

SUMMER ISSUE
03:

ORIGIN

COVER: "A HOME LONG FORGOTTEN"
BY KENNA HARSTELL, 16, USA

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LETTER FROM THE FOUNDER

Hello, dear readers. So far, every issue of this magazine has been dedicated to our incredible followers and staff members. And I truly do appreciate you all – without people, humanity would be nothing, as would this magazine. Thank you to all 973 followers and all 40 staff members for their hard work.

However, this issue has a bit more of a personal meaning to me. Devotion was chosen as the first theme because of the feelings I feel so deeply, and Hygge was chosen as the next theme because of the feelings I wanted to feel. But origin is more than just feelings for me. It's memories. My origin is my grandmother, my Gran Gran, my Doris, my Prema Wati. She was the first person to ever ask what I furiously wrote in my notebooks. The first to clap anytime I read a story I'd written aloud. The first to say, with a fierce determination I hadn't seen in anyone but myself, "Be a writer." She never stopped asking me about my work, whether it was a fragmented fantasy book or an idea that had just begun to spark.

She passed away in late July, at 2:00 AM on a hot summer night. She had always been so closely bound to the story of my life and to the story of this magazine. Without her encouragement, her applause, her unwavering belief that words mattered, none of this would exist. I would never meet some of the most dedicated and talented writers, editors, designers, and planners I've ever known. I would never have found out that almost 1,000 people appreciate writing like I do.

When we began shaping ORIGIN, I found myself returning again and again to her voice. She described beginnings as more than moments after birth, but something sacred that shaped your being every day of your life. She reminded me that every story carries an inheritance, whether it's whispered around a kitchen counter or published for the world to see.

It's hard to find my footing now when she was my foundation. I cried for days after I found out, even on my birthday. But I also celebrate the countless gifts she left behind: the applause that echoes in my mind whenever I finish a draft, the belief that words hold the weight of life and love, and the reminder that every story is a way of remembering.

This issue is my way of remembering her. It is filled with pieces that speak to where we come from: our families, our pasts, our memories, the people and places that gave us our sense of self. For me, that origin is inseparable from her, from my Gran Gran who gave me my beginning as a writer. I hope that, as you read, you find echoes of your own beginnings and the people who clapped for you first, too.

With love,

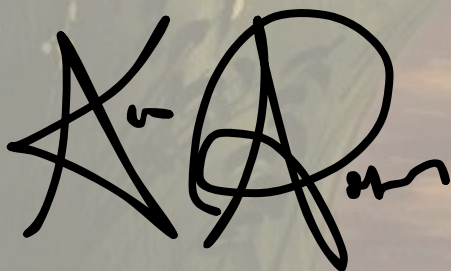
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kristin Aronson'. The signature is stylized with large, sweeping loops and a small flourish at the end.

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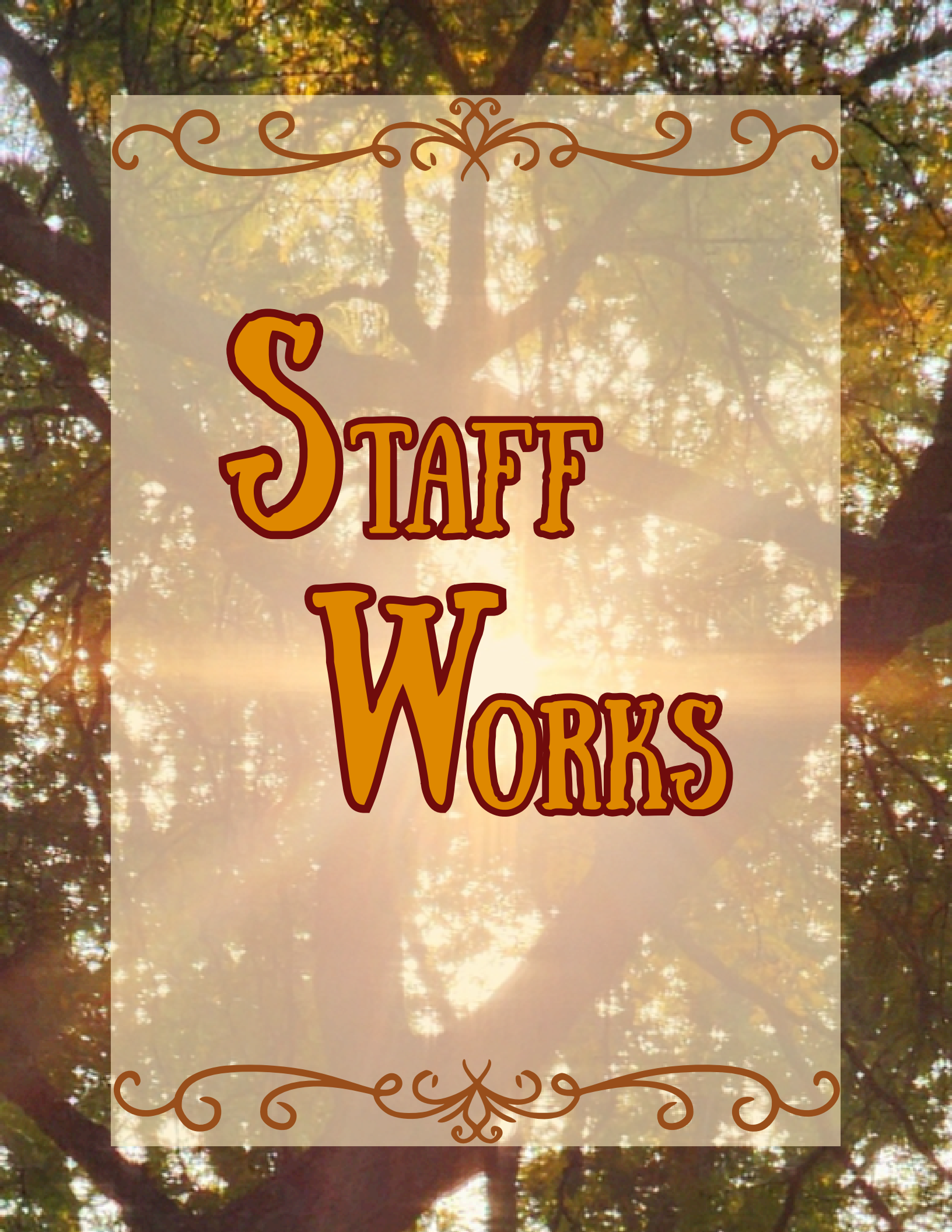
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STAFF WORKS



I'm From the Philippines.

CCBO (Philippines)

When I am asked by those who come from another continent, I like to say I'm from the Philippines. From Manila. It'll usually be one of the only cities they know, anyway. Most people don't know the difference between Manila and the greater Metropolitan Manila area, a tiny area of six hundred and thirty-six square kilometres that's somehow home to over fourteen million people—one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Manila is only one of sixteen cities in that miniscule area, a tiny city made big because of how many people live in it—almost two million people in a roughly forty square kilometre area.

Usually, those who come from another continent don't know about the fifteen other cities; the ones that I'm more familiar with. Like Marikina, the city of the gigantic shoe collection of the wife of the 70's dictator, or Makati, the place where everything is but nobody can get to because it takes an hour to get out of, or Mandaluyong, which I always remembered as "just north of where I used to live", or Parañaque, where my grandmother always went to celebrate one of her friends' birthday parties at the big hotel, or Quezon City, where the biggest universities and the crazy-crowded strip of Katipunan are, or Pasig, with the Megamall and the other three malls that surrounded it, or San Juan, the place I hold closest to my heart.

But I don't tell them this. I just say, "I'm from Manila," because there usually isn't enough time to complexify myself when I have a ten-second timer to introduce my name and country of origin.

Sometimes. I introduce myself with multiple countries. "I'm from the Philippines, but I'm living in New Zealand." I say, although I don't know how truly connected I am to Aotearoa. I'm certainly not as connected as the people indigenous to this land, and everytime I walk the streets of Auckland, I feel like an imposter—an invasive species, like I'm doing to Maōri what the Spaniards did to us.

On the rare occasion I enter the forests of Aotearoa, I still greet nature as I did in Manila—"tabi-tabi po." I whisper under my breath, even though I do not feel spirits walking beside me like I did back home. The forests here always seemed empty to me, but I believe that is because the spirits do not recognise me as someone who belongs here.

(How do I tell them that I also do not recognise myself as someone who belongs here? The customs are different here, and I was never educated on what they were. Shall I educate myself?)

Other times, I clarify. "No." I say. "I'm not really Chinese. My dad's only a quarter Chinese, and I never grew up with the culture." I say, although all they see are my eyes. "But yes, there are a lot of Chinese people in the Philippines, and most of them are more Chinese than me."

Sometimes they say that I look more Chinese than Filipino. This, I do not deny. At the same time, I cannot claim my grandmother's half-Chinese descent. I was not raised with the culture, nor the language, nor do I have anything more than a rudimentary knowledge of Chinese geography. I have, however, been approached by well-meaning Chinese tourists in Auckland who ask me for directions. I show them the way in English, and I do not clarify my descent. (I'm sure they only asked me because they, like others, assumed I am Chinese.)

"You're very good at English," people in Auckland like to note, and for the fiftieth time, I say, "Yes, I was raised bilingual." I say, "A lot of Filipinos are bilingual as well. They teach English in schools." I always tell them that my American accent is because I watched a lot of American movies and TV shows growing up, and never tell them that my uncle is an American citizen, and that my mother lived in New Jersey for a year when she was younger and kept her twinge of the accent that she passed onto me and my siblings. I don't tell them that my father and I speak to each other in English, and that I also hold bits and pieces of his accent. I don't tell them that me and my family slip into Tagalog and English at random when we speak to each other, and that I miss it every day I'm away from home.

I am "very good at English" because English means status in Metro Manila. I don't say that the further away a Filipino gets from a Filipino accent in English, the more upper-class they were seen as, no matter what the truth was. I don't say that Filipinos are full of self-loathing, and that there are Filipinos in the Philippines who hate Filipino emigrants because everyone is hypocritical. Everyone is Filipino when they eat Jollibee, but the Filipino-American teenager who can't speak Tagalog isn't even Filipino because they've never had to step foot in Manila's 38-degree humidity.

I usually don't even say that Tagalog isn't the only Filipino language. Really, there are upwards of a hundred, but I can't name more than fifteen on a regular day. Tagalog is the only one most people know, if they know that it's called Tagalog and not Filipino. Most people don't even know that there are people in the Filipino government who are trying to remove Filipino languages from the official languages of the Philippines—as William Howard Taft once called us "America's little brown brothers" in the early 20th century.

Some Filipinos refuse to forget the term and still try to live up to it a hundred and twenty years later. (We have an avenue in Manila City that we named after that guy.)

I usually don't tell this to people who come from other countries. I usually don't tell them that Filipinos are a divided people, and that they were only united under Spanish colonial rule. I usually don't tell them that the Spanish, the Americans, and the Japanese kept fracturing us as a people.

I usually don't tell them that this is why I am the way that I am, because not only am I a multicultural mess because I am an immigrant, but I am a multicultural mess because my country is a multicultural mess that goes through an identity crisis twice under each presidential term.

When I am asked by those from another continent where I'm from, I don't tell them any of this. I usually just tell them, "I'm from the Philippines."

And they nod their heads and move on.

A luxury I'm glad not to have.

brother & sister

Charlotte Hung (China)

brother sister

the firstborn daughter strikes
the secondborn son

and casts a shadow
of achievement that can never be
achieved.

for i know i am the
first person you are better than,
the first person who was your friend
and

i have never wished for a sister, but
when we fight, i am reminded
i still want you to be proud of me,
and i wonder if we will ever be close
again,
one side of a coin and the other.

the secondborn son
strikes the firstborn daughter.

unknowingly, cursing me to a life of
firsts: forever first place and first
failure.

first loved and hated face of my sibling,
for your success means i have none,
yet i'm all you have ever known

when i was one, i wished for a brother
instead of being alone.

and now i wonder if you know i love
you.

or if you are ashamed of being brother
and sister.

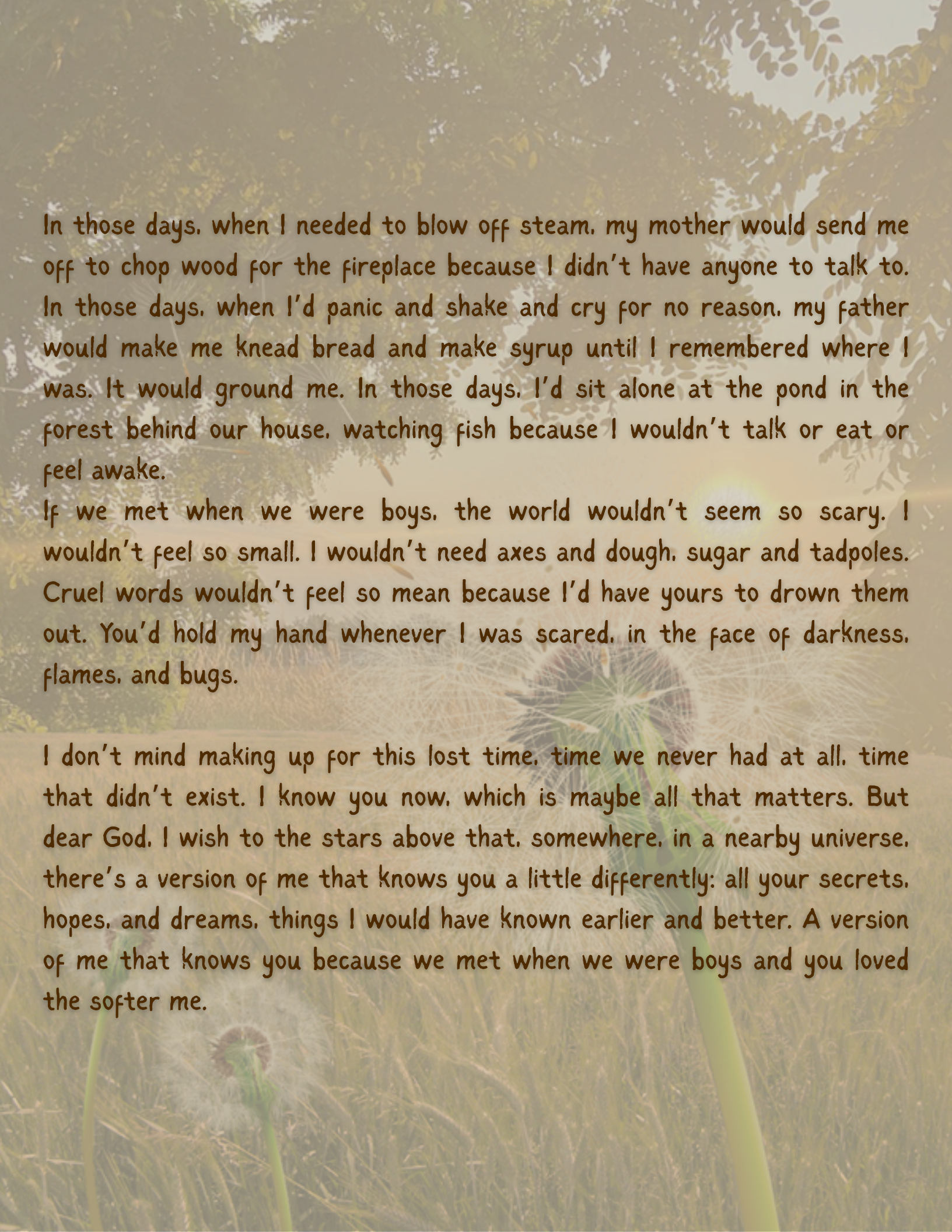
irrevocable as flesh and blood.

When We Were Boys

Kambius (USA)

I wish we met when we were boys. Not the young men we've grown into, in bodies bigger than our pools of strength but smaller than our hearts, but when we were boys. When mornings started at noon. When meals lasted forever and we could run for ages, when our parents felt young and everything was alive. When rain meant running outside and finding worms in the garden, then warming up inside with tea and movies. When fires in the backyard meant sausages, storytimes full of laughter, and songs. When crayons stained paper towels, when animals talked. A time when happiness was stored in cookies, sunlight, and rough carpets.

If we met when we were boys, we could have spent each summer together and you could have been just down the street. We could have wished on the dandelions my mother so desperately wished to pluck. We could have soared on the swingset in the playground just behind my house, tucked in forests on trails we could have followed to the end, filled with our imaginations' limits. We could have run through sprinklers, we could have jumped in pools, we could have seen how long we could hold our breaths beneath the pond. Blankets would cover our couches in sad attempts to make forts, futile because we'd be just too short. Cereal dust would coat our tongues, remnants of breakfasts and cartoons after each sleepover. We could have swallowed sunlight until it shone from our fingertips. We'd be superheroes, saving the whole goddamn world (I think you saved me. You would have done it earlier if we met when we were boys).

The background of the entire page is a soft-focus photograph of a sunlit forest. In the foreground, several dandelions are visible, some with their seed heads still attached to the stems and others that have gone to seed, with the white, feathery seeds drifting through the air. The forest floor is covered in green grass and fallen leaves, and the background is filled with the dappled light of trees and foliage.

In those days, when I needed to blow off steam, my mother would send me off to chop wood for the fireplace because I didn't have anyone to talk to. In those days, when I'd panic and shake and cry for no reason, my father would make me knead bread and make syrup until I remembered where I was. It would ground me. In those days, I'd sit alone at the pond in the forest behind our house, watching fish because I wouldn't talk or eat or feel awake.

If we met when we were boys, the world wouldn't seem so scary. I wouldn't feel so small. I wouldn't need axes and dough, sugar and tadpoles. Cruel words wouldn't feel so mean because I'd have yours to drown them out. You'd hold my hand whenever I was scared, in the face of darkness, flames, and bugs.

I don't mind making up for this lost time, time we never had at all, time that didn't exist. I know you now, which is maybe all that matters. But dear God, I wish to the stars above that, somewhere, in a nearby universe, there's a version of me that knows you a little differently: all your secrets, hopes, and dreams, things I would have known earlier and better. A version of me that knows you because we met when we were boys and you loved the softer me.

Bury Me in Ethiopia

Samara Augustine (USA)

Bury me in Ethiopia, or
Oregon if that's easier.
And push me as far as
You can. I'll shoot up further.
Tentative Habesha blood will
Dry after blooming dandelions.
Before the soil rejects my
Corpse.

Falasha. I will cry as
The corpse rests.
Strange as I clings to what
Others are sewn into. Though,
Am I not too? Have the seams
Snapped and I'm tugging thread?
Have they snapped or
Am I wrong?

Falasha, it will shout as I
Carry myself back to California.
They are foreign to me, and I
To them equally.
Their scripture is what I stare
At mindlessly, telling myself I'll learn.
I remain an Axum subject,
But is it to be believed?
I am part, but do I believe
It truly?

I've never been to Oregon
But I heard the soil is nice.
Bury me shallow, lest
It pushes me out too.

Unnamed Habits

S.K. Sanjana (India)

Some habits do not have an origin.
If depressive defense mechanisms are considered habits.

I think it started around the age of seven.
Some days were good, and some were just painful.

I did not know these habits had a tag name.
That was my earliest memory of mood swings.

When I was ten,
I paced up and down in my bathroom.
Trying to control my breathing, to not cry out loud, to keep quiet.

I did not know these habits had a tag name.
That was my earliest memory of a panic attack.

When I was fifteen,
I started feeling guilty for my actions.
The guilt consumed me to the point
Where I had a blade in my hands and scars on my sides.

I did not know these habits had a tag name.
That was my earliest memory of self-harm.

I don't come from a traumatic background.
I don't have pressurizing parents.
I don't need to meet anyone's expectations but my own.

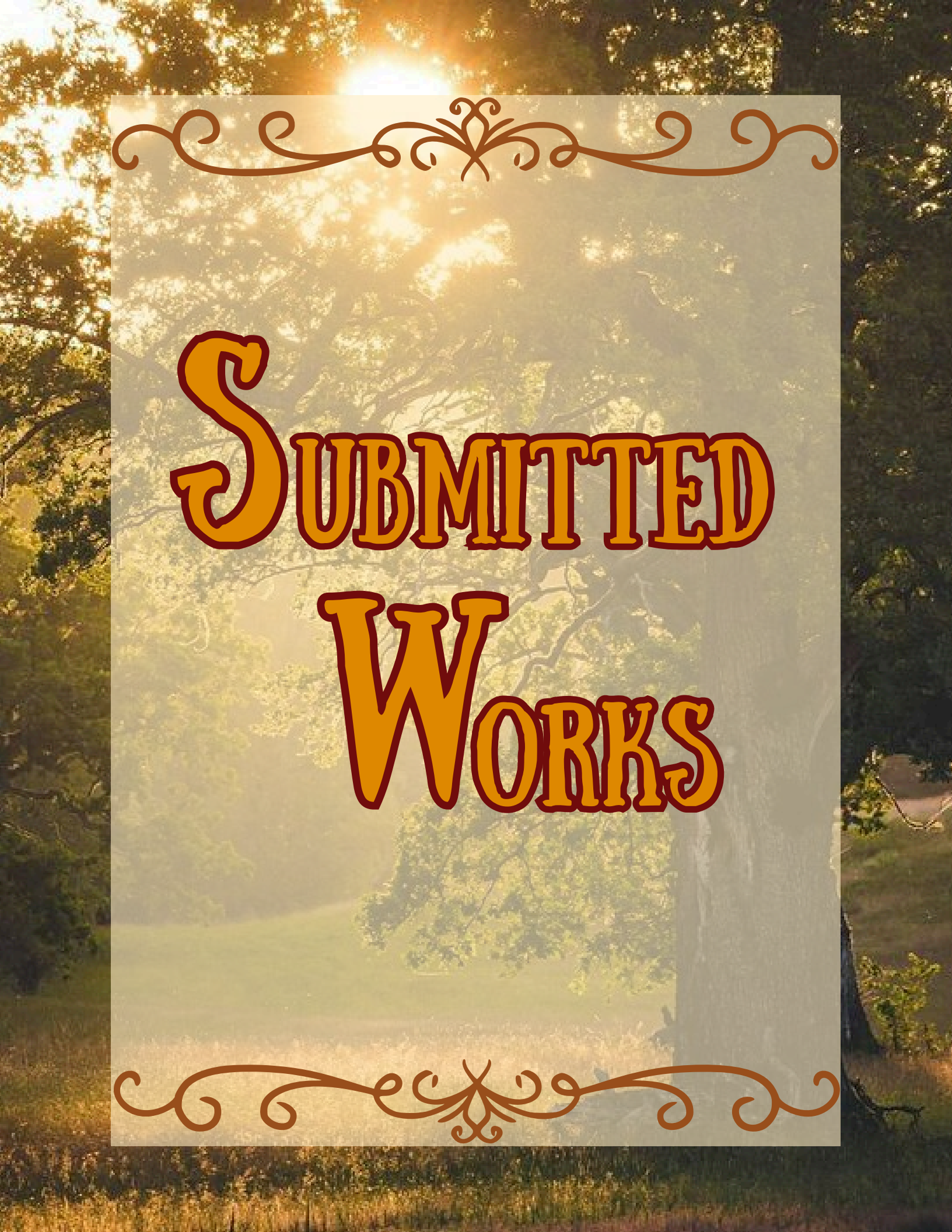
Then, where do these habits come from?
Some things are better left unsaid.



“MI CALAVERA” BY ALEX
ECKLER, 16, USA



**“HAZY RECOLLECTION” BY
UME ROMAN KHURRAM
SALEEM, 17, PAKISTAN**



SUBMITTED WORKS



Oh Hey Man, I'm Just Waiting For The Train

Alana Rodrigues-Birch (New Zealand)

How often do you take the train? I used to take it all the time when I was a kid. From the old train station in Papatoetoe near the Kohuora crater. Man, I thought I was the coolest, running along the iron before the trains were electric and purred like it was nothing. Now I'm taking the train to class, like I never would have thought about it Bus-Train-Ferry, and the trains don't usually run late. I remember being so small my feet wouldn't touch the ground and I'd swing them around while the train guy clipped everyone's tickets like in Polar Express. Britomart has kept its colourful lights on the walls and the skylights into the square above. Sometimes things stay the same. I used to look up at the Sputnik-looking things on the ceiling and think the train would take me to space.

Last year I climbed onto one of those windows and laughed at shutter speed. The train is slower than I remember. Maybe it's because I'm older and not so easily impressed. Maybe the tracks are just bendier in Parnell than they were in the South. Do you feel that? I'm always feeling five and fifty at the same time.

Oh right,
speeding up now.
I'll see you somewhere down the line.

A Letter to My Mother

Aayushi Majumder (India)

Previously Published in The Passionate Post, Issue 2

Dearest Maa,

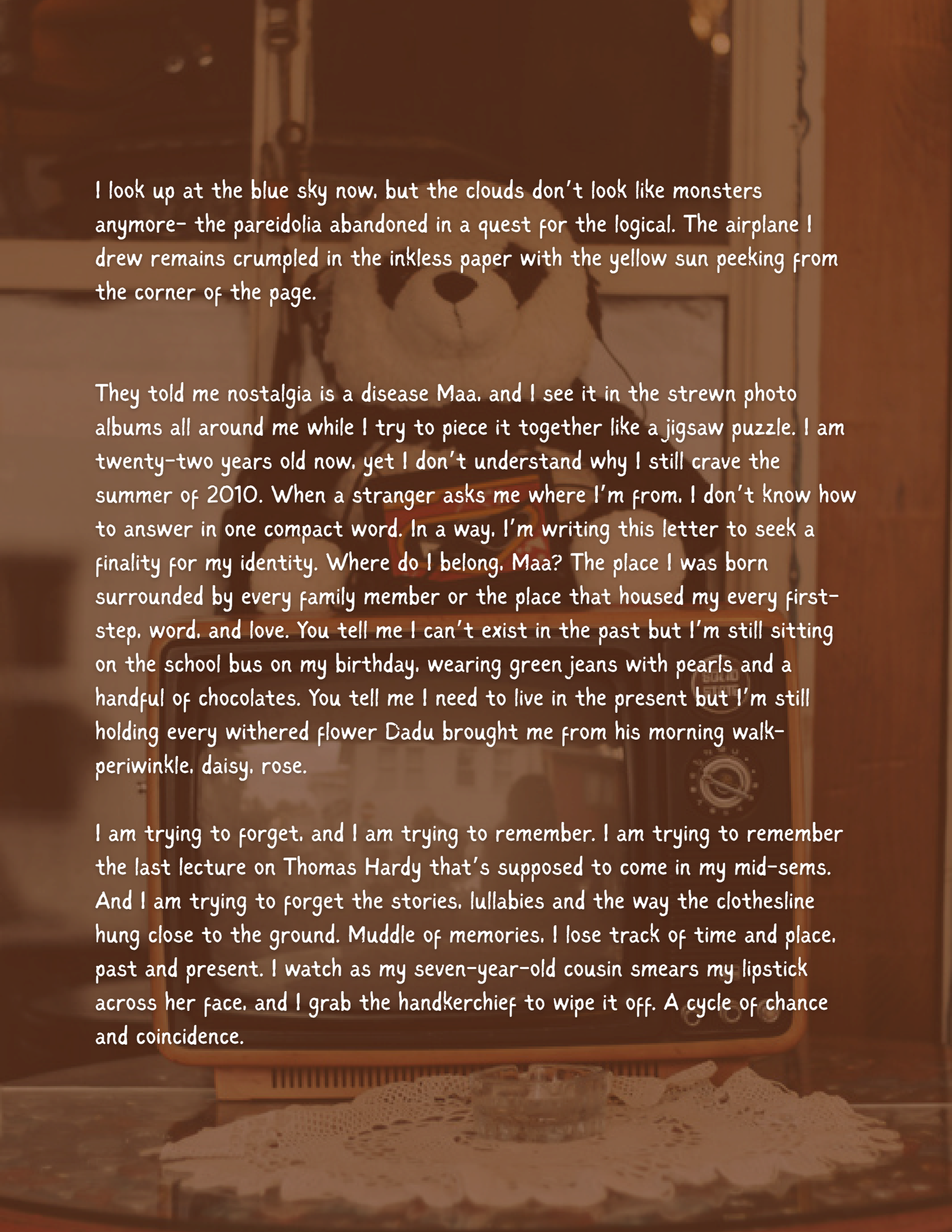
I remember the day I set foot in my birthland. Fourteen years later, I still remember how unfamiliar it felt- to accept this was my home now, forever, with my people. To be born somewhere but raised in another place made me feel like an overgrown child with a quilt that refused to stretch past my broken identity in a country of one billion.

You ask me about childhood, and I grasp the sand of what remained in my empty fist. I am writing about that time in kindergarten, each day you came to pick me up from a sea of tiny feet, my identity still in one piece. Singing songs in bright-colored frocks with my friends, stealing your makeup and pretending to act like grown-ups. I think now of that cherry red lipstick smeared across my lips, and how you wiped hard at it with the white handkerchief. I realize now it was not the misuse of the cosmetics that angered you, but how my face reflected your own and you detested my attempt of aping as an adult.

That time when I was seven and kept playing by myself because I had no siblings and scraped my knee against the window. How I tried the hardest not to scream, because you were not at home, and I didn't want to alarm Thamma. When the pain was too much to bear and I cried so loud, by that time the blood was everywhere- my hands and the white-tiled floor. How you came back to find me in tears, and instead of scolding me applied Boroline and kissed my cheek, and everything was bright and beautiful again. I stare at the antiseptic cream now and wonder whether it was the boric acid that soothed my wound or your tender warmth.

Summer vacation. How you made me do all the schoolwork before the train-ride journey to my birthplace for an entire month. How we stayed awake late nights to finish everything- exercise books of Math and English, and how Baba taught me to draw my first bus in the sketchbook. The way my little heart felt giddy at the sight of smiling faces to receive us at the railway station. How the yellow taxi across the Howrah bridge carried me to my cousins I saw once every year. How that one time, the rain wouldn't stop and Dadu asked, "Do you want to see the flood?" and we waddled across the water-logged streets that came up to my waist drenching my pink camisole. It was a core memory, a reckless act that defied sound judgement. I close my eyes now and I can still taste the pantry food of the train which became my favorite- dry and bland.

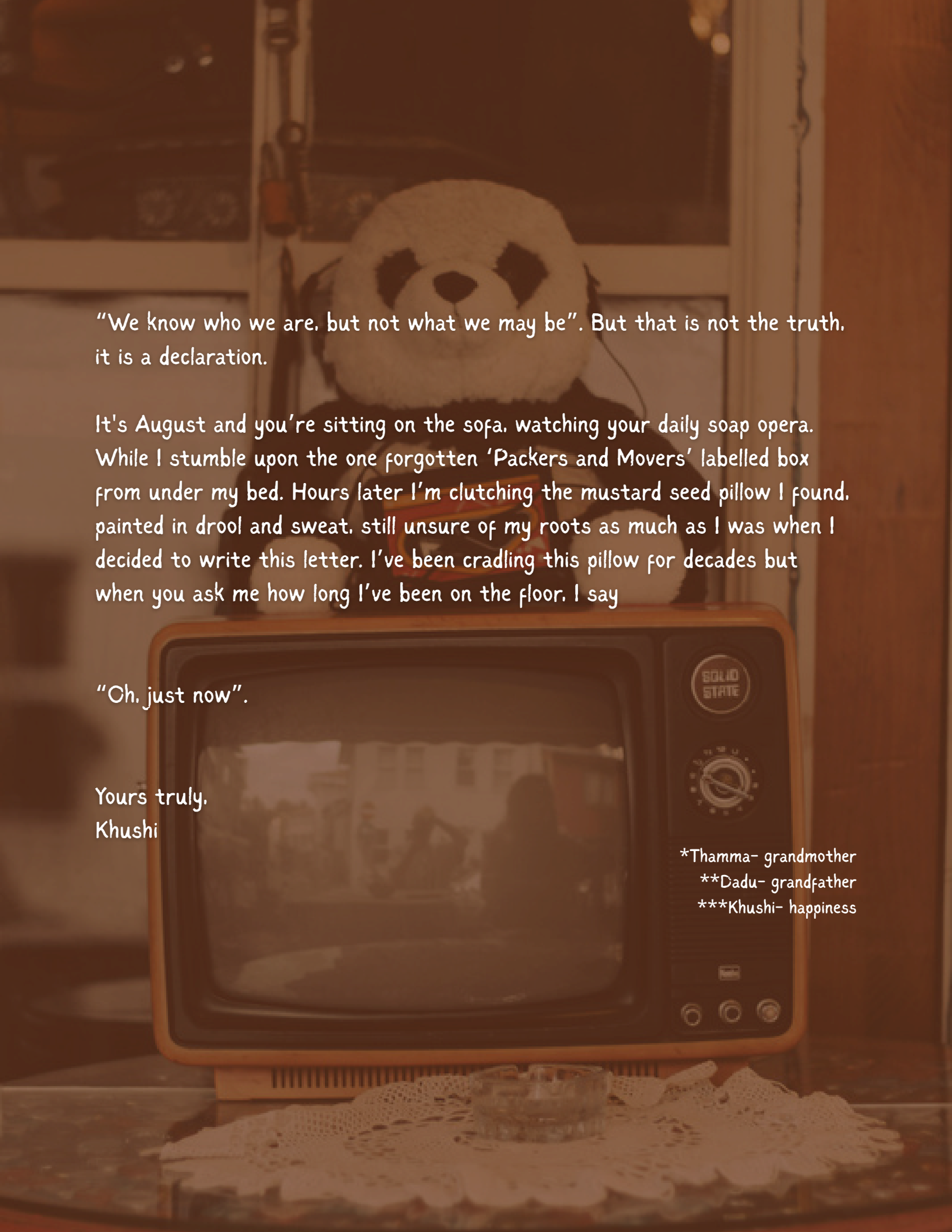
Those Sunday evenings when I eagerly waited for the clock to strike the eighth hour, for a brand- new Barbie movie on Pogo. Twelve dancing princesses. Swan lake. Princess and the pauper. How at times, I would imagine myself as a musketeer and the next, a lost princess stranded on an island with animal friends. Sixth year in fine arts, yet I still draw with colors instead of a pencil like Baba, because he was the one to tell me that it wasn't the sky that was white, but the clouds.



I look up at the blue sky now, but the clouds don't look like monsters anymore- the pareidolia abandoned in a quest for the logical. The airplane I drew remains crumpled in the inkless paper with the yellow sun peeking from the corner of the page.

They told me nostalgia is a disease Maa, and I see it in the strewn photo albums all around me while I try to piece it together like a jigsaw puzzle. I am twenty-two years old now, yet I don't understand why I still crave the summer of 2010. When a stranger asks me where I'm from, I don't know how to answer in one compact word. In a way, I'm writing this letter to seek a finality for my identity. Where do I belong, Maa? The place I was born surrounded by every family member or the place that housed my every first-step, word, and love. You tell me I can't exist in the past but I'm still sitting on the school bus on my birthday, wearing green jeans with pearls and a handful of chocolates. You tell me I need to live in the present but I'm still holding every withered flower Dadu brought me from his morning walk- periwinkle, daisy, rose.

I am trying to forget, and I am trying to remember. I am trying to remember the last lecture on Thomas Hardy that's supposed to come in my mid-sems. And I am trying to forget the stories, lullabies and the way the clothesline hung close to the ground. Muddle of memories, I lose track of time and place, past and present. I watch as my seven-year-old cousin smears my lipstick across her face, and I grab the handkerchief to wipe it off. A cycle of chance and coincidence.

A vintage television set with a wooden-grain finish and a black screen. On top of the TV sits a large, light-colored teddy bear with dark eye patches. The TV screen shows a scene from a soap opera with several people in a room. The TV has a 'SOLID STATE' badge on the right side and a tuning dial below it. It sits on a white lace doily with a glass ashtray in the center.

"We know who we are, but not what we may be". But that is not the truth, it is a declaration.

It's August and you're sitting on the sofa, watching your daily soap opera. While I stumble upon the one forgotten 'Packers and Movers' labelled box from under my bed. Hours later I'm clutching the mustard seed pillow I found, painted in drool and sweat, still unsure of my roots as much as I was when I decided to write this letter. I've been cradling this pillow for decades but when you ask me how long I've been on the floor, I say

"Oh, just now".

Yours truly,
Khushi

*Thamma- grandmother
**Dadu- grandfather
***Khushi- happiness

My Mother Dances To Remember

Ben Ramakrishnan (USA)

when i was small, my mother used to dance
back when she swore i could fit inside the palm of her hand
she would dip and fold in the dim kitchen light, with only the stars
to hold their breath as she gleamed in the karnatik steps of her childhood
we do not waltz

my mother once said to me
we dance kathak and bharatanatyam and bhangra on warm summer nights
we dance not for elegance and arabesques, but to remember
we dance to smell rich, sweet saffron from the earth of our ancestors
to taste the elaichi of masala chai in a circle of aunties who are not related
to us

to absolve our fears and fallacies into a world of dreams and daal tadka
we dance to be back in the family farms near kolkata
the incessant honking of cars by the mughal architecture in old delhi
the foolish dreams on sweaty friday afternoons on the silver screen of
bollywood

the schoolyard in hyderabad where only cricket mattered, not poverty
the auto-rickshaws in chennai with men yelling in tamil and women
responding in telegu and everyone understanding all the same

we dance to remember and we dance to forget
the rivers of blood and tears of the partition
where urdu mother tongues slowly morphed into its sister, hindi
erasing the pakistani soil we have never once returned to
we dance to celebrate, laugh drunkenly, and relish in our realities
that my parents are of two different castes and still married
that our family worships in temple, gurdwara, and mosque and this is
allowed by our god(s)
that a family of immigrants has now created a first generation to be
birthed upon american soil

all the more we dance with our proud expressions and our sharp angles
all the more we ground ourselves in the roots of the banyan tree in
lahore

that, one day, i swear to travel to see with my own eyes
the kitchen is silent in the wash of nightfall
save for the dhoom dhoom of the tablas in our minds
the strings of the sitar playing golden melodies inside our heads
the sanskrit slokas that my pati recites that are

incessant like the honking in old delhi
grounded like the banyan tree in lahore

and here to stay, like our beautiful brown bodies on this soil

Roots of my own

Bree Stock (USA)

Porous earth.
Land populously cultivated.
Acreages of thousand-year roots.
Now cultures mingle
together. A mix of old and new. But
I had no contribution.

Mama tells me.
"Your ancestors were Irish and French."

Resigned, were we? To be
otherwise ignorant with how
other peoples
taught their children from the very
source of cultural wealth?

Today, I forge my own
heritage. One my children will
eventually call theirs.
Maybe they will pass it to their children, too.

No traditions from my heritage to
give

Only, our customs
were long since abandoned.
None remaining for us to cherish.

Fortunately, I refuse to be complicit.
One day, my children will
remember the traditions I bestowed.

Memories of Spring

Eishi (Pakistan)

The joy gained from blossoming flower beds near.
The pride gained from what we have learnt not to fear.

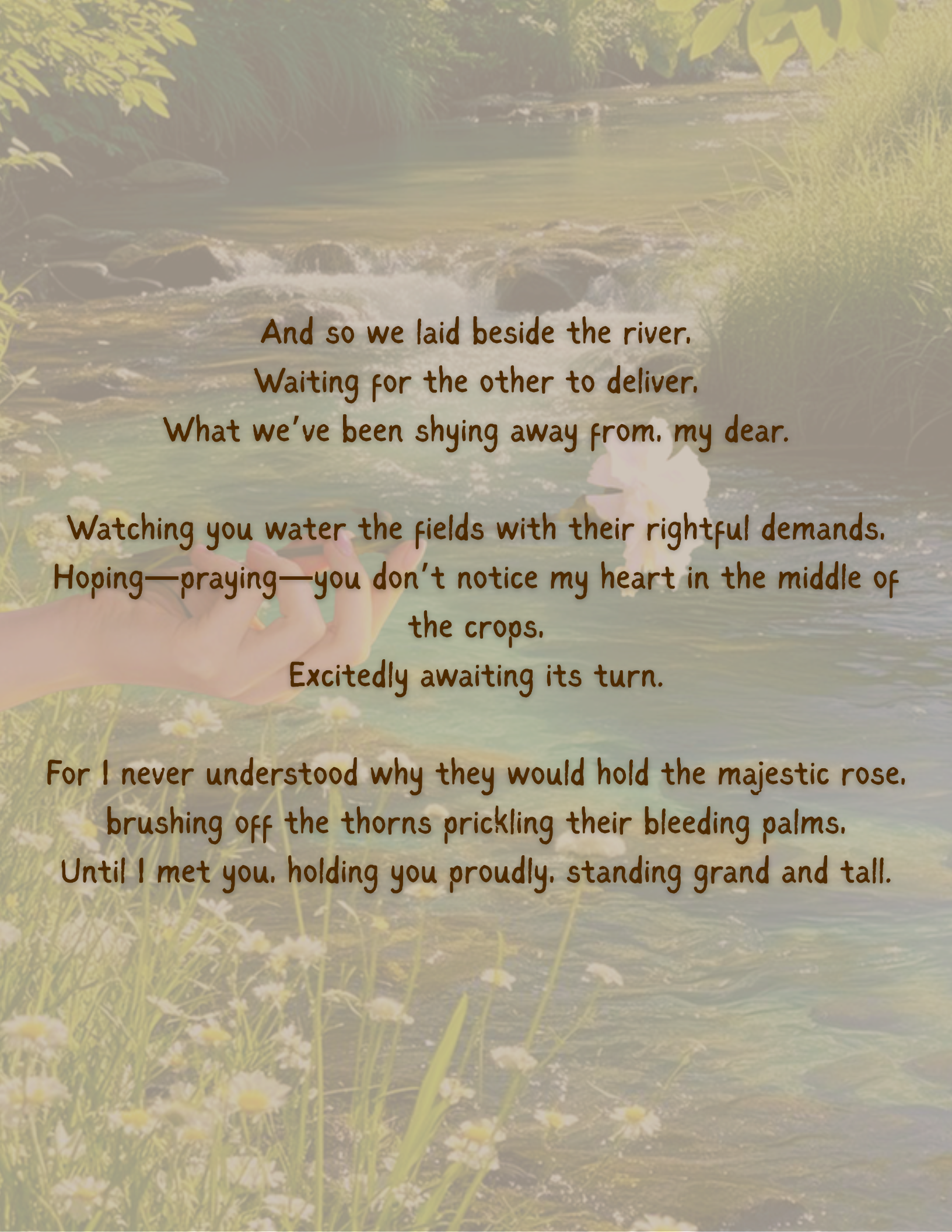
When you breathed life into me. It all became crystal clear.

The sun, cheery and content, shining down.
Glistening like dewy nectar, your flower crown.

Your carefree laugh that bloomed the buds.
The vines who retracted all her thorns to hold you.

The patient buds awaiting their bloom.
Anticipating the sun to kiss the sky up to noon.

Just like my soul awaiting its truth.
Anticipating the faces in the crowd for you.



And so we laid beside the river,
Waiting for the other to deliver,
What we've been shying away from, my dear.

Watching you water the fields with their rightful demands,
Hoping—praying—you don't notice my heart in the middle of
the crops.
Excitedly awaiting its turn.

For I never understood why they would hold the majestic rose,
brushing off the thorns prickling their bleeding palms,
Until I met you, holding you proudly, standing grand and tall.

The Land of Pure People

eishi (Pakistan)

The hosts that wouldn't let you leave without a packed parcel.
The children that would frown upon your departure.
The friends that would sigh in disappointment and longing as your chipped wooden chair remained empty.
The animals who would eagerly wait for your leftovers, wagging their tails expectantly as they eye the bowl in front of them.

All houses, whether extravagant or plain, would all share one word on the wall facing front.

Written in our native tongue.

"God has willed it."

Willed for us a home to keep, to welcome, to embrace.

But that is just one of the countless things we have in common.

Take for example, our one and only weakness: the ice-cream truck.

Whether you are idle, working or showering,

Once you hear that familiar tune blaring from the van in the distance,

It's the point of no return.

Running out like headless chickens with varying degrees of crumpled up cash.

As the all too familiar menu gets closer and closer,

Going bananas as if we've been starved since the splitting of the Pangea.

"MANGO!" she cried out, holding up her coins as if it was a life jacket amidst the sea of hungry children.

"Got any vanilla!?" He demanded, going as far as to poke his head through the opening.

"THAT ONE!" the small, chubby hand pointed with her index; her singular tooth visible as she grinned.

Some bold—borderline mischievous teenagers would even lay on the hood of the vehicle, refusing to let the ice-cream man drive off without taking their order.

It's an apocalypse.
A very ice-cream deprived apocalypse.

But in contrast, no one ever goes to bed hungry; not if we know about it.
Is it someone's birthday, or job promotion?
Perhaps it's a religious event, maybe it's your graduation?
Is it possibly done simply in the hopes of a better outcome?
No matter what it is, we always give out food.

In these towns, we always open the large gates every other day to a clueless child, innocently holding up a tray of edibles.
"I came from house three—Mom told you to give the cups back later."
And so, what began as a polite gift, snowballs into a never-ending cycle of food-trading.

Similarly, we barely head out for groceries.
If we run out of salt,
"Go ask house five; they always have it."
Why need to shop, when good ol' Aunt Freya the Friendly tends to our culinary needs?

Even after long, exhausting hours at work,
The colorful, vibrant trucks on the road with trinkets dangling from every inch possible, will never fail to awe you with the poetry plastered on wherever you look.

Ranging from Love, in all its glory and grief, to patriotism and resilience.
From a promise of a better future, to a reminder that God is always here, watching and supporting.

No matter what you read, you will be pondering over it for a long, long time.

This is my nation, Pakistan, the land of pure people.
Who planted the seeds of compassion, generosity, whatnot in my mind.
I have nothing to thank but my homeland, for bringing me up and shaping me; for teaching me what I need to enforce in this world with all my might.

Gated NBHD

Jamie Saint (Lithuania)

I grew up in a gated neighbourhood
Gated from support
Gated from emotions
Gated from love
Gated from devotions
I always felt behind the bars
Behind the bars of my own
Behind the bars of my family home
Falling behind their expectations
Falling in love with depressing situations
I always felt ashamed
I felt ashamed of who I am
I felt ashamed of what I have
It closes on me like a clam
I carry on and numb the sad

I Am

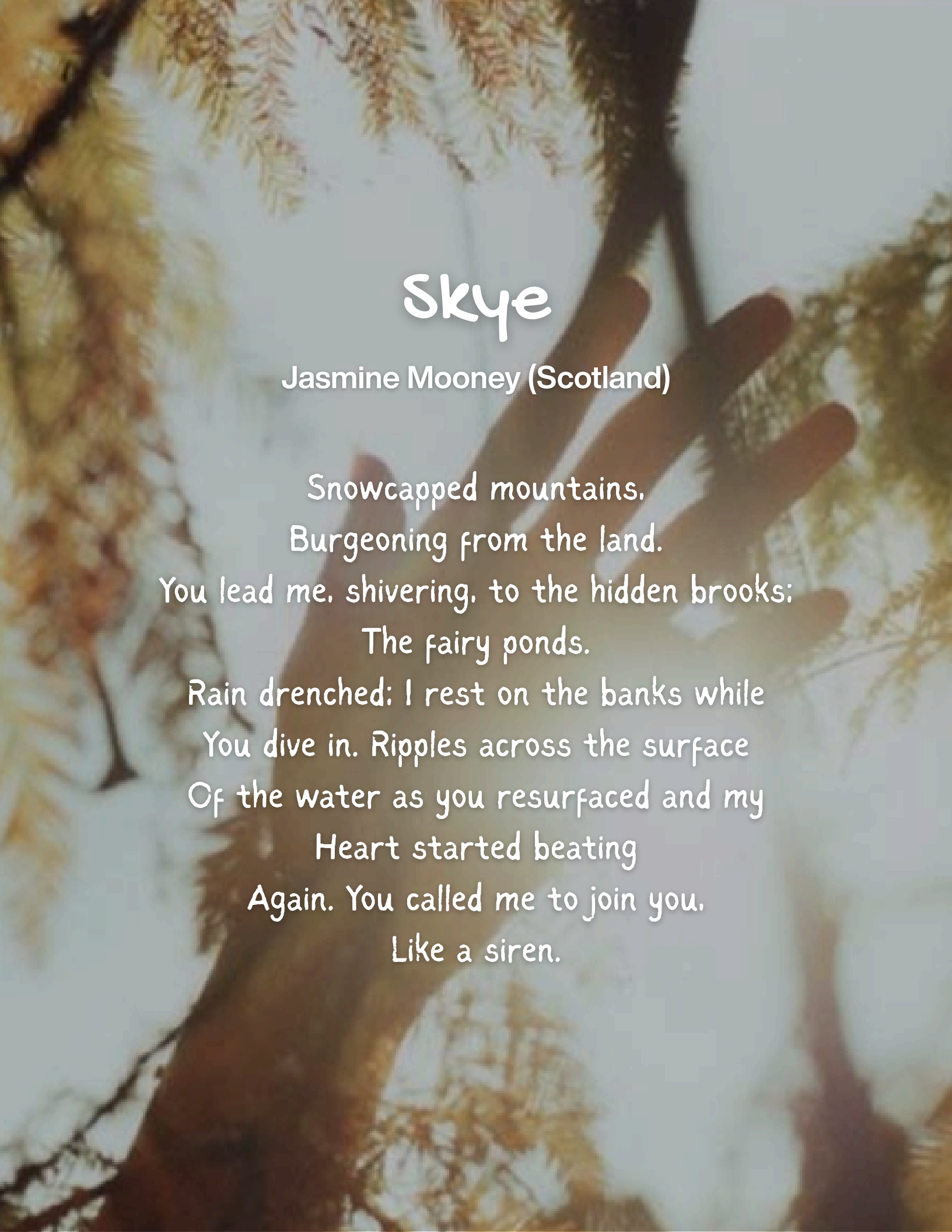
Jane (USA)

I am a ceaseless repentance
A failed imitation of a mother's memories
My hands swirled in a bowl of sticky rice in water
To her engulfed arms in the paddy fields of Ubon
A false tongue to her divine prophet lips I am undeserving of
Who am I but a vessel of unattainability?
A birth contingent on the sacrifice of another?

I am

I am



A hand is reaching upwards from the bottom center of the frame, with fingers slightly spread. The background is a soft-focus image of a tree with dense, golden-brown autumn leaves. The sky is a pale, hazy blue. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

Skye

Jasmine Mooney (Scotland)

Snowcapped mountains.
Burgeoning from the land.
You lead me, shivering, to the hidden brooks;
The fairy ponds.
Rain drenched: I rest on the banks while
You dive in. Ripples across the surface
Of the water as you resurfaced and my
Heart started beating
Again. You called me to join you.
Like a siren.

Smalltown Curses

J.R. Harrington (USA)

Mama always said she found me in the woods, swaddled sitting by the covered cavern they call Devil's Hole, the one that blew half the trees off the hill one day. Mama raised me on menthol smoke and slow-cooked venison. She raised me in a small valley town, more cows than people. Tiny towns like that always have a curse, one that hooks you, keeps you stuck there until you die.

I am from that place, the stained glass windows in the churches and the powerball pencils in the bars. Mama took me and my brother to the bars every weekend to do sound work for her friend's band, and the next day to the Lutheran church, to sit in the pews and listen to the sermon. My brother was born in the hospital, not found in the forest. When my brother spoke it was in the same voice as everyone else—when I spoke, it was in a British accent, and nobody knew where I had learned it.

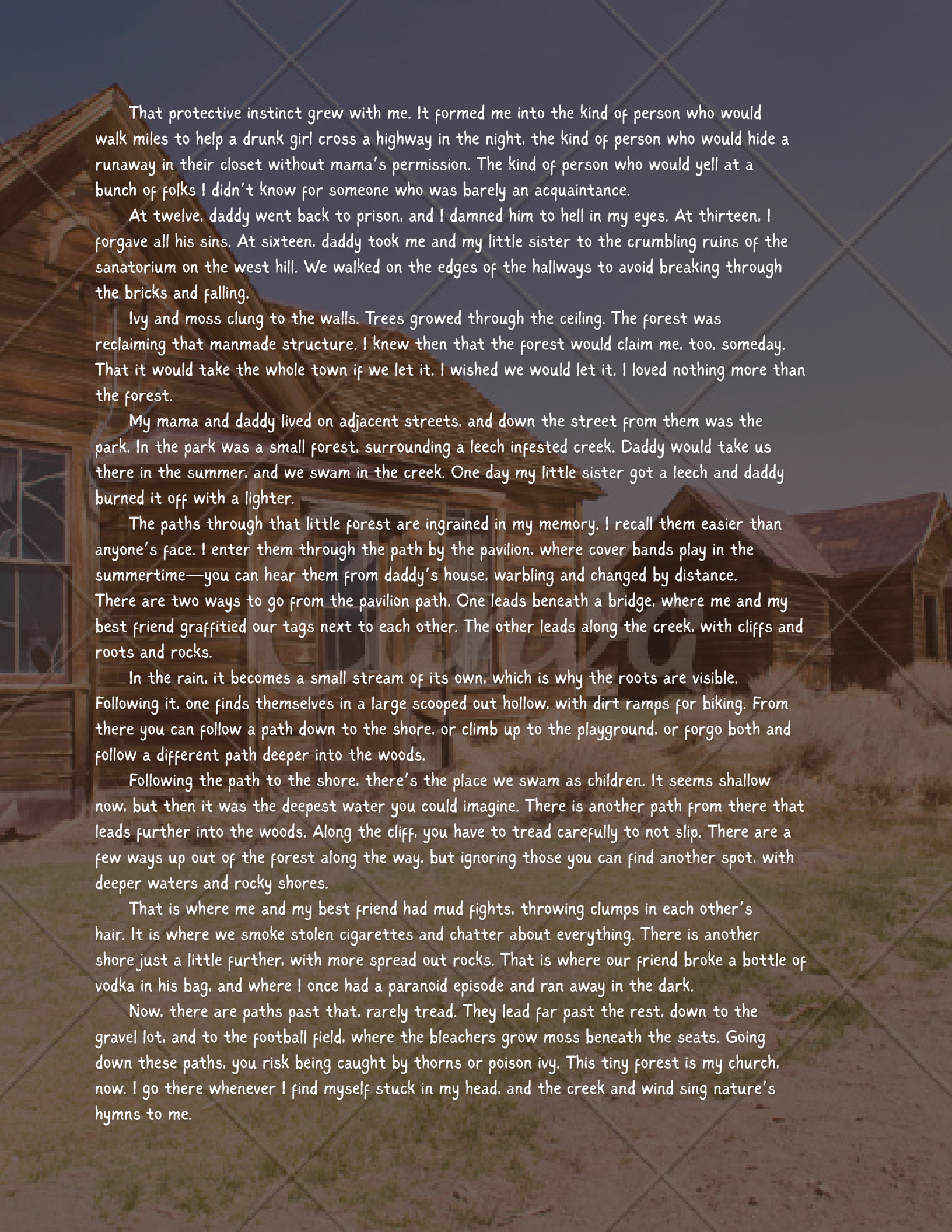
I was the one that broke up our parent's relationship, before I even drew my first breath. I found that out through mama's journal. I was a terribly curious thing, and I read every one of her notebooks while she was at work. My brother never did nothing wrong, but mama's parade of step-daddies all hated him. They loved me, in the way men love a precocious little girl.

Mama loved a lot of men before finding one she stuck with. One of those men came with a step-sister, and she was what the story books would call wicked. The things she did to me and my brother are unspeakable, in that I find them difficult to voice even all these years later. That step-daddy was the worst to my brother. That was the year that mama slapped my brother in the face, after he called her a cruel word our father taught him.

Daddy was a felon. Simple as that, really. He was arrested for child endangerment when I was a baby, and I didn't meet him until I was four. I wore bright pink, and my brother wore red, and we only met in public places for a year, at parks. Then he had a baby with my step mother. That baby changed my life.

I had never thought about it before, but I loved having a little sister. When she got big enough, we would paint each other's nails and do our makeup in the bathroom. She always did it silly, giving herself a unibrow and moustache. I wanted mine to be pretty. We played games on the trampoline in the backyard, and went to the state park.

Sometimes me and my brother would stay the night at daddy's. Some nights daddy would get drunk and beat our step mom. I was nine years old, and my little sister was five, and one night when daddy was drunk and violent I held her close while we listened to her mother cry. I learned, in that moment, that I would do anything to protect her.



That protective instinct grew with me. It formed me into the kind of person who would walk miles to help a drunk girl cross a highway in the night, the kind of person who would hide a runaway in their closet without mama's permission. The kind of person who would yell at a bunch of folks I didn't know for someone who was barely an acquaintance.

At twelve, daddy went back to prison, and I damned him to hell in my eyes. At thirteen, I forgave all his sins. At sixteen, daddy took me and my little sister to the crumbling ruins of the sanatorium on the west hill. We walked on the edges of the hallways to avoid breaking through the bricks and falling.

Ivy and moss clung to the walls. Trees grew through the ceiling. The forest was reclaiming that manmade structure. I knew then that the forest would claim me, too, someday. That it would take the whole town if we let it. I wished we would let it. I loved nothing more than the forest.

My mama and daddy lived on adjacent streets, and down the street from them was the park. In the park was a small forest, surrounding a leech infested creek. Daddy would take us there in the summer, and we swam in the creek. One day my little sister got a leech and daddy burned it off with a lighter.

The paths through that little forest are ingrained in my memory. I recall them easier than anyone's face. I enter them through the path by the pavilion, where cover bands play in the summertime—you can hear them from daddy's house, warbling and changed by distance. There are two ways to go from the pavilion path. One leads beneath a bridge, where me and my best friend graffitied our tags next to each other. The other leads along the creek, with cliffs and roots and rocks.

In the rain, it becomes a small stream of its own, which is why the roots are visible. Following it, one finds themselves in a large scooped out hollow, with dirt ramps for biking. From there you can follow a path down to the shore, or climb up to the playground, or forgo both and follow a different path deeper into the woods.

Following the path to the shore, there's the place we swam as children. It seems shallow now, but then it was the deepest water you could imagine. There is another path from there that leads further into the woods. Along the cliff, you have to tread carefully to not slip. There are a few ways up out of the forest along the way, but ignoring those you can find another spot, with deeper waters and rocky shores.

That is where me and my best friend had mud fights, throwing clumps in each other's hair. It is where we smoke stolen cigarettes and chatter about everything. There is another shore just a little further, with more spread out rocks. That is where our friend broke a bottle of vodka in his bag, and where I once had a paranoid episode and ran away in the dark.

Now, there are paths past that, rarely tread. They lead far past the rest, down to the gravel lot, and to the football field, where the bleachers grow moss beneath the seats. Going down these paths, you risk being caught by thorns or poison ivy. This tiny forest is my church, now. I go there whenever I find myself stuck in my head, and the creek and wind sing nature's hymns to me.



Mama tried to take me away from my forested hometown, across the country to a more mountainous region. We stayed on a horse stable, in a trailer with no internet connection. I hated it more than anything. The forest there was not a forest, it was only brush and cactus. It did not sing to me the way my church did. I learned to write, then, not for fun but as a necessity—it was the only reasonable response to such a change, to begin putting my soul down on paper.

I lived in a desert town for eight years, and when I was old enough, I came back to my point of origin. I walked back into my church, and I was home. I live with my father, who was finally left by my poor stepmom last year. My brother came back too. Like I said—tiny towns get their hooks in you. They consume your soul. They captivate the mind, the way everyone knows each other, the way the graveyards are filled with familiar names.

There is some kind of magic in small towns. If you weren't born in one, it's hard to understand the allure of it. Some people come to a small town and find themselves reborn, like I was in those ruins. Some people pass through and think "maybe, just maybe," but don't stay. Some people sense curses beneath the buildings.

I have a friend who is a psychic, and she says this town is riddled with ghosts. I believe her. Sometimes I think I can feel them passing through me. Sometimes I think they call my name. This town wants something from me. I'm certain, but I'm not sure I can give it what it wants.

Point of Origin

J.R. Harrington (USA)

Verdant green valley.
The ruins on the west hill
Dig their claws in.
Leaving red marks on your soul.

A tiny town nestles
Among the hills.
It has a curse, you see
That keeps you close.

The dirt you walk upon
Is the same that will bury you.
Places like this are
Inescapable.

The equilibrium
Of churches and bars.
Sin and virtue.
Almost distracts from the magic.

The voices that call
In the forest.
Begging you to go deeper.
Find that cavern where
Hands drag you down.

Mama found me in the forest.
A changeling.
And nursed me like her own
On cigarette smoke and
Burned effigies.

So much history.
Mama meeting daddy
In the cemetery.
Falling in love—
And me.
Breaking them apart.

Confessions of a Chinese American Rag Doll

Katherine Zhao (USA)

Previously Published in The WEIGHT Journal

I pry my lips open, graciously
accepting spoonfuls of mashed
bruised-mauve yams onto my dry tongue

"A delicacy when I was your age," grandma says.

"My sister and I left them on the roof in the
wintertime, prying off the icicles like you do the lid
of a soda pop."

Oh, how I yearned for
Sour Patch Kids and
Twix Salted Caramel

5x5, 6x3, 4x7

Times tables rattle through my
teeth by the time I am four years old

While my classmates struggled with
long division and subtracting whole numbers from
zero, I already understood parabolic functions and
why radical over -1 was imaginary.

I mouthed the answers to the
neighbor girl as her babysitter whipped out flashcard after
flashcard by the pool of her
modernist mansion

I wore my gold-embroidered
qipao to school
the week before Chinese New Year

The white kids pointed and laughed as my fellow
Asian classmates hung their heads in shame.
I blushed crimson like a rooster rising at noon
as I clumsily shoved the garment into my backpack.

I came home to Mama watching a
C-drama about a girl who tears the tapestry
displaying her family crest to rebel against
her father

In seventh grade, I learned that
Empress Wu Zetian was China's
first and only female emperor

Two centuries ago, the Island occupied by angels
imprisoned my great-great-great-grandfather.
He wailed like a wounded horse until
epitaphs of confusion covered his walls.

I wondered if
Empress Wu would've curtsied
to the white devils

A transfer student from
Guangzhou sits beside me
in music class

Her upper lip gets caught in her
silver braces between every word
slipped in her silken accent. Her pale fingers
intertwine with mine beneath the mahogany desk.

Later, as we skip across the concrete of
downtown Manhattan in our summer dresses,
a lanky Caucasian man
grins and whistles

Blueberry tits and
apple hips. Measuring tape reads
28-23-34

Kardashian curves & bronzed Aphrodite
complexion. Strawberry-stained lips, shiny
waterlines & slender ankles. Arched nose,
wedged cheekbones & double-eyelids.

Auntie tells me how
pretty my pale skin is. I stopped
swimming that summer

Sweet pork rinds and
fried bok choy glaze my tongue
as I ask Mama to pass the rice bowl

Voice thin as the lead of a
mechanical pencil. I stutter and
fall over my Mandarin like a toddler learning to
walk, tears welling in my small eyes.

The syllables escape through my
teeth, ephemeral as the
rain droplets that fall into the
lake the morning after a storm

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Wildflower flies eagerly free from the motherland
searing her roots until they shall never see soil once more.

Eastern Eve eats the pomegranate, crushing it with her
black teeth until blood and juice coat her gums.

Phoenix rises and dragon entwines, cartoon devil and angel
upon her shoulder. Mere fanciful scarves: a self-deprecating fashion statement.

Has she traveled beyond the ~~wrath~~ reach of our gods?

People stand and gawk
at the Chinese American
rag doll

She sits in the clearance aisle, on the
island of broken Barbies. She comes
with a string: you pull it and she
babbles like a sinner at a confessional.

Replicas of a vintage doll
sold out. Limited edition
turned tragic best-seller

For The Love Of a Parent

Lara (Italy)

Do you know what my greatest mistake was?
To be a good daughter, to obey, to remain silent,
handing over the reins of my life, my life,
letting you decide which dream was worthy of pursuit,
which path I should follow because the others, no,
they didn't fit your idea. I was shaped this way,
taught to be still, to avoid your fury, to swallow my voice,
lest fear take root in my chest. And in doing so,
I fell unknowingly from the edge of a precipice
that belongs to me, from which escape feels impossible,
now that I see the prison you've made of my soul.
Five years, gone to waste, my adolescence, crumbled dust
in your hands, the freedom to drive, to wander,
denied, because of you, and now?
Now you've decided to break my youth,
to shatter the woman I could've become,
for your petty whim, for your hunger to dominate.
Do you know what my greatest mistake was?
To chase your love.

The Cerulean Seas

Maeir Liv (Philippines)

"Where are you from?"

The oceans. I answer.

Cerulean in its depths as it cools the burning sands.

Lapping waves send drops of water flying across rocks.

The seaward breeze brushes the leaves of the palm trees

As coconuts dent the sand.

"Where are you from?"

The blazing sun. I answer.

Where the land is blanketed in blinding light.

Roasting those who walk across it.

The sky's a cloudless canvas doused in light baby boy's hue.

As the hot wind drenches my skin.

"Where are you from?"

Cities of calamity. I answer.

Clouds of ash spotted miles away

As earthquakes rumble the ground.

On flooded streets of rubble and trash

Float several makeshift boats.

Where my people, acquainted with disaster,

Know to await the next day.

"Where are you from?"

The chasm of the corrupt, I answer.

Where the rich build their own mountains

High above those clawing its iron base.

Above those whose faces,

caked from dust trailed behind.

Rummaging through what they can to survive.

Whilst up in the summit,

Are deaf to all the cries.

"Where are you from?"

Infectious glee, I answer.

When your world crumbles yearly

And somehow, a sliver of joy can be found

Wedge in between the cracks of a home.

Welcome is the warm glow of a smile.

Lighting up the dismal backwash of disaster.

"Where are you from?"

The cerulean seas, I answer.

From within its depths rose islands anew.

Individual from the neighboring puzzle-piece lands.

And for all its flooding cities and blinding heat,

And giddily drunk officials addicted to greed.

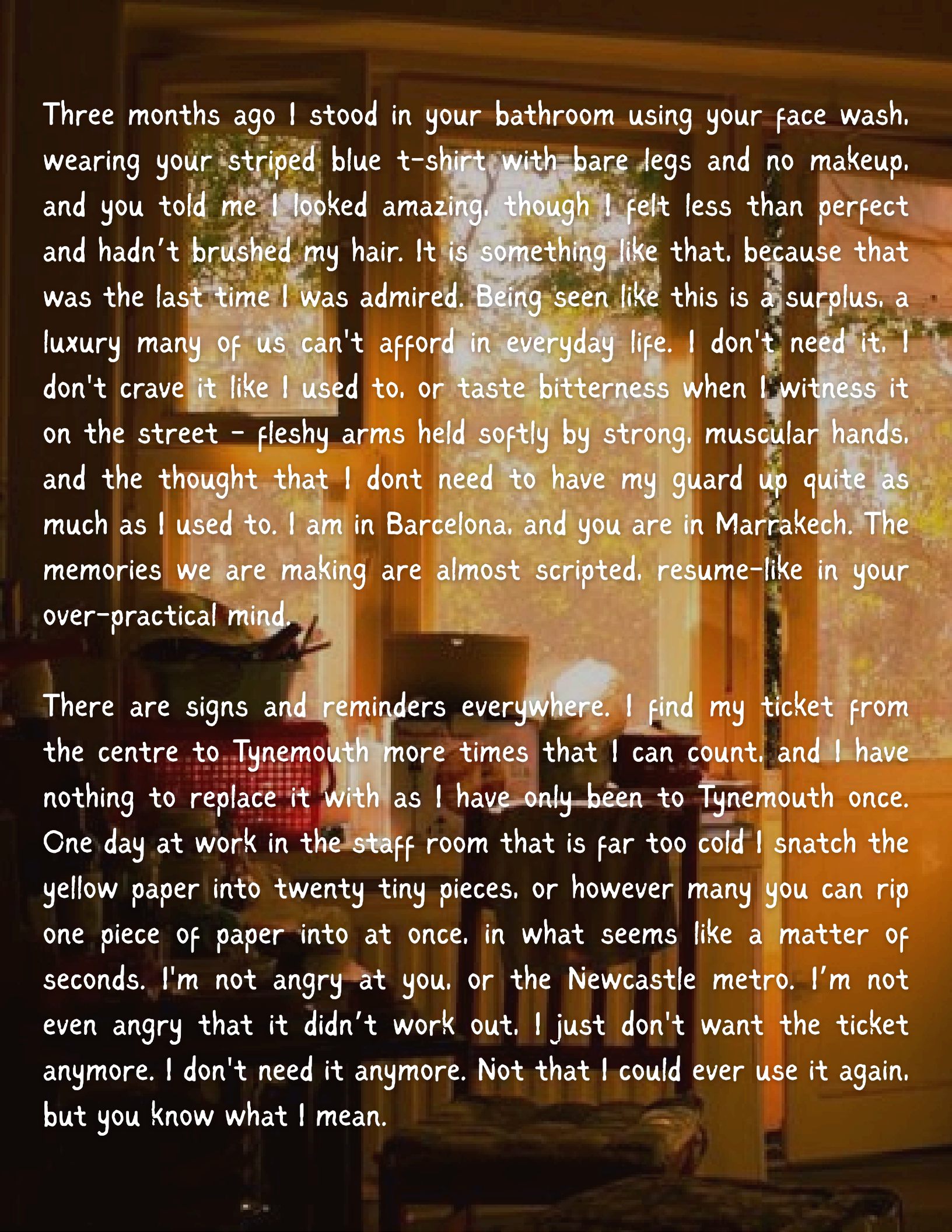
My heart will always swim towards the shores
of my people's undying felicity.

Metro Ticket

Maeve Burell (UK)

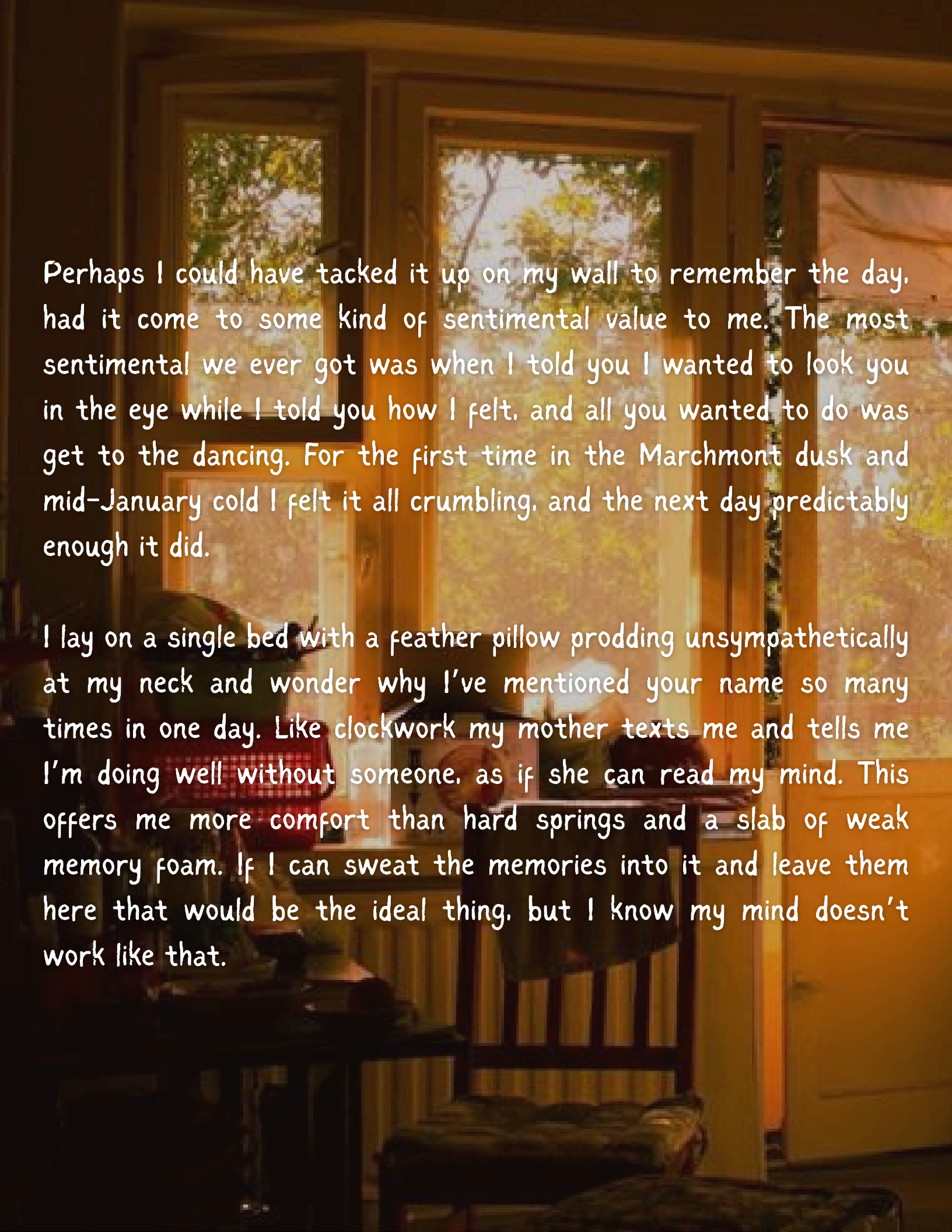
It's strange now to think of you, like a memory that almost feels too soft to touch. I have been desperate to forget about you, which I succeeded, 'til I was well enough and distracted enough and far enough out to not think of you anymore in my day to day, or if I did in a way that didn't stir any tenderness in the pit of my stomach. I saw you on the map and didn't really wonder what you were doing. I didn't care to hear about it as the one time I showed you what I was doing you didn't seem to care either: not in a rude way but at least in a way of mutually understanding that we aren't going about our days picturing what the other is up to, or wishing that they'd would do the same.

I sit at the wooden kitchen table, where the floor is primed for summer but I am still wearing two cardigans, though perhaps that is just my airing on the side of caution. I share a small space with four other girls where we all seem to have a quiet respect for each other's privacy, though the one bathroom I will not pretend is not a challenge.

The background of the text is a photograph of a room. On the left, there is a dark wooden cabinet or desk. In the center, a window looks out onto a bright outdoor scene with green trees and a white building. To the right of the window, there is a dark wooden chair. The room is dimly lit, with light coming from the window.

Three months ago I stood in your bathroom using your face wash, wearing your striped blue t-shirt with bare legs and no makeup, and you told me I looked amazing, though I felt less than perfect and hadn't brushed my hair. It is something like that, because that was the last time I was admired. Being seen like this is a surplus, a luxury many of us can't afford in everyday life. I don't need it. I don't crave it like I used to, or taste bitterness when I witness it on the street – fleshy arms held softly by strong, muscular hands, and the thought that I don't need to have my guard up quite as much as I used to. I am in Barcelona, and you are in Marrakech. The memories we are making are almost scripted, resume-like in your over-practical mind.

There are signs and reminders everywhere. I find my ticket from the centre to Tynemouth more times that I can count, and I have nothing to replace it with as I have only been to Tynemouth once. One day at work in the staff room that is far too cold I snatch the yellow paper into twenty tiny pieces, or however many you can rip one piece of paper into at once, in what seems like a matter of seconds. I'm not angry at you, or the Newcastle metro. I'm not even angry that it didn't work out. I just don't want the ticket anymore. I don't need it anymore. Not that I could ever use it again, but you know what I mean.



Perhaps I could have tacked it up on my wall to remember the day, had it come to some kind of sentimental value to me. The most sentimental we ever got was when I told you I wanted to look you in the eye while I told you how I felt, and all you wanted to do was get to the dancing. For the first time in the Marchmont dusk and mid-January cold I felt it all crumbling, and the next day predictably enough it did.

I lay on a single bed with a feather pillow prodding unsympathetically at my neck and wonder why I've mentioned your name so many times in one day. Like clockwork my mother texts me and tells me I'm doing well without someone, as if she can read my mind. This offers me more comfort than hard springs and a slab of weak memory foam. If I can sweat the memories into it and leave them here that would be the ideal thing, but I know my mind doesn't work like that.

In The Heart Of A City So Old

Pollyanna Halcyon (Bangladesh)

I was born on an autumn day deep in the heart of a city so old that its walls and mosques have an unwritten history etched forever on the old pink brickslike gashes of wounds on an ancient body.

Young people here speak in a mixture of the new and archaic. Words once brought by the Persians and Turkish. Even the Portuguese left behind some vocables for us to utter four centuries later though no one seems to care or look at these. Not anymore. But I like to think of the Armenians who came here, their church with a statue now falling to pieces—a tribute to a woman now dead, faded into oblivion.

And yet somehow immortalised by her husband like the stories of ancient gods and goddesses prayed to by thousands in old temples here that existed before me and my mother and hers and her mother. And I realised how ancient this city is, my Dhaka. She is old and she is holy in a distorted, twisted way telling tales of a past you've never seen and hinting at a future you can't really predict. In her webs is my origin and like her I'm made up of different pieces and threads tied together into one colossal being—always restless—jostling and bustling around. Never quite at peace.

Keep Pedaling

Shel Zhou (USA)

"Keep pedaling! Don't stop!" My dad's voice was a lifeline as I flew down the hill, faster than I ever dared. Sharp slices of wind cut my face like a butcher slicing meat. Branches reached out with claws of bark, scraping my arms and cheeks. "Don't look back!"

But I did look back, just as the bike wobbled. Fear clawed at my chest. I lost control and was pitched headlong into the grass, the world spinning in a blur of green. My dad's heavy footsteps crunched through the gravel as he rushed to my side.

"Are you okay?" he panted, eyes wide.

I blinked up at him, then down at my dirt-streaked knees and scratched palms. I couldn't stop the beam that began to split my face. I began to laugh. It started small, a giggle, and then it bubbled up, unstoppable. "I biked," I gasped, between breaths. "I really did it."

He pulled me to my feet, brushing off the dirt. "Good job."

In that moment, with the scent of crushed grass around us and the echo of my laughter still hanging in the air, I felt courage take root in my heart. My world lit with emerald green.

The kitchen was filled with the comforting aroma of ginger and garlic sizzling in oil, mingling with the scent of the mothballs that always clung to my grandparents' lavender clothes.

I always adored those elementary school summers, when my grandparents flew a thousand miles across the Pacific ocean to see us, the summers I wished would stay forever.

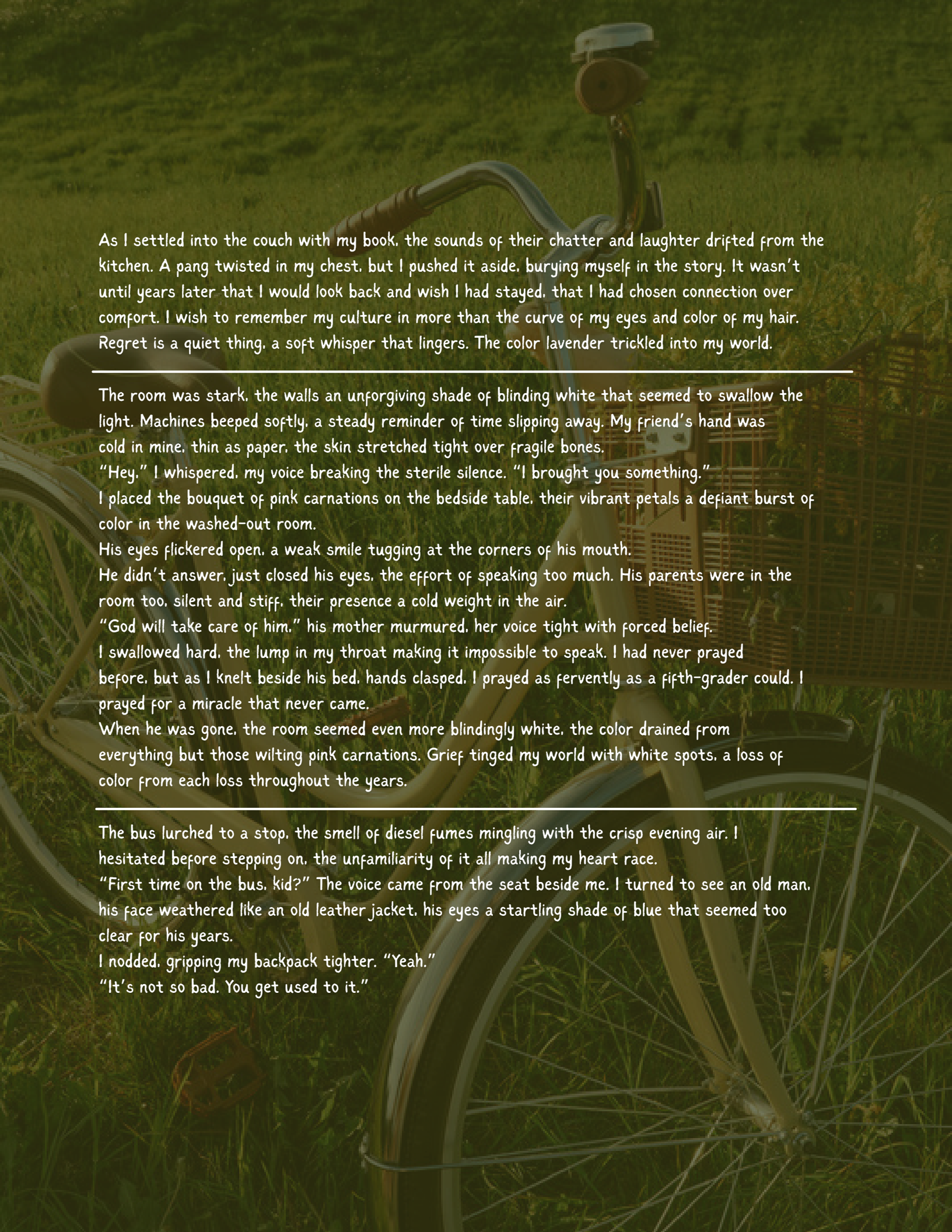
My grandma's hands moved like a dance as she folded the dough around filling, each jiaozi mouthwatering and precise. Our kitchen glowed with soft orange light, a nest of the smell of cloves and Mandarin chatter.

"Like this," she instructed, guiding my small hands through the motions.

I tried to follow, but my fingers fumbled, the dough slipping from my grasp. "I'm no good at this," I muttered, frustration seeping into my words.

My mom clicked her tongue, a tscking sound, from across the counter, where she was rolling out more dough. "It takes practice, just like the piano. You'll get it."

But I was too impatient, too eager to lose myself in the pages of a book instead of fumbling with sticky dough. "I'll be right back," I said, already stepping away, leaving the unfinished jiaozi behind.

A vintage-style bicycle with a black frame and fenders is parked in a field of tall, green grass. The bicycle has a black seat, handlebars with grips, and a headlight. The background is a soft-focus field of grass and some distant trees.

As I settled into the couch with my book, the sounds of their chatter and laughter drifted from the kitchen. A pang twisted in my chest, but I pushed it aside, burying myself in the story. It wasn't until years later that I would look back and wish I had stayed, that I had chosen connection over comfort. I wish to remember my culture in more than the curve of my eyes and color of my hair. Regret is a quiet thing, a soft whisper that lingers. The color lavender trickled into my world.

The room was stark, the walls an unforgiving shade of blinding white that seemed to swallow the light. Machines beeped softly, a steady reminder of time slipping away. My friend's hand was cold in mine, thin as paper, the skin stretched tight over fragile bones.

"Hey," I whispered, my voice breaking the sterile silence. "I brought you something."

I placed the bouquet of pink carnations on the bedside table, their vibrant petals a defiant burst of color in the washed-out room.

His eyes flickered open, a weak smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

He didn't answer, just closed his eyes, the effort of speaking too much. His parents were in the room too, silent and stiff, their presence a cold weight in the air.

"God will take care of him," his mother murmured, her voice tight with forced belief.

I swallowed hard, the lump in my throat making it impossible to speak. I had never prayed before, but as I knelt beside his bed, hands clasped, I prayed as fervently as a fifth-grader could. I prayed for a miracle that never came.

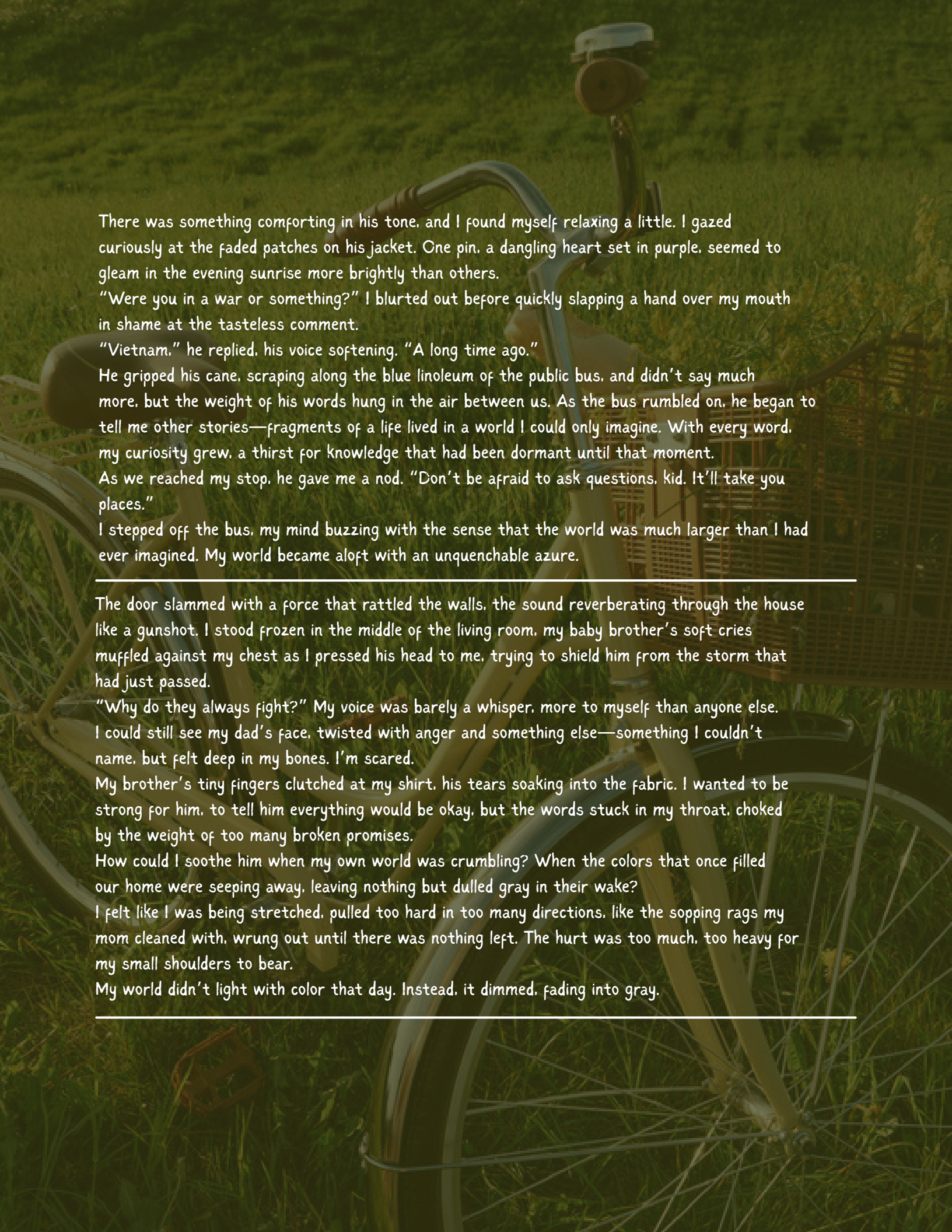
When he was gone, the room seemed even more blindingly white, the color drained from everything but those wilting pink carnations. Grief tinged my world with white spots, a loss of color from each loss throughout the years.

The bus lurched to a stop, the smell of diesel fumes mingling with the crisp evening air. I hesitated before stepping on, the unfamiliarity of it all making my heart race.

"First time on the bus, kid?" The voice came from the seat beside me. I turned to see an old man, his face weathered like an old leather jacket, his eyes a startling shade of blue that seemed too clear for his years.

I nodded, gripping my backpack tighter. "Yeah."

"It's not so bad. You get used to it."

A bicycle is parked in a field of tall, green grass. The bicycle is dark-colored with a silver bell on the handlebars. In the background, there is a wooden fence and some trees. The scene is lit with soft, natural light.

There was something comforting in his tone, and I found myself relaxing a little. I gazed curiously at the faded patches on his jacket. One pin, a dangling heart set in purple, seemed to gleam in the evening sunrise more brightly than others.

"Were you in a war or something?" I blurted out before quickly slapping a hand over my mouth in shame at the tasteless comment.

"Vietnam," he replied, his voice softening. "A long time ago."

He gripped his cane, scraping along the blue linoleum of the public bus, and didn't say much more, but the weight of his words hung in the air between us. As the bus rumbled on, he began to tell me other stories—fragments of a life lived in a world I could only imagine. With every word, my curiosity grew, a thirst for knowledge that had been dormant until that moment.

As we reached my stop, he gave me a nod. "Don't be afraid to ask questions, kid. It'll take you places."

I stepped off the bus, my mind buzzing with the sense that the world was much larger than I had ever imagined. My world became aloft with an unquenchable azure.

The door slammed with a force that rattled the walls, the sound reverberating through the house like a gunshot. I stood frozen in the middle of the living room, my baby brother's soft cries muffled against my chest as I pressed his head to me, trying to shield him from the storm that had just passed.

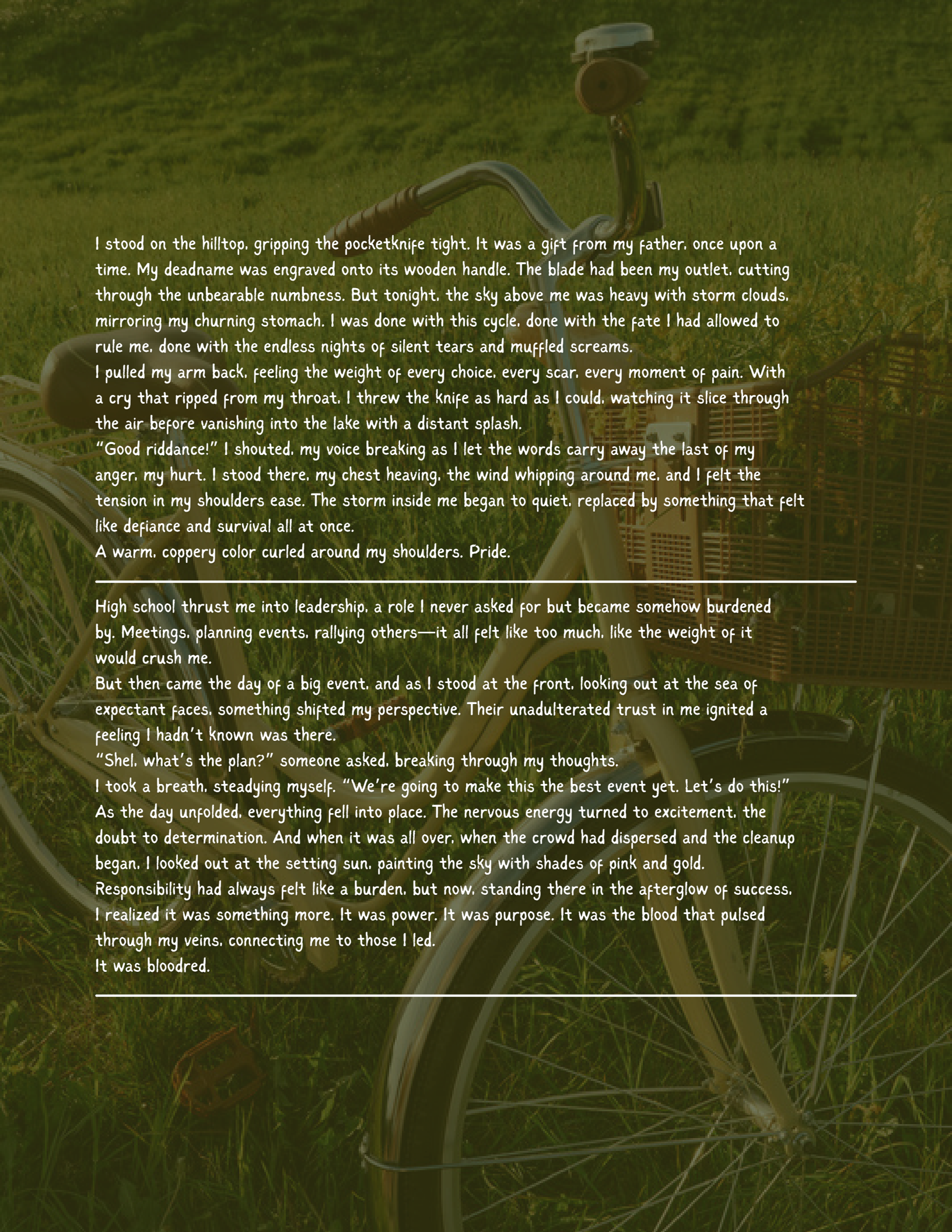
"Why do they always fight?" My voice was barely a whisper, more to myself than anyone else. I could still see my dad's face, twisted with anger and something else—something I couldn't name, but felt deep in my bones. I'm scared.

My brother's tiny fingers clutched at my shirt, his tears soaking into the fabric. I wanted to be strong for him, to tell him everything would be okay, but the words stuck in my throat, choked by the weight of too many broken promises.

How could I soothe him when my own world was crumbling? When the colors that once filled our home were seeping away, leaving nothing but dulled gray in their wake?

I felt like I was being stretched, pulled too hard in too many directions, like the sopping rags my mom cleaned with, wrung out until there was nothing left. The hurt was too much, too heavy for my small shoulders to bear.

My world didn't light with color that day. Instead, it dimmed, fading into gray.

A bicycle with a basket on the back, parked in a field of tall grass. The bicycle is dark-colored, and the basket is woven and empty. The background is a dense field of green grass, slightly out of focus.

I stood on the hilltop, gripping the pocketknife tight. It was a gift from my father, once upon a time. My deadname was engraved onto its wooden handle. The blade had been my outlet, cutting through the unbearable numbness. But tonight, the sky above me was heavy with storm clouds, mirroring my churning stomach. I was done with this cycle, done with the fate I had allowed to rule me, done with the endless nights of silent tears and muffled screams.

I pulled my arm back, feeling the weight of every choice, every scar, every moment of pain. With a cry that ripped from my throat, I threw the knife as hard as I could, watching it slice through the air before vanishing into the lake with a distant splash.

"Good riddance!" I shouted, my voice breaking as I let the words carry away the last of my anger, my hurt. I stood there, my chest heaving, the wind whipping around me, and I felt the tension in my shoulders ease. The storm inside me began to quiet, replaced by something that felt like defiance and survival all at once.

A warm, coppery color curled around my shoulders. Pride.

High school thrust me into leadership, a role I never asked for but became somehow burdened by. Meetings, planning events, rallying others—it all felt like too much, like the weight of it would crush me.

But then came the day of a big event, and as I stood at the front, looking out at the sea of expectant faces, something shifted my perspective. Their unadulterated trust in me ignited a feeling I hadn't known was there.

"Shel, what's the plan?" someone asked, breaking through my thoughts.

I took a breath, steadying myself. "We're going to make this the best event yet. Let's do this!"

As the day unfolded, everything fell into place. The nervous energy turned to excitement, the doubt to determination. And when it was all over, when the crowd had dispersed and the cleanup began, I looked out at the setting sun, painting the sky with shades of pink and gold.

Responsibility had always felt like a burden, but now, standing there in the afterglow of success, I realized it was something more. It was power. It was purpose. It was the blood that pulsed through my veins, connecting me to those I led.

It was bloodred.



I stood, stricken in the Louvre Museum, staring up at the towering canvas of Liberty Leading the People.

Summer before my final year, graduation, my parents took us to Europe. I fell in love with the country's good food, beautiful architecture, and pleasant weather. But I remember most clearly, this defining moment, rooted to the spot and moved to tears by a painting.

The colors swirled and blended—clear blues, grassy greens, blinding whites, and soft, muted golds—each brushstroke a testament to the chaos and triumph of revolution. And in that chaos, I—another revolutionary, a glam rock nihilist, a reader of Dostoevsky and Kafka—saw my own life reflected back at me.

I was born of many colors. And as I stood in the heart of Paris, thousands of miles from home, I felt those colors converge, intertwining to form something whole. The turmoil, the victories, the love, and the loss—they all led to this moment, where I finally felt that every shade, every hue had its place in the painting of my life.

Dear Elio

Shel Zhou (USA)

August 2018

Dear Elio,

You're dead.

- S

August 2018

Dear Elio,

I'm sorry. That was rude. I don't know what else to say to you anymore, though.

- S

December 2020

Dear Elio,

Did you know that there's a pandemic going on right now? My dad went crazy and bought a load of survival kits. He thinks the apocalypse is coming. I bet your parents are acting like that too.

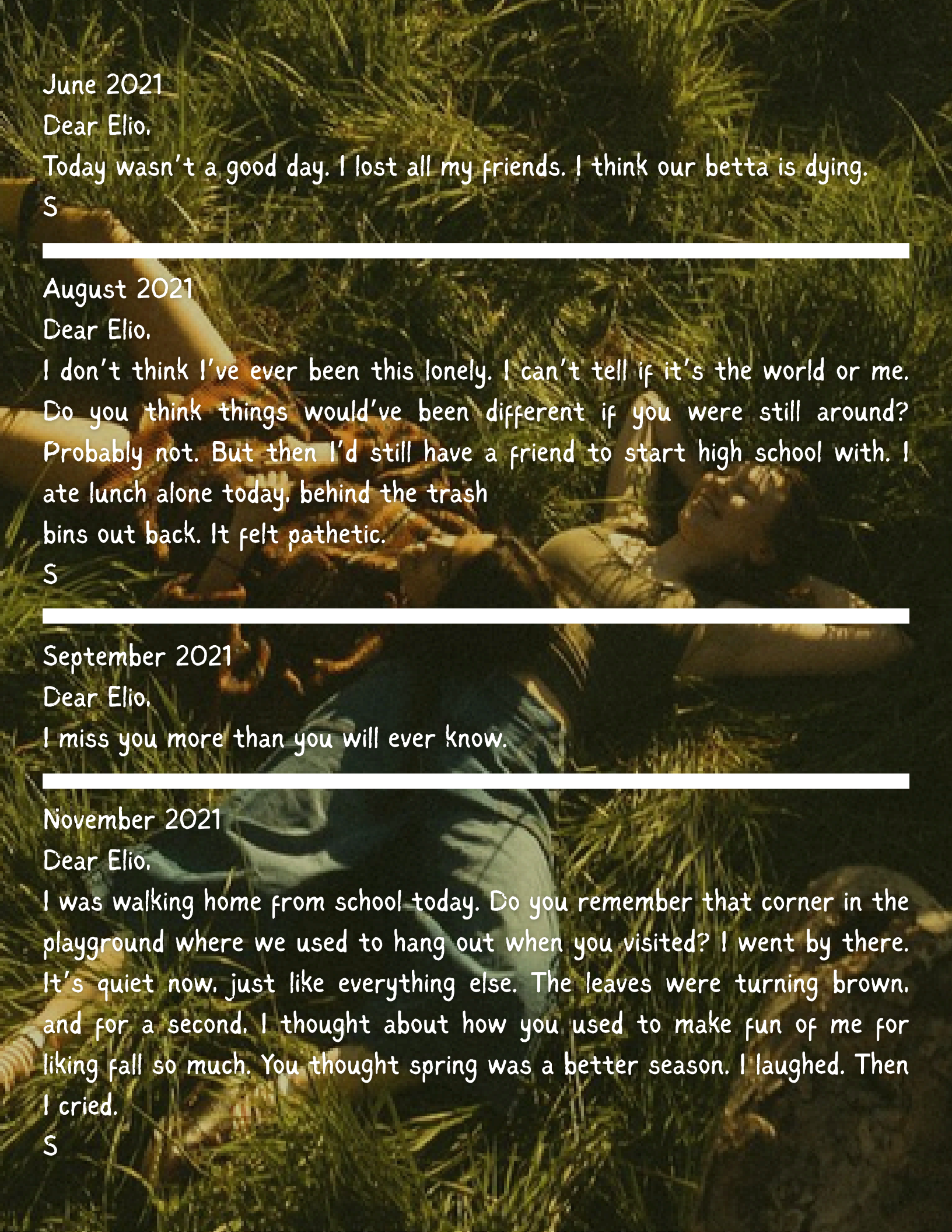
- S

January 2021

Dear Elio,

I went to the pet store today. We got a betta fish. I saw frogs there, and it reminded me of Clarence. I wonder how he's doing. Who looks after Clarence, after your death?

- S

A person is lying on their back in a field of tall, dry grass. They are wearing a dark jacket and light-colored pants. Their arms are outstretched, and they appear to be looking up at the sky. The lighting is soft, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

June 2021

Dear Elio.

Today wasn't a good day. I lost all my friends. I think our betta is dying.
S

August 2021

Dear Elio.

I don't think I've ever been this lonely. I can't tell if it's the world or me. Do you think things would've been different if you were still around? Probably not. But then I'd still have a friend to start high school with. I ate lunch alone today, behind the trash bins out back. It felt pathetic.
S

September 2021

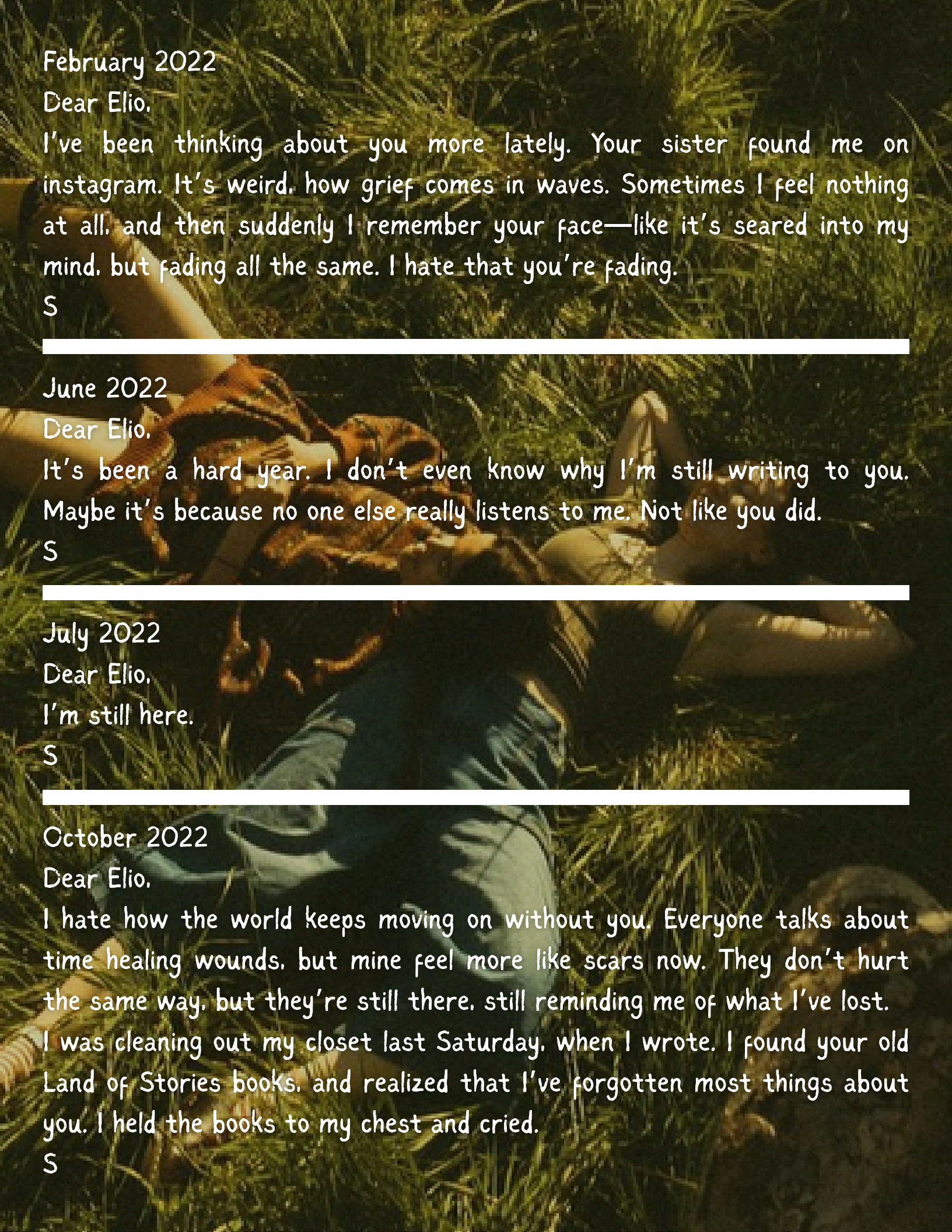
Dear Elio.

I miss you more than you will ever know.

November 2021

Dear Elio.

I was walking home from school today. Do you remember that corner in the playground where we used to hang out when you visited? I went by there. It's quiet now, just like everything else. The leaves were turning brown, and for a second, I thought about how you used to make fun of me for liking fall so much. You thought spring was a better season. I laughed. Then I cried.
S

A person is lying on their back in a field of tall, dry grass. They are wearing a dark jacket and light-colored pants. Their arms are outstretched to the sides. The lighting is soft, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

February 2022

Dear Elio.

I've been thinking about you more lately. Your sister found me on instagram. It's weird, how grief comes in waves. Sometimes I feel nothing at all, and then suddenly I remember your face—like it's seared into my mind, but fading all the same. I hate that you're fading.

S

June 2022

Dear Elio.

It's been a hard year. I don't even know why I'm still writing to you. Maybe it's because no one else really listens to me. Not like you did.

S

July 2022

Dear Elio.

I'm still here.

S

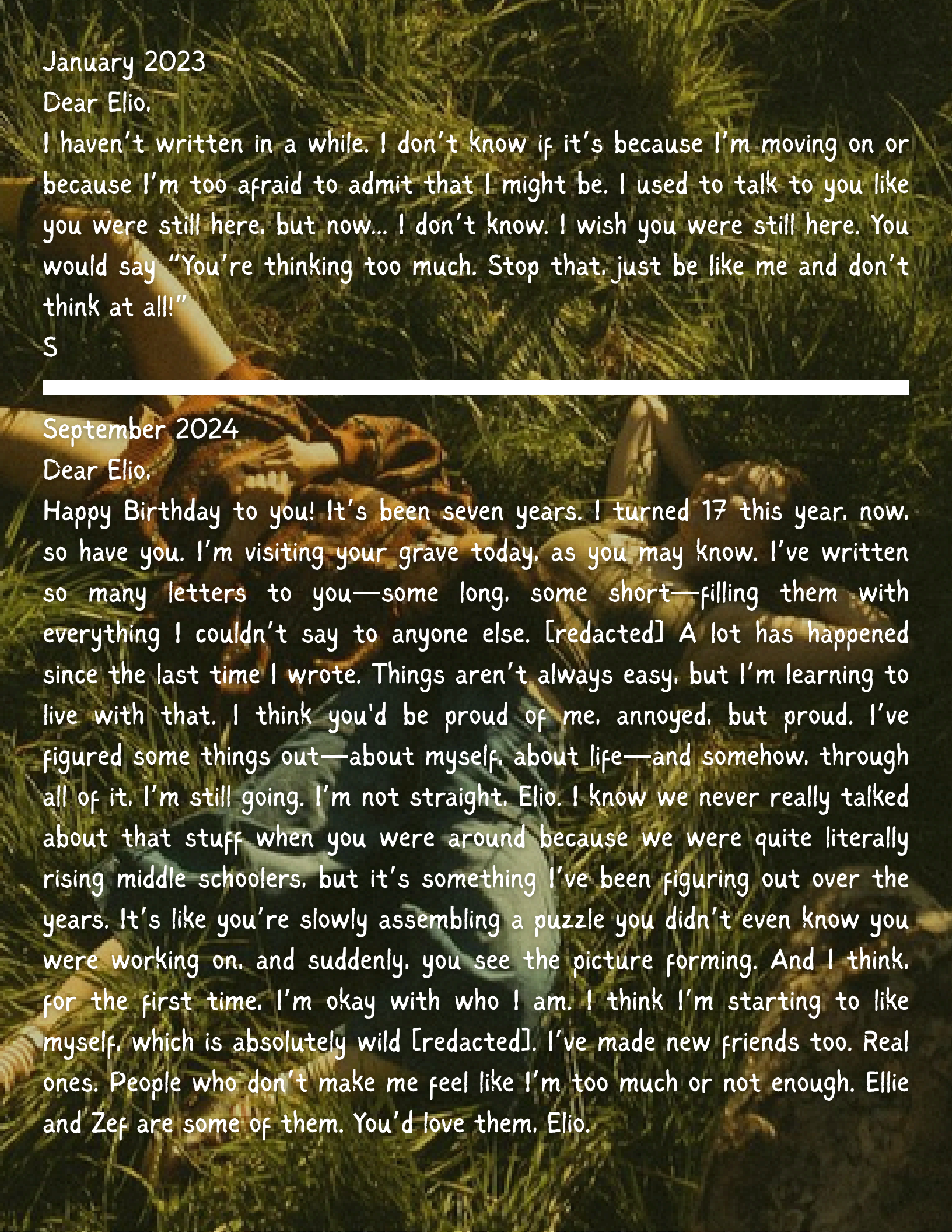
October 2022

Dear Elio.

I hate how the world keeps moving on without you. Everyone talks about time healing wounds, but mine feel more like scars now. They don't hurt the same way, but they're still there, still reminding me of what I've lost.

I was cleaning out my closet last Saturday, when I wrote. I found your old Land of Stories books, and realized that I've forgotten most things about you. I held the books to my chest and cried.

S



January 2023

Dear Elio.

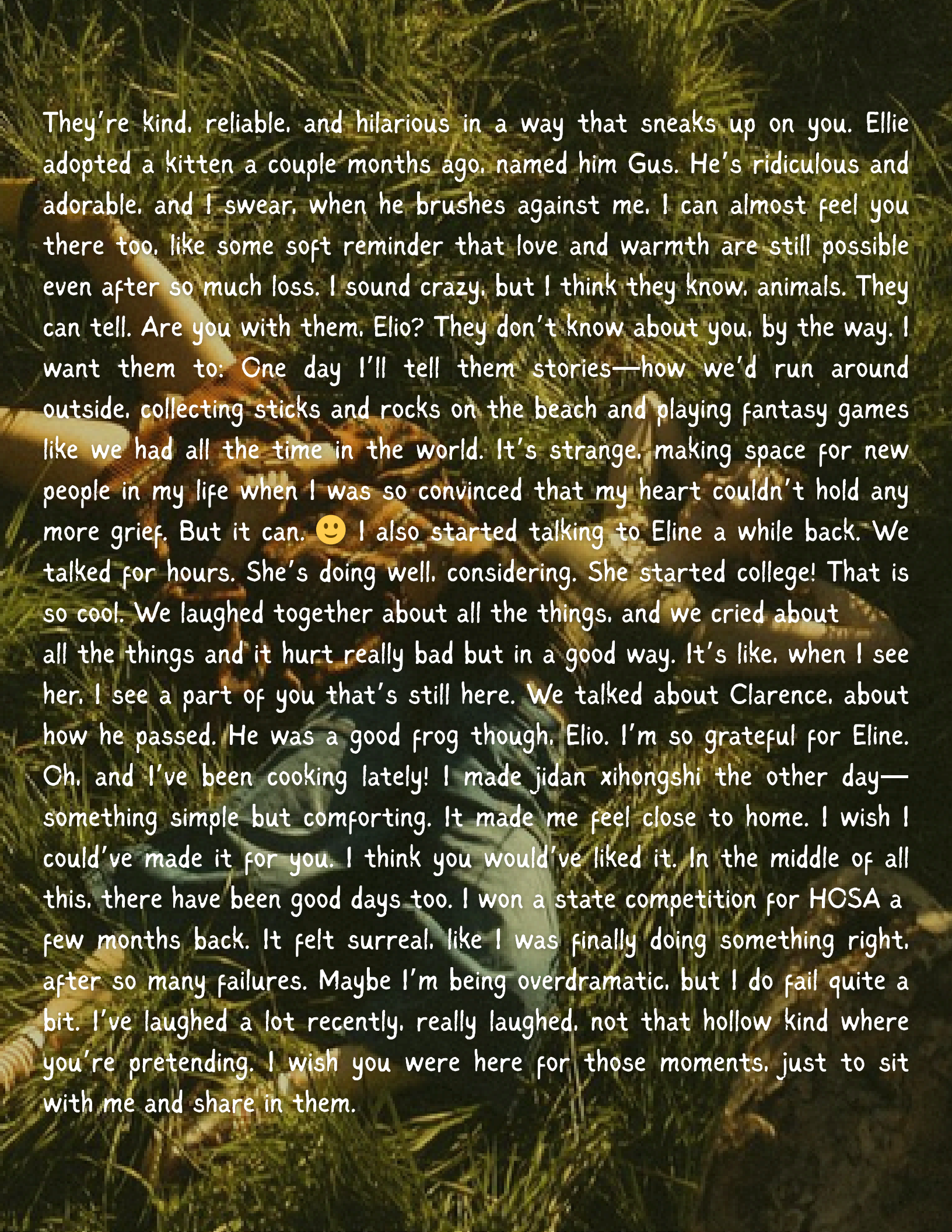
I haven't written in a while. I don't know if it's because I'm moving on or because I'm too afraid to admit that I might be. I used to talk to you like you were still here, but now... I don't know. I wish you were still here. You would say "You're thinking too much. Stop that, just be like me and don't think at all!"

S

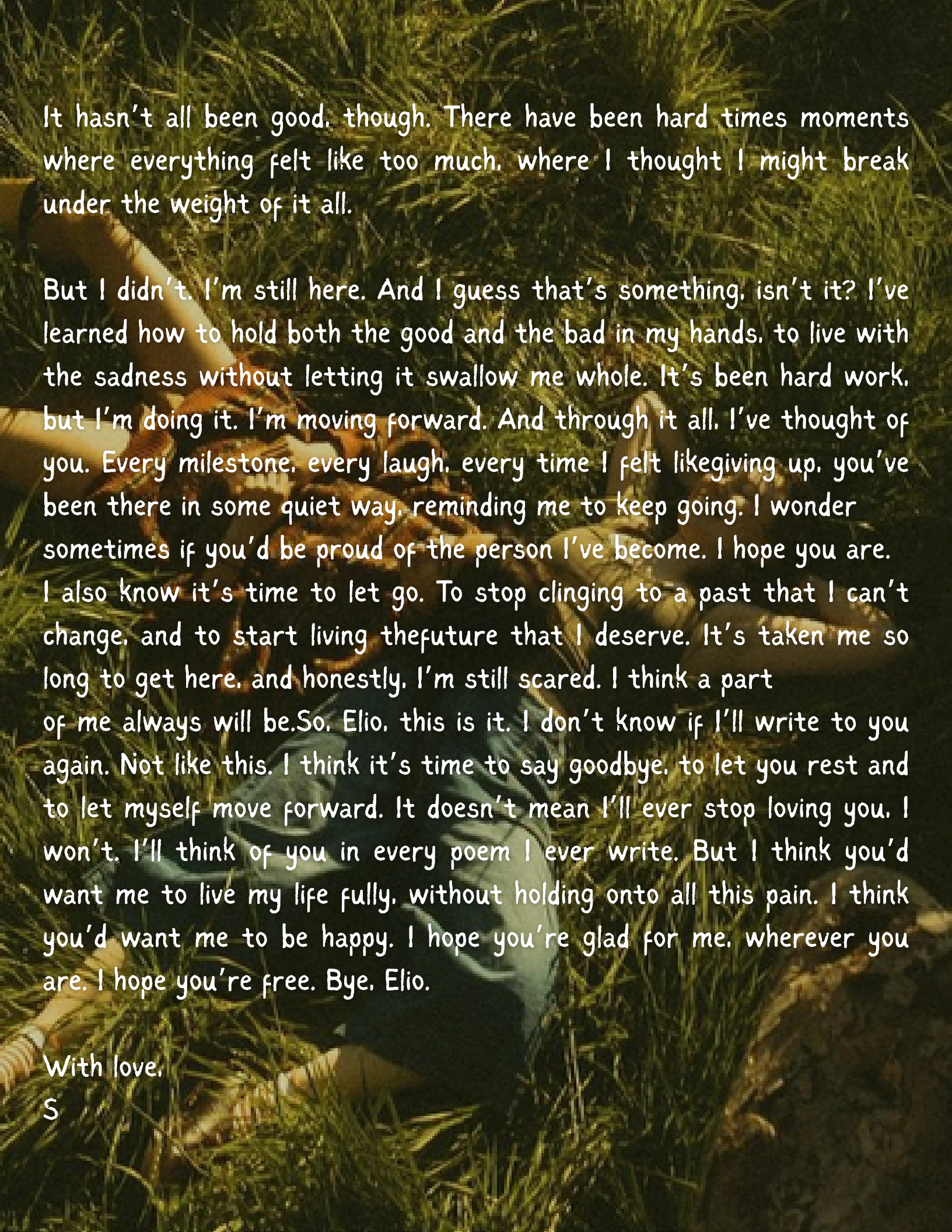
September 2024

Dear Elio.

Happy Birthday to you! It's been seven years. I turned 17 this year, now, so have you. I'm visiting your grave today, as you may know. I've written so many letters to you—some long, some short—filling them with everything I couldn't say to anyone else. [redacted] A lot has happened since the last time I wrote. Things aren't always easy, but I'm learning to live with that. I think you'd be proud of me, annoyed, but proud. I've figured some things out—about myself, about life—and somehow, through all of it, I'm still going. I'm not straight, Elio. I know we never really talked about that stuff when you were around because we were quite literally rising middle schoolers, but it's something I've been figuring out over the years. It's like you're slowly assembling a puzzle you didn't even know you were working on, and suddenly, you see the picture forming. And I think, for the first time, I'm okay with who I am. I think I'm starting to like myself, which is absolutely wild [redacted]. I've made new friends too. Real ones. People who don't make me feel like I'm too much or not enough. Ellie and Zef are some of them. You'd love them, Elio.

A person is lying down in a field of tall, dry grass. A small, light-colored dog is lying next to them. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The person's arm is visible, resting on the grass. The dog is looking towards the camera.

They're kind, reliable, and hilarious in a way that sneaks up on you. Ellie adopted a kitten a couple months ago, named him Gus. He's ridiculous and adorable, and I swear, when he brushes against me, I can almost feel you there too, like some soft reminder that love and warmth are still possible even after so much loss. I sound crazy, but I think they know, animals. They can tell. Are you with them, Elio? They don't know about you, by the way. I want them to: One day I'll tell them stories—how we'd run around outside, collecting sticks and rocks on the beach and playing fantasy games like we had all the time in the world. It's strange, making space for new people in my life when I was so convinced that my heart couldn't hold any more grief. But it can. 😊 I also started talking to Eline a while back. We talked for hours. She's doing well, considering. She started college! That is so cool. We laughed together about all the things, and we cried about all the things and it hurt really bad but in a good way. It's like, when I see her, I see a part of you that's still here. We talked about Clarence, about how he passed. He was a good frog though, Elio. I'm so grateful for Eline. Oh, and I've been cooking lately! I made jidan xihongshi the other day—something simple but comforting. It made me feel close to home. I wish I could've made it for you. I think you would've liked it. In the middle of all this, there have been good days too. I won a state competition for HOSA a few months back. It felt surreal, like I was finally doing something right, after so many failures. Maybe I'm being overdramatic, but I do fail quite a bit. I've laughed a lot recently, really laughed, not that hollow kind where you're pretending. I wish you were here for those moments, just to sit with me and share in them.

A person is lying down in a field of tall, green grass. The person's head is resting on the ground, and their arms are outstretched. The lighting is soft and natural, suggesting an outdoor setting during the day.

It hasn't all been good, though. There have been hard times moments where everything felt like too much, where I thought I might break under the weight of it all.

But I didn't. I'm still here. And I guess that's something, isn't it? I've learned how to hold both the good and the bad in my hands, to live with the sadness without letting it swallow me whole. It's been hard work, but I'm doing it. I'm moving forward. And through it all, I've thought of you. Every milestone, every laugh, every time I felt like giving up, you've been there in some quiet way, reminding me to keep going. I wonder sometimes if you'd be proud of the person I've become. I hope you are. I also know it's time to let go. To stop clinging to a past that I can't change, and to start living the future that I deserve. It's taken me so long to get here, and honestly, I'm still scared. I think a part of me always will be. So, Elio, this is it. I don't know if I'll write to you again. Not like this. I think it's time to say goodbye, to let you rest and to let myself move forward. It doesn't mean I'll ever stop loving you. I won't. I'll think of you in every poem I ever write. But I think you'd want me to live my life fully, without holding onto all this pain. I think you'd want me to be happy. I hope you're glad for me, wherever you are. I hope you're free. Bye, Elio.

With love,

S

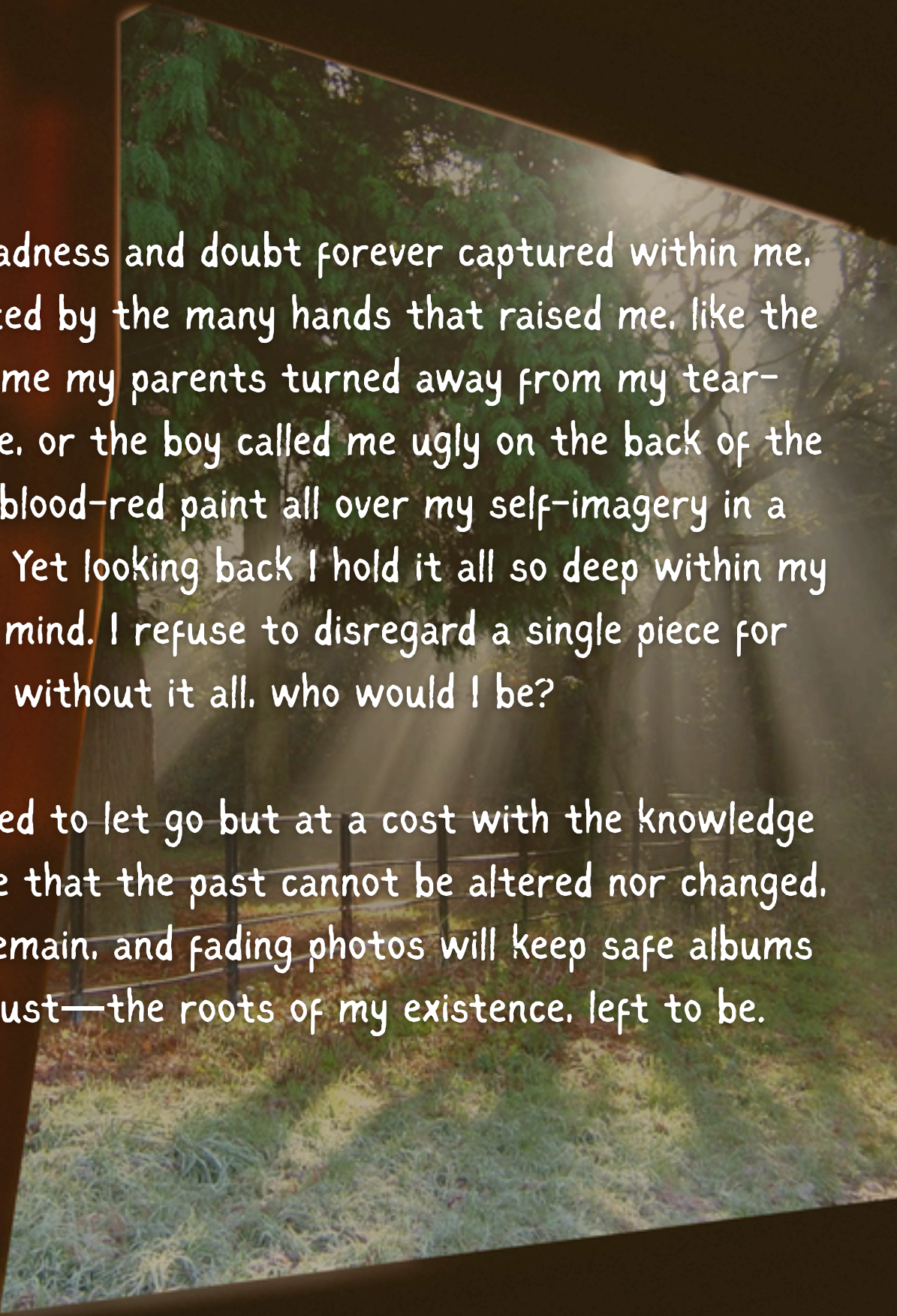
"My origin is Undefined" by Subaiah (16, UK), previously published to TikTok

it's not a color or a race
but a puzzle of a thousands faces
a montage of those who fell in love
ones with the release of pure white doves
who learned the languages of their lovers
and became part of my history that i came to discover
the food they served for each other
because there was nothing else they'd rather
skin color never mattered
not when their souls were flattered
a barrier wouldn't stop their devotion
as long as they kept their true emotion
origin they say
it doesn't make a difference
i am a combination of love
of matter and emotion
that's what makes me. me.

Puzzle Pièces

Trinity Allen (New Zealand)

My origins are kept locked away. They are hidden beneath layers of fears and my favorite things. A time capsule heart that holds tight to what morphed into a little girl once captivated by the potential of fields, and footsteps that ran carefree, to the woman I am to be. The stories and moments became memories, replayed occasionally in familiar songs and my grandmother's cups of coffee. How once I was an actress in my mind's movie, posed and displayed in youth caress, how pretty I looked in daisy crowns and a pink dress. I long to return to the streets and swing sets that raised me. I long to feel the ache of grazed knees, and the portrait smile painted on my baby face by something as simple as the sun on Saturdays. As long as I had myself I never felt out of place, comfortably confident in bare feet and ripped leggings, something the tragedy of aging took from me. Lost amongst button collections, button-eyed dolls, and playtimes in grade three, are bruises permanently stained into my perilous soul.



The core of sadness and doubt forever captured within me, carefully crafted by the many hands that raised me, like the very first time my parents turned away from my tear-splattered face, or the boy called me ugly on the back of the bus, spilling blood-red paint all over my self-imagery in a careless laugh. Yet looking back I hold it all so deep within my puzzle piece mind. I refuse to disregard a single piece for without it all, who would I be?

And I've learned to let go but at a cost with the knowledge and acceptance that the past cannot be altered nor changed, a story will remain, and fading photos will keep safe albums collecting dust—the roots of my existence, left to be.

Lady Hemmington

Excerpt by M.S. Blues (USA)

1969

Bright lights, stinging ones to the eye. (I thought they dimmed these). The fuzziness reduced when she blinked, her senses finally returning.

"Sheila! Oh my Lord, you're awake!"

(Haeth— Rose! It's Rosie).

"Why am I in the hospital?" She wasn't sure why these were the first words she uttered, but she did. She looked at the blonde woman, her sister, and breathed out. "What happened?"

Rose held her hand. "You passed out after I told you about Dad." Her eyes were moist. "You know... That Clarence Ellsten is really our father."

(Oh, yeah).

Sheila swallowed hard, nodding. "When can I get out of here?"

"Soon," Rose sniffled. "The doctor is going to come back soon and run a test on you to make sure you didn't sustain a concussion. He told me he'll discharge you once he feels that you're in a sufficient condition. Okay?"

Sheila sighed. "Alright." That was all her mind would allow her to say.

-

Sheila was discharged five hours later, on the condition that she would remain in bed for the rest of the day. However, she didn't intend to fulfill her given word —

(Forgive me, Father. Please forgive me)

— she needed to do something with Rose and the information. She wasn't sure what just yet, but something.

(You're going to kill him Aren't you, Sheila?

"You're going to—")

She blinked softly. She was in her bed, in nightwear; she felt a bit uneasy that Rose dressed her. But, as the

way most things were, what could she do? Nothing.

Rose came in moments following her awakening, with a face of relief and ambition. Her lips curved into a smile, her eyes glistening under the projection of the lamp.

"Hey, Sheila. How are you feeling?"

(Good question. How am I feeling? Is there an answer that is even applicable?)

"I'm fine."

"Oh c'mon, we've gotten closer now." Rose sighed softly, frowning faintly. "You can be honest with me."

"Can I?" Sheila spoke, treading carefully. "We... You barely revealed who you really are and I still don't know if you're who you say."

Rose frowned, slowly sauntering over to her. She sat on the edge of the bed, setting her delicate hand on top of Sheila's leg, which was covered by one of her quilts. "I am who I say." A lot of determination was behind her tone, as was persistence. "I swear."

Sheila sighed. "But how... Why did you come to me now? And how did you..."

"I know you have a lot of questions, sunflower."

("You're going to be okay, sunflower. It's just a little cut—"

"Daddy hurt me!"

"I know, just breathe.")

Her head rose. "My nickname that Mom..."

Rose nodded. "I told you, Sheila. I'm your sister."

"I just don't understand how this..." She carefully motioned to Rose and herself. "How does this happen? And Clarence Ellsten being our father... What?"

"I wish it was easier to explain, little sister."

"There must be a basic way to explain what the hell has transpired lately."

Rose shrugged softly, but clasped her hands together. "Well, I already told you about Mom and I. So, I suppose I can clarify the entire Clarence Ellsten situation."

Sheila nodded.

"Clarence... Dad... Let me just start from the beginning. I began to write to William once I was established in Texas. When Mom died, he wrote to me and told me. We wrote back and forth, then he told me that Dad's health was starting to decline as well, but he didn't have any plans to dedicate time to help him. I then asked about you and Samuel. He said he didn't know much about you or your life, except that you worked at some hospital up north, in the San Francisco area. Samuel ended up drafting in the Vietnam War and hasn't returned yet, so nobody knows if he's dead or alive."

Sheila processed the information, before taking a deep breath. "So how did Dad end up here? How did you find me directly? And... How did you make up his backstory or how is he registered in the hospital under a fake name?"

"I found you by calling every hospital in the area. Thankfully, I only had to call three hospitals until they said they had you employed there. As far as Dad, I brought him to you. I went through the proper steps of changing his identity. Old man doesn't have much of a memory either, so he wasn't able to interfere with me."

"So that's why he's nice to me... Because he doesn't remember me." Sheila's head began to pound with more uneasiness—but she sniffled, looking at Rose. "But still, Rose... Why did you bring him to me?"

Rose stood up, walking towards the window. She took a brief glance at the sky, then returned back to Sheila's side. She held her sister's hand, giving it a protective squeeze.

"I want to avenge our—your—childhood. You deserve to live with some peace—"

"I was living in peace until you dumped this on me."

"Liar." Rose scrunched her nose as her eyes narrowed, a mannerism reflecting Donald Hemmington a.k.a Clarence Ellsten. "I watched the way you handled yourself before I even spoke to you for the first time. You're still tormented by him, Sheila."

"Screw you."

"Can I finish?"

"Might as well."

Rose sighed, running a hand over her face. "I came all this way and caused you so much trouble because I want to do what I just said. I want to avenge your childhood, our youth." She sighed again, before taking a seat on the bedside again and holding Sheila's hand again. She traced her thumb over the tense skin. "I want to kill him, Sheila. I want him to die."

"We can go to jail for that, you know."

"Not if we do it right."

"Want to explain that plan to me?"

"You know the breathing mask you've given him occasionally when he requests it?"

Sheila nodded. "Yes."

"When he needs it, we remove it," Rose said. "Then, we obstruct his breathing and once we can confirm he's dead, we'll call in Dr. Brown and say we tried our best to revive him but he wouldn't wake. For the family part, William said he's willing to come down and identify him to gain Dad's money. Don't worry about the last name part. William took his wife's last name."

"Jesus Christ." Sheila used her free hand to massage the back of her head. "I don't know about all of this, Rose. I'm not a killer."

Rose leaned in closer, eyes determined. "He deserves to die, Sheila."

"I know that." Sheila hissed back. "But I don't know if I have it in me to do it."

"I can do it for you, sunflower." Sheila's lips dropped and she closed her eyes, head thrown back against the pillow. Rose released her hand and stood up. "I apologize for overwhelming you, little sister. I will go. But, please consider it. You deserve freedom, as do I and William. Mom too, even if she's in Heaven. Do it for us and yourself." She left after.

Sheila then opened her eyes, staring at the ceiling. "Goddamnit."

Sheila didn't sleep that night, nor the next.

The following morning, a fine Friday, Sheila stepped into the shower. She ignored the harassing water, the way it touched her like he used to, and washed herself carefully. She then proceeded to get ready for work. When she went into the kitchen, she saw Rose in the kitchen making breakfast. Rose turned around and smiled. "Hey, sunflower."

"Call me Sheila, if you don't mind."

Rose turned back around. "You're still hostile."

Obviously." Sheila leaned against the closest counter, jaw clenched. "Any normal person would be just as angry as I am if they were in this predicament."

"I disagree." Rose said. "I can name several people who would love to kill their abusive father."

"So why didn't you help someone else with a horrible parent? Or why didn't you ask William?"

Sheila pressed. "Because maybe I don't want to kill him—" (Yes you do, Sheila. Let's not lie. Be a good girl—) "... He's still a person, Rose."

"You contradict yourself, Sheila."

"No, I do not!"

Rose suddenly slammed the spatula down on the counter and whipped around. Impatient eyes glared into Sheila's, as Rose stepped forward. For the first time in years, Sheila flinched. Rose exhaled, then spoke.

"I know you want to kill Dad, Sheila. Your morals aren't as clean as you think."

"Who said anything about morals?" Sheila seethed.

"Me." Rose pushed a piece of her hair behind her ear. "Because despite the fact you know you desire nothing more than to kill him, you hide it from me. You think your morals are so clean and pure, because that's what Daddy taught us to project. We needed to be good girls or sweet little angels. I can read you like a book, Sheila. For God's Sake, you're my little sister."

Sheila was gagged her by own shock, because Rose was right. She did want to kill Donald Hemmington, with everything in her. He was a monster and there was enough validity to balance the godlessness behind such an action. In short, if she did kill him as she's desired to, it would be justified. But that still didn't make it easy.

"I do want to kill him."

Rose sighed softly, turning back to shut off the stove. "I know, that's why I'm here."

Sheila looked up. "When are we going to kill him?"

Rose paused once again, but didn't turn around.

"Today."

-

Work began decently. Sheila signed in, performed her usual duties with her patients, including Clarence Ellsten. She kept her eyes on him during the entire time of the morning check up, practically glued to him. She studied him deeply, especially those eyes—something like bullets that once shot her, killed her innocence, until her rebirth into womanhood.

But, it wasn't like womanhood was freedom either.

"Something wrong, sweetheart?"

A voice rooted with unfiltered malice.

"Oh, yeah." Sheila snapped out of her thoughts, nodding. "I'm alright. Uh, can I get you anything else?"

Clarence shook his head. "I'm good."

She left moments after, taking a deep breath.

(This will be over soon)

-

When the night came around, Sheila went into the bathroom. She knew time was coming closer for it to occur and her stomach boiled with overwhelming anxiety. She felt her insides trembling along with her jumping heart and pounding head.

(Deep breaths

Positive thinking

"YOU REALLY WANT TO COMMIT A SIN?!"

"YOU WILL GO TO HELL!"

"MAYBE THAT'S WHERE YOU BELONG, DEVIL GIRL!"

Deep breaths, Sheila)

"I can do this." She leaned over the sink, staring at her tired reflection in the mirror. "I can—"

(I can't)

Sheila leaped to the nearest stall and vomited.

-

Sheila remained in the restroom for the next fifteen minutes. After spitting out the final chunk of whatever her throw up consisted of, she flushed the toilet and stumbled to the sink. She

washed her face, paused, then looked up. A water drop fell from the tip of her nose.

(I can do this

I can do this

He deserves—

"DEVIL GIRL! DEVIL GIRL! DEVIL GIRL!"

it)

Moments later, the door opened.

"It's time."

Sheila looked up, nodding.

"Let's k-kill him."

-

The walk back to Clarence Ellsten's room was agonizing. Every step felt like a nail digging into her foot. The pain in her body continued to assault her, while her mind raced. She tried not to project any indications of uneasiness, but she knew it was pointless. She was and looked like an absolute wreck. Thankfully, none of the passing staff took much of a notice.

Rose and Sheila finally arrived at his room and stepped inside. Clarence was asleep and soft snores echoed between the walls.

"That makes it a bit easier." Rose whispered, taking a step forward. "I'm thinking we do this the easiest way and stuff a rag over his nose and mouth. Besides, he isn't wearing the mask

and his frail health is only an advantage to get this done quicker."

Sheila nodded. "Y-Yeah."

Rose sighed slowly. "Remember, sunflower, after this you'll be completely free."

(What does freedom feel like?

Kill the bastard and find out

"DEVIL GIRL!"

Go along, Sheila

He deserves it)

"Free."

"Yes."

Sheila took a step forward too, following Rose. Both women took soft steps until they reached his bedside. Then, Rose took a thick cloth she had in the pocket of her scrubs. "I got this

from the supply room. I'll wash it after."

"You're g-going to do it, right?"

Rose shook her head and held out the rag. "No, you are."

Sheila's eyes widened. "You said--"

"No, Sheila. I thought I was clear on this. You need to kill him."

"I don't know if I can."

("DEVIL GIRL!")

"Just remember everything he put you through."

(Yeah, "DEVIL GIRL!")

Remember it all

His hands on you

The words

The abuse

How fragile you are, Devil Girl)

"I can't do it."

(DEVIL GIRL!)

"Sheila, yes you can."

Perspiration fell down her forehead like a landslide.

Rose put the towel in her trembling hands and Sheila squeezed it, taking a deep breath.

"Remember all the pain, everything."

("Daddy please don't—")

"DEVIL GIRL!"

The blood that ran from my nose

The moonlight that protected me when he beat in the night

The showers...

Everything

Do it for Mom

Do it for I

I can do it)

Sheila looked at Clarence Ellsten one last time. That face had so much hate illustrated on it before, but now it was tranquil and delicate. It looked comforting.

(Do it, goddamn

"DEVIL GIRL!")

Sheila took a final deep breath, then killed Clarence Ellsten.

She pressed the towel down over his nose and mouth just like Rose instructed – and she didn't remove it, she –

("DEVIL GIRL!")

Youth is young, now here you are

You killed Daddy

Morals are nonexistent now.

Devil Girl)

kept it there, until Rose finally removed it from her hands. Sheila froze.

Rose stuffed the towel back into her pocket and checked the pulse.

Clarence Ellsten was dead, for good.

"He's gone."

Rose nodded. "He's gone."