

BETWEEN THE LINES:

*Peace and the
Writing Experience*
2020

iwp



**International
Writing Program**

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To begin, a Haiku/Bunnin Renga composed by Nancy Szalwinski, Director of Cultural Programs at the U.S. Department of State, upon the occasion of her zoom transport into BTL 2020:

**I fixed my Haiku
Missing a few syllables
Writing too quickly**

**Virtual worlds joined
Wish you could be here with us
Love you anyway**

Dear BTLers,

Do you remember when I asked you all to consider what action means to you as a writer? You may not because it was at orientation, as we stared awkwardly into boxes of unfamiliar faces, and wondered inside—how will we experience BTL on Zoom? Well, during the course of our two short weeks of BTL, I have found many answers to this question—through learning with you and through observing all of you in action—and interaction!

Despite our program becoming virtual due to COVID-19, you showed up because writing really matters to you. Even though we could not be together in Iowa City, you put yourself out there in words and images via social media and chats and emojis and Write the World and Zoom. You turned your video on and you unmuted. You did not become discouraged when your internet waivered and your power was cut. You embraced the strange and noticed the fantastic, not in Iowa City, but all around you. You recognized, and dare I suggest, even got to know some unfamiliar parts of yourselves, through delving into the beauties, mysteries, languages, and cultures of one another. You turned off your cameras and wrote something you had never thought of before. You finally wrote something you've had feelings about for ages. You lived at home, mingled with your families, and local friends, but tried not let anyone distract you too-too much. No matter where you were or who you were with, part of you kept floating in the land of Vladimir listening, Rumena reveling, Mary encouraging, and Shandana saying something about a chicken, which only you all can understand. Then you came back together in BTL, day after day, at hours many of you could more comfortably sleep through. You read aloud. You read silently. You listened to the voices in your head and of each other. You analyzed, you discussed, you questioned, and you believed. You gave weight and worry to what your peers had to say, and then found out that they supported you. You grew bigger and your worlds grew bigger as the virtual turned real—in experiences and insights, though actions and imaginings. A global pandemic and a BTL through screens could not diminish or flatten or silence you. Through all your sincerity and experiencing your creative work, my world grew bigger, too.

I realize the above are just my observations, and they may not match up to your lived experiences. I can't fathom the extent of disappointment you've felt in not being able to meet in Iowa City. What I can say is that I admire the way you've pushed on and I'm grateful for the commitment you gave to this program. Like your teachers, I am in awe of your intelligence and the ways you have validated and reinforced each other as creative writers. It is because of how much we have grown to care about each other, that we feel even more of a loss in not being able to be together in person. Even so, you did not lose hope and carried on your campaign. And sadly, even so we are bound by financial and logistical realities. You petition for your dreams relentlessly and without apology! And I want that you always will.

Although BTL couldn't bring you to Iowa, you brought BTL to you. Don't give up on each other! Channel your energies into more acts of writing, deepening your friendships, and widening your literary circles. In addition to thinking what could have been I challenge you to dream up what's next? How can you bring some part of you and BTL into your own local communities? How might you stay connected to yourselves, to writing, to each other? If you can transcend time zones and distances during a global pandemic to find true human connection, I suspect you will also find ways to meet face-to-face someday. And I look forward to hearing those stories!

In the meantime, take joy as writers in creating the stories of your meeting. What is that feeling in your chest? Do your cheeks hurt from smiling? How to interpret those tears? Deep breaths as your shaking arms meet the new yet familiar shoulders to rest upon. Notice the warmth that has simmered slowly between you and called into question what's real and what's virtual. For many of us, the pandemic has been difficult, and lonely, and BTL has been a welcome contradiction. We can't promise you another BTL 2020 in 2021. I can only say the BTL world you built in 2020 is as close to the dream I have of a world that is safer, more kind, equitable, and just. Even though we couldn't take walks around Iowa City, you walked us through poems in the cities you love, in more than 20 countries, from 6am till 2am, and all the hours enlivened with anticipation in between.

You know your powers to imagine. What might have been can feel real, especially when the real does not live up to the imagined. Thank you for trusting your teachers and each other and the process of BTL under the most unusual of circumstances. Virtual or face-to-face, the joy of our intersections would always be tinged with feelings of bittersweet separation. Let's think of BTL like Vladimir spoke of his writing—not bound by anything as conventional as an ending—only finished sentences.

Alisa Weinstein
Youth Programs Coordinator
International Writing Program



We were in the field when we first met.
You stood wearing a gorgeous sundress,
Defining every curve of your body.
The fireflies emerged from behind you,
illuminating every perfect and imperfect thing about you.
That's when I knew, you were the one.

We were in the same field when we first kissed.
Your lips tasted like cherries dipped in honey.
I let the taste pour over my tongue,
partaking in every moment of our closure.
The fireflies wrapped around us,
letting just the two of us be the only godly figures to ever walk
That's when I knew, I wanted you.

...

I was in the same field when I missed you,
I was standing alone, waiting,
I knew you wouldn't come,
but I still clung to the smallest amount of love I had for you.
I was waiting for you.
Though you were ripped away from me.
The fireflies came out one last time,
they stood in front of me in the shape of you,
I could feel the sorrow coming from them.
That's when the tears of light started falling from my eyes.
I held the idea of you close to me, never wanting to let go.
That's when I knew, I needed you.

THE FIREFLIES

Yelke - Georgia

HAPPINESS

Huseyn - Azerbaijan

In somewhere

Katy was drowsy. She was wanting to sleep. But, her mom came to the room, and insistently started to sound her girl. "Get up! Get up! It is time to go to school, my dear." Mom kissed Katy's cheek and tickled her. However, Katy was not happy, as if she is forced to do something. Actually, yes, she is forced to do school homework. Just because of that she was not happy. She said, "School is a problem. I don't want to go." Her mom directly looked to the eyes of Katy and said her sentences as if she was saying lullaby. "What happened to you? You do not smile. The only business you do is being lazy and complaining about everything." Katy didn't answer. "Look, there is everything at breakfast. Whatever you want." Katy answered. "I don't want. I'm not happy." Mom raised her voice. "But, why?" Katy said with a muffled voice while gazing at the wall. "I will buy a house near the shores of the Atlantic Ocean, will buy a sports car, and will sip my coffee. At that time, I will be happy."

Katy had everything, but she was sad. Because she was not thankful.



In somewhere

Zahida was drowsy. She was wanting to sleep. But, not because of sleeping for hours and hours, but because of working on a farm from dawn to midnight. Zahida threw herself to the bed. She was looking at her mom's faded dress. She lost her mom five years ago, but Zahida kept her dress as the last thing belonging to her. She was feeling her mom's smell from that. When holding that dress on her hands, she was able to see her mom near the door, which was opened a way of death to her. Her mom always defended that her daughter should go to school. But, now, there is no one. She is alone. Going to school never happened. Maybe, she would be married forcefully to someone, who she doesn't know his existence. Maybe, she will defend herself in order to not marrying someone forcefully. But, if she will defend herself, she will be known as undignified.

But, Zahida was able to see happiness. No, she doesn't see happiness from forced marriage, nor from all of these problems. But, she knows that if there is life, there is hope. If there is hope, there is happiness. Because she knows that life is not a life without problems. Those problems are our best teachers. Yes, some parts of life can be difficult. But, it heralds good days.

Zahida knew that happiness is not getting everything as much as possible. Villas, sports cars, money have no relation to happiness. Happiness is a feeling, which makes life a desired comfortable life even with the hardest problems. Without being happy at this very moment, you will not be happy when you will get millions of dollars, cars, and villas.

Zahida had nothing, but she was happy. Because she was thankful.

Caroline -
CASSANDRA
C U C
C U L
E N T



There are whispers of citrus on her tongue. She is golden as honey and sweet as grapefruit, tangy like a puckered sun. Pillows of pink brush against slabs of stained red as their lips embrace. A magical mixture of ambrosia and adrenaline simmers in the infinitesimal space between Kelly's freckled cheek and her milk-white one.

Her.

Kelly wills the nagging voice to dissipate. Never before has she felt so warm, so whole, so full --

Her.

Loving anyone of any kind is okay, as long as the heart-scrunching you feel for them is reciprocated.

Her. Her. Cassandra. Her.

Kelly's mind tears her body away from Cassandra. Her fingers tremble as she brings them to her swollen lips. She blasts her first kiss for being so beautiful, because Cassandra is a girl and Kelly is a girl. Such a union would split her life squarely into two. Before and after. Alone and lonelier. Nobody and her.

"I'm...sorry. I thought you wanted this. I thought we talked about it," Cassandra murmurs in her curtained monotone. Kelly doesn't look up; she already knows the sour stoniness of Cassandra's gaze.

Cassandra, Kelly, kiss -- such harsh and crisp words, like the slightly painful crunch into a firm apple, or like the bone-jarring discovery that your first love is not a he.

It's her.

Her, with the dead eyes and silken black hair and dreams of being pretty-talented-good enough. Her, the girl already filled with barrelfuls of enough, of too much, of overwhelming grace and empathy layered beneath stoic cynicism. She is so much that Kelly can't help but feel her eyes trickle back to Cassandra's perfectly angular face and perfectly parted mouth.

Kelly lets a smile slip and reaches for Cassandra's hands.

And, once again, they taste the candied fruits of each other's hearts.

DEAR PRETTY BOY

Nafisa - Bangladesh

Dear Pretty boy
We don't talk about feelings but I wish that we did
Dear pretty boy,
Here's something for you.

Dear Pretty boy,
I wish I told you
How I saw you sewed you within the tarnished pieces of my heart and un-saw you
I wish I told you how the serpentine traces in your mildly dyed hair builds efflorescence of numerous petals inside my half
beating half numb heart.

Oh pretty boy
I wish I told you about the times your brown, milk chocolate flesh lingered with my soul even when i begged it to leave
Dear pretty boy

I wish you knew about the times your accent gave birth to the flattering waves of butterflies inside my stomach
of iridescent colors they were

Pink, Red, Blue and maybe a tint of Purple

My pretty boy,

I wish you knew about the times your texts synchronized luminosity with my phone screen and my ashen face

Pretty boy,

You are more than just a pretty boy

Pretty boy,

You listen

Pretty boy,

We relate

You appreciate me

You keep my aching heart beating

But Pretty boy,

I have felt this way before.

My heart has been ripped over a million times

I have hit rock bottom

My heart has been a toy, broken fixed broken

This relentless process has tarnished me from inside

And broken attracts broken

and my beloved pretty boy,

As long as the plastered pieces of my heart beats to stay alive,

my pretty boy you're safe from being broken.

My pretty boy

I wish you knew how hopelessly and helplessly in love I am with
you

My dearest pretty boy,

You are all that I have and everything that I'll ever need

but for today

My pretty boy,

even if you're mine

I can't keep you.



MY DEAR 18-YEAR-OLD SELF

Sanna - Algeria

I know we've been told through Disney movies that monsters lurk under our beds, that they wait after dark to awaken and spring up. However, you will come to understand that our worst demons lay inside our head and we're the ones hosting them. You see, I want you to make peace with every corner of your mind because your spark of madness is what prevents life from being infinitely dull and dim.

Sometimes, you will feel like you are regressing. Wrong. In reality, you are only building some momentum in order to bounce back. After all, an arrow is always pulled back before being launched. And what a fierce arrow you will grow to be!

You will also feel shattered, at times. However, light will infiltrate those cracks to meet you. After all, butterflies need to break the caterpillar's cocoon first, in order to emerge.

Be tenacious and consistent like a wave. Continuously rejected by the shore yet always coming back once more.

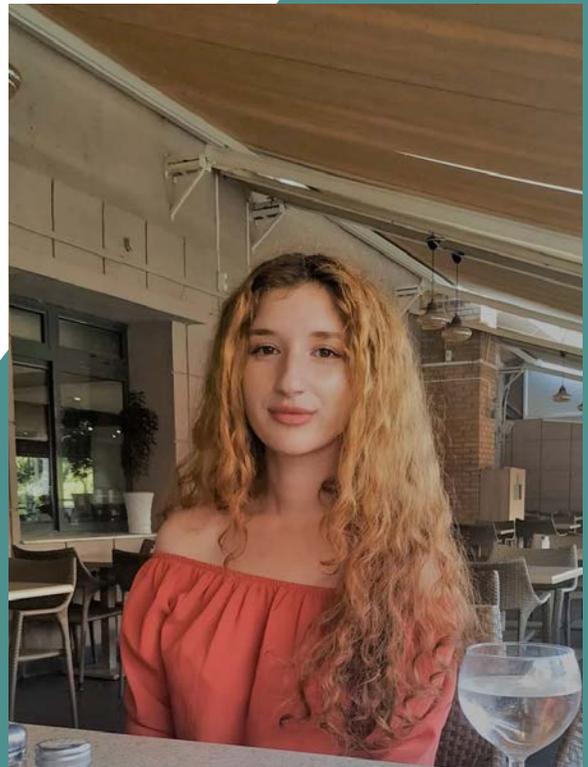
Be resilient like a cloud, it never flinches during a storm and it's always exploring new skies and regenerating itself in a fresh cycle.

If you happen to lose people you hold dear, then remember that trees are stripped of their leaves in winter and that even your shadow disappears in the dark. Remain faithful to yourself and you shall find your way out of the worst labyrinth.

I don't want you to dwell on your past failures, nor on future hardships. You would lose sight of the goal you are aiming at. Besides, people will not remember how you fell apart but rather how you graciously lifted yourself.

Do not let life make you bitter like rusted steel.

Finally, please, nourish the inner child within you, so that you can die young, past a hundred years.



NOONTIDE GREENERY

Now - Algeria



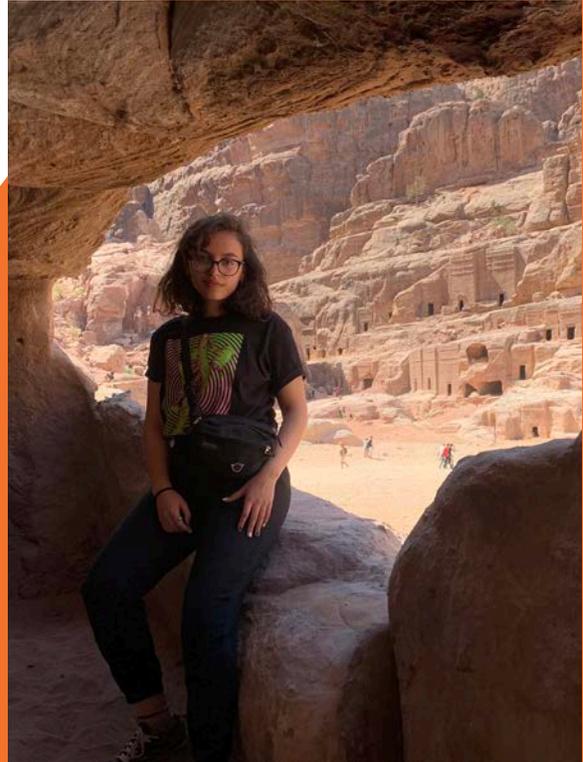
This tale steps out most at the ardent noontide,
Where nothing stays still:
Where everything trembles buckets of ebullience.
It is yet no secret that trees undress for the sky,
Blinking then stretching their budded twigs.
They hunker down, gently nervous
As if to bow before the almighty sun;
Down to the ground—patched in wheat and heat, it cuddles back and sings,
It caresses and pillows most of the clumsy shrubs
Into a bed of greenery, delicate and moist;
So that even peacocks admit to wondering
How greenery stabs right through spring and wide eyes.
They see mountains scoff day and night
At how circus-like every bit of every corner looks;
Even as still as it can be.
And there, the wakeful sacred rill still offers comfort to birds
When they grope for a shower of memories
In its large blue pockets; they could go on and on
Yet it can never be enough for this weeping scenery to truly reach our hearts.
Creation now plays at papery cords of sunlight
When they wave every shade of yellow into the world,
And nature thanks us today too.
For letting her children play at our garden mind,
For seeing her feet spread open just for a minute or two.
A tale like this only goes awfully longer
Than any love song could ever express
Until it all manages to spit me out and my loving gaze.
Over and over again, never once tiring my hungry thoughts.

THE STUBBORN FISH

Shunong - Jordan

“Dad look! There’s a dehydrated fish drifting to shore I’m going to help it”
“I don’t need help” replied the slightly injured fish. The boy promised not to leave until the fish agrees to be helped. The fish stayed persistent and wouldn’t accept the help it so desperately needed. A few minutes passed for the boy to realize that the fish was never going to say yes. He realized that the fish will surely die if he doesn’t help it, though. So he went against its wishes and helped put it back in the water. Despite how annoyed the fish was, the boy was proud of what he’d done. And the fish happily lived.

“There’s no shame in accepting help” said the boy to the fish, imagining that it’s his father. Hoping he heard him all the way from his grave, wishing he’d listened before the noose screamed louder. At least the fish could hear the boy before it was too late.



THE FALL OF Aisha - United Arab Emirates AUTUMN

It was his autumn leaf that he kept tucked in a jar beneath his bed that finally made his mother cry that solemn winter night. That leaf was the last one he would ever see, the last thing he had ever cherished. And he hadn't known. He could no longer touch the leaf but the faint crinkles of the object gave him comfort and hope every time he spun the jar around and around and around. Or it used to, before his heart beat for the last time.

She would watch her son play with it as if there were no tomorrow. Tomorrow's end came too soon for her son.

His piles of clothes and toys scattered around his room like No Man's Land, and her silent tears followed her around as she put his belongings in the empty moving boxes she stored in the attic for occasions. Occasion that there were not like this — not like this.

Time came and went, each one bringing in
New minutes,
New hours,
New months,
New leaves
without the sound of small feet wailing up and down the stairs,



or the puddle of milk on the kitchen counter with cereal all over the floor,
or dinosaur toys swimming in empty bathtubs,
the shower head rusty and brown as the fall leaves.

And it was that autumn leaf that he kept tucked in a jar beneath his bed that she placed into the little pocket of his funeral suit. A gentle kiss shared between a mother and her forever asleep son. And the autumn leaf— never to be played with again.

COVIDATED

Hanna - Ukraine

Devastated.
Frustrated.
Isolated.

In their countries and cities
segregated.
From the outer world
insulated
by insidious virus.
COVIDated.

Hundreds.
Thousands.
Millions

of infected, affected,
impacted,
feeling highly intimidated
by mortality rate.
COVIDated.

Exaggerated?
Irritated.
Suffocated.

Wearing masks will help. - Validated?
Keeping distance may save: outdated
by the time they are
COVIDated.



COVIDated.
Caffeinated.
Updated

to ensure the renewal of frustrated,
isolated, devastated, navigated
by the fears, yet - elated.
To be loved and love -
Motivated.

The coronavirus pandemic has led to
an explosion of the new words. The
verb "to COVIDate" is one of them. The
first three meanings were taken from
urbandictionary.com. The fourth meaning
was proposed by me.

COVIDate:

1. When you and your partner get dressed
to nines to go to the post office, gas station
and grocery store during a pandemic.
2. Use of alternative methods to plan a date
during the COVID19 pandemic.
3. Sex or sexual encounters during the COVID19-2020 pandemic.
4. When you updated your relationship after going through the hard
times together with your partner.

While reading my poem bear in mind the meanings of this verb. It
appears 4 times in the poem, each time having different meaning - in
the order given above.



FROM MY FUTURE DRAMA

Amanda -
Marine

- Well, honey, tell me, where are you from? – asked Amanda.
- I am from New Orleans, there I also was studying on a psychologist, – answered Jane.
- That’s great.
- And I work as an art teacher in elementary school, – added Emily. – And who did you work, Miss Philips?
- Oh, girls and don’t even ask. I worked as a fitness trainer at our local sports club. Oh, I hit so many hearts and broke so many...
The girls laughed at what they heard and sipped some tea.
- Can you tell me about the inhabitants of our street?
- Sure. Miss Phillips and I live alone, except that I have a Barry, my dog. This house is for sale, – Emily pointed to the house on the left.
- To the right of my house, – Amanda began, – lives Mr. Robert Park, a jack of all trades, just a dream man... And on the other side lives Miya Akiyama.
- And she has a good house...
- Yes, very good, but don’t think bad on her, she’s a good person. She works as a lawyer in the center, but used to live in New York. She says that doesn’t like the city bustle.
- And there is a road fork. Is there a park?
- Yes.
- I think I don’t remember everyone and everything at once.
- Well, today you met us, and the following days with the others.
- Right, now let’s drink some tea, – Emily suggested.
- Although I have British blood, I always drink tea with additives... – said Amanda and added cognac to her tea. – Do you want some?
The girls looked at each other and at the same time answered:
- Yes.

INEVITABILITY

Hesandi - Sri Lanka



clock. a tick a tick a tock a tick.
it becomes tangible in your hands,
something meaningful for you to cling on,
to stop your mind from not rushing.

But you can't hold it, you break
the clock into tiny jagged pieces,
glass and metal and
who-knows-what-else
caught in your fingers,
your hands,
your palms,
pain you cling to before you
let go,
toomuchtoomuch all too much.

But you still
can't.
hold.
on.

a tick a tock a tock a tick.
another clock, another jagged
wound, another drop of blood.
somewhere else,
a
clock
ticks.
a harbinger of doom,
endless,
eternal.

I ask you to not break the clocks, dear,
but you do you do you do you do
until there's nothing left,
but you still hear it.
its insistent ticking,
saying,
day becomes night night becomes day you're all going to die eventually.

a jagged hole in your heart,
inevitability
you've tried to prevent to no avail.

a tick a tock a tock a tick.

HALF A MAN

Ishanthaka - Sri Lanka

Sacrifices, sacrifices and more sacrifices. That's what Mother used to repeat every day - the way in which they brought up their sons. Hand-me-downs from older cousins, spare computers from visiting uncles, basic housing for expensive rent in the big city - all for a big private school for the best education. Its impact? Undeniable! Now old, retired without a pension, dogs and plants to replace the sons that have left home, living on the happiness of their sacrifice, they watch you grow on weekend visits and video calls. Mother says, I am ready to die tomorrow knowing that the boys I've brought up can find their way through life.

And here you are, son of the sacrificial. A job not only to feed your hungry belly but also your empty heart, goals lay on your track - awaiting accomplishment, more certificates added to your file, more ink stamped on your passport, and messages from grateful students fill your heart to its brim. But, where is this headed? they ask. Expectations like lake waters rise. They insist on ticking everything on the checklist of the average man - job, house, vehicle, wife, children, etc., etc., etc. Where does it end? If you do not conform you are half a man, they say. But you know exactly what you want. Yet you fear what you want will break their heart and shroud them with shame. Should you make sacrifices to make theirs worthwhile? Should you keep quiet to maintain peace?

On a Saturday evening, over a beer, a friend asks, When do you want to die? You think to yourself, When I reach the peak of my career, like my own teacher did. But you say, I don't know. I take one day at a time.



Celine - Lebanon

WHEN YOU DIE



When you die, I will throw a party on my roof
That is if I will still afford having a roof by then
When you die, I will place my plate on your coffin
And I will eat Lahme Baajin and drink Laban till
I can no longer stomach it
But I won't stop
I would die before I do
I will devour all that you have made me long for
I will eat it raw and let the blood
Like rivers
Make its way down my jaw
And drip on the white of your kafan
When you die, I will wear a dress
Of red
Of white
Of green
When you die, I will throw a party on my roof
And I will buy all the lamps in the country
And I will watch as their light flickers
The same way the flames of my candles flickered
Everytime I turned a page in my textbook
When you die, I will throw a party on my roof
And I will laugh with tears running down my cheeks
And I will scream, my voice that of the ones
Who died on their way to live

I AM NOT AN ALIEN (BUT SOMETIMES IT FEELS LIKE I AM)

part of me wonders, if you would do it
carve out imagined outline of my heart from aching chest and reach
past splintered rib cage, fluttering lungs to grasp
bloody organ and peel it apart
check-boxing requirements
that feel anything but right

you bind red string around my limbs, coiling it across
hole in my ribs and skin shedding away
'til you reach my eyes, but
no tears, no tears, only mind burning
flushed monochrome as you tell me love
and i can't co-exist

lips crack, as truth hits too close to home,
what is hot, or sex appeal?
at least, beyond red desert and heat-flamed canyon
i can identify intimacy,
it rests sugared and saccharine on tip of my tongue
too sweet, too sharp, too strange
violating way through self-preservation like moth
to open flame.

how to tell you, that it is all a lie
when you repeat i will change in due time
how to tell you,
i won't seal promises with the touch of my lips
how to tell you,
i've bled violet since the beginning of breath
and am choking on air, fading to invisible dot on invisible
spectrum:
not straight enough, not oppressed enough
bloody string of fate pulls me one way, and back the next

now arms bruise nuclear as best friend-turned-lover-
turned-stranger
punches abrupt exit through fragile walls
"you won't last, in love"
and it lingers like ashen rubble in burning sun
oozing through sand and staining my shoes
red, red, red

world tugs me around like durable marionette
broken ribs, broken chest, broken mind
bloody violet
and sexuality, or lack thereof, isn't taken into account
but it doesn't matter
because as majority rules:
love is felt through the body, not the soul.



SOMETHING BORROWED

Maddy USA

i.

walking down my driveway, the day's air is sticky and heavy,
but somehow somersaults over my head
as a soft breeze.

the cars brush the asphalt
as I search for my reflection
in each window
(tinted and one-way glass)
black against the young blue sky.

be home by supper only means something
when there's time to kill,
time I spend twirling my watch around my wrist
until the clock hands blur
until each day peels back like a blister,
just painful enough to mark the passage of time.

the tires start again, kicking up sawdust and dirt,
mosquitoes find my knees.
some things never change.

ii.

wind wicks my hair,
dancing in the feeling of emptiness that only comes
from a vacant parking lot.

on the crosswalk i drop minutes behind me
like rice
on a wedding day.



(impossible to pick up afterwards
but we try anyway.)

through the store windows
the shoppers are making masks out of veils
& pretending they're older

their only wedding guests are shadows
(in a world alone, there is always dancing.)

I dance down the aisles,
rice marking my way home.
(in a world alone, there is always someone dancing.)

LAST FIRST TIMES

Zainab - Pakistan

what is it about the monotony of our small-town existence that feels so temporary?

we've been watching the same sunset for sixteen years,
peach burning through the
smoggy dust of the city;
always brimming on 6:45 — earlier
in the winters, when we
watch it from the balcony,
snug in leather and denim
and the silver warmth of your cigarette smoke.
now, our stretched seconds of golden have been stolen
by the silhouettes of the high-rises near Rawal-Lake,
erected illegally,
sometimes by the law itself.

huddling up in the school's veranda
every time it rains and peering at the
crystal dripping from the arches before
defying Sir Zeeshan's orders and running
so the water slices our skin
has become a tradition of ours, no?

like puppies on their first drive we
stick our heads
our friend's Merc and
blink the white-red blur of the Centaurus Towers
away; inhale the thick smoke of our public-transport-less
town and let the air-friction slap us senseless.
we can't even cherish our group drives on our way to the three

restaurants we've worn through — the ride's never long enough.
fifteen minutes feel like five when our friend's dad drives
(seven if it's a Friday, twenty when there's a protest on a Friday).

sixteen years of seeing the same waiters on duty when we order
the night's special (you know, the soup that's 90% starch, 10% chicken?)
and every bite
that sears our tongue feels like the last.
an adolescence getting our hearts broken by the same pretty
boys (Model UNs, school hallways, kings of the Country Club's marble
chessboard)
in similar fashion.

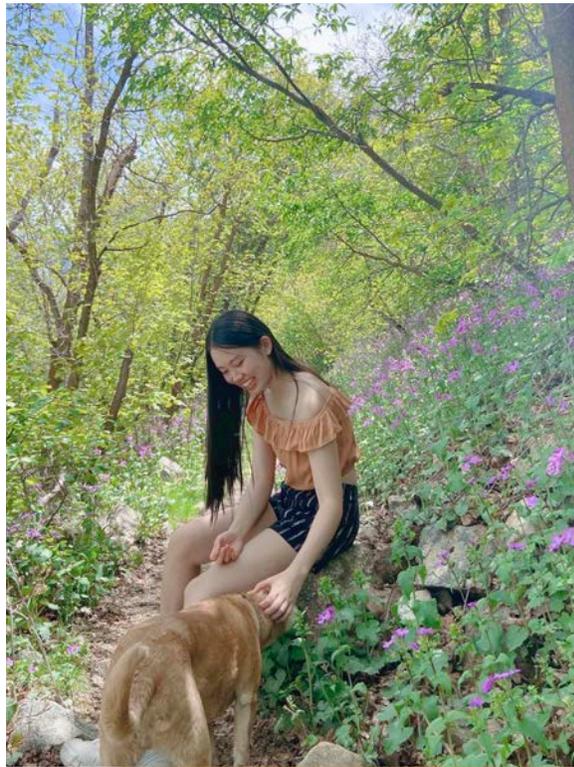
our whole youth, we've been greeting the same faces under Hotspot's
skimpy pin-up posters and yet we
weep on every drive back home
because one day, one of these ice-cream runs post-movie-screening
will be our final, melting away into memories (hot asphalt in summer).
i don't want us to become a memory, i don't want our first times to ever end.



Y
R
G
N
U
H

Loe - 1/28/21

“Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.” —Joy Harjo



do you eat to live or live to eat?
i live to eat at this Kitchen Table,
feast upon the flesh of stories,
swallow whole the bones of my ancestors.

here, my mother feeds me sweet fermented rice with
a side of rural chinese town and dried orange peels.

here, my father makes dumplings filled with
capsella, pork, memories, and silence.

here,
eat.
eat
here.

my ears hear the feet

that took them across an ocean. a man
threw himself down a well, my mother says,
he lived and they took him to jail. your father's father
went to jail, my mother says, after they beat your father
he spent his childhood inside, that's why he is quiet.
my mother says, once, we were so hungry

that we put mint leaves in our mouths,
replaced the feeling of fullness with frost.

Daughter, eat because you can:
you see we chinese are resourceful.

Daughter,
here,
eat!

eat and hear!

listen to the voices that run through your veins,
the blood of tiananmen square in 1989,
devour every bit and lick the bowl clean.

i eat to live at this Kitchen Table,
starving for a past to call my own.

THE SUITCASE

Julia - Russian Federation

The suitcase was packed. It was lying on the floor in its bright orange cover with two palm trees on it promising an unforgettable time by the sea. She was sitting on her bed staring at it blankly. How could she go that far? She had tried not to let her thoughts take over her all week, doing the shopping in these luxurious boutiques with arrogant shop assistants she dreaded talking to, meeting her friends and telling them how lucky she was holding a cup of cappuccino showing off her recently perfectly manicured nails and displaying a shiny Swarovski on her finger, so generous of him. Yeah... a busy week. Now everything was ironed, folded, clipped and zipped. If all her thoughts could be also zipped and put away for a while. Why can't she just relax and enjoy everything as it is. No more thoughts, no reflection, just fill your life with shopping sprees, restaurants, glossy magazines. Furniture and decorate your house and redecorate it monthly, money is not a problem anymore. There won't be time for thinking and reflecting, just get yourself busy with all this stuff, there will be only nights left. Nights are short and even if you cry, the concealer will take care of everything in the morning. Concealer will take care of everything. Come on... anybody would be happy in your Valentino shoes. Parents happy, friends jealous. Why feel like a pilot reaching the point of no return? There will be no time for thinking, always smile, deep feelings zipped... perfect manicure, latest brand clothes, who would care what's inside when the picture is so glamorous.

The suitcase was packed.



THE LONGING *Achref - Tunisia* TO SALAKTA

I miss Salakta*

The soul of Salakta

The scent of Salakta

How much I miss seeing its glittering blue sea

How much I long to walk on its golden hot sand

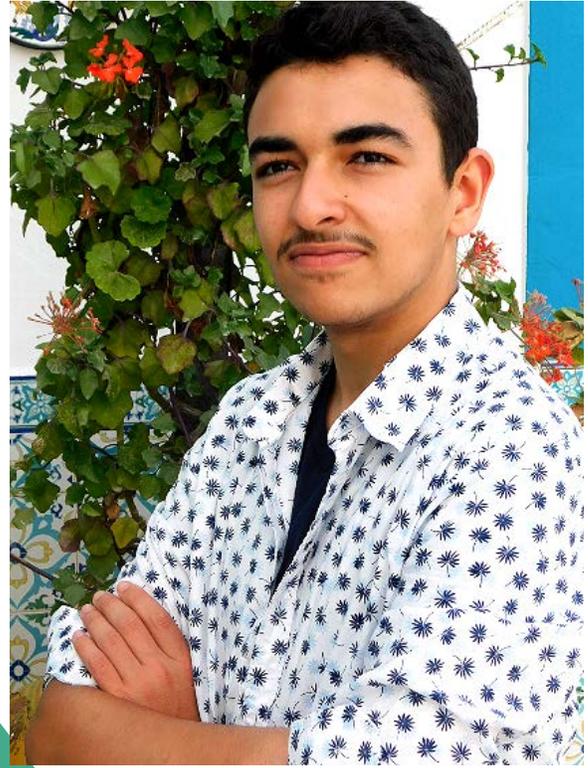
The beach that transports me!

How much I miss diving in its deep healing waters
and celebrate glee!

Oh how I miss looking at the fishermen in the sea port
disentangling silvery fish from the net
The odors of sardines and mullet
that inside me awaken the hungry cat

Oh how I miss those glorious days
when I used to hang around with my cousin
and tell him: "Take advantage cousin! seize now the days!"
For Salakta's morning breeze isn't like any in the world,
and the sea that reflects a thousand and one rays
isn't like any in all Tunisia!"
"Look how blue glows! see how light sways!"

Here we are Salakta,
trapped in our homes
because of confinement
we can't visit anymore
the longing to you is ravishing me,
I am devored by nostalgia and memory
My chest wrung by the pain of seperation
My heart sore
Salakta you are my beloved; I am your desperate lover,
You are Buthayna; I am Jameel*
Do you realize how I feel?



But I will come back Salakta!
I will come back and hug you,
Inhale your morning breeze, take in your beauty,
walk around in your generous streets at night,
guided by moonlight
I will come back this summer, cutie
and together we will celebrate
our love, our unity

*Salakta: a gorgeous small coastal city belonging to the district of Mahdia, in Tunisia.

*Jamīl: ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Ma'mar al-'Udhri (d.701 CE), also known as Jamil Buthayna (Buthayna is the name of his beloved), was a classical Arabic love poet. He belonged to the Banu 'Udhra tribe which was renowned for its poetic tradition of chaste love.



Noorreen - Egypt INHALE, EXHALE

A mist of coconut perfume falls on my bare shoulders. I pull my jeans up and button them. A sigh escapes me. My fingers trace down the, now apparent, curves of my body. I decide to wear a loose sweatshirt to avoid attention, brushing the thoughts of suffocation away. I pull my brown hair up in a ponytail, and a couple of strands fall on my face. I step out into sunlight. Oh, how I wish I had worn my off-shoulder dress with my hair down. To feel the warmth of sun against my bronze dewy skin. To feel the gentle nudging of my hair on my bare back. To feel the day breeze moving the ruffles of my dress, tickling me. But I can't.

I walk down the street at a pace only someone late for work, would. But I'm not. I blast music through my earphones to avoid hearing them. Yet, I catch bits of their words. I feel my heart sinking, and my vision narrowing to the subway station at the end of the street. My eyes catch glimpses of men whistling and smirking. Their shadows following me, haunting me. Inhale, Exhale. I try to calm my beating heart. They won't come near you, I reassure myself. I lose myself in the process of silencing my thoughts.

I reach the stairway down to the subway. Inhale, Exhale. I'm safe now. I feel a hand gliding on my back, and I lose myself again in the throbbing of my chest.

STILLNESS

Shadi - Frag



it all appears in puzzles
and each piece i merge, makes up an unclear image.
but i refuse to look away from what i view this time
i refuse not to see what converts my pupils back to how they are
i let the city lights blind my sight and find beautiful the blur dividing them
i let the streets take me away as i listen to fourth of july beside my mother.
the moment becomes still and a divine disaster of what time holds flashes in front of my eyes
it takes me back to times when i believed the moon was following me on the way back home with a different
smile on its face, on each phase, and kissed me goodnight on the entrance of apartment 4.
it takes me back to when i didn't recognize what the eyes hold and what the hands do when power is given
to them
i stay awake just so i combine more pieces as the sun shows a part of itself behind the mountains
i let its brightness blind my eyes and find soothing the way it touches my mothers skin so softly
the fire starts burning from too much rain and the flame dancing in the gloom warms my eyes
my heart goes slow each time i hate but who's there to tell we have made love on the other side
my friends tell me i look good in red as i let it take over like a disturbing song they scream to on a highway
that mutes my mothers lullaby and my ears
i close my eyes to the moment like a blank dream of empty i'm having
i sing the pieces together till each string of my voice pulls apart and i can finally be myself when i see
agitation in their eyes
the more they pull apart the more they combine me together
and i don't put myself anywhere to get it completed
because i come in lost pieces,
because i have made peace on the chaotic side.

THE OBEYIENT ONE

Rabaa - Tunisia

Whatever they say is what has to be done. It doesn't matter how it feels. It doesn't matter how it looks. All that matters is that at the end of the day, it was their decision. Is it about control? Is it about self-validation? Is it about knowing what would happen in every scenario and choosing to avoid the bad ones? The head boils. The mouth gets dry. But no word comes out. Not even a nod. Just a face with an expression as neutral as possible to avoid conflict, and then it is done. The brain boils. What is it about this unconditional obedience that makes everything freeze for a moment, and then go into robot mode? How did they do it? It's fascinating how manipulation is called 'for your own good'. The longer the overthinking, the harder it becomes to act. The harder it becomes to decide. The harder it becomes to be. Any move can be held against you, so better stay still. The limbs boil, but they'd rather stay put. Is it fear? Is it love? Is it respect? How to know, if your brain is not your own? How to find the direction when someone else is holding the compass? It's pathetic. There's so many things inside. There's so much to say. There's so much to do. There's so much to see. But two out of three monkeys are set, and the last one just does what is dictated. Do they see it? Do they wonder why nothing ever happens? Are they satisfied? How to know when they never share? The ears boil, but just hear and nod. Whatever you hear, you do. Whatever you see, not necessarily though. How to distinguish when no one ever told you which color is which? Blue is fine. Isn't the sky blue and the skirts blue? No. The bruises are blue and the skirts should never be too bright. Say it, talk about it, but not too loud. They might hear. If they hear whispers, their screams will cover them. This is pathetic. The tongue boils, but would rather be fed to cats. It's not that bad though. It's all drama. It's easy to point fingers. It's easier than accepting failure. This is not a failure. This is people's dream. This is an achievement. But how to tell, when no one ever said which is night and which is day? The chest boils, but come on, they say, you should know better. Believing if they tell you to. Stay away if they tell you to. Don't seek validation. You validate you. If no one cheers as loud as thunder, cheer as soft as rain and you'll fill out rivers. Rivers stay longer. Rivers feed trees. Rivers don't tell the seeds what to become. Become the river. Nourish the seeds. The heart boils, but the heart knows that it can't be tamed.

THE GIRL WITH THE WOODEN LEG

Alisa
Fitzroy

April 1933, Germany

"Don't fight the chicken," the Jew murmured, pushing her knotted hair behind an ear. Jagged scars scurried across her face, streaks of red lipstick crawled down her cheeks. Acne scattered itself like paint droplets along her forehead, her cheeks, her nose, her sharp jawline.

A ring of students, myself included, stood around her, jeering; shouting her nickname, "Hähnchen" or chicken; pointing fingers at her bony structure, her murmuring lips. We thought she could not last, could not win another fight.

Hours ago, after school, we trapped her as she was walking out the door, forced her to sit on one of the steps. I pulled lipstick out of my bag. Sweeping the stick haphazardly across her face, I dabbed it once in her eye to my friends' amusement. She did not flinch.

"Now you are ready to fight, pretty bird." I taunted her and tugged at her hair. She is an animal, I reminded myself, nothing more. She only repeated her murmurs, repeating "Don't fight the chicken."

I was next. I will win. I pushed myself out of the tight circle, standing opposite the girl. The girl, pale and skinny, a tiny silhouette in the fading afternoon sky. The girl with a wooden leg. I will win.

I moved before she could react, easily reaching her shoulder, her stomach, her chest. My knuckles cracked, becoming bloody as I hit her. Again and again. Her wooden leg clunked as she fell backwards, landing in a small heap on the ground. Around the circle, shouts congratulated me, "You beat the Chicken!" but I wasn't finished. I raised my fist once more.

For the first time in years, she looked at me, her brown eyes emotionless.

"Gretel." My name, whispered. Quiet in the middle of cacophony. I paused, stopped hitting her. She pushed herself off the ground, standing tall. "Gretel."



A SONG AND FINAL

STANZAS

Seraphina - Russian Federation

Once you said:

«I'm afraid
that the only thing
I would remember - is a flower
I once ate for luck*
and the key
I lost in your yard»

and the hedge between
us - everywhere you look - I've made it -
a cage for a mockingbird
who was mocking you
and now who cannot fly;

I will find the key, I will sing
while you listen; and I'm writing
my own song for the first time
so you could not be afraid
afraid no more.

the repetitions of my respond
are circling in the air
over your body
and beyond
any lies:

"I will lead you through the most
obscure path:
cus we're frozen together like icicles
I will lead you with my voice
eaten by vowels
right to the top
of blooming grass,
to a southern patio on Cherry street
to the house that you've built,
it's the mirror of constant joy
so you could not be afraid.
I've already led you
down the annoying path through
our roots and burnt trails
of small forests;
literary splendor
of a young eagle-owl
who performs for you
over the dawn
protecting from the Night"

5 a.m. corroded bathtub where we never
fitted together
I washed you with my words
I've already washed you with the tepid stream
of my tricky words
and now you're leisurely dissolving
and your shadow is
clinging to limpid hooks of cobweb



DULUTH

David - USA

Dear Marshall
You were my first love
You remember
Don't you?
I remember:
Your heaven eyes
So seethrough that
You covered it with cutout ravens
And sin
So that birds in the skies
And the fish in Lake Superior
And the deer in the woods
And even me
Would not crash
And fall
In love and
in death and
in hell.
How I'd trace circles
On your scratched and bruised back
Filled with bumps
And roughness.
You taught me
To dribble and play ball
To run hard and fast and
To slow down and pace
You taught me
Loyalty
Yet I guess
You didn't teach me enough
Or maybe I'm just a terrible learner
Because I left you
And now I trace her back
Like I traced yours
It's smooth, gentle, undamaged
perfect
But it's not yours
It will never be yours
Does my first love ever fade?



CLICHÉS

Amr - Egypt



Clichés
laid in twos
glistening
with the sun's pristine
melting their Koueider treats
their eyes
down an Olympic swimmer—
deep blue of the river in its
swiftly pace
deep blue of the melancholy in
eyes of the heartbroken
they come back
and
forth
and
up . . . into The Platform Yacht
clichés
sundered in the presence of the
daffodils
mourning the blue
into the black
but they are still clichés

Clichés
in Family Land
or El Bandar
waiting
eagerly
until it hits 6

hands held
a cliché
over
the red chairs
mourning the sun
into the big screen's light
then at 8:
one
strike
one
missed
down
the bowling alley
or
one hit
one lost
in 8 pool
or silly laughters
when you
slip
in Ice Planet
but they are still clichés

Clichés
strolling in Converse
over No. 9
a Crispy Mix
from City Crêpe
or corn dog
at The Backyard
Shawrma
by the corner side
of Abu Mazen
maybe
you leave
unto Al Nasr Street
where you find it silly—
the size of a Quarter Pounder
through the Drive-thru
over
the Mexican Fil
that you
devour
in Chicken Fil-A
or a Big Zack
from the Courtyard
you
sure
shouldn't
have had
those
extra
calories

but you don't care
because they're still clichés

Clichés
lost
in alleys
that could only
look
the same
after you returned
from Tuesday's training
at your favorite
Wadi Degla Club
or when you're running late
from a failing shopping attempt
at Grand Mall
but still you got
that Schogetten and Lindl you
love
dark
and white
from their candy store
and that was enough
to make
it worth it
but they're still clichés

Clichés
as if you're kids
chasing each other
down No. 7's solitude
sneaking
a song
by Amr Diab
on the single earphone pair
you share together
sneaking
a touch
sneaking
a hug
sneaking
a kiss
sneaking
and sneaking
—and
sneaking
before 11
when the Metro
ends its shift
for the day
and you have to leave
that's when you know
that it is
not
a cliché

THE WIND

Alana - Kazakhstan

"If you could command elemental forces, which one of 4 you would choose?" you ask me.

'What a stupid question,' I thought and said it would be Wind.

The wind's amazing. Not many people value and appreciate it, but it's the wind what brings you memories of the past. It's the wind what lets you feel that you're here, that you're present when swaying your hair and fluttering through your t-shirt. It's the wind what makes us equal when sending a chill down the spine of the poorest and the richest guys in the city.

I love observing the wind making miracles. Here, an arguing couple in the park. I can hear their voices rising above the peaceful quietness, insulting words spitting out of their mouths'. A sudden gust muffles their sounds with a whistling, lifting up the girls' skirt. "Uh-oh," she mumbles, blushing and covering it with her pale hands. Her defenselessness, her pink cheeks and blowing hair remind the boy of his true feelings. "Wanna take my jacket?" he asks. "Oh, that would be nice, thank you,".

There, an office worker on his last 10% energy left is carrying a huge box of paper that no one will ever need from one building to another. A wind blows and all the documents, all stupid blankets with billions of signatures fly away, along the street. This means the end of a career for him but all empathic passers-by lift a paper that felt next to them. Without knowing each other, they help each other, placing a warm flame of happiness in each other.

The wind is never seen, never noticed. Invisible, confident and free - this is what wind is. It fills my heart with hope and determination, that's why yes, I would choose wind to fill others, too.



"Don't fight the chicken!" My little daughter cried out to me. We were in the country side, and her siblings were scared. I tried my best to drive the chickens away, but she kept trying to stop me, her little fingers desperately tugging at my feet. "Please, daddy, don't fight the chickens. I love them."

A memory of many which I dwell upon. Memories of when I didn't yearn for my kids. Memories of when they were always by my side. Of course, they had to grow up. I kept telling myself everyday. They had to leave. They have their own lives now. And I am but an old man, living alone in the country side. Fighting my own chickens. Every time I get near them, I remember her and her beautiful smile, her mother's smile. She was as breathtaking as her mother. Oh, that curious daughter of mine. I hope life is treating her well. It has been so long, so long I can barely stand looking at the chickens.

With an old man's sigh, I tried to keep the worries and thoughts from getting to my overused body. I am barely holding it together, eh? I chuckle to myself as the thought crossed my mind, still trying to keep the chicken from getting out of their den. But I grew tired. They were energetic, I was not. I had to give up. I sat down for a little to catch my breath. I closed my eyes, letting the scent of the pure air cleanse my body, and hopefully my paralyzing thoughts too. I pined too much over the past, loneliness was finally getting to me. I wasn't ready to admit it, though. It would be selfish of me to miss them.

Perhaps the sun was getting to me. I felt like I was hallucinating when I heard a familiar soft voice. Maybe my mind finally reached its limits too. "I told you it's pointless, daddy." The voice called out. "Don't fight the chicken."



A DADDY'S CHICKENS

from - *Rebecca*

S I L E N C E

Aleksei - Russian Federation

He is a teacher, tutor and deputy headmaster. He is interested in finishing his apartment renovation and sports.

Sitting in silence in the classroom he still could hear his phone's vibrations. No attention at all. He is staring at the desk in front of him as it was something desirable. Phone's vibrations.

This look can only be compared to lions watching some smaller animals eat and drink at the river. Old lions who are tired of this endless race of surviving and catching food for living. Still they are lions - brave, fearless, cruel, powerful, ferocious, one of the strongest predators on this planet and supposedly some other planets, too. Phone's vibrations.

Living in a pride of usually two males, seven females and some cubs, it's unimaginable to wonder how much patience a lion should have. Only two males. If one dies? There is a male, seven females and some cubs. Ha. In schools the ratio of males/females is 1 to 7 in a lucky case. Phone's vibrations.

With his tired neck he turned to the window where kids were playing and shouting some imperceptible words. He wishes he was there, he wishes he could be a cub without this everlasting battle with a daily life of shopping, doing a dozen of things for living, caring for others and being friendly with a smile on his face to everyone he sees. Is it a smile or a bared teeth grin thing as lions do to frighten enemies and other animals to be safe? In people's world it's called a smile. Phone's vibrations. Unknown number.

'Hello. This is your Internet provider and we inform you about ...', said the electronic voice.

'At least with this voice expecting nothing in return I can be myself.'

JUSTICE

Paris - USA

"she doesn't own the store" her mom says.

she stares in the dressing room mirror. she wears the outfit a girl in her grade, her first crush, the girl she wants to be, wore the previous week.

sometimes she wondered if she did own the store. she knows no other nine-year-old that goes shopping that often.

her stomach protrudes from the knee length blue shorts and matching blue graphic shirt. she regrets the panda express she just had. she doesn't regret eating it, but she does regret eating it before this. sighing, she reminiscences the sticky sweet sour chicken - her crush is likely never fed such a meal.

she is nothing like her crush. she wonders if she should even get the outfit. doesn't want to look like a copycat.

her mother sits watching her. clutching her michael kors purse, jcpenny bags at her feet. she thinks her daughter looks good. her daughter wonders if her mom knows why she really brought her into the store.

she turns from the mirror and tries on the same outfit in purple. she then realizes the clothes are not the problem.

her mom buys the outfits and she wears them monday. she's ready for the recognition she's been waiting for.

at school a girl asks why her shorts are so long. she says her mom forces her to be modest.

she then runs to the playground and swings as far off the ground as possible.



“Thank you,” she said to the waiter.

She is a defense attorney working for Winchester & Co Attorneys-At-Law; with black hair made into a bun, circular glasses and a suit to compliment it, she looks just like one. Sitting at a café table, she awaits her breakfast while reading documents about her upcoming case.

She is to defend a suspected homicider of the aforementioned’s husband. His body was found on his side of the bed with several fatal stab wounds in the abdomen, therefore dying from internal bleeding that night. The suspect was sleeping next to him and woke up the morning of the murder. She was the one who called the police. It would be very unlikely if she was the murder, the lawyer thought, if it weren’t for the evidence.

She slept with a dagger in her hand; the bloodstained dagger specifically used to stab her husband, with no fingerprints on it but his and hers. The dagger was specially-made, it had a specific blade shape that matches with the wounds. To add on the incrimination’s basis, there was no sign of burglary; no broken locks, no unlocked or broken windows, no one else in the house. Well, except for their child, but there’s absolutely no way he could’ve done it. He’s only thirteen-years-old, after all; it would be very anticlimactic would it were true.

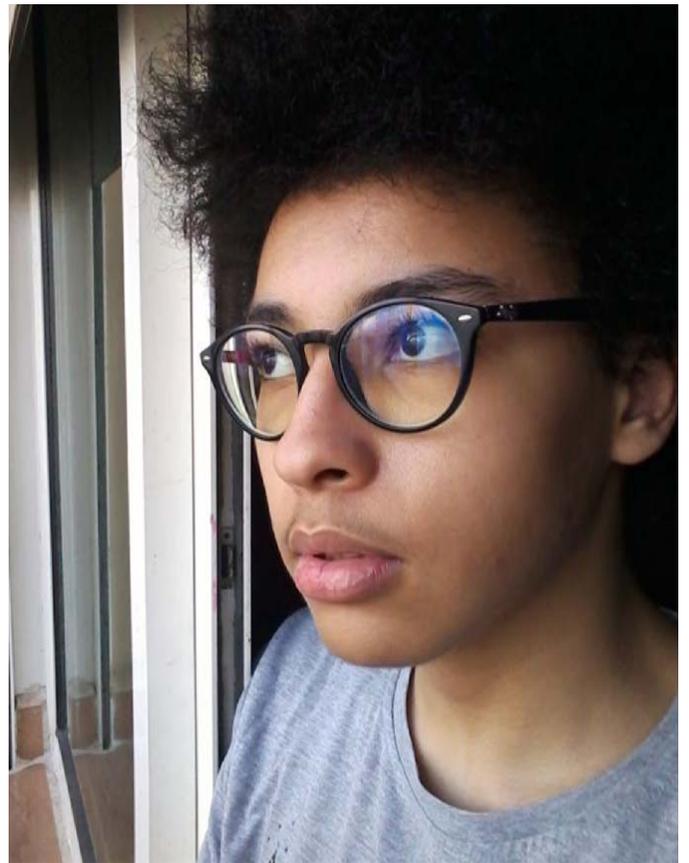
It couldn’t have been suicide, there were too many stab wounds to support that possibility. The only possibility there is up until now, is that her client is the one who did it.

Unless...

Wait, she thought, why was the dagger specially-made? The blade has a very peculiar shape, wiggly is the only way to describe it, like the Indonesian Kris dagger. It had a symbol engraved into it. The lawyer can’t remember it very well, but she thinks; maybe, it was a singular open eye with the pupil crossed out? She’ll have to check in court in the afternoon.

The waiter approaches finally with an assortment of croissants and a cup of bitter, unsweetened, black coffee — her favorite. “Here you are, Ms. Grave,” he says with a French accent as he puts her breakfast on her table, “Would you like anything else?”

She looks up at him and gives him a sweet smile while pulling out some cash. “No, thank you so much, cher,” she places some money into his apron’s front-pocket. He smiles, clasps his hands together charismatically, nodding barely, and leaves her to her food.



THE BEE

Yosna - Tunisia

As she was walking down the street, thinking about her destination and how she could reach the café, she felt bothered. She felt strange and uncomfortable. The street was full of movement and people whom she didn't know or could barely assimilate their faces to some far fetched memories of her childhood. she felt their looks and their curiosity about her. maybe they were wondering who she is. Maybe they knew who she is and were imagining what wrong deeds she has committed in the past and what she is about to do. " She's always down the road waiting for a cab or someone to pick her up. what a slut!!". Their voices were too loud to her ears and too heavy on her consciousness. Is this why she felt that way?

Somewhere else, she loved walking for hours and she loved contemplating the large vast spaces around her. She also liked discovering new places even without a prior plan. She's the kind of person who would go to the end of the world without the slightest hesitation. Maybe that's why they called her a slut.

She remembered those days where she could navigate the streets while lighting up a cigarette, and thought to herself: " what wrong could it be in this society for a women to light up a cigarette and walk peacefully? ". A sudden memory stroke her with an unknown voice that seemed to be coming from the depths of history:" If you were a man, you'd light up a cigarette and drink that Espresso". That's where she realized that...!

For a second she almost forgot where she was going, and cab was passing by. She stopped the cab, got into the car and automatically said to the driver " Hammem el Gharbi Yaachek".

THE "MARK"

Aleksandre - Georgia

"I closed my eyes and waited. Waited for the slap that would no doubt be hard enough to break my neck." I knew this was it. Salty-tears were burning my already pinkened eyes from inside.

I've done horrible mistakes. I really have done them. And the punishment was looming like a majestic blue whale - fierce but calm, prodigious but innocent. It was more like a symbol that I feared, rather than the punishment I deserved.

I needed it to wake myself up from the "short dream of life."

I held my breath as my eyes were shut; my heart was skipping beats and coldness was biting. My soul was walking on a hair-thin bridge, below which molten river of tar was gushing, waiting for the "mistaken of the devil."

I stood there frozen, waiting for the slap - for the punishment that never actually came. My anxiety was exponentially growing and sweat was dripping down my body. Seconds stretched like hours, hours like days, days like years... Yet, nothing was coming.

There was no greater sorrow than to recall happy times when miserable. I was subtly crying from inside. A single slap scared me to death, the slap that would change my life for ever.

The slap was a moral slay-down. It wouldn't end my life there, it would place a mark upon my forehead, a mark that would indicate everyone that I was "the escaped slave from the plantation." The executioner's hand was next to me but the slap would never come. Not the slap, but the anxiety would kill me. Yes, it would. And I thought it was the end of mine. Yes, it truly was. I would never be the same again. I knew this was it...



TO BE HUMAN

Amir - Zeharati

"Closer, please, come closer" I heard that exclamation through the sounds of bombs like thunder on a cold day in winter;

it was one of the hardest days of war, some people even went as far as calling it a day damned by God himself.

I stopped in my place as my eyes caught the insides of a man laying next to him, the scene was so gory that I couldn't even tell what those body parts were.

"My last words, closer, please"

His mouth was hardly opening as I caught his hand

"Death, what a sparkling light at times of such darkness"

He paused for almost 5 seconds as he grunted and continued

"I've always wondered what a man's final thoughts would be, never thought I'd be experiencing them that soon. Feelings and emotions, on a dying bed, that's all what a man is."

"Don't bother yourself, rest while you may"

"A man, in the end is everything he's ever felt, without feelings one is nothing but a robot, a machine."

The sound of a blood-curdling explosion blew the remains of what was once a wooden barricade all around us

"If you make it, and I hope you do, plea--"

And that was the end of one, in a war of millions. War doesn't give you time to think, it doesn't wait for you to process; war is death, war is destruction.

As I ran to find another barricade to host me as it's temporary guest, all I had left with me was the feelings, everything this man made me feel, everything this war made me feel. In that position where all a person is allowed to do is obey orders without questioning, the only thing that remains in ones head reminding him that he is human is in fact, feelings.



ADDICTION

Farah - Azerbaijan

The air is rich with the smell of paper and ink. Freshly printed novels model the displays, hoping to attract passersby.

To you, they looked like freshly baked cakes, waiting to be devoured.

The bookshop is filled with a sweet musky smell, a drug to any book lover. There was a hint of coffee in the air, drifting between shelves. It was a fairly small shop, a warm yellow light filling it, a contrast to the dark outside. Wooden bookshelves (which may have or may not have be antiques) lined the walls, each shelf dedicated to a different genre. Sometimes a bell could be heard, signaling that a new customer arrived, or left.

You pick up book after book, eyes scanning the wooden shelves packed with knowledge. As you move, the floor squeaks underneath your feet, the worn out carpet protesting with each step you take. A new novel catches your eye, forcing you to add it to your pile. You were a child, unable to decide between chocolate or lollipops.

Soon enough, both your hands and your wallet are struggling to hold all the stories you chose.

Once again, you have no choice but to leave one behind. You whisper a promise to get it next time, followed by a prayer that no one buys it before your next visit. Your hands work to hide it, conceal it away behind dusty books of history.

No one will look there.

There it was safe.



HONOUR YOUR FATE...

Adan - Pakistan



Some may claim to be the masters of their sea, the captains of their souls. They refuse to fathom the idea of some concealed force that determines their future. To them, all that happens in life is a mere coincidence with no pre-planned disposition. The weak smiles we see on streets, the tornadoes that knock away our homes, the humiliations that have the power to shatter our pride are mere acts that happened without a lesson camouflaged somewhere within them. Thus most failures in life are caused by their own incompetence causing them to persist a goal that was never meant for them resulting in completely wrecked self-esteem.

Then there are those who believe that everything is tied together with invisible knots, braided cords of fate. They converge and take shape. They twist, tangle, sometimes unravel, break and then connect again. And at the end of these knots, we wind up where destiny had always planned to bring us. To them, the stray cat that rubbed its head with their leg was meant to be on the street to make them smile, humility was necessary so vanity could extinguish and tornadoes showed them how little power they actually held. In life they are caught in a current much stronger than they are and believe that a struggle against it would only cause them to drown. Whereas this view of life may make some people entirely satisfied with what life brings them, it may also cause utter destruction within the active parts of their mind. They may learn to live with a job that doesn't pay, well merely because success was never 'a part of their fate' resulting in a highly incompetent human.

We are not mere puppets of fate. I believe there is so much about life we cannot control, but other things do fall under our jurisdiction. We can choose how to consider unfortunate circumstances, in life – whether to see them as afflictions or opportunities. We can decide how we spend our time and with whom. But most of all, we choose our thoughts. Our soul absorbs the colours of these thoughts, our actions paint them and fate presents them in the art gallery of the universe.

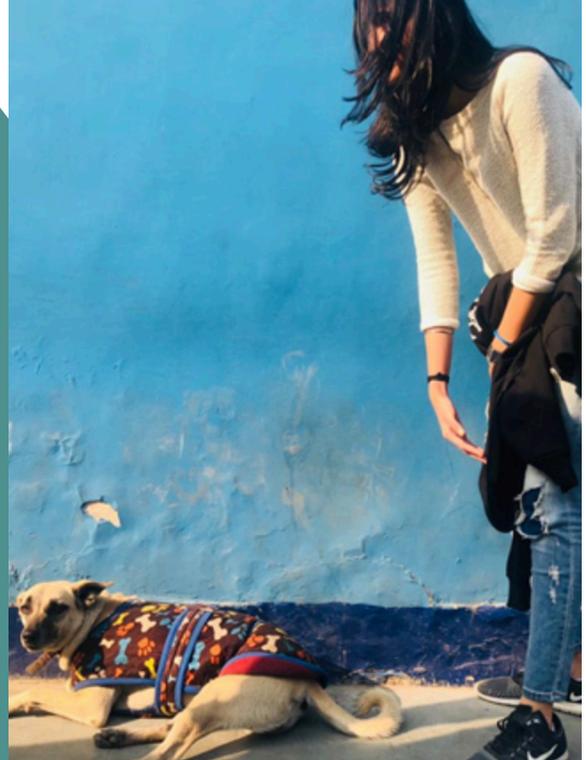
H O India, M E New Zealand

At an odd five pm of an irregular Sunday, I decided to flee. I was wearing a triple extra-large hoodie and torn pyjamas. With that commotion, I packed some clothes I never wished to wear, some medicines and all my books and pens in a black camping bag. The hoodie was an odd grey in colour. Not grey, but an odd mixture of black and teal watercolour paints. Like roadside mud after the first downpour in monsoon. It was faded but not too worn – just enough worn. The sleeves covered my wrists and knuckles, so I liked to hide in it. Somehow two or three pale skeletons like mine could comfortably fit but I never felt I was alone.

It was raining again, so I wore the hood and drew the strings until it engulfed my face in a teal-black void. With my oddly large bags, I stepped inside the train and did not cry. It was now dark outside, but free.

The first time that I saw the sea, it was three a.m. and I had just stopped crying. The winter wind blew against some direction always against me. I cursed it because the sea wind rattled me but never took me along. I remember the sea was black, like the odd streaks on my face and some scars. The only light was of ambitious commerce buildings, a few billboards and a torn moon. There were white streaks on my sleeves, made of salty water and some nose junk. An odd milky way in a teal-black sky.

Mom hated when I wore it because it always clung to me. Maybe she was upset because I looked oddly natural in a rag. Maybe she was scared that I will never wear a plain white t-shirt again.



PETITION: SELLING

THE SIBLING

Shaham - Simi Zarka

Whenever I'm faced with a technical glitch, I trust the Sibling to solve it. A quick shout and a small bargain and the Sibling gets to work. A minute later and the Sibling sees that the speakers were switched off. He switches them on. The Zoom meeting carries on excellently and the Sibling forgets about his end of the deal.

So why not share this invention with the world? It is with the spirit of Edison presenting the lightbulb that I give to you a product that can fix the lightbulb when it goes out in the middle of dinner. Yes, a constantly on-call healer of every technological ailment.

It doesn't matter if it's the middle of the night and you can't find batteries—the Sibling materialises. Occasionally making breakfast for him is all it takes to keep the Sibling fully operational. The product is meant for long-term use where the Sibling is likely to spend his life making useful things like one-click-can-openers in the garage. He makes do with few tools and pushes down costs. The massive turnover may be used to buy Bluetooth speakers on the side



A STINGRAY FOR A DAY

Catie - *NSA*

She woke from her slumber in the sand not by the music of the fish, as usual, but by the immense sound a particular wave made. Confused, she lazily drifted higher in the shallow water, wanting to see the chaos. There on the shoreline were two figures, similar to the water birds that frequented the beach, but larger, with a presense of unrest and exitment. This intrigued her, but she felt her spinal blade tighten, telling her to use caution. They shed their unfamiliar skin until they were in an equal amount of bright covering, and then, as if one spotted her through the cristal clear water and the other caught on quickly, they made unfamiliar sounds that was tiring to her sensative hearing before running straight towards her. A flight response took over and she slipped back into the sand, a wave of worry falling over her. This existential crisis made her increadable tired, and she allowed herself to fall back into her dreams, naive to what those creatures would do to her home.



ODE TO A FALLEN SKY

Clara - USA



The sky is falling.

A storm cloud of dark pointillism
The heathered dusk sliced as if into netting
(cotton strings woven over fresh nectarines)
light strobing through a nosedive—
the sky is falling and you let it.

Right when
any distance becomes imperceptible,
the wind, striking feathers in flight, rings out
in a cacophony you swear will be the last sound you hear
(almost mistaken for raindrops on a slate roof)
the cumulonimbus takes a dizzying twirl upwards and away,
its image fading in and out before your eyes.

This is the greatest downpour that never was.
An organism takes shape, its outline dissolved before you can even discern it
A nameless figure, fluid and kinetic and entirely unknowable
to those of us bound to solid ground.

Individual chirps overtake the sound of movement itself
and you cannot remember whether the murmuration has moved on
or simply dispersed into the violet sky.

MY NAME

Rebekah - USA

There's dust everywhere. In the creases of Rebekah's robe, falling into the water, coating the thick camel's hair. Blowing against the legs of the strange messenger. She gave water to both the messenger and the camel. That's what I remember about her. Or what I choose to remember anyway. She didn't forget about the camels.

My mom tells me she has great faith. She left her family to get married to a man she never met. That was her act of great faith. I never really understood that part. I never really understood faith, even with all the verses and stories and songs.

There was a bible story book we had, with shiny pages and photographs for every story. Rebekah by the well with the messenger, Rebekah cradling her twin babies. I didn't know about the camels at first. But she's who I was named after, so I'd press my fingers against the sleek pages where her head was bent forwards, always towards somebody else.

My middle name is after my both grandmas, both named Dianne. My friends used to call me Rebekah Dianne, except all in one breath. Rebekahdianne.

One grandma likes flowers and sewing and small dogs. The other likes people magazines and route 66 and Swedish food.

I like my name and all the things that make it up, the one quick breath of Rebekahdianne, the water for camels and flowers on the side of route 66.



DREAMS FALLEN

Hasan - Bangladesh

Books shouldn't be handed over! Books are personal, as is someone's wife. If they are handed over, we might get it back, but the contents might be modified. The way we cover our book, the way we write our name there, the way we adjoin--all these are different in others' hands. In these seventy-two years, neither I had a wife nor children; only they were the sweethearts to pet.

Before I sleep, I should put them into new beds. They have been sleeping on me and I have responsibilities. They are safe here and I believe that no one can pet them better. But, this old buddy can't take care of this kingdom anymore. All my children deserve to get them on better skies. Five thousand buddies altogether, I guess. Although I never counted because the source of happiness can't be counted and should not be as well.

I called a wood maker this morning. No sooner had I met him I realized that it can't be done by him. Wood is expensive; more expensive are my books. Without taking the risk, there were no options left and the evening was pushing the sun to take rest. Therefore, I allowed him. He started shaking hands. I stood beside. He was nervous. I thought it would be better if I let him work alone, although I was in a dilemma.

However, I got busy reading Kate's 'Fallen' and went into the deep. I couldn't go enough into it as my mind was stuck here, to see what's happening with my future memories. I went there and asked him,

"What's up?"

Before his reply, all the shelves fell on me, and all the books as well.

I wasn't silent. I reminisced, "Books shouldn't be handed over!".



LIGHTS ARE BLAZING

Parlo - Ukraine

The lights are blazing, music's playing,
Like jewels gleaming in the night
The eyes of youth are shining gaily,
Alight with hope, with pleasure flaming;
Their eyes are bright, for to the sight
Of innocence all things seem right.
So all are laughing, all are jolly,
And all are dancing. Only I,
As though accursed, in melancholy
Look on and wipe a mournful eye.
Why do I weep? Perhaps the reason's
That dreary, like the rainy season,
My youth has uselessly slipped by.



STANZAS WRITTEN IN ADMIRATION

Eleanor

51

I
Adonis lies upon Persephone's winter breast,
Slender Aphrodite longs in Orpheus' place of rest,
Comely Baldr cries out to me too,
How I could never compare to you!

Our beauty fades as yours grows near,
I, Hekate, jealous of Helios' ambrosic veneer,
And of the fauns who play in the springtime afternoon,
For only the Sun can light up the Moon.

II
This day has been declared your birthday,
As well as the birth of the stars and
the Moon and the Sun,
And all things beautiful and sad,
And lovely and perilous,
The birth of war and of peace,
Of light and of dark,
Because you, my unsuspecting Baldr,
Are the restraint of balance,
Forever stopped in time,
Loki's arrow points at your back,
Your smile to the crowd,
Lit with yellow light and warmth,
You are the hearth of greatness.

III
For the gentleness of Adonis,
Crafted out of soft April embers,
And emerging like Venus from the springtime marsh, the season of
Nuptial joy among boy-mothers,

To great to admire, to great to ignore,

You are the flame that ignites when
Struck against the matchbox of fate,
The Parcae look upon you and tremble
I look upon you and smile.

And like the summer sweat sticks to my skin,
I stick to you.

SOUND

Samandar - Tajikistan

The sound which bounded by the shame,
can no longer be the sound.

The words which spoken by the mouth, sounds, like birds are singing briefly.

This way we lose our brave,
when we just become ashamed.

Advice is easy, do not afraid,
to speak the thinking in your head.

Opinion of other humans is just a noise.

Your language will be mixed into clay,
if pay attention to the tension of toxic human gossip.

UNTITLED

Quinn - USA

There once was a rich man named Gill
Who had great trouble deciding his will
He had no sons of which he could embellish
No daughters in which he could relish
Thus with his riches his grave was filled



M O R

T A L

W O E

Samira - Bangladesh



She says she is my friend,
Promised me to remain as one, till the end;
She comes nearer to me,
Asking me, "We are best friends, aren't we?"
She keeps reminding me the things I fear,
Reminding me of the consequences, which were severe!
That's when my chest feels tight:
Not knowing what's wrong and what's right.
Her words are so powerful and oppressing,
My peace fades away; it all feels depressing!
She haunts me throughout the night ,
Making me so weak that I give up to fight .
When she tells me that there is no one for me to love,
I question myself, "Why am I still ALIVE?"
She kills me from inside,
Portraying me with a fake smile outside.
She tends to steal my sleep
Forcing me to think about her, instead of the memories I wish to keep.
I can't feel the beats of my heart:
My dreams, my desires, all being shattered!
Far away from the reality,
Driven by her brutality.
All those things which used to seem clear,
My eyes now sees them blur.
She begs for my attention,
Yet, I know she is nothing, but an evil creation.
Even though I want to fight her back,
But there is something that I lack.
She wants to be my best friend;
But it's time to overcome and put this to an end.
She is apprehension!

Tonight, as I write about her,
I take pride in letting her know—
Sooner or later, she shall melt like the snow.
Nothing lasts forever,
Neither the gaiety, nor the grief
And so will not our friendship,
For she is a mortal woe, and nothing more than that.

So, here's to a new beginning!

The new folk of Delhi,
Are a sight to behold.
They strut around the capital,
With their expressive expense,
And make me feel empty,
Because I cannot spend.
The new aunties of Delhi
Sit in their verandahs.
Reading literature of the likes I can't possess.
Pickling all the salty words I said.
And creating inflammatory limericks out of them.
I see them at French film festivals, and American too
They have their crisp English with them.
The new uncles of Delhi,
Slide into life with their whiskey,
Their ego is staggering
For they have studied engineering
They know what their kid has to do
Even before he/she/it is born.
Sharma Ji's son is a certified scoring machine.
Straight A's cannot become B's
And if there isn't a 100 in Science and Maths,
Sharma Ji's belt would be out of the loops.
The new youth of Delhi
Can't see anything
Because the aimless existence is enveloping
To fill that gap
We have our means.
A Jaguar. A party.
A sniff.
We can cheat in the exams
With the wildest of methods
We can beat up the new kid
We don't care if he becomes a cadaver.
We can do everything
But we can't get our life back on track.
For we want more than we need
We want that extra sniff and that extra follower
We can't see what's ahead
Because the road already diverged and we've reached a dead end.



A SPECIAL

Our participants (with the help of Alisa Weinstein) assembled new biographies for their teachers. Read what they said about our BTL: Peace and the Writing Experience Faculty! We are so grateful for their work-- and so are the students!

Rumena Buzarovska

Rumena Buzarovska is a buoyant teacher who fills her students' hearts with hope and will to write and read; she animates every session. We can't catch our breath while we are with her. She's thoughtful, imaginative, and powerful with her words. Impassioned and inquisitive, she pushes her students to ask difficult questions, and imbues lessons with her love of literature and writing. She is vivacious and full of light; a deeply intellectual reader and writer who always makes everyone feel included. Rumena makes people feel seen. She takes control of a situation and allows everyone to feel as if they are the center of the world. Rumena has the ability to connect to people, to push through boundaries, to ease worries, and bring smiles to people's faces. There's something about her that feels so refreshing, so revitalizing, and she makes learning feel timeless and easy and engaging. She looks into the details of things and she gives this vibe and energy of a person that you can be confident and fully yourself around! Every discussion with her leaves a lasting impact and somehow makes you reflect on everything. Rumena is everything you can hope to find in a teacher, she is kind, loving, she gives the best constructive criticism ever. But most importantly, she cares. Rumena Bužarovska is an absolute glowing spirit ready to take each of our souls to infinity and beyond when being a writer. Rumena Bužarovska is an inspiration who radiates warmth, wisdom, and has an amazing sense of humor. She opens students' eyes to a diverse set of literature and reminds them why they love writing; to forge relationships and to breathe life into the world.

Recountings of her kindness
Unfurl from the
Mouths of any lucky
Enough to
Nab
A conversation with her.



THANKS TO

Mary Hickman



Mary Hickman: warm, milk, sweet, autumn, sweaters, leaves, gentle, safe, calm, willow, slow waves, quiet rivers. The word “uwu” surmises everything we feel for Mary. Ironic and disappointing, the teacher who encourages us to write every emotion cannot herself be described with the same letters. But that is the beauty of it, right? Mary. Reminiscent of Mother Mary, and Mary is nothing less than a mother figure. I adore Mary. I adore how she compliments almost everything. I adore how she complains about not getting tech stuff, I adore when she opens a fake ig account to stalk people, and I adore how she keeps reminding us that we're not at Iowa city. I adore Mary for being the wholesome person she is. Mary Hickman is a very kind and supportive teacher. She encourages students to speak out loud their thoughts, emotions, stories... Mary Hickman is perceptive. She inspires her students to think outside the box, whether it's about literature or their own writing. Mary Hickman is passionate about poetry and a teacher who cares about every single one of her students. Mary Hickman is gentle, with a kind smile, and comforting words. She lets you know it's okay to be anxious, it's okay to be scared, or not know who you are. I'll give you these questions in advance, so you can prepare, she'll say. She will ease your worries. She'll stand with you and take you through this harsh world, and you'll make it out okay. Mary is very down to earth and sees into the heart of things. She is loved for her way of explaining writings so calmly, and in detail, and giving a whole different beautiful perspective from what you have read. Mary has a very charismatic mindset, interpreting everything positively and always thinking the best of people at first. She has a knack for including emotions in her works. Mary, despite the fact that the program is virtual this year, makes it feel like we're sitting face to face sometimes. It's easy melting into her discussions. Most importantly, her workshops make one feel comfortable; make one feel at home. Mary Hickman tickles the fun out of you, the creativity out of your mind, and the unspoken words out of your fingertips.

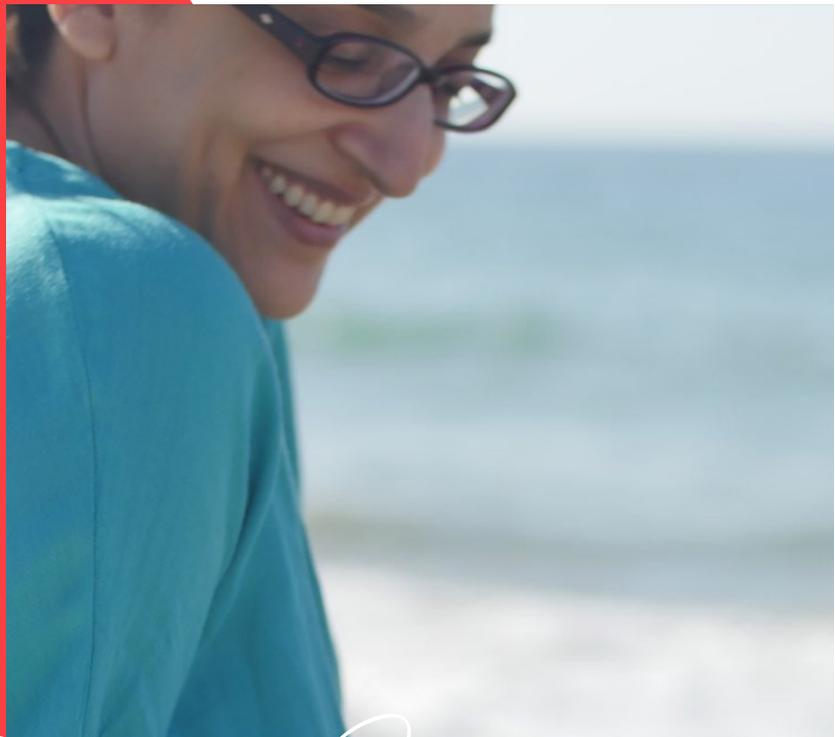
Character
Accomplished Artist
Respectable
Inspiring
Nourishing
Gifted

Many minds has she ignited.
An artist who asks about your
Rose and thorn, Mary makes
You feel seen.

A SPECIAL

Shandana Minhas is a teacher and a mentor, who sees her students as equal, and not lesser. She wants them to succeed. With her special warmth, she takes time to listen and enjoy each of their ideas, and never dismisses any of them as wrong. This makes everyone want to learn more, open up more, create more. It develops your thinking, your imagination and the insight she shares with you feels like she has seen into your very souls, almost. And maybe she has. Shandana makes us smile, laugh. She makes waking up at four to prepare for six am writing workshops fun, vivid, and exciting. Her lessons are instructive and so absorbing that no one notices the time pass. She challenges her students to expand their worldview, not only in relation to writing, but in general. Her love for craft and love for teaching is both palpable and electrifying. Shandana Minhas is witty, insightful, glides through life with a perspective that is curious, and questioning, eager to know about other cultures; You ask a question, and she counters with one of her own. You ask a question, and you gain insight, you gain new questions, you gain the power to find answers you wouldn't consider, or realize that some questions never have answers, and that is okay. She is dedicated and astute and cheerful all the time. Shandana is appreciated for being patient, kind, and hardworking; very focused on what she's doing, and making sure everything is completed the way she wants it to be. She makes sure everyone gets the message of things right. Shandana is like a horse. Calm and cool when with you, but fierce when you discuss sensitivity in literature. Absolutely amazing! Shandana is a video lover, who wants her students to understand the meaning of the text, music, song, video, character that they want to convey. Shandana: snappy, excited, cliff, tumbling words, quick, dart, flash. An emotional authoress in a good way. Despite everything she has been through, she's still held on to her emotions which is the hardest thing to do when going through harsh situational circumstances. Shandana Minhas has a unique way to inspire you to be yourself and sparkle power out of your words into the world. She will help you take back your mind and trust your thoughts when no one else believed in you. She will tell you that you become a better writer through experience, through living. Shandana Minhas: everything we want to be when we grow up. She represents a future we want to achieve: pursuing craft, moving to the UK, being warm and sharp and witty and kind, and being able to live with self-assured confidence that this is your path. Shandana is unforgettable.

She
Has
A way of
Noticing
Delightful perspectives
And
Nourishing storytellers.
Also, don't fight the chicken.



Shandana Minhas

THANKS TO

Vladimir Poleganov

Vladimir Poleganov is a thinker. He is able to consider all things fantastic. When he speaks, you get lost in a world of craft and morality and the divisions of society. Vladimir is an open mind, full of countless thoughts and ideas, he is, you can assume, spiritual in nature, and attaches deeper meanings to everything that encounters him in life. In his quiet way, he is good listener, and always explains what's incomprehensible. He supports his students while pushing them to try new things, and engages with each of their perspectives as young writers. Vladimir makes you see the bigger picture of things and can make you get thousands of words out of a thing you see daily and give no attention to. He teaches you how curiosity can be a very good inspiration and have a big influence on writing especially if you're having writer's block. As a teacher he is Vladimir Poleganov is one of the best teachers you will ever meet. You will feel so happy to be one of his students because he is a source of inspiration, with an attractive way of speaking and conducting lessons. An excellent listener, who makes you feel welcomed, and excited each day to learn more from him. Vladimir: kind, gentle, calm, nice, accepting, encouraging each of us to share more, but always taking into consideration our fears and our nerves. He asks questions that need to be answered. He is the sort of person you wish you could speak to forever. Vladimir Poleganov makes you dig under your skin and discover all kinds of wonderful gemstones about being alive.



Viewing
Life with
Attention to
Detail and genuine
Interest,
Moments
In his presence are
Rewarding.

