

I'm waiting for you again

Luke Carmichael Valmadrid

a little like you used to wait for me, as if two machines could mix up their timing unless all they thought and all they knew was a little artificial, a pinch of doubt crosses my legs, an insecurity undoes the knot, my hand through my hair almost has a razor's permanence, as if Occam knew it wasn't a person, but a place, as if you would forget me under a tired face, a tired smell, sun and sweat and faded mint, beautiful, natural, and totally lost at the intersection that wasn't ever halfway for either of us, the exhaust fumes, but even exhausted I can't, because the stoplight and the oncoming traffic and all the bad things that happened today can only smile and wave in surrender at your forehead's touch at the base of the back of my neck.

Luke Carmichael Valmadrid enjoys cooking tofu, qualitative research, and playing video games with faraway friends. He hopes to make some music soon.

House of Santelmo
Maria Bolaños

A daughter is a burning candle.
My mother shakes her head,
a white hair for every day I was
a bad child and made her angry.
My job was to pluck them out,
undo the damage done.

A white hair is a wick of dynamite.
I light the ends of my white hairs,
singe them to black. Flames crawl
up the nape of my neck, sizzle
in my ears, and wash my skull in light.

An ate is an apparition in the fog.
I move in migration patterns
swamped in disappointment
hoping this place won't kill me.
I walk across the threshold, scorch
black footprints into carpet.

A day is a box of collected regrets.
I bring my mistakes with me
bubble-wrapped and stacked
like fractures up a spine. I carry them

up a flight of stairs, back burning.

An apartment is a history of empire,

each room a world domination.

My bookshelves go up in flame.

The eggshell paint becomes

charcoal and petroleum,

forests of paper thin dinosaurs

hatching, dying, fossilizing.

A housewarming is a warding

of evil. But holy water, like good

intention, is a thing that seeps

and rusts and ruins. We bless

this house, knowing our demons

gather in the dark corners, ready

to follow us to the next place.

If a family is utang na loob

then is a home the tableau

of how we fail one another?

A Pinay is an angry spirit

constantly burning, always

in some state of packing

and leaving. A body threatened

and threatening to disappear

into the whitening horizon,
the way lightning leaves
a scar of memory on the sea.

Maria Bolaños (she/her/they) is a Filipina-American poet and book reviewer and is committed to building spaces to nurture and showcase Filipinxao literature as well as Black, Indigenous, and POC literature. She is the General Editor for *Marías at Sampaguitas* literary magazine and a 2021 Best of Net nominee. Her writing has been featured in *Touchstone*, *Cut Fruit Collective*, *Antigone*, *CP Quarterly*, and the *International Examiner*, among others. Find her on Instagram @mariabewrites.

Oblivion / Забвение

Ivan de Monbrison

**В карманах глаза
они видят только в темноте.
Но твоя одежда сделана из камня.
Ты ходишь по зеркалам,
они ломаются под твоим весом,
и твой образ тоже разорвал.
Река уже все забыла.
Но забвение
Легко, как воздух,
И глубокий как Память.**

Eyes in the pockets
see only in the dark.
But your clothes are made of stone.
You walk on mirrors;
they break under your weight,
and your image is also torn.
The river has already forgotten everything.
But oblivion
is light as air
and deep as memory is.

Ivan de Monbrison is a poet, writer and artist living in Paris born in 1969. He has studied several languages there after high school, not with great success. Ivan has autistic and schizophrenic tendencies that he has been trying to cope with through art in the past twenty years of his life. His writing and art reflect maybe also the feeling of the decadence of today's society, centered on its own vacuity and its lack of real purpose. He has been published in literary magazines globally. Visit his website at <https://sites.google.com/view/ivan-de-monbrison/home>.

THE DOOR'S OPEN

Heath Joseph Wooten

“If you lived here, you’d be home by now” -Aimee Mann

I don't know how to ask you to stay. That after dinner
and drinks. How much have I lost
between the kitchen table and the couch. My head
on your lap. I don't know how to ask. I look up
at you. You touch my ribs. How much
can I. I suppose I wonder: you come late, and in my bed, you sleep
past noon. You hold me, cradle my chin. Snores push through the dark
like a needle through thread. Do you
blame me? For washing the sheets, for lighting
a candle. For knowing wanting you
is a weakness but not caring. Do you know,
and if you don't, can I tell you: Stay. Come in. You don't have to knock.
Do you. You can. I suppose
I wonder: wanting you. Welcoming you with crossed arms,
some kind of smile. I suppose:
hold me
past noon, until the slant of the light
through the window suggests it's time
to start again.

Heath Joseph Wooten (he/him) is an MFA candidate at Northern Michigan University. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *Von Aegir Literary*, and he drinks way too much Diet Pepsi. You can find his work in or forthcoming from *perhappened*, *Lammergier*, *Eunoia Review*, and others.

pamilya
Daisy Miller-Wells

they woke us with roosters
the roosters woke us up,
rather, when they came to be
too lonely with the sunrise

they sent us out to feed them
sunny pairs of brown girls with
raven hair that baked beneath warm light
and calloused toes from stubborn earth

gathered around plastic kitchen table
with knees on the floor and right hands clean
blessing lolo and tiyo before
sound floods the room, warm and consuming

i was languageless there;
i never learned Kapampangan or Tagalog
i never took up the offer before
life split the path

i find myself returning often
clinging to the rafters of that sturdy family home
with stone walls made to weather monsoons
and a sprawling garden built with care

i long for its lush land, well-loved
its rotating cast of relatives (“you’re so big, nana!”)
its massive windows
and how easily they let the light back into you

how the warm rays guide find you, penetrate,

and guide your distant head back to crashing waves
and fire ants biting your toes
and family

Daisy Miller-Wells (she/her) is a 22-year-old bisexual Filipina undergrad student studying English. Her work will be featured in *the levatio's* "serenity" issue. She tweets @daisyjademw.

Lampreys
Thomas Nuhfer

Lost in the wrong hands
favor sours.
This is hubris and
life changes for the lamprey
loved for nearly three hundred and fifty
million long and lugubrious years.
Then the locks unlock
bring down the dams
ill-begotten flux unfairly won
lures them into the Great Lakes
luxurious and lush with blood
one little bite of everything, lurid tastes
but we loved them. They were our lambs.
Once Lucius Licinius Crassus spoke to Rome:
deliver us out of the jaws of those
whose ferocity cannot get its fill of our blood.
Well, then, deliver us. Do what you must.
But in the Connecticut River
They only come to die. They come to flood.
This is home. Let them return.
Sing them the Lich Wake Dirge.
Now they are done. Now their last bodies
float up forlorn. They long for Labrador.
When Crassus' favorite lamprey died
he wept. Not yet delivered, then.
Thank god. Be not nonplussed.
Love the lamprey. Love Lake Michigan
and kill the lamprey
then regret. In this way be forgiven.
In this way resurrect.

Thomas Winfield Marie Nuhfer (he/him and she/her) is a biologist and poet. After growing up in Tucker, Georgia, Thomas moved to Vermont where he received a BA in Biology & History from Marlboro College. Her work has been previously published by *Tiny Seed Literary Magazine*, and is forthcoming in *GenControlZ Magazine* and *River Heron Review*. Find him on Twitter @deincarnation.

Doodlebug Gauntlet

Clem Flowers

Held tongues flicker in the fog fortune in wrought iron tears hangs on like burnt polyester for the grey mornings and molasses whispers that has gone to rest off in the sugarcane pastures and now the road is filling back up with anger and brake noise and the untended flume of wayward hearts.

Blistered hands & hard howls for hours lulls off into another round of shadow boxing with the dust while every tired eye hope these gentle minutes will—at least, for once—not go the way of wet dental floss before the promise of rapture breaks like a dropped bottle of bohemian beer at some forgotten house party that you swore at the time that you'd never forget because it was the best night of your life

Clem Flowers (they/them) is a poet, eldritch horror, & soft spoken southern transplant living in a mountain's shadow in Utah. In an eternal quest to be the host in constant disbelief in an infomercial. Nb, bi, and queer as the day is long, they live in a cozy apartment with their wonderful wife & sweet calico kitty. They can be found on Twitter @clem_flowers.

yellow fingertips

Fran Fernández Arce

ask me where one might find those who leave you behind
when all the places to go are waiting underground?

I've been trying all winter to put together a picture of your hands
but every lens is caked with a bitter layer of coal dust and grime.

it is the sickness brought by hunger which my head can't stand.
are hands all we have left when legs and hearts fail? ask me

what waits for you when chests begin to cave in and expressions
drift away with time. through dry winters and soggy summers,

I've been scouring all the pieces you may have touched to close
down this almanac of fading fingerprints and stained walls.

ask me about my memory and finish the answer for me.
it's in tatters from all the fragments that smell of you. I can't

fully remember because time is dense and marred by rotted
tea leaves and tobacco imprints on the floor but at one point

you became nothing but furniture and framed moments
of yesterday and before. I dug down with broken, bleeding

fingernails and rabid mouthfuls of dirt to uncover the roots
of this sadness living inside this house. I planted peonies and lilies

and marigolds in the corners of my body to cleanse your perfume
from my skin. ask me what I remember besides the pain

and stillness at night. nothing but those yellow fingertips
and the grief slowly eating away what used to be mine.

Fran Fernández Arce is a Chilean poet currently living in the intersection between Santiago, Chile, and Suffolk, England. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in *Pollux Journal*, *The Selkie*, and *Anamorphoseis*, among others. Find her on Twitter @dylanblue3, or on Instagram @effie.1995.

Two Poems
Matthew Schultz

True Love

I hope you never get
what you deserve.

Reconciliation

Imagine a beach. The Sun
shines Day-Glo orange
against the pale-blue
water that mocks the clouds
with its white capped waves.
An eastern breeze blows each
soft tuft toward the empty
shoreline covered with snow.

Matthew Schultz is the Pushcart Prize-nominated author of two novels: *On Coventry* and *We, The Wanted*. His chapbook, *Parallax*, is available at 2River.org. Matt has poetry collections forthcoming from *Beir Bua Press* and *ELJ Editions* in 2022. Find him on Twitter @eireprof.

The Morpheus Ministry

Huang Runchen

“You’ve got a long day ahead, Lu.”

Her supervisor chuckles sympathetically as he dumps a pile of papers on Lu’s table with a dull thump. Lu sighs and takes another long pull of her coffee, waving him away. There are eleven reports today, a few more than usual. Her assistants should have read most of the information, but she looks over them anyway, just in case.

When she walks into the operation room, Sara and Devan are booting up the Drift and testing its controls. They nod at her, exhausted. Lu notes the rings under their eyes and knows she must look the same. The city has been on high alert lately. The Morpheus Ministry has been running them into the ground with the sheer volume of people that keep flooding in.

Their first patient of the day is pretty standard, an open-and-shut case. Her file says she is a Priya Nagaratnam, recently divorced. Her productivity at work has been slowing down. Her cortisol levels are too high. Could be at risk of depression. Lu finds her bad memories easily on the Drift, the threads of it obviously tangled and uneven. She puts on the Drift goggles, fixes the electrical nodes to her head and lies back on the reclining chair. Devan starts the simulation. The Drift screen comes alive, murky images spreading into sharp focus.

Lu blinks awake, and finds herself in a quaint little cafe, the sunlight pouring through the windows in warm spools of gold. A cafe meet-cute, Lu thinks, typical. She breathes in the smell of coffee and checks that she can still see Devan and Sara in the goggles. They wave at her in reassurance. Satisfied, Lu watches a younger Priya join the queue. Her would-be husband is standing a few places before her. Well, whatever coffee-spilling, shirt-ruining rom-com incident is about to come, it isn’t going to happen.

“Excuse me,” Lu says and taps Priya on the shoulder, smoothly sliding into line behind her. “I feel like I know you from somewhere!”

She makes up some lie about knowing one of her friends, all information gleaned from her folder. Her job here is to stall, until her potential husband-slash-ex is out of the picture. It’s a bit like time travel,

Lu supposes, although less real, because her meddling here will only fade the man's presence in her memories. She talks to her about her engineering degree, her clothes, some boring drivel about her cousin's second baby. He buys his coffee and peacefully exits without so much as a glance at Priya. Mission complete. Lu makes her excuses and leaves Priya at the shop, going into the back alley to launch herself back out of the Drift. She takes a breath of clean, air-conditioned air and opens her eyes back to the blank walls of the operation room. Sara and Devan get her out of the gear, wiping her forehead where sweat had gathered. Drift-jumping always takes a chunk out of her. Lu checks Priya's memory threads. They've straightened out, a little rumpled still, but she would be fine in time. She writes a command to the Agents, because long-time memories like this are sensitive. Soon, she will be moved out of the house they shared and her husband's things relocated. He will be transferred to a company somewhere further out, maybe in another city, an assurance that they might never meet again. Priya should be feeling much better when she wakes up in her old apartment, back to peak working efficiency. She gives her a shot of dopamine just in case. It's merciful, Lu thinks. In the days when the Drift was a publicly marketed service, people paid good money for the same thing anyway. Now you get it done for free. Isn't that lucky?

They send Priya off. Their next patient is—complicated. Lu knows as soon as she sees him. His clothes are muddied, dark browns stains mixing with red. The nurses have cleaned him up as best as they can, but he sports a huge yellowing bruise over one eye and a split lip. He must have been taken in fresh after the workers' strike last night. When she opens up his memory threads, she can tell they had been tampered with before, multiple times. The older threads had been perfunctorily smoothed out, but the recent ones were all scrambled. A tough nut to crack, then. He just kept going down the same paths no matter what they did. Pockmarks that never healed.

His name is Zou Juan, and he's a migrant construction worker. Been in here twice before for inciting workers' riots and the removal of his worst impulses, accordingly. Well, this is his last chance, then. Three strikes and you're out. Beyond a certain point, it's more trouble for the government to spend their resources on remoulding someone to be a better member of society than just eliminating them entirely.

Lu gears herself up and reclines back in the simulator chair. The Drift washes over her. She opens her eyes to find herself running, the cold press of rainwater hammering down on her and the throng of a crowd rushing past. Alarmed, she follows them, but not before glancing behind. The tide is a veritable wall of water behind her; she can see where the first line of half-constructed sea rigs had fallen, the broken bits of brick and sand now floating debris. Christ Almighty, she curses, tripping and stumbling over herself as the crowd surged forward. It's a typhoon. She can't die in the memory, but it feels real all

the same, the acrid taste of panic and fear on her tongue. For a moment, she almost forgets what she's supposed to be doing. Zou Juan, she thinks. Where is he? I have to find him. He's—

There is a figure at the back of the crowd, dragging someone up the beach, shoulders-deep in murky water. It's Zou Juan, she realises with a start. A wave crashes hard into him and separates the two, sending Zou Juan sprawling several miles up the shore by some insane stroke of luck. The other man is lost from sight. He looks back and wails, almost goes charging back into the tide, but someone else pulls him up and hurries him uphill, running, running, running.

Lu ends up at a church with them. She watches Zou Juan huddle with some other men as the nuns and the priest hand out water and blankets all around. The wooden pews are packed. The air smells musty and damp.

“Bai,” Zou Juan is mumbling, jittery, arms around his knees and rocking back and forth. Another man has his hand on his shoulder. “I lost him. How could I—? Lord save us...”

The men talked, hushed. Lu strains to listen. They seem to be getting angrier, more agitated.

“—left us to die. They had us working on those rigs in the middle of a storm.”

“They killed Bai. They did.” Zou Juan's eyes looked wild. “I'm going to the streets. Hell, I'm breaking into the boss' house. He can't get away with this—”

Lu's eyes widened. Of course! She had missed the trigger point because the weather had been so disorienting. She had to save that man from before, take away Zou Juan's revenge craze and change his aggravated memories.

“Sara,” she whispers into her intercom. “Send me back an hour in this memory.” Her surroundings shift, and she is back at the thundering shore, the wind whipping at her hair. This time, she runs against the crowd, fights her way to the sea like a madman. Several people try to stop her but she finally makes it to where Zou Juan is dragging the man named Bai through the water. Bai is unconscious. Lu sees the wave, that huge, deathly thing, in the distance. Reaches out, braces Bai on her back and takes off for dear life, pulling Zou Juan along. The wave hits; she is almost airborne, crashing with Zou Juan and Bai onto the coast. Bai stirs, uneasy. Zou Juan looks up to thank her, but she is already gone, a figment of his imagination.

Lu comes back to herself in the operation room, coughing out the taste of seawater. Sara and Devan hand her water hurriedly, dabbing at her forehead. Her coat is absolutely soaked. As she catches her breath, Devan starts timidly, “there is another flashpoint we have to get to, if you are up for it, ma’am. Or we could take a break—”

“No,” Lu says. She reaches for a needle and jabs it into her arm. Devan looks alarmed but doesn’t stop her. The dopamine enters her bloodstream in a rush, clearing her head. “We’ll be here all day otherwise. And I’ve never been stumped before. We’ve got nine more reports today, kids.”

One more thread to untangle.

This time, she finds herself in a darkened room, lit only by odd pinpoints of light. As her sight adjusts, she realises they are mobile phone flashlights, arranged next to a group of men gathered in a circle. The floor is grimy; her steps stick as she hides behind a nearby bunk bed and peers at the men. Zou Juan is sitting at the head of the circle, gesturing animatedly.

“I’ve contacted them,” he is saying, excited. “The rebels.”

Lu’s eyes widen.

“Tomorrow, we go to the streets. Now we know they wipe your memory afterwards. The rebels gave me this antidote. Drink this before you get arrested, and you stave off the sedative. If you’re conscious enough you could even—”

The scene suddenly stops in front of her. Just pauses, like a video tape. Zou Juan is frozen, in the middle of passing out some bottles among his fellow workers. Lu moves involuntarily, stunned. The air is growing shimmery. She reaches out towards the people and is stopped by an invisible wall, goopy under her fingers but real and solid.

“Sara, Devan,” she says, urgent and afraid. “Stop the Drift right now. I need—”

Fingers close firm around her wrist. She screams, turns to find Zou Juan—another Zou Juan, not the one inside the strange shimmery bubble—behind her. He grins, mean. There is a click of metal sliding against metal, then the cool, sharp feeling of a blade at her throat.

Lu gasps awake for the third time in the white operation room. Sara had pulled the plug. The three of them stare in growing horror as Zou Juan's eyelids flicker and his fingers twitch, and then he is sitting up on the operation table and looking right at them. "Security," Devan yells, pressing the emergency call button urgently. "Security!"

In seconds, he is across the room. Lu's head hurts. There are hands at her throat and she is gasping for breath. Zou Juan's bloodshot eyes blur in her sight.

"Beaten at your own game." He laughs. "Did you think we could move on so easily?"

In the corner of her eye, Lu can see Sara and Devan advancing on him warily. For a moment, she thinks they might get ahold of him, but then Zou Juan turns and hefts Lu against his chest like a meat shield. He grabs a needle and points it at her temple. The two of them back away, frightened.

"Security is coming," Devan says shakily, hands in the air. "You won't get away with this!"

"Bai is dead," Zou Juan continues, ignoring him. "Lots of my friends are dead. I saw you at the sea. You messed with my head and told me he was alive. The next day, the boss said he had been transferred somewhere else, and I accepted it. You think you've won."

The needle pricked her skin. A bead of blood bloomed.

"But how could we ever forget how miserable we are?"

The door bursts open. Security is here at last! She stretches a hand out to a guard, pleading, but he points his gun at her warningly. She draws back, stung. Zou Juan releases her, lets her sink to the floor as he strides over to the security. The rebels, Lu realises belatedly. They got in.

Zou Juan drops something on the floor. Vapour oozes out and begins to fill the room. The men retract their guns and begin filing out through the door.

"We are still here," Zou Juan says. "Don't you dare forget that."

Huang Runchen (she/her) lives in Singapore and gets off her ass to write something like once a year. In her free time, she watches anime, reads fanfiction and pokes holes in every stupid plotline she sees. Mostly, she would like the world to be a kinder place.

Undeniably a Heart

Rachel Canwell

When my father died he left behind his heart.

It tumbled from the box of ashes and broke my brother's toe. After all those years of doubting its existence, now we couldn't even throw it away. A carefully carved piece of the blackest stone, polished smooth. Veins, vessels, arteries, all present, all correct. Anatomically accurate. Complete.

Undeniably my father's.

It had, however, one tiny imperfection. Hidden—but perceptible with fingertips, from top to bottom, running like a seam—was the slightest hairline crack.

Father was a careful man, methodical, precise; he never mislaid things, never forgot things. So how could he have so carelessly left behind his heart?

It fell to me to guard it. My brother, limping, outraged, refused; refused to touch its onyx glow, refused to even acknowledge its existence. So it nestled in my study, amongst other amassed curios... peacock feathers, sea glass.

And now my father's heart.

My grief was complex and consuming: despite the warm June weather, I found that I was chilled through. The insistent sun was unable to lift my spirits; it created instead dark shadows around the man I thought I knew.

My father...

The baby conceived in secret, given up and never reclaimed. The boy whose childhood passed in a string of institutions. Places that taught survival, self reliance and grim determination. Places short on hope.

The man who found family life alien and difficult. Who ran his household like a ship that never found its water.

I rang my brother repeatedly, tried to get him to talk; to help me heal, help me reanimate my father's still-warm corpse. But fear had made him mute and he stopped answering my calls. I was left to deal with things. To sift, to sort the reams of paper, bank books, useless dead objects into some semblance of order. Filled with spite, rage and shame I took to using Father's heart as a paper weight. Made him pin down his own detritus.

Late one night, however, I found a folder. Slim, brown cardboard, uncharacteristically unnamed, whose contents broke my heart.

In those less than twenty close-typed pages I found details of a search: one short search for his mother. Fruitless, long-abandoned, and never spoken of again. As I read each spare, impersonal detail I moved both nearer and further from my father's soul. And again I wept alone. Endless, unseen tears.

Seeking comfort in practicality, I made endless circular phone calls and began the disposal of his things. Bonfires and charity shops became the backdrop of my days.

And in one such junk shop there it was.

Just like my father's. Smaller. Rounder. But essentially the same.

Undeniably a heart.

Hardly breathing, cupping it in shaking hands, I took it to the counter, to the shopkeeper, who looked at it and laughed.

“This strange old thing! Had it years. A house clearance I went to, some old dear. Bought this and a baby photo in a silver frame.”

He draws me in.

“I need to tell you, though. It's got a crack...”

Rachel Canwell is a writer, reader, blogger and teacher, but not always in that order. She is currently working on her first novel and is busy falling in love with flash fiction a little more every day. Find her on Twitter @bookbound2019.

Firsts

Isabelle Ryan

After, he carries me into the bathroom. Two plush towels wait folded on the lid of the toilet; I let my shaky hands stroke them while he prepares the shower, adjusts the temperature, the pressure. We rinse together almost touching, his hand bracketing air around my hip, just in case. My legs tremble but hold. I know I'll ache tomorrow, high up around my thighs, pulling at the small of my back. I'll lie awake awhile, pondering the not unpleasant pain, and wonder what I did that made me sore. I'll stretch, and then I'll know. Now, instead of pain, I feel his absence. He washes me, head bowed and humming. His eyelids are heavy, his lips curved: spent and blissful. I put my arms around his neck and think about moving beneath him, flexing my hips, the reverence of his name in my mouth—wanting and begging and giving as much as I received, or hoping to. I think about the muscles of his back, fluid then taut, a grunt in my neck slurred into a confession (his first). I think about kissing his cheek, his shoulder—whatever I could reach—and his slow, regretful withdrawal, how I wept and touched his face.

Now, he lifts me out of the shower and dries me, drapes a towel around my shoulders. Bashfully, he fingers the smallish purpling marks on my skin, asks if any of them hurt. Grinning, I tell him no, not a bit, and this—pointing at my side—is my favourite. He kisses the bruise: asks forgiveness for and with the culprit. He dries himself and ducks my fingers ruffling his hair to scatter diamond droplets. Foiled, I hug him from behind, nudging my nose into the secret spot at the nape of his neck, searching for his scent, his sweat beneath the soap. He's still damp and warm; loose curls brush my brow. He chuckles. His back shudders and stills. My body moves with the gentle rise and fall beneath his skin, like wings making ready for flight. He takes my hands and kisses them.

In the bedroom, we slip shivering beneath the sheets. He lies flush against me, one hand on my hip. Cherubic curls pillow on my chest; I stroke them, twist them round my fingers, tug gently and release. He sighs, rippling gooseflesh down my legs. I tell him, slowly, how good I feel, and how much I love him. His lips curl against my skin. Then, more slowly still, I tell him I'm glad he was my first. He must have known before today, but the way I gasped and almost came apart on the tips of his fingers would have confirmed it. He set a pace for us, slow and steady for my comfort; I was at once achingly grateful and wanting him more badly than I had thought possible. He props himself up now to look at me. His curls catch gold and silver in the dropping light. He smiles.

Isabelle Ryan is a writer from the UK whose work has previously appeared in *with confetti* and *Not Deer Magazine*, with a piece forthcoming in *Sledgehammer Lit*. Isabelle tweets @Ph4ntomR3q.

I met you at 18

Audrey Fong

Meeting you at 18 was admitting that nothing would ever be the same. Gone was the bored girl who idly passed over boys. She had never been interested anyway. In her place was someone who counted down the minutes until she saw you, memorized every word you said, and etched the curves of your glasses into her mind. For her, the world started and stopped with you. She would've done anything to make sure you achieved the future you dreamed of. We all know that for her every moment with you was cherished and carved into her memory like an insurmountable ravine cutting across the desert stone.

Clear blue skies, the heat searing into her skin, sand burning beneath her feet—she used to picture the coast stretching outwards towards the jungles, the sidewalks sticky with melted bits of leftover ice kachang, the lazy afternoons spent swatting away mosquitos of your youth. She liked to think that the Pacific connected your two worlds and that maybe your backgrounds weren't so different at all. Maybe it wasn't so ridiculous to think that a red string could've connected the two of you since birth, slowly but inevitably pulling the two of you together only to meet on the corner of Washington Square and West 4th Street.

It's been several years since you've last seen her, even longer since you last shared a meal with her. She's forgetting what you sound like and can't recall what your favorite dishes were. She wishes she had written all of these things down. She wonders if your sister still collects stuffed animal giraffes and if you're happy transitioning from being a student to just another body in the workforce. Sometimes she pictures your office, the panoramic window letting in sunshine, and wonders if you ever look out at the still, green sea. Because each time she tries to remember something, anything about you, she reaches outwards to the waves of the Pacific, tugging on the red twine, pulling you home.

Audrey Fong is a Southern California based writer, interested in Asian American narratives and coming of age stories. A graduate of UC Irvine, she is currently pursuing an M.F.A. in fiction at

Chapman University. In her spare time, she enjoys playing with her Insta-famous dog, drinking boba, and listening to alt rock. Find her on Twitter or Instagram @audreyfongfong.

Underdeveloped Wings

Vanessa Maderer

Debilitating waves ripple through my small, rounded stomach, and I'm forced to stop in the hallway to hunch and huff before ambling on into the sterile white examination room.

“Roger, Fiona?” the intern, round-faced and entirely too nonchalant for my liking, jokes. His lopsided grin falters at an utter lack of reaction. “Having some pain today, Fiona?”

I nod, still wincing from that last vise-like squeeze. Ivy-no-Violet-no-Victoria is making it really hard for me to foster that unconditional maternal devotion at the moment, but fear was the real motivation for my rushed journey here. My mum, tight-eyed, had assured me it was just the “practice run”, but unlike her I don't have the luxury of experience to tell the difference. Dave (according to his name badge) hums a prolonged “hmmmm” as if to give the illusion of consideration, but he's already closing my folder.

“Well, Braxton Hicks contractions, as you likely know, can start as early as 6 weeks—”

I cut in, tired and *very* cranky. “They'd cause this much pain? You haven't even examined me.”

“Well,” he repeated, the smile less genuine. I imagine him going to fellow medical professionals later to complain about the difficult new mum who *knows everything*, and warmth ignites in my cheeks. “They tend to be more of a discomfort compared to actual active labor, but many first time mums—such as yourself—with nothing to compare it to are anxious about pre-term delivery.” He pats my arm in what seems meant to be a sympathetic gesture. My lower abdomen yells at me, Violet-no-Veronica (Clementine maybe?) making her presence known. I wipe sweat from my nose to hide the grimace, embarrassed to show pain in the midst of his patronization. “Definitely safe to be sure, Fiona. You were smart to come in, but trust the professionals. This is just your body prepping for final exams.”

Another wide, undeserved grin at his own sad attempt at a joke. Uneasiness joins the rest of the malicious circus going on in my gut, but then I didn't go to medical school.

“Okay...”

But he's already halfway out the door, an obligatory hand waving goodbye behind him. "Head on home, and we'll see you in a few months!"

He's gone before I can respond.

Okay. Trust the doctor. Well, intern. He's read books. He must know. I'm sure he's not the goof-off idiot he seemed like. I'm just cranky, I'm sure.

I look down at my purse on the floor, calculating the level of effort I'd have to expend in order to bend for it. Ivy kicks hard. (Okay, alright. Impatient). It's awkward, but I manage. As I straighten, pure heat radiates up my body, then back down, settling like hot-iron brambles just in the small of my back, twisting insides, and my stomach flips. Fuck. Is this Hicks?

My uncertainty only mounts as, once the nettles settle, I begin to waddle back to my own hovering mother. She smiles reassuringly, but too bright. Looks false.

"He said it's Braxton Hicks," I say, though it comes out like a question.

"Well tha's good, innit?" Relief eases her features, shedding a few years immediately, though the shockingly bright lights here really highlight the silver streaks in her roots. I feel bad dragging her out. Making everyone worry for nothing. Wasting medical professionals' time. I should just listen and go home.

My innards quiver yet again, pulsating in a slow dull stabbing pattern. Clementine (?) kicks again, though I notice this time it feels higher up than normal. I grab onto Mum's arm, trying and failing not to dig my nails in, releasing my exhale in one thin shaky go as the tide swells and, eventually, wanes.

Nope. Nope. Nope. It's not right.

"I'm in labor."

"Fiona?"

"Labor, fuck Hicks." I turn back to regard the reception desk icily as I answer, regaining my ability to feel my legs and therefore use them.

“Are yae sure, Fee? Thae sed—”

I march onward, a pain-fueled bark to the nurse in charge of reception, interrupting my mum’s hesitancy. “I’m having a baby, and I want a real fucking examination because I am *not* planning on a home birth.” Random strangers with ailments of their own glance around, nervous at pregnancy’s hormonal rage, and the receptionist seems unsure as how to proceed. I can almost feel the neurotic expression forming itself in my facial muscles, and the purple pouches hanging beneath my eyes. I throw in a cautioning, “I’ll squat in your goddamn lobby and give birth there,” for good measure, which elicits some degree of panic from those around. Worsening pain shudders down my core (Veronica, please!), leaving my breathing ragged and my skin damp. I essentially repeat this sentiment, loudly, until I’m ushered into a small room and handed a gown, amidst some dirty looks.

Mum, stressed as she is, mutters a quick, “Christ, Fee. Yer Scottish, no’ a sailor.” But she’s never won the profanity debate with me, and this is as good a time as any. It was certainly effective.

The intermittent agony makes my exam feel like a breeze, like an exhale lost in a windstorm. Cold hands? More of a relief than anything. And I guarantee I’m in a worse mood than any nurse I’m inconveniencing. (Damn it, Violet. I love you but damn it). And then the magic words:

“Well shit.” No, the *other* magic words: “You’re having a baby.”

Immediate smugness—medical school my ass—is washed away by a veritable tsunami of fear. A proper doctor is paged, and words like “pre-term” and “26 weeks” float around the room like sinister spectres, eyes locked to snatch Ivy-Lily-no. *My baby*.

Preemies die. Preemies struggle for breath through emaciated lungs.

26 weeks. 3 months early. My baby is lacking a 12 whole weeks’ development. Too many. My eyes leak, nose dripping, cradling my protruding tum as though that may settle her.

And then it’s a whirlwind of epidurals, nurses and doctors, Mum and siblings and Wayne and Wayne’s mum... Even he is anxious about the early arrival of his child.

That damnable vise constricts my midsection again. Victoria is going to be tiny, so why does she feel like an obese elephant? Immediate guilt for that. I’d rather an obese elephant baby than an underdeveloped one.

A hushed and urgent, “8 centimeters dilation,” reaches my ears, and I realize how very near my baby is to taking her first breath... or last.

Fuck.

“Start prepping a delivery room,” another voice echoes.

Am I such a bad mother already that I’m failing at pregnancy? How can I protect my child outside the womb if that very transition from inside out is the threat?

“You ready, Fiona?”

Another wave, a worse one, and my scream isn’t entirely from physical pain.

She’s here.

I can’t stop studying her. She’s like a tiny doll too dainty to be real. Translucent red skin, huge wet violet eyes engulfing half of a delicately crafted skull, like that of a little bird. Spindly limbs are decorated with a scattering of soft white down, glittering in the harsh white lights. Barely two pounds, she squirms in the incubator as though confused why she is back in a womb of sorts.

She’s perfect.

And so when my comedian stepfather tittered, “Congratulations, it’s a monkey,” a wrath 16 hours in the making erupted from my very chest out of my mouth in the form of the only swear I’ve ever directed his way. He was quiet after that.

Lily, I had decided, and even tentatively told select family and friends. And yet, even that gorgeous flower doesn’t seem fragile enough for my baby of paper and glass, my red little girl. None of my previous V’s work either, too regal or sturdy sounding. Her tiny lungs are so underdeveloped that they have to *fight* to flutter enough oxygen through her body.

Flutter.

Something sparks on the periphery of my memory, some half-remembered name barely considered, and with a meaning...

Mum had left my well-worn baby name book—an appropriate symbol of my indecisiveness—with me before heading for food and rest. I leaf through, glancing down at her frequently to ensure she hasn't vanished or broken.

Vivianne? No.

Venus? No, no, no.

Valentina? Definitely not, no...

Where...?

(Vanessa).

Yes.

Vanessa. English in origin. Meaning: Butterfly.

One flits before my mind's eye, pale and flimsy. A butterfly with fragile fluttering wings. That's what snagged my recollection, I see now. Her fragile fluttering little lungs. Maternal warmth pushes the anxieties of my day away, reassured by having found the correct name. I swear it was woven in the tapestry of fate, and maybe it explains my previous indecision. I knew there was a right answer.

I go back to her, close enough to the glass to leave a small little spot of fog on the outside. She wriggles a bit, blinking up with dark little purple buttons, stretching a tiny mouth into a little "o" of a yawn. Go to sleep, I think to her. You're safe cocooned here. Your wings are still growing, wee caterpillar, but they'll be strong and beautiful. You'll see. Your metamorphosis is coming, here in this plastic little chrysalis.

Mum returns, glassy pink eyes of a young new grandmother still evident, silver-streaked blonde wisps pinned up so as to better cry. I smile up at her, as she does back.

“Vanessa,” I introduce. The butterfly coos.

Vanessa Maderer is a young reader-turned-editor, writer, and finally enthusiastic poet who has recently debuted her first chapbook entitled *Cusp of Dusk* after a decade of revision. Now, she has an insatiable appetite for new ideas and themes, and can be found most easily through Twitter at @MadererV.

Atlas Moth

Elizabeth Hay

To the moth that landed in my room on a Friday afternoon: this is what I wanted to tell you when you cried. But I didn't. Instead, I handed you two thin tissues. I circled my arms around you, but I didn't touch you.

I am old enough to see young people as Atlas moths. Hong Kong has aged all of us, speeding up our life cycles like those time-lapse films that show moths and butterflies wrapping themselves up in chrysalides and emerging just a few seconds later, breaking out and unfolding their wings. I feel like I am on the other end of that film, the bit that they don't show, when the flickering ends and the lepidopteran subjects die and fall like leaves.

The English name *Atlas moth* fits the insects it describes in a certain light, obscuring as much as it illuminates. Their wings sometimes seem cartoonishly blown out of proportion, as if they were born into a world that isn't ready for them, or as if they were made for one that has long since disappeared. Like the product of an experiment gone awry, they flap into an under-sized world that makes us question it. If an Atlas moth landed on your palm, the wingspan would go beyond the reach of your outstretched fingers, blotting out your whole hand. But look at that tiny body, and touch a wing: they are brittle and disturbingly delicate. A flick, a tug, or a snap and they would shatter in your hands. It baffles me that we see young people as the strongest among us. In doing so, we burden their newly emerged paper-thin wings with our greatest struggles; their strength, just like the Atlas moth, is an illusion we can convince ourselves of because they seem so bright and bold. Their open-book wings seem etched with maps, routes, a way forward, another kind of atlas. As though they know where to go. It's just another illusion; the young bear marks of hope, not maps of reality.

The Cantonese name for the Atlas moth translates to *snake's head moth*, shows that there is more to the wing patterns than pathways and places. Atlas moths are so big that the tips of their wings can pass as the heads of snakes. Imagine this: a predator emerges, and the moth drops down to the forest floor, mixed up with the dry leaves its autumn-hued body blends so well into, but the lighter tips of the wings—complete with eye-spots, what looks to be a dash of a mouth and even the illusion of reptilian-textured skin—are still visible. The moth writhes and bats its wings, making the dual snake-heads appear raised, ready to bite. Any sensible predator would retreat. But people, people have worked out this mimicry. And they are the worst predators. It makes me think of the defences of our

young people. Often improvised or home-made; their umbrellas, helmets, sticks, sometimes a small float held up like a shield. I see them changing their clothes—black camouflage—and knocking on each other's helmets, checking for each other, making sure they are still in there. Sure, they are, but for how long? I see enough of them caught, writhing on the ground, perhaps wishing they could transform themselves into snakes with the ability to bite. It has reached the point that the struggling is almost a relief for us observers, despite the bleeding: the writhing is proof that they are still alive. But things changed and they started to leave. I would get messages from them in Canada or London or Berlin. They would be working in a warehouse, at a university, looking for work and telling me not to worry, that they had the money their mother left when she died, or caving and taking the job they didn't want in a vaguely Hong Kong themed restaurant. One even jokingly told me that the staff ate better food than the patrons.

Atlas moths don't eat. They don't even have a mouth. They are only moths, in their bold and beautiful phase for a few hungry days. They have sex, lay eggs, and die. That singularity of purpose, there's an inevitability to it. And a purity: *I put all of myself into this and this is all I will do*. Moths can't accept they will die. They're moths. Young people, though: they have accepted too much. They've weighed it up, the chances of their dying or worse. They write letters to their families, their boyfriends, their contemporaries who might be with them or overseas or in prison or floating face-down in the ocean or splattered remains, somewhere. They send their thanks, apologize to them, and accept what might result from what they are willing to do. What we others, we who with our silence in lieu of support, haven't done is accepted their sacrifice. It is too much.

Atlas moths, like all moths, are guided by the ultraviolet part of the light spectrum that is invisible to us. The light can drive them to hurt themselves over and over again. Somehow the size of their broad kite-like wings makes it sadder when they fry their little bodies, the chrysalides that house their changing form being so big that they can be used as coin purses.

The silk of Atlas moths is strong because it is secreted in broken strands. It's not the smooth, long fibres that make delicate silk scarves; it's a thick and wooly silk that makes blankets. I wish we didn't take it away from them. But they keep emerging, climbing out with huge, strong wings. Stronger than we feel because we are tired, and worn, and compromised. But young people: are they Atlas moths, or snake's head moths, or another name that we wouldn't understand? It doesn't matter. They're a few beats of the wings, a surge of potential, and the flicker of over-sized hopes in a world we made too small.

Elizabeth Hay works and lives in Hong Kong. Her writing has appeared in *Cha* and *Cicada* and *Stories on the Nature of Cities*.

Content Warnings (CW):
domestic abuse, sexual assault

The High Wire

Cynthia McDonald

When I was four, my mother took me to the circus. I remember watching a man on the high wire, far above the crowd. He attempted to perform a stunt and slipped. In my memory he falls in slow motion. I can still hear the thud that echoed throughout the tent when his body landed on the ground. There was no net.

Can you picture it?

People like to use phrases like *life is a journey* and *follow your path*. My life has never been as easy as walking on a path or following a road of signposts. Instead, I envision myself on that high wire, holding the weighted bar the performer used when he walked across from one platform to the other. Each careful step made us hold our breaths, and when the bar rocked and his foot wobbled on the wire, the crowd would collectively gasp.

Can you hear it?

At two, my father whipped me with a leather belt. I don't remember why. I do remember he and my mother inspecting my flesh for visible marks to ensure others wouldn't be able to see. He would pull off his belt, bending it in half and snapping it in warning when I was committing some transgression worthy of another spanking. When I was three, I repeated a swear I had overheard. The punishment was holding wine vinegar in my mouth for a full minute. I failed the first time and so I had to do it again.

Can you taste it?

At five, my mother brought home her new boyfriend, having divorced my father. They moved in together, and it was only a few months before he started touching me, then taking it further and further. This would last for the next ten years. I received my first scar from him, a inconsequential scar that merely came from his fingernail cutting into my hand when he grabbed it. Sometimes I look at it, a

small white line that has never gone away, a reminder of a time when the balance bar leaned so far my single foot nearly lost its grip on that thin wire.

Can you see it?

When I was thirteen, I was walking alone on a country road near our home when a man stopped to ask for directions. While I was explaining, pointing the way, he grabbed my arm, climbed out, and forced me into the ditch and raped me. I laid there as he drove away, in the damp fall leaves, used as I had always been. After a while I got up and went home. No one there was worth telling. Leaves still clung to my hair and clothes.

Can you smell it?

Finally, I escaped. Adulthood appeared to be the time when the bar in my hands would steady, and my feet would plant firmly on the wire beneath me. The worst was behind me. Married and supported, raising children, we struggled to support ourselves but made it work. Then I was diagnosed with a back disorder that caused my disks to fail, one by one, and the back surgeries began, one by one. Slowly I lost my mobility and learned what chronic pain was like.

Can you feel it?

I worked through the pain after each surgery. I went to college. I found my calling and the dream job I had wanted. The place that hired me accommodated my disabilities and I was good at it. As good as I had dreamed. Then, after a seizure, I was diagnosed with a brain tumor. It turned out to be a slow growing cancer. I was forced to leave my dream job because I no longer had the ability to perform my duties.

Can you bear it?

My whole life I have suffered stomach pain, bloating, headaches, and other issues. I saw GI after GI and none could ever find a cause. I had several diagnoses, and each turned out to be wrong. Last year a GI decided to do a biopsy on a whim and discovered a rare genetic condition that makes it impossible for me to digest lactase, sugar, and starch. I have been sick all my life because of the food I have been eating. Now I can eat only a very few foods, just meat and five or six vegetables and berries.

Can you miss it?

This balancing act is exhausting. I hold the bar in my trembling hands, keeping it so carefully in place. If it leans too far one way or the other, I will fall. My feet must curl around the wire, never flat, always curling, gripping tightly, or I will fall. There is no net.

Can you hold on?

I am not old. For so many, the *path*, the *road*, is long, so long they cannot see the distant end that inevitably comes for us all, so they ignore it and pretend it is not there. I do not get to do that. The tumor in my head is growing again and will inevitably kill me.

I still have much to live for. I have found a new career that suits my abilities, I have adult children, I have a wonderful relationship I would like to continue. I have a young grandson whom I would like to be around for long enough for him to remember me.

I can see the end of the wire. It is closer for me, not an ending out of sight I can ignore. As I move forward, balancing my bar, gripping the wire with my feet, I can see the wire fraying. Each individual wire popping loose, reducing the tension of the wire, getting closer to releasing it from that platform at the other end.

Can you say goodbye?

Cynthia McDonald is a disabled, bisexual, dog-loving mom of two kids in their 30s who still thinks she's 32 years old. She recently moved to Oregon because after living in Wisconsin for most of her life she realized she really hated it and cold and snow sucks. Now she is visiting the ocean whenever she can, savoring the mountain views, and spending as much time as possible with her 3-year-old grandson who she thinks is the greatest kid in the world. She writes full time. She has brain cancer, but it does not have her. Find her on Twitter @mccind72 and on Facebook and Instagram @ISeeYourHearts.