

THE ECKLEBURG PROJECT

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ISSUE 2

POETRY & PROSE
ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY
LITERARY JOURNAL

EDITOR'S NOTE

The state of youth is quite ephemeral, as it comes and goes, sometimes before we can think of a way to keep it—and that is precisely what makes it precious. It's a transitional era, a time wedged between the adult responsibilities of tomorrow and blissful ignorance of yesterday.

It is precisely in this transitional age that young people find out who they are going to be and what they are going to stand for. We stumble forward holding onto every precious moment that forges the reality of who we are. It is only during this time, before adult responsibilities emerge to make us practical, that we as young people are able to create and to speak up for what matters to us and to live as though we might never see our middle age. The youth of today is keenly aware that we are the future, and in all of our perceived frivolity and carelessness we are constantly looking for ways to grow and become the worthy inheritors of this planet.

So, Reader, in this journal you will find the expressions of the incredibly resilient character of the youth at Texas A&M University. You will get to look inside of the minds and the hearts of students whose youth was cut short by a pandemic. You will see our fears and our hopes and our dreams laid out bare. All I can ask of you is to observe this state of mind, this plea for more time, and remember that this is a place in which you once were, in which you are, or in which you will be. Use our art to remember, or to look forward, or to live in this beautifully terrifying moment when everything is at once falling apart and falling together.

A white, stylized handwritten signature on a dark teal background. The signature is fluid and cursive, starting with a large, looping 'M' and ending with a long, horizontal flourish.

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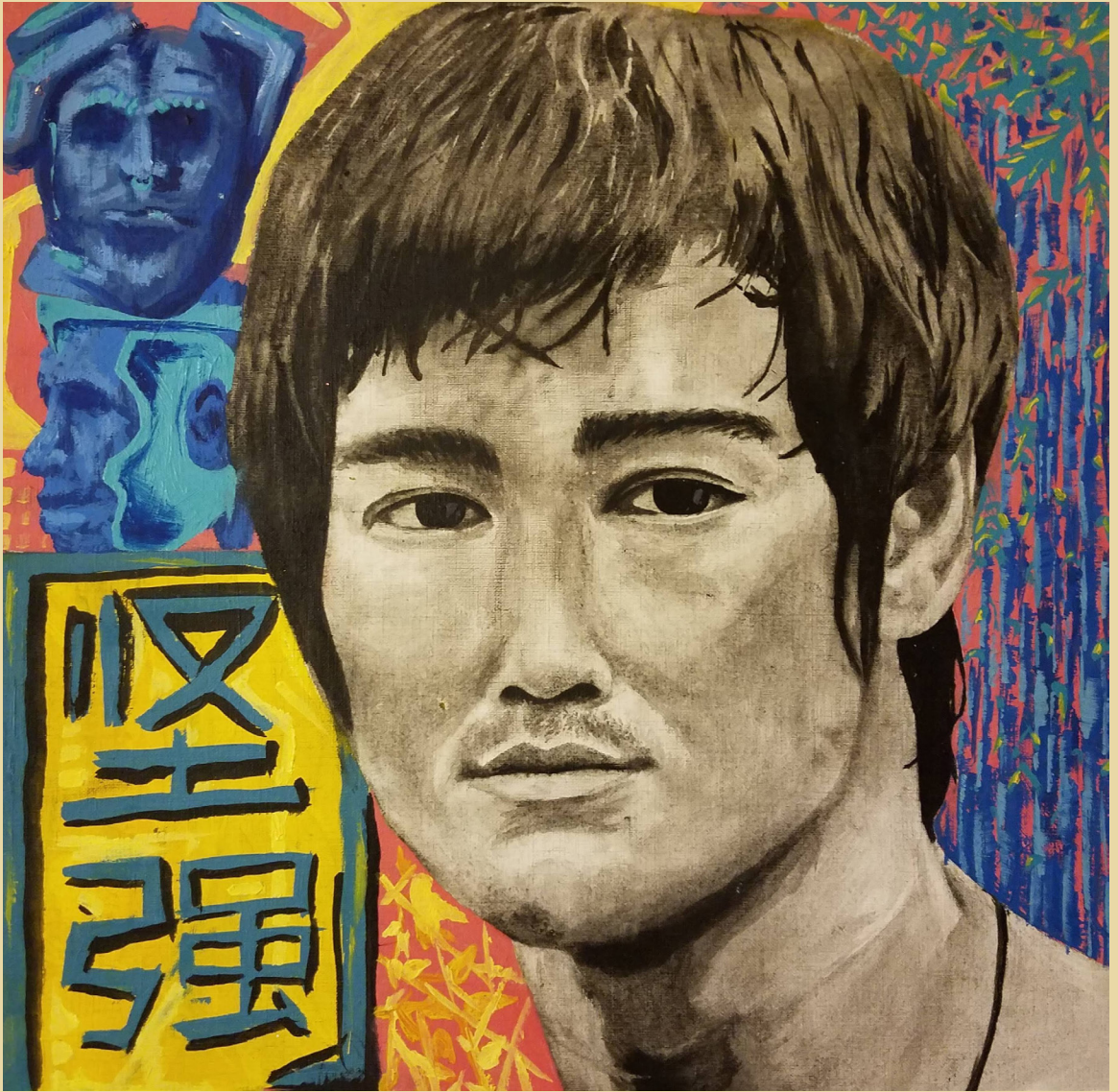
LEGACIES

BY DARBY LORAIN JOHNSON

I do not need a legacy
My soul desires it not
My name in lights or on brass plaques
Would ultimately rot

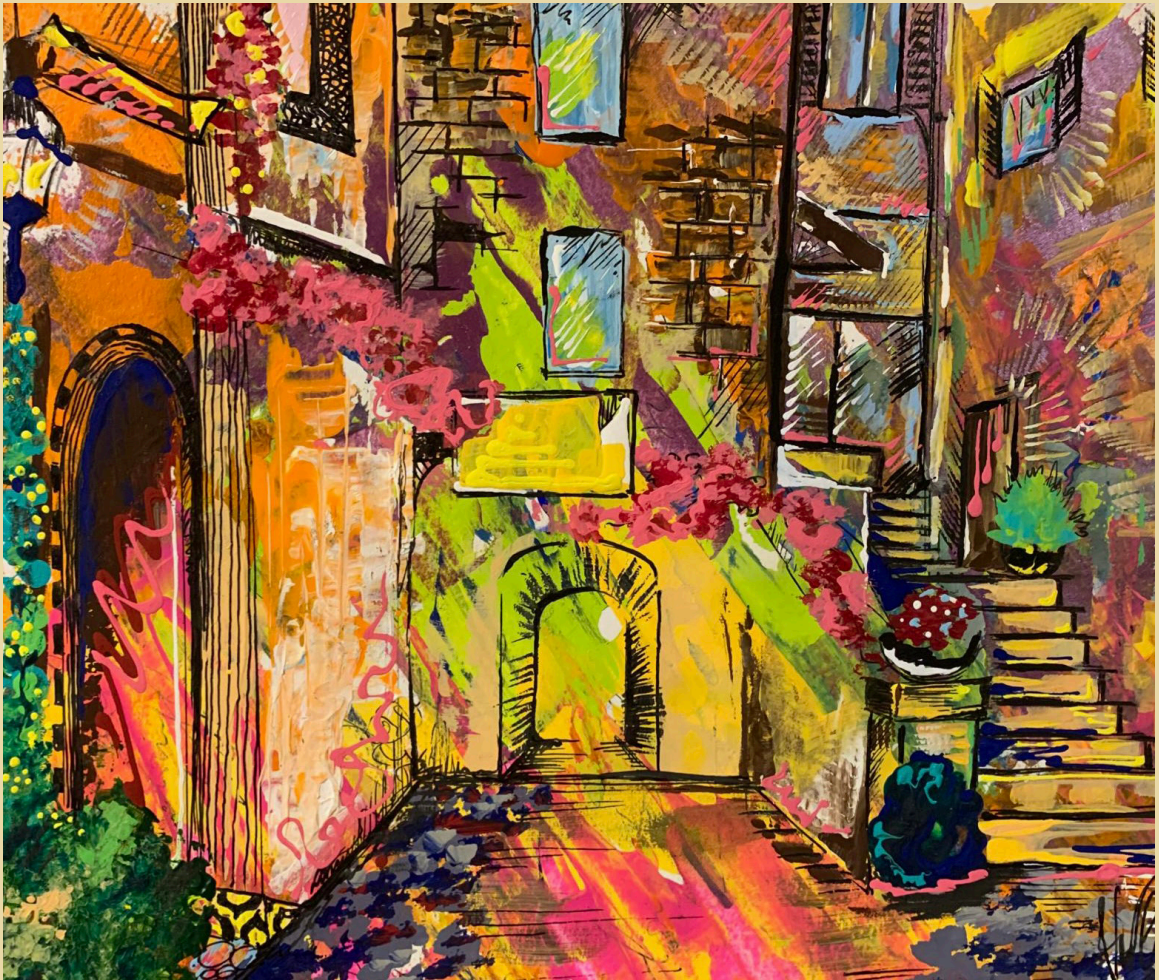
No if a memory of me
Should pass away in time
I'll know I lived a great vast life
With this one thing in mind

If you and I, in our last rest
Could just sleep side by side
And above us the rock would read
"Their love lives--multiplied"



“THE WARRIOR”

BY JESUS MANUEL FRIAS



“A VIBRANT ECHO”

BY SAMEEKSHA SHARMA

GRATITUDE

BY RITIKA BHATTACHARJEE

I give thanks, each morning, that I am not you.
Your blunders today shall haunt your tomorrows,
But only when you develop
The wisdom to be embarrassed.

You speak no symphonies! Just cacophony.
Your mouth is like that of a horse –
So much bigger than the small, meaningless sounds that come out of it
Your utterances, more physiological than psychological.

At least, even at my worst, I am no ass.
I am manipulative, calculating, sharp
In a way that is too human to be animalistic
Too deviant for mother nature's accord.

I give thanks that my fault is my savoir faire,
My beautifully woven silken diplomacy
Easily outshining your rough-hewn, uncouth vulgarity,
The collar and saddle you wear to every interaction.

There is little difference between you and a sow
Except that a sow is good for something
And you, despite your best efforts,
Can only sow seeds of disparity and resentment.

Those who call their plebian bluntness “honesty” – ha!
Simply excuse themselves of the effort
Of considering connotation from alternative perspectives.
They are animals – being, doing – not thinking, dreaming.

I give thanks, each morning, that I am not you.
For when you finally develop the wisdom to be embarrassed,
You will see, after being the bull in the china shop for so long,
All of us, whom you have broken and mauled,
And your own shattered self-image.



“BASS”

BY CHRISTINE YEH

BY RITIKA BHATTACHARJEE

ERASURE!

He's erasing her! The traces of life she brought to this home, he jettisons out, ignoring the sentiment of a life well-lived! The perfumes, shoved in small bags and thrown down the stairs, her favorite cookware, ripped from their cozy cupboards and forced into foreign, careless hands, hands that know naught of the value they possess, nor my mother's skill as an expert chef. And I, I stand frozen in an attempt to stop the erasure, writhing against my inability to accept nor refuse, to stand with baited breath as I watch the emblem of my childhood, the maladies and remedies and stories of my mother in matter, thrown without care to greedy and feckless hands. I don't understand him: his actions are that of an evil stepmother, triumphing in her quest to off the kindred matriarch. But he is no stepmother, no – he is just an immature, grieving son with an agenda to restructure, and while his sister's ways of grieving takes to the page, through writing and endless dramatic lamentation, his ways of grieving involve a broom and a critical eye, sweeping and throwing away what doesn't serve him without any regard for the beautiful person it served in the past, the woman who has since passed and looks on from the ether of the sky.

My father is part of the problem. My mother had the sole burden of cleaning the house, of keeping everything clean. Alone, my father fills the void with junk food and junk purchases, useless, unnecessary trinkets from HEB and Costco, accruing more for my brother to step in and sweep away every month. It gives my brother something to do and my father something to look forward to. And somewhere in the cyclone of dust and arguing over what must stay or go, how

to alter the house in ways my mother was so very against in life, it becomes easier to forget the insidious silence that still lingers, the unsweepable cobwebs death leaves even after four years of trauma.

My family, like much of America, does not know how to grieve. We give ourselves a few days off work and cry outside of our 9-to-5 jobs, so as not to inconvenience nor wound our worlds the way tragedy has both inconvenienced and wounded us. It strikes me that my father and brother deal with death the American way, though they are both more seemingly traditional than I am. I thought my tradition lived in my ability to wrap a sari, to look every bit the picture-perfect Indian daughter, studying engineering and never partying and always so focused on school. I realize now that the most traditional part of me is the way I grieve. Grief is like a fog that hangs around my frame, seeping into my very bones and slipping off of my shoulders and arms like droplets of water, spilling into everything I do until I can shake it off.

I have never been partial to housework, by any means. (This was frequently my mother's chief lamentation and greatest fear, that nobody would ever want to marry me because of my abysmal and nonexistent interest in home-making.) I have found more comfort in the sharp veracity of language, the lulling melodies of my piano, the bright colors in my paint pallets than I ever have in scrubbing away the residue of life well-lived. So I take up my post, my role in this horrendous play, and argue with them to keep her perfumes, her beautiful saris and scarves, her cookware and her makeup. I have become the villain of the

story, the roadblock to progress, because I never willingly contribute to housework, yet I can't let go of all of these things that my brother somehow has the right to disregard because he makes an effort to dust, to vacuum. I allow them to villainize me so that I can collect her things in the wake of the hurricane that is my brother's erasure. I don't think they yet understand that grief is a living monster, unwilling to silence its shrieking until acknowledged and lulled to sleep. I don't think I yet understand that no matter how much I salvage, she is gone.

I have often described it like a long-distance phone call; I still talk to my mother, when I meditate, in the gaps left by the wind when I walk home alone, in the silence of my living room when the television is off. I talk to her all the time, and I still hear her responses with startling clarity, but it's a long-distance phone call: no hugs, no kisses goodnight, just words.

I get frustrated, often, because she is so painfully gracious now, so kind and loving and supportive as I speak to her, in ways that she wasn't in life. I remember the last few conversations she had with me in MD Anderson as she wasted away with everyone else on floor eleven, and she held my hand and told me she was sorry, that she did what she did because she wanted me to become the best I could be. I wonder how different my life could have been, had I been allowed to be mediocre. I was constantly held to such a high standard by my mother because I was exactly like her, and we are all our own worst critics. I wonder if all those who endeavor to achieve great things become damaged because of what it takes to achieve those things, and I wonder how I have changed with the grief dripping off of my clothes. My mother, in her last

few days, reminded me of my humanity in ways I had been guarding against for years. I ignored the pain of my own abuse because I wanted to survive, and I believed that the greatness could come one day, if I kept trying, bringing love with it.

They're erasing her, they're erasing her! Or perhaps, they are finally getting rid of the ugly parts I survived, the parts I didn't want to remember after my mother passed away. Perhaps I am the one who needs to learn to let go, to know that my mother is not in these ephemeral materials, but in me, my voice, my appearance, and my desperate, constant will to survive. I suppose I will continue to speak to her in the mirror of my own image, my eyes as her eyes and my mind as her mind. She becomes easier to understand as I live through the experiences she survived, hitting the milestones of pain and prejudice the way she did.



“BLUE CROC”

BY RACHEL BROWNELL

THE BLOOD OF A BROWN-SKINNED OPHELIA

BY ANGELA JULIET DE LEON

I hate this journal.
Not because it makes me write but because it lays me bare.
I expect myself to write and speak truth but when I write I see a mirror and it only hurts.
What do you mean?
Stop asking questions.
Who am I?

Stop. Stop thinking.

I thought about jumping from the second floor of my apartment complex.
I started giggling at the blood-spattered concrete beneath my eyes.
Logic made me laugh. I couldn't even jump the railing. And if I did, it wouldn't be enough to kill me.

Roll over sideways and over.

I think I'm strong enough to survive but weak enough to try to escape.

Turn to community, to family, slap, slap, turn.

I'm truly
alone.

Family? Half are strangers that I'm expected to smile and talk to over a screen.

Hola tios, como estan? If small talk could slice, I'd have little

chop chops.

Am I supposed to be excited?

Why weren't you excited.

My efforts become ours.

What about me?

Don't be selfish.

This is because of your papás. Your parents birthed straight A's, they pay for the sleepless hours of the night. They produce the anxietyanddepressionandconstipationandan-dandnandn

They make me want to fall over a ledge and die laughing.

I dedicate this to you papi. The tears and the sorrow that I poured into my studies are mine, but the gold is yours. Conqueror of my heart, I'd give you the world if only the world would let me.

But then they come and say
Because of your parents.

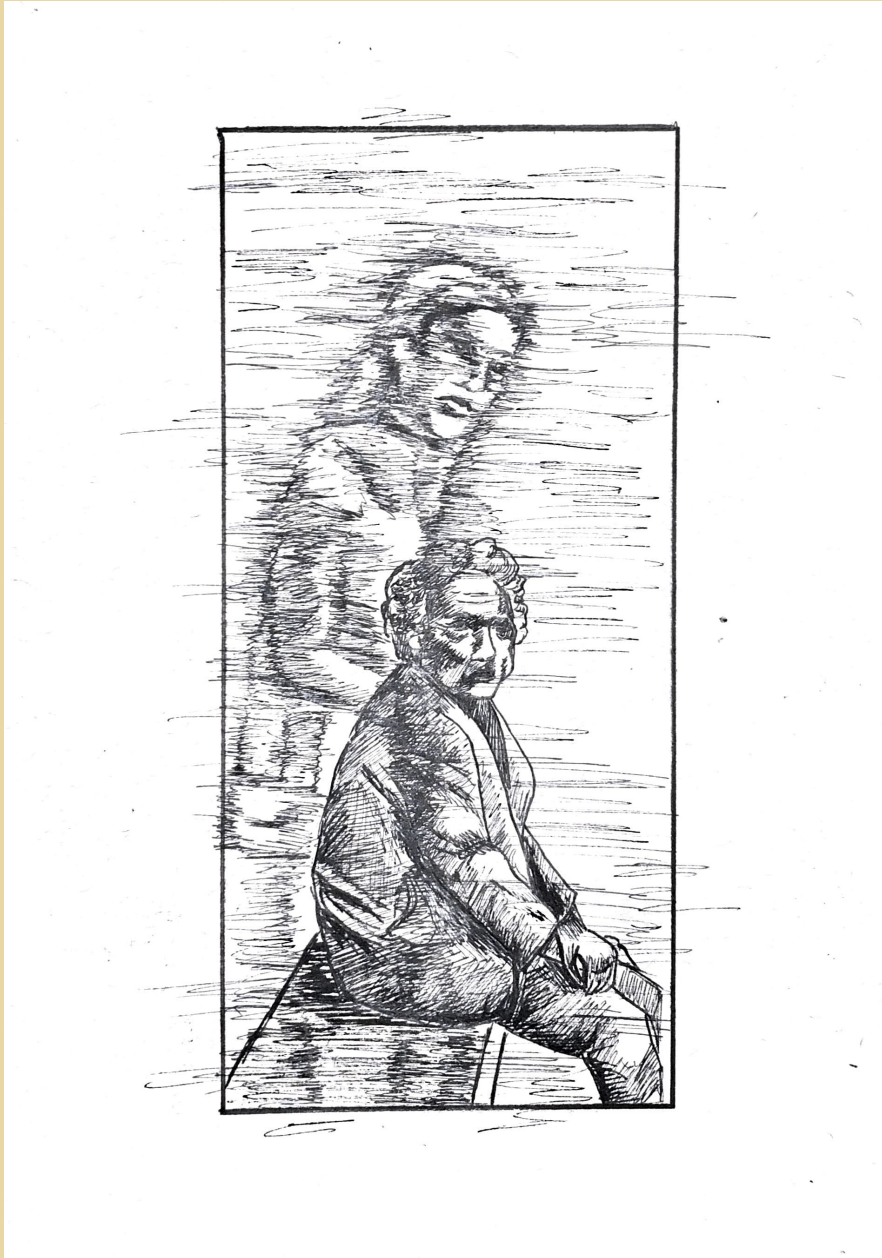
Don't blame my parents, I do this for them.

I'm not
selfish.

I'm just worn, let me be the cause of my weariness. Let me. Letme. Letmelet-meletme

Here we go again.

If you claim community carry the burden with me.
What's that?



“REFLECTION IN A WINDOW”

BY CALLIE HANNA



“CHERRY BLOSSOMS”

BY AUSTIN BIEHLE

THE CELLO PAPERS

BY KAYLA MORALES

FAURE: APRÈS UN REVE

I used to play cello, once upon a time. The cello, so resonant and rich, I could never do it justice. So smooth, with broad vocal range, broad shoulders and hips, the instrument that closest resembled the broad human voice. My favorite part of the cello was the scroll, so beautifully curved and carved and detailed in its ridges and discoloration, the pegs jutting out from their sturdy base and difficult to turn. I would play such intricate solos and ensembles, regurgitated from my high school mind and high school fingers and high school body and high school feelings. I realize that I did not know pain at the time, not the way I know now. How I wish I could go back sometimes to a much more innocent period of misinterpreted music.

Faure, who wrote the music accompanying Bussine's poem of the same name, did not write *Après un*

reve as a piece to be played on the cello; it was to be sung by a beautiful French person at the top of their lungs, belting out the dramatic triplets that make it so painfully human, marking out shifting dynamics and legato notes. It was later transcribed for the different string instruments, most famously for the cello, and soon enough I laid my eyes on the sheet music and attempted to, as a criminal, bring it justice. It was immediately arrested.

I was a criminal, I butchered and slaughtered every piece I came to contact. My hands are forever tainted with the crimson stain of bleeding music, my fingers remember every painful note carved out of the fingerboard, every callous digging deeper as I tried, to no avail, to tame my wild cello. However blood-stained my past, I still acknowledge the foundation I laid for then future me,

now present me, to go back to my cello and try once more to bring the music back to life.

Faure and Bussine describe a beautiful dream, unreal and fleeting, as the dreamer wakes up and longs to dream again. "Alas! Alas, sad awakening of dreams I'm calling you, O night, give me back your lies, Come back, come back radiant, Come back, O mysterious night!"

Oh, how I butchered *Après un reve*, once upon a time. Now I understand the glimmering allure of dreams, just out of reach, fingertips still tainted red and glowing with what once was, with the fainting whispers of love long gone floating through the air, resting asleep in someone else's bed far far away, resting in the cool dark earth next to a coffin, resting in the twisting and coiling folds of my brain as I lie in this new bed, miles from my home, restless and paralyzed and unmoving. I see you as you once were, as we once were, but with the sweet song of nostalgia singing above how I used to cry, playing above the imperfect details of our love, my love, my pain. I dream of what I wished we could have been, so long ago, in the twisting spirals of the past.

But now I wake up from my deep deep sleep, listening to the whispers lingering in the dark cold morning air. I reach my hand out to you, to touch your face and feel your suffocating

heat. I am met with pillows, lonely blankets still cold, I am met with nothing and everything. You are worlds away, both physically and metaphorically and figuratively and I cannot begin to understand. Such complicated notes, incomprehensible motifs, atonal and barely music. But I can feel it all. Pain is no longer smothering, not in the way it was when I first cried, and my chest caved in, and I thought I knew what death was. Pain plucks the breath off my lips when I least expect it, but I follow it until I can take it right back. I will continue to breathe.

When I go back to my cello, I know exactly how I will play this piece. How I will stay relaxed, especially throughout my arms neck and shoulders and not be stiff and not overextend and make sure my fingers are in the right spots on the fingerboard as I drag the bow across the strings and carve the notes out as I used to, once upon a time. I will make the most horrid music and sound, once more. I will not play the cello, I will make it cry, as I sometimes do when I wake up after a dream.

ELGAR'S CELLO CONCERTO IN E MINOR: ADAGIO

This one starts off with a bang, drama, rich chords and double stops that make you pause midsentence, mid-thought, and ends in a fading whisper. At least that's how it's written. I remember first learning this piece, not knowing how to interpret the musical notes on the staff, the bass clef frowning at me as I tried to make sense of the bowings and which fingerings would work best. Even after I learned the basic notes and bowings, I still did not know how to feel the piece, how to play the part of a broken voice gliding through each changing motif that Elgar so clearly wanted me to sing and yell and belt out of the strings across my cello. I set my cello down, lost, not wanting to continue down the path of a failed and forgotten cellist. I was only eighteen at the time, not knowing

where I wanted to go and who I wanted to become.

Soon after, everything began to change around me. I went home one day and did not go out again. People left. Nearly everyone left. Some more permanently than others, never to be seen again as they laid reduced to ash under freshly packed earth, somehow not flooding with the seas raining from my eyes, sheets upon sheets of pouring tears. Others moved far away, settling into someone else's home across town, someone else's bed, as I laid in my heartache, confused and crying, dying. Yet others abandoned me, waiting for someone that did not exist anymore to emerge from my broken body, someone who had died tears ago. I was, for the first time, truly alone.

My Elgar started with a whisper, hushed abandonment as I lost my friends, who hurried and scurried away in the chaos and stress of high school, leaving me almost alone in my last year. The rich, vibrant chords gave way to these hushed whispers, painful little daggers between the staff lines, between the notes. How was I to make music when these daggers stabbed at my eyes, the music blurring as my vision reduced to held-back tears?

My Elgar included a canon, a gunshot, seemingly random midway through the piece. I laid in my own blood, as my cello stained a crimson red, matching my butcher hands, lost fingers gliding smoothly on strings slick with a wet warm. I remember those staccato hiccups as I cried a forte, seemingly Shostakovich instead of the intended Elgar. I was not playing it right, but what was new with that?

My Elgar continued, past the ending note displayed on the sheets of music, past the first movement and into another year. My Elgar buried someone, was it me? Was it someone else? Perhaps it buried two people, who I was before my music had ended and continued into nothing, and someone who I had truly lost, now only seen in pictures. She didn't realize her Elgar had ended in that room, as it spiraled past noise and into pain. The hospital didn't know her Elgar, her hospice bed in the room she had slept in most of her life did not know

her Elgar. We couldn't see the music anymore.

My Elgar was not conventional; I didn't know how to play it, and sometimes it felt like my cello carved the notes from my heart instead. My Elgar was a mismatched, atonal piece composed by the notes that had fallen off the sheets on the stands, noncoherent and random.

I had always dreamed of playing my Elgar, so why did it end up so badly out of tune, out of tempo with the rest of the orchestra, overpowered by an accompaniment instead of being the shining star solo it was supposed to be?

INITIATING LOVE

BY JESSICA KING

Initiating Love, come near me,
invade my heart.

When you pursue me, everything changes
and stays the same all at once.



“AN UNHURRIED ETERNITY”

BY SAMEEKSHA SHARMA



“REPOSITORY”

BY RAAIDA HASNAIN

OUR HOME

BY GRACE W.

My faraway...friend,

Do you remember
When we built a house
And made it our home?

Your ingress thrillingly abrupt;
The day our paths were destined to cross,

We met.

After eighteen years of living separate lives,
There and authentically we stood;
Bright eyes met bright eyes.
I timid, you in strong-willed pursuit.
It was an instant connection,
Turned innocent affection.

Green, damp grass,
The sky flecked with twinkling stars,
There under the blanketed night, we lie.
A soothing silence,
A close, comforting quiet;
The movie reel still runs in my mind.
It was on that night,
Entering the unknown and all,
We stood hand in hand,
And built our first wall.

Behind us, time rolled on.
For the foundation, we poured the concrete.
We'd stay up late, converse 'til dawn,
Editing our floorplan until it was complete.
Embraces, laughter, hand in soft, warm hand,

Time only led us to empathize, to understand.
Our big renovation projects
Matured to superfluous decorating.
Hanging curtains, flattening carpet,
Polishing, shining, perfecting.
Trust, honesty, care.
The more and more we'd share,
The house we were building
Became our home.

But one pretty, summer day,
You told me you wanted to move out.
Move out of our beautiful home!
But how on earth could you want this,
When you and I had made our home,

Our own?

I reached for your hand
As you turned to leave through the gate.
I told you to pause. I told you to wait.
And you turned around with that smile,
To admire, with me, what we'd made.

Together we stood, looking at our house.
You tilted your head, not making a sound.
I looked up at you and saw
Solemnity creep in.
Your sad eyes met mine,
As you uttered the same phrase again.
My words rendered useless,
As I pleaded you to stay.
You looked at me one last time,

And slowly walked away.

I peered from our doorstep 'til you were too tiny to see.
So happens the fear of ever being left alone
Was not an irrational possibility.
The paint on our house has begun to chip and fade.
Yet your footpath still remains from your departure day.

My friend, are you still wandering down that road?
If you're lost, you should sit and rest.
I just have to ask; all our plans for our home,
Will those lonely hopes ever be addressed?

A now unfathomable concept
Is my pair of eyes meeting yours.
I'm realizing now I was so swiftly swept
Into the most blissful of storms.
Yet as briskly as your winds whirled in,
Mundane skies reign the new norm.

I pass by our house quite often.
I wonder if you ever think about it too?
It's warming knowing the last time I was inside
Was when I was spending time with you.
Now comforting me is the knowledge,
Although standing empty and alone,
The house we built together
Will forever be our home.

All the best
(wherever you are),
your forever friend

STAFF WRITING

FLY PLANET

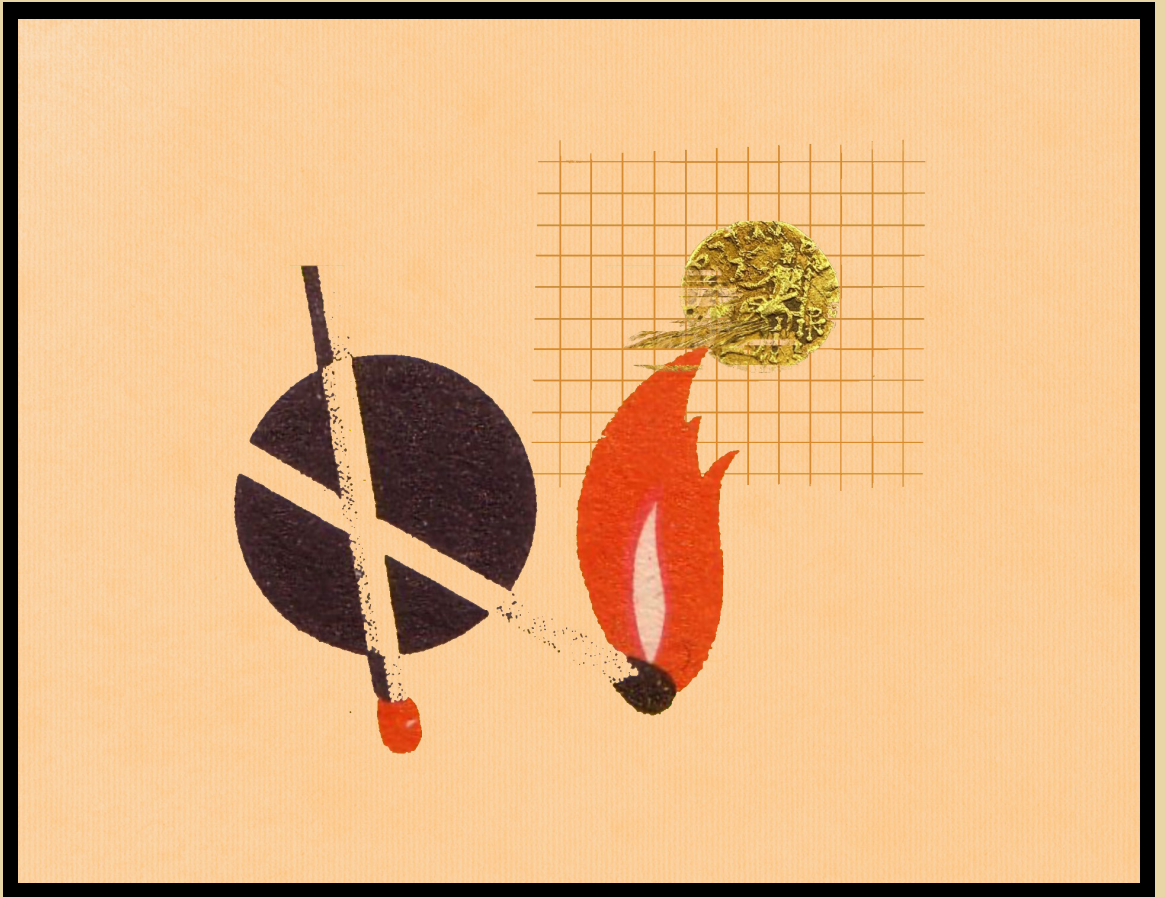
BY REN MAI

the fly in my room
circles above my head
like a halo and
i am transformed into
a planet serenaded by
a vagabond moon.

buzzing turns to symphony
and mind turns to earth.

duty, responsibility, to why
does mars kiss the sun from
millions of miles away?

innocence in red,
the dust settles,
and day is revealed to be
nothing more than a disturbance
to the night,
unswaying and firm.



“TESTED BY FIRE”

BY AUDREY RYDEN

GHOSTS

BY JOAN J. BELL

The panic haunts me like a ghost,
Uninvited thoughts impede
my ability to function
they don't take no for an answer
and they have no sense
of when they are not wanted
my mind becomes a jungle,
Every palpitation, a heart attack
Every whisper, a scream
and every
Blister
an open wound
I pour salt into.
The ghosts of punched brick scars on my
knuckles
bleeding spectral blood.
I have no use for memories
Only
Bruises
and rusty release.
It has been too long,
the bullet still trapped in the chamber
lodged in a ventricle
so deeply
I believe
it would kill me
to cut it out.

BREATH

BY MARIA CECILIA PELAYO

In and out. Up and down. One and two.

I watch, entranced,
as your chest expands—
And contracts.
In and out.
Your little snores
In the dead of night,
Keep me alert.
Every move you make
An earthquake
And every sound
A roar,
So all I can do is listen
And watch.
Up and down.
Your nose was red all day,
Your cries could be heard
Across the house.
It might have made anyone else
Despair,
But not me.

Hand around my finger
And your cheek against my breast,
I wonder if all older sisters
Get so little rest.
One and two
Fell asleep not long ago
And I, too scared to move,
Lay still
With you on my chest—
Moving up and down
As I listen for your breath.

Fear grips me on the edge
Of this treacherous ledge.

How did I get here?
What coiled road did I take

straight to the brink?
I must have forgotten to think

of the consequences
and the decisions I'd be forced to make—

Is it better to jump than fall?
Maybe I'm trying to stall.

For one last moment
in perfect calm.

I have to jump.
This truth hits me like a thump

on the back of my head
screaming "stop thinking and live!"

My mind reminds me
of who I am
and who I have always been:

Wild, careless, illogical and brave—
I've never let anything get in my way,
and I won't start now.
I'll leap down the precipice
where fear turns to relief
and death feels like living.

And if I get hurt
I'll pick myself up
and put myself back together—

But

There is water at the bottom of the cliff.
I didn't know that before,
but I see it as I fall
and I realize—

I'll be alright.

JUMP

BY MARIA CECILIA PELAYO

GAME OF TWOS

BY REN MAI

heavenly composition,
word of words—
the sounds that
come from your pursed lips
leave curving traces
in the dirt where I once lay.

mirror of mirrors,
you are me? or perhaps
all is me, in
a world of only pairs,
you, me— deity,
nestled among
the lilies and twisting
into incomprehensible design.

like smoke, you
leave me, soft and
sweet—
so with the press of two fingers,
the wax seal placed on your mouth
melts and
i make a wish
for me to fade into
obscurity.

BY KEVIN CASTRO

ORION'S BELT

A star has a star floating above it.
|
Lays heavy on the sinner's head
It clouds his vision with thorns that relentlessly draw
his blood.

A crown
Heavy is the crown that the sinner must bear...
Holy is this privilege bestowed upon
the fallen god.

The copper crown (Once a beautiful brown)
Has turned a deep green, now.

Dull and broken,
Chipped and worn...
Weary is the crown that's braved the storms —
The never-ending barrage of the prayers of his dying men.

Orion's belt is fastened tight.

Orion's belt,
Caresses his neck, such a beautiful thing to behold,

The crown has fallen from grace.

Weary is the king that leads his men to their death.

There is a god under Orion's belt. | There is a king that will always be missed.

FROM ALL OF US

AT THE ECKLEBURG PROJECT

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Cheers all around.
It truly takes a village to raise a creative project.

- THE ECKLEBURG PROJECT STAFF

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