

HSURV 2021



**Perspective
Renewed**

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HSURV 2021
Creative Writing Club

Photo credits: Shanivi Srikonda

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Editors' Note

Gabrielle Landry and Nathan Alakija

We are proud to present *Perspective Renewed*, an anthology of creative writing from the Harvard Undergraduate Summer Research Village Creative Writing Club.

Perspective Renewed is a collection of hope. Our writing emerged over the course of this summer through conversations, workshops, prompted free-writing, and plenty of feedback and laughter.

The title, cover, and contents within are meant to display our diverse approaches to returning to life after a year of significant change. The pieces in this anthology explore themes of change, love, longing, transformation, renewal, and more. The literary genres are just as vast: short story, song lyrics, poetry, and plays.

Creative writing in all its styles helps us communicate our perspectives. Each writer's unique voice materializes through the creative process. One of our favorite parts about this summer's Creative Writing Club has been learning about some of the techniques, settings, and processes used by everyone. In our weekly meetings, we learned from each other's writing habits and refined our own.

We are so grateful to the members of the Creative Writing Club for their willingness to share their writing and create new material. Sharing creative writing is a vulnerable process, but Creative Writing Club was a community of inspiration, positivity, and creativity. We learned more about what it means to share our own perspectives and to appreciate the perspectives of others.

We hope you enjoy *Perspective Renewed*.

Red Line

By Shanivi Srikonda

Distance bridged by metal and heat,
piercing through air, wind, snow. Over water, underground —
collective travel, communal time.

What invisible stories endure amongst these empty seats?
How many memories do these windows carry?
Shared spaces transformed into sacred places, there is an intimacy
in sharing fleeting moments with others — of people connected,
however briefly.

Time seems to pass faster when you concentrate on the landscape
blurring outside of the window,
a special relatively reserved just for this.
How can you memorize a moment in time?
How do you count the seconds that go by?
If you know where you're headed, how do you choose which way to go?

We are suspended in motion, and full of inertia —
time as thick as morning fog.

A New Season

By Taehwan Kim

When winter storms bury the sky
and you scour for warmth in snow-clad hills
Beyond the grainy white walls that pour from above
What do you see?

Do you see anything but
a season bygone
sandcastles on a sunny beach
bound to wash away

The air will warm and ice does melt
but for you, sunburnt and frostbitten,
a Spring without honeybees
a silent reverie

The Girl with the Bowed Back

By Brammy Rajakumar

She was only noticeable for how normal she was.

She smiled too much. She laughed at all the right jokes. She kept up with the witty banter.

But the one thing she never did was talk about herself.

And that was right. After all, she was a listener. A giver. She was a tree that gave shade and never received it. She was a lover, never a fighter. She was a walker, not much of a talker.

I followed her one day. Just the way kids do, when they're curious about someone. She was in my sister's grade, and my sister had referred to her once, saying, "She's chill. Likes movies. Talkative, but knows when to shut up. She's, you know, fine."

Those words surprised me. Usually, my sister was the exact opposite of this mystery girl: all fire, all anger, no fuss. She had an opinion on everything and everybody, no matter how inconspicuous. But Mystery Girl barely rated a mention in my sister's burn book.

So one fall day when Mystery Girl slipped out artfully through the high school door and down the chalk-covered steps, I decided to follow, ducking down behind a big bush with sharp leaves so she wouldn't see me as I tracked her movements.

She walked in the direction of the county store, and I followed, always fifteen paces behind, my head hidden under a big grey baseball cap. Although she kept a brisk pace, she nodded and waved at everyone she passed, making eye contact and smiling.

"Hiya, Mr. Willabee!" she said as she passed by the gas station, her eyes crinkling at the corners.

Mr. Willabee paused in his work next to a broken gas pump and wiped his brow. "Why, hello there, Scout."

“Hi, Mrs. Dubose,” she called, walking past the old woman who always stood outside the post office.

“Hey, Scout, sweetheart!” Mrs. Dubose gave her a quick smile between puffs of a cigarette.

“See you later, Mr. Finch,” she said, leaning her head into the air-condition of the county store for a second before stepping around the half-open door.

The man inside scarcely missed a beat in his scanning, only bobbing his head a little as he spoke to acknowledge Scout. “See you, ole Scout!”

“Ole Scout” walked past the cracked black basketball courts, the green leafy park, the orange tennis courts, the white-walled hospital, and the dusty golf course. She walked past the train tracks and the elementary school house. She walked so far and so fast that I felt my whole town was on a roll of film like a movie, zipping past my eyes in double-time.

She walked past the neon-lit sign that boasted the wares of the only jewelry store in town and the flashing red sign of the steakhouse boasting about its LOW LOW prices and thick juicy BEEF.

She walked and walked and walked and I got tired. I considered turning back and going home. I’d throw down my backpack by the kitchen back door and settle down on the living room sofa, answering my mama when she asked me about my day with a skittish smile and a cautious “Nothin”.

But then I’d never know about Scout, so I kept walking.

After we passed the town’s library and crossed a muddy road, Scout’s steps began to slow, and I sighed in relief. She released the grip her hands had on her backpack straps and put her fingers to her lower back, gripping the muscles there tightly. Finally, she dropped her smile and stopped walking.

“Oh, god. How much more of this do I have to do?” she groaned.

I flinched, my feet frozen in place for the first time all evening. My food back home was probably still warm on the table, I thought to myself. No

harm in leaving here. In giving up.

But then I'd never know about Scout, so I kept walking.

She was standing in the middle of the sidewalk, and I caught up to her. Without saying a word, I took her backpack and braced it against my left shoulder, next to my own, which hung from my right. Her backpack was heavier than mine, which was correct because I was in middle school and she in high school. But she didn't say a word to me, just smiled half-heartedly. Smiled in a way that showed the tiredness behind her eyes, the lie that she had just been barely holding up all these months I'd known her.

She started walking again, and I followed. We walked another block up to a picket white-fenced house, almost in the countryside outside of town, and here we stopped for the final time.

She swayed on her feet, as if she could barely stand.

I broke the silence. "How long?" I asked, tone flat. "How long?"

She sighed.

"Willa Jean," she said, a bit reproachfully, her shoulders hunching up as if to defend herself from my scrutiny.

"How long, Scout?" I pushed, dropping both our backpacks on the sidewalk in front of the fence.

"A while," she said. "I've been in pain for...a while."

"And you didn't tell nobody?" I replied. This town told everyone everything. I knew who had diabetes, who had heart disease. But that was all old people. I didn't know that much about the illnesses of the kids, I realized. There was the one kid in the neighboring town who'd had cancer and died. Someone Somebody's grandma's stepson's dog's co-owner's son. I hadn't gone to his funeral, only knew a couple people who had.

Scout was different. She was only a kid. She had major back trouble. But she would live. She wouldn't die a dramatic death from a famous killer disease. Instead, she would die as barely a blip on the radar.

Scout sighed again, this sigh longer than the last, as if she was an accordion and she was getting tired of always making music. “I used to tell,” she said. “At my old place, back in Hartford. I told everyone I could find. Tried to get special treatment, tried to explain all the procedures, all the heartache, all the falls, all the not-walking, all the back-and-forth to the emergency room, to the hospital.”

She paused, but I wanted to hear more. “And then?” I urged.

“But no one wanted to hear it, and then I didn’t want to tell it no more. Everyone got bored and moved on and figured I ought to be fine by now. No one wanted to keep up with the story.”

I winced. “So what did you do then?”

“And then I started—I started smiling more.” She shuffled her feet, staring down at the cracked concrete between her shoes.

“Smiling?” I echoed, confused.

She nodded.

“Because you were happy?” I asked hopefully, naively.

She laughed, but her laughter was hard. It had an edge, and it scared me. “No, Willa Jean. Because I wanted to. Because I got tired of not smiling and always feeling sad and I guessed that I had to go make what I wanted, because nobody would help me. So I had to fake it till I made it.”

“And did you?”

“Yeah, I did okay at faking it. But I guess I didn’t fool you so well ‘cause you followed me, huh, Willa?” She gave me another smile, but this one featured her trademark sparkling eyes—the eyes that had fooled everyone else.

I ignored its charm and shook my head. “No, I meant...did you make it? To happiness?”

She looked directly at me for the first time. I’d never realized how well she could look at you without looking at your eyes, how she chose to

look at your lips and forehead instead. But now that she looked into my eyes and forced me to look into hers, I understood why she normally refrained. Her gaze was piercing hazel, the whites of her eyes like sea glass, and it pinned me down against the sidewalk under the white hot sun. I couldn't look away. For the first time in her presence, I felt uncomfortable.

"What do you think?" she challenged. "Do you think I made it?"

I hesitated, and looked down at my shoes—a red pair of ratty Converse—which were next to her blocky, thick-soled, old-lady shoes. Her feet were positioned oddly, with one leg taking more weight than the other. My eyes migrated up. Her hips were angled to one side, one knee pointed in a different direction than the other. Her blouse and skirt were both button-up, and I realized that it would prevent her from having to pull the clothing over her head or down her legs, allowing her to remain upright in her preferred position. Her neck and head were level, the only "normal" things about her posture.

"Maybe. Maybe not," I said finally. "But how did we never notice?"

"People see what they want," she said, not questioning my interpretation of her potential answer. "And it's not so hard to convince them."

I opened my mouth to say something, anything, but she cut me off and held out her hand expectantly for her backpack. "Well," she began, her voice gravelly and deep. "Thanks for the lift, Willa Jean, but I wouldn't suggest coming by here again. I'm not one for pity. It's much easier to just forget."

"But then you won't solve your problem," I burst out, my hand still firmly on her backpack strap, even as I offered it to her. "You won't get anywhere without talking about it."

"Who says I got a problem?" she said. "Not me, no siree." She winked, yanked the backpack from my grip, and limped through her gate. I closed it for her after she passed through, but then she gave me a look that made me shrink back and remove my hand from the white posts.

And then she was gone.

After that, I turned back to walk home. My feet dragged, just like hers had. My head felt heavy, just like hers had looked. I wanted to laugh, then cry.

Yesterday, the doctor had told me that the only other person in the valley who had my condition was Willa Jean. "Go talk to her and ask, honey. She's real sweet, she helps everybody."

But I didn't want to be a mystery girl like her.

I didn't want to be the person who had to fool everybody, so that she'd stop trying to fool herself.

I and Thou

By Gabrielle Landry

Words waiting to come out
build behind my lips like a pack of wild Christmas shoppers against
store doors on Black Friday.

I want to fold you in arms gentle as rose petals,
secure as homemade tortellini,
and tell you how sorry I am for all the pain the world has put you
through,
to take your hand as you share your story
through forced yet bitter laughter, sharp as ice, that masks the scars
of pain unnoticed, left to fester and decay.
Sawubona: “I see you, and by seeing you, I bring you into being”—as
you see me.

It is a gift to hold the hurt of another,
to carry together a long-obscured weight,
to see beyond fear and fading hope a patchwork of love felt deeply, joy
that has sustained light, an ever-evolving quilt of wonder and memory.

When our eyes meet,
Can you see that I have felt what you feel?
To bring hope from despair is a capacity
best realized in unity;
We were never meant to be alone.

No Strings Attached

By Rebecca Araten

I'd much rather have this strain on my toes, as my body stretches in opposite directions—my feet pressing firmly downward, upper back lengthening like an extension cord—than strain my eyes skimming through innumerable pages of academic jargon, or burden my brain with trying to decode it.

My shoulders have become acquainted with my ears after scribbling with a pencil for hours and frequently stooping to squint more closely at the luminous screen of a laptop. Where others might have leaped in fright at the feeling of an unannounced hand touching their backs, I was trained to recognize such a touch as that of my mother, who would consistently try to rearrange my body parts into some semblance of posture.

“Pretend that there’s a string pulling you up from the top of the head,” my mother would say each time we walked together outside, where patches of sunlight illuminated the full extent of my back’s curvature. It was her insistence that brought me here, to the ballet studio’s dark, glossy vinyl floors, which transform my blundering slip-ups into elegant slides. The crooning voice of the instructor gently introduces my body to grace, spoon-feeding it to me like an allergen she hopes I won’t react to. And how could I, when my falls are cushioned by tranquil piano music, when every move I make is masked by the twenty adults around me, equally clueless about the proper execution of a *dégagé*.

When the instructor’s gentle voice directs us to a plié, my knees go out beneath me, but it’s not the same buckling that takes place when I stand up to disengage from hours of belabored typing, of vacillating between the extreme of hammering keys so quickly that my mind can’t keep up with what I type, and of having so much to say that my fingers can’t soar swiftly enough to catch it all. This time, when I descend, my knees remain steadily beneath me, so that my torso is floating despite its proximity to the ground. I suck in my gut, reducing myself to a single point, a dense neutron star of microscopic radius, radiating energy and awaiting my explosion into the next fluid motion.

Actively pressing all of my sides inward, I am hyperaware of all the bits that usually hang out, of the spots that give way to my finger when

pressed. This is the point where many dancers decide to bar carbohydrates from their body, to respond to pizza with a slight shake of the head and lips pressed firmly together. The self-deprivation spreads outward in rays and unchecked, it may force dancers to put a torch to themselves and weld their joints into linearity. But those concerns increase with proximity to the New York City Ballet, and with time spent prancing across the polished floors, and here in the beginners' class from 7:30 to 9:00 PM on Wednesday, that feels as far as Antarctica. There are no harsh criticisms shouted from an instructor's seat in the corner, nobody pushing me while I'm standing on tiptoes to see if I'll surrender and keel forwards. Even when I become the class example of what not to do, it's never at all personal—the instructor doesn't even know my name.

And so, in relative anonymity, I am free to take off my ballet shoes at 9:30 PM sharp, to toss them into my backpack, and to throw the load over my shoulder, hunched forward against the weight and the wind outside. My feet pound on the pavement as I race towards the 9:35 shuttle, which will whisk me away from the sound of waltz music and slight odor of sweat, back to my dorm room, where I will inspect a small-font book from the Western literary canon and slouch over it, no strings attached.

Suburbia

By Connor Haskin

I don't think life is a box of chocolates
It's more like a potluck after church on Sunday
You never know what you're going to get, but it's definitely not sweet
It's mostly bland, poorly seasoned, or over-salted
Maybe savory if you're lucky, but someone else usually gets there first
So you're left with the soggy potato salad
The mediocre white bread sandwiches with the crust edges cut off
Salad with too-thick ranch dressing
A stale donut

Life never quite goes the way you plan it
You get served a dish you probably won't like sooner or later
But you got to suck it up and eat it
And pleasant conversation that means nothing
Is the law of the land
You don't want to talk to Stacy about her daughter's wedding
Or Jack about his favorite team
Or hear about how Mr. Robinson is at it again

You don't know where else to go
Because everything you know is this world
The social hall
Potato salad
After school taekwondo lessons
Ten minute drives to the mall
Suburbia wraps around your mind
Like plastic wrap
To preserve you
While you rot from the inside

And I

Just can't get away

From it

All

But

Everyday you got to find a way out
Out of your mind
Out of your body
Out of your being
To say
Get me the fuck out of here
I want to feel something real in my life
No more Pottery Barns
Or L.L. Beans
Or pre-ripped jeans
Or fake scenes
Populated by desperate teens
Trying to get a feel
Of what a real really is
Or anxious parents
And their ranch-smothered salads
Wanting to see you fly
While keeping you tied to the ground
Like a parrot in a cage
Trained to say set phrases for visitors
To their amusement
But you can't have a voice for yourself in this

Life is a grab-and-go lunch
You take what you want and then run
And stay content with the mediocrity
Nine-to-five corporate synergy
Holistic ass-kissing to the nth degree
And the adult life you got isn't quite what it seemed
Like when you were young
Because you took for granted the lack of responsibility
No bills
No worries
No trouble
Not for you
In your insulated house
In your cookie-cutter development
Surrounded by sameness everywhere
That wasn't your life

Uniformity is bliss
Until it haunts you
And the guilt wells up
Because you know it gets rough
And you never had to deal with that, did you?
Because mom and dad paid for everything
But they're not here to help you anymore
And you got to confront the things you never could
The pain inside
Stepford smilers populate your memories
So it wasn't as great as it seemed

But you never went hungry
And you never had thirst
And you never had to drop out of school
Or raise your siblings
Because you were protected
Under a blanket of security
From the disorder behind the scenes
The lives that don't live in your TV screens
But is that all that life can really mean?
Miserable misfortune, or suppressed dreams
You made it this far
So you better count your blessings
Because at least you're at the potluck
And not locked

Outside
The boundaries
Of respectability
That lurk everywhere
Undefined but still there
The silent hell that they call
Welcome to the American Dream

Darkest Brown ~version four~

By Nathan Alakija

Brown as a color never quite appealed
not on my sweatshirts
not on my shoes
not on my neatly ironed corduroy
some psychology is not meant to be understood

With two brown eyes,
I see the black of my skin meet the brown of my world

I love my hue.

My blackness is written on my face
written on my fingers
written on my eyes
which rest in the hollow caves
just below my forehead
close though not near enough
to touch
my thin and coarse plucky brows.

Ten dark fingers can
stroke the brows smooth though instead
I lift five of my ten
raise them to my head
and rest
my hardened chin lying
on the pillow of my
clenched fist.

They fit atop one another
as if building blocks
So, fully aware of my pondering pose
I question whether I was made to be this way

African Honey Bees

By Braxton Marion

Braxton with an x
Or with a Bee

A branded reminder
My personal twisted history

Raised second
To my own honey

A life now far in the past
Still cracks run through me

So when we've torn one another to the ground
And only the floor we can see

Hold my tears with your heavy hands
And hear their softest plea

A Bee stings after it dies
Not dies after it stings

Histories of Things

By Shanivi Srikonda

Rivers that span millennia, octogenarian trees, mountains that have
always existed —
how much have they seen?
We are surrounded by giants of time,
things that existed before us and will persist even after we are gone.
If these giants could speak, what would they tell us?
Centuries change, eras come and go, yet these giants remain constant,
ancient landmarks in an ocean of time.
The histories of things are secret to us — we do not know what they
have seen,
we do not have the privilege of knowing their wisdom.
How do they endure?
The histories of things are precious — there exists a narrative in each
river,
in every sapling there is a story.
There is strength in their endurance, power in the histories of things.

#19

By Rebecca Araten

This too shall pass,
Like a kidney stone:
Searing soft skin
Tearing through your body
like the night through bloodless stars.

It shall close the spacious rooms of empty souls
And clog them with ragged breaths
And mark the walls with daily growing tallies
A line per day we've counted towards rebirth.

A distant light does little to stifle
Melodic screeches whistling through your chest,
For light can travel a thousand miles from its source—
Perceiving it does not mean it's near.
Like beams at cats' paws,
The closer you come the further it may run,
Prude and coquettish like the moon.

This too shall pass,
but so may you,
so you search for your G!d in the tendrils of your breath
for an outstretched arm to pull the cancers out
for a listening ear to spill your entrails forth.
Your startled eyes refuse to close,
Your mouth gapes like an open sore.
Waiting for relief to come,
tossed like a ring
Into the lap of tomorrow.

Antarctica

A captive penguin's dream of returning home

By Edward Athaide

For many years I've longed to see
The icy cliffs of home
Where icebergs float so gracefully
Atop the ocean's foam!

I long for endless summer days
And frigid winter nights
Beneath the green and purple blaze
Of brilliant Southern Lights.

When will my feathers feel again
A blast of freezing air?
Inside this stuffy little pen
My heart is near despair.

Yet as I think of home, I still
Recall that in that place,
I felt, in the engulfing chill,
The continent's embrace!

This land, though far away, I know
That someday I shall see;
For as I thither long to go,
Antarctica longs for me.

First Day, Last Day

By Connor Haskin

This was the first day that Salman could not bend over. It wasn't even during prayer. It was before that, when he'd grab his tattered, rolled-up prayer rug, drag it towards the tiny window of the closet-room, unroll it, pray towards Mecca, reroll the rug, and stash it away in the corner. But he could not bend over to grab the tiny rectangle of fabric. His lower back felt like it was on fire. So he was forced to squat as low as he could and wobble over to his customary position to pray. It was six in the morning, and Salman knew it would only get worse.

If he were a younger man, he could have gotten used to bending from his knees. That was the way the PT told him to do it, right? But in these quarters, the further you were from the ground, the better, because the stained concrete of the crowded block smelled so awful that he would rather lock his knees and bend from the back if it meant he could stay a few inches above the stench. The stench. The whole block smelled like that stench. The stench of hundreds of unwashed humans, crowded together in inhuman conditions, living from concrete slab to concrete slab, draping filthy rags over the filthy floor pockmarked with burns and water damage and cockroach remains and rat droppings and rotten crumbs of discarded food and stale water and all kinds of dirt. The corner of the closet-room was the cleanest spot in Salman's corner of the complex, only because so few people bothered to crawl into its claustrophobic corners. But Salman did.

Sixty-three months since he had arrived here from far away, from a land across the sea, and he suspected he may see sixty-three years before he could leave the block. Each day it became denser and denser, unless the police came to disrupt the most unruly migrants and launched tear-gas and emptied the building as much as they could. But they could not really purge the building any more than its wretched inhabitants could purge their quarters of vermin or stench. Even in the worst raids, there was always an alcove within which a man could hide. Salman's was the closet-room. Five square feet of space between a forgotten window, with the entirety of his life piled into the corner. There was nothing else left.

By midday Salman could not pray on his rug. His back was ablaze. Was it really that he had been bending over too much, or was there

something else wrong? Some kind of disease of the nervous system, or an ulcer? Could one even get an ulcer on the back? Salman did not know. He groaned in the corner, rubbing his burning-hot skin, muttering prayers on his breath while facing the right way. It was the least he could do. Everything had a reason, right? Somewhere, a child screamed.

And with each passing day his strength withered. His strength, which had carried him across the seas to this wretched place, where dreams die and love is strangled, where armed men who spoke a language unknown to him cursed with tongues of fire, where the mildew from the broken pipe that connected something upstairs dripped steadily onto his rug and made it grow mildew, made his fading clothes grow mildew, made him grow mildew, it seemed, sometimes. Unknown. Unknown to all the world, across the seas, in a land of damp chills and seething flame. Salman laid on the ground, stared into the miserable little window, and strained to see how many stairs there were in the sky each night. One, or two? The light pollution was so bad, it seemed sometimes the world was brighter on cloudy nights than even when the full moon arrived. On cloudy nights, the whole sky was a dim orange, not unlike the blackened oranges he had seen lying near the cots of children, rotting toys for their enjoyment in this hell-scape where the bare minimum was too much to ask for.

Salman began to wonder if he was a human at all, or some kind of animal, some starving hyena holed up in a dank cave, hissing at the passersbys, grunting with each piece of food he could sneak away, take for himself, make for himself. He forgot what day it was that he stopped praying. What difference does it make? He must have drowned on that crowded, desperate ship, when the water began to take and the terrified jumped off board even if they could not swim, only so they could not face the coast guard ships that came to arrest them, not to save. He had watched their bodies bob in the sea, like human buoys, and he wondered if, really, his mind deceived him. Had he not jumped in himself, drowned in the freezing water, and gone and descended to hell? So, then, was everything he had seen, felt, tasted, yelled, moaned, groaned, and shuddered since then just a fantasy? But the mildew walls had no answers to his questions.

And God felt so far away.

Dormant Theology

By Chinyere Obasi

I talk to God as I'm falling asleep

There's something about the instant response of the world and
Something about the delayed gratification of sleep and salvation that
makes it easier

Makes it right

I always pass out before I quite know how to reach Them
A staircase winding up and up until it isn't

And so I wake up again

Brazilian Blues

By Connor Haskin

Scene i. A Brazilian beach at midday. The sky is clear and unrelentingly bright. A boardwalk meanders some distance away from the beach in the background. While the beach looks crowded, the boardwalk is deserted except for GUNNAR sitting cross-legged on a bench. A neatly groomed man in his late 30s, GUNNAR wears a tan-colored tailored linen suit and a panama hat in a way that makes him look like he fell out of an old travel poster. He sits under the shade of a palm tree, reading a newspaper, when ALEX enters. A shirtless and disheveled-looking man, also in his late-30s, ALEX approaches GUNNAR cautiously, like a cat stalking prey. GUNNAR looks up and locks eyes with the other man, then checks his watch.

GUNNAR

(cold) You're late.

(beat)

Again.

ALEX tentatively smiles.

ALEX

The ocean has a way of washing you away.

GUNNAR

(critically) More like leaving you washed up.

(beat)

Where have you been? I've used every communication method at my disposal and you never responded. Meeting in person was the last resort.

ALEX

Hey, this isn't exactly my first resort either, eh? I like to leave my days... uh...how'd you call it...well never mind, a foreigner would never understand the way things here go. That's why you need me, eh?

ALEX looks over GUNNAR's attire.

As for not understanding - how are you not drenched in sweat? I feel like my skin's peeling off with this sun.

GUNNAR

It's quite comfortable, actually. Far more comfortable than whatever rags you're wearing.

(beat)

(deadpan) And as for your skin peeling, consider investing in sun-screen.

GUNNAR sets his newspaper aside.

Enough small talk. I want to know why you never transferred the blueprints to us. I checked the dead drop five times - there was never a package there. And last we met, that was the agreement. I give you two months, you give me the-

ALEX

Yeah, yeah, I know. It's not for lack of trying, though. Have you ever seen the kind of file cabinets they have up in Brasilia? Good luck finding anything in there, eh?

GUNNAR

(coldly) We're a long way from the capital.

ALEX

And you're a long way from home, senhor. We have a different way of doing things here. You know - I bet you wouldn't believe it - I spent the last four hours chasing some rascal for your precious intelligence. And you know what happens, when I finally grab him myself, eh? Turns out he forged a government ID - he didn't know the first thing about, eh, what's it called, the SQUASH network?

GUNNAR

SKAK. S-K-A-K.

ALEX

(*ignoring GUNNAR*) Well, he didn't know anything about SQUAWK - and by the way, what's it with you spooks giving your organizations the dumbest names?

GUNNAR stands up. It is evident that he is much taller than ALEX, and he uses this height to tower over the Brazilian.

Boy, if you were any taller, I'd think you were a palm tree. Except palm trees know how to be flexible.

GUNNAR

(*said like a command*) Where are my blueprints.

ALEX

You can't come crashing into the government like a tsunami and take whatever you want, eh? You must be patient, take time, see the situation, work it out. We don't act impulsively here.

GUNNAR

You talk about your country. But you do not know what mine is willing to do.

ALEX

(*unnerved*) ...What do you mean by that?

GUNNAR

Do you even know what the blueprints look like? Do you know how they are stored, whether in a physical folder, a CD, a USB drive-

ALEX

CD? USB drive? What decade are you living in? I haven't used either since 2011.

GUNNAR aggressively slaps ALEX across the face. ALEX rubs his injured cheek.

GUNNAR

You are so wrapped up in doing things on your time that you cannot even begin to understand mine. But your time has no power here. I decide the rhythm of this operation, and you have no choice but to conform to me.

(beat)

Now, before I lose all of my patience, where are my blueprints.

ALEX

(with a shaky, nervous voice) I don't know exactly where, but there is a major administrative compound about 11 kilometers inland from here. It's unmarked and it's registered under the name of a shell company, but I've seen high-level bureaucrats enter and leave there. Security is lighter than you'd think, and I know a way in. I've checked everywhere except there, so if it isn't in there, chances are it was destroyed already.

GUNNAR

But you don't even know what format the information is stored in.

ALEX

There are only so many ways to store a set of blueprints, and I think something that important would be hard to miss.

GUNNAR

When is security lightest at the compound? Assuming you bothered to check.

ALEX

(*confidently*) End of the working day, a few hours after the guards sweep the place but before midnight. Even if anyone sees you, all it takes for some quiet is a couple of reals, eh?

GUNNAR

If you are telling me the truth, then we will meet at the perimeter of the compound at 18:00 and you will let me in.

ALEX

I can do it myself.

GUNNAR

I have to verify for myself at this point.

GUNNAR looms over ALEX again.

And if I find that you have lied to me, or if you are not present at the time I specify, then I will make sure you will have to start worrying about far more than some beach crooks.

Blackout.

Scene ii. A government office. One end of the office is designed to look like a modern drawing room, with contemporary furniture and colorful abstract paintings on the walls. The other end is sparser, with only a simple desk, a semi-recent desktop computer and monitor, a slightly worn leather office chair, and a back wall lined with filing cabinets. The windows reveal the night skyline of the city. A door at one end of the office opens, and ALEX enters, followed by GUNNAR. ALEX has changed into a maintenance worker uniform.

ALEX

This is it. It's the secret office for the minister's assistant. If it's not here, it wouldn't be anywhere else.

GUNNAR skeptically examines the room.

GUNNAR

How can you be so sure this is the place? Didn't you say that you've never been to this compound?

ALEX

You got so little faith in me, eh? I used to work cleaning offices like this all the time. Professional bureaucrats all think the same, and they always organize things the same way, too.

GUNNAR snaps back towards ALEX.

GUNNAR

Then why didn't you say so earlier?

ALEX

The easy part isn't learning the pattern. It's finding the exceptions to the pattern. Better to be careful, and realize you were too cautious, than assume how things will be, and realize too late that you are wrong. Now, you want your precious blueprints, eh? Go look for them.

GUNNAR, impassive, heads to the cabinets. He rips through their drawers and quickly looks through files, tossing them aside if they are unsatisfactory. ALEX takes a seat on the other end of the room and watches him with amusement.

How are you ever going to find anything if you come in like a whirlwind, eh?

GUNNAR

I've wasted enough time with you. All I need now is to locate the SKAK's plans...

ALEX

Enough about SKANK, eh? You know, I bet the minister's assistant must have a good bottle of rum around here. If I were that senhor, I'd have a fantastic bottle of rum, or gin, or scotch, or whatever my guest likes. And with windows like these - when dusk is over the city, I would bring in my good friends, maybe a lady or two, and toast and drink-

GUNNAR slams a cabinet drawer shut, cutting ALEX's musings off, and moves to investigate the computer.

I didn't realize - those are very ugly gloves. They don't go with your outfit.

GUNNAR

(nearly snarling) Why don't you do something other than sit there and talk to yourself?

ALEX

Not all work is done with violent action. Look - did you ever check the desk drawers?

GUNNAR hesitates, then starts opening the desk drawers quickly. He pulls out a USB drive triumphantly.

GUNNAR

(smug) At last, I've found you.

ALEX

(distastefully) You could have found that without ripping half the room apart.

(beat)

How do you even know it's what you're looking for?

GUNNAR

(confidently) It was located at the farthest corner of the bottom drawer

relative to the chair, naturally making it inaccessible enough to evade casual scrutiny but just conveniently located enough to allow easy access when needed. The dimensions of the USB drive itself...

ALEX starts giggling. GUNNAR glares at him.

GUNNAR

What's wrong with you? We've been searching for these blueprints for the better part of the year at this point. This information is the tipping point. What's so funny about that?

ALEX

What a stupid question of me to ask. You found what you were looking for, eh? You say I know nothing, but you know less than nothing.

(beat)

(newly abrasive) Don't you get it? You fool, I planted it. There are no blueprints. I spoon-feed you bullshit for months, and you crave it so much, you summon me to get a spoonful more. Do you really think we're so careless and unsophisticated? Even if your people figured out a way to hack our network, you'd never be able to decrypt our communications.

GUNNAR

(not comprehending from disbelief) What?

ALEX slowly rises from his seat, as if being pulled upwards by marionette strings.

No, that's not possible. The existence of the blueprints was confirmed in several different agency reports...there's no way...who have you been in contact with? Do you know what kind of hell I can unleash if you-

ALEX

A storm from the sea can rattle the windows and rip off the roofs, but it cannot break the will of men who are willing to impose order and spite the chaos.

ALEX pulls a gun from a hidden compartment in his uniform.

It's a real shame, getting blood on a suit like that, eh?

Blackout.

Dust of the Earth (Song Lyrics)

By Rebecca Araten

Don't need to feel my heart to know it's beating
I can't see the air, but it keeps me breathing
Can't see rhythm through a scope, but it keeps us dancing
No design for hope, but it keeps us chancing

Invisible weights are pulling me down
Invisible love can turn me around

Like that wind blowing through the trees
Invisible, Making leaves flutter in the breeze,
You whip my hair back and forth,
Smash foundations, turn mills, and blow the sands
You make the dust of the earth dance

I search caverns for your word, but I'm left with silence
But just when I've lost hope, it rings like sirens
Like the nostrils on my face, I look right past you
The world's our question, but how do I ask you?

Invisible doubts flying through my head
Invisible God, bring me faith instead

Like that wind blowing through the trees
Invisible, Making leaves flutter in the breeze
You whip my hair back and forth
Smash foundations, turn mills, and blow the sands
You make the dust of the earth dance

The things that are everywhere I've trouble seeing
The spots in my vision my brain's stopped perceiving
The gifts that you give I forget I'm receiving
Not seeing is Believing

You're that wind blowing through the trees
Invisible, Making leaves flutter in the breeze.
You whip my hair back and forth
Smash foundations, turn mills, and blow the sands.
You make the dust of the earth dance

How 2 Love

By Nathan Alakija

My favorite number is four
and so is hers
four plus four equals eight
that lucky number eight

I love us combined
I don't know where her love lies
my guess? The duality of intimacy
lost somewhere between comfort and passion

But mine resides in the infinite loops of eight
where we have nothing between us save a fiery heat
Two circles always at three hundred sixty degrees
sometimes separate but always touching

1 for me and 1 for you
you see we combine 2 infinity.

So close that your eyes close with my dreams

By Gabrielle Landry

When you lift me from my worries
I forget how it feels to shoulder them alone.
Pillowcases smeared with tears of grief
quietly move aside for warm quilts that comfort,
holding me as you do.
Across this mass of land and sea
your voice gently brings my smile out again,
spreading in unison with yours.
How do you manage to bring such light to the darkness?
Our love washes over me, hugging me tight,
so close that your eyes close with my dreams.

And oh, but when you laugh, your voice flies away from this world
and takes my soul soaring with it.
Have you found a place for us, where no distance divides?
Where connection like delicate rings linked on a crocheted blanket
rest softly, like my head on your chest,
my hand in your hand,
so close that your eyes close with my dreams.

I keep this love close;
When the turbulence within me threatens to take over
I remember that I have you to lean on.
Like a child holding a dainty flower,
as gracefully as your fingers play a tender piano melody, yes,
that is the way your hands hold my face
and lovingly pull me closer,
until our foreheads touch,
so close that your eyes close with my dreams.

He Sh(e) We

By Nathan Alakija

It is divine how We (just) mesh.

She is within me
I am within her

To what extent we cannot be fully sure
?

Ice Window

By Brammy Rajakumar

The windowpane was cold against my hand.

My nose pressed against the glass, I regarded the snow, a pure white sheet that had come down sometime between midnight and 9 AM this morning. Only two set of footprints marred its surface, and I thought I could discern boot prints and faint pawprints. The soggy snow had collected several inches on top of my father's car, giving the bronze Honda Accord a caked-on winter hat. I imagined the car with a scarf and reindeer antlers accompanying its hat, its front bumper warped into a smile, and I managed a smile of my own, alone in my room. I winced at the glare of the sunlight as it glinted on our fresh new snow.

The blanket wrapped around me was warm. It should be; I practically had lived in it for the past nine months and probably would be for a few months longer. The pandemic didn't look like it would be easing up this winter. Christmas had been a set of empty seats and bare branches, and New Year's had somehow entirely passed my notice. What was another month to me, then?

The blanket of snow was fairly light. It was South Carolina, after all, and any snow for us was a miracle. It would have been a snow day, were I still in high school, and not a college dropout, as my mother referred to me.

Drop-out is not the same thing as leave of absence, Ma, I had said many a time.

But you're not studying, Kutty, are you? she would always point out with a raised eyebrow and a hand on her hip. You're not doing anything.

I leaned my forehead against the chilled glass and imagined a regular snow day, a regular day without school that I would have celebrated. With shut eyes, I imagined an open school building, a room filled with people. Winter hats, warm boots, hot chocolate, snowball fights, snowman building—the dregs of memories for which there would be no need this lonely winter. Now, I spent my days wondering if I should glue my mask to my nose and whether I might feel comfortable in a crowded

place ever again.

I pictured sledding with my friends. I could go sledding or at least build a snowman, I mused to myself. As a solitary activity.

Shaking my head and stifling a laugh, I looked back out over the snow. A solitary activity? I might as well get back into bed if I wanted to be alone. But for a moment, I let myself picture it: I would yank on my winter gear, trudge downstairs and out the front door, and rake my fingers through the soft snow. Snowflakes in my hair, wind howling, I could mold the fine snow into large chunks, and eventually into a short little snowman. His name could be Jeff.

I settled down into a chair and stared at the snow, eyes unmoving. There was no point. Outside by myself in the snow, inside by myself in the warmth—no difference. I couldn't do it anyway. I couldn't lever my body out of this chair now that I was in it, let alone push myself downstairs and out the door. My former self would have done it immediately, eyes twinkling, hair wild. The sad shell of her now was a completely different person, a silent, unmoving, aimless sort of person. The sort of person who didn't do anything but scroll on her phone and try to do a job that she had signed up for but now hated.

We had been running out of money. It hadn't sat right with me to pay tuition for a place that I would barely attend without making any money. Online classes seemed like a nightmare, so I quit. I declared my leave the day before the deadline and sat alone in my house, mouth open as I tasted my freedom. My mother hadn't spoken to me for a week.

Guess you're a quitter, teased my college best friend when I had called to tell her the news. Guess you run out of steam.

Guess I do, I had laughed back. Guess I do.

—

My boots crashed through the snow, tearing up the soft, calm blanket spread out across the city like a coat.

Watch out! Snow is slippery, Southerner! called my best friend.

I don't care, I called back between giggles. Snow is fun.

It's not a snow day, you know, she pointed out between gasps as we raced through the streets and up the hill in front of our dormitory. We have class later.

Thank god for that! I exclaimed. We've had enough snow days to last a lifetime, don't you think?

Her eyebrows furrowed. Watch out for black ice, she muttered.

Black ice? I echoed.

It looks like normal ground, but it's actually clear ice. So it trips you up, she explained, miming a fall.

Unexpected?

Like a pandemic, she said with a trace of a smile.

I stopped running, and we turned around to survey how our school looked in the snow. The steeple of the school's auditorium was coated in snow like frosting. The day after a snowfall, everything looked like a cake. I tipped up my head and opened my mouth to taste the falling snowflakes.

My friend laughed. You know that snow is just water, right?

Water never tasted so good then! I said, tongue sticking out.

The wool of my scarf had gotten caught in the zipper of my jacket, and I fiddled with the collar as I licked my chapped lips, absorbing every molecule of snow water that I could.

With a quick glance at me, my friend jerked her chin at a nearby lake whose surface had been frozen over. Small knots of people were gathered at the edges as lone skaters ventured out onto the ice.

It's safe, one called back to the others. Join me!

With a whoop, several others slid out onto the ice, some stumbling, but

all laughing. I felt the corners of my mouth twitch.

Okay, I said in response to her unspoken offer. Let's go!

We linked arms and jogged over to the lake, pausing far away from the gathering before pushing up close to the others.

I held my breath in reflex before letting myself inhale normally.

We didn't bring skates! I reminded my friend.

Just walk out onto the ice, she offered.

Hesitating, I lifted up a stocky winter boot. I don't want to break the ice, I worried, my teeth caught on my bottom lip.

Take a risk, go on! she urged.

Carefully, I lifted my boot and settled it onto top of the ice.

There you go, was that so hard? she asked, eyebrows raised.

Looking up, I met her eyes. You want a real risk?

With a grunt, I shoved my foot through the ice. The cold water immediately rose to engulf my toes, soaking straight through my boots and into my socks. I wiggled my toes in glee.

What were you thinking? she shouted. What the hell? You'll lose your foot!

At least it's awake, I replied. At least my foot can wake up.

In the morning

By Gabrielle Landry

In the morning, I stretch out my hands to reach for sunbeams
Shadows dance away as I pull the curtain back, and,
Like an actress taking her place,
Daylight strides in, the windowsill her stage.
Eyes blink away dust and fading dreams;
I slowly return to myself.

Odyssey Call

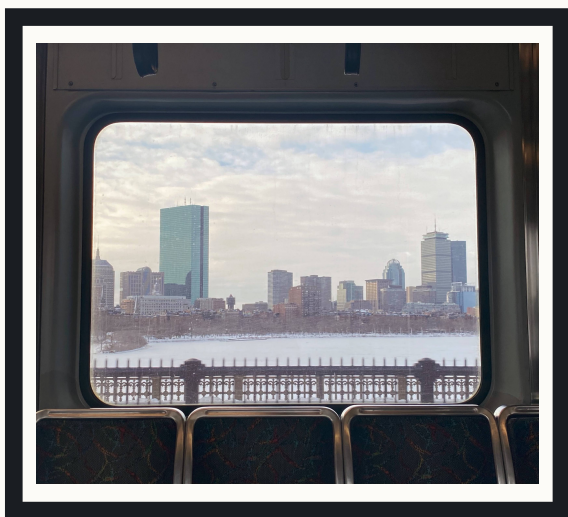
By Chinyere Obasi

O muse, he of contradiction, sing!
Proclaim a tale of woe and wander
After he made Trojan armor clatter and ring.

Met whom, traveled where, tell of storms yonder,
Of a sea's god that caused him so much pain,
As his mind, for flesh's sake, did ponder

And work to bring him home, did also strain
For kinsmen's sake, though they be fools
And from the Sun God's cattle would not abstain

The death of many, as gods' punishment rules.
An age-old modern story of a broken man, oh goddess,
Tell it
My voice, words, and clamor as your tools



Creative Writing Club