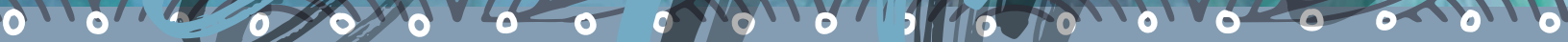




# SAGE CIGARETTES MAGAZINE



*Depths*



Vol. 3, Issue. 3. June 2026

Cover art & title page photo by LE Francis, nocturnical.com



SAGE CIGARETTES  
MAGAZINE

*Depths*

VOL. 3, ISSUE 3, SUMMER 2026

SAGE CIGARETTES MAGAZINE

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# Dear Readers,

In this world, there are places we cannot fully map.

The ocean floor remains more mysterious than the surface of the moon. Beneath layers of water, sediment, and silence, entire worlds drift beyond the reach of ordinary sight. We know they exist. We feel their pull. Yet their contours remain elusive.

For this summer issue, we invite you into the depths.

Depth is not simply a measure of distance. It is emotional, ancestral, creative. It gathers in the stories we inherit, the memories we revisit, the obsessions we cannot shake, and the questions that continue calling to us long after we think we've moved on.

Our prompt, "Echoes from the Oubliette," began with a fascination for what we consign to the deepest parts of ourselves. The word *oubliette* comes from the French *oublier*: *to forget*. But forgetting is rarely permanent. Even what has been submerged has a way of resurfacing.

The works in this issue explore hidden currents and unseen ecosystems. They dive into grief and wonder, longing and transformation. They examine what it means to search beneath appearances and to linger where certainty dissolves.



There is a particular unease that accompanies deep water. It asks us to confront the limits of our perception. To accept that not everything can be illuminated at once. To trust ourselves enough to descend anyway.

Look carefully, for sometimes what rises from the depths is not an answer, but a doorway.

Thank you for joining us below the surface.

With gratitude,

Step & L





Prose

The word "Prose" is written in a bold, black, cursive script. The letters are thick and have a slight shadow or outline. Below the word, there are four horizontal, wavy lines in a light blue color, resembling water or a decorative flourish.

# THE BLUE HOUR

*by William Cass*

*This story was previously published in Prosetrics.*

Lupe had been Mr. Naylor's housekeeper/cook for twelve years, since shortly after his wife died. Before starting, intimidated by the grandeur of his waterfront estate, she'd googled him: he'd bought and sold several companies prior to turning forty, then settled into an even more lucrative career as a venture capitalist until retirement. No children; he was described as having become something of a recluse. Already growing old when she began, he'd aged considerably since.

There wasn't much to the job. The fifteen rooms only required occasional, cursory cleaning, and for meals, Mr. Naylor was a creature of simple habits: black coffee and oatmeal for breakfast, a crustless sandwich for lunch, and soup with a slowly sipped glass of beer for dinner. He never had visitors.

It was an early-fall evening, the blue hour just begun. Lupe waited until he'd finished all but the last sips of his beer before lighting a candle on the cupcake she'd baked and carrying it out on a napkin to the back terrace. Mr. Naylor was in his preferred spot at the small table where the flagstones met a sprawling lawn leading down to a beach she'd never seen him set foot upon. He sat very still in his buttoned cardigan, a plaid blanket over his legs and his walker beside him, gazing out at the muted sky draping the water.

He startled slightly as she set the cupcake before him and said, "Happy birthday."

Mr. Naylor's expression slowly eased until he mumbled, "Thank you."

She nodded twice, smoothed her apron, then said, "Blow out your candle."

His wisps of white hair rose and fell on the soft breeze, and the flame flickered across his weathered face. He looked from the cupcake up to her and said, "I don't know if I can. Help me."

She bent down and counted, "One, two, three..."

Their expelled breaths mingled, his hardly more than a puff, and the flame extinguished. Lupe straightened and clapped. "Eighty years old." She kept her voice bright. "What would you wish for if you could have any gift for this special birthday?"

He returned his gaze back over the water's gray expanse. A sailboat a hundred yards out made a thin, starboard tack before he said, "To feel needed."



Lupe felt herself stiffen. Even at that distance, two voices could be faintly heard on the sailboat, a man's and a woman's. She glanced at her watch; she'd already stayed late for the birthday cupcake, and her invalid mother awaited her own dinner and attention in the apartment they shared in town. Very gently, she placed her hand on Mr. Naylor's bony shoulder and gave it a small squeeze.

"You take care," she told him. "I'll see you in the morning."

He didn't turn, but gave a couple short nods of his own. She cleared the table of all but the cupcake. Retracing her steps over the flagstones, the receding voices from the sailboat remained just audible, quiet and intimate in the dwindling light.



# ON SUNDAYS WE WEAR BLUE

*by Maria Ali Jawad*

Every Sunday, Mrs. Jameeleh chooses the blue cardigan before the nurses begin their morning rounds and waits.

She keeps it folded in the second drawer beside her bed, wrapped in tissue paper as if it were silk. "Joseph likes this color on me," she tells anyone who asks. "He always says it brightens my complexion."

The hallway smells faintly of antiseptic and overcooked carrots drifting from the kitchen, yet Mrs. Jameeleh breathes in as if she might catch Joseph's dark, sweet oud instead. In the main lounge, she sits by the wide window where the sun warms her knees through the glass. From there, she can see the parking lot.

"He always comes after church," she says, a soft pride warming her voice as she looks toward an unfazed Mrs. Therese in the armchair across from her. "He never misses it, ilhamdillah. I raised him properly."

Mrs. Therese hums but says nothing.

Mrs. Jameeleh smooths her skirt. Her frail hands tremble slightly now, but she keeps her back straight. "When he was little, he would hide behind my coat before school. He cried the first week. Held onto me so tightly I thought the buttons would snap." She chuckles at the memory. "Such a sensitive boy."

Around eleven, she hears the elevator doors open.

Her heart lifts, like it does every Sunday. "That will be him!"

Footsteps echo against the tiled floor as nurses move past with medication carts. A volunteer wheels in a tray of tea. The clock ticks loudly above the television.

"He called yesterday," Mrs. Jameeleh leans forward. "He said, 'Mama, don't wait outside. I will find you.' But I like to wait. I want him to see me first."

At noon, she asks the nurse at the desk, "Has my Joey signed in?"

The nurse offers a gentle smile. "Not yet."

"He must be stuck in traffic. He drives too fast. I tell him all the time, slow down, ya immi\*." She heaves a sigh, then adds, "He never listens."

By one o'clock, the sunlight had shifted away from her chair. The warmth leaves her knees cold.

“He works very hard,” she shakes her head at Mrs. Therese. “He does not rest enough. I worry about him.”

At two, she is still watching the parking lot.

In the small office down the hall, a new caregiver stands with a clipboard. “Does her son usually come this late?” she asks quietly.

The head nurse lowers her voice. “He does not come anymore.”

The caregiver frowns. “But she said—”

“It has been five years,” the nurse says gently. “Car accident. Sunday morning.”

The caregiver’s eyes widen.

“We do not correct her,” the nurse continues. “It is kinder this way. She remembers him happiest on Sundays.”

Down the hall, Mrs. Jameeleh straightens in her chair as a car door slams outside.

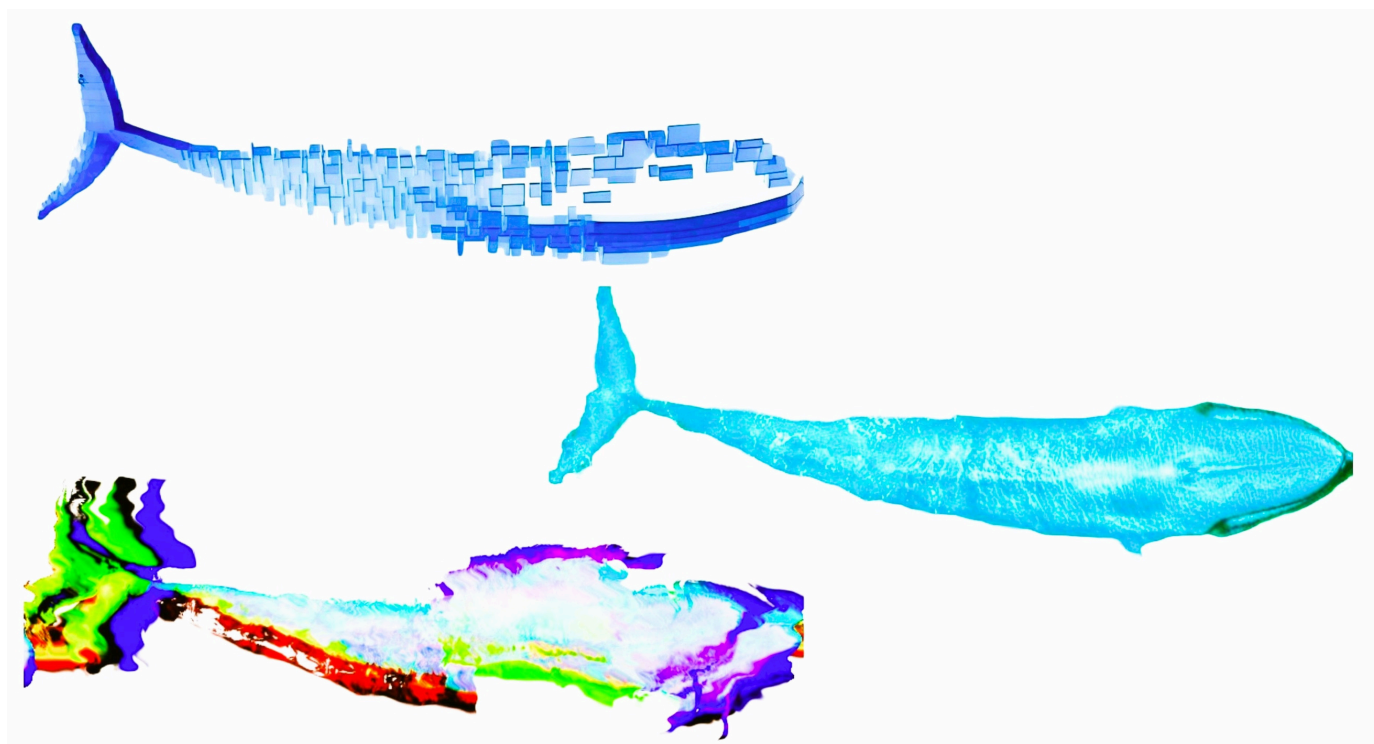
Her breath catches. She adjusts the blue cardigan and smooths her silver hair.

“There he is,” she whispers, her voice bright with certainty.

And she waits, smiling at the door.



*\*Ya immi is a common Arabic phrase (used here in Levantine Arabic) that means “my mom.” Arab parents call their children “mama” or “baba” primarily as a term of deep endearment similar to “sweetheart” and “my love.”*



**“BLUE WHALE POD 3” BY ROBERT FLEMING**

# PAPPY ONCE SAID ALL OLD PHOTOGRAPHS HOLD A HAUNT

*by Lauren Kardos*

Before the end, he told me he burned all his photographs, but the albums I pull from the trunk in my grandfather's attic have soft edges. Each photo oft-handled, plastic peeled away from each album's pages.

And this photograph, I've seen a copy before. *The Great St. Patrick's Day Flood, 1936* says the exhibit label in our town's historical society. The old diner windows peek from the currents. Rocking chairs float near the inn's wraparound porch. Seems half the town crowds around the flood line. Hands shoved in peacoat pockets, hats pulled over ears, neighbors peer toward third street where the photographer stood. All look uphill, except one little boy, seven or eight, upper body swiveled backwards. He points toward the river. *That there's Pappy*, my father pointed to the boy during our one historical society visit years ago. We had ridden our bikes through town, my training wheels recently removed.

I don't know if that boy was truly my grandfather. Could such a man, gnarl-fingered and stooped from decades of steelwork, have once been a child? A sliver of his right cheekbone is visible in black and white, a photo I've not seen in two decades at least, but I tell myself, I know that cheekbone. The hook for the curtain of his grin when he stole my nose and pulled quarters from my ear. I hated when he jumped from behind door frames, hollering *Boo!* Perhaps 1936 was the year he still only spoke Slovakian. Perhaps all he could do was point at the water, words he didn't yet have for that cold leviathan that might've swallowed him whole.

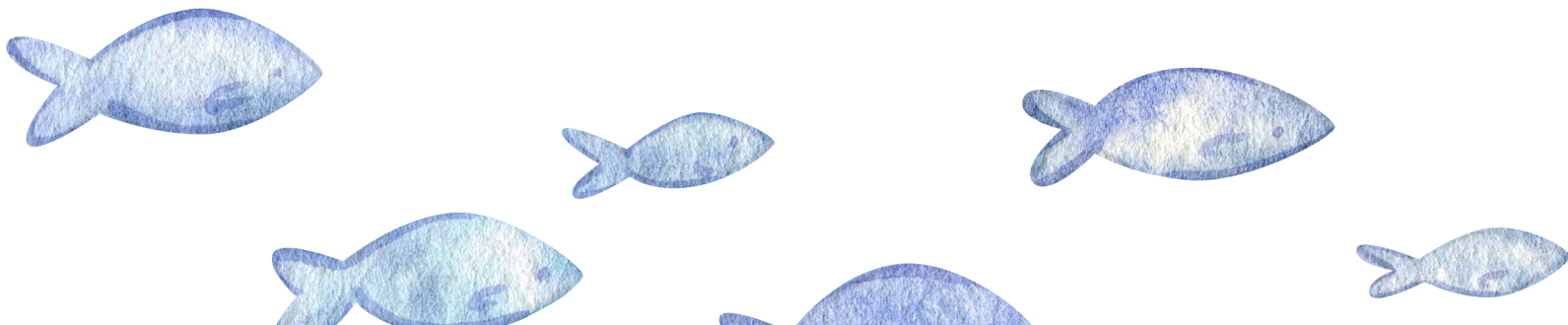
Seems Pappy stopped sweeping ash from his fireplace at some point. I hope the stench is just critters dead in the chimney. I chisel soot with the poker, sweep ancient crust into the tarnished dustpan to keep from wondering why he didn't ask me to come by more. Over my shoulder, a crack, a creak. *Go look, you baby*, I tell myself, so I do. A step before the dining room, I pause, swallow my runaway heartbeat, expecting to see his sausage-thick fingers, labor-hardened nails, wrapping around the doorframe. *Boo!* Back at the hearth, I pull from the yellowing newspaper stack. Ball pages into tinder, just like he taught me. My ink-stained palms, I wipe onto Pappy's limp flannel slung over his recliner.

## “PAPPY ONCE SAID ...” CONT.

Another photo found while cleaning out the trunk. Sepia-toned color. My grandfather sits in a wingback chair beside the fireplace, my toddler-aged father atop his knee. *1963, William*, says the cursive on the back. Though my father reaches toward the camera, Pappy only has eyes for the fireplace, a roaring blaze bleached white with exposure. Left cheekbone shiny like the poker set polished and new in the picture, the brick scrubbed clean. *Did you know*, my father always started when I displeased him, *that when your uncle and I misbehaved, Pappy had us go out back and find a switch? One winter evening, we let all the heat out the back door, and Pappy made us sleep in the attic. Just a single blanket for the two of us.*

I never knew that side of my grandfather, the one that kept my father yessir-ing and no-sir-ing ‘til his deathbed. A giant, malevolent. My Pappy played *Pretty, Pretty Princess* with his granddaughter. My Pappy gave lollypops after his pranks drew tears. *Gotta keep yinz kids on your toes.* A man I loved, but one I was told to always keep an eye on, to treat like a once-feral dog. When I ask for my father’s help clearing out his childhood home, he says: *Take what you want. I’d burn it down if I could.*

I never asked Pappy what the Great Flood was like, but I think I can guess, kneeling by the blackened hearth. Perhaps it took weeks to shovel Allegheny silt from the grocers’, to unearth the train tracks into town. Months to cart away debris. Years to rebuild a semblance of what was lost. Another historical society photo I still remember. A modest Sears kit-house upside-down, wooden beam foundations belly-up. Roof stripped shingle-by-shingle in the current. Was that the neighborhood Pappy’s family first lived, down by the riverbank? Perhaps the cold and damp never left Pappy’s bones. If I could ask him now, would he answer honestly or spin a tale like all those evenings he babysat and we huddled close to the fire? My fingers singe, and I yank them back from the popping cherrywood logs, now aflame. *Did I set that?* I ask into Pappy’s old den, search my inkblood fingertips. A crackle behind me, then a hiss from the dining room. *Boo!* Reaching for more newspaper, I tell myself, *perhaps it was nothing.*



# DEEP BLUE

by TYC

*When I was eleven, my family went on vacation to Hawaii. We took a boat out to a secluded reef in the shade of a lush cove, where the water was a deep blue and you couldn't see the bottom. Peering out through their comically-large snorkelling goggles, my parents beckoned for me to join them in the water, but I was afraid to jump in.*

*I was afraid of what might meet me there in that deep blue.*

*I stood at the edge of the boat, waiting—for what, I don't know... perhaps some divine assurance that I would be alright if I jumped. It never came.*

*My parents swam around in the vicinity of the boat, gazing at whatever it was beneath the water. Squinting, I tried to make out what was down there, but above the surface I could see nothing.*

*Scintillating flecks of light danced in the noonday sun. Turquoise swells broke gently against the hull of the boat. Beneath it all, that deep blue plunged into unknown depths of rich shadow. I realised that the ocean was mesmerising as much as it was terrifying.*

*As I craned my neck to see over the edge, the rocking of the boat threatened to pitch me into the water. My heart skipped a beat as I imagined the waves rushing up to swallow me whole, never to spit me back out. But I couldn't stop staring.*

*I don't know what went through my head right then, but I found myself squeezing my eyes shut, clenching my fists.*

*I took a deep breath.*

*And I jumped.*

*I opened my eyes to a flurry of bubbles, but in a moment they cleared and I saw the beautiful world that I had been missing.*

*What took my breath away (I suppose in a quite literal sense) was the sheer number of colours—the bright hues of a googly-eyed yellow tang, the shocking pink markings of a parrotfish flashing against blue scales, the waving tentacles of anemones in multitudinous shades. I felt like I was immersed in a chaotic, colourful dance.*

## “DEEP BLUE” CONT.

*There were fish of all shapes and sizes—I couldn't name them all back then. I gawked at the subtle iridescence of a black triggerfish, giggled internally at the spindly form of a trumpetfish. Even the moray eel peering out from a crevice didn't scare me.*

*The coral formed mountains and valleys and towers and caves, every nook and cranny teeming with movement. I was enraptured, lost in this new world full of colour and life.*

*That was when I fell in love with the ocean—with that deep blue.*

*And to think that I almost missed it...*



“Caleb?” I started at the sound of my name.

Steven stood an arm’s length away. The blue-green light filtering through the aquarium tunnel rippled across his dark skin, highlighting the contours of his face. He smiled. I loved his smile—always warm and genuine.

“You looked like you were zoning out for a second there,” he said. His voice echoed off the glass walls, ringing over the quiet shuffling and murmuring of passers-by.

“I was just lost in thought,” I replied quietly.

As I spoke, a sandbar shark swam overhead, gliding effortlessly with languid strokes of its tail. Looking at that elegant, powerful creature, I felt a swell of awe inside me.

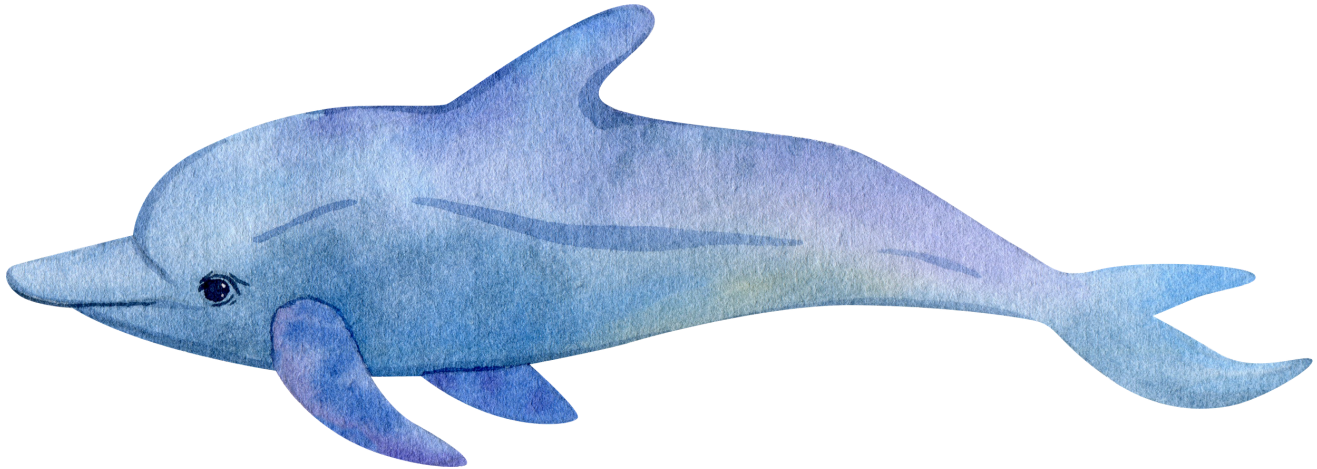
“I love how your eyes light up in this place, even when you've been here a million times already. You must really love it, don't you?”

I smiled and nodded, turning to him. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

He moved closer to me. I could see that he was wearing the earrings I got him for his birthday—round studs boasting proud stripes of pink, purple, and blue. His gaze met mine, those soft, brown eyes of his sparkling with a smile. “Happy six-month anniversary.”

Six months already since we had started dating.. I could hardly believe it. It felt like it had passed in an instant. And yet the way he looked at me now was the same as when he had first kissed me on the park bench that night.

My heart fluttered as he said those words, like I was getting the butterflies all over again. But I wished he hadn't spoken so loudly—it was echoey in the tunnel. People might hear...



Steven was close enough that I could feel the warmth of his body, despite the chill of the air conditioning. I wanted to move even closer, but my eyes darted to the other people in the tunnel. Were those some strange looks shot in our direction?

I drew a shaky breath. "Let's go look at the tropical reefs section, shall we?"

*Maybe there would be fewer people there.*

Without waiting for an answer, I walked briskly past him out of the tunnel.

As I walked, Steven caught up to me, reaching for my hand. I wanted to lace my fingers between his and squeeze tight... but I just couldn't. I sunk my hands deep into my pockets.

A step ahead of him and with eyes trained ahead, I couldn't see his face. But I felt something break there in the space between us.

The tropical reefs section of the aquarium featured a big, round window into a vibrant reef, bathed in turquoise light. With anemones waving gently and fish darting about, that mesmerising circle of colour would seem to shift and swirl in a way that I never seemed to tire of.

But this time, I couldn't seem to focus on anything. Somehow, the light seemed too harsh, the colours gaudy, the textures and patterns bewildering.

Steven came up behind me, laying a hand on my shoulder. "Caleb, what's wrong?"

I gently pushed his hand away. My heart was in my throat. "Please, not here..."

I looked into his eyes and they were wet, and so were mine.

"Are you... ashamed of me?" he asked, voice breaking. "Are you ashamed of—"

I put a hand to his lips quickly. "Please, not so loud!" I said in a hushed tone. I swallowed.

"Maybe we should go back to my apartment."

**“DEEP BLUE” CONT.**

“Caleb, I brought us here to celebrate our love... not to hide it.” His voice was tinged with pain and frustration, and I looked away in shame.

"I thought I could do it," I said. "I thought I could be brave and... Proud..."

I sighed. I felt small and vulnerable standing there, and my voice dropped to barely a whisper.

"...but I'm scared."

A silence fell between us, feeling like an eternity. I wanted to look at him — look into his eyes and know that everything was alright. But I kept my gaze fixed on the ground.

When Steven finally spoke, his voice was soft. "I'm sorry."

I looked up at him.

"I understand how you feel." His voice was trembling ever so slightly, and he swallowed. "I shouldn't have pushed you."

I sighed. "It's alright. I know I shouldn't be a scaredy-cat."

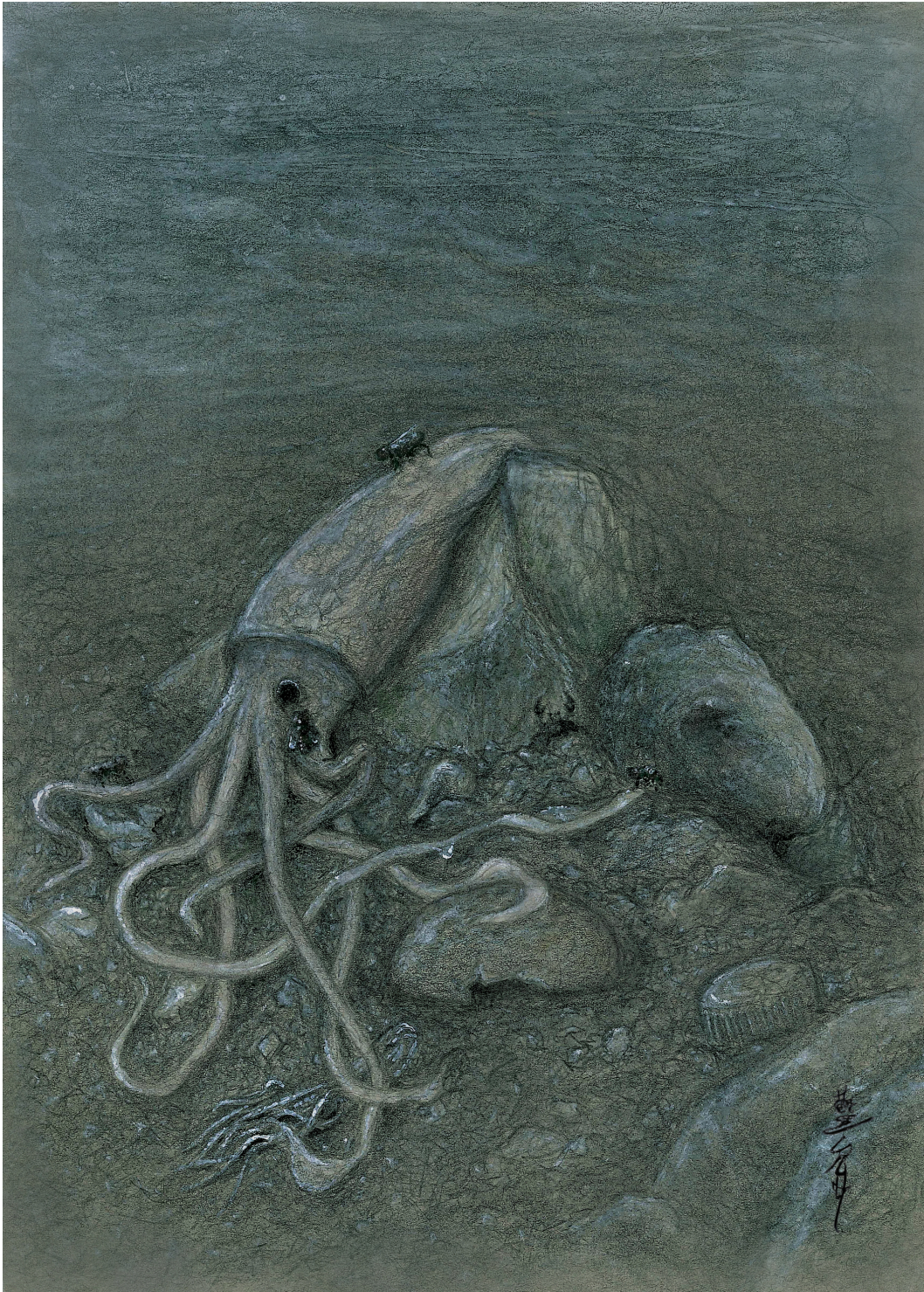
"No," he said, shaking his head, "it's normal to be scared—don't be ashamed of that. I just hope you know that I'm always here for you, even when you're scared."

He smiled softly, and the light from the circular window behind him looked like a halo around his head. "You're already brave in so many ways you don't know."

I held his gaze for an eternal moment, slowly leaning closer. I swear that people were staring, but as I looked deeper into his eyes everything else faded into a turquoise blur.

And in that swirling circle of colour... I kissed him.

*I didn't know how beautiful the water could be until I jumped.*



**“EDIFICATION” BY TYC**

# LATE BLOOMER

by Kelly Murashige

You come out to your family over video chat.

It's a Tuesday evening, and though your mother is the first to log on, your father doesn't join her in the Zoom window until well past the agreed-upon starting time. She explains that he was busy bringing the plants in from the lanai.

"Is this a real storm," your younger brother asks, "or will it turn out to be nothing?"

You study the sliver of a bookshelf behind his head. You have not yet seen his new apartment. You never even saw his dorm. While he left as soon as he could, you chose to remain, the sole thing keeping your parents from becoming empty nesters.

"They estimate six inches tomorrow," your father says to your brother. "Up to fifteen inches by Thursday, and from there, who knows?"

You sit alone in your room, your parents' voices filtering through the thin drywall. You know video-chatting from here does nothing to change the fact that you are well into your twenties and still living with your parents, but you like having a rectangular window of your own, separate from the shaky vertical video labeled PARENTS (MOM DO NOT CHANGE THIS AGAIN).

"Fifteen inches," your mother murmurs, echoing your father.

"Six inches," your brother says. "Some of us have no idea what six inches looks like."

You clench your jaw, ignoring your brother's insufferable smirk. In addition to being the first to attend college—to leave the nest, to fly out of the country on a study-abroad trip to Japan—he was also the first to lose his virginity.

You wish you didn't know this. Wish you hadn't been the one to catch him and his first girlfriend hooking up on the couch, which, to this day, you won't touch with a ten-foot pole. Wish you hadn't blushed so furiously when he asked if you were going to give him The Talk, prompting him to then say, *Wait. You've done it, though, right?*

Sometimes, at night, you remember your long silence. The way it stretched between you, shattering when he laughed.

It's true that you have no way of conceptualizing six or fifteen inches. You haven't measured anything since freshman-year geometry.

“Is this a sex joke?” your father asks, his voice thundering out of his Zoom window.

You close your eyes, imagining yourself drowning in fifteen inches of rain. You wouldn’t even try to stay afloat. To tread water. You would open your mouth. Invite God’s tears in. Let them fill all your hollow spaces.

“Is it?” your father asks. “Is that what this is?”

“Honey,” your mother says. “Inside voice, please.”

Her children are grown, but she’s still a mother.

“Yes, Dad,” your brother says. “It is. That’s why she doesn’t get it. She’s basically asexual.”

“Not *basically*,” you snap.

The regret is instant.

You only just manage to catch the surprise flickering across your brother’s face before slamming the lid of your laptop and kicking your door closed with your heel.

“What is she saying?” your father asks from the main room. “She’s asexual? What does that mean? She reproduces on her own?”

Your mother, a former Women’s Studies and Political Science major, breaks it all down for him, keeping her voice low.

“No, she’s not,” your father says. “She can’t be. That’s not normal.”

“*I CAN HEAR YOU*,” you shout.

They fall silent for a minute.

Then, urgent whispers that creep under your door.

Your phone buzzes with a text from your brother.

*Maybe we should talk, he says.*

You turn off your phone.



Though your father doesn’t believe in hanakotoba, having grown up in America with almost no link to his Japanese roots, you have always felt as though he speaks through plants anyhow. Twenty-something years ago, for example, after accidentally missing your brother’s birth, he showed up at the hospital with nine separate bouquets: one for each year he and your mother had been together.

About a decade later, after berating you for failing your road test on your first try, then quickly shifting gears at the sight of your teary face, he left the apartment and returned with peonies. Your favorite.

## “LATE BLOOMER” CONT.

Your father stands in your doorway with a new plant, his expression apologetic and his hands clamped around the pot. Once he has set the plant down on your carpeted floor, he says, “*Epipremnum aureum*.”

*Gesundheit*, you think.

“Look it up,” he says. “It’s a fascinating plant.”

You watch him retreat, then do what he says.

*Epipremnum aureum* is considered a late bloomer, infamous for its reluctance to flower. It can grow quite tall if supported but rarely develops adult leaves.

It also, evidently, can be propagated asexually.

Another knock at your door. You slowly look up. Your father’s back in the doorway, his hands clasped behind his back.

“It’s resilient,” he tells you. “Can survive basically anything.”

Outside, the rain has started, splattering the windows.

“It’s different,” your father says, “but it’s beautiful.”

You watch him for a minute.

You’re so much like him.

Standing, you wrap your arms around him, your arms like thin vines. You cling to him. Hold him tightly. Feel him hold you in return. Stronger together, you wait out the storm.



# THE BEETLE WHISPERER

*by Kelly Murashige*

The first time she heard the buzz, she assumed it was tinnitus. Tinnitus or a leaf blowing across the lanai. The tinnitus came almost as frequently as the loneliness, neither of which she particularly appreciated. Both of which she had come to accept.

She therefore ignored it, comfortable on the love seat, curled up with her history textbook resting on one knee.

After three or four unmistakable buzzes, she closed her textbook, pulled herself up, and tugged the curtain aside. Holding her breath, she crouched behind the screen door. On the tile of the lanai was a beetle flat on its back, its spindly legs waving like false eyelashes in a breeze.

She frowned. She had never been much of a bug enthusiast. She smashed cockroaches out of necessity, but anything else left her screaming for her father.

She studied the beetle. Though larger than a cockroach, it hardly seemed threatening. It reminded her of a turtle stranded on the sand, staring up at a cold blue sky.

She straightened up and retreated into the apartment, then returned a minute later, armed with a disposable chopstick.

She held out the chopstick, all her muscles tensed. The beetle, whose motions had just begun to slow, desperately clung on, all six of its legs curling around the tapered end. Once she was sure it had a good enough grasp, she pushed herself to her feet and stepped over to the railing. She set the beetle on the ledge and stood back, one leg crossed over the other. It took a minute for the beetle to catch its breath. It was so still, she thought it had died.

Then, just when she was about to give up, it shot off like a bullet and disappeared like a wink.

The girl stood there for a while, her eyes on the sky. She expected to feel some sort of emptiness, a familiar woe is me. She had come to believe everything left her, in the end.

Instead, something in her began to come loose, as though a part of her had finally been freed.

Over the years, she saved every beetle she found. Her mother started calling her the Beetle Whisperer, the only one who heard the insects' calls for help.

## “THE BEETLE WHISPERER” CONT.

It delighted her. Being a savior. Even if the only things she ever rescued were bugs.

In her darkest moments, after failing to save just about everything else—friendships, relationships, her best friend from the drugs—she thought of those beetles. Of what she had saved. When she finally began dating again, her parents then regaled her partner with her beetle escapades, making her out to be a softie, deep down.

Once she and her new partner were finally alone, she said, “Let’s never speak of that again.”

“It’s sweet.”

“It’s stupid.”

“It makes me like you more.”

It was nice, everyone claimed, to know she was gentle. To find out there was still some kindness in the world.

She held onto that love. Held onto that hope. She wanted to be the person everyone thought she was. The person she could only sometimes be.

More years flew by. At some point, she realized she couldn’t recall the last time she had heard or seen a beetle. In her optimistic moments, she told herself this was good. She did not hear the beetles because they no longer fell. They had grown not to need her, evolving past helplessness.

Still, when she was lonely, and the real tinnitus crept in, she thought of the beetles. Remembered how it felt to hold out a shaking hand, help them back onto their feet, and watch as the creatures spread their wings and soared.

Then, one evening, following a Kona storm, she stepped out in rubber slippers to find a beetle on its back.

It was clearly dead. It likely had been for a while. It must have blown in with the wind and the rain. She imagined it in a puddle, floating aimlessly like an inner tube in a pool.

She stood there for a minute, her whole body numb.

She hadn’t saved it. It had died on her watch.

Her father, on his way to the kitchen, watched her come back inside. All these years later, she still lived with her parents. Her relationships, including that with the partner who had learned of her savior complex, had floundered worse than a bug in water.

“What happened?” her father asked.



She pulled the curtain aside.

It took him a moment to identify the small creature on the lanai. Even once he had, he didn't seem shaken by the sight.

"It was probably trying to eat my rosebuds," he said.

The rosebuds had been a gift from the neighbors, a small potted plant they had taken indoors during the worst of the wind. Her father said the roses should have blossomed a while back, but for some reason, they hadn't, their buds starting to dry.

"It wouldn't have eaten your roses," she said.

"How can you know?"

"I don't. I just think..." She crossed her arms tightly, her lip caught between her teeth. "It wouldn't have done that. If it had lived."

Her father studied her, his soft little girl. Then, after a pause, he said, "Grab the spade."

Out on the lanai, they buried the beetle in the dirt of the rose pot. They sat there together, both their heads bowed, knowing something beautiful would soon start to bloom.




**“THE REBIRTH” BY GIULIO R.M. MAFFII**

# A GIFT FROM THE SKY

*by Fox Rivera*


The metal weighed down every step towards the land's edge. I held the thing in my sore arms, just above the rippling surface. I let go and with a quiet splash, it began to sink. I watched it. I watched it sink into the impossible dark, the impossible deep. I watched it after I could no longer see it. I watched it until I was only watching me. A murky reflection staring back. The me from the world below. We watched each other.



They tell me I was born in water, swimming before I could walk. I was never impressed by that anecdote. Everyone of my generation, the one before, and even the one before that were intimately familiar with water. The first sailors of the globe, the golden pirates, the navies of the world, none of them could have never understood water like we did. And we hated it.

Every sip was reluctant. Every bath begrudged. We needed water, but we stopped wanting it. For centuries it had been worshipped. Seas of wondrous places and mystical creatures. The joy of sliding on snow and romance of a kiss in the rain. Even in the face of its horror: floods, hurricanes, tsunamis, water was never to blame. It giveth and it taketh away, they said. Like it always had. But always had isn't always will. Water changed its mind about our arrangement. It was tired of giving. It was time to take.

They teach us of the flood in every history class every year. Each one of us could recite the tale by heart but none of us ever did. Who would we tell it to? For as long as we exist as we are, we will remember. Whatever civilization comes after us will call it our creation myth:



One day like any other, it began to rain. That day, like any other, people responded. They went inside to read. They smiled at the boon for their gardens. They sent their kids to run out and play before dinner. The kids were the first to feel it. The rain was hot. Boiling. They screamed and ran inside as the air filled with steam.

## “A GIFT FROM THE SKY” CONT.

What followed was a slow extinction. The rain didn't stop. Scalding water poured from the clouds as if cooked by the sun itself, pulling gallons upon lakes upon oceans of water from the greater universe to rain down upon us.

The creatures of the land never stood a chance. If a structure wouldn't yield to nature's universal solvent, it would yield to the heat it brought with it. Boiled, drowned, crushed, lost, burned, eroded. Humanity cowered in its walls, desperately searching for answers. Those animals who knew nothing of metal work or buoyancy or insulation were cooked in the great soup pot the earth had become.

And then it stopped. The rain disappeared and the clouds parted. What dwindling representatives homo sapiens had left climbed out of their floating panic rooms and looked out upon a world they didn't recognize. Even the tallest structures, the greatest feats of human engineering, sat miles below where the surface of the sea now sat. The 30 percent of the globe rock and stone had once claimed was gone. Water had conquered it all.

It never rained again. To this day, I nor anyone I know or could ever know has seen rain. It's almost childish. Petty. Cruel. If we were going to survive, we would be given no more. Every sip we drank would have to come from the warm sea. From the communal grave of the old world.

Sometimes I walked to the edge to scorn the surface. When I was young I would scream and yell, batting my fist against the liquid, vowing to never forgive it for what it took. Now, I just quietly stare.

I stare down and wonder what their final thoughts were when they stared up at day. I imagine what it must be like down there. Lost in a place so deep that the sun abandoned it. Preserved cities with sodden roads and bloated corpses for citizens. Do they still stare up? Do they peer through soggy eyes and search for a gift from the sky that will pull them from the depths?

I had never seen a fish. The creatures of the sea fared little better than their land cohorts, boiled alive by a heat they couldn't understand. Experts say all sea life went extinct long ago. But there is no way to be sure with water, is there? Perhaps down there some strange breed of shark adapted its new environment and hunts after giant crustaceans wearing automobiles as shells.

But, despite never seeing a live one, I still decided to sculpt one for my graduation project. It felt right. The ocean was full of things never meant to live within it. Best gift it something that was.

It took a little over a month. It was born of metal and sloppy welds. I stuck dark washed-up shards of glass to its scales and stabbed rods of dry driftwood into its jaw. It was a horrible thing to look at. If it had somehow come to life it would topple by the weight of its iron tail and thrash with rusty creaks.

In its first few days of life, it gave me nightmares. As my sleepy eyes watched it in the dark corners of my room, my dreams filled with surging water and the sculpture drove its wooden teeth into my legs. I kicked and fought with the same futility of those who had drowned before me. It was taking me to the bottom and there was nothing I could do.

By its completion my nightmares had faded, giving way to dreams of the underwater world. I would swim through ruins, seeing the sunken versions of what I'd only recognize from tales of people older than I. In one dream I sunk all the way to bottom. I stood on the paved roads and stared upward, looking for the sky I couldn't find.

When I woke up, I knew the fish's name. And when I knew its name, I heaved it from my rocking bedroom floor and walked it to its home.



As I stared at my reflection I began to see deeper into the water. I could see myself down at the bottom, staring up. I watched and soon a glimpse of something came out of the murky black. An ugly gift of metal and glass fell from the sky and landed beside me. I closed my eyes and faded into the warm waves.



# FORTUNE FAVOURS THE BOLD

*by Molly McGill*

It got dark under the water quicker than I thought it would. I only know which way is up because of the sliver of light illuminating the bubbles of my last lungful of air, escaping to the surface where I cannot follow. Then the light is gone, and my air is gone, and then I, too, am gone. Into the dark.



When I was eight my parents took me to the visiting fair. I was too short for the big rides so, instead, we went to every booth and tried to win prizes on the rigged games. A lot of that night I only remember in snatches of sensation; the cold hard pound coins I clutched in my hand, my dad playfully tugging on my braid, the taste of candyfloss and the dizzying jewel-coloured lights that I could see even when my eyes were closed. The part I remember with absolute clarity, though, was the fortune teller's tent. It was smaller than many of the attraction tents and made of patchwork blue and purple silky material.

My mum challenged my dad to one of the games and he crouched down and told me to cheer him on. The last thing he said was not to wander off.

My eyes drifted to the colourful tent and the orange lamps that lit it up. I remember thinking that it didn't count as wandering off if it was only a few steps away from the game.

I don't remember going in but I certainly remember sitting in front of the fortune teller on a scratchy embroidered pillow and resting my elbows on her chipped wooden table. I was thoroughly mesmerised by her.

To me she looked ancient. She had green eyeshadow caked on in layers and a dusting of it sunk into the wrinkles around her eyes like she was wearing a colourful eye mask. Her lips and fingernails were a garish red, though there were chips in the paint on a few of her nails. When she spoke, there was a dot of lipstick on her front teeth. Her pure white hair was pushed back off her face by a silky green headscarf. I think I told her she looked magical because she laughed.

The fortune teller took my little hand in her wrinkled one and traced the lines of my palm with a blunt fingernail. Her face dropped very suddenly from a smile into a tense frown.

She muttered to herself about the vibrancy of youth and how often it is cut short, then she looked up and asked me if I understood what she was telling me. I didn't, and I started to feel very scared at the change in her eyes. The fortune teller sighed and told me that I must be careful around water. I still didn't get it and she started to get frustrated.

Eventually she told me, bluntly, that she saw me die by drowning. I realise now that she didn't mean to be so harsh, but trying to soften the message did not work. Her eyes were the colour of ice and I felt like they sunk right into me, planting that ice in my brain and freezing me in place. I managed to choke out that I had just passed all my swimming lessons at the local pool, I even got a gold medal. The lady just shook her head; I remember what she said exactly.

'We can not fight what is inevitable, my dear. Fighting against the tide of fate will only weaken you against the waves of your destiny. Death comes for us all, but for you it may come sooner than most.'

Just at this point, my mum burst into the tent calling my name and immediately saw me crying. I must have told her what the fortune teller had said, or perhaps the lady told her, because my mum slapped the fortune teller hard and cursed at her. Mum lifted me and carried me out to my dad who was still standing next to the game holding a massive plush dolphin. He tried to hand it to me, possibly to cheer me up, but I was so worked up that the cartoonish smile on the thing made me scream.



From that night, I refused to go into any body of water. I even stopped taking baths and took showers instead. My dad must have joked a thousand times that the fortune teller clearly wasn't very good, since she couldn't even foresee that my mum was going to slap her, but that didn't prevent my beach day screaming episodes or my poolside panic attacks.



After several months my terrors were showing no sign of subsiding and I was shunted into Dr Fells' child psychiatrist office. I had sessions within the yellow walls of her office until I was fourteen. While it was clear that my phobia wasn't going to go away completely, I hadn't had a panic attack or a nightmare for a while, could take a bath when it was necessary, and was even able to play with my little cousins in a paddling pool. My parents contented themselves with my improvement.

## “FORTUNE FAVOURS THE BOLD” CONT.

By the time I was eighteen and had moved out for university, I was reasonably comfortable around water, but then the pool incident happened. Maya, my roommate, invited me to a party at her boyfriend's house. It wasn't until I got there that I found out it was a pool party. In Maya's defence, I didn't share my phobia with people unless I had no other option, so she had no idea. I told her that I didn't go into pools but kept the reason vague. Maya shrugged and directed me to a poolside chair; I wasn't even the only one not in the pool. I talked to my fellow dry landers and started to relax and enjoy myself. The mere presence of a pool in my vicinity wasn't enough to scare me, and I was able to forget it was even there, right up until Maya's boyfriend lifted me bodily and threw me into the deep end.

I have no idea why I was targeted, it was probably just bad luck, but the fact remains that I sank like a brick and it triggered my first major panic attack in over four years. I was totally unable to help myself as I sank further and further, for what felt like forever, water forcing its way into my open mouth and into my tight lungs. Then arms grabbed my waist, pulling me to the surface and on to dry land. When I had coughed out most or all of the water, a towel was thrown around my shoulders, and the same person carried me inside. My panic attack still had me in its grip so it was several more minutes before I was able to thank the girl who saved me. Vanessa was a lifeguard and had instinctively jumped into action before anyone else had time to gather themselves to help. I ended up blurting out the story behind my phobia in an attempt to make her understand just how much she had just saved me. Two days later Vanessa called to check up on me and asked me out on a date.



The story about how we met was told at our wedding, but the speech left out how much I regressed after the incident. I had to go right back to therapy but this time no amount of talking could stop the nightmares or the terror seizing and constricting my lungs when I saw a pool, lake or ocean.

Sadly, this was one of the reasons Vanessa and I eventually divorced. My inability to be near water was a constant strain and it seemed to me that Vanessa cared more about her lifeguard life / job / calling? than she cared about my fears. She never took the fortune teller's words seriously, just like everyone else I had ever told. But none of them had seen her eyes, none of them had heard the certainty in her voice, things I relived in my nightmares. I missed Vanessa the most when I woke up screaming and there was no one to comfort me.

I don't mind admitting that I became reclusive after the divorce. Meeting someone new and having to explain my story seemed like too much effort. It was so much easier to go to work, very occasionally meet up with a friend for a coffee or just stay at home by myself. My sister Emma, however, was justifiably worried that I was isolating myself and started a campaign to get me to visit her in Switzerland. I finally agreed, mostly because where she lived was land locked and she knew better than to book water activities. My phobia was older than her, and Emma had never known me another way.

That's how I found myself on the short two-hour flight.

That's how I found myself clutching my armrests when there was turbulence.

That's how I found myself clutching an oxygen mask to my face.

That's how I found myself shoving the life vest over my head.

That's how I found myself watching with horror as the ocean rush up to meet me.

That's how I found myself in the freezing water.

That's when I heard the fortune teller's words in my head again and I knew that every decision I had ever made had pulled me here, as surely and naturally as the tide pulling a piece of driftwood further out to sea. "We cannot fight what is inevitable, my dear."

And

That's

How

The

Dark

Swallowed me whole

And my last breath

Made bubbles

That rose

To the surface when I couldn't.





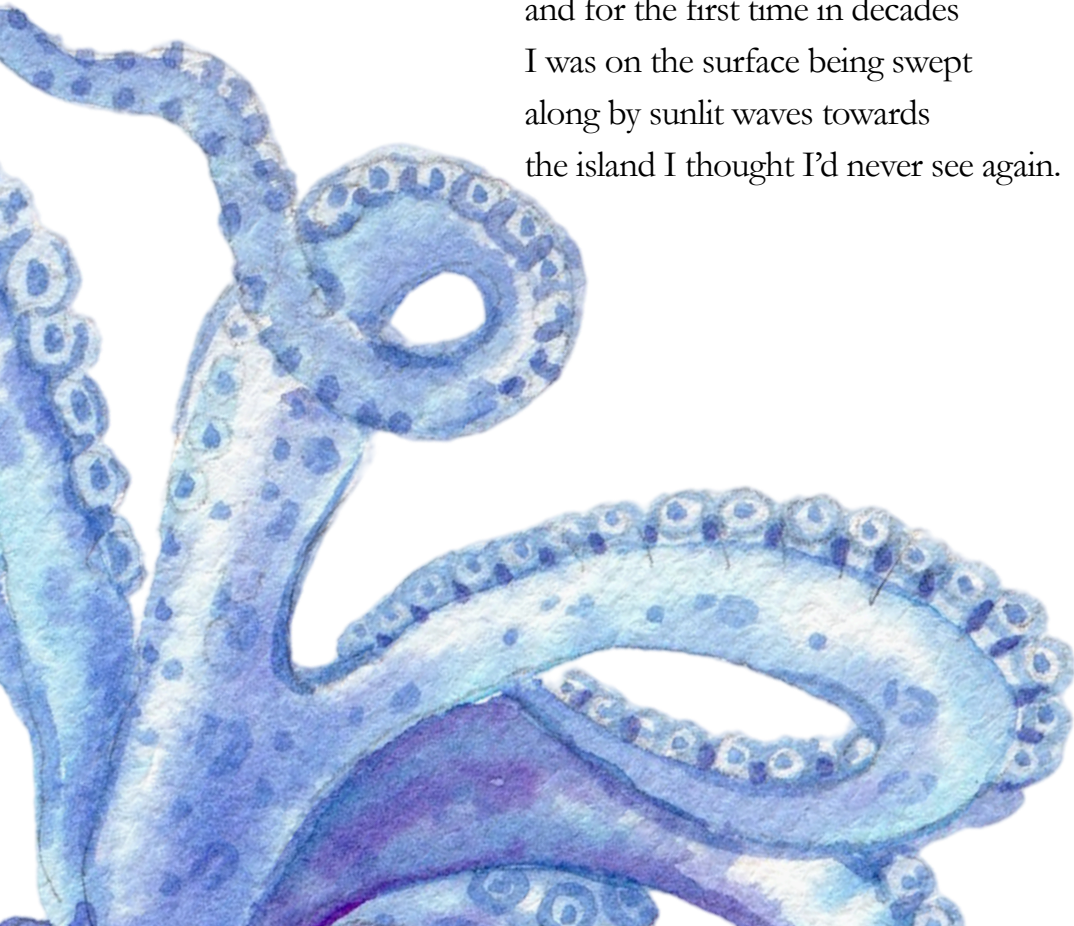
Poetry

The word "Poetry" is written in a black, cursive script with a light blue shadow effect. Below the word are four horizontal, wavy lines in a light blue color, resembling water or a decorative flourish.

# TRENCH

*by Paul Bavister*

As gannets crashed, sea lions snapped  
and fish formed a surging ball to protect  
themselves, until all that was left was  
a shimmer of scales drifting down  
through twilight, to the still cold  
and the glowing bait of angler fish.  
Crabs patrolled fluorescent coral  
and softened bones and in that silence  
I finally felt the hurt I'd caused and heard  
your voice as if for the first time  
telling me where I went wrong  
and giving me a chance to change.  
I rose up slowly through the twilight  
and for the first time in decades  
I was on the surface being swept  
along by sunlit waves towards  
the island I thought I'd never see again.



# LOOKS DECEIVE

*by Petra Brungarott*

as I sat, in quiet awe  
watching the cerulean water  
foaming, waves crashing  
into the loamy shore  
only to pull away again  
a tempting dance  
saying "Follow me."  
it dawned on myself that  
mermaids, sirens of the sea  
are a metaphor  
for the ocean itself  
the violently calm lull  
seduces one to a state  
of blissful tranquility  
it is no wonder  
sailors went to their deaths  
in her depths.

# COMPARING CANKER SORES

*by Marina Cone*

she heard from her grandmother  
that canker sores were signs

she'd been out at sea for too long  
her metaphors might have been mixed

or her remedies in need of remedy  
but at last cankers have caught up

her restless gargling of saltwater  
is a swallow without swallowing

hope grumbles, digested into routine  
perhaps old age is all it is, untenable reality

like a long-listened song grown  
irritating with ripple-inducing bass

she's listening to it in the doctor's office  
looking longingly at the aquarium

dreaming of the sea swallowing her  
like the plastic skeleton on colourful stones

whose mouth yawns in practiced pleasure  
and exposes exuberant canker sores;

she's waiting for signs she's *really* been at sea  
because she *can't* have lived landlocked

*can't* be a dry skeleton posthumously  
gifted to be nibbled at by polite goldfish.



“HERE, THERE” BY ATLAS MOSS

# HE DROWNS ON DRY LAND

by J. S. Coursey

*This poem was previously published in Badlands Literary Journal.*

His body: a shipwreck.

His lungs: two sailors

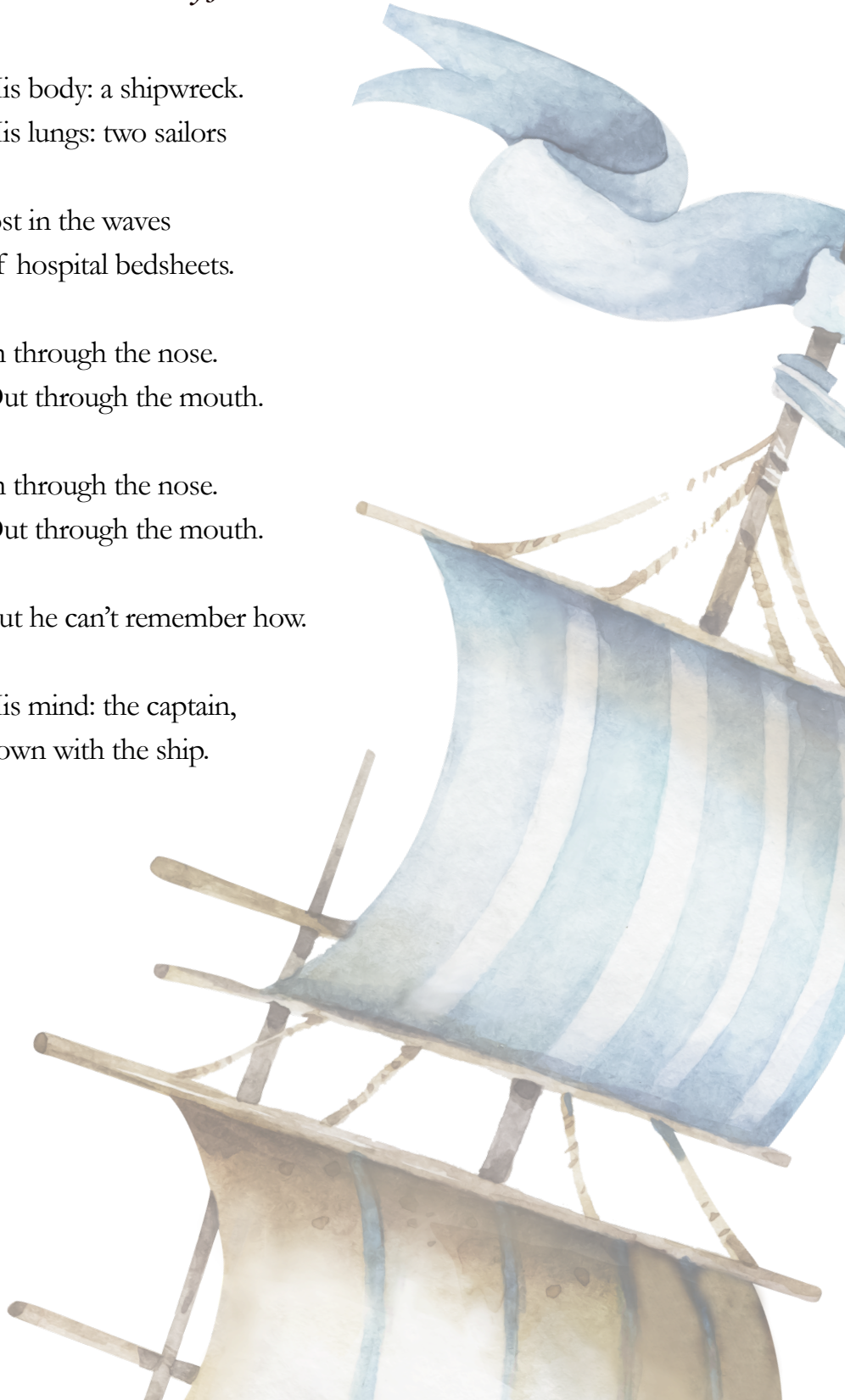
lost in the waves  
of hospital bedsheets.

In through the nose.  
Out through the mouth.

In through the nose.  
Out through the mouth.

But he can't remember how.

His mind: the captain,  
down with the ship.



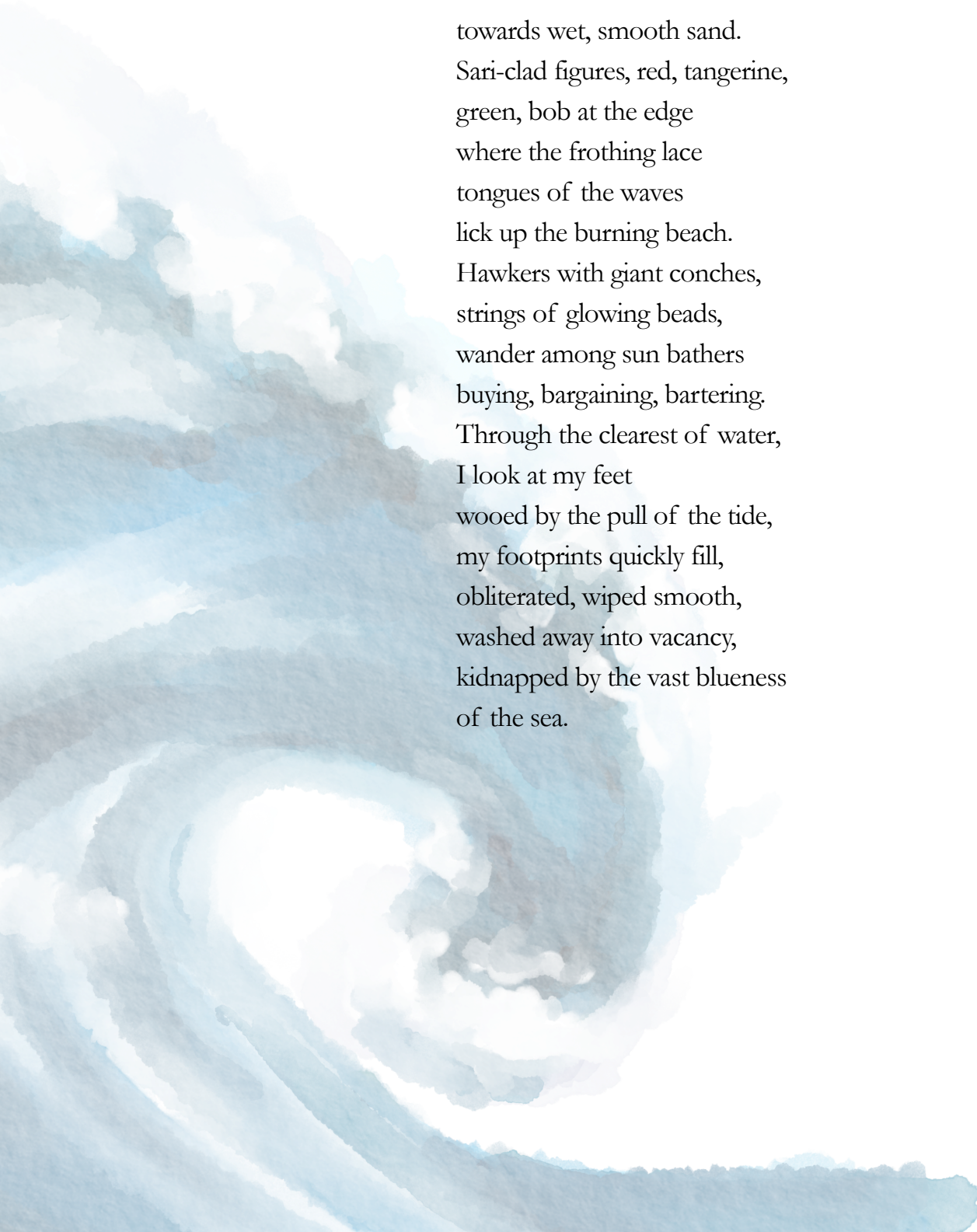
# WOMAN IN THE WATER

*by Melody Cui*

i see a woman in the water  
staring at the horizon as  
the sun sets in doused skies,  
someone asks what she is looking at,  
she says  
    something ethereal,  
    something she has never seen before,  
i wonder if she's read the Awakening,  
because who could resist being consumed  
by the vastness of the sea when  
the sea is all there is,  
i wipe the sand off my feet, lick  
the salt from my cheek, i cannot help  
but watch her dark back against  
the pink of the sky,  
    there is peace in the unknown  
    there is fear in closed eyes,  
she steps forward and drops her hair, i  
try to pull her back because  
something about her curved back, the  
way her legs bend as if they want to give in  
tells me she has read it, that she drove  
all the way to a red beach with white sand,  
so she could find something ethereal,  
and hold it in her heart forever,  
    I will let go if you do,  
    I will let go of it all.

# THE BAY OF BENGAL

*by Sarah Das Gupta*



Breakers roll  
towards wet, smooth sand.  
Sari-clad figures, red, tangerine,  
green, bob at the edge  
where the frothing lace  
tongues of the waves  
lick up the burning beach.  
Hawkers with giant conches,  
strings of glowing beads,  
wander among sun bathers  
buying, bargaining, bartering.  
Through the clearest of water,  
I look at my feet  
wooned by the pull of the tide,  
my footprints quickly fill,  
obliterated, wiped smooth,  
washed away into vacancy,  
kidnapped by the vast blueness  
of the sea.

# KOLKATA MONSOON IN A SLUM

by Sarah Das Gupta

She had no idea of the time;  
she only knew it had been raining for hours.  
She sat on the rope bed marooned  
by filthy black flood water, swirling around  
the one small room she shared  
with Ma, Pa and her toddler brother.  
Krishna was banging on a battered saucepan,  
competing with the monsoon rain  
pounding on the tin roof.  
By the lamplight, she watched bottles of oil,  
plastic buckets, bobbing excitedly  
in the deepening flood. *Time to get out.*

She stepped into stinking water.  
Already it was up to her waist.  
Krisha was heavy and trying to scoop  
the water with a spoon.  
He wailed as she wrestled it  
away from his chubby hand.

Outside a stream of water flowed  
through the slum.  
Underfoot, she could feel the sludge  
as she struggled to the road.  
The road? It was a dark river  
carrying the city's detritus.  
She flinched as a dead dog floated past.  
Krishna was sobbing,  
his legs clenched round her waist.  
Crowds from the slums,  
as they pushed through the torrent,  
were making waves.  
One surged over her head.

Someone lifted her up.  
In the dim light,  
she recognised Pa's face,  
felt his familiar arms around them.

# NIGHT, HARBOUR

*by Jen Devlin*

Stained glass platter  
Left on a garden wall  
Brimming with antique water

Liquid thickening in its gilt surround  
Auric shadows  
Inlaid with glittering mold

A slaughtered leaf floats  
Hole punch under a sharp shoulder  
Its veins a darker brown

I went down to the ocean  
The brine tracing a crisp wind  
all swaddled and swallowed in dark

I let go of depths  
Marching on with time  
In this Hard North

I lost my way on the streets  
With impossible names and edgeless shadow  
Pulled to the bite of salt and grit

I danced out of my heels  
In the lengths of wet grass  
Spurs burning

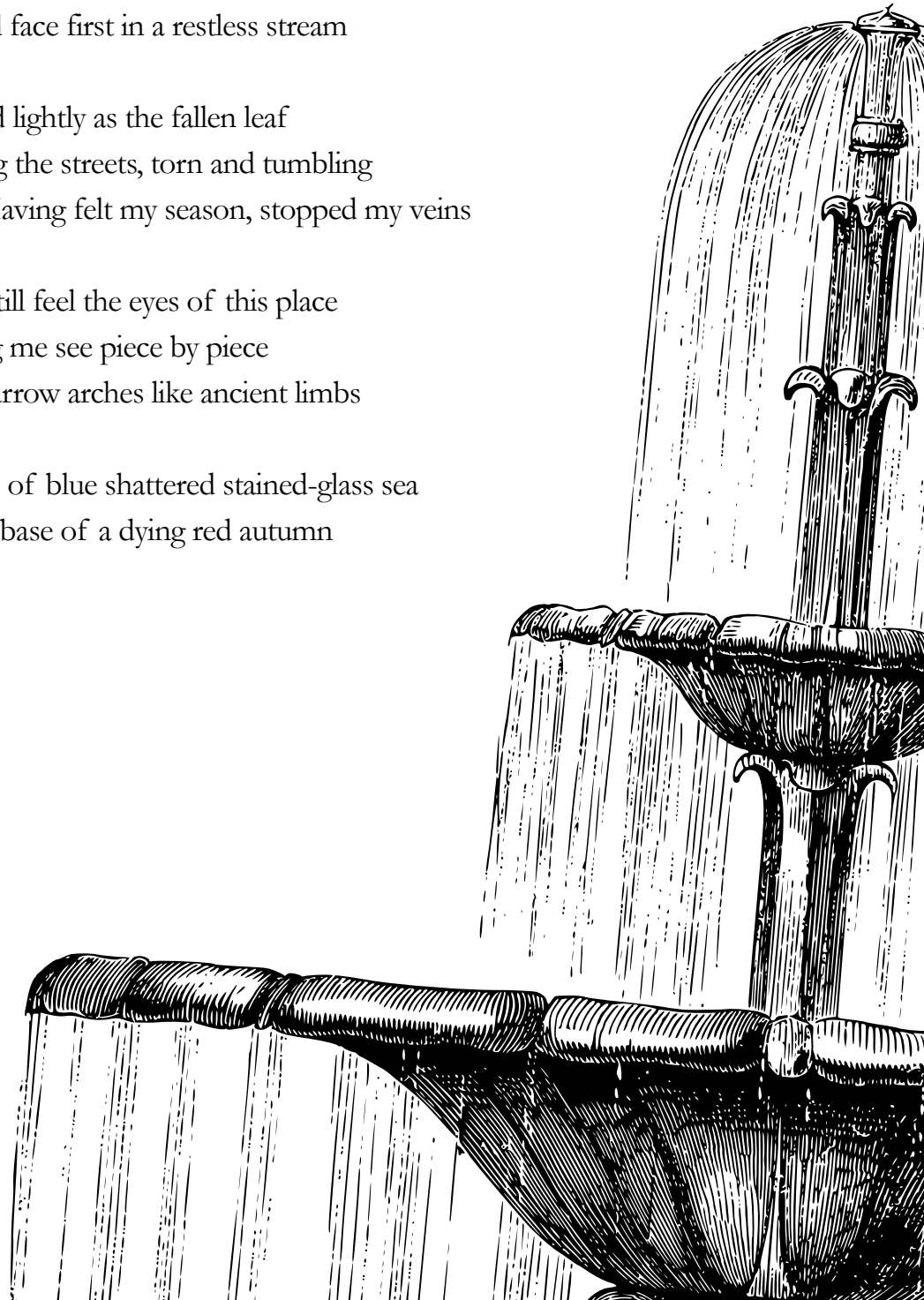
Down Once pastures  
Leaning up against the city's edge,  
Crisp quilted, stargazing

I hopped the fountain fence  
Stretched to the shoot  
Bathed face first in a restless stream

I paced lightly as the fallen leaf  
Tracing the streets, torn and tumbling  
And Having felt my season, stopped my veins

I can still feel the eyes of this place  
Letting me see piece by piece  
The narrow arches like ancient limbs

Shades of blue shattered stained-glass sea  
At the base of a dying red autumn





*Ponni Paavendhar*

“TICK-TOCK” TAMIZH PONNI VP

# BLISS-SOAKED

by Emily Eaton

i'm just happy to be a lesbian. lucky. joyful. as in, my heart could explode like a shaken bottle of pepsi at any second. okay, not *any* second. but particular seconds, like: when she first kissed me, and my insides turned fizzy. or standing to the side of a pride parade, dressed completely in pink—body crying grateful tears and letting out loud giggles. when i write, and i get to write that *i'm a lesbian*, knowing others are going to read it and think, *i'm a lesbian too!* we add little orange/white/pink heart emojis to our texts, blowing each other virtual bubbles in queer calling. when life means dancing through a chiang mai shopping centre, standing smugly close to my girlfriend on an escalator. we browse stores and find big bubble wands. i choose one with a *hello kitty* lid—take it to the counter to buy with baht. later, back from the cinema, she blows bubbles in our room and the floor gets wet with silliness. some of the bubbles pop in my palms, my hands now bliss-soaked. blown away by life. blown away that lesbian existence is nothing like a small, scared version of myself imagined it would be. it looks like glitter freckles; feels like coffee foam. smells like prosecco, but tastes like lemonade. it sounds like crackling catherine wheel fireworks, golden spinning specks. thailand's warmth tattooed into skin—i'm away from home, but *at* home. even when lesbian life is lonely, none of its goodness leaves. blocked by ceilings but still in the sky—queer sparkles are swinging stars. outside, we greet a violet haze—happiness hanging above. the sense of belonging steals loneliness's seat, sits back, and sips seltzer.

the bubble wand travelled in a backpack—came out for sunset on the beach, in bali. soap floating over soft, sticky sand when young girls ran through them—there were three. we gifted the kids what was left of *hello kitty*—smiled at their loud, gleaming glee. i watched the sun sink into its reflection—washed my feet in copper ripples of the sea. what a radiant view and a lovely life,  
so very lucky to *be*.

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# SOMETIMES I DREAM OF WATER

*by Annette Gagliardi*

This fiery tomb; this empty oven —  
dry as Sahara sand, *parched* beyond dust.  
Desiccation's long since provided

any small dampness. This  
body shrinks while it stands  
stoically — waiting for water.

Which eventually arrives —  
— This drop.      *This new drop;*  
This is the one that will suffice.

This sprinkling of fluids that  
fulfill and refresh — Gods'  
shower of life's renewal.

This cool, moisture drips energy —  
increasing its liquid flow  
into my dehydrated body.

My past extinguished; my barren,  
seared life is **doused** in a torrent  
that renews me with juices bound to ancient ashes.



*This drop is all* that matters. It funnels  
to my roots. Daisies and Daffodils rise  
up and bloom along my arms.

My moss, lain dead and brown,  
softly colors again. Willow  
branches become green and tender.

I am full again.  
I am whole. This drop.  
This moisture renews, restores  
revives to sustain existence.

# A STUDY IN STAYING/LEAVING

*by Ava Gordon*

I keep thinking the ocean remembers    you said forgetting is a kindness

how light bends before it disappears    like a hand loosening its grip

there are creatures that make their own stars    in places no sun has ever reached

I wanted to be like that—    self-sustaining, unafraid of the dark

but every glow costs something    even if you never see the wound

you told me not everything needs to last    as if endings could be gentle

as if we hadn't already practiced leaving    in smaller, sweeter ways

like unfinished sentences    or like doors left slightly open

I learned to speak in almos<sup>t</sup>s    almost love, almost staying

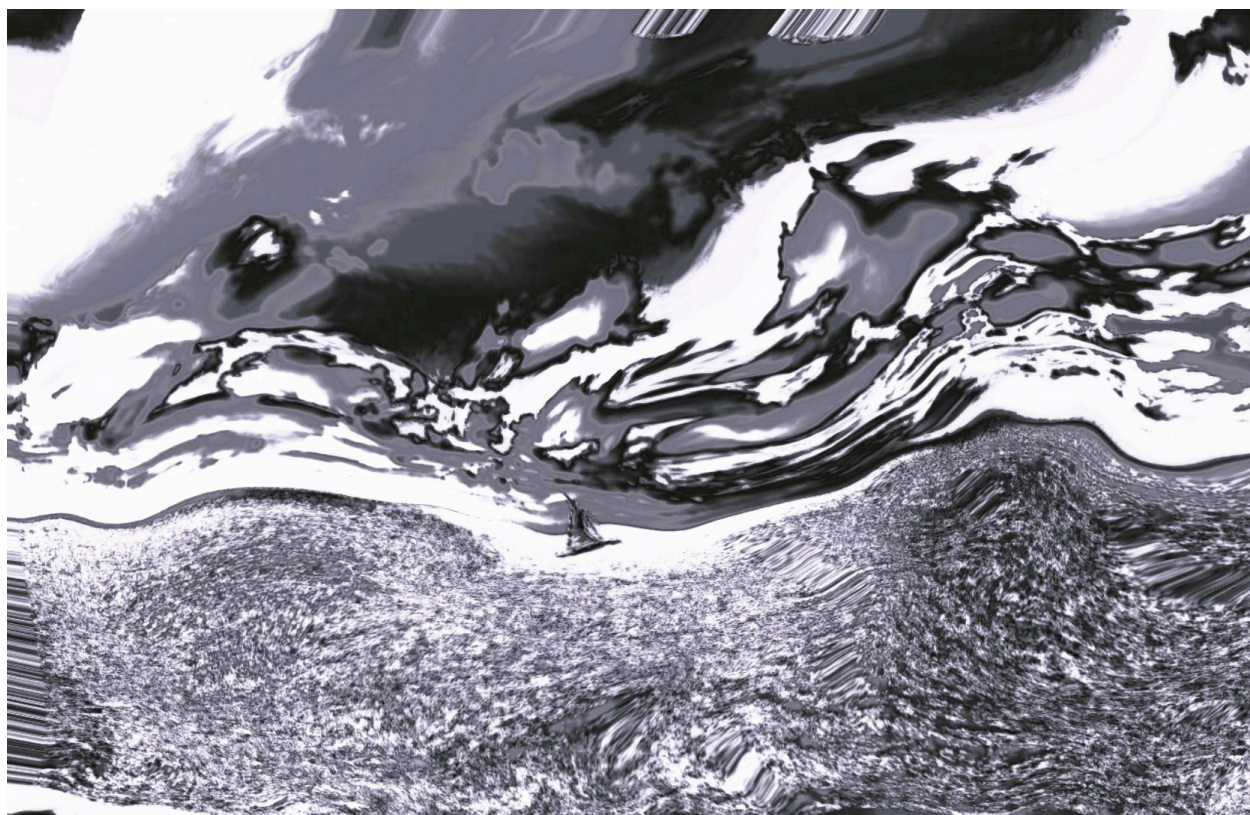
for the ocean keeps what it cannot name    and names what it cannot keep

I am trying to believe this is survival    you are trying not to look back

still, something flickers beneath the surface    stubborn, luminous, unresolved

and if I follow it long enough    maybe it will lead me

back to you—    somewhere I can breathe



**"OCEAN SAILBOAT IN BLACK AND WHITE" ROBERT FLEMING**

# WAVE

*by Nikki Kossaris*

Slumbering waves commence an inner wake  
Numbing liquid tentacles trailing over extremities  
Soaking the tips of fingers and toes

Currents of fear trickle then flow down the spine  
Surging pins and needles run across bone  
Internally a contradiction does blow  
A threatening tempest of the soul

Thundering awareness increases  
Among a cyclone of memories confined  
Shame and regret naturally hidden by time

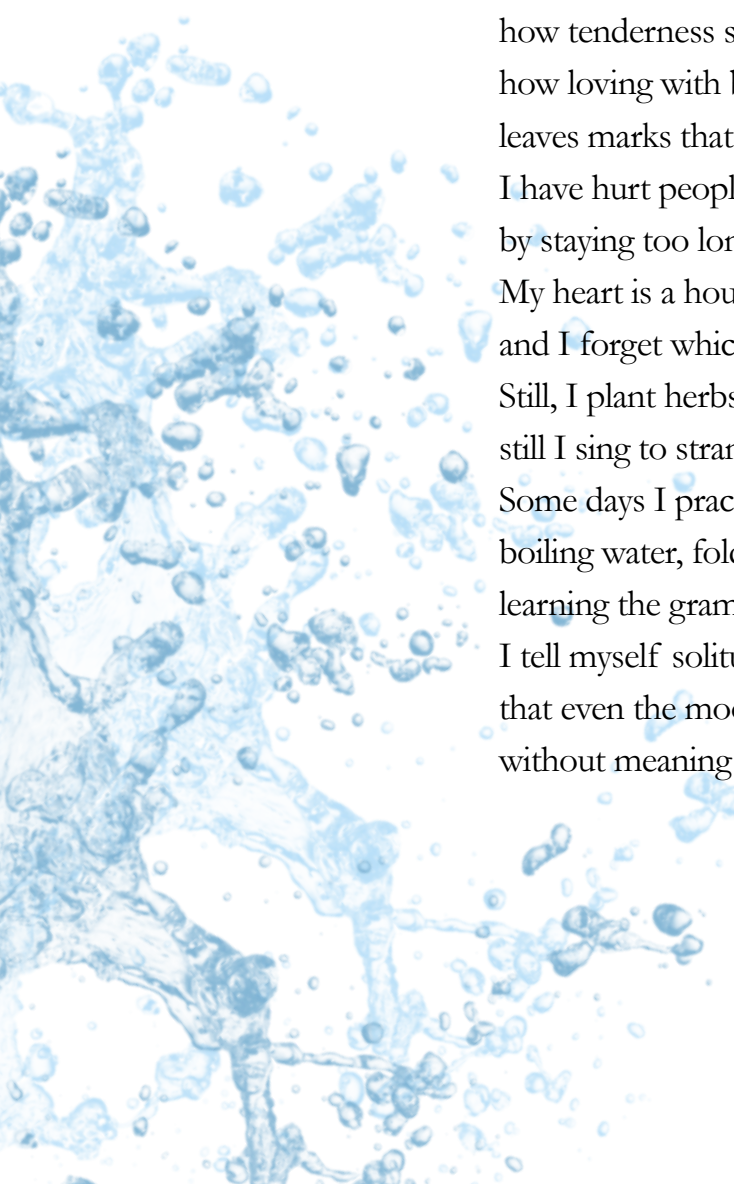
Freeing inspiration from guilt's chains  
Approaching the entrance of the self-made cage  
Anticipating a dance with what is inside

Cresting calm masking downpouring pain  
Aware now the depth of heartaches reign

I am just a vessel for the storm raging within  
A frenzy of uncharted water covered in skin

# METEOROLOGY LESSONS

*by Layla Lenhardt*



I learned the weather by listening.  
Apricots cracking open in the heat,  
the long ache of highways pulling west.  
I carry my name like a cup of river water,  
sloshing as I walk,  
trying not to spill what I love by moving.  
There are rooms inside me where no one sits,  
even when the lamps are warm.  
In them I count the cost of being gentle,  
how tenderness splits the skin,  
how loving with both hands  
leaves marks that look like regret.  
I have hurt people by leaving early,  
by staying too long, by trusting silence.  
My heart is a house with too many windows  
and I forget which ones open outward.  
Still, I plant herbs for the neighbors,  
still I sing to strangers like they are family.  
Some days I practice being alone  
boiling water, folding light,  
learning the grammar of my own breath.  
I tell myself solitude is not a sentence,  
that even the moon keeps its distance  
without meaning to wound the tide.

# PEARLING

*by Layla Lenharott*

I walk along the tide line with a pocket of tiny griefs.  
The mollusks know what to do with theirs.  
A grain enters the body, just a rumor of a harm,  
and they answer slowly, patiently,  
layering nacre until the wound shines.

I've never been that good at repair.  
Every person I loved was a fragile harbor light.  
Every time I tried to cup the flame  
the wind came for me.  
This is the quiet headline I keep rewriting:  
There's Not a Single Person I've Ever Loved  
Who I Could Keep Safe.

Not from the sea.  
Not from the night that keeps arriving,  
and most certainly not from myself;  
I am a shoreline that changes shape  
each time the tide wants to feel something.



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# THE MOON CHECKED IN UNDER YOUR NAME

*by Layla Lenhardt*

At the edge of the salt marsh  
where the cattails whisper in ciphers  
and the moon yawns wide,  
I said your name three times into a jar  
of rainwater and milk teeth.

The sky did not answer  
but a sparrow stared at me too long  
and the tide pulled back,  
a breath held for centuries.

You are not a man, you are a season.  
Somewhere between crow-call and frost.  
My heart crawled out of its husk to follow you,  
left a rib behind in the blackberry bramble.  
It sings when I pass.

In the dream I keep having,  
you light a candle in my throat  
and laugh as the wax melts through my spine.  
I wake up with your fingerprints  
on the backs of my eyelids.

And somehow, the woods know.  
The wind knows.  
Even the bones I buried beneath the elm  
have begun to hum your name  
like it's a spell that costs  
more than I have,  
but I pay it anyway.



**“WHAT DO YOU SEE” GIULIO R.M. MAFFII**

# I BUILD BOATS

*by Atlas Moss*

if you replace every part of a ship,  
is it the same ship?

my mother's hand on my cheek  
is warm like the sun as she  
tells me it's like her daughter

has died. the sun glares down  
at blue water and back up  
at me. i am beginning to understand

i am less boat to her, more driftwood  
going where i'm carried  
eventually lost and previously beautiful

if you replace every part of a ship,  
have you just built a ship?

on the day i was born, i'm sure  
many ships took to sea. as they did  
whatever it is ships do, i was

being told to watch the ships  
from the shore. my mother hated  
when the waves stained my hull and

hated when i replaced it. maybe god is  
disappointed, i think i remember  
him caring a lot about boats

if you replace every part of a ship,  
is the ocean the same?

we sit on the dock and she wants me to  
share in her grief but my daughter  
didn't die and hers was just a boat

she mourns, i start hormones.  
it feels sudden to her. she wants me  
to wait "until the body is cold" but

my body is hot, and  
like everything alive,  
it cannot help but change.

if you replace every part of a ship  
who forgives it?

# MERMAIDS DON'T HAVE EXISTENTIAL DREAD

*by Kate Porch*

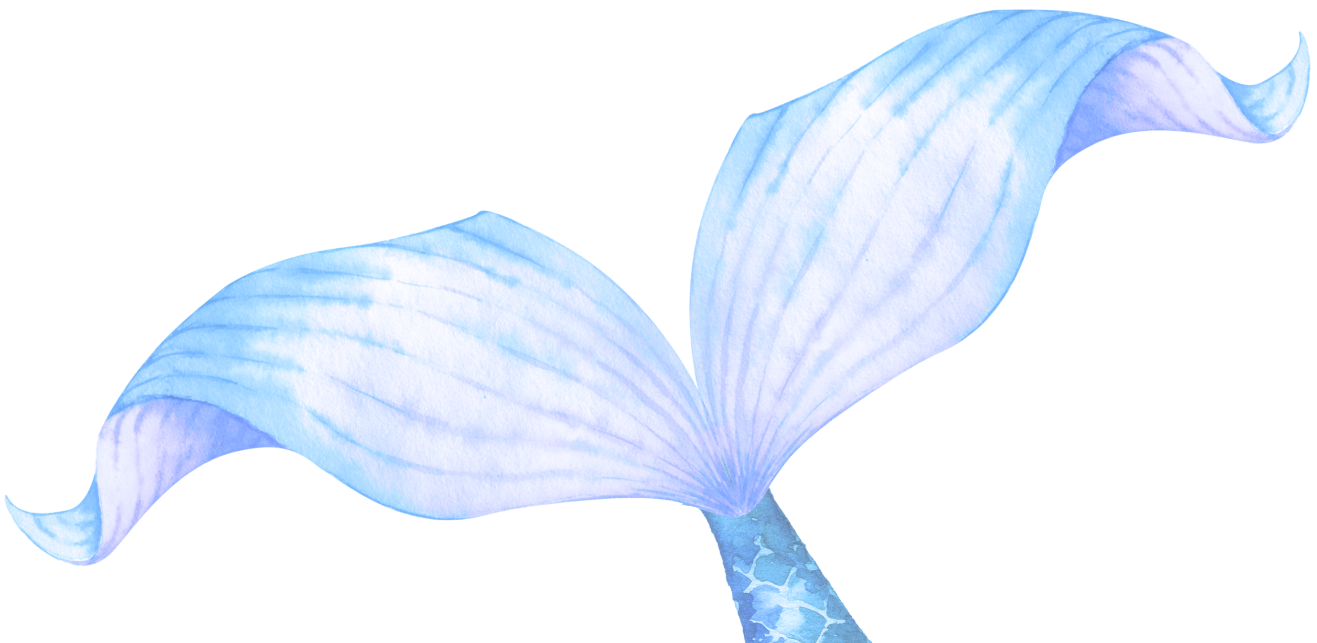
So I dig my heels into the sand and lean back,  
letting the waves fold around my skin,  
and I tell them they can take everything.

I will unlearn all I have to lose.

To be real is to be breakable,  
so I let the sea make me imaginary,  
infinite, holy.

She melts my legs into one another  
like a sandcastle washed into the shore,  
scales rise from under my skin  
like tiny bruises.

I devour the rolling kelp forests  
till my skin greens,  
and sharpen my teeth on fish bones,  
till I become the stuff of children's dreams  
and men's nightmares,  
and forget I am anything but the sea  
swelling beneath the moon.





“RADIOACTIVE” TAMIZH PONNI VP

# ABYSSAL WOMAN

*by Cee Pugsley*

I'm first child of a hydrothermal vent,  
my love, deep and wet as the Mariana Trench  
It's told such wild depths

supplant the senses,  
but I understand cold, when,

over my olfactory cilia, I make the water move,  
taste sulfur, and cobalt, and you.  
I luminesce to bait you.

But I'm late, and you press, slip, lift  
tumid from my grip,

and the frigid void is salt.  
Nothing but salt,  
buoying me to the surface.

When it breaks, I am in a stock pot at Le  
Bernardin  
being stirred by Eric Ripert himself.

And my love is Dover sole  
with soy-lime miso emulsion:  
salt and fat and rich umami.

Did you know how fond he was of Bourdain?  
Did you know he found the body?

As he stirs, he nurtures me,  
till I'm curled, red and fetal as a spot prawn,  
pale shins, limp chest hot against the rounded  
steel.

Our males are small and have no mouths.  
I think he feels that, knows it, somehow.

Out back, he bangs me into a  
dumpster with three metallic blows.  
I've grown skin now, to know

the algid slime of cut greens,  
the jagged edges of opened cans.

The fissure that spread her slit for me will fruit  
multitudes.

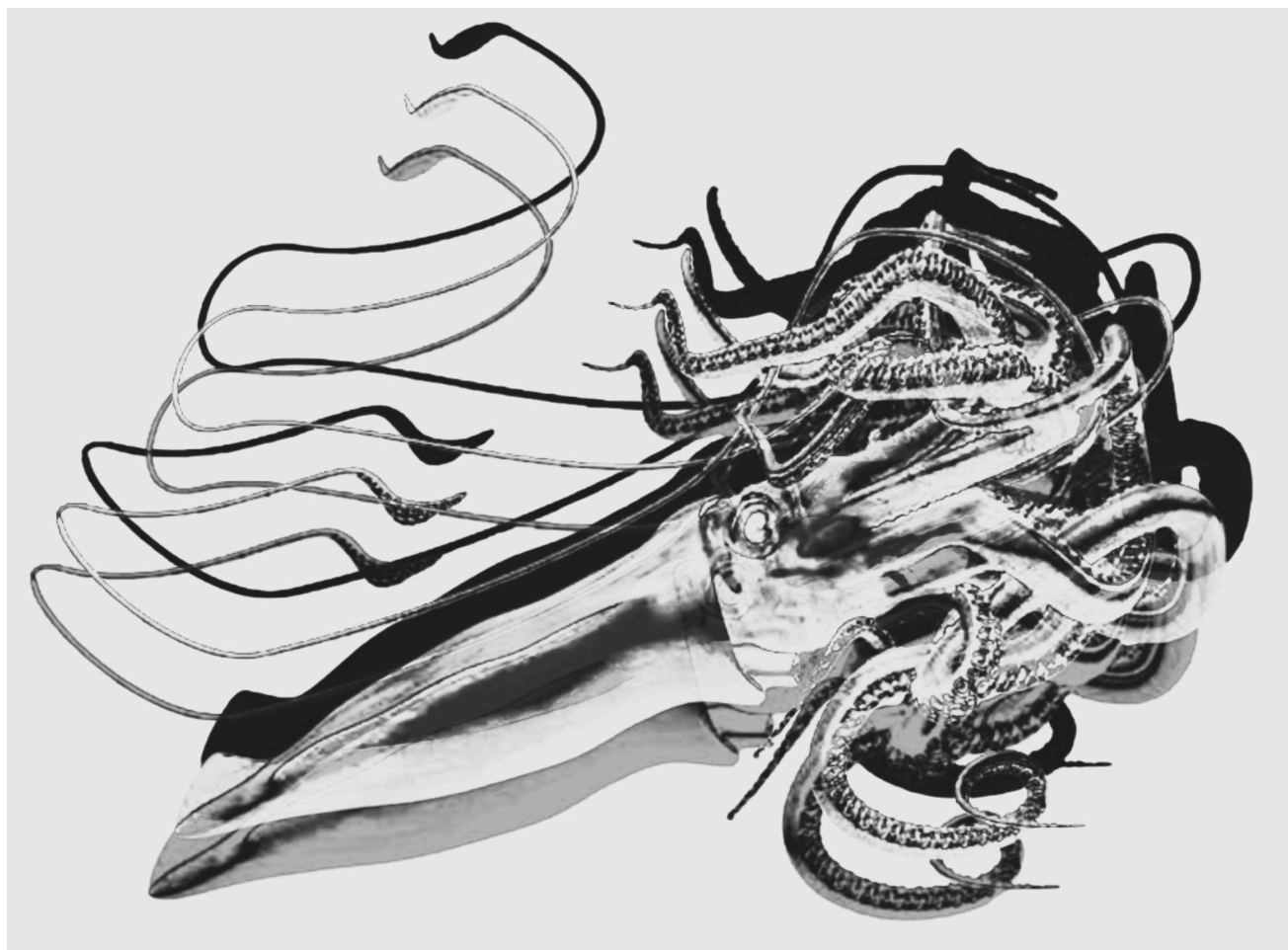
You cannot stitch your husband sutures on la  
Mer.

She doesn't care—how tight she is—

The dumpster flaps its plastic mouth  
behind me, to bid farewell.

I tread my first bare, timid steps  
in this midtown alley, loose breasts,  
useless esca swaying in the heady swell:

the August sewage of this city  
making its slow way to the sea.



**“COLOSSAL SQUID IN BLACK AND WHITE” ROBERT FLEMING**

# CUMAEAN CONFESSION

*by Bianca De Nobrega Silva*

I head home to unload the dishwasher.

I know metal mouths await me — gaping, screaming  
like Sybils, swallowing what I cannot.

Like the priestess, I age indefinitely;

I fill the coffee machine with water.

The heels of the world hammer my spine—

Atlas undone on the linoleum floor.

No altar flame to bless this,

no candle lit to see what curdles in the dark

It speaks clearly at night

keeping me awake in bed—

with my voice buried

beneath dishes,

while rough hands move through tomorrow beneath sheets.

Small enough now to fit inside a jar.

I wait to be asked what I want.

Morning yawns its command.

I rise again.

Unloading metal mouths,

lighting candles for a God

who has forgotten my hands.

# OUROBOROS

*by Bianca De Nobrega Silva*

I am losing my mind.  
I kneel in a river that retreats from my mouth.  
I kneel beneath a tree that recoils from my hands—  
ripe fruits flee into the unresponsive starry sky.  
So I starve beside abundance.  
*Desire fattens; I grow thin.*  
My skull, a banquet hall of unfinished symphonies,  
cathedrals built and abandoned,  
exposed brick to haunt unsatiated hunger.  
I knew this all along.

I am losing my mind.  
Collecting its cinders in my blistered palms—  
cup the smoke and breathe a prayer  
build a pyre from my ribs  
and lie down filthy in the spark.  
*How to burn and be mistaken for salvation,  
how to collapse into red whispers of ash.*  
From the ruin, winged and feral,  
feathered in flame, shrieking with promise, I rise—  
only to inherit the dryest tinder.  
I knew this all along.



I am losing my mind.  
The mountain waits, a patient verdict,  
my shoulder pressed to a boulder  
that knows me all too well.  
The impossible weight of its roundness  
the impossible summit to the top—  
a peak to invent new sky.  
But the fall is always faithful.  
And I know how to harmonize with its echo.  
*I'll do this again tomorrow.*  
I knew this all along.

I am losing my mind.  
So I let it be lost.  
Let famine kill me  
let ash be swept by wind  
let the stone choose its own path.  
I will lie on jagged land and offer up my wrists  
to the clanking chains of surrender.  
*If the gods require a body,*  
*I have one.*

And I will feed whatever vulture descends  
methodical, unastonished,  
and I will not flinch.  
I knew this all along.

The serpent finally bites down around its heavy tail.  
The world breathes through the wound.

They will eat  
and eat,  
and eat—



**“HEAD ON SEA” GIULIO R.M. MAFFII**

# RISE, FALL

*by Lydia Rae Bush*

nothing left to deny  
no one left to defy

nowhere left to fight

when you asked me to stop pushing you  
so I pushed myself away

from the shore

everywhere else to see  
only myself to be

everyone else to free

when the wind and water asked me  
for my name and nothing more



# THE ILLUSION OF OPEN WATER

by LE Francis

High tide hides the scuttle — ragged,  
molted half-claws & casings of sand fleas,  
bloated corpses of kelp that swelled  
under the sun until their briny bellies burst.

You ask beyond the surface, beyond  
the disorienting lilt of the current, beyond  
the soft hiss of the waves becoming  
& unbecoming. Because every direction is

possible, every plotted course infinite.  
There are a million ways to turn back  
on yourself & discover that you had been  
right all along, or wrong — *you know what?*

It doesn't matter. There is all in the body  
of the ocean & all in the whirring heart  
of a hydrogen atom & even that is a question  
of how many books you've read & what dread,

infinitesimal sense haunts your summer night vigils  
thinking *too many stars, too much sky, what the hell  
is the point of trying to know any of it as myself?*

But it is not to be known — ragged, empty mugs litter  
the desk; an abandoned verse, a half-painted canvas,

several chapters that need a careful eye. It is already there  
& all is nothing but open water, infinite ways to plot a course,  
to turn back, to believe something for a minute, a measure,  
a stanza, a lifetime. The waves are giants before they break  
but you know them by different names & they know you

by every voice that has called  
in desperation, in awe; felt  
but not followed, a resigning  
current, grasping for a moment  
before it dissolves.



# CONTRIBUTORS

*William Cass*

William Cass has published over 400 short stories and won writing contests at Terrain.org, Cardinal Sins, and The Examined Life Journal. He's been nominated once for Best of the Net, twice for Best Small Fictions, six times for the Pushcart Prize, and had three short story collections released by Wising Up Press.

*Maria Ali Jawad*

Maria Ali Jawad is a graduate with a BA in Psychology based in the UAE with an interest in memory, perception, and human behavior. She loves exploring subtle psychological tension in her writing and the blurred boundaries between reality and what is remembered or believed.

*Robert Fleming*

Robert Fleming (b. 1963) is a visual poet and digital artist from Lewes, DE. He is an editor @ Old Scratch Press and Instant Noodles magazine. His books are White Noir and Con-Way. An award winner: 2025 Massachusetts poetry Olympics silver/bronze; 2022 San Gabriel Valley CA broadside, 2024 & 21 Mad Swirl best poetry; Delaware Press: Poetry: 3rd, 2 honorable mentions (HM), graphic design 4 HM, photography 1 HM.

*Lauren Kardos*

Lauren Kardos writes from Washington, DC, but she's still breaking up with her hometown in Western Pennsylvania. Milk Candy Review, Flash Fiction Online, Lost Balloon, and Best Microfiction 2022 are just a few of the fine publications that feature her words. You can find more of her work at [www.laurenkardos.co](http://www.laurenkardos.co).

*TYC*

TYC is an author, visual artist, composer, and educator based in the NYS capital region. Much of their written work explores themes of queerness, cultural identity, and religion, seeking to capture the nebulous in-between feelings that are so hard to articulate, but with which every human is so intimately familiar.

## Kelly Murashige

Born and raised in Hawai'i, Kelly Murashige is the author of the award-winning YA novels *THE LOST SOULS OF BENZAITEN* and *THE YOMIGAERI TUNNEL*, as well as the upcoming adult novel *MILKIVERSE* (2027). Her work has been nominated for Best Small Fictions. Though she can be shy, she loves obsessing over books, video games, and strange animals.

## Giulio R.M. Maffii

Giulio R.M. Maffii is an Italian poet, writer, and visual artist whose work focuses on poetry in its linear, experimental and visual forms, as well as its dissemination. He has published numerous books and essays, and his work has appeared in many international magazines, both as a poet and visual artist. He collaborates with the theatre company Bubamara Teatro and taught for many years at the University of Florence. His most recent book, *Copia*, was published in the United States in 2026.

## Fox Rivera

Fox Rivera is a Black & Boricua trans-woman writing fiction and critical essays. As a first generation and chronically ill student she earned a bachelor's in English from UNC Greensboro and has since published a handful of short stories in magazines like the *Corradi* or *Wild Greens*. She aims for her stories to provide misfit birds like her a new place to roost.

## Paul Bavister

Paul Bavister has published three collections of poetry with Two Rivers Press. His work has appeared in *Confluence*, *Dream Catcher* and *Smoke*. *Starlings* came highly commended in the Rialto poetry competition.

## Petra Brungardt

Petra Brungardt is an American poet and writer who holds a BA in English Language and Literature from Southern New Hampshire University, and who is also a member of the International English Honor Society, Sigma Tau Delta. She enjoys reading, mythology and collecting old poetry and classical literature. When Petra is not writing poetry, she shares vulnerable musings on her Instagram page @wildeunomia94 under the acronym PRSB.

**CONTRIBUTORS CONT.***Marina Cone*

Marina Cone (she / her) is a writer, game designer, woman, and PhD candidate in English at Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka in Aotearoa. She spends much of her time contemplating the hope and terror of an empty Word document, and uses her writing as a vehicle to explore gender dysphoria and euphoria, womanness, platonic love, space, identity, and memory.

*Atlas Moss*

Atlas Moss is a printmaker, poet, and conservationist based in Atlanta, GA. Their “dayjob” involves developing native green spaces in community areas, and a great deal of their art and writing is informed by the natural landscapes they work in. Their work relies on nature imagery, queerness, and attempts at comedic relief, resulting in soft landscapes, haphazard textures, and confident guesswork.

*J. S. Coursey*

J. S. Coursey is a marketing professional and an MFA student in the Bluegrass Writers Studio at Eastern Kentucky University. A graduate of Georgia State University with degrees in Creative Writing and Film, he now lives in Missouri with his wife and five cats. He can be found at: [jscoursey.com](http://jscoursey.com).

*Melody Cui*

Melody Cui is a student, writer and designer. She writes introspective poetry that revolves around culture & identity.

*Sarah Das Gupta*

Sarah Das Gupta is a writer from Cambridge, UK who taught English in India, Tanzania, and UK. Her work has been published in over 25 countries in anthologies and magazines. She has been nominated for Best of the Net, the Pushcart and a Dwarf Star.

## Jen Devlin

Jen Devlin is a napkin writer who has been known to post poems on the fridge to greet their roommates. Longlisted for the CBC Poetry Prize in 2024, their aphantasia shapes a unique, vivid style. They write to create moments of catharsis and connection. Their writing is a creative act of tender rebellion rooted in their communities: people with disabilities and queer communities.

## Tamizh Ponni VP

Tamizh Ponni VP is an ambivert and a stoic art buff who loves to express her skills through literature, visual arts and music. She is an IB educator and sees learning as a life-long process. Her stories were featured in 2 anthology books, "Mia" and "Varna". Tamizh's articles, poems and paintings have also been published in many digital journals and educational blogs. Tamizh spends most of her free time painting, reading, writing articles, stories and poems, playing piano and watching documentaries/movies.

## Emily Eaton

Emily Eaton is a writer and overthinker from Essex, England. She regularly writes about queerness and places on Substack: [somerheresoftly.substack.com](https://somerheresoftly.substack.com).

## Annette Gagliardi

Annette Gagliardi is the current Poet Laureate for the League of Minnesota Poets, the president for the Mississippi Valley Poets & Writers, Secretary for her Parish Council and Des Moines PEN women, and anchoress for the Annunciation Seven Sisters group. If you want anything done, ask a busy woman.

## Ava Gordon

Ava Gordon is a student at Emerson College. She was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts, and spends her time writing poetry that examines the beauty (and pain) of the human experience.

**CONTRIBUTORS CONT.***Nikki Kossaris*

Nikki Kossaris was born loving all things spooky and fell in love with horror novels at the age of seven. Her fiction leans toward psychological and body horror, and when she's not writing or reading, she enjoys cooking, horror movies, and chasing adventure. Her short fiction and poetry appear in t'ART, Sirens Call Zine, Gridiron Gates of Hell, Cult Horrotica Magazine, Aberration Labyrinth, Frission 1, Readings From Cursed Room 301 and Till the Yule Log Burns Out.

*Layla Lenhardt*

Layla Lenhardt is the author of Mother Tongue, Mainstreet Rag 2023. She has been published in Rust + Moth, Prairie Schooner, Pennsylvania Literary Journal and others. She has received her MFA from IU and is a gemologist and harpist.

*Kate Porch*

Kate Porch (she/her) is a poet born and raised in South Florida in a family of seven. She holds a BA in creative writing from the University of Central Florida and currently lives in Bangkok, where she works as a kindergarten teacher. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and Best Spiritual Literature, and has been featured in Ghost City Review, Redivider Journal, Miniskirt Mag, and The Swamp Ape Review, among other magazines.

*Cee Pugsley*

Cee Pugsley is a writer and transcriptionist from Baltimore, Maryland where they live with their partner and 2 children. They're currently at work on their first novel.

*Bianca De Nobrega Silva*

Bianca De Nobrega Silva is a Brazilian writer whose poetry is born of passion and stems from a curiosity for every kind of love and pain within the human condition. Silva earned a Bachelor's of Arts in Psychology and English from Penn State University and has published poetry and essays in Kalliope, Folio, and KLIO.

## *Molly McGill*

Molly McGill is a writer from County Derry, Ireland. She has a bachelor's degree in film studies and creative writing from John Moore's University and has a passion for writing and reading weird horror fiction.

## *Lydia Rae Bush*

Lydia Rae Bush (she/her) is a poet exploring themes of embodiment and social-emotional development. Her work is Best of the Net nominated, and includes *Free Bleeding* (dogleech books, '25), *Keeper, Seeker, Dragon of the Sea* (Bottlecap Press, '25), and *All the Little Church Girls' Paper Dolls* (fifth wheel press, '26).

## *LE Francis*

LE Francis is a writer, visual artist, and musician working from the rainshadow of the Washington Cascades. Find her online at [nocturnical.com](http://nocturnical.com).





