

COEXIST

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VOICE ▶



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Dear Readers,

Coexist Lit aims to be a diverse collective of creatives around the world with a passion for writing or designing as a form of activism. This was the primary goal of this organization at its founding; after working for other youth-run publications, I felt that in many of them, the editorial staffs were too homogenous, and the pool of pieces, although offering different viewpoints from one another, rarely touched on identity and how that affects one's experiences. In one of the publications I engaged with, none of the executive board members made any move to speak out against systemic racism in the United States following the killing of George Floyd and the rise of BLM movements in the summer of 2020. Even when I advocated for the outreach team to focus on this topic and posted a few stories about silence and complicity while also sharing antiracist resources, I was reprimanded because I was considered to be too aggressive; the tone did not match the one the organization aimed to have. Hence, I wanted to create a publication with a board of people spanning many identities with one shared passion for speaking out against injustice.

We are not perfect. In trying to stress intersectionality and its affect on human experiences, we risk burdening our creatives to "represent" their identity groups and leaving perspectives out of our work. When reading this issue, please keep in mind that these are personal perspectives-- identities have a strong pull on how we experience the world, but many other overlapping identities that may not be discussed in these works make one creative's perspective distinct to the next. If you feel as though there is a way we can better showcase these marginalized perspectives, we strongly encourage you to comment and critique our work and offer suggestions on how we can include more perspectives as a publication. In other words, Coexist hopes to be an inclusive publication, and in doing that, receiving feedback is a way for us to make sure our mission matches its impact.

As the capstone of Coexist's work for our first year running, we present to you our inaugural issue: VOICE. The narratives and pieces in here touch on, but are not limited to, the following topics: being silenced, regaining voice, and art as activism. There are a few pieces included in this issue with possibly triggering images or topics; we advise you to read the trigger warnings carefully.

Thank you to all the creatives whose works have been included in VOICE. This issue could not have been materialized without you all. We hope you enjoy.

Sincerely,

Aryana Ramos-Vazquez
Founder and Editor in Chief of Coexist Lit.

LETTERS TO AMERICA by Sena Chang

Previously published in Brown Sugar Lit

November 9th, 2014

dear america,

what are you?

“the land of the free,” you call it.
when freedom chokes innocent men
and hangs them from their necks,
when it crushes man of its conscience,
melted power and white skin
into a single entity;
is it really?

“the land of the oppressed,” i call it.

July 4th, 2019

dear america,

why is it that you paint your skies with fireworks
on the fourth of the seventh month,
when a hundred thousand slaves have toiled
for your existence?

May 25th, 2020

dear america,

why is it that your history is a rotting log
feeding off the souls of the oppressed?
why is it that your breath reeks
of years of utter injustice
that sits decomposing on your earth?
look down at your crimson-stained hands, will you?
only then will you see
the ghost of precious souls,

*Breonna Taylor.
Atatiana Jefferson.
Aura Rosser.
Stephon Clark.
George Floyd.*

July 4th, 2020

dear america,

your re-genesis awaits.

MARCHING THROUGH HISTORY: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CURRENT BLACK LIVES MATTER PROTESTS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE HISTORY OF SMALL-TOWN, SOUTHERN AMERICA

by Julia Comino

As I arrived at the intersection of E 5th and Mobile Street in Hattiesburg, Mississippi on June 13th, I took in the unfamiliar space. In all 17 years that I had lived in this city, I had only ever seen this area of Hattiesburg in passing. At first glance, Mobile Street seemed to be an inconspicuous and slightly worn-down road, riddled with potholes and the occasional family business.

Overall, it looked underwhelmingly ordinary.

By the time I had walked from where I had parked at the C.E. Roy Community Center to the designated starting area for the march, a crowd of a couple hundred had gathered in the humid, southern heat. They made a peculiar scene as they filled the normally deserted street - milling about as an excited hum of conversations and chants muffled by masks filled the air.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought upon a new age of civil resistance. Public health concerns have made masks and social distancing a familiar sight at these events, but these measures are not the only changes that have occurred with protesting as of late.

Since the murder of George Floyd in late March, Black Lives Matter protests have erupted across the country, and small-town, southern America has not been excluded from this movement.

On Saturday, June 13th protestors in Hattiesburg, Mississippi marched from Mobile Street as well as from Vernon Dahmer Park to the Forrest County Circuit Courthouse where around a thousand people gathered to call for the end of racial injustice.

The group from Mobile Street arrived at the courthouse first and the afternoon continued as the voices of speakers resounded down the block, periodically interrupted by chants of "Black Lives Matter" and applause. When the protesters that had marched from Vernon Dahmer Park arrived, a deafening cheer rang out from the crowd sweeping down the packed street.

The energy that permeated through the air that day was overwhelming. As we made our way down Mobile Street toward the courthouse, I remember noticing the multitudes of ice chests set up along the sidewalks and the many small businesses that had opened their doors to pass out waters and masks. I could not help but thinking surely this is what southern hospitality meant.

Our footsteps fell atop a large, yellow-green script spelling "Black Lives Matter" that had been painted on the street by local artists the day prior. I could not shake the feeling that this scene (cont.)

was historic -- that this time and this place held great value and significance that, at the time, I could not quite understand.

Hattiesburg, Mississippi when it was founded in 1882, was unlike many of the older Mississippi settlements that existed at the time. The city, still in its infancy, offered a fresh start for African Americans trying to escape the systems of sharecropping that entrapped many in the Southern countryside. This movement from rural settlements to southern cities often referred to by historians as "The Other Great Migration", allowed Black communities in Hattiesburg to begin developing at the same time as White communities- an economic opportunity not possible for African Americans in other older Mississippi towns.

In the early days of the development of Hattiesburg, although Black and White communities could not be completely segregated economically as they both relied on and were vital to the city's booming lumber and railroad industries, these communities were starkly segregated geographically. The Railroad tracks running in between the Black Mobile-Bouie district to the north and the White Newman and Bushman Street Areas on the west were overt, visible manifestations of this separation.

The Mobile-Bouie District carved a safe haven for the Black community and economic prosperity, out of what was otherwise a strictly segregated city, and Mobile Street became the backbone of this population. Black-owned businesses, banks, movie theatres, barbershops, and hotels made for a thriving Black Business district unheard of in much of the South at that time.

The economic prosperity of this region allowed for community and culture to thrive, and the heart of the Mobile-Bouie communities laid within their churches. Although churches are culturally significant to many across the South, the importance of churches to Southern Black communities exceeds a purely spiritual relationship.

At the protest in June, before we marched to the courthouse, the protest's organizers stood on the steps of Mount Carmel Baptist Church explaining the route we would take concluding this speech with the singing of a hymn. Its lyrics rang of freedom, hope, and a promised salvation, all values prominent in Black Southern Christianity.

This Church as well as many others served as a center of community, service, and education during the rise of the Mobile Street district. Mount Carmel's congregation has now moved into a building on Main Street that was once a "whites-only" church, but the building on Mobile Street still stands as a reminder of all who once called it home.

This trend of congregations relocating and church buildings being left behind has been true for many of these churches that had once been thriving centers of community. However, St. Paul's Methodist Church remains an active fixture in the Mobile Street Community to this day, and its congregation leads in the fight to remember this church's history. In William Sturkley's book "Hattiesburg: An American City in Black and White", he describes the history that has been quite-literally engraved into the St. Paul's building. The stain-glass windows in the church have messages etched in them by previous congregations, a lasting mark of all those that found a home in Mobile Street.

Turner and Mamie Smith had both been born children of Slaves and before coming to Hattiesburg had been sharecroppers in Alabama. Their settlement in the Mobile-Bouie district allowed them to provide their children opportunities unheard of for Black individuals in the South previously. All three of their sons entered into the medical field all three of them founding businesses on Mobile Street. One of them, Hammond Smith, founded Smith Drug Co. on Mobile Street, and this pharmacy became a central fixture in the lives of those who lived in the Mobile-Bouie community as a place where children gathered to buy sodas and adults would stop to socialize.

St. Paul's Methodist church acts as a living history of all those who contributed to this prosperous community and of who many have since had their stories forgotten. We cannot recognize the prosperity of Mobile Street without remembering the stories of those whose everyday lives made it possible.

In her 2017 lecture at the African American Military History Museum in Hattiesburg, Mississippi entitled "The Rise of Mobile Street, 1884-1920", Dr Eve Wade, an Assistant Professor at Northwest University, stated, "In what some would consider an act of collective activism, the existence of Mobile Street, and other black communities across the South, illuminate one way African Americans defied the prevalence of fear, violence, substandard living conditions, and negative stereotypes created by segregation."

The importance of the Mobile Street district to the Black Communities of Hattiesburg cannot be overstated. This street served as a place of prosperity, community, and refuge for African Americans during a time where they faced constant discrimination.

When I marched on Mobile Street that day, I had been completely ignorant of the history that was ingrained into the sidewalks I was stepping on, of the lives that had been lived there, of the fight that had been fought there and is still being fought there.

The June 13th march was not the first one that has occurred on Mobile Street.

Imani Steven, an organizer of the June 13th march, told Hattiesburg American, "This was one of the routes that the Freedom Summer protestors would march down to get to the courthouse."

Freedom Summer, also known as the Mississippi Summer Project, was a volunteer campaign that's purpose was to uplift Black communities and register Black voters throughout the state of Mississippi during the summer of 1964. Though often remembered for the horrific violence that occurred as a response to this movement, the positive effect this program had on Black communities across the state cannot be overemphasized. Hattiesburg was the largest Freedom Summer site in the entirety of the State of Mississippi, with estimates of 3,000 local participants and over 600 Freedom School students.

The city of Hattiesburg became known across the nation as one of the most prominent locations in the fight for Civil Rights, with Mobile Street at the heart of it all.

Freedom Summer officially began January 24, 1964, when over a hundred Black Hattiesburg residents gathered in front of the Forrest County Circuit Courthouse. On this day, remembered as Freedom Day, the crowds marched from Mobile Street to gather at the courthouse in a mass attempt to register to vote -- the same route that protestors took this June 13th.

Mobile Street became a hub of activity for the Freedom Summer Movement as it hosted several marches after the initial Freedom Day that lasted throughout that spring and summer. The businesses, churches, and other residences on this street played key roles in the Freedom Summer movement and continued this work long after the ten-week program ended.

Jarrius Adams, a former Hattiesburg resident and activist, gave a passionate speech on the steps of the courthouse on the June 13th protest this year, exclaiming; "The heart of Civil Rights--Mississippi. People across the nation read about our leaders like Fannie Lou Hammer, Medgar Evers, Vernon Dahmer, and so many more. Every activist from that era including congressman John Lewis and James Meredith reflect on their time spent fighting for equal rights here in Mississippi.

Civil Rights leaders flocked to Hattiesburg both during Freedom Summer and for long after. Two weeks before his murder, Martin Luther King Jr spoke on the steps of Mnt. Zion Baptist Church, also known as the "Civil Rights Movement Church" here in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Medgar Evers, the NAACP's first field secretary and martyr for the Civil Rights movement, became a key figure in the Civil Rights fight in Hattiesburg. Evers led some of his most effective voter registration campaigns out of the backroom of Smith's Drug Co. during 1955 and held some of his most influential speeches on the steps of St. Paul Methodist Church on Mobile Street.

His murder in 1963, the year before Freedom Summer began, left Hattiesburg residents newly engaged in the Civil Rights Movement. Medgar Evers had become one of their own, and his death was felt widely across the Mobile-Bouie community.

Peggy Jean Connor, owner of Jean's Beauty Shop on Mobile street and later a prominent Civil Rights activist in Hattiesburg, stated that "When Medgar Evers was killed I was determined to get deeper involved in the Struggle".

Evers' murder along with the death of Clyde Kennard, who was falsely imprisoned for attempting to de-segregate the University of Southern Mississippi located in Hattiesburg, in the year of 1963 spurred many Mobile Street residents to join the fight for Civil Rights leading to the mass support of the Freedom Summer movement in the summer of 1964.

The decline of Mobile Street as a business district can be blamed on many factors: The mass movements of the white population out of downtown Hattiesburg that resulted in the creation of the suburbs of Oak Grove and Petal, the movement of businesses that followed, the desegregation of schools that resulted in the privatization of education and defunding of public schools, the abolition of Jim Crow laws that left Black-owned, small-businesses competing with the low prices that commercialized chains offered, and so many more factors left the business district on a slow decline.

When I marched on June 13th on Mobile Street, I was completely unaware of the history I was walking through.

Growing up white in Mississippi has allowed me ignorance and naivety that furthers the systems in place that cause the history of Black communities to be forgotten.

Growing up white in Mississippi is being taught about the horrific past of slavery, Jim Crow, and discrimination as something long forgotten. As if it did not happen in my own city, by my own relatives, and in my lifetime.

The same can be said of almost every small town in southern America.

The American South saw the Civil Rights movement at some of its most powerful moments, but also at its most tragic ones. As protests advocating for the end to racial injustice have spread across the United States, it has become past the time for white, small-town, southern America to investigate the history that happened in their own backyards.

During his speech on the steps of the courthouse on June 13th, Jarrius Adams declared "Attention White People," continuing to explain, "It is not up to Black Folks to undo racism. It is not up to Black Folks to undo white privilege... We didn't make this mess, white folks did. Now white folks need to clean it up."

Every city in the American South holds a history of Black perseverance being constantly met with the open jaws of hate and white supremacy. Small-town, Southern America still has a long way to go in its fight against racial injustice.

The Mississippi flag containing the confederate saltire is finally being taken down at government buildings across the state as legislation to replace the flag has been signed into law.

Yet, a confederate soldier statue stands protected in front of the Forrest County Circuit Courthouse, with the justification that the Vernon Dahmer statue, commemorating the Civil Rights activist, across from the confederate statue provides a "racial balance". Forrest County remains named after Nathaniel Bedford Forrest, a Confederate General and the first Grand Wizard of the Klu Klux Klan.

The Woods Guest House, a historic hotel and Black-owned business on Mobile Street often referred to as the Hattiesburg Freedom House, served as the headquarters for Civil Rights workers during Freedom Summer. Mrs Lenon E Woods, the owner of the Wood's Guest House, allowed Freedom Summer workers to operate out of vacant rooms in the hotel creating a safe haven for those being targeted by local White Supremacist groups for their affiliation with the movement.

This business became not only a key factor in the fight for racial justice in Hattiesburg but also became a fixture in the Mobile Street community as it was dedicated as a Freedom Library becoming the only source of reading material available to local Black residents. The Hattiesburg Public Library remained segregated until November of 1964, but even then, required African Americans to complete an application to gain access to its resources.

However, on September 17th, 1998 the Wood's Freedom House caught fire, leaving nothing but a burnt skeleton of the historic fixture left behind. Today, the area this building once stood has been turned into the J.B Wood's Park, a grassy area consisting of a bench and a plaque commemorating the hotel.

Many of the buildings that were once vital meeting places for Civil Rights workers have since been lost in time. Some lost to natural disasters, others to neglect, and even others to government-sponsored demolitions.

The Masonic Lodge that housed the Hattiesburg Ministers Union and provided food and lodging to pastors and rabbis working for the Civil Rights Movement during Freedom Summer is now an empty green lot without a trace of the former building.

The Hattiesburg Community center located on Dewey street that once served the residents of the Mobile Street area was lost to a fire in the 1960s.

Jean Connor's Beauty Salon, once a thriving business on Mobile Street and a center in the fight for voting equality in Hattiesburg, is no longer in existence. This building once also housed a shoeshine parlor run by her father, John Henry Gould, but has seemingly disappeared from the sidewalk where it once stood.

Mobile Street had once been packed with business fronts crowding the sidewalks, but now cement patches of these building's foundations and grass lots left behind by demolitions outnumber the buildings that are still standing.

This mass loss of history is not at the fault of the residents who once did or still do live in the Mobile Street area, but rather a wake-up call for individuals, like myself, who had never considered this street's history. To remain in ignorance of this historic place is a disservice to all those who fought, lived, and died there.

Some of his most influential speeches on the steps of St. Paul Methodist Church on Mobile Street.

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The American South saw the Civil Rights movement at some of its most powerful moments, but also at its most tragic ones. As protests advocating for the end to racial injustice have spread across the United States, it has become past the time for white, small-town, southern America to investigate the history that happened in their own backyards.

During his speech on the steps of the courthouse on June 13th, Jarrius Adams declared "Attention White People," continuing to explain, "It is not up to Black Folks to undo racism. It is not up to Black Folks to undo white privilege... We didn't make this mess, white folks did. Now white folks need to clean it up."

And Governor Tate Reeves designated April “Confederate Heritage Month” earlier this year.

There is still a long way to go but recognizing the history of these towns is a vital step towards progress.

Without recognizing the history of the places that these protests are occurring; we allow the others who fought before us to be forgotten.

While I was in the process of writing this article, I decided to revisit Mobile Street.

Walking down Mobile Street for the second time felt as though I had not seen it at all previously. My earlier assessment that this street was ordinary, was a devastatingly false evaluation based on my own ignorance. Where I had first seen empty grass lots or crumbling road, I now saw the remnants of the Wood’s Freedom House, Masonic Lodge, Jean’s Beauty Salon, and the hundreds of other businesses that once thrived there. The hundreds of lives that once existed there.

To compare the reality of Mobile Street today to the thriving historic site of its past requires one to recognize how and why this happened, but also entails not dismissing the community that still does exist here.

The Hattiesburg Convention Commission is currently in the process of expanding the 6th Street Museum District that is currently located less than a block from Mobile Street, adding plans to create museums commemorating African American heritage and the Freedom Summer Movement. Currently, the District consists of the African American Military History Museum, once the Black U.S.O. club in Hattiesburg that served as a community center and one of the only Black libraries for the area, the Historic Eureka School, once the only school African American students could attend because of segregation, and the Oseola McCarty House, the house of the late philanthropist who gave her life savings from years being a washerwoman to the University of Southern Mississippi to create a scholarship for low-income, minority applicants. The plans announced for this district also include commemorating Mobile Street businesses.

In January of this year, the City of Hattiesburg announced that the Smith’s Drug Co. building that had been left vacant for years would be restored as a part of their 6th Street Museum District Program. The Smith’s Drug Co., founded by Hammond Smith in 1925, represented the peak of Mobile Street not only as a business district but a vibrant community.

When I read that this business was being commemorated my mind immediately shot back to the names that I had read that had been carved in the windows of St. Paul’s Baptist Church. Turner and Mamie Smith, remembered in those carvings, had brought their families to the Mobile-Bouie District in an act of hope in the early 1890s settling there as educators.

Their three sons who had been the ones to carve that engraving had become successful medical field workers, all three opening businesses on Mobile Street, though Hammonds Smith's pharmacy is the only one still standing. Smith's Drug Co. once stood as a center of the community, Smith's soda fountain lies in the childhood memories of many who once called Mobile Street home. The Smith Family represents the interconnectedness between every church, business, and resident of the Mobile-Bouie District.

Tashara Smith-Shoemaker, the granddaughter of Charles Smith, the brother of Hammond Smith that was a doctor on Mobile Street, told the Hattiesburg American in an article published January 16th of this year that it had been hard for her to find information regarding her grandfather as he had died before her birth and described her emotions after learning about his significance to the Mobile-Bouie neighborhood stating "I'm excited. I'm ecstatic. There are not enough words to describe it. Now everybody is getting a chance to learn about it."

The restoration of Smith's Drug Co. represents the beginning of a new era in the fight for remembering the Mobile-Bouie District. The restoration of this business will commemorate the life -- not only of the Smith family -- but of every business owner, civil rights worker, and member of this community, and will also open the doors to the possibility of honoring other Mobile Street businesses individually.

This year would mark the 15th year of the Historic Mobile Street Renaissance Festival. This festival usually occurs on the first weekend in October with events located throughout the historic Mobile-Bouie Area. This event's purpose is to remember Mobile Street not as a business district, but as a once and still vibrant Black community.

Protesting in small-town, Southern America presents an interesting relationship between fighting for a better future as well as honoring the not so distant past. Straddling these issues calls upon us not to forget the history of these people and these places, as without them the progress already made for racial justice in America would not exist.

We must recognize that protests in small-town, southern America could not happen today without the years of marching, fighting, and simply just existing that Black communities did for generations before now.

It is crucial to remember Mobile Street both as a prominent, business district that defied all odds but also as a community--a place many once did and still do call home.

Hattiesburg is not the exception. Every small, Southern town has a history that is struggling to remain remembered. The first step toward justice must be remembering these places' histories.

Because without remembering the histories of all those that came before us, we will not be able to bring about the change needed to create a more just future.

UNDOCUMENTED VOICES by Tashifia Ahmed

The sun rises from the other side of his bed one day
And father's gone, he's been taken away,
And you cry, you cry your eyes out but the hands,
The hands that soothed your sobs are gone,
No one hears your voice fading away.
Has that ever happened to you?

You were driven away from a place that you called your mother land
And you walked into new grounds with your tiny hand
Wrapped around a tired, calloused finger
That led you into new horizons to call your own.
This is your new abode.
They tell you you'll be safe here, but are you?

The people here tell you you're not welcome here.
The bombs back home tell you you're not welcome there.
But you're just a child, you just want a bed
And faces that don't sneer at your existence.
Has your existence ever been made into a burden?

The voices tell you to unburden their lands
The land you traded with your sweat dripping onto wooden planks,
That you built a roof over to protect your kins
From the bullets of sharp-tongued words,
That pierce through skins, and embed into their consciousness.
You can soothe them from the demons that plague their dreams at night
But how will you ward off all the demons that plague their life?

Watch your step, your life is a game of minesweeper.
Keep quiet, nod, tip-toe around the rules they've set
Rules on how you can breathe, while they breathe down your neck.
It's true the law is blind. The eyes of law have been blinded
With a bandana woven in bills of green
The green of envy, the green of greed, the green of ignorant fear
That they threaten to strangle you with,
Until they squeeze your voice out of its shell
And you're mute. They've transferred their fears onto you.

But you, you'll fight on for survival won't you?

You're a fighter, you'll stand your ground
With roots planted firmly in virtues
With eyes that navigate through the darkest of paths
With arms that reach out for light,
And reach into new heights,
Where vengeance is kindness returned times nine.

You're a fighter, you'll stand your ground
Against the blindness of a law, an impaired constitution,
That draws lines between humankind,
That strangles humanity with barbed wires
It had wound up to shut out evil eyes
Of malicious masterminds that threaten to corrupt these lands.
But what good is a border of barbed wires,
When evil is homegrown?

What good is a constitution that contradicts its own virtues?
What good is a law that keeps turning a blind eye to the child being tossed from room to room?
What good are lands that hang the promise of freedom above your head,
And snatch it in the name of civility masking self-service?
What good is a soil that buries humanity to use
Its carcasses as fuel?
It's fuel that burns for backdoor giants that smashed the wires
And poured bills of green into the well of power.

Hear your wake up call, survivor.
Choke out the soil they shoved into your airways.
You brave thing, dig up your voice from its graveyard of fear.
You and I, we are of the same blood and flesh,
Tempered in the same fire,
No matter what color you wear on your skin.
There is power in the oneness, we'll form a symbiosis
And synchronize our voices in a harmony of protest.

THE VOICE OF REASON: HOW PAST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS HAVE SHAPED CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE VOICES OF MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

by Amanda R. Chapa

While most of America is still reeling from the whirlwind that has been the 2020 election season, one filled with record breaking voter turnout and more than a few upsets from both political parties, we've also seen a resurgence of conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and an uproar of political unrest, as well as two campaigns headlining many of the issues our society is facing at the moment, and one who is nothing but a catalyst, and that has headlined numerous other Presidential elections as well— the topic concerning race. While this topic has been regarded as too “taboo” a subject to talk about freely, it's become a means for political debate, where candidates try their cases on what the issue is through their own perspectives, and treat it as an issue instead of a topic that encompasses over 83% of Americans. Seen through the presidential races of 1860, between former President Abraham Lincoln and Democratic nominee John Breckenridge, as well as in 1960, which claimed the race between former President John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. The third race, however, is also one of America's most memorable, and has held the birth of racial conspiracy theories at its frontline: the race between former President Barack Obama and Mitt Romney of 2012.

Beginning with the race of 1860, in which we see the issue of slavery connect individually to the topic of race, we also see a non-discreet variable constantly overlooked: the amounting tension of abolitionists— or those who were ready to talk about race, and free Black and Brown Americans from the cusps of the chains the white and wealthy had kept them under for too long. This race, which highlighted the Centrist movement between Republican Abraham Lincoln, a candidate who was pro-slavery, and John Breckenridge the Southern Democratic Party's nominee, and one who was also pro-slavery for the Western part of America. These candidates juggled the issue of race and slavery as one unit together, but both entirely overlooked the cost of each life they took by doing this. When Lincoln took office in 1860 and was proclaimed President Elect, he was still on the cusp of slavery, and was against abolition of the entire state, something many abolitionist like John Brown, were entirely against. His win meant settling for the bare minimum, and although he is often praised as the President who “abolished slavery and racism” (Library of Congress, 2020,) he instead took this racial issue and upended it, creating segregation for Black Americans against their white counterparts, and people who left them with nothing at all. In fact, with the Civil War on the backburner of everyone's mind, Lincoln was able to entirely overlook those he freed after backlash and the publications of “The dangers of extending slavery; and, The contest and the crisis: two speeches,” (1856,) by William H. Seward, who was an abolitionist, but who was defeated by Lincoln for the Republican nomination.

The topic of race wasn't exactly born yet, but began from conversations stated by abolitionists and those that were pro-slavery, and was a topic that will forever headline this Presidential race — not for its turn for the best, but both nominee's disregard for those that weren't white, and for their disrespect and disregard for those suffering from slavery, with and without the Emancipation Proclamation.

Although the issue of slavery was diminished into that of segregation, the topic of race was still ingrained deeply into it, seen in the election of 1960, between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon (Elections History, 2020). This race, which was at the height of the Civil Rights Era, and the Civil Rights of Black Americans was seen as a crucial issue concerning racial injustices in the country. As segregation raged on, this race saw backlash and constant mockery being made of Civil Rights Activists such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

These influential activists wanted full legal equality, something Kennedy saw as a borderline issue, but something Nixon saw as ghastly and unneeded. While both candidates tiptoes around the issues concerning the race of Americans, such as that of discrimination when it came to the abundance of issues concerning the livelihood of Black Americans, (such as housing, employment, education, etc.) segregation remained largely undeterred, especially with the arrival of hate group such as the KKK, which were the deciding votes for counties won in the South towards a Nixon victory. Although the race was won by Kennedy, he was slow to deter segregation during his presidency, and although Black Americans were the reason Kennedy had the edge in the race, with over 70% of voters, he was compelled to take them more seriously after it was further publicized by the Freedom Rides, in order to defy segregation on interstate transportation (J.F.K Library, 1960). However, official legislation to cover race and defend Black Americans wasn't passed until months after the assassination of Kennedy, called the Civil Rights Act, which necessarily banned segregation (National Archives, 2020).

However, after the issues of slavery and segregation concerning race were put to rest, or at least properly ignored, the final Presidential Race was a moniker for more and slightly rampant conspiracy theories, and brought the race of one of the candidates to the front stage of multiple conversations. That race, in question, was the 2012 race against Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. As the first Black man to ever hold the presidency, Obama was constantly being seen as a token politician, something that was further politicized in the racial issues surrounding the Black and Brown communities. Romney, who was politicized for racist remarks, was a front runner for these conspiracy theories pushing what is seen as "Birtherism," which called into question Obama's nationality and race as an American citizen. His racial injustices also spread along to his deportation of numerous minorities and legislative moves that would disengage many laws that protected colored individuals from being outlawed from housing and public offices, as well as racist and Islamophobic remarks towards Muslim individuals and those who didn't fit the WASP model he rectified. Although the race was won by Obama by a wide margin, Romney's cessation left a large hole in America's ideas of racial injustice, and although it was pushed because of Obama's race and his tokenism, it was once again overshadowed, despite playing a major role in both men's campaigns and the election of the former President.

I EXIST AND I MATTER by Yœbeno

For many years, I suppressed what I believed and what I desired to affirm out loud. I buried my creativity because I genuinely thought no one cared about my voice.

My heart was sealed. My expressive eyes were narrowed. My thoughts were silenced. My lips were fastened.

2019 and 2020 amplified this exhausting fear of solely being “me.” I’m voluntarily left with the attempt of acknowledging who I am. The one thing I know for sure is: I still struggle to defend myself when someone affects me verbally and physically.

I will be more efficient at this. I will be more capable of defending myself because I deserve justice too.

To my dear ex-friendships, mutual ex-acquaintances, ex-not-serious-relationships, ex-classmates, local ex-teachers, ex-neighbours, ex-co-workers: I Existed and I Mattered. Prevalent racism, misogynoir, sexism, patriarchy and lies could have been avoided. I was astounded by all of those things.

They could’ve been avoided. How? Instead, I got out preserving my lifetime peace. Is it selfish? Wrong? Please, I just want a safe surrounding. How? I’m quiet, isolated and observant. But I’m working on collecting my power back after all this negative energy.

Let’s say I’m thankful for the lessons learned. I guess there’s a room for growth. Because all I was facing was confusion, indignation, sadness, embarrassment, despair, frustration and unhappiness.

They usually say “I understand you” but they never will. At least, I hope so.

I Exist and I Matter just like You Exist and You Matter.

THE LOOP by Sheeks Bhattacharjee

'Round and 'round the bush
children squabble
heels of their shoes
clacking on the cobble.

A new child spoke up once—
just once—
before seeing greener grasses
and moving towards the fun.

Children continue to scream;
yelling bad words and
saying things that are mean.
"That is my enemy", they believe.

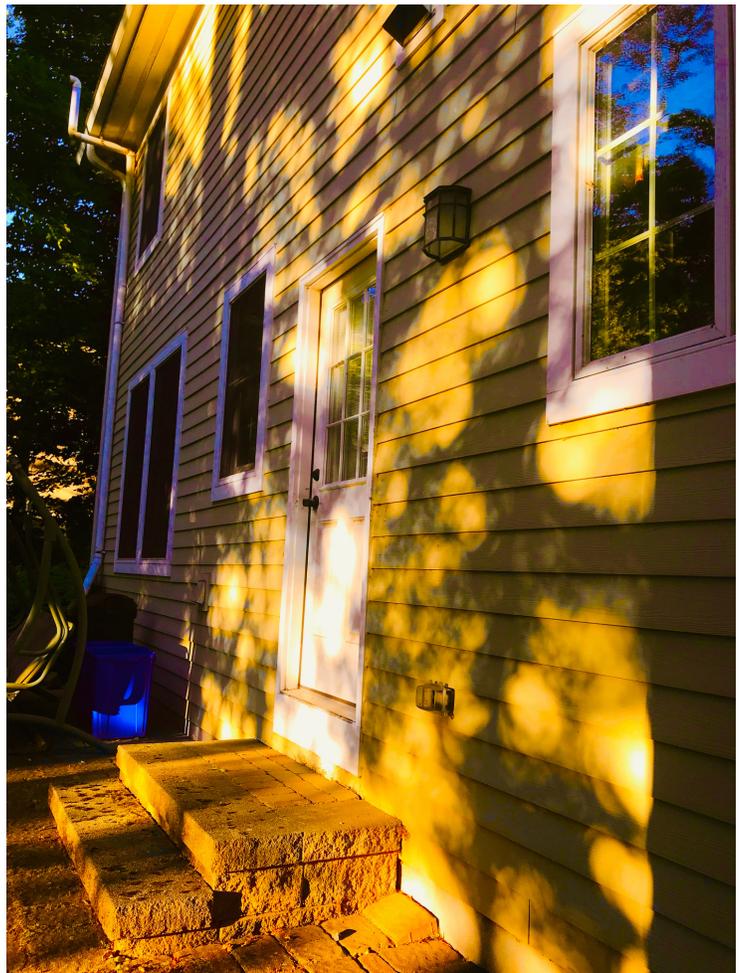
While the children talk
about the fate of the world,
the adults continue to walk
towards the One who is too bold.

We don't hear the cries
of those locked up
and left to die;
too busy to look up.

'Round and 'round the bush
our little planet goes,
but the streets are hushed
and nobody will ever know.

We don't know the hurt;
We don't know the pain;
What we know now
is our remains.

Until the new kid moves in;
and digs this up again.

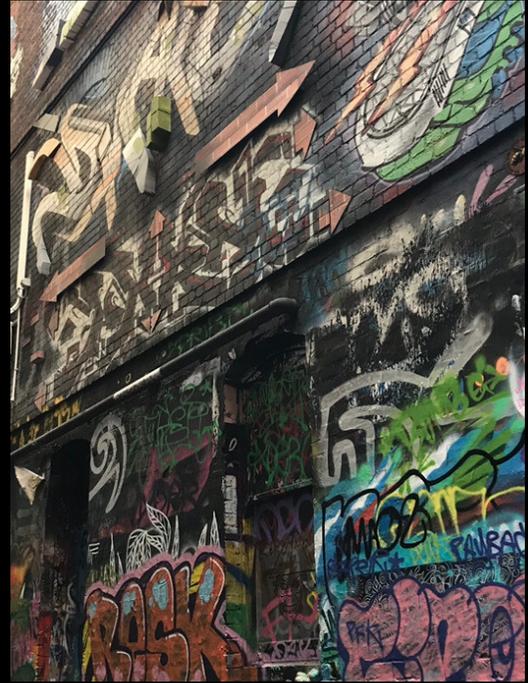


Summer Afternoon by Maggie Yan

SUPPOSE YOU'D NEVER SEEN DAYLIGHT

by Tashifa Ahmed

This skin only knows artifice.
It has never seen or felt the warmth of daylight.
This skin only knows the fluorescence
Emitted by tubes of glass electrified.
It knows not to ask for the nutritions
From which it has been deprived.
It only seeks out brightness,
Believing it to be Truth, undisguised.
Little does it know of
The vastness of possibilities
Lying outside.
If it's never known what lies
Beyond the bounds of its walled up heights
How could it crave
Its unbounded shine.

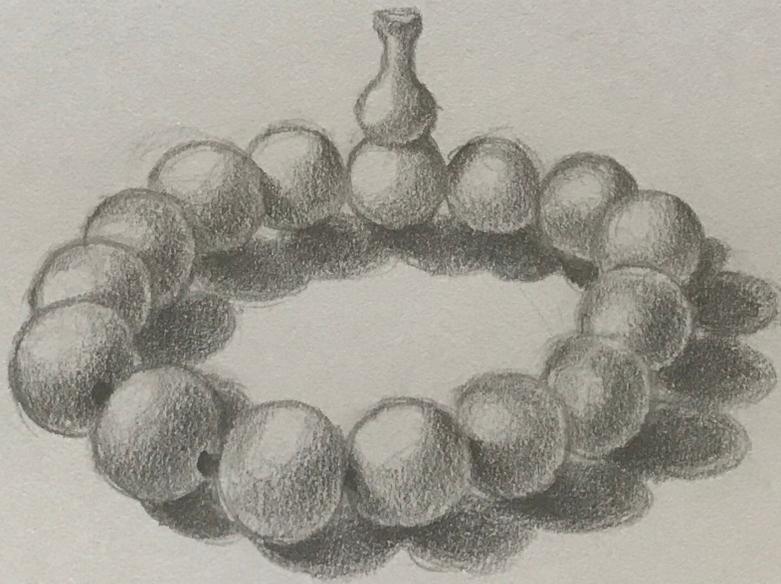


Urban Cries by Anonymous

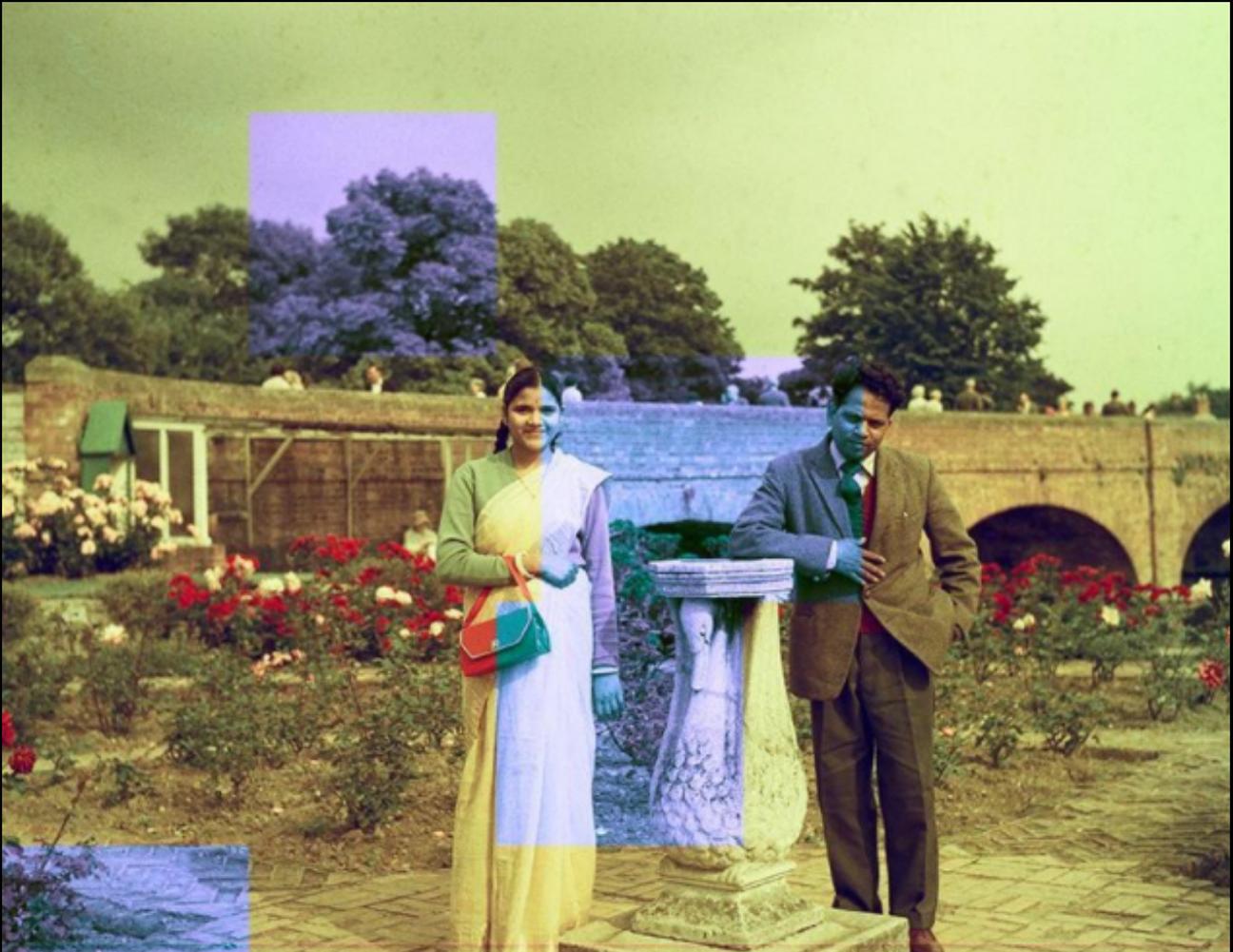
YOUNG SPOROPHYTE

by Maryam Arshad

We grew up
Small seedlings
Barely a life, absent leaves for shelter, absent blossoms for beauty
Grew from small things
In the wilderness and frost of early December
As the ivy coiled around its closest competitor
And the roots of the chestnut oak stretched out for miles
Where there was nothing but emptiness and melancholy
Age brought with it a softness that did not belong
Too curved and perfect to belong in the barren
We wish we hadn't grown up
For the dreams turned into cold clouds of grey
To realise that growing up does not mean we grow
We grew from small things
Warm amongst the stones and the soil
Only we did not grow
Not at all



THIS SPACE IS TAKEN by Tarla Patel



Amplifying the voices of my past gives me the courage to face the future. I tried to move away from my history and memories but circumstances brought me back home. In my teenage years, listening to my mum or dad talk of the past flittered by with the noise of television and other distractions. It is amazing how easy your voice can be lost, becoming a hidden story in another generation, where only fragments drift to the surface.

As I turn the leaves of the family albums, I wonder why it has taken me so long to recognize the importance of my own family's history. But I know the answer to this question. This blinkered perception has been created over decades. To only see your cultural heritage as a decorative footnote for diversity. To hear artists from the same background shun their heritage, not wanting to be 'that type of artist'. It did not surprise me that my mum would question why anyone would be interested in stories of the past, why anyone would be interested in her story.

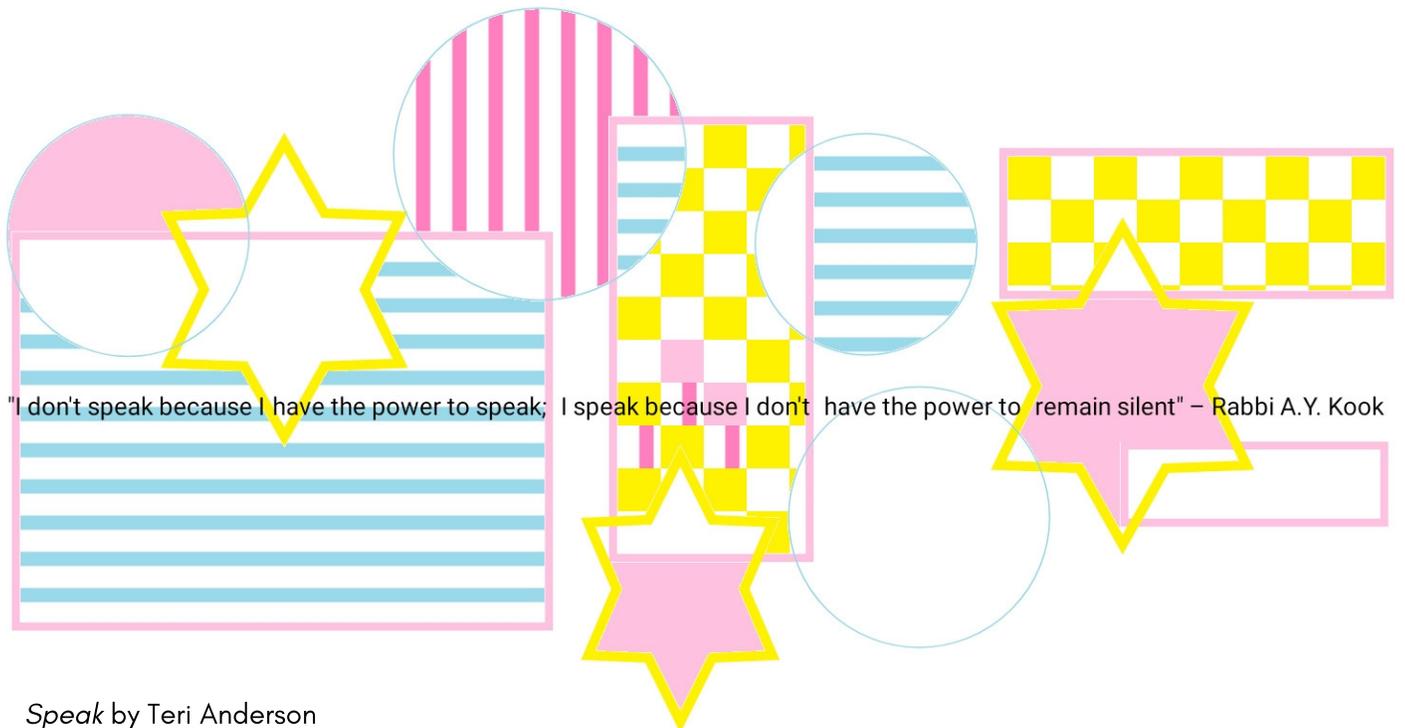


As lockdown continues, I share my mother's space. This space is filled with reminiscence and rituals of her past. Her encounters with wild snakes, memories of pulling water from a well, seem so idyllic next to the life she happened upon in the UK. I wonder if the past is always tainted with nostalgia, no matter how unfair it seems now. In one story she praises how her mother in her small Indian village had kept secret that she had started her period so she could continue her education. In another she tells of waiting to see the Queen with a group of Indian friends and being pushed to the back by the police. In another breath she tells me of her first trip to the hairdressers in England and buying a Christmas tree. I lock these memories in a white glowing screen. Her experiences have shaped her and me.

My art has become my voice. It has helped me explore my identity and the space I occupy. It has given me the tools to create a voice for those marginalized in society and with that I start with the voice of my mother.



Photographs of Ramaben Patel from the Masterji Photography Archive © 2021



PACKAGES AT THE CLAIM by Jana Jandal Alifai

I am patiently waiting at the airport
You see, I was told my package would arrive today

That I would finally get a grasp on my identity—
bygone to the waiting, my story will become full of meaning

However, all I found was broken glass and shattered plates
The glass marked as words, sentences and metaphors that no longer make sense

It's my language that makes my blood seep through me
Cries while letters of another language, no longer familiar to me,

Stuck in my throat and at the bridge of my tongue
Letters that spell my name with pride, I don't feel anymore

I drenched it with water and English letters
For perhaps, it can flow better within me, and others

The package contained lost bridges that supposed to connect me
To the rivers filled with poems, and forgotten stories intertwined with lost history

It contained reminders of things I had let go,
So I can carry the lighter bag

But alas, my broken Arabic serves as a reminder
Of damaged packages and wrecked parcels, the same way I am.

Tomorrow I will be at the package claim
Helping, aiding and explaining.

"Don't worry about the disappointment," I say
To the new faces, with a broken smile similar to mine

At the end, my siblings, we learn not what we wanted,
But what we needed. We will forever be broken and torn.

The way our names, life and identity are
And at least we all are at the package claim together.

THE PAIN AND FORTUNE OF FORGETTING

by Jana Jandal Alifai

When I was 8 years old, the Syrian civil war started. I remember having this exciting feeling that something was happening. I watched protestors from my living room window crying for freedom, and I longed to call with them. My family never shed away from discussing or participating in politics; in fact, my grandfather was a politician and once a protestor. I had understood the corruption and dictatorship that had devoured Syria's system, though not as deeply as I do now almost a decade later. It felt unusual though, that my mother was silent about the state of our country to everybody. I understood why later.

Not many days after the demonstrations had started across the country, changes started to happen. Firstly, my private school that was supposedly free from government oversight had an appointed supervisor from the ministry. We were forced to go on little 'demonstrations' in support of Assad around the school and to change our uniforms to match public schools one.

And at one point my teacher was replaced with an 'approved' one. Violence ensued soon after. I recall tanks being on the street parallel to mine; bombs and shots could be heard.

There was an instance I remember, where our school kept us in our classrooms instead of letting us go on the bus. Imagine children buzzing around, unsure of what was happening. We were confused and frightened. When they finally started dropping us off, they took weird routes and changed the drop-off order. I recall being dropped off last and my mother freaking out about my very late arrival.

My mother had been in fourth grade when the Hama Massacre of 1982 happened. It was a mini revolution in her hometown that was brutally suppressed by the Assads. My mother knew strong forces were coming, but they were much worse than she had ever seen, and so she started taking precautions.

We stopped going to school. We moved to stay with my grandparents a few streets away. A few months after, we moved to my mother's town. My father was living in the UAE, so we were able to get flights out there and leave. We were Canadians too; we knew we were always going to be protected.

I don't remember much of the war because I didn't see it. I was saved by the luck of going to the UAE and then again to come here.

None of my friends had that privilege, none left.

My childhood friends are ones that I spent most, if not all, my waking time with. I memorized the Quran with them, I danced with them, and I went to school with them. They were almost like siblings to me.

I don't know their names anymore. It's like their struggles had too become too foreign.

After I left, I didn't know how to reach them or what to talk to them about. How could I ever say anything after I got out and they didn't. The ones who left later lived in refugee camps or other Arab countries tormented with war. My biggest worry was that my iPad ran out of charge sooner than I thought it would. Guess what? I had electricity to charge it too.

I recently found a picture of me and my friends, and I barely knew one of their faces. What I do remember is how great they all were, and how smart and talented they were. But still, they are in a war-torn country with no water, no electricity and I am here. I am here because my father decided to come to this country before he even met my mother and became a Canadian.

A few years ago, I went back to Syria and I got invited to attend my school's summer camp. I hadn't had the chance to walk through the door of a basement of a building I had never been to before. Before I even understood what was happening around me, a teacher recognized me. She was so happy to see me again, so happy that I was here to visit and happy that I had gotten out. It took me a minute to see who she was. It hurt me that I couldn't be as happy as she was to see me.

I am here because I got lucky. I will never forget that.

I promised myself that even if I don't remember their names or their faces, even if I don't recall the names of my teachers or what they taught me, I will remember their impact.

I will work hard at every opportunity. I will try my best at every chance I get. To prove to myself that I deserve to be here. That the luck I got doesn't go to waste. I don't want to be a weed in a field of flowers. I want to work hard so that one day I could look my friends in the eye and say that I remembered your spirits and what you taught me. I will work hard for all my friends.

All the people and memories that my brain erased, are kept in my brain in everything I will do.

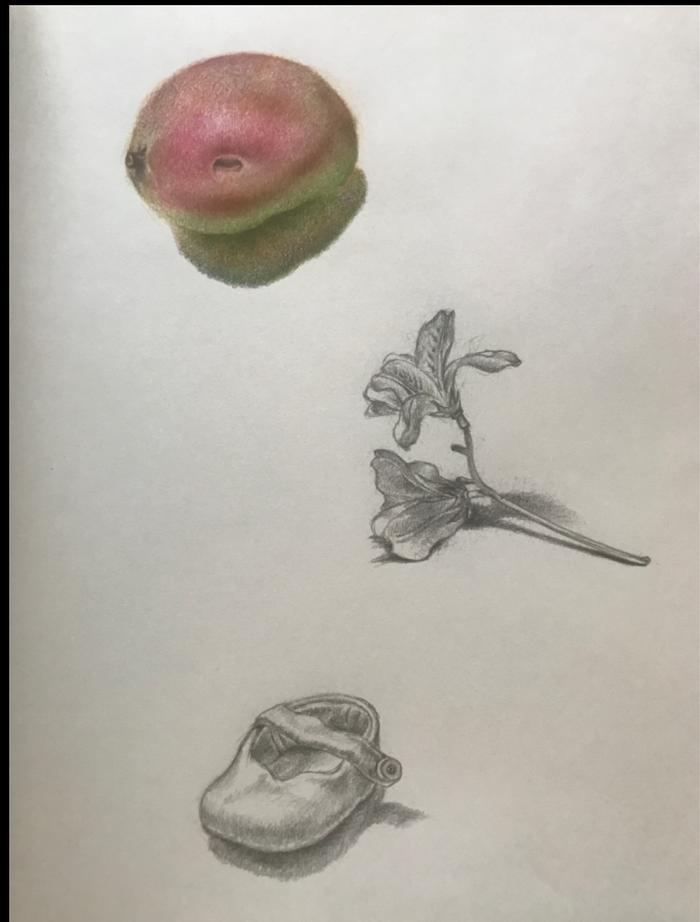
MEMORIES by Mahin Sameen

Content Warning: Sexual assault

Somedays, they come as a hoard, locusts eating away all sanity,
silence roams all around, dark clouds form above,
engulfing everything in a shadow, an impending doom,
visions flash, of dead sunflowers,
a flock of crows exploding from a tree,
and somewhere lurks the sadness; despotic melancholy,
crawling out of hiding,
grief is a hurricane, coming forth like a gushing stream,
grief, regret, bitterness, disgust,
all at once, like hands from an abyss,
take hold of me.

You scratched away at my innocence,
and my naivety began to rust,
parts of me were stained,
others were poisoned or crushed to dust,
leaving me a rusty, injured object,
you opened the facet of hatred,
and disappeared into thin air.

You gave me a wound
that hasn't stopped bleeding.



Nostalgia by Maggie Yan

I'M NOT SORRY, GOODBYE by Geraldine Devarras

Content Warning: Domestic abuse, murder

I've always been a fan of justice. I love the thought of how Lady Justice should always wear its blindfold to not pick and choose based on one's wealth, power, and status. I watched different law series and entertained myself with several preaching of lawyers. I wanted to be a lawyer who defends people's rights and serves justice in the right process.

I chose a different path, a trail different from what I imagined I would become.

"Does anyone care to share his or her favorite toxic chemical?" our professor asked. Well, even though I don't want this degree, I make sure I don't fail. After all, I don't want to be a disappointment.

I raised my hand.

"Arsenic, sir. It's my favorite because, unlike other toxic chemicals, it has no taste, color, or smell. It is hard to identify" It's hard to accept at first, but studying chemicals has grown into my heart. Hours pass and my classes finish. I drive my car to the cemetery to visit my mom.

"Hello there, Mama. It's been a while since I last visited you. School's been hectic" She may not respond but I know she understands it. Ah, my loving and caring mother. I wish you were still here.

My Saturday went well; today is Sunday, a sunny day. It looks like the sun is smiling.

"Senor! Senor! Open the door! Your father is lying down and unconscious in the kitchen!" I run over and see my father lying near the stool bar.

"Petro! To the nearest hospital!"

But we are late, he's dead on arrival.

My father is a well-known businessman, we own a pharmaceutical company that supplies different drugs around Asia. News from different outlets and rumors started to spread like a wildfire. Even my father's autopsy has been revealed to the public. His cause of death? Poisoning. They say I'm the culprit, but they lack shreds of evidence. I am not shocked for being the prime suspect: my dad and I used to have misunderstandings all the time.

After my father's burial, my sister looks so devastated. Losing both of your parents is heartbreaking.

"It's okay, Trishia. I will never leave you behind"

Our lives don't go back to normal. We don't have parents anymore. Currently, it's just me, my sister, and our house servants. Unusual things start to happen in our house. Nana Isabel, our long-time maid, says maybe it's our father whose soul is wandering. 40 days is not yet over.

In Petro's point of view, our father didn't want to die yet, but suddenly, he died anyway. Picture frames and other things on the wall are starting to fall as if someone is touching them. Nightmares after nightmares are plaguing me. Some of our maids are even complaining that the piano behind the stairs is starting to play. My sister said she can sense someone is always with her in her room.

"If it's you, old man, leave me alone."

But our father is such a hard-headed old man. He's even choking me to death in my dreams, or better to call it a nightmare!

I visited his room the other day. It was neat and clean even though he was dirty. Well, it's still the same room I used to sleep in whenever he wanted to. What a total jerk and asshole.

I saw my sister holding his picture.

"What are you doing here?" she startled and looked at me with a teary eye .

She runs and hugs me. **"You are now free from his hands."**

"Trishia, what?"

"I knew it! I knew what he was doing to you!"

Since our mother died, dad was a loving father. Then, he started to come home drunk and exploit my body. I was taught to follow him because he was my dad and I was afraid that he would do the same for my sister.

Flashbacks enter my mind.

"Hmm. You're reading Principle of Taxation?" Andrew asks, he is one of my block mates who also tends to be one of my board mates.

"Yes. For some reason, I want to take Legal Management" he seems shocked; no wonder, I take BS Chemistry in College.

"Why?" Here we go again.

"Because I have no freedom"

My dad is the CEO of a worldwide known pharmaceutical company who develops and distributes drugs—in the context of healthcare—to our partners in business. Well, my sister is just in her 8th grade of Junior High School, which makes me, in a few years, his next successor to manage our company.

I don't really like chemistry, but I don't want to disappoint my parents then. However, things got complicated when my mom died.

"Senorito Aiden!" One afternoon, while I'm on my lunch break, Petro calls me, our family driver.

"Senor, you must go to the hospital!"

"I'm confused. Why? I am not sick." I wear my confusion and worry clearly on my face. I have a bad feeling about this.

"Senora Aizel is rushed to the hospital! She was seen unconscious in the garden with a stab—"
My mind went blank, lots of scenarios filling my mind-- my mom, my mother.

The adrenaline starts to work. I drive to the hospital as fast as I can-- there is no way I can allow my mom to die. But the world wants to test my faith in God. My mom died. Of all people on this planet, why does it have to be my mom? She's sweet and caring! The most kindhearted person I've ever met.

"Condolence, Trav."

"My deepest condolence to you and your family, Travis."

"She is now an angel, Travis."

"Angel? Did he have to take my mother this early in my life?" I am mad. I am on the verge of my life where I no longer believe in him.

"Travis! Your respect, please!" I ignored my father. Not this time, Dad. Not this time.

A month after my mother's burial, I go back to our house. I can still remember how my mom used to call me every day to convince me to stay in our house. I wish I did that.

"Welcome back, Seniorito." I smiled at Nana Isabel, aside from my mother, Nana Isabel also raised me. The house that once I called home no longer gives me warmth, instead, it's giving me chills that make me run away and never return.

"You're here!" But for some reason, I want to stay with my sister and father. They're what I have now.

"Yes, I guess I'll be living with you for a while." she smiled happily, my poor sister, at a very young age she lost our mother.

Well, for months, we've been happy, but after that, another deluge came into my life. "Hey" out of nowhere my sister called me.

"Hmm?" I shake my head.

"Okay. but I want to ask something" She seems uneasy.

"Shoot." I can hear her deep breathe

"Do you notice that dad often goes home drunk?" That caught me of guard.

These past few days, he always comes home drunk and late with Uncle Jerome, his secretary, but I just shrugged it off.

“Maybe he’s just devastated, he can’t move on about what happened to mom?” “Go upstairs and sleep, I’ll be waiting for dad.”

A couple of hours, he’s at our house, drunk with Uncle-- again. Minutes have passed until Uncle finally leaves.

“Ugh. this family gives me a headache” I whispered .

I accompany dad up to his room until that happened, up until after few years, his hands traveled all around my body .

“If you will not obey me, your sister will be the one who will do this.”

Hell will be your only destination afterlife, Old man. I will gladly take you to hell.

“He harassed me and treat me like a whore. I am his son! His own flesh and blood!” I looked at Trishia, my sister whom I treasure the most after our mom .

“I know, I know” She’s sobbing, crying like a baby.

“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry” She started saying sorry as if the word “sorry” is a chant that will make her feel better.

“Justice is served for you, I can’t take it anymore, t-that’s why, t-that’s why I killed him!” she shouted and hysterically sat down and cry again, she cried hysterically for a long minute.

“Sorry to interrupt both of you, Seniorita Trishia and Seniorito Travis, but the Investigators and the police are downstairs in the living room.”

“The police?”

“Yes, Senior.”

“Leave us for a while”

“No! No! Stop them! They will put me behind bars! They will come for me” My sister is begging me like crazy.

“Trisha calm down!” I hold her at her shoulders ***“Just stay here”***

I run down to the living area.

"Good afternoon, what do we have here?" I ask as if I don't know what will happen.

"Is Ms. Trishia Azel Montenegro here?" Sir Julio, the investigator my father's company hired, asks.

"Hmm. why?"

"We found her fingerprints at the crime scene" Sir Juan handed me plastic that has pieces of evidence.

"Also, a deleted video of CCTV that we recovered, she put the poison to your father's water," he added.

"We are still figuring out what poison she used, we detect Botulinum toxin but we can sense something is wrong." I nodded at pointed out our father's room.

"Please, take care of her."

They carry her while she's struggling and trying to escape. My poor little sister. The house feels emptier.

Nightmares are done. But I can still feel his presence at our house.

"Wow. Leave old man, aren't you happy that your murderer is now paying her debts to you?"

For instance, a vase fell off. I smile darkly.

"Hmm. Want to reveal my little secret?"

It was not only my sister who killed our father. It was me and her. I was the one who grew tired of all the dirty things he has done to me, and I'm glad my sister did the dirty work for the both of us.

My sister is dumb for not working clean.

Days before, I eavesdropped on my sister that she will kill our dad like crazy. I purposely gave her my book about poison, hoping she will use her brain and not immediately surrender herself to the cops.

"Why are you giving me this?"

"Use that for future purposes, I might not take over the company"

Days pass. my plan is going smoothly.

"Hey, is Arsenic poisonous?" Bingo, Lil' sis.

“Well, it depends.” It is up to her where she will get the Arsenic, but I figure my sister is a little dumb, so I tour her around the company.

But for me, arsenic is not that poisonous, the victim will still have the time to recover.

Hmm. I have an idea. Wait for it, old man, and you'll die soon.

My sister is such a weak-hearted girl, she's trembling while putting the poison, she even didn't use any gloves to cover her fingerprints, but I'll save her ass at the CCTV. In a panic, she left the Arsenic next to the glass while she took something from the living room, then I added a little dirt and mess.

But let just say. I am not guilty.

“Sorry, old man, my bad.”

I looked at his big picture in the hallway and touched it

“Do you want to know what poison I used? It's Botulinum toxin, aren't you proud of me?”

I laughed at him. Looks like he created a monster inside of my body. Arsenic is a good choice, but I will not let my father have a chance to live again, that's why instead of Arsenic only, I put Botulinum toxin with it. He may disturb me anytime he wants but my conscience will remain high. He deserves what position he is in now.

“I'm not sorry for what I did, you deserve it. Now, look at me as I will be the king of your empire. Goodbye, you may now rest in hell”

I'm not sorry, goodbye.

THREE BODIES by Emma Clancey

Content Warning: Eating disorders

I'm not allowed to be sick. It's not who I am. I'm the girl with everything.

I'm the girl with good grades and straight teeth. A messy high ponytail is the closest I ever come to falling apart.

I'm not falling apart.

With my forehead pressed against the carpet, I can smell dust and sweat. My arms shake. Nails dig into my palms, leaving angry crescents on my skin. Hyperventilation pumps unrelenting oxygen into my lungs. The sharp stab in my gut doesn't go away.

To an onlooker, I might look like I'm praying. But I have no words to whisper to the heavens. Instead, I grit my teeth and try to stand.

I'm allowed to stand. A sick girl doesn't stand. I'm the girl who can stand.

A full dinner awaits me at the kitchen table. I swirl pasta around my plate, counting the red squares running lengthwise across my placemat. Forty-nine. Each mouthful worsens the pain in my stomach, but if I slow down, they'll know. I count the squares from top to bottom.

Thirty-five. Marking my place, the mat tells me that I need to be here. I need to finish my plate. *Are you here?* I ask my body.

She responds with a sharp throb.

I walk back to my room with slow, deliberate steps. Weary arms lower me to my bed, legs curled against my chest. *I'm sorry*, I tell her.

Whether in sadness or anger, she offers me only silence.

Hours later, the lights in the house dim. I ease my door open and step into the hallway. The floor is cold against my bare toes. I can stand. I am fine.

The sound of plastic is too loud. My breaths are too loud. I slow each exhale, limit each inhale to the rhythm of my feet padding back down the hallway, my prizes clutched to my body. I slip beneath my blankets and eat. I eat until a ragged sleep claims me.

The next morning, I sit in a church pew, back straight. The pain in my stomach has worsened. It takes all my strength to keep my spine pressed against the back rest, refusing to bend down to ease the ache.

I wonder how the remains under my bed fit into His grand plan.

They drown me in guilt as I lie awake, sinking through the night. I can't bring myself to pick the pieces from the carpet and throw them away. Instead, I let the debris swell beneath my bed night after night. Perhaps I want the guilt. Perhaps it will make me stop.

Is that why? Is that the reason? I ask her.

She gives me no answer.

I have a friend who reminds me of a bird. She flits through the day effortlessly, keenly watching the world around her.

One day, she sidles up to me in the library with wide eyes, nodding her head at the plastic bag in her hands. Triumphant, she reveals her catch – two jelly pouches. Claiming the lychee, she hands me the peach and presses a finger to her lips. Stifling giggles behind our laptop screens, we slurp sweet worms of jelly through the straws.

She continues to dart around through the coming weeks. One day, we laugh at the way she talks about meat with unbridled affection. The marbling is sexy, she asserts to justify her affection, fondly spreading thin strips of wagyu beef across a plate.

Gracefully twisting her chopsticks, she selects the best pieces from the hotpot broth, dropping them into our bowls with the unquestionable authority of a mother bird. Lifting the morsel to my mouth, I notice that her bowl stays empty, save for a lone piece of bok choy.

Soon, the hot Australian summer begins to threaten. Yet, her clothes thicken and hang looser, building a feathery armour in defiance of the weather. Swathes of thick fabric blur the edges of her body, protecting the softness of flesh from the harsh outside world. Even her fingers retreat inside her sleeves, taking comfort inside the boundaries of her nest.

On a rare cold day, perhaps the last of the season, she prods my jeans. Her fingers clench into a beak, pulling at the tight fabric. "I wish I had the confidence to wear those," she sighs. I wish that I had the confidence too, but it seems that the deception has worked.

A girl who is sick doesn't wear skinny jeans. Only a normal girl can let the fabric cling to her body like that. Look, they call, I still have a waist. It's still here, I promise. A sick girl can't do that. Logically, I must not be sick.

Despite her best efforts, bird-girl cannot hide in her feathers forever. Her face blinks through the gaps. As summer wears on, I watch her skin pale, shadows deepening under her eyes. She moves slowly, sluggishly. Each day seems to lay a new weight upon her, tying her to the ground no matter how hard her wings beat.

I wonder what if she sees an animal in me. Is my laughter grating, like the bark of a hyena? Are my limbs ungainly like a giraffe? Is my skin rough, stretched and creased like an elephant? Am I a bird to you? I wonder. Am I a pig?

Slowly, I feel bird-girl slipping through my fingers. She does not soar away. Instead she plummets downwards, wings wrapped around her body as she braces against the rush of wind.

I haven't seen my grandfather in months. When I arrive home from school, he is washing up at the kitchen sink. Scones bake in the oven and flour dusts the counter-tops. He dries his soapy hands on a tea towel. "Have you gained weight?" he asks.

I look at him. He is six foot three and a Type 2 Diabetic. I can't wrap my arms around his middle. I want to laugh. I don't.

"No," I say instead. "No" is the correct answer. The bathroom scale tells me so. But slipping away to my bedroom, I begin to wonder who is lying to me.

The first result when I search up "Calorie Counter" stares back at me. The app is approved for ages four and up. Six-thousand-one-hundred-and-ninety-seven people have rated it an impressive four-point-six out of five stars. I read a review. "It works!" it declares. Five stars. "Life changer," another promises. Five stars. "Logical way to lose weight," comments a third. Good, I think. I am logical.

I press download.

I plug in my height, weight and age. You must be at least eighteen years old to join. I add the years I need.

The app asks me for my goal weight. It doesn't matter that my BMI already balances on the line between underweight and healthy. I take five kilograms away. This weight loss goal looks good. We know you can do it!! Lurking behind the exclamation I see thin lips stretched back, exposing blood-red gums.

I have six-thousand-four-hundred-and-thirty-three kilojoules for tomorrow, then I'll reach my goal in five weeks, the app promises. Idly, I scroll the list of food items. I can have five and a half cups of ice-cream. I can have one and a half packets of my favorite chips.

When at last I got to sleep, numbers run through my head.

I have another friend who reminds me of a dolphin. This time, I'm not the only one who draws the comparison.

A group of our friends huddle around her phone, watching a trio of bodies dance.

Her limbs rise and fall to the arc of the music. As she leans back, her leg straightens into a crisp line; hip, knee, ankle linking into a natural agreement. The three swirl across the stage, serenely leaping over invisible waves, tumbling through the depths as though they belong here.

It is beautiful, I think. It is unfair, I feel.

"Doesn't she look like a dolphin?" someone says. Pausing the video, they zoom in, framing her face. "She smiles like a dolphin, doesn't she?"

Dolphin-girl looks like she doesn't know whether to take the comment as a compliment or an insult, but she laughs along. Staring at the picture, I agree, but not because of her smile.

A few weeks later, we take a train to Newtown in search of gelato. "It's the world's best," she swears. "At least in 2014."

Letting the taste of raspberry cheesecake melt on my tongue, I look at dolphin-girl. Her body wears none of the scars of being pushed to its every limit from early childhood. She's spent countless hours stretching, practising, leaping and falling, I know. Does she demand it to bend? I wonder. Does it listen to her?

"I'm worried," she says to me.

"What about?"

She says bird-girl's name.

In a moment, I feel completely exposed. Not because she's noticed bird-girl, but because if she has, then she could just as easily notice me. A thought surfaces. Did I want her to say my name? Did I? I'm worried. What about? You. I don't know.

"I'm worried too," I say.

"I don't know what to do. I've tried to talk to her, but she won't say anything about it. Did you know that she's stopped having her period?" Dolphin-girl sucks on her spoon. "She says that her parents are really happy that she's losing weight. I know I'm not a doctor but ..."

"I know. We need to do something." They're easy words to say. The words of a perfect girl who isn't sick but knows that her friend is sick and knows exactly what to do to help her sick friend become not-sick again. The only problem is that I'm not perfect and I am sick and I don't know what to do so I am lying.

That night, I stand in front of the mirror and try to move my body, twist my limbs the way dolphin-girl does so easily.

I try to straighten into her line. My hip protests, my knee shapes a sharp corner. I relent, gently tipping my ankle in and out of line. I breath out and hold, turning side-on to the mirror. My back arches, shoulders slumped. I suck the breath back in and push my shoulders back. My ribs jut out above my stomach, yet, stretch marks line my outer thighs. I breathe out. Too fat. I breathe in. Too thin.

It would've made me happy to count each exposed rib a few weeks ago. They're a validation – no matter what I eat, I will be fine. Now, I wonder how many bird-girl can count. I wonder if each number makes her happy. I wonder when it will be too late.

I look at the girl in the mirror. I want to be better, I tell her. I don't want to be sick anymore.

When my body speaks to me for the first time, I am surprised by her voice.

With my forehead pressed against the wooden court, I can smell sweat. My arms shake with exhaustion, from the effort of separating the ball from the court with the slightest sliver of palm. My knees and hips sting from the desperate dive. Panting breaths drive oxygen, sweet and crisp, into my lungs. My stomach tightens, not with guilt nor pain, but with excitement.

Look what we can do, she whispers to me softly. Look what we are capable of. Together.

A teammate offers me her hand, grinning as she slaps me on the back.

My body lifts me to my feet and holds my head up high.

I feel her with me as I leap, as I run. My fingers splay, not with grace, not with the arc of a beautiful song moving through taut limbs, but with power. I have always been here. I will always be here.

We don't win the match.

On the way home, a teammate questions my silence. She reaches across the middle seat to bump my shoulder. The world outside the car is dark. Glimpses of streetlights strike her cheekbones in amber.

"Why are you being so quiet?" she asks. "Bummed about the game?"

I know that I should be. I'm the competitive girl. The one with trophies in her bedside table drawers and a comprehensive strategy to beat you at rock-paper-scissors. I'm hard on my team and harder on myself. I should be bummed.

I'm not.

"I'm not," I tell her. It's the correct answer. This time, no one is lying to me. "Everyone played well. I'm happy."

She studies me for a moment, before leaning back against her seat. "I almost had a heart attack when you went down for that save," she comments. Her fingers wriggle in the air as she pretends to play a ball above her head. "I've never seen you play like that before."

"It was worth the sore knees," I grin.

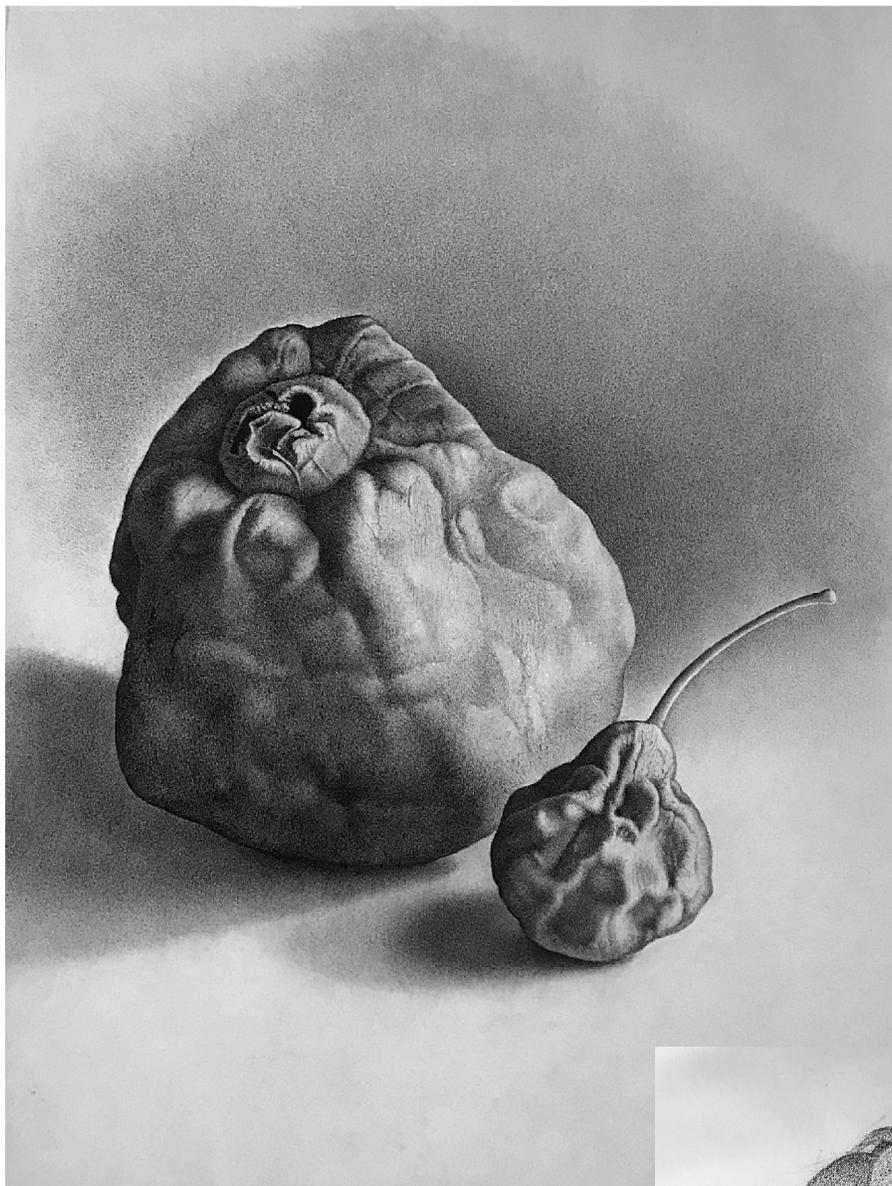
"I know!" Shoving her kneepads down, she rubs her own bruises, shaking her head like a disapproving parent, as if a stern talking to will remove the purpling blotches from her skin. "I swear the padding does nothing," she sighs.

I look at the skin covering the hollow of my kneecap, prodding my bruises. How long ago would I have looked at the marks, seen them as yet another blemish, another inevitable imperfection to conceal? How long ago would I have resented the ungraceful, extruding bone, or the thigh above it?

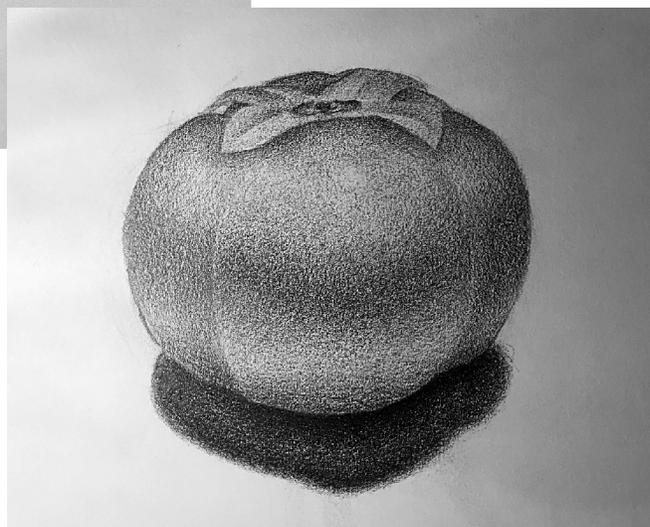
Now, I marvel at the shapes of muscle beneath my skin. I smile at each stretch and crease and bruise and spot. I don't need swathes of armor nor tight jeans. She will still be the same.

Not every night is easy. Some nights, I walk the hallway again. Some days, I refuse to look under my bed. But every day, I know that she will not blame me. She will not ask for perfection in a place where it cannot, and should not exist.

She will still be here. She will still be powerful. She will still be me.



Decay and Lone by Maggie Yan



THE VIEW FROM UP HERE by Tashfia Ahmed

I'd never thought of any of my imperfections as "pretty."
My rolls of skin, the stretch marks etched within,
They've all merely been boxes in my to-do list to be ticked off, to get rid of.
They've been years of standing before the mirror, holding them in my clawed fist,

Sucking in till they seemed acceptable,
And stretching back until they disappeared from my two-dimensional reflection.
So when I sat down before you on the floor,
With my legs tucked in below my torso,
I prayed silently to myself that you didn't find me unattractive.
You'd asked me, why do I seem so tall?
I told you in feigned confidence,
"Oh it's just my fat thighs,"
As I towered over your much smaller, fit form.
And I prayed silently to myself that you weren't disgusted.
And you weren't. Not at all.
You held my hands in yours.
Rose to your knees to whisper sweet nothings to my ears,
Kissed my forehead and sat back down,
Having eased the fears I'd saved up in my brows all these years.
And I thought quietly to myself,
Maybe I don't mind sitting on my legs folded in,
Staring down at this face so comforting.
Maybe I don't mind the view from up here,
When that view is you.

FINDING FREEDOM by Ilana Drake

I used to tremble when I spoke
Words like bubbles I could not poke
I was a shadow in the dark
But, always co-existing with a shark

Clear blue skies above my head
Yet, I was not able to tread
After being knocked over by waves
Plunged deep into the water with underground caves

Your jagged words hit me like bricks
And tore at my spirit until I was sick
Holding onto a ladder so I did not fall
Trapped with your hostility against a wall

Yet, when the door was slammed tight'
I found a crack of light
A higher power instilled my blood with steel
And healed my body so that I could feel

My inner strength grew stronger
And I felt powerless no longer
No longer your pinata or puppet
As I hear the sound of the trumpet

Now I am finding my voice
I am not scared to make some noise
I am not a feather or a mouse
I am a wolf with a howl.

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