

# The Merrimack Review

fall 2020



**The Merrimack Review**  
Fall 2020

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The Merrimack Review is a student-run literary magazine. We accept submissions from undergraduate and graduate students, regardless of academic institution or program of study, with the purpose of giving new and emerging writers/artists a space of their own. We are proud members of The Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, and are sponsored by The Writer's House at Merrimack College.

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**POETRY**

**february elegy**

*Martina Miranda*

I spend so much of my life searching for you,  
The same way the Messiah looks heavenward when he is about to die.  
When I am not scouring for a hiding place  
In the recesses of our time together,  
    I peel tangerines into twirls like how you used to shave my pencils,  
        Or crush garlic with the flat side of the knife  
            (there is tenderness even where the blade is supposed to be sharp—).  
I sing songs in Latin from the days we were in the cult;  
    I wash my knits by hand with hard water  
        (—and entropy where there is loveliness).  
                                After this, I become the detective again.  
                                I get the warrant to tread my own dreams,  
                                Shaking hands with scintillating teratisms  
                                And vanquishing delights living in the shadows.  
                                Violence, incessant violence in your absence.  
Eventually, I became the penumbra dulling the image of you  
Until there was no more you to look for.  
I turn into what I fear the most: forgetting.  
                                Troy was buried, so the Trojans vanished.  
                                Maybe it was the other way around.

You're not around for me to ask,  
So I've become my father's daughter,  
Bereaved of a mother like a house disemboweled of its most precious belongings.

**al nahda, 2015**

*Martina Miranda*

you're learning about a different renaissance  
sitting in a private school classroom in the north end of a continent  
ruled by war criminals murdering civilians across my country's borders.  
i have school on sundays, but it is not sunday school, and you take the trolley  
to a church worshipping a god for whom you wouldn't prostrate yourself  
in a couple of years. i read bolaño, you talk about girls on a podcast,  
we have not yet met. i scoff at organized religion, your mom keeps  
a spanish bible in your car, we switch places in college. our senior year  
we learn about forces in physics--torque, mass and centripetal acceleration--  
and you don't see that each revolution has to have a turning point  
just like how each awakening stipulates a sleeping giant. i hate you  
at first, but i'm only joking when i say it later. *luz de mi vida, fuego  
de mis entrañas—te odio*. i would take a bullet for you soon,  
but soon hasn't happened yet. and if we only have the future,  
i'll be fast enough to run next to you towards it.  
there are five languages between the two of us,  
but none of the words for deliverance are ours.  
the revolution i want is just a pedestrian fiction where you love me back,  
but we're spinning in ellipticals pregnant with chaos.

## Skipping Class

*Alejandro Lucero*

Maybe because I had math next, lunch after.

Maybe because the blond boy had stolen  
his dad's red car. Maybe I went along

for no good reason at all. I found myself  
in the back seat, declining a lit cigarette  
offered by the big junior with a mustache.

*Put that out*, blond boy begged. *My dad*  
*doesn't smoke anymore*. The motor roared  
for movement. The mustache'd junior

spat the smoking butt out of his mouth  
like the shell of a sunflower seed,  
said more to himself than us, *let's go*. Two lefts

and we were off school property. The car  
was a red blur on that long dirt road.  
I couldn't see the speedometer, but I was first

to see a lone goose on the side of the road  
trying to cross through a barbed-wire fence.  
Mr. Mustache yelled stop and got out

like a first responder. The blond boy,  
an opportunist, quickly dusted the cig ashes  
off mustache's empty seat, out the door.

Mustache came back holding the goose  
by the black silk of its broken neck.  
Two rights back into the school parking lot.

The goose thumped against the walls  
of the car's stolen trunk only once.  
We stood around the popped hood

like first day mechanics. Mustache stretched  
the dead bird's body over the car's warm engine.

The blond boy begged for him to take it off.  
I heard the feathers singe over the radiator  
and I could taste its blood. Cup holder pennies  
coating my mouth. Licked off my fingers.

## **In Betweens**

*Fatoumata Ouedrago*

In between grief and rage

Fingers trembling on the page  
Everything in flames  
From the scrapers of my sky  
To the unborn ferns  
Tears putting them out before they even burn

In between numb and pain

Body moving like a bowling ball  
Slow and heavy  
Rocking ever so slightly  
But one push and all will fall

In between want and hate

Heart standing at the precipice of something great  
Hands clawing at the closed gate  
Someone has the key  
But I made the lock  
At this rate  
Love comes from the things I create

In between life and death

Body becoming bone  
Voice becoming air  
We are nothing but a series of breaths  
Dying the second we are born

## **Someone Like Me**

*Fatoumata Ouedrago*

Someone with the same eyes  
And mouth  
And nose, lips and hair  
So someone can braid me too  
So I can have the same hairdo  
Someone with the same color  
And skin  
And blood, bone and being

So when we talk about slavery  
I don't look around nervously,  
Cheeks turning into flames,  
As if I were the one to blame

Someone with the same word,  
And memory,  
And breath, soul and heart  
So I don't feel so isolated,  
Out of the loop and separated

Of course, my mother is strong  
My anthem and song  
Her wisdom an ocean  
Her love an explosion  
Yet even her fire  
Cannot quench my desire

And yes, there are stories  
Of the victories and glory  
But they are only figures  
Their presence mere whispers  
I need someone  
Whose name rhymes with my own  
Whose past is carved on the same stone  
Whose dreams are just as loud  
Whose voice is just as proud

It took me this long to see  
The person I thought I would need  
Is just the person I want to be  
But the beauty within  
Only shines when it is believed in.

I only need a mirror,  
To see myself clearer.  
I don't need someone like me  
I just need to love me

**Teenaged Keys Sea Shanty**  
*Zachariah Rohrbough*

red sky that morning, and  
i failed to take warning  
so, come sunday night on the marsh  
i almost drowned

and lost my one-man sailboat  
salt stinging my throat  
the mangroves gave way to stormy seas  
and in fear i lost my grip  
on the sheets

a night alone at sea left me pondering  
maybe my life oughta matter  
a little more to me

**this poem belongs to the girl i'm in love with**

*Abigail Jade*

I wish I hadn't given back the stars you framed for me  
or the t-shirt with your face on it.

I wish I had something to show my children  
when they ask me about my first epic love.

I have nothing left of you  
except some pictures on my laptop,  
two socks  
and the memories which will someday fade.

I wonder what you kept of me,  
if you kept me at all.

Or were you like me,  
so angry that you had to  
baptize yourself of me  
because any reminder,  
any memory,  
even the good ones,  
would just shatter you  
all over again.

## **hand-me-down**

*Abigail Jade*

I don't remember ever  
seeing her wear the yellow dress,  
but I know it was hers.  
And I know that she gave it to me.  
And I know that it fell shapeless  
over my twelve year old body.  
The pockets  
sticking out too much  
the shoulders  
too square.  
But I loved it anyways  
because it was hers.  
I don't remember her face,  
but I know she was beautiful.  
My memories of her  
are short and sparse.  
But I remember how much she hated  
the cicadas in the summer  
and how I teased her, waving one of their  
empty shells  
in front of her face until grandma yelled at me.  
And I remember crying when she left,  
even though I told myself not to.  
I don't remember any of the  
words she said to me.  
I don't remember whether she  
liked me or whether she didn't.  
I don't remember whether she  
was nice or whether she wasn't.  
So maybe my thoughts of her are all wrong.  
But when I do think of her,  
I have the sense that  
she was good.  
Fingers of light  
stretching through the clouds.  
A lemon drop  
in damp coffee grounds.  
A canary  
too deep in the cave.  
And because I somehow knew that she was good,  
I had a rule about the dress.  
I only wore it on rainy days, when the sunshine was gone.  
That's when the world needed her most.

## **My Father, the Museum**

*JC Choi*

There is a picture of my father in a shoebox.

He holds a drooling baby in his lap,  
his mouth an open cavern in the land  
of his cracked and wrinkled face.  
His teeth shine like sun-bleached stones  
at the bottom of a river.

I don't remember when the cavern walls  
collapsed in on themselves,  
hiding the stones,  
stemming the water flow,  
until someone digs for the smile  
hidden underneath the dirt.

The smile sits in a museum now.

The museum often has its lights turned off  
and no visitors inside  
but the door will be open  
I jiggle the doorknob  
turn it just so  
pull with all my might and—

open sesame

I saw my father smile today.

## **A Letter to Empty Places**

*Sheridan Hansen*

to vacant auditoriums  
and early sunsets over barren deserts  
and my silent cul de sac at 3 am  
to isolated graveyards wrapped in shadows  
and still lakes in hidden clearings  
and abandoned streets shrouded in mist  
to gray winter skies  
fill me.  
can i be filled with emptiness? rallied with silence?  
the city gives me life but the desert lets me breathe  
an open spaced empty place stretching out for miles  
the bitter cold night reveals burning stars  
and forgotten roads offer their solitude  
the sun touches even the loneliest scenes  
and a quiet graveyard is only deserted on the surface  
let listless landscapes fill my pen with secrets made of cinders  
let my ink mark untouched ground  
for nothing could be more full than empty places

## **I Have Seen Moonlight on Moonless Nights**

*Lauren Phillips*

I look out past your silhouette and see space,  
but the infinite sky is nothing but blinding white light.  
In the other meadows I have seen neck wringers, flightless hummingbirds  
sprinkled like chunks of a meteor across the viridescent field  
and in their feathers live only the letters of your name.  
The space between my other friends feels like a shade of space-gray  
expanding into vast, uncharted and meaningless brunches,  
trunks in the car filled with swimsuits coated in Seabrook Island's sand.  
You planted your seed in my mind's garden later than the others, but yours  
grew pastel wisteria instead of sunflowers.  
And nobody tells you that the space needs to be white light, but it's  
Instinctual  
like a newborn clinging to life in its first weeks  
and I pray you understand that our space is crackling lightning,  
electricity pulsing through our blood.  
But you see, I'm starting to think  
I'm colorblind,  
and I don't think I can take many more mistakes.  
I have seen light on moonless nights  
and it has led me to the graves of my hummingbirds—  
graves that have sprouted like lilies in the midst of winter.  
So that's why  
I need you  
to tell me  
if you can also feel  
the clouds  
coursing through your veins  
in a new field  
where our hummingbirds fly  
in pairs.

## **Elegy for a Gardener**

*Andrea Negrin*

I can't remember how  
many notebooks there were;  
could have been five or six –  
they once belonged to her.

Memories flood flowers  
loved, gentle touched, each day.  
Dancing lady orchid,  
no longer could you stay.

An empty, darkened house—  
though light will still creep in.  
Beg, nurture the orchid;  
nurture what long had been.

The dying is so near  
for death has ready come.  
Took the dancing lady,  
will take her orchid crumbs.

And write my sorrows I  
in empty notebooks bound  
with hopes the four or five  
will, day to day, be found.

## **Rage**

*Katelyn Allred*

Sing, sisters, Briseis' rage  
Bright and burning, buried in the history  
Of incalculable pain, countless souls  
Suffocated under what was expected,  
Their bodies taken from them  
By men who fancied themselves their gods.

Sisters, sing of Briseis' grief,  
Of her screams as she was dragged  
From the only home she had ever known.  
Brought into the den of beasts,  
Who squabbled over her like she was  
A pretty trinket, nothing more

Sing of her desolation  
As the war rages on  
Outside a city of tents where she is held prisoner  
To the greatest hero her enemies know.  
What comfort is it to her that her captor is divine?  
What god deigns to care for her?

Sing, sisters, of Briseis' resignation  
The men have their twelve days  
But there is no respite for her,  
The trophy, the prize.  
She bites her cheeks against a scream  
No one will help her. No one tries.

Sing the stories of the heroes who endured,  
Those who had no choice but to be brave,  
Those who never received godly glory.  
The war never ends for these heroes--  
They exist and die and are buried and forgotten.  
Do not forget.  
Sing.

## **Still Rising**

*Emily Ladd*

For nothing is true, and nothing is just,  
and tides are indecisively changing like  
the earth has sprouted many moons-  
the ground is shaking and  
the sound of our voices is like  
a blazing cacophony atop unforgiving suns,

Don't leave tonight and go to bed with  
a monster of three-entitled-heads and the  
notion that he will give you any certainty,  
but remember the tales that women tell of  
white-orbed moons and tumultuous tides,

For nothing is true, and nothing is just,  
we are not the only ones who have felt like  
our hands are bound in ropes, meanwhile our hopes  
never falter and our spirits ever-springing  
up into a frenzied air, treading on heaven-high

Don't resolve to silence, but dare to be still  
tell the stories of the moons, the suns, and I'll  
come when needed. Call, and together, we'll Rise.

**After Rachel Ruysch**  
*Jack Kohler*

all the magic tricks occur  
near the ground where  
moths peter around and euonymus  
s t u m p e d  
s i t i n e r t .  
visible flies with invisible flies

meet the queen's henchmen. All go whee  
l i n g l e i s u r e s . s h e

s n i f f s e a c h s e e d  
but slogs around too  
with the beetles rolling about  
w h o o h e r e , w h o o t h e r e  
b u t t h e c a r d i n a l s —

a l s o t h e m .

t h e y d a l l y , t h u m b s u p ,  
in a carvinal of reds through the wood.  
t h e y t r u n d l e t o t h e c h a p e l .

## **Mountain Mourning**

*Courtney Griffiths*

A familiar chill sweeps my body  
on a serene mountain morning  
where sunlight begins to fill  
the sky with a clarity  
I've only experienced  
through the daylight's wholeness.  
I want my mind to change  
its tune  
with the cricket's  
chirping rhythm  
while I go through this  
mountain mourning.

**It**

*Nisâ Sevsay*

she is being close to it  
she will do all she can  
only to be close to it  
taking her first and huge steps  
what she feels is the opposite of fear.

she will shout to the world from the rooftops,  
a bird's-eye view,  
while the sun revolts from the East  
the same world that she will shout to,  
will be on her back too.

Palmyra, Damascus, Aleppo, Baghdad, Dara'a, Fallujah, Cairo, Maghreb, Mosul.

the sun will salute us while it dashes through our thin, wet lashes.  
we are gilded with sun.  
a soft but austere breeze blows through the domes.

we will shout.  
to the world.

from the domes.  
all of us, purled.

## **A Loom**

*Kristian Perez*

We made the night  
dressing in linens and  
lace, frays and fibers,  
with our love of notch work  
looming in our splintering  
mouths and cool tongues.  
Reversing our garb into  
a knit of torn threads, in  
this wool we wait patiently  
until someone unravels first.

## Eviction Notice

*Liam Strong*

What ending were you expecting—  
the one where our hotel room wasn't  
a mirror of my apartment, where  
the pendulum of you wavered,  
an icicle whittled with spring,  
    where exile is an oasis  
the color of watermelons, vacation only a number,  
    not a letter permitting our non-existence,  
where our antibodies  
were the kind of immune memory  
needed to shove the other  
out of a room, where you  
are a room, its tangerine of light  
like splitting skin with a thumb  
nail, the one where you were a finch,  
the one where you flew, the one  
in which you prefer my  
grandmother's quilt, our nest,  
in which we held motes of light kneeling  
at the navel of the other,  
in which God was praised more than you,  
    and He was jealous of the garden  
we grew, your tongue a trowel,  
where I didn't find your jewelry box,  
your mother's, its purple hearth removed to reveal  
hundred dollar bills, like wads of used spear-  
mint gum, where we don't waste  
all the lotion, the ending that is all ending,  
all landing and no take off, where  
I'm able to write my signature the same way  
every time like you, our letter opener with the hilt  
of a bronzed stallion, gashed apart snow,  
the one where you boil  
the keys first, without candlelit flesh,  
where you blow-  
torch the keys, where your voice  
has no feet, the one without  
our bodies, the one we don't  
expect, the one right here.

**FICTION & NONFICTION**

## Like Rena

*Michelle Nguyen*

For a Friday evening, the bar seemed too empty for comfort. The dim glow from the string lights above and the neon sign, which aptly read “UNHAPPY HOUR,” just-illuminated the faces of the regulars who had chosen to spend their time there. A line of familiar-looking bottles lined the back wall. The bottom part of the counter was padded with some odd burgundy tufted leather material. The bartender, who was walking swiftly behind the counter, was a pretty blonde girl Amy vaguely remembered from high school, and there was a small crowd of people swarming the pool tables near the back.

Amy was halfway done with her fifth Blue Moon when she felt his hand slide a dangerous six inches north of the hem of her skirt. There was no resistance. His lips were right there when she turned to her right, fast, tumbling into the arms of a man her body seemed to vaguely remember. She leaned in harder, closer so that their limbs were suddenly intertwined, bodies pressed together. His breath smelled sweet, musty, familiar.

Too familiar. She was suddenly aware of her legs, splayed open like an invitation.

“Wait—” she said. “I’m sorry, I can’t.” When the man showed no intention of stopping, she put her palm on his chest. “Really. I can’t.”

His eyes, that had been glassy moments ago, flashed with annoyance. “What do you mean you can’t?” His eyes narrowed. “You’re that McClary girl from high school, aren’t you? Ally or something?”

“Amy.”

“Right. You had that sister.”

“Yeah.” She didn’t elaborate.

“Just thought you wanted this. I’ve seen you in this bar every Friday for the past three months.”

A wave of embarrassment washed over her. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know—”

“Sure,” he replied. “But whatever.”

As he walked away from her, her stomach hurt with the knowledge that she’d been noticed. She pictured his lips in places south of her neck.

Above, the neon sign flickered once like it knew.

When she came home late that night, the kitchen was empty, which meant that her parents had gone to bed. She put her keys in the bowl by the door, hung up her coat in the foyer closet, poured herself a glass of water and made herself a double-decker PB&J, and sat down. It was quiet. Her eyes closed.

“Amy? Is that you?”

One eye opened. “Yes, momma, just me.”

“Sweetheart, I was worried. It’s late.” Her mom had come down, her hair damp. She tightened the sash around her bathrobe. “Happy birthday by the way. I got you a cake after work today, but forgot to ask if you were going out tonight.” She paused. “Were you out with Mansi again?”

“Yes, mom.” The lie rolled smoothly off her tongue. “She told me to tell you hello, and that she misses you.”

Her mom smiled widely, indulgently. “That sweet girl. You two were always so good together. You know, if she wants to come over for carrot cake, tell her she can. I wouldn’t mind. And I hope you like the cake too, dear. I remembered it was your favorite.”

“My favorite’s actually red velvet now,” said Amy. Her mom’s expression fell, and quickly, she added, “but carrot cake is up there too.”

“Well alright. Maybe it was Rena’s favorite, I forget.” Her mom’s gentle expression shifted vaguely, contorted with confusion. Her delicate brows drew together. Then, as if to think better of it, she turned towards the stairs again. “Happy eighteenth, Ames,” she called over her shoulder.

Amy said nothing, just held that tight smile, listening to her mom’s footsteps fade. When the kitchen was quiet once more, she moved towards the kitchen drawers, rummaging through them for the box of candles. She removed the cake from the fridge, stuck the candles into it, all haphazard and crooked. Then she closed her eyes, made a wish, and blew out all twenty-eight flames.

\*

Ever since younger-sister Rena McClary had gotten into Brown, the McClary family dynamic had changed. For a while, Amy held on tenaciously to the fantasy that it would be a temporary thing: that her little sister would simply return to their home in New Haven, New York after four years, but no—Rena had gone from graduating college to getting married straight-after, and eventually moved to Carlisle, England with her husband.

Life was so much duller without Rena. The days seemed all the same: Amy, Christopher, and Maureen McCleary under one roof, in a large house in the northern part of town that was large enough that they never had to hear each other talking from their individual rooms. The exterior of their house was painted a very sterile white, all but the door which remained a vivid shade of scarlet—courtesy of Rena, of course, who had picked out the color when she was eleven.

Amy had only been eighteen when she decided to stay at home. She had been nineteen when her mom was diagnosed with early onset dementia. She had been twenty-two when Rena had left home.

She wanted to be angry about it, but then again, it was an implicit understanding that this was where she was needed. It was fine, she would remind herself. Fine, even if it was never the same after Rena left. Never the same after Rena got married. It was always about Rena, Perfect Rena who had always gotten everything she had wanted. That was how Amy had always preferred it anyhow.

But there was also a time it wasn’t always like that. In high school, Rena was still sneaking out at night to see Jack, and when Amy caught her one night on her way out, she had begged Amy to keep her secrets for her. Despite her better judgment, Amy always did, promised to take Rena’s secrets to the grave. Then when Rena was caught sneaking out one night, both girls were grounded for two weeks.

Rena apologized to Amy for weeks afterward.

“Ames,” she had said. “I’m so sorry.”

“Oh,” said Amy. “That much is very clear.”

“I’ll do your chores for a week.”

“A week?”

“Two weeks,” amended Rena. “Please? And we’ll go on our backyard camping escapade after the two week grounding period is over. I promise, we’ll have a good time.”

Amy thought about it. “I suppose,” she relented. “This camping trip better be worth it.”

“It will be.” And as always, as Rena had predicted, it was.

\*

Rena’s wedding invitation had been sent on cream, embossed cardstock. It was the kind of card Amy had always wanted for her wedding: simple, timeless, elegant. The edges were traced with gold. *The honor of your presence is requested at the wedding of Serena Catherine McClary and Jack Joseph Redford...*

The card now had a permanent residence on the McClary fridge, right next to the sixteen photos of Rena and ten of Amy.

Rena was on the high school varsity volleyball team for three years. Rena won an award senior year for some scholarship to the university a town over. Rena made Dean’s List at Brown.

Amy’s only claim to fame was a paper she wrote her senior year of high school, which had won first prize in the Cornell Essay Writing Contest. It was the paper she had once submitted to Stanford as a writing sample in her college application—and apparently, it had been good enough for Cornell, but not for Stanford.

When her parents had asked her why she chose to take what was supposed to be a year off from school, Amy never knew how to answer. But she didn’t have to. It was no secret that Stanford had broken Amy McClary’s heart.

The rest of the acceptance letters didn’t seem to matter much anymore, so that was when Amy had shoved the rest of them into her nightstand, and promptly forgotten about them until it seemed too late to follow her dreams altogether. Those were the dreams that once convinced her she could move across the country and live out her best life there. She had always believed she’d be a writer in California, fall in love there, where the sunsets were prettier and the snow never fell more than two inches. This was the way California always appeared to her in her dreams, except now they were just that: dreams, a would-be figment of her imagination.

\*

The last time Amy had spent real, quality time with her sister, Rena had been eight months pregnant.

Rena was on an extended visit home then, all because their mom had insisted on delivering the baby in upstate New York. Rena will be so tired after delivering that baby, she had said, as though it were a bona fide fact. Of course she’ll need her momma with her. So Jack and Rena (and Rena’s very pregnant belly) had made the agreement that they would make the trip from England and stay until at least a month after the delivery.

One particular night, Amy and Rena had decided to once again follow their tradition of camping out in the backyard. Jack and their dad had been out on a guy’s night; their mom was indoors, fixing herself for a good night’s rest. Amy and Rena were lying out in the backyard together on top of colored blankets, their noses turned heavenwards towards the stars. A

telescope stood nearby them, and a tent just big enough to fit two female bodies. It would be a tight squeeze that year.

“You know,” Rena said softly. “Jack really wants a boy.”

“Mhmm.”

“We... we’d name him Christopher. You know, for dad.”

“He’d love that.” A pause. “You know he’s a boy then?”

“Oh god no.” Rena gave a tense, short laugh. “You think I’d want to know?” Her eyes suddenly grew moist, her voice soft and thoughtful. “Jack and I don’t want to know. Or, I guess, he does, but I definitely don’t. You know me—I hate knowing. Gets so predictable.”

“Well geez, Rena, there’s nothing wrong with predictable.”

The words came out more bitterly than Amy had planned for them to, and Rena knew it. She could always sense it when Amy was mad, even before Amy knew it herself.

“I didn’t mean—”

“No Rena, listen. I’ve been here for ten more years than I had planned to. I’ve been living with mom and dad my whole life. But you, you got out, and I’m... I’m happy for you. I just wish you’d realize that my life is still here. It’s never changed.”

Rena was silent for a while. “No, I suppose there’s nothing wrong with predictability. It worked out for you, didn’t it? I think I’d... I’d just rather keep everyone on their toes. They all love me more this way.”

“Let’s be honest, they’d love you regardless. Mom, Dad, Jack... I’m like second string next to Rena McClary.” Amy laughed. “If the town were looking at me now, they’d be laughing. I’m not like you, but I wish I were.”

“Oh Amy,” said Rena, “you’re acting crazy.”

The air seemed to still around them.

“Besides,” said Rena. “You were always the brave one anyhow. Staying around after Mom—” her voice broke. “Well, you know. After she was sick, I just... I just couldn’t bear to be around and I—”

“Oh stop. Really.” Amy rolled to her side and put her arm around her sister, careful not to push too hard on the belly that rippled and flexed between them. For a moment, it seemed even more alien than usual. Like some odd skin, a strange barrier that laid between them.

\*

The hospital room had been too small to fit the entire McClary family, so they waited in the waiting room while Jack accompanied Rena to the delivery room. It would not take long, the doctors had told them. Two hours max. Rena was already dilated to eight inches when they had arrived at the hospital.

“You can all go home,” said Jack. “Two hours is still a long time to wait.”

But they had decided as a family to stay, and Jack had smiled, shaken their hands, and pushed past those double doors with the confidence of a man about to become a father.

The waiting was the hardest part. Amy and her mom had solved two Sudoku puzzles in the time her father woke up from his nap. It had been three hours. And then, Jack had come back, his cheeks flushed. “They’ve taken her to the operating room and I couldn’t be there,” he had explained. “Some complications. It might take a little longer.”

“Is she... is she going to be okay?” said Amy.

“Yeah,” Jack replied. “The doctors said—well, they said probably. Yes, she’ll be okay.” The answer wasn’t entirely reassuring. Two more hours they waited.

Then someone called Jack’s name. A woman in a blue surgical gown. The two of them talked, and Amy watched the blood drain from his face. And then he turned again to face them, and Amy knew then. There was a beat of silence. His face was blanched, his hands slackened.

It seemed to be one fluid motion, and Jack walked straight up to his sister-in-law, put his head in her arms, and together, they cried.

From what they all knew, the baby Christopher had simply come out wrong. But he was healthy and strong, the way Rena had been when she was a baby. Strong and curious, just like Rena.

Jack and his son moved back to England after the first six months, and Amy applied to Stanford. Two months later, she got in. Her parents were so pleased, they put her acceptance letter—all crisp, white, and clean—up on the fridge, right next to the seventeen photos of Rena and ten of Amy.

When people came to look at that fridge, the acceptance letter never was what they focused on first; it was always the newspaper photo of Rena—bright, red-lipped Rena, who was radiant even after death. *Serena Catherine McClary, age 24, of Fair Haven, passed away Saturday, June 11, 2019...*

“What a pity,” they’d say. “She was so young.”

But that was alright by Amy. In California, the sunsets really were prettier and the snow never did fall more than two inches, and when the city was quiet enough, she could almost see the stars. They were never as bright as the ones back home, but bright enough that if she squinted upwards hard enough, she could almost make out the shape of a girl and two crystal blue eyes.

## Silent Speech

Haley Sui

Quiet. Trance. Silence ruled me for several weeks after my brain surgery. Several weeks, that dragged like several years. I had things I wanted to say, but an unfamiliarity, an almost dimensional difference, kept my lips glued shut and my vocal cords immobile.

But time heals all wounds. The clock ticked; the hours melted away. My pent-up emotions begged release, begged freedom. Writing opened my subliminal awareness. A steady stream of ink replaced the words I kept hidden; old-fashioned pencil and paper kept me sane and safe, from the tumor and from myself.

Immediately after surgery to remove my medulloblastoma brain tumor, a bunch of blue-scrubbed nurses transferred my prone body into the Intensive Care Unit at Lucille Packard Hospital. My parents say I was a screamer during my stay, of mostly obscenities-highly out-of-character for the pre-tumor shy, reserved Haley. Bilingual, too. My dad likes to tell friends who know my cancer history how I shrieked at him, in strands of perfect Mandarin Chinese, calling him 你頭豬 (roughly: you pig head). Strange: I wasn't even close to fluent in Mandarin before medulloblastoma.

Unbeknownst to me, those curses would be the last things that came out of my mouth for a long, long time.

At home, everything was the same. Same blue bedspread over my bed, same stocked up neon sweaters in the closet, same colorful post-its plastered on my window.

But it was all wrong. Nothing was the same, because the girl who slept in that bed, who wore the pullovers, who stuck the Post-it®s in a rainbow pattern; that girl was gone.

I remember my parents asking if I wanted to sleep in my room, like before. Like nothing had ever happened. I shook my head. *No. Never.*

My dad would connect his phone to the Bluetooth speaker, blasting his favorite song (Fernando, by Abba). Hearing the lyrics and the music conjured an image of a younger me ballroom dancing with my dad. But I'd see, despite my double vision, the leather ottoman in the living room that I tore apart during the onslaught of my pre-cancer headaches. I'd see; I'd remember. I wasn't the girl who flounced around anymore. I wasn't me.

Ba-daa-da-daa-ta-daa-da. "What do you think, Haley?" I stared at the wall. *I don't care.*

I slept on a bumpy twin mattress in my parents' room. Sometimes, the little lumps would wake me in the middle of the night. Sometimes, the springs would poke me as I slept.

I couldn't bother them, not about the uncomfortable lumpy mattress, not about my late-night bathroom trips. I couldn't dare give them another burden, no matter how small.

At dinner, 奶奶 (paternal grandmother) tried to engage me in conversation. I'd stare at the bag of tortilla chips on the snack stand, too ashamed to look up at my parent's worried expressions, or my grandma's hopeful one, too convinced that I was useless, a liability. A few moments of silence, and then I'd hear sniffing. Crying.

And I just felt so bad, because I failed in my quest to not add more burdens; I failed because I hurt someone around me, again. You could say I failed to live up to my Mandarin nickname 樂樂 (happy).

So I tried harder. Nods or headshakes became my language, apathy transforming my once lively household into a fortress of solitude. After too long, I couldn't do it anymore.

My muteness led me to the pen.

Writing gave me a medium: screaming into the void, a blank abyss waiting to be filled with complaints, with pleas, with words. It gave me my outlet. My scribbled “cancer pages” spanned 50 pages of dense, usually illegible handwriting.

It got the words out. I could say what I had to say, even if it was my meal for lunch.

Even if it was how my dad didn’t know my favorite shoes before the treatment were my rainbow flats and I thought that meant he didn’t love me.

Even if it was how my parents and friends always gave me that weird smile.

Those stung. A smile is supposed to mean happiness, support, love. Not pity, sorrow, anxiety. Just another, constant reminder that my life was anomalous, that I wasn’t normal.

So I kept my head down, avoiding the smiles, avoiding the people who said time and time again they understood what I was going through. NO YOU DON’T!

My own tongue betrayed me! A body part, that was supposed to be useful and constant for the entirety of my life, proved out of service when I needed it most.

But my writing was always there for me. Always available, always accessible.

I wrote about my diminishing appetite, my constant nausea, the struggle to stay silent. How I needed to appear strong to my family, even when everywhere hurt. How they were hurting but trying to be strong for me (Hey, I can hear you; I’m momentarily dumb, not deaf). I wrote how I felt I wasn’t entitled to weakness, wasn’t allowed to show suffering.

With my pen, I was relaxed. With my new voice, the lumpy mattress felt smooth. I tried sleeping in my old bed again. Writing brought back my confidence, and slowly, I started responding to 奶奶 at dinnertime.

In my recovery stage, my silence articulated a don’t-talk-to-me attitude. My family started leaving me alone. More hushed rumors floated around my home.

“Is she ok? Is she healing right?”

“Why isn’t she talking? Did they touch something they weren’t supposed to?”

“She’s weirder now,” from my younger brother in his pre-pubescent squeak.

My silence was supposed to make them less burdened; it made them more worried.

But it gave so much more than it took. It led me to writing. It led me to a relief I hadn’t known was possible. It led me to my real tongue.

True, I’ll never get those years back. Those years of quiet, of bottled emotions, of immobilizing silence.

But I discovered something bigger. My silence taught me the freedom and weightlessness of the written word. The unattached strings, the free-flowing river. The abnormal girl, the idiosyncratic spirit. I found me.

## Oh Baby, Oh Baby

*Cora Lewis*

A good friend my age is pregnant and no longer equivocating. I tell her I'll meet her at the red-sauce place, and I'm early.

When I look up from the menu, she's in front of me, gems in her ears and one on her finger. Her watermelon-roundness is clear, sweater taut against her stomach. She orders quickly and gets down to it:

Before she thought she knew where she began and ended, but not anymore.

"No more monism," she says — a theory we'd once subscribed to, of "things in themselves."

He's still her, that is, her son, but also himself. They haven't yet decided on a name. Her husband confessed he doesn't like the way his own father's name sounds.

She's afraid of giving birth, she tells me — the tearing that occurs, the stitches. Her husband worries her negativity will get passed on to their baby, and so he frets about her moods, which she dislikes.

"His moods don't affect me, mine shouldn't affect him," she says.

"No more monism," I say.

The gynecologist and her husband both find it endlessly funny, too, she tells me, that her husband is 6'3," and she's so small-framed, and the baby is already tall — with "long femurs" — according to the sonogram.

She checks her phone for the time, forks a last mouthful and kisses my cheek on her way out, promising to Venmo her portion of the check.

\*

I go uptown after I see her, because I'm already halfway to where he is.

He's scruff-faced, Simon, with that big coppery mess of hair, a new fleece over his collared shirt and tie, saying he worked late, taking off his shoes. He tells me about his new job at the city agency, the first interview he did that day. We're sitting on his familiar couch, the cushions grooved to our bodies.

I decline a beer, take a sip of his, and, restless, say, "Take me to bed."

"One sip," he says, "a new record," and kisses me.

\*

I first met Simon through Anne and Tom, an August day at Coney Island. The four of us had packed water and snacks and beer and filled a pew of a subway car, which spat us out an hour later near the sand and the famous hot dogs. We patchwork-ed our towels and read paperbacks between trips to the crowded water, staggered expeditions to rides and restrooms.

After the day by the foamy, oily surf and splintering boardwalk, we ducked back underground and zoomed to another friend's birthday in Queens, all hazy from the sun and day-drinking.

Neither Simon nor I knew the host, and eventually we found ourselves sitting on the building's stoop together in the relative cool, half-hiding our cans behind our feet.

I was talking about the news. At a pause, Simon made a substantive comment, and I replied.

"I'm just trying to keep up," he said then, which I found to be a winning remark, because I'm highly susceptible to flattery.

No doubt he saw this in my face as an opening, because he kissed me, and then kissed me again. Escaping party-goers made their way around our goblet tableau.

"Come home with me," he whispered into my hair, when we'd broken for air, like whales.

I did, and then I never seemed to stop.

\*

I tell him about the baby's long femurs, lying in the sheets, my hand on his thigh, where the femur is.

"Not as long as mine," he says.

We name the bones in the leg.

"There's the tibia," he says, feeling for my skeleton beneath my skin. "And there's the fibula."

"And the tilapia," I say, and get a laugh.

He asks about the shooting I'm covering that week, which took place in Texas — whether we found anything incriminating about the victims, any "secrets or skeletons." This is the kind of question he asked. I say, "Yes, the unborn baby killed was a real good-for-nothing." (One of the dead had been pregnant.)

I tell him fetal homicide law in Texas means the unborn are listed in the official death count by the authorities, the only state in which that's true, though it's a crime in every state to kill an unborn child.

"The parents hadn't known the sex yet, so they listed two names," I tell him, "one for each gender." Two ghosts, or one many-named ghost.

He'd been reading the case law, he tells me, about fetal homicide, for his old day job, and there's language — of course there is — of an exception for doctors. Because, of course, I realize, of course, if the woman wants it done and seeks it out, it isn't a crime. It's medicine.

\*

Now I'm crying in the doorway to my room — sobbing, embarrassingly so, snot-faced, a day or two after the procedure — between errands. And my roommate, when he comes home, sees me there and comforts me right away, without knowing what's up, as one does, and I explain as soon as I can breathe again.

He tells me, after I've calmed down, he had thought at first someone had died, seeing me distraught.

\*

Here are my notes on the abortion:

I watched Rosemary's Baby the night before the second pill, because, no, I am not humorless.

"Pain, be gone. I'll have no more of thee," I said, the next day, like Mia Farrow with the angels at Rock Center in the 70's, only on my knees and retching.

I focused on droplets clinging to the inside of the porcelain toilet-bowl, to blot out the pain with an image.

When the codeine hit, and I got sedated, woozy, I could talk again. Simon said I seemed better. He got into bed with me, then, in the dark, blood and all.

He's seen me now like an animal, in dumb animal pain, bleeding through sweatpants, through the sheets, onto the mattress.

Taking the heating pad off my lower stomach, towards the end, I coughed and felt something larger come out of me — clots and tissue. Something translucent, other-seeming, when I flushed it down.

Of course you see what you think you'll see.

Resting in bed, after the fact, a car alarm was going off in the street. When it stopped, the relief was just like my body.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"An alarm had been going off," I said, "and then it wasn't."

"I appreciate the phrase 'getting into trouble' now," I tell my older sister on the phone. "Trouble is what it was."

"You literally cannot do this by yourself, to yourself," she answers.

I tell Anne, later, it was like a car accident, but I was the one driving the car, and the only one physically hurt.

"You were doing something most of the population does — it was just your bad luck to be born a woman," she says.

"It would have happened a lot sooner if I were the one who had to remember to take a pill every day," Simon had said when I first told him.

"No one else I know has ever had to have a medical procedure because of me," he had said, after he got the day off work to spend it with me, when I knew I'd be sick for hours.

An email from my mother, after we'd talked on the phone:

I'm going to go. do you want to come? it's at the Lincoln Center movie theater. also, I can't find the article I mentioned, and I'm not going to keep searching, because the anti-abortion people have taken over any google search on the subject, but the gist of it was that there's a lot of social pressure to feel shame and guilt. (similar to the shame and guilt over

rape, which shouldn't be any more shameful than getting mugged.) the idea, and I'm oversimplifying of course, is that you're free to have any emotional reaction you want. inevitably your hormones are a little screwy, so your reaction will certainly be emotional, but there's no rule that you have to be sad or guilty. if you do feel sad, that's fine, it's a process of grief, and that may be necessary to go through. but fixing a physical problem is not a reason to feel guilty. now don't double down and feel guilty for feeling guilty. I know you. but just know that some of the emotional baggage that comes with abortion is socially dictated, and you can feel whatever you want. also, brilliantly, you are now a reporter, and somewhere in your career you many have a chance to change things. let me know if you want to meet me at 2. otherwise, see you at dinner at 6:30.

lots of love

\*

That good night on the stoop, in the margin of the party, Simon had asked me if I'd ever noticed how machines almost exclusively make sounds of woe.

A subway passed ahead and beneath us, just then, grumbling through the grated cement. His eyes glowed like coals in a breeze.

"There's a lot of grinding and screeching, it's true," I said.

"They're all expressions of being worn out and tired from use."

"New York buses exhaling big sighs all the time, kneeling."

"Most machines just don't have that broad a range of emotion. They can't sound happy."

"There must be a machine with a spectrum of sound that can express joy."

"You know what a machine that can make a beautiful sound — that has range — is called?"

"What?"

"A musical instrument."

\*

I used to say, sometimes, I felt "reckless like a man" in my life — "careless like a man" — before it happened. After, I stopped saying that. It wasn't really like that at all.

## **Contributor Bios**

**Katelyn Allred** is a writer and student at Snow College, where she is currently finishing an Associate of Arts. Her work has been featured in Snow College's literary journal, *Weeds*.

**JC Choi** is an English major and a Creative Writing minor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. They are a senior, and hope to be a high school English teacher once they graduate. JC enjoys failing at video games, learning from other accomplished writers, and spending time with their chaotic friends.

**Courtney Griffiths** is an undergraduate student studying English with a concentration in Creative Writing at Utah Valley University. She has had a passion for writing, specifically poetry, for as long as she can remember. After graduation, Courtney plans on teaching high school English and creative writing.

**Sheridan Hansen** is an English major at Utah Valley University who enjoys poetry and fiction. She participates in National Novel Writing Month every year and aspires to be a published novelist. Aside from writing, she loves musical theater and punk bands.

**Abigail Jade** is a third-year student at Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri. She is currently working towards her bachelor's degree in Health Science, and is hoping to work in the business side of the health field. Abigail has always been an avid reader and has been writing since the age of 16.

**Judah Jubilee** is a Fine Arts student at BGSU. Focusing in alternative practices of photography, she works heavily in creating pieces that blur consciousness and objectivity into dissociative trances that may allow a viewer to re-examine reality.

**Jack Kohler** is a poet and visual artist based in Columbia, MO currently pursuing an MFA from the Iowa Writers Workshop. He is an avid museum goer and amateur cyclist.

**Emily Ladd** attends the creative writing program at Southeast Missouri State University. When she is not writing, she is usually making up songs that she sings to her little cat, Nina. She loves making music, crafting short stories and pouring out emotion into poetry.

**Cora Lewis** is currently an MFA Student at Washington University in St. Louis. Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Epiphany*, *the Saranac Review*, and *TINGE Magazine*. Her nonfiction has appeared at *BuzzFeed News*, *the New York Observer*, *the Wall Street Journal*, and *the New Haven Independent*.

**Alejandro Lucero** is a writer from Sapello, New Mexico by way of Denver. He serves as an intern and assistant editor for *Copper Nickel*. Pushcart Prize nominee, his most recent poetry and nonfiction can be found, or is forthcoming, in *Progenitor Art & Literary Journal*, *The Susquehanna Review*, *Thin Air Magazine*, *ANGLES*, *Sink Hollow*, and *Zingara Poetry Review*.

**Martina Miranda** resides in San Diego, California but hails from the Philippines and Dubai. She is a rising junior studying biology at Grand Canyon University. Martina loves to bake, collect vinyl, and annotate novels like a conspiracy theorist.

**Andrea Negrin** is a double-major pursuing both English and Economics at Florida International University, where she seeks to both write contemporary poetry at the professional level and research the implications of failed education systems transgenerationally with focus on the creation of generational wealth.

**Michelle Nguyen** is a current MPH candidate at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health. She graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a BS in Biological Sciences and Nonfiction Writing in April 2020. Her poetry has been published in *Canvas Literary Journal*. She is currently working on a collection of memoirs about her Vietnamese-American family.

**Fatoumata Ouedrago** is a rising sophomore at Harvard. She plans to study government, ethnicity, migration, and rights, and Spanish. As an activist and writer, she is passionate about advocating for human rights, in particular in the field of criminal justice and refugees. Her writing serves as a space to reflect on the events around her, the struggles of different communities, and celebrate and spread hope and love.

**Kristian Perez** is an undergraduate student at the University of Central Florida. He is majoring in creative writing and was previously the Vice President of Writers Uknighed, a creative writing club inclusive to all majors. His work can be found in *Sink Hollow* and *The Blue Route*.

**Lauren Phillips** is a sophomore at Washington and Jefferson College where she studies English and psychology. She is an editor for the student newspaper, *Red and Black*, and writes poetry in her free time.

**Zachariah Rohrbough** is an undergraduate student and student athlete attending Palm Beach Atlantic University. Zach is originally from Fort Pierce, Florida, and is pursuing his hopes of carving out a career as an accomplished writer and veritable beach bum.

**Nisâ Sevsay** was born and raised in Turkey, and is currently doing her MA on the American Culture & Literature Department at Hacettepe University. Defining herself as a breathing cultural mosaic of the Middle East, a place that is as chaotic as it is enchanting, she is looking forward to share her words with people who would love to lend an ear to this part of the world, through her exuberant, far-reaching voice.

**Liam Strong** is a Pushcart Prize nominated queer writer and studies Writing at University of Wisconsin-Superior. They are the former editor of NMC Magazine. You can find their works in *Impossible Archetype*, *Dunes Review*, *Monday Night*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Chiron Review*, *The Maynard*, *Panoply*, *Prairie Margins*, and *The 3288 Review*.

**Haley Sui** is a senior at Harvard University, studying Creative Writing and Philosophy. She is an active member in her college's acapella group and dance club, as well as a fervent writer for the university's science newsletter. When she's not studying or working on club projects, Haley enjoys listening to lofi music and writing personal memoirs.

