

LEAVINGS



August 2021

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Let's Begin

Alexandra Davies

It's so good to be back while everything around us is going wrong. Perhaps it's a distraction—stare at art and avoid the news. *Everything is in decline!* Perhaps this is the answer to our problems. Not the external, for we cannot singularly repair the people suffering around us, or even the places and countries falling to fragments. No, it's the existential repair. Whether we're stuck in silence or drowned out by terror, there are still voices. Steady voices. Voices with words that shoot across pages and read so sweet that the page might as well be made of honey. Voices that do not know you but recognize the sensitivities that bind themselves around all our bodies. Small releases from loneliness. It's so good to be back with this issue of *Leavings*—to hear these voices pour their stories out of the page.

Danika Stegeman LeMay begins with "Astral Projection," a verbalization of fluidity-- or lack thereof in relationships. Water cannot survive in a desert but can cause destruction. Maybe it's desire, the unattainable, that causes destruction. Ajay Sawant follows with "Old Day Hide Space." I am drawn and stuck by this cascade of images. The food and its actions, the body and its unrehearsed movements. Then there is "Your Mother Dies" by Noa Saunders, an etching of grief scorched into the pages. I'm burnt by the undercutting lines "finding her like finding water damage was not-long-expected / after the new year." To write about the grief of another is not a simple task, but Saunders paints the scene so precisely like a flaming Rembrandt.

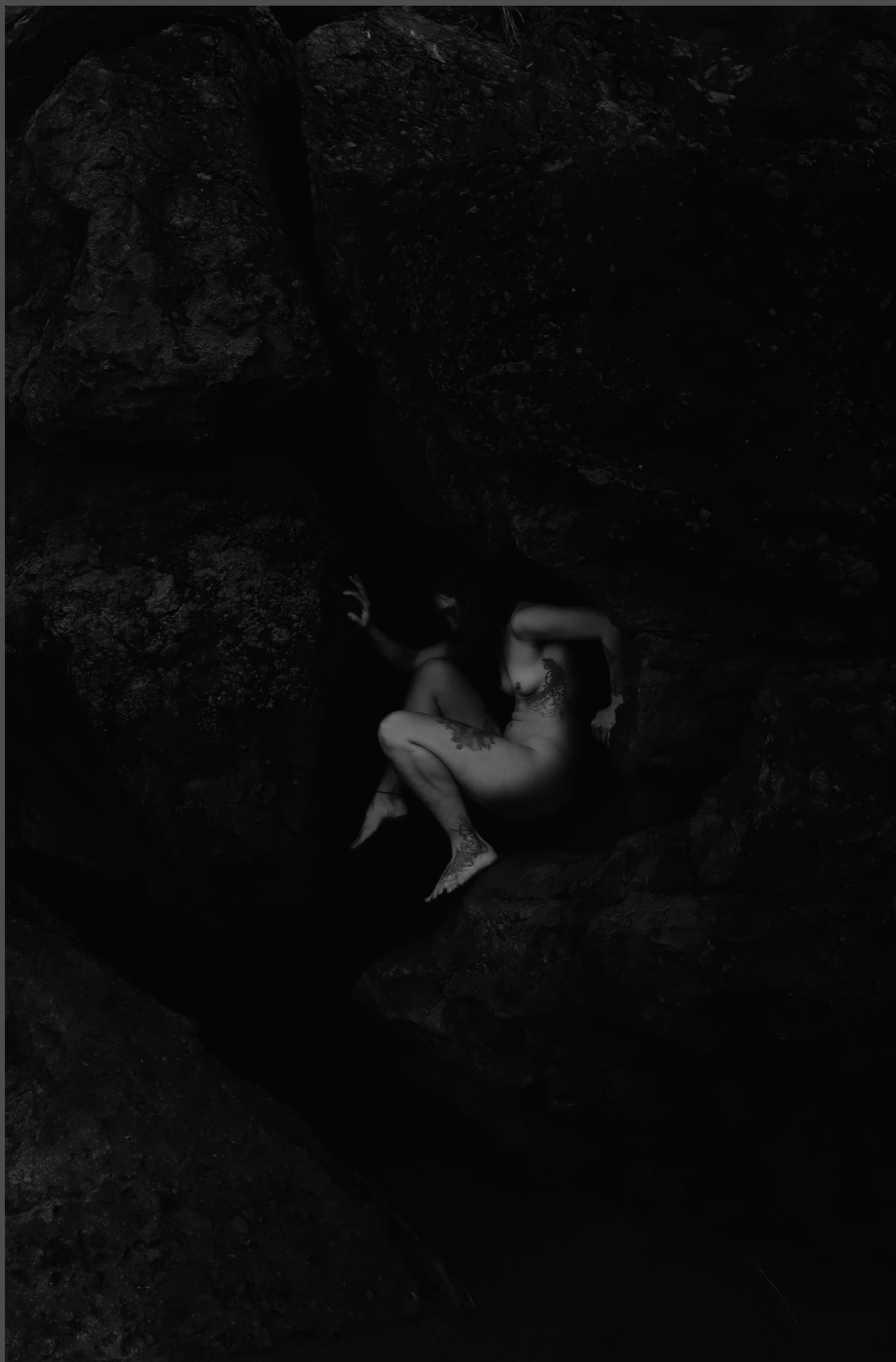
Apurva Raghu's "Hair" is as relatable as it is honest. It's the attachment, the way one brushes the hair out of their face upon reading this and pauses to wonder what it feels like to lose something so seemingly permanent.

It's the fact that we've all witnessed this story but never attain the ability to stop the sorrow. Clara Burghlelea's "Prologue" follows Saunders in the examination of grief. We are present for her suffering, the acceptance of loss that comes quickly and leaves itself a mess on the page.

I am pulled by the pairing of Lucas Jorgensen's "Cruelty" and Obáfémi Thanni's "Bloodseeds." It's nature—the vibrancy in the face of brutality. It is growth, the boy turning into something new. Something harder. While Jorgensen points out the chaos of boyhood (does the salamander understand its sacrifice?), Thanni sharpens the image (can the roses hear the hurt the thorns cause?). Then there is Despy Boutris' "Self-Portrait as Creek," a statement of want in a space that does not allow for giving. Wanting to go back to a space that does not exist. Boutris' desire to be something so simple is universal in these unrelenting and stressful times.

Aysha Qazi's "Traces of Sand" is a tremendous testimony to memory. The myth-making terror in these words creates a portrait of a suffering land and people. I'm in awe of the lines, "they said if you move, you'll shatter / from the core and cracks will make/their way to your edges until there is / nothing left but shards of history / and their puncture wounds." To move away from a homeland is to take the broken pieces of memory with you. Philip Kennedy-Grant's "Shakedown" starts at the edge of the sea. There's something satirically Fitzgerald-like about his characters; the sails and boating clubs, the popped polo collars and martinis. I couldn't drink with these characters, but maybe you could.

At the end we're left with three poems. Jack Jung's "Carnival" is a movement of sound across the page. A textbook example of consonance. Nicole Callihan's "grief being somewhat symmetrical" rips apart the bond of parents and children. We see shades of grief transform to shame at the ending edge of the poem. Its brutality recalls Sarah Rose Etter's *The Book of X*. Finally, there is Samantha Liming's "Escape." Escape from what? The humdrum moments of life, of the capitalism blues, maybe it's the fear that we'll all be stuck in our terrible apartments for the rest of our lives? I see myself in this poem. I see most people I know in this poem. The only way out is through imagination, a photograph that gives way to daydreams. •



Astral Projection

Danika Stegeman LeMay

We come from antithetical environments that engender
polarized types of suffering.

I was born in winter, amid lakes sheeted in ice 16" thick.

You were born in a desert in spring, when the heat is
stifled and rain is possible.

Our temperatures fluctuate between -3°F and 63°F
for a maximum difference of 66°F and a mean of
33°F.

We meet at a point just above freezing.

Sometimes I'm trying to inhabit your ecosystem,
and sometimes I'm trying to imagine you into mine.

You don't know what winter feels like.

Once, in the desert, I fainted outside a motel lobby
with smoke in my lungs, disarranged
in the pre-dawn eeriness.

In a faint, I enter an unfamiliar life mid-
stream and exist there for seconds at a time.

When I resurface, I'm left with a flashpoint of other-life
that must belong to you.

The desert desires water and takes it.

Home, I trudge through a snow-covered forest
to an open field, make a U-turn and shadow myself
back.

It's easy to forget snow is just crystallized water
piled up; it'll seep underground eventually.

Water is an offering whatever form it chooses.

The desert is most radiant in a flood.

The leading cause of death in the desert isn't dehydration
but sudden drowning.

The belief that drowning is the most painful way to die,
while freezing culminates in euphoria, turns out to be
apocryphal.

When I look up "is drowning painful" the third search result
is a suicide hotline.

I find this somewhat comforting.

I faint when I'm sick.

I faint when I give blood.

I faint in large crowds.

I faint in dry heat.

Each time, I arrive in the place I first saw you.

I deconstruct the desert in brief intervals
to take inventory.

I separate the prickly pear cacti from the
long-needled diamond cholla,
place the snakes near the red rock
and the chalk dudleya near the limestone.

I conceal the scant clouds well-distant from the night sky
because what I want more than anything is to see the stars
pierce it.

I listen for the cascade of water.

Tossed for luck, I wake to taste the glint of pennies
rolling in a creek's mouth.

I keep you with me for seconds at a time.

Old Day Hide Space*Ajay Sawant*

Brisket grilled on
stake [Kalimir] pepper
brinkered into

open air The thickness
frizzled, the hair
ripe, the skin

pliant in burnt stomach, nose coiffed
red a plump pimple in hide
I know I am reviled so much

blank, destroyed and lemons
lavender field, nectarly clouds and blue
headache This glory

is a beautiful terror, checkbox
sore collar and midnight
rain in fever

Your Mother Dies*Noa Saunders*

She had gotten trapped between the walls of the house, an irregular paper star

folded in a leather womb.

In my imagination fixed as a painter or cleaner there as normally

collecting wrong answers and buttons

and leaving not a trace.

Finding her like finding water damage was not-long-expected
after the new year.

The parlor caught Columbus Sunday in Spring light,
grass like heaven's chill slowing the blood.

I remember you as a griever, non-eater, with no
open words. Your father was finally alone

but-with-what alone, standing above her in the yard. The pair
you made was two left feet with shoes on.

Dreamchoked in the orange morning, nothing
could get me to tell you. Not the wide-smiling door

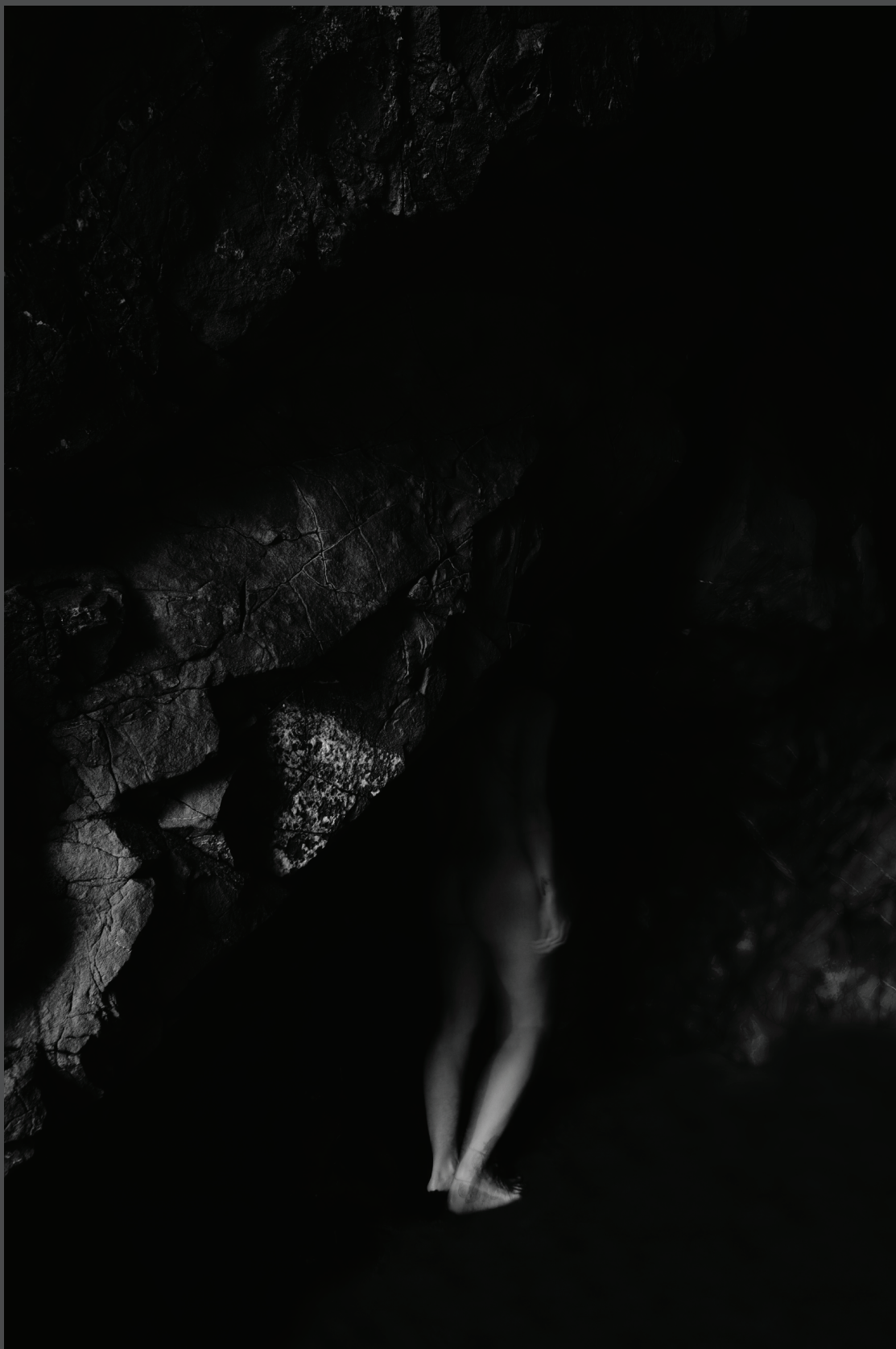
of our room, not your own terrors
wherein I, a box carcass, sound the mort nightly.

Not while we're alive at least when your skin spikes
in the dark and in the light your eyes soak me up.

What an immemorable piece of myself I have here
left with me.

You were slipping off the bed, mouth in mock-scream
like a child, I peered down the well that opened you

and the silver at the bottom peered back. Don't go.



Hair

Apurva Raghu

“Ow! You’re pulling too hard!” Nandini reached up to touch the back of her head, giving her sister a reproachful glare. Kavya just smiled, gently prying away her fingers and running the comb through Nandini’s hair again, this time considerably slower. Nandini gritted her teeth as the comb struggled to fight through the tangles, finally gliding to the bottom of her hair with a rough sweep. She felt a light pull as Kavya parted her hair and began taming it into a thick braid, humming softly to herself.

“There we go,” Kavya said. “The worst of it is over.”

For twelve-year-old Nandini Varma, her hair was her greatest treasure. Nandini never considered herself to be extraordinarily smart or charismatic, but if there was one thing she could pride herself in it was the hair on her head. Layers of dark glossy strands bounced over her shoulders, coiling delicately to frame her face and tapering off below her chin. Nandini and Kavya had spent years caring for their hair with moisturizing oils, deep conditioners, and a multiple-hour wash routine, and it had taken Nandini just as many years to begin appreciating the beauty of what she was given. Her thick black curls had once been rough and frizzy, a subject of great mockery. The words thrown at her so long ago sometimes whispered at the back of her mind, reminding her the consequences of losing what she had worked so hard to perfect.

A group of elementary school girls crowded around the bathroom mirror, fawning over the tall blond girl

standing in the middle. The girl tossed her hair over her shoulder and flashed a confident smile towards her admirers.

“Wow, your hair always looks amazing, Rachel!” one girl cooed. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“I know. Yours is okay but it’s definitely not as great as mine,” Rachel agreed.

The girl nodded, her smile shrinking slightly. Another girl behind her put a hand on her shoulder.

“Hey, don’t feel bad. At least your hair isn’t the worst in the school. Have you seen Nandini’s?”

Nandini’s eyes widened as she crouched lower in the bathroom stall, hoping none of the girls would hear her. She had run off to eat lunch where none of them could bother her, but it felt like they somehow always managed to find her regardless.

“Oh hers is awful,” the other girl responded in a low voice. “It’s so frizzy and curly. Every time I see it, I want to just pull it off her head.”

Rachel’s mouth morphed into a smirk and a chill ran down Nandini’s body. She turned around, her gaze landing directly on the stall Nandini was in.

“Why not try it?” Rachel said, her voice sickly sweet. “Right, Nandini?”

The stall door was kicked open as Rachel stepped inside. Nandini backed up against the wall to try and hide, but to no avail.

“Please,” Nandini begged softly. “Don’t do this.”

Rachel ignored her pleas, grabbing a fistful of Nandini’s hair and running it between her fingers. Her eyes narrowed and when they met Nandini’s, there was nothing in them but raw hatred. Before Nandini could react, Rachel pulled hard, a sharp pain radiating across Nandini’s skull. A loud tearing sound could be heard throughout the bathroom, followed by the laughs of all the girls.

“It almost looks better, don’t you think?” Rachel said, dropping the lock of Nandini’s hair to the ground. “Come on, girls, lunch is almost over.”

Hot tears flowed down Nandini’s face as she was left alone in the bathroom, only kept company by the awful throbbing of her head. Before she knew it, she was running as far as her feet would take her, no thought except to escape this hell she was trapped in. She ran with Rachel’s harsh words chasing at her heels. She ran until her school was nothing but a tiny spot in the distance. She ran until she saw somewhere she knew she could be safe.

Nandini ran into the field behind the middle school

where her sister was outside for recess. She slammed her back against the school's wall and shrunk down, hiccupping quietly to mask her sobs. A shadow fell over her as a person stepped closer and blocked out the sun.

"Nandini?" Kavya's voice asked. A gentle hand brushed against the throbbing part of her scalp. "Who did this?"

Nandini stared at her sister kneeling in front of her, swiping at her tears. "Rachel."

A dark look passed over Kavya's eyes and she hoisted Nandini up, putting an arm around her shoulder. "Don't you dare listen to a word that horrible girl says. Let's go home. We can fix this, don't worry."

"What about school?"

"Forget about it. Mom will tell them something."

The pain seemed to fade slightly as Kavya's warm arms wrapped around her. Nandini fell in step with her sister, wishing for a day in the future where she could hold her chin up high, just like Kavya was doing for her.

Such events had tapered off once Nandini started middle school. Years of meticulous hair care routines had brought life back into what Nandini had felt ashamed of and her hair was now met with eyes of envy, even from girls such as Rachel.

Nandini had long since stopped caring what others thought of her hair. She loved it and that was what mattered. Yet even the greatest of things could use some work and there was still someone's hair she wanted it to become like one day. She briefly craned behind her, glimpsing the luxurious waves that cascaded down her sister's back. "I wish my hair was more like yours. It's so beautiful and long."

Kavya laughed, the sound filling Nandini with such delight she almost forgot about the memory from before. "In time. Just let it grow, put oil in it like I did today, and before you know it your hair will be even longer than mine."

"I like it better when you put the oil in my hair," Nandini said. The thought of having to care for her hair alone made the cozy warmth of the room seem to recede, replaced by a sort of lonely coldness.

She handed Kavya the hair tie and watched as she finished the braid, giving Nandini a playful tug after tying it. She wrapped her arms around Nandini and placed her chin on her shoulder, meeting her eyes in the mirror.

"I'll always be here to do it for you, then," Kavya

promised. "Don't you worry."

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Nandini leaned over her math homework, tapping her pencil to her chin as she tried to recall how to factor trinomials. A sudden chill rushed through her despite the afternoon sunlight pouring through the window and she shivered, pulling her sweater around her tighter. Had Kavya forgotten to turn on the heat again? Shrugging the thought away, she turned back to her assignment, but not before feeling a warm liquid run down her face, tickling the bottom of her nose. Nandini lifted her hand, only to have it return with bright red blood staining her fingertips. Her heart quickened and she bounded up the stairs, racing to the bathroom.

"What's wrong?" Kavya called from downstairs, as she heard the commotion above. She began climbing up the stairs and met her sister in the bathroom. The blood had begun to stream down her face and a metallic taste entered her mouth. Instinctively, she tilted her head back to ensure no blood would fall and stain her clothes. Kavya pulled tissues from the tissue box and handed them to Nandini.

"Apply pressure," she said, and Nandini pressed the tissues to her nose and squeezed, grateful when the blood began to cease flowing. Of course, Nandini was getting used to the routine by now. The sixth nosebleed in a week. And they were not quick, minor nosebleeds, stopped with one tissue, but heavy, long, drawn-out affairs. Kavya wetted a wad of toilet paper and began mopping the rusty blood from Nandini's face. Her eyes widened as she touched Nandini's skin and she brought another hand up to her forehead. "You're burning up."

Nandini shivered again, leaning against the bathroom wall as a sense of exhaustion filled her. She watched as Kavya stepped out of the room and returned with her phone, dialing their mother's number. Long shifts and working two jobs had meant Nandini's mom was rarely to be seen at home, often leaving seventeen-year-old Kavya to do much of the work around the house. Nandini tried to help where she could, but there were some things she didn't know how to do even if she wished she did. After a few moments, Kavya shut off the phone and turned to

Nandini.

"I'm taking you to the doctor's," she said. "Between your fever and nosebleeds, mom and I are getting worried."

Nandini's heart started speeding up again, her breath becoming shallow. "Is something wrong with me?"

Kavya shook her head. "Hopefully, it's nothing major, but we want to make sure." Her expression fell as she watched Nandini continuing to shiver, gripping the tissues pressed against her nose. "Come here," Kavya said, holding out her arms.

She pulled Nandini into a warm hug before gently turning her around and running her fingers through her hair. Nandini felt her racing heart begin to slow as Kavya braided her hair into the intricate 5-strand braid she always did to calm her down. As the final strands were pulled back, the trickling from her nose stopped and Nandini placed the tissue on the counter. She grabbed another coat from her room and followed Kavya out the bathroom door.

The drive to the doctor's office felt impossibly long. A tense silence seemed to fill the car. Nandini tried to look out the window and watch the leafless trees near the road fly by, but it was difficult with Kavya's constant worried looks.

Ever since they were little, Kavya had been the one for Nandini to run to. When she'd had an awful nightmare that would make her heart race and force her awake in a cold sweat, Kavya was always immediately by her side, holding Nandini's hands until the darkness faded away. When their mom and dad had screamed at the top of their lungs, words of hatred echoing through the house until a slammed door and cold silence was all that was left, Kavya had told her stories of a land far away where the sun shone and everyone smiled. When Nandini had come home from school, her face stained with tear tracks and choked words spilling out faster than she could stop them, Kavya was the one to reassure her that, no, her hair wasn't ugly and, no, her friends didn't know what they were talking about.

But never once had Nandini seen such a worried look on Kavya's face. The car came to a screeching halt and Nandini glanced out the window to see a familiar red building. She grabbed a handful of tissues in case the bleeding started again and followed Kavya through the wooden doors, taking a seat on a worn old chair.

The harsh fluorescent lights of the office seemed to bear down on her and she settled for closing her eyes while Kavya spoke with the receptionist.

"Dr. Stevenson will see you now," a voice spoke from the inner doorway. Nandini rose to her feet as Kavya placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, and made her way down the long hallway into another white-lit room.

They waited, Nandini fiddling with the tissues in her pocket and Kavya tapping her foot on the cold linoleum floor. A young dark-haired doctor finally stepped through the door, greeting Nandini and Kavya with a small smile. Nandini sat quietly as Kavya told him about her symptoms, speaking only briefly about what she remembered from the past week.

"The nosebleeds might just be because of the dry air. As for the fever and tiredness, a viral infection has been going around, so maybe you caught something from school?" Dr. Stevenson asked. Nandini shrugged. Her friend had been sick in science class, so it was possible. She told Dr. Stevenson just as so and he noted it down. "I do want to rule out any other possibilities. I've written up a lab slip for your blood test, Nandini, just to make sure."

Nandini nodded as Kavya accepted the small slip of paper from the doctor's hand. If both the doctor and Kavya said it was probably nothing, she had nothing to worry about, right? Everything would be okay.

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Everything was not okay. Nandini had been called into the doctor's office again, this time accompanied by Kavya and her mother. The doctor had spoken on the phone about coming in as soon as possible. Fear began welling up inside Nandini again and she swallowed thickly as the doctor stepped into the room.

Dr. Stevenson's usually playful expression had sobered and when he smiled politely, it didn't quite reach his eyes. He placed the lab results down on the desk, out of view, and sat down across from Nandini and her family.

"The test results came back," he stated slowly, leaning forward and clasping his hands. "Nandini, we have a strong reason to believe you have acute lymphoblastic leukemia. It is a cancer of the blood."

Nandini froze. She stared at the doctor, wondering

if she had heard him correctly.

The doctor glanced at Nandini's expression and then the horrified looks on her mother and sister's faces. After a moment, he continued speaking, his voice solid and sympathetic.

"The survival rate is high, about 90%. The next steps would be a bone marrow biopsy to confirm the blood test results," he said. He turned to Nandini's mother and Kavya. "If the cancer is confirmed, we would want to start chemotherapy as soon as possible." Silent tears flowed down Nandini's cheeks and she watched numbly as her mother asked the doctor more questions about the biopsy, her symptoms, the treatment. The words seemed to quiet around her and Nandini just sat, feeling like a stranger watching someone else's life unfold. Only after a long car ride home and stepping into her room with Kavya behind her did the truth begin to sink in. She thought back to all the symptoms and the reassurances that had been offered to her, whipping around to face her sister.

"You said it was probably nothing!" Nandini screamed, red-hot anger blurring her vision. "You lied to me!"

Kavya's eyes widened. She stared for a moment, before bursting into tears. "I'm sorry," she cried. "I didn't know. How could I have known?"

She pulled Nandini into her arms, holding her shaking body tightly and running her fingers through her hair until the blazing anger had faded and all that was left was despair.

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It had been three weeks since the blood test. A dully painful scar lay on the back of Nandini's hip, a reminder of the diagnosis which had now been confirmed. Nandini spent her days at the hospital with pinching of needles and the smell of alcohol filling her waking hours. The cycle seemed endless and Nandini grew to hate those white fluorescent lights that judged her as she sat, yet again waiting to see what next steps the doctors would suggest.

Kavya was with her every step of the way, not leaving her side just as she had promised. She put on a supportive smile for Nandini every day, but Nandini could hear her quiet sobs from her room every night as she struggled to fall asleep. She hated the pain she was

causing her sister and she wished there was some way to make it disappear.

That night, Nandini found herself standing outside Kavya's door holding a bottle of oil and a small brown comb. She knocked softly and heard the sniffling stop as Kavya opened the door and greeted her with a smile.

"Can you do my hair?" Nandini asked.

Kavya nodded, swiping at her eyes and beckoning for Nandini to come inside the room. She brushed the oil into Nandini's hair gently, far more gently than she had ever done before. Nandini leaned back and relished the feeling of her sister's fingers running through the tangled strands, looking for some semblance of normalcy and comfort.

With a final tug of her braid, Kavya rested her hands on Nandini's shoulders. "You should get to bed. I'm taking you to another doctor's appointment tomorrow."

Nandini's heart sank at the thought of being in that cold, bright room again. She rose from the chair and stepped to the door, the warm calm of Kavya's room quickly leaving her.

"Goodnight, Kavya."

"Goodnight, Nandini."

The next morning was spent at the hospital as usual. Nandini fiddled with her fingers as she sat in the white-lit room again, waiting to see what the doctors would suggest this time. A familiar blonde woman stepped through the door, smoothing down her white coat and jotting notes on her clipboard. The last time Nandini had seen this doctor, Dr. Miller, was the day they had confirmed the bone marrow biopsy. From what Nandini remembered, she seemed to lead the team of pediatric oncology fellows.

"Hi, Nandini, how are you doing today?" Dr. Miller asked sweetly.

"I'm alright, I guess."

Dr. Miller smiled. "That's good to hear. I know the hospital visits the past few weeks have been tiring, but we're hoping these next treatments will help you not have to come here much longer. How does that sound?"

A small smile grew on Nandini's face. "That sounds pretty nice."

"The next steps are going to be difficult, but you're a really brave girl," Dr. Miller said. "We think it is a good

time to start chemotherapy. It might hurt for a while but after that, the hope is you will be all better.”

“Doctor, are there any side effects?” Kavya asked.

The doctor nodded. “It varies from person to person, but some ones we commonly see are nausea, vomiting, and hair loss.”

Nandini’s eyes widened and she reached up to touch her hair, meticulously braided back by Kavya that morning. She glanced at the beautiful, long curls tucked behind her sister’s ears and then back at the braid clutched in her hand.

“Hair loss?” Nandini repeated.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Dr. Miller said. “I’m so very sorry, but chemotherapy is the best option to treat this type of cancer quickly.”

The lights bore down on Nandini again, reminding her of the gravity of the situation. She thought of all the nights she had spent with Kavya brushing her hair, hoping one day it could be as perfect as her sister’s. She thought of the thick curls always bound back in a loose braid. She thought of all that gone and walking around with a bald head.

Then she thought of herself dead.

“I understand,” Nandini said.

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Nandini pulled her hair tie out of her hair, standing up in front of the toilet. She watched as a large, black clump fell to the ground and leaned down to pick it up, recoiling from the second wave of nausea that passed through her. As the dark strands joined their family at the base of the trash can, Nandini caught a glimpse of her reflection in the bathroom mirror, recoiling at what she saw. Thin wisps of hair were all that was left, hanging around patches of brown skin that reflected the bathroom light. Nandini stared at the reflection, an awful kind of horror filling her stomach, but somehow being unable to look away. Then it hit her.

This was not someone else standing in front of her. This was her.

This was what she looked like now.

The hair that she had painstakingly put years of effort into perfecting was gone. The one thing that made her beautiful, that made her worthwhile had disappeared and all she was left with was a pitiful memory of what she once had. Fear gripped Nandini

as she was reminded of the mockery she had faced years ago. Would everyone hate her for how she looked again?

Nandini thought of the events of the past few months, thought of the countless nights her family had spent in tears behind closed doors. The hours Kavya had dedicated to driving her back and forth from appointments. The medical bills her mother had gripped tightly until her fingers turned white because, though she didn’t admit it, Nandini knew they couldn’t keep going on like this for long.

Nandini was worthless and now she was going to die and she was hurting her family and her friends were going to leave her and it was all her fault.

The thoughts poured in like crashing waves and Nandini found herself sliding down the bathroom wall, tears blurring her view. She squeezed her eyes shut and the image of her reflection burned behind them, pulling darker and darker memories with it. Harsh fluorescent lights bearing down on her. Pinches and pricks of needles. The sound of her mother’s sobs. Where had she heard those sounds before? When her dad had left. That too was her fault, wasn’t it? Nandini tried to remember the argument from that night. All she could remember was the echo of her name.

“Nandini! Nandini, please look at me.”

A warm hand wrapped around Nandini’s knees and the torrent of anxious thoughts slowed. Her mind stilled long enough for her to notice the trembling of her arms and frantic panting of her breath.

Kavya’s voice cut through the darkness. “Nandini, I want you open your eyes. Can you do that for me?”

Nandini nodded. Or she tried to. She wasn’t sure if she actually succeeded.

Slowly, her hands still shaking, she reached up and swiped at her eyes, prying them open. Her knees were pulled tightly against her chest and her body felt heavy, like a sack of bricks she couldn’t move.

“Tell me three things you see,” Kavya said softly. “Take your time.”

Nandini scanned the room. Her pounding heart began to quiet and she managed to open her mouth, words coming out in shaky breaths.

“The toilet... the cabinets... the sink.”

Kavya rubbed Nandini’s knees softly until her breathing began to slow. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Nandini took in a deep breath before gasping out,

“My hair. Do something, please.”

She felt herself being pulled up into a chair. The buzzing sound of a razor filled the room and Nandini stared as the remaining wisps of her hair left fell to the ground. The action was somehow comforting, reminiscent of late nights and hushed laughs with oil-filled hair.

The razor cut through the last strands and Nandini watched as Kavya placed it on the counter before reaching up and undoing the ponytail on her head. She pulled out scissors from the bathroom cabinet and grabbed a fistful of hair.

“What are you doing?!” Nandini cried out.

Kavya pursed her lips. “You always liked my hair, didn’t you? I’m showing you that you can be beautiful without it.”

Before Nandini could protest, the scissors clamped across a thick lock of hair. She watched, powerless to do anything, as her sister’s hair joined her own on the ground. Kavya didn’t hesitate once, her chin held high when her head had become bare.

“There we go,” Kavya said. “The worst of it is over.”

Nandini glanced at Kavya’s reflection and then back at her own. Something warm welled up inside her and before she knew it she had burst into laughter.

“You- you look like an egg!” Nandini said. A smile bloomed on Kavya’s face before giggles escaped her mouth. Peals of laughter filled the room and the weight on Nandini’s chest lightened considerably. It was ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous, and yet she couldn’t help herself.

When the two girls had calmed down, Nandini looked at her, and Kavya’s reflection truly looked, and something struck her. Despite the clear absence of glossy curls surrounding their faces, that beauty that had been there before remained. It was there in the kindness Kavya offered with every one of her actions. It was there in the courage Nandini had every day to go to school and ignore the pain that penetrated down to her very bones. It was there in the genuine smiles that lingered on their faces after something as silly as a joke about an egg.

Nandini straightened up and crossed her arms, feeling more confident than she had felt in a long time. For the first time in the past month, it felt like the world had hope for her after all. •

Prologue*Clara Burghlea*

You text me you are dying one Thursday
afternoon in the middle of my Phonics class
and I see sounds melt away, slowly trickle
down the floor, a jolly puddle. Ten kids watch
my lips go white, a folded hummingbird
throbbing inside the throat. All of a sudden,
I am a giant spider crawling into the west
corner of the tall room, above ABC posters
and measuring charts, a thick, choky web
spurting out of eyes, mouth, hands. A pair
of sticky fingers feel at my left leg. *Miss Clara,*
your nose is bleeding. My upper lip is moist,
my tongue tastes metal. For the first time
in months, post Covid, I can actually feel
a salty subtle flavor and I smile. I won't wipe
it, this ironish reminder of being alive, back
to my senses, though my heart, limp fish,
is choking with sorrow, yet you won't let
me walk this, rather snowslide into acceptance.
What remains, remains, you say, as if love
can be burnt off and the bitter ashes won't
clog my breath, so I am here licking at
this shallow wound, a nosebleed and before
I know it, I am lost in the squall of you, and
will have poems grow out of my chest like
mushrooms during dew hours and you will
know the sound a woman makes when birthing.

Cruelty*Lucas Jorgensen*

something makes no sense
& all of it watching machinists
work the levers of their hands

is the opposite of pressing metal
to the back of my teeth I can't
explain it my own hands

daze me I stole a pocket knife
from my father once & ran
its dull blade against the neck

of a salamander I couldn't sever
the head from the body the other
boys in the neighborhood gathered

didn't have to speak to say
what we wanted not one
stepped in to stop me to save

the small animal spilling
over the palms of my hands
I must have killed it but maybe

worse I don't know its life
tossed like gristle we hunted
salamanders spring to fall

stripped the silk from our hands
& replaced it with yellow
bark in a wake of crushed

chrysanthemums & doors slammed
the hair on my chest rose
then fell like clipped grass

BloodseedsObáfémi *Thanni*

Enter into this garden and
swear by everything holier than flowers,
to call everything by its name.

Watch the scarlet laughter of roses,
like children conceived in the search of nectar.
Watch their lush unfurling and

call it petal. Not boy.
Watch the scarlet, and even as a thorn grows
in your oath, call it scarlet. Not blood.

Reach for the soil where it thirsts and call
it a season. Not country. Not where the skies withhold rain. Not where the
earth is softened only by blood.

At the edge of this garden, the earth is tender.
Call this tenderness a seed, and watch the boy sprig into return

Self-Portrait as Creek*Despy Boutris*

Off-trail, I make my way
to the creek, climbing
over rocks. Distant,

there's the sound
of kids laughing,
a mother telling her kids

to *be careful*. Daily,
I think about going back:
cargo pants, tie-dye shirts,

searching for crawdads.
Back then, my body
was only a body—not

a war-torn town,
constant battleground.
This creek was just a creek,

not something I wished
was deep enough
to drown me. & how

does one go back
to when the world
was a wonder?

Or, if I can't go back,
let me turn to a body
of water,

let me be
this rippling creek
dappled with sunlight.

Traces of Sand*Aysha Qazi*

We were forged from glass.

They heated our earth until it

melted into their palms like

Play-Doh in a child's hand.

With blue lips they blew gray

clouds into our skies, and told

us to dance. Umbrellas above

their heads, they colored our rain red.

It scalded our skin; it made a mess of

the castles built with sweltering sand.

They said if you move, you'll shatter

from the core and cracks will make

their way to your edges until there is

nothing left but shards of history

and their puncture wounds.

They stole from our flags—

a star and a hollow crescent moon,

filled our lungs with fire,

the rooms of women with darkness,

and tents with children until schools collapsed

like us when they pushed us to our knees,

silenced our tongues, asked

Where is your God

—in the space between the ground

and our bruised foreheads,

—in the seconds between our final breaths,

and just like our fates,

We were forged from glass.

Shakedown

Philip Kennedy-Grant

This is a land of water. It is inescapable. It is ever-present. It flows, runs, crashes, seeps, tumbles. Asleep, it lies still as glass. Wakened, it rushes wave on wave from the sea, jumping onto the beaches, slapping the face of sand. Escaping, laughing, it slips between and beneath evermore curling whitecaps charging the shore. It creeps in as the tide, then departs clandestinely, leaving mud flats and the gurgling lairs of crabs.

From the beachfront looking east, one imagines the solid continent looming behind, protector and refuge should calamity threaten. It is a false hope. Past the beachfront is more water, in lagoon and bay, river and stream, inlet and rivulet, and marsh, the varied shapes and attitudes a reservoir of latent energy.

It is as if the land lies atop an unfathomed depth, unmeasured, unnumbered, unquantified. But it is not unknown. Those who inhabit this thin, balsa-like, flat sheet of earth understand they float as if on a raft, precariously atop an uncontrollable, surrounding force. The experience that accompanies time reveals the natural joy and sadness inherent in living in this place. Newcomers, only partially aware, do not possess the wisdom of the natives.

This is Hampton Roads. This is where the Atlantic Ocean confronts Chesapeake Bay, where the James, Elizabeth, and Nansemond Rivers join to create a safe, protected, port as deep as a sea.

To the south and slightly west of this port is a lowland marsh, riven by almost invisible threads of creeks and gullies, a vast, sodden mass, at the center of which lies the Great Dismal Swamp. The Peninsula shapes the north side of the port, formed by the York River, a slicing

parallel of the James, and although not as wide, wide enough to be discouraging if not impassable.

Here, in 1962, on the banks, on the shores, within the woodlands, and sprawled across the pavements, live nearly two million people. Knowingly or not they survive at the will of the water, for at any moment, Hampton Roads could easily become the next Atlantis.

Malcolm Findlay stands on the shore, thinking this might be home, wondering if it might include Elena.

Scotty had spent the better part of his free time over the winter working on his boat. He replaced rigging and hardware and bought a new suit of sails.

In late March, a freak snowstorm swept in. Its flakes came big and fat and wet, but on unfrozen ground, they didn't stay long. A good thing. Tidewater towns are ill-prepared for snow removal, and we local drivers are inexperienced and dangerous in conditions of snow and ice.

Sitting at the small table by the window I used as a desk, I watched fast white dots rush in an angle downward toward the bay. I tried to gauge how far away I could distinguish individual snowflakes from the uniform chalk-white background of sky. Maybe twenty feet.

The bay's surface lay flat and black, a vast, gaping mouth aching to be replenished by the storm. Snow falling atop the water became swallowed in an instant.

As I watched, Scotty called. "Hey, Mal, how about you join me on the water with my refurbished boat?"

"Now? Are you crazy?"

"No, not now. Say next week. The weather'll be better. I'm ready to go, but I need a crew to help me check out my new baby. I could use your expert opinion in the bargain."

"Flattery always works. Sure. It'll be fun."

Scotty said, "Let's meet at the club after lunch. We'll sail the afternoon, and have a drink afterward."

"Done."

In the week's thaw the snow vanished. Just after one on Sunday, I saw the club had overwintered well. The brown grass was neat. No scraps of paper hung tangled in the bushes by the front door, and no twigs or small branches were lying about. The maintenance crew paid attention.

Boats in the yard looked good. During the active summer season, the launching and storing of boats on trailers and dollies and rafts became haphazard. Boats

wound up parked willy-nilly wherever a space could be found. A collective desire for order at the end of last fall, unregulated and arising naturally, resulted in the arrangement of vessels, big and little, nestled in neat rows.

My upbeat mood reminded me how seeing Elena affected me the same way. I planned to tell Scotty about her after our sail.

The club wasn't busy. Few people were obvious, only a couple in the yard tinkering with the hardware on their boat. This early in the season you couldn't expect much activity. The social atmosphere wouldn't bloom until May, along with the racing schedule.

I spied Scotty just beyond the boatlift. He had arrived well before me, his boat already lowered onto the water and the mainsail rigged. The jib still sat bagged on the foredeck.

Stopping at an empty trailer, I pulled out my foul weather gear and dragged it on over my jeans and bulky sweater. As I headed toward Scotty, I gloved my hands. Did I dress warmly enough? The cool air chilled with the breeze.

I stepped aboard lightly, grasping a shroud to steady me as I did. Scotty said, "Hiya, sailor." He couldn't be overlooked in his yellow slickers and orange vest.

I replied, "Permission to come aboard, captain?"

"I'd say 'aye,' but you've already arrived."

"Keelhaul me."

"Maybe later."

We rigged the jib, I hooked up my life jacket, and we were out on the water in no time. Scotty took the boat through its paces, and me through mine, taking the measure of his boat and crew. I shared his curiosity. What can she do? How high can she point into the wind? What's her optimum heel? What's the best distribution of crew weight, fore and aft?

I admired Scotty's methodical, meticulous approach. That's not how I understand a sailboat. I care about feel. I can sense a happy boat; I can tell when she reaches her best. My method is an advantage in regattas that require crews to move to different boats after each race, as in college, where I excelled. Scotty prepared a list and checked each item one at a time. He reviewed that list every time he sailed. His method of learning everything about his boat, in every condition, was superior for those who campaigned the same vessel over a season's racing.

Soon we found ourselves off Newport News, near the shipbuilding yard. The first nuclear-powered aircraft

carrier, the USS Enterprise, had been launched here two years ago. Now, the immense hull of the second, USS America, had begun to take shape. Gantry cranes and piles of material covered the docks on both sides of the ship-in-progress. All was gray and metal and hard. A lone figure pulling a handcart appeared insect-like as he trundled beneath the towering curve of the hull.

Just past the shipyard, we came about smartly, one of our better efforts of the afternoon, and Scotty said, "Let's let this sucker fly, Mally!"

I hooked up to the trapeze and crouched, then stood on the gunwale. With the wind snatching Scotty's words and screeching them away the moment he spoke, I could scarcely hear him.

A rogue gust blew across us and spilled the sails. I dropped backwards as the boat lost its heel. Smartly, the breeze filled in, and the straining sails jerked me back up, splashed and soaked.

Crashing each spitting wave, spray from the bow showered me with bucketsful of the bay, wildly thrown. Behind us the foaming wake flatlined, marking our passage. The stays sizzled, vibrating their nervous, tenor tune.

Scotty shouted, "We're cooking now!"

Leaning out parallel to the water, every crest we shattered doused me. The more the cold water drenched me, the less I cared. I communed with the boat, my only concern, slicing each wave with precision. I scanned the jib for the slightest imperfection, adjusting the sheet in tiny increments, maintaining the sail's curve. Scotty surveyed the main, even as he kept an eye on our bearing. On the lookout for approaching vessels and obstacles, I spied none on this blustery, spring afternoon.

We scudded across the harbor, our tiny vessel dueling the elements, shattering through the whitecaps while Navy behemoths, unaffected at their berths off Norfolk in the distance, seemed indifferent or bored. Every surface of our boat glistened, alive with rivulets and cascades of water sweeping across and down and off.

After what seemed like ages, Scotty had had enough, and we reached a point where it would be an easy, broad reach back to our berth.

"Ease up!" he hollered. "Falling off. We're gonna jibe." The boat aimed away from the wind. "Careful now. Jibe ho!"

Scotty pulled the tiller, allowing the wind to cross our stern. As it did, the mainsail spilled, then the boom

jerked across the cockpit and blossomed on the opposite tack. Scotty grasped the traveller, and I held the boom to temper its forceful thrust as it swept from one side to the other.

"Not bad. Not bad," Scotty said, always evaluating.

We sped back toward the docks. Scotty, with exquisite timing, had me drop the mainsail as we glided in, relying on our jib alone for propulsion. We slowed and slid toward the shore. I released the jib sheet and let it luff as we sidled expertly alongside the floating dock.

After hoisting the boat and stowing sails, we showered and changed. Tired but refreshed, and pleased with ourselves, we headed upstairs to the bar and dining room.

Pushing through the door, Scotty said, "Sally's coming at six. We thought we'd have dinner. Care to join us?"

"Love to."

The nearly empty bar felt relaxed and unstuffy. One's first impression might suggest an egalitarian place, until it became known that many of the members owned yachts in excess of fifty feet.

Scotty and I sat at the bar's corner at the end and ordered martinis. As Scotty reviewed our afternoon sail, critiquing the boat as well as our seamanship, I imagined how I might introduce Elena into our conversation. I began to wish she were with me. Scotty would like her.

The bartender eased over, pointed to our not quite empty glasses, and raised his eyebrows, his way of asking if we wanted another drink.

Scotty said, "You bet."

As ice rattled around in the shaker, I looked over Scotty's shoulder to see Sally and a woman who looked to be her sister arriving. The pair were similar in height, and though the new woman was as thin as Sally, she moved differently. Sally strode forcefully, knifing through the atmosphere and anything else before her, while the other woman glided forward, atop, around, or gently through.

Sally motioned to me with a finger to her lips. Reaching us, she put an arm around Scotty and poked him in the side. He turned around in surprise and practically shouted, "Sally!" Recovering, he said, "Welcome. Join us for a drink. We just got here."

"Then whose glasses are those?" she asked, pointing to the two now drained.

"Must've been somebody here before us," he said.

The bartender arrived with our martinis, and looked at Sally, and the woman standing beside her. Sally said, "Two more of the same," glancing at her companion for affirmation. Her sister nodded.

As I shifted left, Scotty slid to the stool on his right. The two women claimed our seats, Sally next to Scotty and her sister next to me.

Sally said, "Let me introduce my friend, Nikki. Nikki, this is my husband, Scott, and this is his friend, Mal."

Primly attired in tan slacks, white polo shirt and yellow cardigan, Sally looked smart. Nikki's slacks appeared to have been painted onto her long, lean legs. The upturned collar of her vivid Madras blouse sprouted from a navy blue crewneck sweater, accenting the sharp line of her neck and chin. The fullness of her ash-blond hair seemed to have been shaped into waves by the breeze across the bay.

Later, I learned Sally suggested dinner so I could meet Nikki. Sally had planned our entire day. She assumed, rightly, that I would agree to sail with Scotty, then grab a drink with him afterward. Having lured me into the bar, it would be simple to get me to walk into the next room for dinner.

Nikki's thin frame made her seem taller than she was. She had a tendency to lean forward while speaking. She spoke quickly and briefly, in a staccato fashion, as if to dissuade interruption. On first impression she seemed intense, but as her playful nature became obvious, the notion of intensity vanished.

We took our drinks to a table in the dining room near the windows overlooking the fleet. Scotty sat with his back to the view. Protected by the porch, the room grew dim, though outside remained bright. The wind had stiffened, sweeping every cloud out of sight and setting wire halyards clacking against their aluminum masts. We were cozy in our corner, tucked into an alcove against the glass, the table linen and carpet and window drapes deadening the clink of silverware on china from the other diners.

I sat opposite Scotty, with Nikki on my right, hoping Sally would start the conversation. She did.

"Nikki and I met at the kids' school. She's an artist, a painter. The twins were in her class, and told me how much fun they were having, so I wanted to meet her. We hit it off and became friends."

I asked, "What do you paint?"

"Landscapes, mostly. The odd street," she said. A wave of her hair crested over an eyebrow as she turned to me. She swept it aside with graceful fingers.

"Oils, watercolor?"

"Oil. Small pieces. They tend to be delicate. Very detailed."

Scotty said, "No wonder Sally likes you."

"Why?" Nikki asked.

"She's all about the details, always detailing the things I need to do and the things I've done wrong, and ..."

"No, no, no," Sally said, laughing. "That's not fair."

"You're telling me."

We had a delightful evening. I liked Nikki and her wit immediately. In a conversational pause I told myself "her smile is delicious." Instantly I realized I saw Elena's smile in Nikki's face. What am I thinking? Am I so fickle I succumb to any engaging woman's charm? Guilt ran through me like a blade. I became a bit subdued.

After coffee, Sally said, "Nikki came with me, but she lives over your way, Mal. Could you take her home?"

"I could," I said. "But I don't think that's your question."

"You rat. Will you?"

"Don't be fighting about me," Nikki said.

"I'm not fighting," I said. "I just can't do whatever Sally asks right away. Of course, I'll be happy to drive you home. If you'll let me."

Nikki said, "I don't know. I don't know you. Can I trust you?"

"No. Probably not."

We left the club, headed to our cars. Scotty walked beside me with an arm around my shoulder. I said, "What a good day."

He gave me a tug, looked at me slyly, and said, "So far."•



Carnival*Jack Jung*

A clown's parakeet masters paraphrase
Answers for antics fanatics orchestrate
Price gouging matinee for bloodless reenacting
Scenes from history none rallying lived,
Circusgoers primed by bird's rhymes reminisce
Eager to believe in maneater whale-kin
Cut out from beached guts its bleached meat
And from dissonance resemblances
Emerge. The émigré troupe divulge
Harrowing hours spent in snow, the monster's spine
Lifting up alpine peaks over oceanic abyss
Until washing up near this fishing village
They have searched far and wide.
They get the applause they deserve.
Lawyers come to hammer out fine print.

grief being somewhat symmetrical*Nicole Callihan*

my grandfather could balance a spoon on his nose

or was that my father?

here is a bladder of warm water to ease your pain

here is a table improperly set

for a period of my youth my mother could not bear to look at me

instead of sitting across from her at the table

she asked me to sit beside her

that way my stomach doesn't turn

for a long time I believed this was a funny story

Escape*Samantha Liming*

The wind against
my corner of
the building
is a dull drum,
then a whistle
as it bends
and moves away.
The cutting board
quivers. There must
be drafts. There must
be little ways
in and out
I had not noticed.
In is more
of a worry—
I don't have plans,
I have plants.
The wind though
doesn't change
how the sun bounces
off the buildings
into my window.
I don't get
any direct light.
But the direct
deposit comes and I pay
the bills. I just spent
days digging out
two holes above my bed—
sexed the wall up
with a screw.
Each time I pulled
the helix out

I emptied the wall
of more of itself;
little snow, white
dust dusting down.
Slow work like I imagine
any escape to be—
slow like the old movies
when they make it out
with nothing
but a spoon.
Then, I mounted
the shelf. Now,
above me lean
a few photos. In one,
two girls play in a body
of water. The wind
has chopped it,
it swells
against their bodies.
The wind whips,
rattling the blinds.
In a boat, the swells
would be intolerable.
Like that time crossing
the Bay of Maine.
Then, we were glad
they weren't against
the ribs. Those are painful
blows. No, we'd headed
right into them
and the light
was blinding.



Linds Sanders habits in getting lost in her van where she lives, writes, and creates art while trying to park on level ground. Winner of the 2021 Icebreaker Prize from Sparked Literary Magazine, her writing is published or forthcoming in FOLIO, The Wayfarer, Rising Phoenix Press, and more. Outside of galleries, her artwork is forthcoming in Stonecrop Magazine, 3Elements Review, and Parenthesis Journal. Find more at LindsSanders.com

Danika Stegeman LeMay's debut collection of poems, *Pilot*, is available now from Spork Press. She lives in Minneapolis with her husband and daughter. Her work has appeared in 32 Poems, Cimarron Review, CutBank Literary Journal, Denver Quarterly, Forklift, OH, Sporklet, and Word for/ Word, among other places. Her website is danikastegemanlemay.com

Ajay Sawant is a student and writer studying English Literature (British and Commonwealth) and Journalism at the University of Delhi. He currently serves as Editorial Intern at Five South Literary Magazine. In the past, he has been a guest editor at Inlandia Institute's Literary Review. His poems have been published or are forthcoming in Detester Magazine, Literary Yard, Vayavya, A&U: America's Art & Understanding Magazine, The Caribbean Writer, Hawai'i Pacific Review, Xavier Review, Paper Crane Journal and The Louisville Review & Fleur-de-Lis Press. Ajay often tweets at @ajaycycles

Noa Saunders is a PhD Candidate at Boston University, where she teaches poetry, film, and writing. Recent poems can be found in Ninth Letter.

Apurva Raghu is currently pursuing a BS in Biology at the University of Maryland and dreams of becoming a doctor one day. She loves to write and paint in her free time. Her hope is to use her writing to explore the intricacies of human relationships, and she draws inspiration from the world around her. Currently, she is trying to improve her craft through writing short stories and working on her first novel.

Clara Burghilea is a Romanian-born poet with an MFA in Poetry from Adelphi University. Recipient of the Robert Muroff Poetry Award, her poems and translations appeared in *Ambit*, *HeadStuff*, *Waxwing*, *The Cortland Review* and elsewhere. Her collection *The Flavor of The Other* was published in 2020 with Dos Madres Press. She is the Translation/International Poetry Editor of *The Blue Nib*.

Lucas Jorgensen is a poet and educator from Cleveland, Ohio. He holds a BS from Florida State University and currently studies in the MFA program at New York University where he is a Goldwater Fellow and assistant poetry editor for *Washington Square Review*. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *The Massachusetts Review*, *Fugue*, *ellipses... literature & art*, and others.

Obáfémi Thanni is a genre-bending writer whose poetry was nominated for the 2021 Best of the Net Anthology. He is a reader at *The Masters Review* and is currently making attempts at beauty while applying for a citizenship in Lucille.

Despy Boutris's writing has been published or is forthcoming in *Copper Nickel*, *American Poetry Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Colorado Review*, *The Journal*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere. Currently, she teaches at the University of Houston and serves as Poetry Editor for *Gulf Coast*, Guest Editor for *Palette Poetry* and *Frontier*, and Editor-in-Chief of *The West Review*.

Aysha Qazi is an undergraduate senior at the University of Maryland pursuing a major in computer science and a minor in creative writing. She was born in Pakistan but has spent most of her life in Maryland, where currently resides. After graduating, Aysha hopes to begin a career in technology as well as continue her writing. She draws inspiration from her own experiences and relationships, the enduring struggles of minorities, and the complexities of nature and her dynamic environment. Aysha looks forward to sharing her work in hopes to inspire and connect with readers.

Philip Kennedy-Grant is the former editor of *Architecture New Jersey* magazine, co-author and editor of *AIA New Jersey Guidebook*, and a practicing architect and artist.

Jack Jung is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where he was a Truman Capote Fellow. His translations of Korean poet Yi Sang's poetry and prose are published in *Yi Sang: Selected Works* by Wave Books. He is the American Literary Translation Association's 2021 Emerging Translator Mentorship Program Mentor for Korean poetry. He currently teaches Korean poetry translation at Literature Translation Institute of Korea.

Nicole Callihan's poetry books include *SuperLoop* (2014), and the chapbooks: *The Deeply Flawed Human* (2016), *Downtown* (2017), *The Couples* (a novella, 2019), and *ELSEWHERE* (w/ Zoë Ryder White, 2020). Her work has appeared in *Tin House*, *Sixth Finch*, *PEN--America*, *The American Poetry Review*, and as a Poem-a-Day selection from the Academy of American Poets. She is currently Artist-in-Residence at *Asterix Journal*. Find out more at www.nicolecallihan.com.

Samantha Liming graduated from St. Mary's College of Maryland with a double major in English and French. She has worked with the Chesapeake Writer's Conference, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Origins Journal*, and has read with *The Inner Loop*. She is currently an MFA candidate in poetry at the University of South Carolina.

