

Red Shoes Review

2021-2022



Vol. 38

UIC's Literary and Visual Arts Magazine

Mundane Magic

Letter from the Editors

To our readers,

Red Shoes Review has had yet another magical year. Life after a pandemic seemed like a plateau. To celebrate twenty twenty-one, we asked our members to find beauty in the ordinary. Whether it was a collection of images for a photo dump or walking to a coffee shop for another overpriced latte, our audience was enchanted by the little joys that made their day special.

We encompassed our vision for the year through UIC's Involvement Fair by showcasing past and upcoming events. While adjusting to the in-person and hybrid system, we were extremely successful in arranging multiple events which gave our audience space to connect with others who have similar interests. In addition, to amplify student voices, we launched a podcast known as Heels and Spiels for the first time, which provided students a platform to appreciate every occasion and focus on the aesthetics that bring these small, mundane magics. We grew immensely when our goal of 1000 followers on Instagram was achieved. RSR has been represented in a multitude of ways on campus. During the homecoming week, we won second place for our window painting competition. It depicted not only the theme of Hollywood, but also the range of talent that is present within our organization. Furthermore, our annual tradition of hosting an open mic night was enhanced with the magnificent performances by our talented members and a live A Capella group known as Downtown Voices. We look forward to our upcoming collaborations with other diverse organizations to empower the love for art and literature.

But what exactly made our year out of the ordinary? The answer to this question is found in our magazine. If you're enchanted by the magic of things regarded as monotonous, keep on reading! Thank you for your contribution and a special shoutout to the executive board for their endless efforts to make our organization unique and enriching for our general body!

Your editors,

Anooshay Aamir
Pahul Kaur



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UIC Writers and Artists
And our readers

Editorial Policy

Red Shoes Review is a journal of free and creative expression. The views expressed here are those of the authors and artists, and do not necessarily reflect those of the editorial staff or the Honors College. This journal welcomes and publishes work that represents a diverse range of beliefs, and does not discriminate against race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability. With the exception of grammatical changes, the content of this magazine is presented as is and is chosen through blind voting and panel review. All works presented are created by UIC students who were of undergraduate standing within the course of the 2021-2022 academic year. They represent only but a small portion of all UIC writers and are not necessarily associated with the UIC Honors College.

Springtime Silver

by Iemaan Khiyani

A breeze,
A ray,
A drop,
A whisper,
A wave of color,
A whiff of lilac.

Blue, blue, blue,
Up above.
Green, green, green.
Down below.

No droplet was trapped here.
All souls were left to blow,
On petal-soft wings,
In a gentle breeze.

Out of artificial lights,
Bright, blaring screens,
Warning, screeching, crying,
Of all the danger and panic.

When I was in the warmth of Sunshine,
Breeze flowing without a trap,
Leaves stirring,
Bubble gum hyacinths waving,
Tulips shrugging,
Daffodils bowing,
Cherry blossoms swaying,
Peaceful, quiet, fragrant,
Naive and deaf to the world,
Of news, tragedy, trauma,
Of death and virus,
I could feel,
Their ignorance.
I could enjoy,
Their peace.
I could be,
A part of them.

In a world where green lives,
Where life lives,
Thrives,
And even perishes.
A world full of sunshine,
And thunder.
Drizzles,
And darkness,
Hope,
And certainty,
I knew one thing,
That if winter does come,
Spring *will not* cease to follow.

Winter comes,
With its dark days,
Dreary nights,
Snow and slush,
But there it was,
Snow turned into angels,
Glowing in the drear of night.
The hidden beauty
Present even in the midst of a storm.

And even as the tragedies kept coming,
Spring kept striding,
To brighten, to shine, to illuminate,
The inevitable truth.

Hope is like a shining star,
Present even in the darkest night.
To me,
It was present within the breath of spring,
Its luscious growth,
Regrowth, revival, rejuvenation,
A sign that I could move on,
Just like the trees could.

Trees can not save me,
Viruses can duplicate, mutate, violate.
But life will always go on,
Seasons will always change.
And Spring
– Will Always Come –



The Drive Back Home

by Aitanna Nadala

comfort in nature

by Noor Iqbal

the light air
picks up the delicate fabric of my hijab
as I walk through the damp
sidewalks of my neighborhood.
i am lost in a tranquil haze
brought forth from the quiet hum of the city that surrounds
me.
a cool drop of rain settles on my warm shoulder
and brings me back to reality.
the crunch of once green leaf, now orange,
with the turning of a season.
the comforting breeze
and rustling of trees
once again,
carries me to a place
void of
stress
void of
worry.
i watch as mother nature exists before me
and brings a
warm
welcoming
feeling of content.



Bliss Over the Ocean

by Masab Bokhari

The Simplicity of the Sun

by Saamiya Ali

The Sun is so innocent,
So ordinary.
Always above in the sky,
And always providing sustenance
Trying to create a World with Balance

But even when a blanket of darkness falls upon the World,
The sun still continues to shine.
Many consider it as a symbol of happiness,
But I see it as a symbol of hope for another day
A new beginning.

No matter where a person stands,
The sun is always the same around the World.
So no matter where you go,
No matter how lonely you feel,
If you look up, the same sun still shines in the sky,
And will be with you each day of your life.



Magic of Beauty

by Avi Patel

I dream of you in colors that don't exist: a love letter to mother earth

by Susan Singleton

A long time ago
You came into existence
And from you all of us were born.
A long time ago
You were home to the first humans
Probably before we decided on things to disagree on
Things to hate each other for
Ways to manipulate power.
A long time ago
You were a culmination of everything right in the universe.
And a long time ago
You gave us as a species
Somewhere to land.
To live.
To experience.
To love.
To grow.
To be.
Nuestra Tierra.
The depths of your ocean we explore
The vast continents we travel
Into your deepest crevices
Your darkest caves
Your warmest islands
We stand.
We walk.
We run
Trying to find something.

We look at you and ponder existence.
Look at you and ponder
How we can show up as the best version of ourselves
To represent the type of beauty that you show us.
So when I dream of you
I dream of everything beautiful.

When I dream of you
I dream of you in *blurple* and *yeen*
Gellow and *vlue*.
I dream of you in browns only you can create
And greens that existed in you first.
I dream of you in the colors that you parented
That we can only replicate.
I dream of you in colors that span the imagination
That stretch across the universe
I dream of you and I think about every body that has walked down
this same street
Across the same field
Traveled the same oceans
For so many years.

I dream of you and I think of everything and nothing at all.
I dream of you and my breath is taken away.
The breath that your trees provide to me.
I dream of you and I think miracle.
I think divine timing.
I think sacred.
I think whole.
I dream of you in grass blades.
I dream of you in flower petals.
I dream of you in streams.
I dream of you in mountain ranges.
I dream of you in valleys.
I dream of you in marsh and swamp.
I dream of you in sand.
I dream of you in grains of sand.
I dream of you in the waves of the sea.

I dream of you in sharedness.
In strength.
In hot magma.
I dream of you in all of the elements.
I dream of you in earth, wind, fire, water.
I dream of you amongst the stars
And then I feel amongst the stars.
I dream of you in tandem with the moon
And then I feel connected to the moon.
I dream of you in colors that don't exist.



comfort in the rain

by Aliza Nadeem Abbas

Minor Ode to Earth

by LeeLoo Rose

You are magnificent
Look at you go
Our planet
Earth~

You are omnificent
Motherly glow
Art planet
Earth~

You are innocent
Monsters glow
Jail planet
Earth~

You are no longer benefit
Humans throw-
trash planet
Earth~

*And yet you are still here, after our human-monster gashes and blows
I thank you, we thank you, some of us thank you more than you know*



Morskie Oko

by Domi Machlowska

Burnt Sunsets and Bright Sunrises

by Rahal Khan

Legs curled to my chest - Eyes gazing across the Everglades,
Burnt Sunsets and Bright Sunrises circle one another in a
never ending motion

The display of it all - a collection of notorious accolades
That paints humanity, violence, love, loss as one interwoven
emotion.

A brushstroke of protests, debates and a sponge-dab of
achievement to rise,

Yet will it all suffice? Does it soften our cries?

Amongst complex trauma embedded into Us,

It is questionable whether if it was enough

To highlight the rawness of Our Human Nature.

Excitement at a new beginning was replaced with an absence
of solace - a void of hope

My life reflected a YA dystopian trope,

But this isn't Hunger Games and I am no Katniss Everdeen

The battle was greater, mental and physical exhaustion tied
together - no questions.

It is a mere reflection of society's faux pristine

And I witness the shambles of systematic oppression.

But maybe if we cared and maybe if we listened,

We could have still seen Burnt Sunsets and Bright Sunrises
glisten

Instead of watching the screen blare words and pictures,

Where this monotonous routine emits a permanent fixture.

So I transcend my mind into ballads on ink,

Every swift move of the feather pen rises and sinks,

Into the coffee-burnt landscape - formulating a note, a song,

The words stare back at me and inquire

When did you go wrong?



Painting on the Sky

by Laiba Athar

Her

by anonymous

Vivid visions looking up at the night sky
With my back against lush grass
Gazing at the stars
That have traveled an eternity
To glisten up my eyes

How I yearn for you to be by my side
With your back against lush grass
Gazing at the stars
That have traveled an eternity
To see the glisten in your eyes

I count the days, they slow by
I count the hours, they sit still
I count the minutes, they trickle by
Time will not obey my will
I'll just daydream moments with you
As my head lay on the window sill

Your hand fits perfectly in mine
Every finger interlocks in accord
Every fold and crease aligns
Heart racing as my soul roars
How it yearns and begs
To be the perfect note to your chord

Vivid visions looking up at the night sky
With our backs against this green grass
Gazing at the twinkles of my lore
As I wish for an eternity
For you to be my forevermore



deep within the hues of
friendship

by Noor Iqbal

Orange

by Alexandra Panos

I want to see through your eyes,
to reflect on the color and light.

In the doldrums of my mind,

I want to feel the shades you see inside.

California poppies glow in the mist of morning

You feel the sights that grab at sunrise,
love lingering on the tips of your fingers; yearning.

Someday, I want to feel it move through,
To touch my heart and make it orange too.

Fruitful Apologies

by Serena Ahmad

My mother has this funny way
of apologizing.
She won't allow anything like "I'm sorry"
to escape from her stubborn pink lips;
Instead, she procures
impressive assortments of fresh fruit—
you could paint a rainbow with them, coloring
even the duller of skies.
She slices sunset-toned peaches with care, discarding
their rough pits,
her hands gripping
their velvety skins in her palm
for comfort.
This ritual deeply adds to her sense of control—
she's secretly plagued with guilt,
though she'd never admit it.

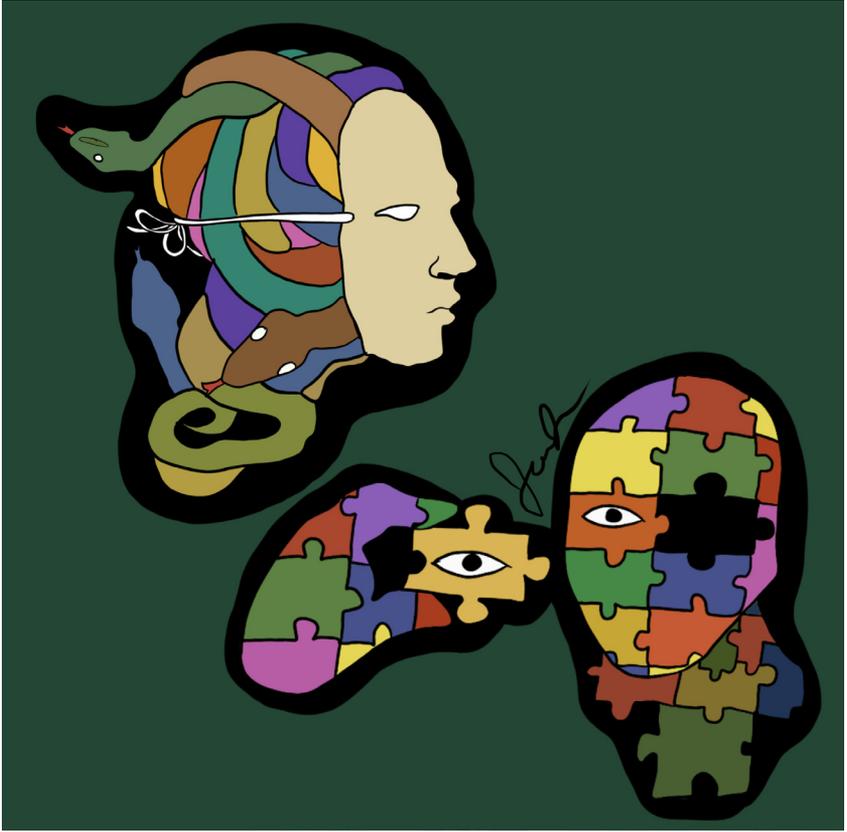
She rinses the strawberries, fresh
from the farmer's market;
She knows I adore them,
so delicately arranged with unspoken apologies,
their brilliant red giving away
the very motives they attempt
to conceal.
Each time, she artfully sprinkles
glistening grapes onto the platter.
Green, burgundy, and violet—
splattered with desperation and water droplets—
flash out at me,
like neon cones at the side of the road
warning me that
American kids always lose this battle;
I can't beat Brown Culture's traditions.
Why am I still trying?

The same cheddar cheese cubes I've loved
since I was six
no longer taste
the same.

She's attempting
to pass them off as a just-because-I-love-you snack,
but I now see right through her ploy to lure
me in with nostalgia's spell.

Yesterday
my frustration spread like wildfire
as I glared at my mother,
whose eyes briefly flashed
her shame
before she reached for her stoic mask
once again,
the mask she wore tightly
against the flames in my own tightening throat
that restricted me from shouting,
Why is your head still in Pakistan even though your body is here?
Forest green glass shards
scattered her wooden floor,
like too many blades of grass, plaguing
the sidewalk after a freshly mowed lawn.
A mug she threw.
Last time, my glasses.
Next time, my favorite snow globe.
So many moments
lost
as casualties of war.

Today
she wordlessly glides
into my room with the finished product, waiting
for the damage to undo itself.
I take one look at the fruit tray.
I reach out and grab the first piece I see: a strawberry.
I rotate it in my fingers
and lock eyes with my mother.
I know why you're here, I know what you're trying to do.
But she acts like she doesn't understand me:
"Oh *beta*, you're always so skeptical."
Her false, honey-coated optimism doesn't surprise me.
I shoot her a smile
that doesn't quite reach my eyes,
signifying my thanks.
As I bite the berry,
I consider the Orange
that has stained future sunsets
with memories of cowardly peaches,
the Red
of the strawberries bolder than she,
and the Green
of the false calm
after the storm.



Snakes and Ladders

by Janna Jann

backward walking

by Fatima Basharet

the mirror watches me falling
easily back into footprints that i had wiped
from existence long ago, but my steps found
their way to the edge of my thinking
where buried beneath my new mask of
something better than who i was
laid the ashes of who i had been, resurrecting
as if death was only in our heads
my mind loses to what was always there
the light darkens and the mirror is no longer watching



The Stranger

by Aitanna Nadala

Soft because

by Pahul Kaur

soft because none of us are the same people we were five or ten or two years ago. soft because peonies exist. soft because my plants managed to persist patiently waiting for water. soft because i know what it is to not want to wake up in the morning. soft because there is a bloodhound somewhere who has befriended a duckling. soft because he thinks the duckling is a puppy. soft because i carry four losses inside my chest- one for each cavity of my heart. soft because i'm running out of cavities. soft because i've been hard on myself for so long. soft because i don't know what you're carrying. soft because i don't know how much more weight will cause it all to fall through your arms. soft because we're both human. soft because coral melted into gold at dawn. soft because i want you to still be here in the morning.



Daydreamer

by Janna Jann

Peering into the Dreamer

by Rahal Khan

Friday's jubilance - the dancing and the laughter,
Echoed across the grand walls of the room below,
Her dress covered in all the stars of the universe,
The people swiftly moved with their silver masks aglow.

Alas, it was only a dream that I consumed each night,
Like a warm glass of milk stirred with droplets of honey,
This time I promised myself I would return once more,
To escape mundane society's obsession with
over-productivity and money.

Here I soared beyond the clouds, beyond the stars,
beyond the cosmos of human
Existence,
No one to question my 20's, no one to disrupt the light breeze,
for here I could only
Reminisce,
Friday's jubilance- the dancing and the laughter
To enjoy prancing in the present without worrying about the
After.

And so we raised our glasses, crystallized indeed,
As our footsteps sent a ricochet across galaxies,
The friends gossiped, the lovers interlocked fingers,
The gods and goddesses watched from above,
And everything was simply perfect, simply divine,
Yet I wish this moment would last a thousand nights.



Melting Curiosities

by Anupriya Matthews

a compliment's magic

by Fatima Basharet

it's the simplest of interactions
funny almost to think about it
but i do, again and again and again.
it's a break from monotony
to have something to think about
so i do, until the thought no longer consumes me.

you say it without thinking
a passing thought that escaped
but i listen, again and again and again.
my eyes weren't even that bright
and i don't think they're anything special
but i listen when you say they sparkle.

for the rest of my day
i take your three words and analyze them
and i glow, again and again and again.
a kind stranger's words hold magic
you will never know the effect of what you said
but i glow, discovering sparkles in brown embers.



Baarish

by Yumna Baig

Under the Stars

by Zuviriya Anarwala

Here under the stars,
On a cloudy night,
The moon has lit across the horizon,
And a cool wind blows through me.
Here, I lay under the stars,
Thinking of you,
Of the times we shared,
Not only of joy,
But laughter, anger and pain,
Sadness and despair.
Here under the stars,
I wish time would be at halt,
So I could tell my anxious days and heart not to despair,
That fifty thousand years ago,
No other name was written next to yours.
Here under the stars,
Let me write your name on the sky,
Let the gardens see the love we shared.
Here under the stars,
Let me repeat your name again.
Pray a prayer for you once again.
Feel the touch of gratitude all over again.
Here under the stars,
My lips have sealed silent,
My heart writes what my tongue could not say,
And it marches in prayer for you,
That if life were to be lived a thousand times,
That you shall be mine,
And I yours...



Is it okay if I hold your hand?

by Aitanna Nadala

The Wonders and Blunders of COVID Hands

by LeeLoo Rose

Hands

My hands

Your hands

I want to touch them

~~I should not~~

Hands

My hands support

Your hands do the work

I want to hold them

~~I cannot~~

I have missed the feeling of hands

On my back, on my arm

In my hair, on my cheek

But now, I just look

Praise the hands

Pray with hands

Please take my hand

With your marvelous hand-

one day, again



Lagoon

by Domi Machlowska

[a letter unsent]

by Anooshay Aamir

like a list of weary and defeated things in life,
like the sorrow of a poet
writing empty words on a paper,
everything that is beautiful,
doesn't always start beautifully.

spare me the terror of beauty,
for I am in love with stories
from books with rusty pages,
the spark glimmering off the eyes
of a four-year old selling roses on the street,
the crisp of dried dandelions
hand-picked by you.

spare me the terror of beauty,
for I shuffle through the same playlist
from five years ago,
searching for songs that reminded you of me,
feeling the nostalgia of what once was,
what could have been.

spare me the terror of beauty,
I am yet another twenty-year old,
a useless spec,
lost in the sea of livelihood.
for I have a lifetime
to feel weary
and defeated alas.



A Simpler Life

by Mehreen Ali

Happiness Town

by Laiba Athar

The world, driven by violence and war, has complicated happiness. We spend our whole life waiting for it on a darkened street, believing it will be an illumination of stars or something spectacular that no one has ever seen before. While this whole time, people are already floating in the colors of life. They are reminded of it every time they have a home-cooked meal when their body aches for familiarity. They are reminded of it in those smiles that turn into a reflex when they see someone they love after a prolonged period. They are reminded of it in those familiar conversations that flow from within them, making them realize that time has not changed a single thing. In those seconds of innocent laughter that fills their whole being with warmth. In those friendships that shatter the stone-coated walls, and in those moments of strength and vulnerability when they have to lay their heart out one more time.

Time slips away as we try to encapsulate all of the wonders of this mundane beauty in our whole being like radiant heat. Mind overwhelmed from all it has experienced. We observe the landscapes, the rosy skies, and the meadows full of flowers for the thousandth time. We watch the trees dance together with the wind. It is only when we are done experiencing the delicacy of the moment, we realize that it has completely numbed us.

No matter how boring it seems to another eye, time and time again, most of us will always press our nose up against the glass on the window of life. We will sigh at how beautiful it all looks because suddenly it makes our life seem lighter, a bit more Gene Kelly singin' in the rain.



red moon
by Domi Machlowska

Red

by Patryk Szczepaniak

The poetry inside of me falls silent around you.

In other words-
I become crepe paper cut-outs around you.

In other words-
I am fragile around you, my inferno,
And I like it.

In other words-
I am hot plastic,
Burning plastic,
Misshapen, slippery velvet.
Mold me-
I want to hear your heat.

In other words-
I wish to be consumed by you,
Cognizant that once we start,
I won't ever be able to stop.
And no matter how many bottles of wine I drink,
You'll remain residing in my heart.
Last stubborn dot of merlot at the bottom of the glass,
You'll be there forever,
Whether you want to or not.

In other words-
Since the night I saw you from across the restaurant,
Smiling like God, moving like willow branches (carefree, regal)
I knew you'd stain my heartstrings
'Til death and the afterlife and beyond that.

In other words-
Your voice like vanilla,
Your eyes like earthlight,
Paint my world brighter than Van Gogh,
So what I mean is that I'll never let go.

In other words-
I'll forego the warmth of tickling flames,
Forego the allure of Napa Valley,
Forego the loving whispers of bristles on canvas

For the red heat called
Your love.



Finding Joy in Joplin

by Kyra Kroll

can i move forward?

by Fatima Basharet

it feels like everything's slipping
away from my hand
the clock keeps chiming
faster than i can count
everything is moving
forward and upward and onward
earlier i was suffocating
in the stillness of stagnation
and now i am drowning
in the current of change
fear is strangling
my breath and mind
from fully accepting
a new chapter of life
from fully staying
just where i am
suddenly life is pushing
me to face it all
slowly i am befriending
an acquaintance named change
though i remain craving
the constants of yesterday
i am learning
the pace of the clock
i am accepting
a changed tomorrow



How can sadness appear on the face? (Loneliness effects research)

by Samia Aljaradat

Sometime between yesterday and three years ago

by Pahul Kaur

Somewhere between yesterday and three years ago, you grew up.

You will realize this in your kitchen, as you finish washing your dishes, while your dinner simmers on the stove and your bedding spins circles in the dryer. You'll realize that you can't remember the last day you didn't check your email, or the last morning you went without a cup of chai, or the last time you went down a park slide.

It's habitual, now. You shop for yourself. Set your own alarms. Fill your own gas tank. Tie your own shoes. You wear this independence like an accessory, like an identity, like something you've always known.

But it wasn't always here, was it? There was a time when you were called downstairs for breakfast, when you sat in the backseat, when you counted the seconds until your next birthday.

The transition was supposed to be obvious.

How did you miss it?

The days are getting shorter, but you've endured them before. At some point, you learned how to handle things like cold and hunger and loneliness. These darker days don't scare you like they used to.

You're older now. But you're still afraid.



Stranger
by Janna Jann

Sweet Enough

by Serena Ahmad

The fifteen minute walk from 9 a.m. English punches me in the gut when I glimpse multicolored skyscrapers and bustling streets, and not empty grass fields that can't pronounce my last name.

My phone screen's open to the contact of a now stranger I can't call, so my soundless tears fall through the crammed cracks in the pavement. But from them, roses and peonies and at the very least, Life, will bloom.

Now I'm big city Chicago, not tiny town Michigan.

So I go sleep beside windows taller than me, with the curtains cast aside. I let the warm, blood orange sunrise kiss my eyelids to wake me.

I toss out my dictionary; my new friends don't make me feel like I need esoteric speech and pretentious prose to impress them.

I let myself wander, revisiting the tacky red rug at Target that never sells, and the coffee shop on 22nd, the one with the mahogany bookshelves gathering dust.

I gingerly trace my fingers over my best friend's loopy L's from her card on my eighteenth birthday.

I fold the feather-light blanket my roommate wraps me in each time I pass out, face still glued to my chem textbook at 1:30.

I smile when the lunch lady wishes me *'Good luck on midterms, boo!'* and begs me to grab an apple, or a salad, or maybe even a prayer.

I order the same sacred white chocolate mocha from the same Starbucks every Tuesday. The nonfat milk cancels out the extra classic syrup and the barista knows this, knows me, so he asks me if it's sweet enough, if it'll do (it always does).



A Photo of A Photo: Meta Art

by George Guffey

a perfect day

by Fatima Basharet

when my head floats in pink clouds
avoiding white voids of emptiness
i dream of my perfect day
it would begin
with me waking up
precisely 20 minutes before my alarm
while sunlight dances across the walls
i would follow
my diligent routine
and the first drop of coffee would erupt
on my tongue and show my eyes the way
it would end
with me sipping tea
eyes keenly focused on crisp white pages
flipping to the ending of my favorite book
i can sleep easily
as my head hits the pillow, there are
no nightmares and i fall asleep in a minute
when my morning starts brightly
perfectly flowing into night
i call it a perfect day



Same Sunrise, New Place

by Mehreen Ali

Maybe After Midnight

by Patryk Szczepaniak

Palatine,

Criss-crossed with Rand
(Lone chemtrail, lone boat wake-
I'll write about you too some day,
One day soon,
That's a promise.
I pray that you hold me to it.)

Do you remember when I ran along your arms,
Picking seeds out of sidewalk samaras
To toss them behind my back
Like wedding-day rice
Or breadcrumbs in the palms of lost twins?
Because I do.

And I regret the passing of time
From when I would pass over your acreage
With precision, with decision

To now,
When I pass you over like uninterested
fingertips
Skimming a textbook-
Lazy, languid.

I hate that I can't care any less about clovers sprouting from pavement clefts
And that the sole occupant of my mind is the hand-shaking anxious-
ness
Of a merge on a cloverleaf interchange on IL-53.

Maybe after midnight-

When the sun gets restless and closes her eyes,
Meet me where my rubber soles would kiss your cracking (but not
breaking) asphalt
Under cars going too fast.

Hear the katydid screams,
Smell the pollen bestowing April allergies,

And think of me before I arrive.

Maybe after midnight,

We can meet again, and I'll be careless no more;
See you how I used to see you and how you used to see me:
Little more than seed-scatterers
With beautiful minds and dainty daydreams.



my luvs

by Aliza Nadeem Abbas

Beyond

by Anonymous

My favorite gift that I ever received from my grandmother was a glimmering golden fish with a giant mouth for devouring evil spirits. The gift was a necklace that my grandmother had bought during the years she lived in Japan. The fish was attached to a long chain, with intricate detailing and deep turquoise eyes. It even moved like a fish, much to my delight. As she put it around my neck, she told me the story of the golden fish who protected people from malevolent spirits with its magical powers by swallowing them whole. Though I was young and imaginative (perhaps nine or ten years old), I could not quite bring myself to believe that the fish really did possess such powers. When I opened its mouth, I did not see the evil spirits being sucked in. But it was unique and I liked the look of it, so I accepted my Nana's gift excitedly.

It would take me years to realize that magic is beyond what you can see.

~

When my grandmother died, I did not cry for her.

That sounds really awful. I swear I'm not, like, an emotionless potential murderer type or something. I don't mean to say that I did not love my grandmother, or that I was not saddened by her death; I did, and I was. But I did not, could not, cry for her. The wound was internal, and so was the bleeding.

"Really?" my little cousin asked. "You didn't cry for her *at all*?"

It was the first anniversary of our grandmother's death. My two girl cousins and I were best friends; each of us only had brothers (yuck), so we turned to each other for sisterhood. Except, of course, sisters normally live in the same house. We did not live anywhere near each other, so frequent FaceTimes, texting, and family gatherings every few months had to do.

This was the first time we had seen each other in a while. Our older cousin was at college, but we had still clambered our way up to her bedroom to chat, as was the custom. After texting our older cousin to inform her that we were trashing her room while she was gone (a half-joke), we had started off normally, talking about school, hot boys, annoying boys, what have you. But we could not pretend. Soon, grandma came up in conversation, inevitable as a crisis atone of our family holidays or potholes after a long Chicago winter.

"No, I didn't cry for her."

A beat of silence. Then, "why?"

"I don't know," I sighed. "I just didn't."

This was a partial truth. I had a guess as to why. My grandmother's illness and death were anything but sudden; she had been ill my whole life, and dying for a while. What's more is that despite my grandma's love, thoughtfulness, and generosity, we were never exceptionally close. I didn't live near her and had no means by which to visit her for much of my life, so our interactions were brief and infrequent. Still, I could have, *should* have, cried for her, shouldn't I?

I did not have the words to say this to my cousin. It was too convoluted. Hell, I didn't even have the words to make sense of it myself.

"Well," she said after another pause, "I cried like a baby. Me and mom were sobbing, like, all night."

"That's probably healthy," I replied.

“Yeah, probably,” she sniffed. “Hurts like a bitch, though.”

“Yeah,” I whispered.

Another long pause. My cousin and I never ran out of things to say to each other, but today, anything I tried to say wilted in my throat before I could say it. Nothing seemed like the right thing to say; either it was too complicated, too unnecessary, or both. Finally, my cousin broke the silence.

“You know the last thing she said to me?”

“No, what?” I asked.

“When I came to her house, I was wearing those cute ripped jeans, you know, the ones with cutouts?” I nodded.

“Well, grandma took one look at them and said ‘Your jeans have holes,’ and I was like ‘Yeah,’ and she sat there for a sec, looking at me, and then she was like ‘We need to get you some new jeans.’”

A slight pause. Then, the melancholy feeling that made my breathing feel heavy evaporated, ripped apart by peals of laughter. If ever there was a right thing to say, that was definitely it. *Of course grandma said that*, I thought. *Even on her deathbed, she was still that same affectionately merciless fashion critic.* When I rolled over to catch my breath, I fell off my cousin’s bed with a loud thump.

“Ow!” I wheezed, laughing even more.

“You’re such a dumbass,” my little cousin teased, squealing like a hyena.

“Harassing an injured person. Shame on you,” I scolded half-heartedly, rubbing my head where it hit the floor.

“It’s not harassment if it’s true,” she grinned.

I hadn’t cried since my grandmother’s death, but I hadn’t really laughed, either. Not when I thought about my grandmother, at least.

Funny/embarrassing/funny-and-embarrassing grandma stories used to be a frequent topic of our FaceTimes, but after she died, they had all but vanished. I had missed laughing at Funny-Embarrassing Grandma Stories.

“It’s a shame our older cousins are still at college. They would’ve defended me from you, you heathen,” I pouted.

My cousin laughed. “You’re just mad that I’m funnier than you,” she teased.

“Excuse me?!” I exclaimed dramatically. “Who is it that bought the three of us ‘stay sexy, don’t get murdered’ keychains again?”

My cousin was laughing too hard to answer. “Yeah, that’s what I thought,” I sniffed. “I’m definitely the second funniest cousin, second only to Ben, and since he’s at college, that makes me the funniest.”

“Does it now?” my cousin asked, mellowing out a bit.

“Yes, it does,” I smiled, too winded to keep giggling. My smile dropped a bit as I thought of how long it had been since I had seen my older cousins. “I’d give up the ‘Funniest Cousin’ title to have the rest of them here, though.”

“Well, it was nice to see them on Zoom at least, don’t you think?”

“Hah. Sure. I’m, like, still processing that whole call, honestly,” I replied, tugging at my fish necklace with hands that suddenly wouldn’t sit still.

In remembrance of my grandmother, when my family had gathered for dinner, each person shared a fond memory they had of her. My cousins who were still in school had called in on Zoom. It was a very thoughtful way to remember her, organized by my aunt, who had always been the epitome of the word “thoughtful.”

“You sounded fine when you were telling your story,” my cousin said, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah. That,” I huffed. “Want to hear the rest of that story?”

When I didn’t get a reply, I sighed. This was going to be complicated, difficult to tell, and probably unnecessary. But even though I had silenced myself in my fruitless search for the right thing to say before, I suddenly began to speak without searching for the right words.

“Not that my memory wasn’t fond,” I clarified. “My story was genuine. Grandma did have that big music box collection at her vacation house, and we used to love listening to all the songs together. That’s true, and it’s one of my favorite memories. But whenever I think of it, I also think about how the year after, she got me my own music box for my birthday, or maybe Christmas or something, I don’t even remember. A real pretty red marble music box. It was such a nice gift, so thoughtful, just like her gifts always were. But, I don’t know, I must’ve been distracted or something when I opened it, or made a weird face, and she was convinced I didn’t like it. But I *did* like it; I just didn’t expect it. I tried telling her that, but she wouldn’t believe me, and I think she felt bad about getting it for me. She shouldn’t have, though; the second I got home, I listened to it like ten times before putting it on my dresser. I don’t think she ever realized how much I liked it.

Except, maybe a couple of months after she died, I noticed the music box sitting on my bookshelf, and I just felt like, insanely guilty. It’s probably the most thoughtful gift I’ve ever been given, and I never really showed her how much I appreciated it. And, God, she had probably forgotten all about it since it was so long ago, but I just couldn’t stop thinking that she still thinks I don’t like it and that I made her sad. And I just felt so fucking guilty and I couldn’t stand to look at it, so I put it in this big box on my bookshelf where I couldn’t see it anymore. I’m a pretty ugly granddaughter, huh?” I finished with a mean smile and clenched fists.

“Is it still in the box?” my cousin asked carefully.

“Yeah,” I said, peeling my nails from where they had dug into my palms and tugging again at the fish necklace. “Shitty of me, I know. But if I leave it out, I’m just gonna feel bad when I look at it, and then I’m gonna feel bad about feeling bad. What else am I supposed to do?”

“Well,” my cousin said, dragging out her words, “if she didn’t believe you when you said you liked it, then you just have to enjoy it twice as much, right?”

“I guess?” I mumbled, unsure of what she meant.

“Just take it out when you get home,” she instructed. “Play it once. I think it’ll help you feel better. If nothing else, you’ll feel less guilty about not using it.”

Before I could reply, a knock sounded at the door.

“Girls? It’s Auntie. Can I come in?”

“Sure,” I called, wiping the unpleasant expression off my face.

We opened the door, and my aunt peeked inside before striding through in her usual efficient manner.

“Before you all take off, I have something for you,” she said, humming as she slid open my older cousin’s closet door. My cousin and I shared a look as she rifled through the clothes. Suddenly, with a cheerful hum, my aunt whirled back around with her arms full of fabric and plastic dress protectors.

“So you guys know we went through all of grandma’s stuff from Japan in

her house, right?" We nodded. Our parents had gone to clean out my grandma's house a few months back, each returning with numerous heirlooms. Our grandma loved art and culture; she had paintings that danced across her walls and statues that told stories. After she died, we had inherited the pieces she bought in her travels.

"Well, this is one of the things we brought back," my aunt said.

"Dresses by a Japanese designer. We found them in the back of grandma's closet. Why don't you try them on? They're going to need some new models."

We nodded and our aunt left us to try on the clothes. Laying them out across our cousin's bed, we took the dress protectors off.

"Oh, I *have* to have this one," I said. The dress I had opened was a long-sleeved, dark blue dress with a white pattern like little grains of rice running down it. Tight on top with flowy arms, a belt, and a knee-length skirt, the dress was both beautiful and comfortable. It didn't hurt that it was my favorite color. Plus, it came with a matching scarf. It was not something I would normally wear, but it was so charming that I found I didn't care.

"Is it okay if I take this?" I asked, turning to face my cousin.

"It's all yours. Besides, I like this one better," she said, holding up a brown dress in a similar style with funky white shapes all over it.

"What's the last dress?" I asked. Opening the plastic case, my cousin revealed a lightweight dress with a pastel floral pattern. As my little cousin held the dress up against the light purple wall, I was shocked for a moment at how well the dress matched the pastel color palette of my older cousin's room.

Three dresses, one for each granddaughter, each in our preferred styles. It was perfect. And yet my grandmother couldn't have intended the dresses for us; she had bought them in Japan decades before any of us were even born. And yet, here we were, with our perfect matches. Sure enough, my cousin and I tried our chosen outfits on, and they fit.

"We are so wearing these to Thanksgiving," my cousin chattered, admiring our reflections in the mirror.

"Sure, as long as I get to take off my belt for the meal. This dress was definitely made for someone a bit smaller than me," I chuckled. Still, I smiled at myself in the mirror. We looked damn good.

In a throwback to our days of childhood fashion shows, my cousin and I descended the stairs to show our parents.

"Oh, wow!" My little cousin's mom exclaimed. "They fit you so well!"

"What do you think, dad?" I asked, giving him a twirl.

"Very nice," he said in a typical understated dad tone of voice, but with a smile that spoke volumes.

"Oh, girls," our aunt sniffled. "You look wonderful."

After a few more twirls for extra flair, my cousin and I headed back upstairs to change and head home.

"Well that was a little magical, wasn't it?" I heard my dad say on the way up.

"That's God for ya," my little cousin's mother replied.

For the second time that day, I smiled when I thought about my grandmother.

~

Now, I can't say in truth that I believe in God or magic in a literal sense. I'm pragmatic to a fault, and I was never one to buy into the idea of fate or des-

tiny. But I *can* say that after a year of feeling wounded, my cousin's company and our stories about our grandmother got me to remember her with joy again. I *can* say that somehow, decades ago and half a world away, my grandma bought three dresses that fit her granddaughters perfectly. And I *can* say that when I got home that night, opened the box on my bookshelf, and played the music box after far too long, my eyes watered – not just because I was sad, but because I was happy, too.

And on Thanksgiving, I wore my dress, my grandmother's final gift to me, as a thank you – a thank you for the stories in each of her gifts, from new jeans without holes to designer dresses from Japan to the ruby red music box. A thank you for the friendship forged between my cousins and me throughout the years, who remind me that no way to feel is wrong or overcomplicated or unnecessary. A thank you for the golden fish hanging around my neck, a reminder that a generous heart and an open mind allow for a deeper enjoyment of a meaningful life.

A thank you for the gift of magic beyond what I can see.



Painted Shore

by Masab Bokhari

For the First Time

by Aya Alshboul

And for the first time,
I fell in love with my own solitude.
For it was only I who could understand,
the laces wrapped around my heart,
and the joys that led to my fulfillment.

Solo coffee dates,
replaced dry conversations.
A sense of peace,
replaced shallow friendships.

It took me too long to realize,
That the more I lost you,
the more I gained me.



oil series - the last man/a dream

by Domi Machlowska

Speed Bumps

by Serena Ahmad

The Velcro straps clamped
to my blue and black roller blades
allow me to fasten them so tightly
the rubber wheels feel like my own two feet
vibrating from the street's rough friction. I
breeze through the neighborhood, gliding
on the smooth gray roads where
tiny pebbles scatter the asphalt
like comets in the Kuiper belt.
They act as mini speed bumps, not smooth,
but jagged—geometric disasters, interfering
with my skates' ability to coast freely.

Annoying gravel urges me
to slow down,
 down,
 down,
so I don't trip face first
into hasty decisions,
breaking my own heart once more.
So I don't slip back into
the arms of the mismatched
puzzle pieces from my nightmares,
an unfit series of Someone's with colorful language
that tends to suck out my own vibrance.

Wind musses my hair until stray strands
are stuck to the shiny strawberry lip gloss
coating my lips, and I'm forced to brake.
I rip several wisps away from my eyes
with the same impatience I'm trying
desperately now to quell.
I peer down at these pebbles that stop me from flying
off the rails, keeping me tethered to reality.
I wonder if maybe that's what they're there for.
I wonder if maybe there are a lot of people who
need to be saved from themselves,

who need to be saved from the sheer recklessness
of speeding on highways,
of saying 'yes' to things without pausing to clear
schedules, of mistaking the familiarity of history between
two people with salvageable love.



drapes

by Domi Machlowska

Shared Sense of Senselessness

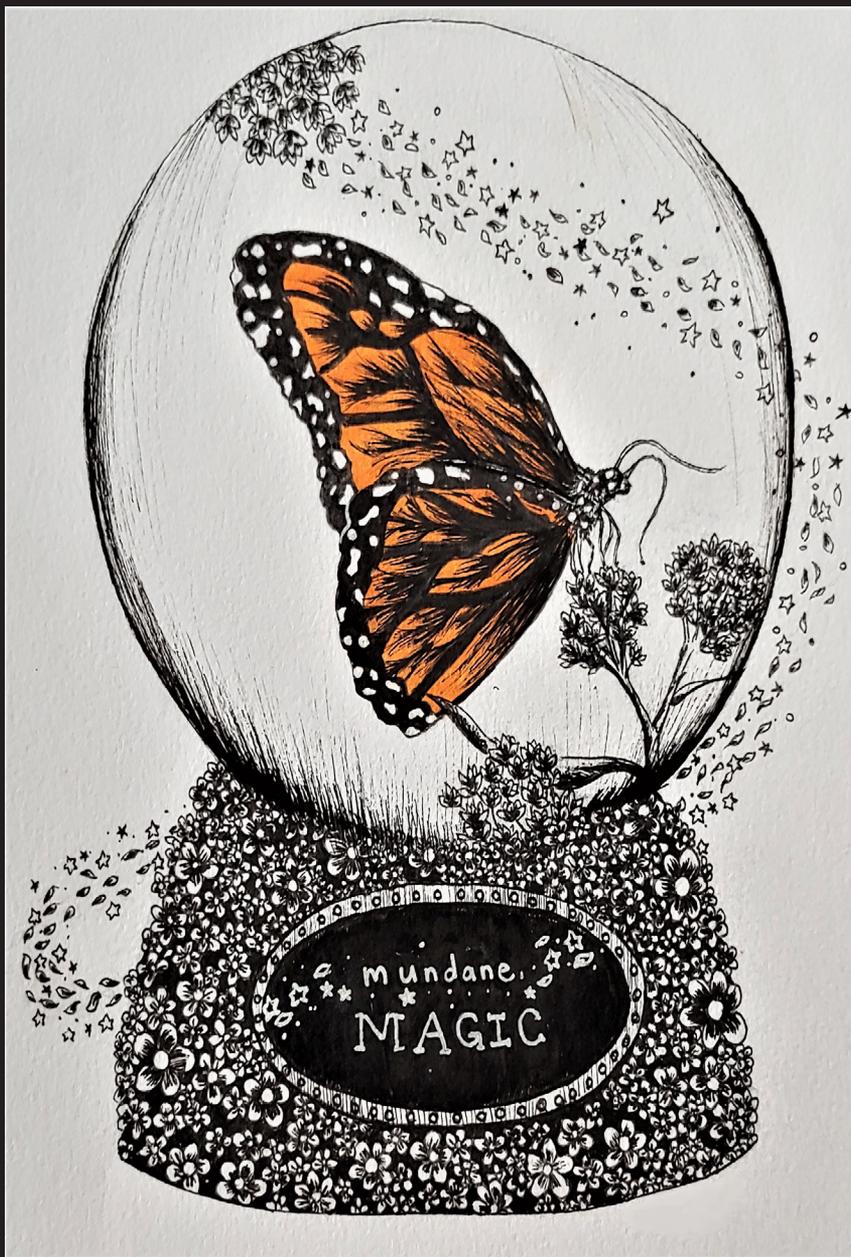
by Lina Gebhardt

bubbled beverages
clink, cheers to new
beginnings.
to each their own,
free to associate life's
tangible with fleetful
intangible.

memories of once
was clings to what's
senseful, since sweet
smelling perfume reeks of skin
now, midnight kisses left my
lips chapped.

my, your
individuality is a cumulation
of subjective happenings
yet certainly, we're more
collective than dividing forces
want us to believe.

how else can you
explain swollen feelings
of camaraderie around
the holidays, or shared
human senselessness?
or people that remind you
of another, or lips that
taste like someone else
*we walk and talk, eat
and sleep, read and conquer,
throw fits and kiss and*



Red Shoes Review