food, sitting through so many rituals, and experiencing so many traditions/holidays, I have not absorbed anything besides the unconscious part. Not only did I let our Hindu culture die, I let my parent's dreams and values die. They grew up holding these things close to their heart - it was the very way they lived their lives and they brought me up. Our Hindu culture bonded us all - if anything, its teaching could have been the last reminder of my parents. Not just that, I let a part of my identity die. How could I call myself a Hindu without any significant appreciation or understanding of the culture? How could I call myself a Hindu when I am someone responsible for its death?

As much as her death starts with me, it doesn't end with me either. My part alone, while it is certainly responsible for the death of our Hindu culture, isn't the sole cause. In order for it to die, it must be forgotten by people across the world. My former school's Indian Student Organization, although it had good intentions, was an example of our culture slowly slipping away. At our formal events, the dress codes weren't kurtas and sarees, which were traditional Indian clothes. Instead, many of the guys came in suits,

and even though it didn't seem like a big deal at the time, we were, in a way, normalizing wearing such attire to Hindu events. It didn't just end at clothing though - every major aspect of our culture was turned on its head in this organization unintentionally. Anyone who walked into a club hosted by the Indian Student Organization would expect to hear Indian sounds blasting in the background. In reality, at these events, Indian songs were a rarity. Rap songs and pop songs would be at the top of the playlist, burying the Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu childhood classics. Despite its attempts to celebrate Hindu culture, the ISA club didn't do much to preserve its history and its memory. With its other activities, it neglected what was most important to the culture, and as time went on, no one could even remember what the essence of the culture was in the first place. Without even intending to, clubs like these and many others all over the world were responsible for the death of our Hindu culture.

We never realize that it is too late until it is too late. With her last breath, neglected by us all, we must live with no more festivals - no more lighting fireworks on Diwali or throwing colors on Holi. No more traditions - no more tying a rocky around a brother's wrist or wearing a bindi on one's forehead. The very thing that grew up with our ancestors and brought them closer through tradition, festival, and war is no longer - without the Hindu culture to bind us together, what does that make us in the first place? If our culture was still alive. I would have taken the initiative to learn from my parents about our culture. I would have sat through the aching five hours of ritual, observing not ignoring the preparations or the priest's mantras. The ritual must be connected to my culture in my mind, and I shouldn't see it as something that stands alone.

If our culture was still alive, I would stand next to my mom as she cooked her delicious meals for me every day, observing the plethora of ingredients she would add to the dish and the process by which she turned it all into something spectacular. I'd ask my mom if she had made this dish for a special reason - if today was a festival, a God's birthday, or a special event. If our culture was still alive, I would take that extra minute after my Carnatic music class to ask my teacher what the meaning behind the lyrics were. I would ask which God I was singing to or what emotion I should be conveying. If our culture was still alive, I would do everything I could to keep her alive.



*Fig 2.1*

# Ophelia

By Emily Leary

*Pens, watercolor, guache*





*Voted Best Writing*

## **Sharing a Blanket with my Best Friend's Corpse**

By Madeline Wade

*"...Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping."  
"Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Talitha cumi," which means, "Little girl, I say  
to you, arise." -Mark 5:39 & 41*

She lays too still, arm hanging limply  
off the stranger's bed, her graceful form

splayed awkwardly, a poorly positioned  
mannequin with blue skin.

I stare long into her pale face, her dark eyes  
curiously open, gazing fruitlessly, that same

shade as the poison so greedily swallowed down.  
The room clears and I lie next to her, tense and timid.

Hours pass and I've grown sicker, the drunken  
city screams through the window to keep me awake.

I lie in misery, held by duty and thin polyester,  
next to the one who means so much, running my

careful fingers through her chestnut hair, praying  
that God would take her hand, as He's done before.





*Fig 2.2 by Kirsten Sturgill*

# Faithless

By Madeline Wade

I don't know if I'll survive  
this conversation  
want to throw up  
in my shirt (her shirt)  
the most I've cried  
since Dad left  
My ribs heave  
and she asks if she  
can please touch me now  
I let her and  
heave and breathe and  
don't know I don't know baby  
I don't know how I can deal with this  
She thinks  
all we have is here in our hands  
thinks  
in her arms  
I'm all she really has  
says it's all  
in our bodies  
must think we are very clever for making up God  
speak along  
with the prayers in the pews  
next to me  
knows  
it's really just neurons  
I couldn't tell you  
what those are except  
very small  
never liked science  
I cry  
for how little  
I understand  
of her theories  
She says  
She's not saying it right  
across the bed  
she's not saying she's right  
she'd never say  
she's right  
I know  
she deserves more  
I know

to live  
I know  
life past this  
eternal  
she says  
You know  
I'm not christian  
I say I know  
I know  
but I didn't know it was like this  
I say  
Do you even think that we have souls?  
she says  
she couldn't really tell me what that is

I wrap my arms around her core, bury my face,  
let my tears soak into her shirt (my shirt),  
let our sobs overlap, and plead with God between breaths

# Sodomite

By Felix Elliot

None of my sins go                      unseen  
by the Bible in the nightstand  
touched by the                      trembling hands  
of countless men with forgetful faces  
and hushed breaths.

Urging    for forgiveness as they stroke  
the spine  
and spread  
that                      unholy  
                    thing                      open.



*Fig -2.3*

# Kneeling

By Reese Cilley

I left my childhood kneeling,  
on a prayer pew, hands held  
tightly beckoning away sin.  
Feet kicking to a chorus of  
giggles, teachers wandering eyes warning.  
Amen.

Resonating, waking sore knees.  
A pastor's eyes, meeting mine, a smile  
only god will see. His hands a weight  
on small shoulders, his whispers tickling  
small ears.

Incense is burning,  
I am drowning.

Clutching small knees,  
Banging for relief,  
lactic acid builds, I  
could drown. When you  
swim you must rest. Where  
is my rest? A boy  
whispers, A pastor watching,  
my best friend.

Bible verses chorused  
at my departure.

Isn't it funny? A sin-  
ner chorused off. A  
pastor looks at me,  
then a little girl.  
A smile only reached by  
god. Her childhood not yet  
left kneeling, on the prayer  
pew. I wish to save her, but  
I am drowning  
rest is only given to the righteous, only  
a second





*Fig 2.4 by Reese Cilley*

# the cicada-killer

By Jess Soffian

Anastasia is sitting by the pool, her feet dangling in the water, stockings soaking through. Her shoes sit beside her on the cement, perfectly shiny and perfectly dry, and beside them my cheap orange flip flops look completely absurd. There is an absurdity about Anastasia as well, in her entirety; a certain incongruity to the shine of the pool lights reflecting off her dark hair.

Anastasia is humming to herself, which she does often, even though she's not very good. She gets upset if I tell her that, or if I interrupt, or if I look like I'm not paying attention. One time I put on headphones to listen to my own music and she just started fucking screaming at me, like I'd done something despicable. Anastasia gets upset about a lot of things. It isn't her fault, probably. I guess it's just a result of who she is. When you grow up like that, like how Anastasia grew up, when you're someone like her, you get used to people listening, and you get used to mattering, and you get used to the lies people tell about how good you are, even if you aren't, which she isn't. She's lucky. She doesn't think so, but she is.

I look down into the pool and kick my legs back and forth, sending ripples across the calm surface. There's a wasp in the water a few feet to my right, drowning. It keeps trying to scramble up the smooth tile but every time it gains an inch the lapping water drags it back in again. It's a big wasp, yellow-striped. A cicada-killer.

"Let's go swimming," I say when Anastasia shuts up long enough to take a breath before her next song. She doesn't really need to breathe, of course, but I guess that's a hard habit to break. My grandmother was a singer; she used to say that singing was all about the breath. Maybe Anastasia was a better singer back when air was still a thing for her. I guess I won't ever really know, and so much of what she says is bullshit that asking her wouldn't do any good.

From the corner of my eye I can see Anastasia's mouth pinch in that irritated expression of hers, like she's eaten something sour, like the sour thing is me. I can't begrudge her that, I guess. I wouldn't want to be stuck with me, either. I certainly don't like being stuck with her. "I can't swim," she says.

"You could learn," I suggest. "Better late than never."

She turns her scornful gaze on me from all the way up the length of her nose. "So what, are you offering to teach me?"

"Hm. No, you're right, I don't want to," I say, and she huffs in a self-satisfied sort of manner as though she's just won an argument, even though we weren't actually arguing. You're right are Anastasia's favorite words to hear, alongside you're so important and I'm so, so sorry about what happened to you, you poor, poor thing.

Anastasia isn't a poor thing. Anastasia used to be a very, very rich thing, and now she is a dead thing, but she is also a story. A story isn't a poor thing, but it feeds itself on being pitied, even as it thrives on its own remembrance. So many people have stories that are never remembered. Where is the pity for them?

“My bubbe was an opera singer,” I say. Anastasia groans and rolls her eyes dramatically, her whole head moving with the gesture, dark curls bouncing around her shoulders.

“Not this again.”

“My bubbe was an opera singer,” I repeat. “Was. Do you know why she stopped?”

“Yes,” says Anastasia.

“She stopped because she couldn’t get work, and she couldn’t get work because they wanted her to change her name, and she wouldn’t. They said, you’re a wonderful singer, and we’d love to have you, but nobody buys tickets to see a Jew perform, and she said, no, I won’t do it, and then she never got work. Isn’t that fucked up? Your family made us take a name, and then when we came here they wanted us to change it, and now no one knows about my grandma. She could’ve been famous. She was that good. But now no one knows her name at all.”

“You’ve said.”

“Everyone knows your name, though,” I say. “And you’re shit at singing. How is that fair?”

Anastasia has no response for this. She shrugs her shoulder up and down in a gesture that means nothing at all. The sky rumbles with the distant thunder from some far-off summer storm, and the cicada song in the trees swells in response. The air hums like a chorus, like the discordant hubbub of an orchestra tuning before the performance, except the performance never comes. The buzz just goes on.

“You can’t even swim,” I say. “The biggest thing you ever did was die.”

The corners of Anastasia’s lips turn down even as her chin jerks up and she glares at me. She looks like she wants to slap me, which is fair enough. That’s the thing about Anastasia: she reveals the worst in me, and maybe I reveal the worst in her. For the rest of the world she’s an innocent in a fairy tale. For me she’s something else.

An adult cicada thuds into the ground by the fence perimeter and buzzes and buzzes as it tries to get its wings working again. Cicadas live years underground, feeding and growing out of sight of the sun. Once they’ve finally crawled out of the earth they don’t last long before they die; the summer sidewalks are littered with their corpses. Anastasia hates them; she turns that scowl of hers towards the dying one by the fence. “Stupid bugs,” she says, the depths of disdain, “don’t they ever shut up?”

“Don’t you?”

Anastasia’s eye twitches like she knows I’m being contradictory on purpose. “In my country—”

“In your country you don’t have cicadas, I know,” I say, cutting her off just to see the annoyed



way her nose wrinkles. “Just snow and fancy palaces and dead princesses.”

“I hate you,” says Anastasia, turning away. She says it without much heat, just matter of fact. It’s not news for either of us. I wonder, sometimes, if she’d hate me so much if I’d been someone else, or if I’d hate her if she wasn’t who she is. Is it something she learned before she came to me? Is it me, or is it the guilt, or is it the separation between the human princess and the outcasts in the crumbling villages of the Pale? Do I hate her, or what she represents, or because of her family and what they did, by proxy, to mine?

I lean down and run my fingers through the water, exploring what shapes I can trace in ripples. “My great grandmother never left your country, did you know that?” I say, flicking water at Anastasia. It darkens her dress in droplets and then falls through her to speckle the concrete. “I know I’ve told you this before. Do you remember this too? My great grandmother never left your country because she was still looking for her sister until the day she died. Do you know what happened to her sister?”

“No,” says Anastasia. She frowns down at her dress and smooths a hand over it. The wet spots disappear under her touch.

“No,” I echo. “Me neither. No one does.”

I remember my bubbe’s eyes when she told me the story, distant, like she was seeing it, even though she hadn’t been born when it happened. She was young when they came here, her and her father and her brothers. She never knew her aunt, but she also never saw her mother again. It’s the kind of thing that sticks with you. Once upon a time two girls went out to the market and only one of them came back, and the only thing we can ever know about what happened is that there was a pogrom. The horror of it lingers, and the wondering. I’ve had nightmares about it since I was a child.

“Do you ever get nightmares?” I ask Anastasia. I don’t wait for her answer. I get to my feet and pull off my shirt, then my shorts, and then I jump into the pool. I let myself sink until my feet scrape the bottom and then surge upwards through the bubbles to breach the surface. The hot summer air feels cool on my wet skin.

“Of course I get nightmares,” says Anastasia, having waited for me to surface. “Of course I do. Don’t you know how I died?” Then a smile spreads across her face. “No,” she says almost triumphantly, “you don’t. No one does.”

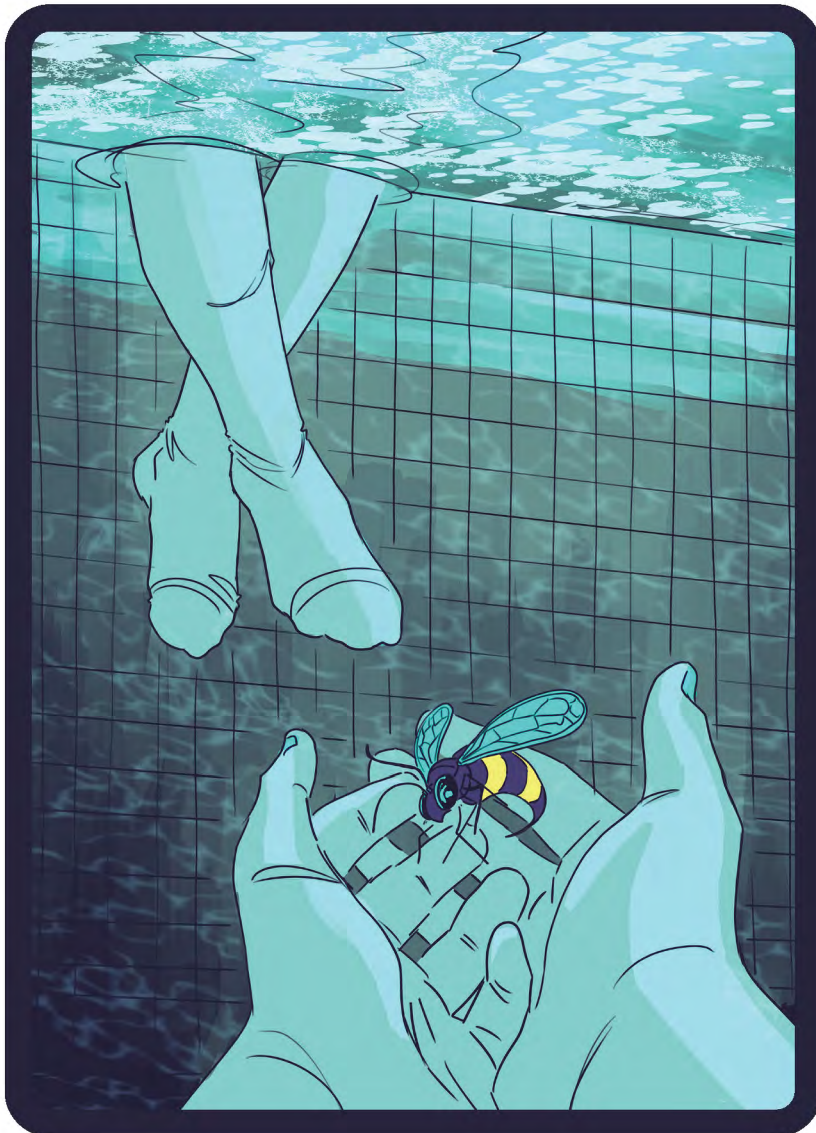
I don’t bother to retort that this isn’t true, that we know how and when and where she died, that her grave has been found, her DNA tested, her corpse identified. It doesn’t matter, because that isn’t the point and it’s not why she said it. The real Anastasia is dead; this Anastasia is a story. And the story, after all, is the reason all those people bothered to look.

“My bubbe’s aunt,” I say, and Anastasia groans again, kicking out at me with one leg, but I swim out of reach. “My bubbe’s aunt never got a legend. The only one who remembered to look for her was her sister, and then her sister stopped looking because she got dementia, and now my bubbe’s getting dementia too.”

By the edge of the pool I spot the cicada killer, still struggling. I swim towards it. Cicada killers are docile insects, lacking the aggressive tendencies of other wasps, but in its fear this one stings me when I reach out to touch it.

“It’s not my fault,” says Anastasia. “You’re always blaming me. I was a child. I died a child. It’s not my fault what my family allowed to happen to your people.

I cup my hands around the cicada-killer and duck underwater until my feet brush the bottom of the pool. Eyes stinging from the chlorine and thumb burning from its stinger, I watch the cicada-killer drown.



*Fig 2.5 by Jess Soffian*

# Sociology



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# Memories of Escape

By Felix Elliot

You're still the same as when we were kids and  
though we've grown  
apart, every time I see your face  
I am staring upon something powerful.

A god of trains and hurricanes.  
Of power and ruin and new  
beginnings, because everything  
you do screams freedom.

I wish I had left this behind;  
the diploma I'm still fighting for. The men  
I'm still lying with.  
There was a promise I should have kept.

Maybe we would be on a train together  
now; Dirty and tired and little  
bit hungry but free  
in a way I can't actually understand.

Maybe you would sing me some of your poetry.  
I would plunge my fingers  
into the dirt as I listen to the sounds  
your voice creates  
and nothing would be the matter.



*Fig 3.1 by Reese Cilley*

# Poof!

By Rena Bridge  
*Linocut*



# Five is Red

By Ivy Walbert

Five is red, a strong, true red, the red of the crayon in your crayon box labeled “red.” Not “maroon” or “scarlet” or “razzmatazz” or even “brick red” (which is not really red at all, more of a deep berry color), but pure red. You are five years old, and you are very frustrated that only one crayon in your box even comes close to real red. You’ve already used up the one red crayon, and everything else is too orange or too pink. How are you supposed to draw anything at all when you’re missing one of the most basic primary colors? You’re working on your nature journal for homeschool, trying to draw pictures of animals and plants you see in your backyard, but the cardinal perched in the tree in front of you is red (not “wild strawberry”) and you can’t draw him without your red crayon. You explain this all to your parents in the very serious I-may-be-five-but-I-know-literally-everything-and-will-tell-you-about-it tone of voice that you have. They seem amused by how specific you are about your colors, but on your next birthday you receive a box of 12 crayons, all true red.

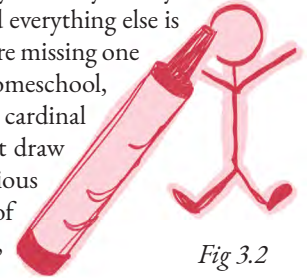


Fig 3.2

Seven is green, the bright fresh green of budding leaves in the spring as they cover the branches of the trees in your backyard with a mist of color. Green like the smell of grass when your parents mow the backyard, like the little tendrils on the sugar snap peas in the garden by the driveway that you eat right off of the plant even when you’re supposed to be bringing them inside for dinner. Seven is green like the round stems of the dandelions sprinkled across the grass and clover in spots of yellow and of white. You pick the white puffs and blow the seeds into the wind, hoping the wind will swirl them into wishes. Green like summer at the Eno River state park, where you have your seventh birthday party, which you have decided you want to be turtle themed. A park ranger takes you all on a hike along the river, pointing out the spots where turtles nap on rocks poking up through the water. Your mom sets up a huge sheet of thick paper on one of the wooden picnic tables in the clearing at the park, and you and your friends use markers and crayons and colored pencils to cover it with drawings of turtles and deer and the river and each other and whatever else you feel like. The scribbled drawings overlap each other and fill the page to create a giant mural, a page filled with the joy of being seven years old and creating whatever you want. You put the mural on your wall when you get home, and it hangs there over your bed for almost a decade.

Nine is purple, the hue of the violets that flood your backyard with color each April, the ones you pick in handfuls in an attempt to turn them into chains and flower crowns and bracelets. Purple like the cover of the soft book you draw in with blocky wax crayons for homeschool with your mom, a true strong purple like your colored pencil with the words “dark purple” pressed into its side in shiny gold lettering. You have moved on from your old how-to-draw books written for kids, and are working your way through a book on colored pencil technique. The book is clearly intended for adults, but you’re trying all the exercises in it anyway, learning how to layer the pencils to create the right tones of color, how to use the white pencil to blend different hues together, how to capture the texture of the skin of the cherries you’re trying to draw. Your drawings never come out as good as the pictures in the book of course, but you don’t care. One afternoon you declare to your parents that you’re going to be a famous artist when you grow up, like Monet or Van Gogh, but with colored pencils instead of paint. You think it’s very silly that no one has done this before, since colored pencils are obviously the superior medium, so you will be the first.

Eleven is Thalo Blue, the bright saturated color of the clearest of skies and your favorite shirt, the soft turquoise one with the hand printed lace that you got at a music festival which you’ll wear constantly



until it all but falls apart. Eleven is blue like your favorite shade of paint. For your eleventh birthday your dad gives you your first set of nice paints, watercolors, the kind that come in little tubes that you squeeze into a palette, which feel so fancy and grown up compared to the flat cakes in the plastic trays that you used as a younger kid. You have a couple of browns and six basic primary colors, one warm and one cool of each – burnt umber, burnt sienna, lemon yellow, golden yellow, alizarin crimson, vermillion hue, ultramarine blue, and thalo blue. The green-tinted thalo blue is your favorite of the tubes, bright and bold and so so saturated. Through trial and error you discover all of the ways of mixing the hues, and you fall in love with the colors you can create. You learn that thalo blue is the strongest of all the colors you have, that you only need the tiniest hint of it to turn a pool of lemon yellow into a vibrant green, and you become familiar with all the shades of purple that can come from combining it with alizarin crimson. Colors start breaking down into pieces in your mind's eye – neutral gray becomes a specific ratio of ultramarine blue and vermillion with a touch of yellow, the color of the skin on your hand is crimson and yellow with a dab of thalo blue to cool it down. You test your skills, choosing objects in your living room and trying to match the colors as best you can, as a little game for yourself.

Fifteen is orange, deep and slightly red toned. Orange like a vibrant pumpkin from the farmer's market, like the center of a sunset. Fifteen is the color of the embers of campfires on camping trips with your Girl Scout troop. Orange, like the dyed silk fabric of the costumes in the puppet show your mom performs in the summer you turn fifteen. Each year the show is different (you've been every single summer since you were six), and this one is centered around fire – the stage is an explosion of reds and yellows and vibrant oranges. Masked dancers in brightly painted costumes, stilt walkers with cloth flames draped over their backs, and an enormous dragon held up with poles of bamboo swirl across the sandy ground of the ampitheatre. You get to be a volunteer in the show some weeks, holding up set pieces and helping the puppeteers into their costumes backstage. Sometimes you get to help bring one of the puppets to life, something you look forward to each show, and you put all of your care and attention into the few short minutes you get to be onstage. The weekend of your fifteenth birthday you get to fly a tall painted cardboard airplane over top of the mountain set, all on your own, and the way that you hold the bamboo pole as you cross the stage feels like the most important thing you've ever done. You're fascinated with the puppets, and the detailed craft that went into making them. Every weekend you spend backstage you bring your sketchbook, and try to draw the figures of the puppets as they lean against the cool stone walls of the theater. You love the people there just as much as the puppetry itself – warming up and playing games in a huge circle with everyone before each performance, dancing around with the other performers when you don't have to be onstage, smiling from ear to ear as you run out onto the stage together during curtain call, laughing with your mom over all of the inside jokes about the show you've collected over the summer.

Seventeen is green yet again, like seven, but a little different. Seventeen is sap green; deeper, richer, more mature, the color of green tea leaves and the moss growing in fuzzy clumps along rocks and tree trunks in the woods behind your house. Seventeen is the green of early autumn, with undertones of golden brown starting to peek through. Sap Green has become your new favorite shade of watercolor as you've started painting more trees and greenery. You spend long afternoons outdoors, sketching your backyard, trying to capture the hues and shades of the different types of leaves. You join the Teen Arts Council at the North Carolina Museum of Art, and are asked to do a short talk on your art over a zoom meeting, which is incredibly nerve wracking because you have no idea how to talk about your art. It's just something you do, something you've always done. You spend weeks thinking about the presentation, trying to pick apart all of the things that



Fig 3.3

have influenced you to paint other things, even though your ideas come from everywhere all around you, constantly. You think about all the time you spent outdoors as a kid, and the nature trail running through your backyard, and it hits you how much of an influence it was. Seventeen is green like the leaves of sycamore trees reflected in the surface of the Haw River that runs behind the Paperhand Puppet studio, where you intern that summer. All the puppets that delighted you each summer as a kid are being made by you now, and you feel honored to be there with every painted brushstroke and strip of paper mache that leaves your fingers. You learn to build huge structures of wood and PVC pipe to carry puppets so tall that they almost scrape the ceiling of the studio, and to cut tiny little details with an x-acto knife into thick black paper that will be set on a projector to become delicate shadow puppets dancing across a cloth screen. You sculpt and paper mache and hot glue, and with each puppet and prop you work on you think how grateful you are that you get the chance to do this. Late in the summer is your favorite, because that's when you get to start painting the puppets you've crafted; fiery oranges and rich violets and bright yellows for dragons, subtle variegated browns for a cat, warm earth tones for insects. You have to learn to paint for the back row of an audience, not with the tiny details you tend to gravitate towards but with long, bold flicks of your brush. Sometimes during the breaks between building puppets during the day and rehearsing in the evenings you go down to the river to swim (still in your shorts and t-shirt because you forgot to bring a bathing suit to the studio that day, but that's not going to stop you), cooling off from the intense southern July heat and catching glimpses of herons and turtles and snakes doing the same. The running water reflects the leaves overhead and catches the sunlight, creating sparkling ripples and shadows across the surface, and as you watch their dance you pay attention to the beauty surrounding you. You have many different small parts in the show that year, but one of your favorites is being in the shadow puppet piece at the very end. You hold delicate paper figures and animals on thin rods against the white fabric while the other puppeteers are moving cutouts across a set of overhead projectors, creating a story out of shadows and light. Once, the very first weekend of the show, you hear a child in the audience yell out 'Look! It's an otter!' when the river otter that you cut out pops its head up on the cloth screen. That little kid used to be you, yelling with joy about your favorite puppets from your seat in the audience – you were out there, and now you're back here, holding the puppets, creating the magical art that enthralled and inspired you as a kid. This is what you want to do.

Nineteen is brown, Burnt Umber, with perhaps a touch of Burnt Sienna. Not a dull brown, but the warm, lively color of hot Ceylon tea on autumn afternoons and libraries and old brick buildings. Nineteen is the color of the sound of leaves crunching beneath your feet as you walk across campus, the color that looks the way a crackling fire smells. Brown like the color of art museums, like the one you visit with your new friends to celebrate your birthday. Brown like the old corduroy jacket that used to be dad's, the one you wear almost everyday once it finally starts to get colder outside. You have to cuff the sleeves to be able to use your hands while wearing it, but you don't mind. You've both gotten mistaken for professors while wearing the jacket, and you laugh together about it over the phone; you wear it again the next day and smile. Nineteen is brown like the skirt you bought at a thrift store on your first full day of living at college, with the first friend you made there. It's long, with a pattern of little cream colored flowers and a strip of buttons down the front, and it makes you feel weirdly grown up to wear something you bought while living on your own. Brown like the dappled color of sunlight on the brick sidewalks you walk down each morning to get to your studio art classes, bumpy and uneven in places from age and tree roots pushing their way up through the cracks. In your painting class you study color; the subtle differences between Raw Umber and Burnt Umber, when to use a warm red or a cool red and why, their different undertones and how to use each one effectively. You're pleased to find that the intuition you developed back when you got that first set of watercolors was right, that you know just how much of each color to blend to match the hues and values of the still life in

front of you. All of your work has paid off, although it's never really felt like work – learning technique for art isn't something you've ever had to force yourself to sit down and do, it just comes naturally. It's the way your brain works, you see a pretty flower and instead of simply thinking what a nice color and moving on with your life, you start analyzing, trying to figure out how you would make that exact shade with paint. You have a hard time answering the question, "So when did you get into art?" because there isn't really an answer – it's always been the thing you love, the thing you have to do to stay sane. You wouldn't be complete without it. There isn't one event, one big "aha" moment that made you realize you wanted to be an artist. Instead there's a collection of small, quiet moments that make up who you are, each time you pick up a pencil or notice a color you love. Once, early in the semester, you doubt yourself – what if you've made a mistake? What if you end up hating the program you choose? Should you change your major, do something more straightforward, more stable? But you remind yourself that you've never questioned that this is what you want to do forever. If you were to choose a different path, study something else, get a job in a different field, you know in the depths of your heart that you would regret it for the rest of your life. There's never been another option, another thing that brings you joy in the way that this does. You feel like color runs through your veins, ever since you were a little kid who was overly specific about her crayons.



*Fig 3.4 by Olivia McCabe*



# Elegy to Kitchens

By Jennifer Bui

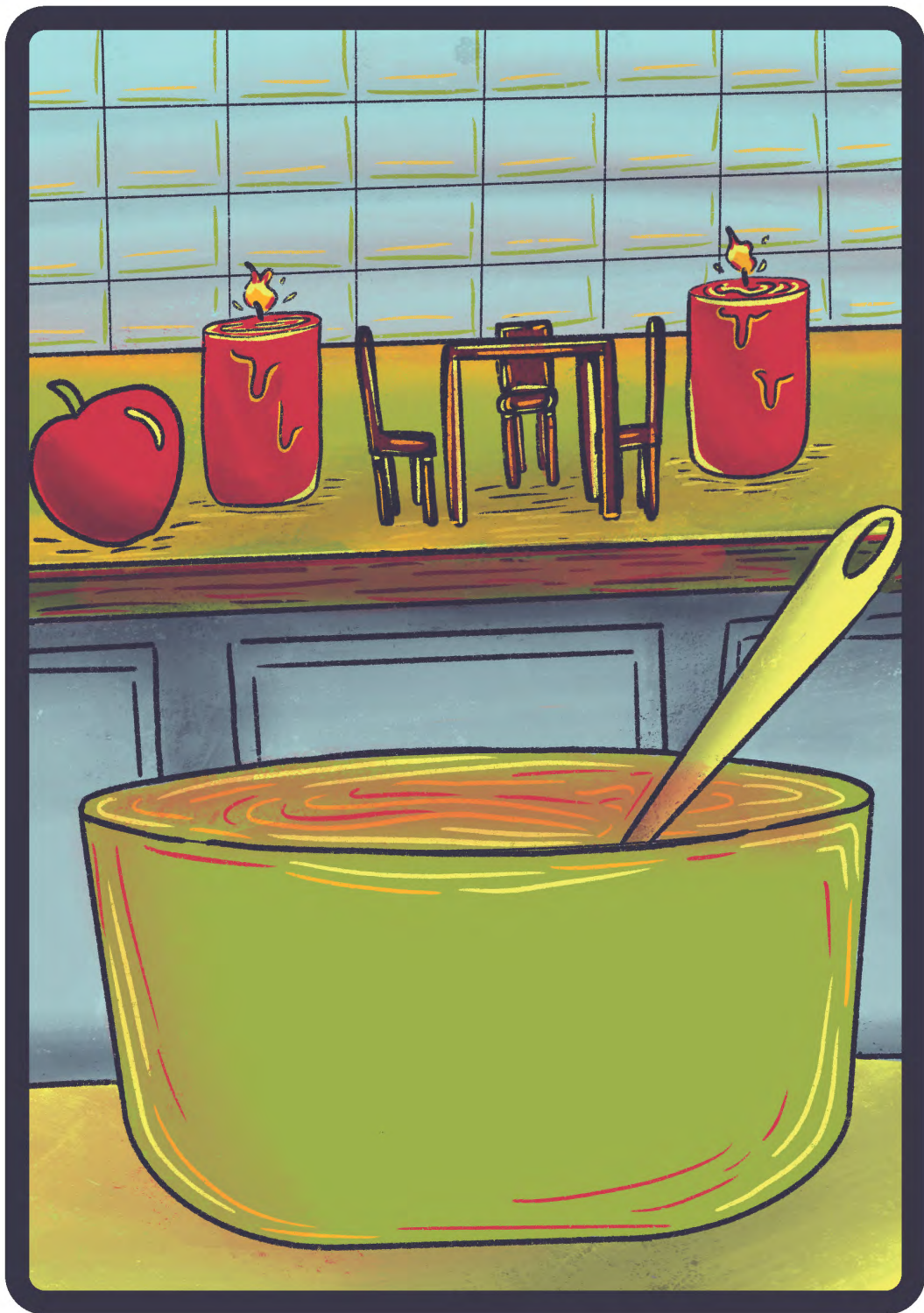
The kitchen is a shrine  
to happiness and family gatherings.

It's a room of cinnamon sylphs  
waltzing with cocoa and apples, roses peeking into the room like mischievous children.  
It's warm like starry summers, when fireflies flash their neon lanterns and charcoal perfumes a day of  
laughter.

It's a table for three  
with homemade meals, orchids  
basking in the morning sun.  
Love comes with the scent of  
ginger or green onions, cozy  
like soup in winter and herbal tea.

But this kitchen is a mausoleum,  
where families die and bodies decay, screaming and slamming in time  
to the beat of watery tip-taps  
of a shut-off faucet. Dinner in the dark with silence alone, and no one's coming.

It's food welling up with bloody bile, hunger a biology-dictated tuberculosis sanding away lives and sanity.  
Vanilla and almond-scented sickness and burnt skin offerings for happiness and a smile saying I'm home  
how's your day.  
Ghosts drift where everything is broken. Don't come home. There's nothing left.



*Fig 3.5 by Reese Cilley*

# You on Friday

By Madeline Wade

Painted vivid, I admire the memory's warm hues.  
I find myself again

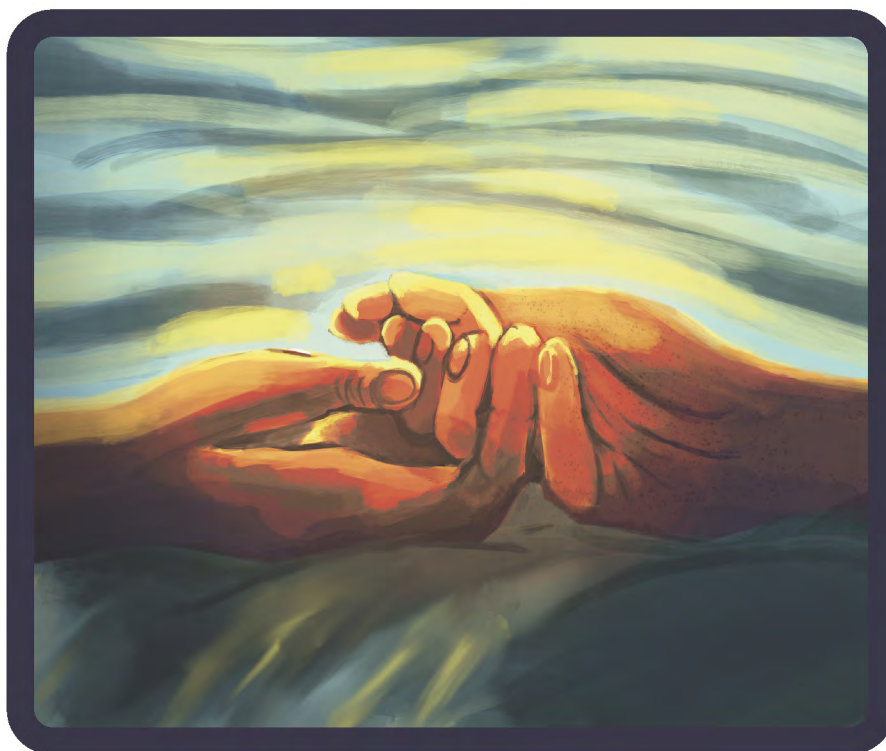
Thinking of you, thinking of Friday night,  
How I knew I was drunk because we'd stolen away,  
and my eyes wouldn't stray from yours  
Too long spent on the back porch, sharing bad drinks,  
talking meaningless loud, sending laughs to the moon

Later, we snuck small touches as we talked to friends  
On the couch, I rested on you, nestled sleepily into your shoulder  
Our arms tangled under the blanket, my thumb painted  
Pink strokes on your forearm, again-and-again  
My soft thumb painted over your freckles

Stroke by stroke—  
I'm sure you had a mark in the morning.



*Fig 3.6 by Kirsten Sturgill*



*Fig 3.7 by Kirsten Sturgill*

## Early Saturday

By Madeline Wade

We stayed there,  
when everyone was gone  
My head leaned into you, nestled so sure  
Like I owned property on your shoulder.  
The buzz in my veins hummed above my convictions  
So I let your warmth soak into my cheek and jaw.

Sleepy bodies jumbled in timid morning light  
you laid next to me  
brown sugar speckles lit by quiet sun  
perfect  
I tried to think of how to tell you  
You acted so casual  
Talked about everything but us.  
But I know you write these poems too.



# Take it

By Olivia McCabe

*Digital painting*



# Leaves

By Tilden Culver

I had always admired the falling leaves.

Clouds of red and orange, seas of brown and yellow, all raining down upon me with nary a care or reservation. It was a magnificent sight; in fact, it was a spectacle of sheer Elysian proportions. They danced before my eyes like the rogue embers of a midsummer's campfire, pirouetting with great grace to an unstoppable, silent crescendo. I adored them; each and every leaf that cascaded gently down to the browning grass enamored me more than the last, playing the strings of my heart like those of an angel's gilded lyre. It was a torrent of joy, a downpour of euphoria, and I was wholly flattered to be caught in the eye of their storm.

However, though my heart beat with every leaf that kissed the ground, it was always through the corner of my eye that I found a ghastly scene. It was a scene so horrendous, so obscenely grotesque, that the infatuation I so relished petered out with the next gust of air; there they sat, high in their treetops, gaudy in their coats and boastful in their gaud—leaves unfallen. Yes; while I had always admired the falling leaves, it was the ones that refused to fall that had always irked me.

They clung to their branches with unwavering grasps, watching haughtily from above as their peers fluttered to the floor in their stead. Perhaps they would sway about in the wind, twirling and twisting and twittering with each gust, though they never seemed to give in—no matter how hard it blew. I could imagine little that would prove more frustrating than those leaves. Blowing and roaring and howling with all your might—only to be met with a face of harvest-hued indifference. How dreadfully audacious, those leaves.

And so, as I sat there upon a lonely park bench, I cherished the leaves that fell, and I cursed the ones that didn't.

The sky above my head was ablaze with color, spotted with flocks of the most vibrant autumnal palettes. It painted over the clouds, blocking out the sun with the sheer magnificence of its grandeur and enamoring my every thought with refined elegance. They swayed, they danced, they glistened, and so too did my eyes; I was madly in love with the way they moved, but I was ever the more obsessed with how they fell.

My mind followed their choreography with ravenous precision, imitating each twirl and bound as my eyes watched on in similar, enchanted hunger. My mind leapt, and equally did it spin. Yes; just like the falling leaves, my mind spun far beyond the shackles of mundanity, gripped by a beautiful, unrelenting tango and the consequent stupor that came beared in hand. It spun so far, in fact, that it collided with memories long since abandoned, buried by the soils of time and only now exposed to the scrutinizing gaze of remembrance.

I remembered my father. I remembered his wiry jaw and the graying specks peppered throughout his beard. I remembered his almond brown eyes, and how they always glimmered with joy at the sight of falling leaves.

He loved the falling leaves—but he loved even more the ones that remained. He could watch for hours, admiring the dances that they led in their grand, anticlimactic ballet upon the branches. He used to tell me all about the wonders of their tethered bodies, about how their reservation told tales of strength and how dismissing those tales would make even the wisest man a fool. They were purveyors of resistance. They resisted every gale that whispered their names, electing life over death as they clung heartily to the trees' wooden veins. Though their siblings bedecked the ground with a carpet of decay, the resisters breathed outward a red and orange vitality, bearing grace far beyond the mindless descent of the undead.

I was, then, a fool. Their beauty was lost on me, and the magnificence that he preached seemed



no more than the imaginative jabber of a child. And it was every fall, when the sun began to set young in the sky and we journeyed into our backyard woodlands, that I would let my foolishness soar. While we sat upon the corpses of a thousand, we would watch as a thousand more fell, and as their lively brethren mourned from atop their bark-coated thrones. Their regality seemed to capture my father wholly and wholeheartedly, but my mind continued to be seduced by the rotting, decaying rain. Death blocked out the sunset, and I was simply partial to its allure; I was taken.

But my foolishness was no more a sin than my father's hypocrisy. I remembered vividly now— as my thoughts twirled about upon the park bench— the day that he fell. Much like the leaves he could never quite fully admire, he lost his grip on the branches fettering him to life. I didn't remember how, nor did I remember why— perhaps it was a particularly aggressive cancer, or perhaps it was a driver whose breath reeked strongly of booze. All I did remember, though, was that he fell, and that I had been left to watch the scattered pieces of him cascade down to the earth.

I stood from my seat. The storm of morbid color dissipated as I rose, replaced by a still nothingness, its absence consumed by the ravenous fangs of impenetrable, unmoving fog. I was alone. Not a single leaf consoled me, neither in the grass nor air nor trees; all that remained to await me was a lone, looming shadow amidst the haze.

And I would not leave it waiting any longer.

I approached it upon cautious soles, my steps light and my breath heavy. The fog parted ways to reveal the face of my companion, though the nature of its appearance persisted forth behind an unshaken, mysterious mist: a tombstone. I remembered this tombstone. Though my thoughts were no longer spinning alongside the vanished leaves, my memories continued to crash into me like rogue waves to a harbor, crawling from their own graves as I looked upon the overgrown one before me. It was my father's grave. I had visited it before, though its present state of disarray was far from the rose-spotted plot I so recalled. Perhaps it had been a few years since I last saw the old man, but I hadn't expected dilapidation to rear its ugly head so soon.

Soon.

Had it been soon? How long had it been, exactly? Had I truly forgotten about my father, and left him alone to rot in the dilapidated annals of a cemetery? The blanket of shattering, brown leaves seemed to only affirm my sickening suspicions, taunting me coarsely with their rot. They appeared strangely hideous to my eyes, my irises once appreciative of a beauty I could no longer see. It was simply overwhelming. The leaves and their cracking faces, the gravestone and its moss-filled cracks— I began to grow appalled by the notion of it all.

My feet scrambled backwards in a rushed retreat, the repulsion and horror that coursed through my veins now taking steady hold of my heart. The panic of each step quickly grew to offset their balance, sending my body and all the malignant thoughts it held careening backwards. I was falling.

My arms writhed about with little comprehension, fueled only by the fret and fear that raged deep inside my core. I did not want to fall. The orange and red offspring of autumn may find their joy in death, but I was not them. I would never be them.

I refused.

Visions flashed before me as I descended to the earth. They were visions of disarray and chaos, not of grandeur nor awe, though they baited my strained breath all the same. I saw sky, and I saw leaves. I saw, too, the remaining fog begin to dissolve, and I saw it give birth to a grave. However, this grave was

not my father's. It bore not a name, nor did it bear the familiar, though strikingly unfamiliar, state of decay that now personified his. It was blank. Virginal. Innocent. And beneath it, the ground's gaping maw opened up to consume me.

I then saw darkness.

And the darkness persisted. It persisted with such tenacity, in fact, that I began to fear it would never relent. I felt alone, completely ostracized by the darkness and isolated by its ravenous hunger. The abyss of my sight was filled with nothing more than alarm. Just as I was eaten alive by darkness, I was digested by my own fretful thoughts and a grossly gnawing panic. I wanted to scream, to cry, to reach out and hold onto something. Anything. Anything that I could find. Anything that I could touch. Anything that I could cling to and never again let go of. But everything evaded me.

Everything, that was, but a memory. A single, insignificant memory. A memory that had sat just as forgotten as all the others, and a memory that now burned itself into the forefront of my retinas. I remembered this darkness. It wasn't the first time I had met with its sickening fathoms; this was but a reunion.

The first time was a Saturday. It was a Saturday like most others, fraught with the same calmness that typically radiates from a week's undoing. There was only one detail, I remembered, that posed rather unorthodox for a Saturday: my father. I was going to visit my father. Though he had fallen years prior, he rested now, and I intended to stand guard while he slept his eternal sleep beneath the earth.

The sun was perched low in the horizon that Saturday, peeking out above distant mountains and oaks and painting the air orange with the death of day. I remembered watching fondly as it fell beneath the sky, entranced by its decaying beauty with the smirk of a necrophile upon my face. I remembered adoring such sickening splendor from behind the windshield of a car. My car. I was driving down a road— a lone, barren, silent road, accompanied only by the swirling bodies of my tree-born peers. Oh, how gracefully they swirled about in horrific disgrace. They filled the air that day, those leaves. That chill-kissed, orange-skied, insignificant Saturday; it was eaten alive in its final moments by those leaves. They left not a space untouched, not a cloud uncovered, blanketing the world with the shadow of their rot. And with their rot, I remember— distinctly— how enamored I had fallen. Fallen. I had fallen like the leaves above me, the leaves below me, the leaves I had always so craved.

I had fallen like the limb now jutting through my windshield.

See, I had fallen so enamored with those hideous, mind-choking leaves that I hadn't remembered to keep my eyes on the road. I remembered with vivid lucidity, though, the tree that I hit. In my star-and-leaf-stricken wonder, I had collided not with grandeur, not with my father nor the cemetery that he dwelled, but the hard, unforgiving, unwavering bark of a tree. It was a tall tree, an imposing and strong tree, a tree that stood unrelenting in its grand, stately posture. A tree that my car, with great crudeness, hugged beneath the quivering leaves of its branches. I remembered the shards of broken glass that bespeckled my lap, and I remembered the billowing smoke that poured readily from the engine.

And it was then, I remembered, that I first met with the darkness. It embraced me far tighter than my car could ever embrace such a tree, and it embraced me at once. A hungry beast, the darkness was; its grasp was as cold as gales that carried the corpses of leaves upon their backs, and as asphyxiating as the smoke now poisoning the sunless air. I was taken by it. Not by its beauty, though, or the hidden splendors only I could see— it had none. No; I was taken by its infinity. It extended above, and below, and to all degrees of East and West, its blackness riding forever forward on Death's unbridled, pale horse. I had fallen, wholly, into the dark.



It was a fall that I'd now resumed— though “resumed” may not be the right word. To resume a fall, one must have first refound their footing. I had done no such thing. My fall was eternal, continuous, never-ending, much like the darkness that consumed me. There was no park bench, no gravestone, no haze. There were no leaves dancing in the sky. It was only darkness; a darkness that, though I had closed my eyes to its fathoms and dreamt of realities far from realized, had never truly left me. I was falling, and I would never stop.

But I didn't want to fall anymore.

I wanted to stand. I wanted to sway and dance about, and let the wind brush my hair, but I didn't want to fall. I wanted to feel the safety of ground beneath my feet, or, perhaps, the refuge of bark in my grasp. I wanted to see the sky, and bask in its wonders— not its material afflictions, no; I cared not for the flocks of leaves that so littered the air. I wanted, rather, to gaze into the depths of its sapphire pond, to admire each cloud that stood guard above me and to praise the sun for bathing my skin in its light. And I wanted to sit among the leaves— the ones that remained— as I did so.

I wanted, simply, to live.

And that want would not die.

That want raged inside my chest. It burned bright with all the colors of autumn and the heat of inextinguishable flames. My passion was painted across my face in red and orange and yellow hues, the resistance it preached now echoing loudly throughout the otherwise soundless abyss. I would not submit myself to its eternity; though it blew with all the strength of November winds, my resolution was not to be uprooted. I would remain.

And it was then, as I reasserted the nature of such resistance, that my hand felt something lodge within its grip. My arm outstretched, I had reached for salvation, and it was salvation that had found me. In my palm rested the coarse pattern of bark, a tree branch ripe with all of its promises of safety, security, and life. I held onto it with every fragment of my might. Though I was vitalized only by my will, my will was strong enough to tether me to that spindly, slender branch; indeed, my will was so strong that I simply would not fall.

So I hung there, swaying in the darkness as I clutched to my lifeline of a tree branch. How audacious I must have been to swing so coolly, so casually, so confidently from that branch as I taunted the blackness below. My heart pounded not with fear, nor did it race with cowardice— it beat with sheer, unadulterated triumph. I had won against its fathoms. I had fought off the tendrils of death that came to drag me into the depths of the unknown. I had lived, and I couldn't have felt more alive.

I was laughing in the face of darkness. Its face— I wanted to see its face. I wanted to see it frown and weep in its untimely defeat. I wanted to revel in its dismay while it drowned in its shame. I wanted to look it in its eyes.

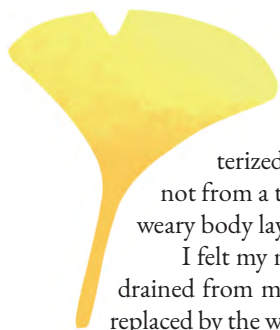
So I opened my own.

I was not greeted by its broken gaze, however.

What stared back at me was not darkness. It was far from it, in fact; my irises were met with a light of stark brilliance, a glow unlike any I had ever before observed. It was white, all-consuming, divine— and it poured outward from the flickering form of a fluorescent bulb.

The ceiling above me— a ceiling, not a leaf-spotted sky— was bedecked with these lights. They shone down upon my skin, blanketing me in the warmth of its touch and cordiality of its reception. I felt, for once, safe. The branch that I had swaddled now bestowed upon me gifts of great fortune, embracing me with its blessings of security and leaving me pacified— simply serene. I was so very grateful. I wanted— no— I needed to thank it.

I glanced over to the branch, its life-giving, gift-giving bark still caged within my grasp. Or so I



expected it to be; however, when my eyes fell upon its slender silhouette, there sat an imposter in its place. For it was not coated in the wrinkled, coarse flesh that so characterized the woodland-born, but a sleek metal that could be only man's creation. It extended not from a tree— instead, the glossy, steel limb grew inward, bolted to a nest of linens in which my weary body lay. It was a bed. A hospital bed. And I was in it.

I felt my muscles, once tense, relax, my head easing upon the pillow as the final drops of terror drained from my blood. Though my bones now ached, the agony in my mind had finally subsided, replaced by the whispers of dismay long gone and the promises of a future free from torment. I knew, at once, that I would never fall again.

With the monitor's song caroling alongside the triumphant beat of my heart, I cast a gaze— jubilant— to the window at my side. Though its frame was quaint and its glass smudged, the splendor of the outside world was no mystery to me. The wind had grown stale in the air, struck dead by forces unknown and leaving its usually lively disciples lame in their tracks. Bushes lay still, trees stood immobile, and the leaves that decorated them— the many, magnificent leaves— clung tightly to their arms. I smiled at the leaves' audacity. It was a sight I might have, at one time, ridiculed, mocked for the impudence that they bore in their graceless lethargy. But such idleness was a courageous feat; to choose persistence, to choose breath— it was a choice far beyond the domain of the faint-hearted. And that was where those leaves, sitting high up in their branches, earned their elegance.

So, yes; I smiled at the leaves. I smiled in spite of the pain coursing through me, and in spite of the bruises and scratches and scars that now lined my lips. And, though my father wasn't here, and though it wasn't quite yet my time to visit him, I was certain he was smiling down at the leaves alongside me. They were sight deserving of a smile, after all. Though the air was barren of their grand ballet, my heart was more than willing to swirl and flutter about in their stead, boasting a rather humorous, unmatched pride as it did so. It— and I, myself— was taken. With those leaf-heavy trees standing guard outside my window, the pirouettes of my heart continued to leap and dance and bound with great grace, theming dreams of autumnal wonder as I found myself lulled to sleep by the beat of its joy.

I admired, with every fragment of that beating heart, the leaves that remained.



# The Bells of Moscow

By Adora Gamage

Thrice they chime, and I find myself amongst a crowd enveloped in black. Amassed around a casket they peer downwards, silent. The barren trees, great shadows overhead, whisper madness on the vengeful wind. Forward, they command. Low is their voice that seeps below my feet, frozen. Forward.

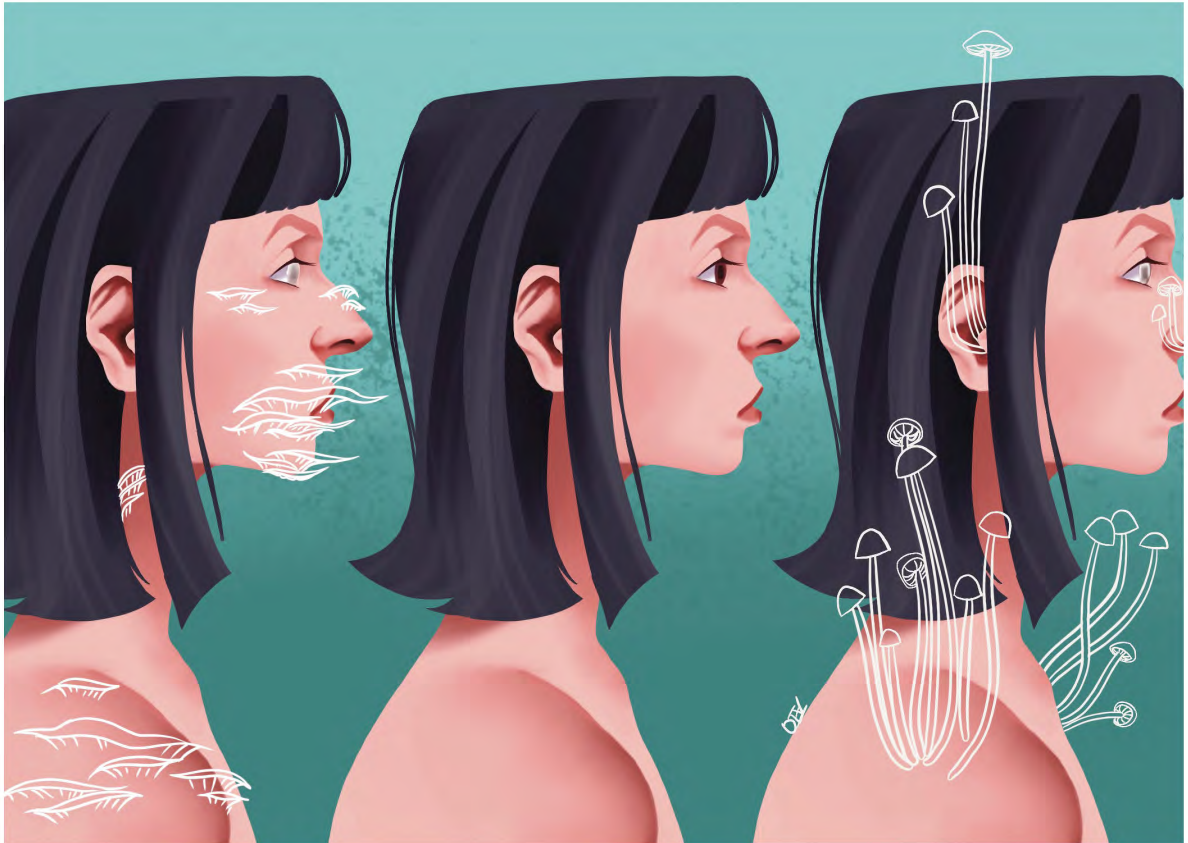
Hesitant, I proceeded down the aisle. Gazes once downcast turn to me, faces empty and eyes vacant but for bewilderment. My pace, quickened, pulse uneasy, beading sweat stinging cold. The faces follow my approach, their stares at my back. The mass of black parts and I peer into the depths.

A scream escapes my lungs at a face familiar, my own. Pale blue skin touched with frost rests within the casket, lifeless, cold. The bells chime, deafening, pounding, reverberating through the ground and into my bones. Thrice they ring, and thrice again. What nightmare is this that the bells command? Thrice they ring, and never again.

# Community

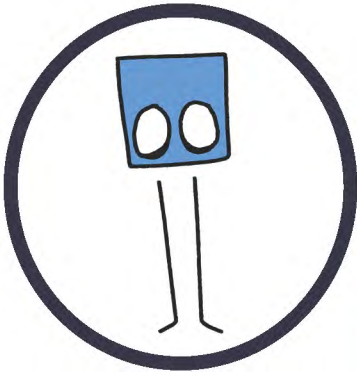
By Olivia McCabe

*Digital painting*





# Meet the Staff



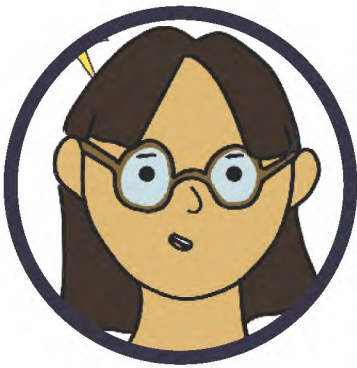
Jesse Beck is a sophomore in the Film department at VCU and spends much of his time drawing, writing, and making fun crafts. He is immensely glad to be a part of Pwatem and hopes to continue adding his flare to upcoming publications.



Reese Cilley is a sophomore in Communication Arts with a minor in Creative Writing. They love illustration, animation, reading, and playing the trumpet. They love Pwatem and hope you enjoy the art direction of this installment!



Jess Soffian is a senior in Communication Arts. After their graduation in December 2023, Jess plans to pursue a career in narrative illustration or concept art, with a special interest in comics. Outside of a school and work, she loves to bake, play music, read graphic novels, and run TTRPGs.



Julia Martinez is a sophomore majoring in mass communications. In her free time, she'll usually watch movies, listen to soundtracks, and take pictures around Richmond.

# Meet the Staff



Kirsten Sturgill is a Communication Arts Major, focusing on storyboarding and animation. They love to draw, watch tv and movies, and play video games. Kirsten hopes to go into animation full time after graduating.



Abby Lacuesta is planning to graduate next year with a B.S. in Urban and Regional Studies and a German minor. Outside of (pwa-tem), they enjoy going to the movies, playing guitar, and spending far too much money on iced coffee.



Jordan Kalafut is a first-year Social Work major and peanut butter & jelly sandwich enthusiast with hopes to work in Harm Reduction after graduation. Jordan enjoys playing Pokémon games, Minecraft, and petting dogs.

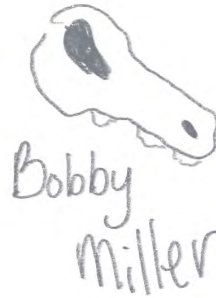


Melody Vang is a freshman in AFO. She plans on majoring in Communication Arts, and enjoys drawing, content creation, and singing in her not so free time. You will probably find her at the library for a minimum of 3 hours a day.



Typeset in EB Garamond font family  
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# Art directors



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