

the
*Nassau
Literary
Review*

Spring 2023

“Solace”





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Poetry

Desire – Malia Chung	10
Marie Antoinette Waits Seven Years to Sleep With Her Husband – Avery Gendler	16
A Dinner – Roya Reese	19
Songs of the West – Chisom Nwadinobi	22
Driving at Home – Zoe Montague	31
Frances – Juliette Carbonnier	32
Roadkill Sunset – Daniel Viorica	40
Ghazal for Fall – Malia Chung	42

Fiction

13	Shoes – Jessica Wang
24	The Hatbox – Anna Chung
34	The Girl in Room 431 – Ngan Chiem

Art

Twins – Juliette Carbonnier	11
SHIFTING – Madison Davis	12
Models – Juliette Carbonnier	17
Desolation Unfolding – Lauren Olson	18
Recollection – Annabel Green	20
Reminiscence – Annabel Green	21
Fluid – Madison Davis	23
Deer Under Deck – Ashley Teng	30
Delacroix Orphan Girl – Juliette Carbonnier	33
Reflection Rendezvous – Audrey Zhang	43

table of contents

Nonfiction

44	How to Steal from the U-Store – Maddy Heyler
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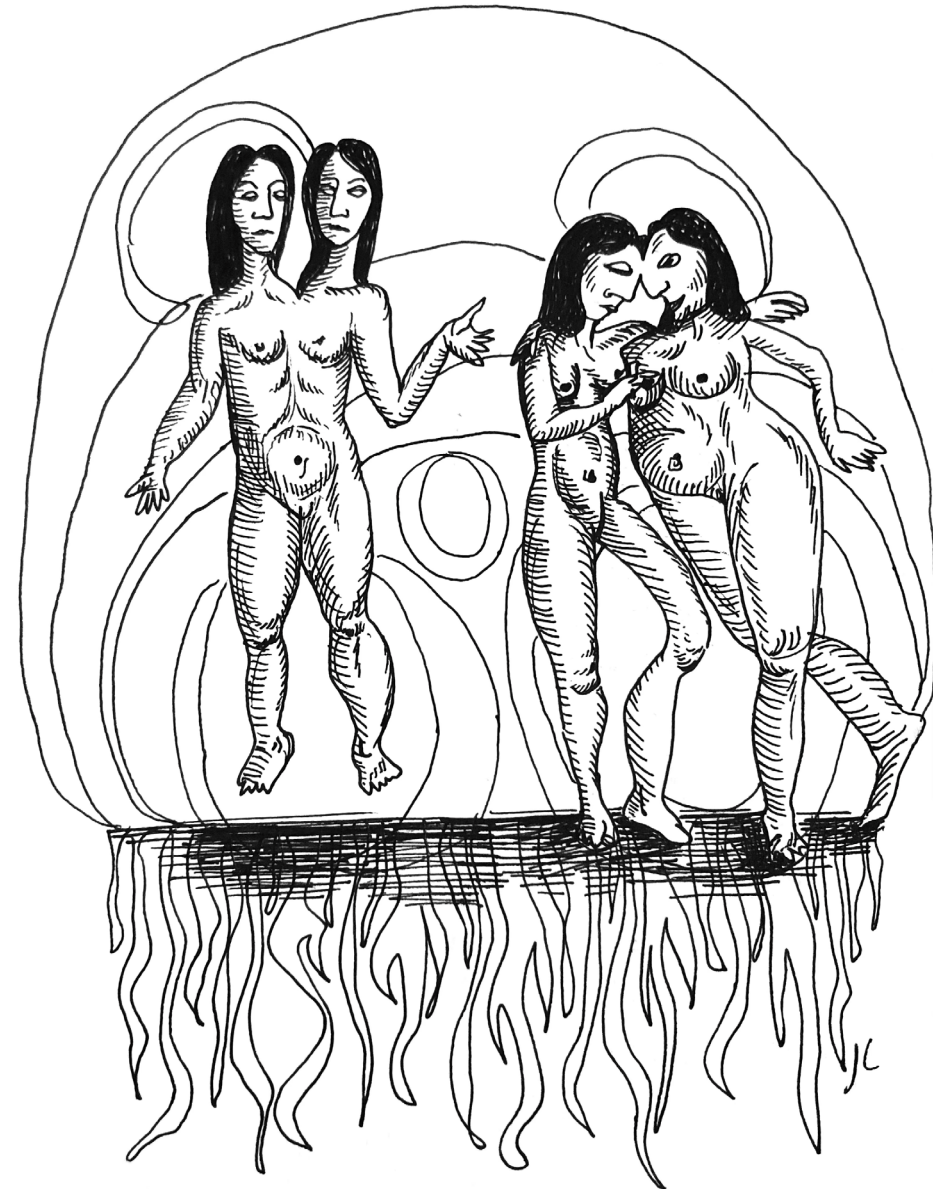
Desire

Malia Chung

Today, lying against you, I felt a door open, your chest peeling wide like lips around a mouth, gums and teeth. Inside, I touched a fluttering lung. Inside, you smelled warm, male. Can I stay here, curled between rib and lung? Carry me with you; let me beat like the small animal of your heart. In a Mexican wood-printing class, I learned my Zapotec sign. Once a pregnant deer stood still for me in a garden. We watched each other, apprehensive—her ears shifting to catch the noise of my breath. Here is a dream for you: when I take out my own heart, you bite it like a peach, puncture soft skin, and juice. In eating, you hollow me, hallow me.

Twins

Juliette Carbonnier



*Jessica Wang*
Shoes

She knew him by his shoes. Scuffed black leather, neat round laces. Every lecture, the tapered tip of his left shoe rested just within her peripheral vision. A quick glance sideways, and she could see that it had no tread. Not great for mud, she thought. But he wore them every day, even on the rainy ones.

He usually showed up late to lecture, but he was never obtrusive. First it would be the click of the door, then the footsteps stealing down the aisle, then the swish of his coat as he settled into his seat like a sigh. A pen uncapped, a few adjustments, and then his shoe would appear, peeking out from just beside her chair like a greeting.

Every part of her was attuned to that shoe. She knew when he'd taken a shortcut to class by the mud and grass on its sole. She knew when he moved restlessly at another student's question. She knew when he began to fidget toward the end of the hour.

But she never turned around.

On Monday morning, he was later than usual. He was late enough that someone had taken the seat behind her — his seat — right next to the aisle. She heard him enter; the door swung shut a little too loudly, the footsteps a little more uneven. Heavy breathing, and a pause just behind her.

"Sorry, can I get through?"

A glance sideways showed the tips of his shoes glossy with fresh dew and cuffs stained with green. The student behind her grumbled and acquiesced. He moved into the row, rustling, the light touch of his coat on her back as he shuffled past the first seat and sat in the second one.

She waited.

The pen uncapping, the adjustments. Then his shoe — the right one this time — appeared just in her periphery. The side was frayed, rubbed at the edges, and it seemed like the sole had been ripped open. Damp strands of grass clung to the tip, littering the floor. As she watched, the shoe started to tap — fluttery, irregular beats.

She touched her hair. The professor had just posed a question, and she had no idea what it was. She copied down the formula on the board. Maybe it had been the wet grass. He'd slipped and fallen. Or the construction — maybe it had been the new construction by the quad. She squinted at the page. She knew this formula, but the units seemed wrong. Had she copied it wrong? She looked up, but the professor had already cleared the board.

Perhaps it was the sense of his gaze behind her that compelled her to raise her hand on impulse. She wasn't an impulsive person. In fact, she hardly felt bold enough to speak up from the back,

“All of a sudden it felt more important than anything that the shoe not be withdrawn.”

and she nearly withdrew her hand. But the professor spotted her, and the shoe — the shoe stopped tapping.

She stilled as it stilled. She heard the undercurrent of murmurs in the classroom, but all she saw was the shoe. All of a sudden it felt more important than anything that the shoe not be withdrawn. She needed it there; she needed him there. In that pause, with the professor staring up at her, she blurted out the first question on her mind.

“Are you okay?”

A ripple of laughter passed through the classroom, drowning out the professor’s perplexed reply. The shoe shifted against the floor, and she felt her ears warm.

She kept her head down for the rest of the lecture. The shoe didn’t resume its tapping, nor did it withdraw. It just remained at her side, like a steady comfort.

After the lecture, when the classmate next to her walked away and the crowd murmured and she stood with embarrassment sitting heavy in her stomach, he lingered. She watched a notebook disappear into his bookbag,

followed by a pen and a scarf. She tugged her beanie over her ears, and when he turned to leave, she followed his shoes up the aisle.

At the exit he held the door open like it was perfectly natural, and she felt suddenly like they must have known each other. He nodded and she smiled, passing by the warmth of his body and feeling, for a moment, like her world was safe and certain again.

Are you okay?

Are you okay, she’d said. Had she meant him? She must have noticed his shoes. He had to get a new pair; they were all but ruined now. He turned left on the path with a lightness in his step.

Today, he was shoe-watching. In his head, a crossword puzzle was beginning to form. Its theme was something along the lines of shoes. He’d been collecting them as they passed by. *Heels. Moccasins. Sneakers.* Or maybe not sneakers, *trainers.* Then he could make a quip about the gym, or the U.K. Everybody knew about the U.K.

He reached into his bookbag for a scrap of paper and withdrew a napkin and a pen. *Moccasins* was the long one, he figured, so he’d make it a vertical cross. He stopped at a bench and was just beginning to sketch out a grid when a pair of brown sandals stopped a few paces in front of him.

“Oh, hold on a minute. I’ve got to put this on.”

There was a beat of silence, and he looked up to see a boy pulling on a sweatshirt. The boy’s sandals pointed toward the library doors, but his head was lost somewhere in the folds of cloth. Just to the side a girl had paused to wait with a half-smile. The boy wriggled; the twisted-up sleeves made some progress, but the shape of the head still pushed through in the wrong place.

The concept of earthworms came to mind: soft, blind, pushing through the earth. How pale, how vulnerable they were. How trusting they must be, knowing that only the layers of earth protected them. And then, he thought, wouldn’t it be a miracle for two earthworms to find each other if both of them were blindly searching in the dark? His thoughts touched on the girl from the lecture. Maybe tomorrow he would sit next to her.

“Aha!”

He glanced up again in time to see a head of curls emerge from the sweatshirt. Golden hair like wheat in the sun, face beaming. Laughter leapt from the boy’s mouth, and the girl laughed too. She moved to him, and touched the curve of his cheek lightly with the back of her hand. She said something — *you silly boy* — and the two moved to the library doors. The boy turned around to face her as he leaned into the door, sweeping a pathway of air open for her to enter. A gleam of her sequined ballet flats, and they were gone.

Sandals, he thought. And *ballet flats*. The pieces fit together in his mind. Maybe that would be the theme: pairs of shoes, halves, soul mates. *Two of a kind.*

He stood, brushed off his jeans, and turned his black leather oxfords toward his next class.

Marie Antoinette Waits Seven Years To Sleep With Her Husband

Avery Gendler

The hairdresser sculpts
my wig into a bird's nest
this morning. Blonde curls

spin into twigs near the crown
of my head. I am stuffed with baby
blue feathers, dusted

with flour. The excess settles
on the floral patterned
loveseat and I stand, ruffle

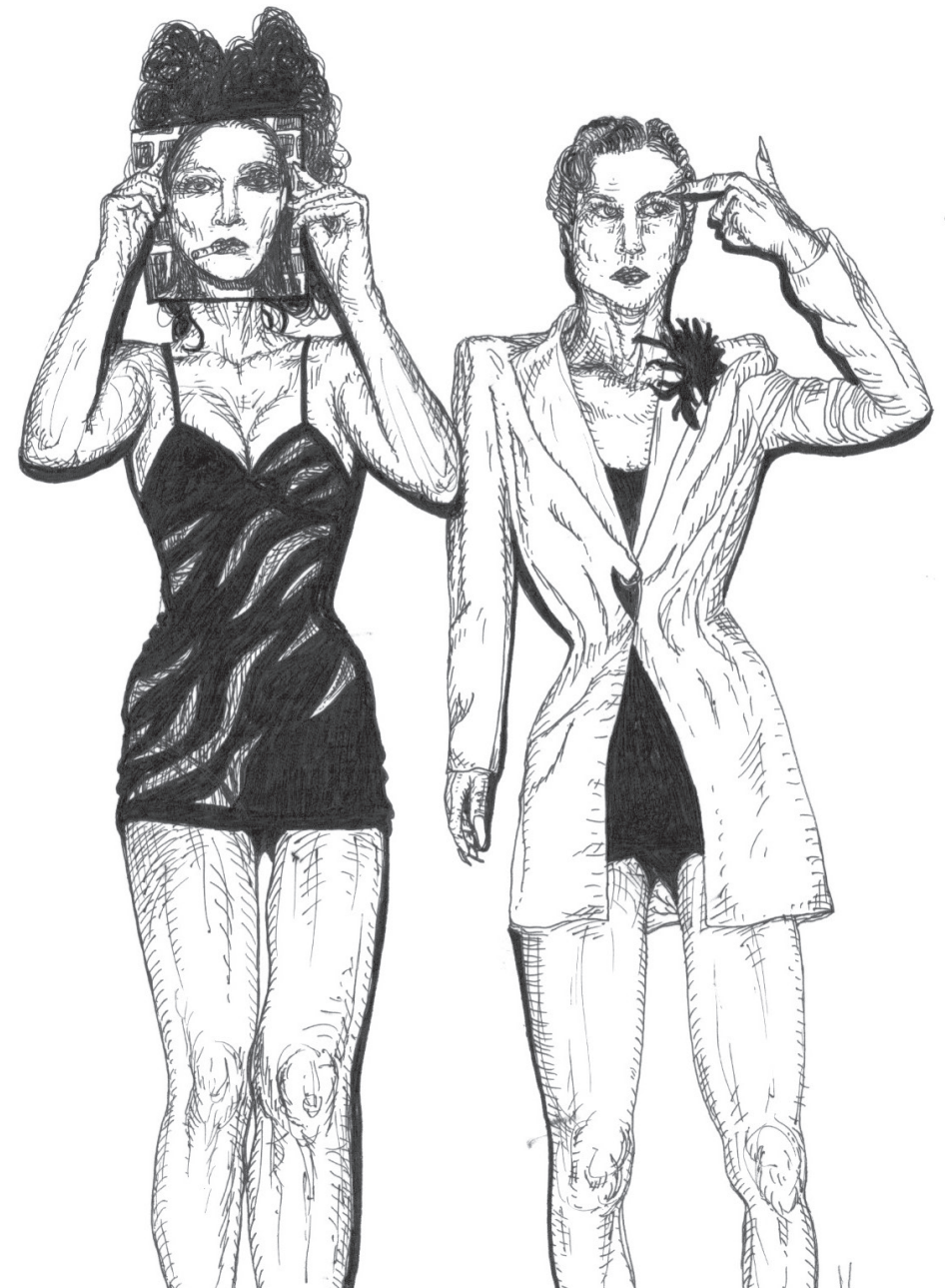
my skirts, brush away
any thoughts of flight. I paint
my own lips with pink

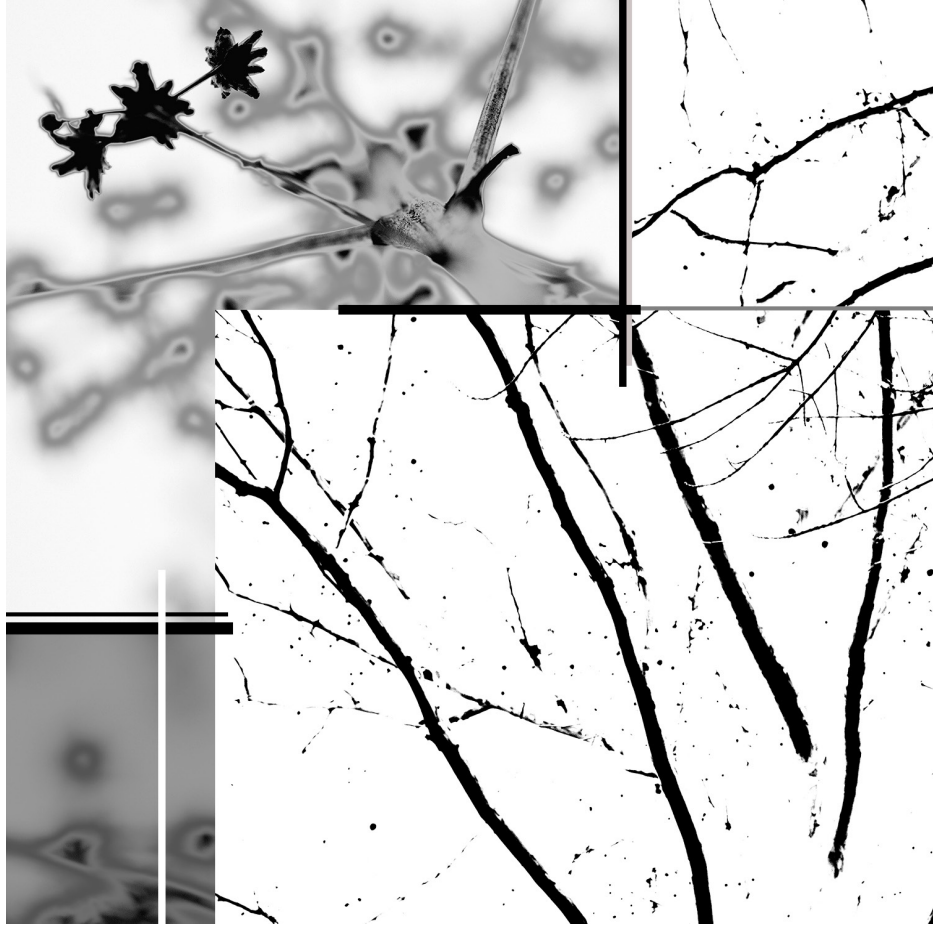
sugar crystals from syrup soaked
raspberries. The summer
is overripe gold. And still

empty. The hairdresser pins
a stuffed blue finch
into the nest.

Juliette Carbonnier

Models





A Dinner *Roya Reese*

We sit for a half an hour; triplets walk through the door.
Recalibrating – *I must not show my hand.*

We go to the bathroom.

I make friends with the kind cashier who offers to get me out of this; we go to Taney after dark,
There are no bears here, and only two points of a triangle.
Flashing Greek goddess bodies, sculpted from marble, through blue screens.

My boots clack. I wrap my arms around her head.

At Niva's apartment, I cry to the books, touch three piano keys,
and we leave as the coffee brews.

Lauren Olson Desolation Unfolding

Recollection
Annabel Green

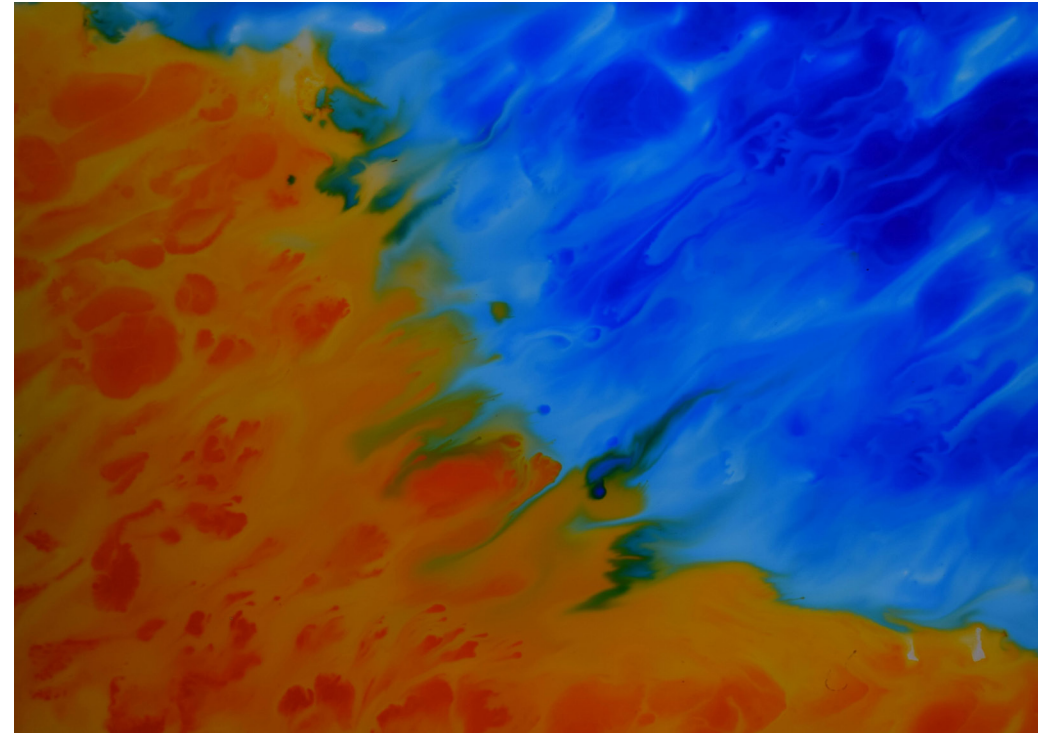


Annabel Green
Reminiscence

Songs of the West

Chisom Nwadinobi

Ada, I carry with grace
warmth dances on the crevices of my skin
honey leaks from the borders of my chin
will our maker approve of our feminine embrace?
we hum our quiescent tune
singing sweet songs of the west
while coddling and stroking a bees nest
our early leaf's a honeymoon.
only in shadows, our affair thrives
sweet, like the young aunty carrying fruit on her head
eerie, like the wise old man warning us of what's ahead
how will we escape when the sun meets its rise?
you grip my hand, tight like the gele you tie,
I believe all African children can fly.



Madison Davis
Fluid

The Hatbox

Anna
Chung

June contemplated the hats that sat gathering dust on the top shelf of her closet. A breeze rustled the curtains behind her, carrying a slight draft into the largely bare bedroom.

It was Sunday.

Normally, she was up by dawn, preparing a meager breakfast (at least in comparison to the ones she ate back home): half to eat before she left for the flower shop, the other half to pack haphazardly in saran wrap for Chul. Sometimes she remembered to put it in the fridge. Sometimes she didn't.

Sundays, though, were different. Sundays she took her time. When the inevitable anxiety threatened to pull her from sleep, she resisted, reminding it that today was her day. She took great pleasure in the drifting, in the in-between. The blending of dreams and reality.

When she finally did get up, she usually took her time getting ready. Brushing her teeth, she would stand still, watching her hand move in methodical circles in the mirror. She would stare at her face, wondering if she was imagining the little wrinkles whose shadows had begun to take shape if she looked close enough. She often touched the mole by her left ear mindlessly, remembering the letter that Chul mentioned it in after they had finally exchanged photos.

Today, she had refrained. Today, she brushed her teeth in front of her dresser. Her day-to-day attire was sparse enough that she could simply store it in the nightstand drawer on her side of the bed. This practice saved her precious minutes in the cold dark of the mornings when she was loath to leave the warmth of her sheets. Sundays, though, she allowed herself the luxury of contemplation.

She ran her hands first over the four designer dresses that hung limply on mismatched wooden hangers. Those she displayed as best she could, left the wardrobe door open to let them rustle with the breeze from the window. The hats, on the other hand, were hidden. They sat unused in boxes almost as ornate as their contents, most tied neatly around their middle. As her gaze traveled over the four of them, her eyes were drawn to the light blue one that rested precariously atop two others.

"Yobo," Chul called from the kitchen. "Come eat before church," he said in English.

"Coming," June replied in Korean.

She pulled the box from its shelf, carefully removing the lid. The small oval mirror stood behind the dresser, and she turned to it as she gently positioned the cerulean hat atop her hair, streaks of brown visible in the rays of sun escaping

into the room. Her biggest grievance with the mirror was that she could never see her entire body in it. Even now, she had to tilt her head to see the hat along with the white blouse she had picked out for today.

Her feet padded softly on the cold floor as, satisfied with her appearance, she made her way out of the room. She felt a pang of longing for the warmed floors back home but let it pass, as always. As she made her way into the kitchen, her husband laid his newspaper on the table, eyes still lingering on a particularly lengthy article.

"We're going to be late," he announced as he downed the last of his coffee.

"I'm not hungry," June said. She was silent for a moment as Chul returned to his paper. "What do you think?"

Chul tore his eyes away. "About what?"

"It's handmade," she said after a beat. "Halston Pillbox." When Chul didn't respond, she continued. "Jackie Kennedy wore it to the presidential inauguration ceremony."

The name Kennedy sparked the first indication of interest in Chul's eyes. "The hat," he said finally. "It's nice."

Nice. She contemplated contesting this pathetically bland characterization of what had once been her prized possession, but she remembered what her father used to say about choosing one's battles. *Restraint*.

Chul stood up and folded his newspaper carefully. "Alright, time to go," he said in Korean. June followed.

She had bought the hat two years ago.

Or rather, her father had bought the hat for her two years ago. *Chosun Hotel*, she remembered reading as they walked into the hotel lobby. The boutique itself was hidden, known only by a select few. The owner prided herself on her clientele, consisting mostly of wives of foreign ambassadors.

June recalled the women she saw that day in their gold jewelry and long coats, posture decidedly straighter than that of her friends' mothers. She wondered if the hats made them stand up taller, regal-like.

"That one," she had pointed out after surveying the room.

"Yes, good choice, good choice," the owner had said, appearing seemingly out of thin air. "Worn by America president wife, that one. Very good quality, top of them all."

That was enough for her father. As she walked out of the hotel that day, she felt as though she were walking on clouds, clouds made light by the promise of glittering evenings donning the very hat worn by the United States' first lady.

Four months later, she was packing it up with the rest of her belongings, about to embark on the journey that her sisters and friends enviously insisted would change her life.

"Mrs. Jung looks different today," Chul commented as he parked their car. June tore her gaze away from her feet to the window.

What about me, she wanted to ask. *Do I look different?*

"Yes," she responded instead. "Her

hairdresser did not do a good job.” She remained in her seat as Chul made his way to her side, opening the door as he had every week since they had arrived. She no longer thought anything of this gesture. It was more a dutiful habit, she assumed, than a demonstration of love.

They did love each other, to be fair. Love, however, was not static; it changed, evolved. No longer was it the rush of adrenaline that came with a postmarked envelope, the thrill of seeing one another’s handwritten professions of admiration and desire, hope and longing. It had subsided, as all things to, to a soft beat to which they played the drum of life.

This was what June reminded herself of as she stepped carefully onto the thin layer of snow that coated the asphalt.

“Mrs. Lee!” came a voice to their left. Mr. and Mrs. Cho made their way towards them, Mr. Cho trailing slightly behind his effusive wife. “Why do you look so pretty today?” she demanded good-naturedly.

June smiled slightly, thanking her in an appropriately humble way.

“Are you and Mr. Lee celebrating any special occasion?” she asked slyly, winking.

No, no, June and Chul were both quick to deny, just a normal Sunday service.

Well, Mrs. Lee looked fantastic, Mrs. Cho repeated, making sure Mr. Lee knew just how lucky he was to have such a beautiful wife.

“Yes,” Chul said. “I am very lucky.”

June never used to go to church. Her father would occasionally take her and her sisters to the temple on special occasions, teaching them the proper way to kneel before the statue of Buddha. Those visits were few and far between, however, and June was still getting used to the monotony of the sermons that she more often than not had to force herself to stay awake for.

Today, the pastor lectured on about the danger of storing treasures on Earth.

“Our eternal treasure lies in heaven,” he declared staunchly. June’s fingers lingered on the brim of her hat as she brushed away a few spare strands of hair. “Do not forget that.”

That was what her father had told her when she wrote him of the car that awaited her on her first day. *It is not the shiny new car he had promised, she scribbled that night under covers that she, for the first time, found herself sharing with someone else. The gaps in the paint job tell me he sprayed it with some imitation color before I arrived.* She had paused after this sentence to make sense of her thoughts. *I suppose I appreciate his effort, though I cannot deny the disappointment I felt upon first sight of the vehicle.*

Little did she know this was only the first of many disappointments she was to experience from then on. *Weigh more heavily in your mind those things that cannot be bought, her father’s reply came some weeks later. You will soon find them to be much more valuable than that of this world.*

The crowd trickled out of the sanctuary slowly, rich talk and laughter filling air

made thick and heavy by the church’s broken heater. June and Chul walked briskly, however, not stopping for their usual pleasantries. Chul double checked his watch as they made their way back to the car, nodding once before moving to open June’s door.

June no longer noticed the rudimentary paint job. As she climbed in, her hand hovered above her blouse, smoothing it out after a moment’s hesitation. Her feet pressed together under the seat as Chul made his way to his side of the car. The thrum of the engine matched the pulse she felt in the space beneath her jaw, the inner corner of her neck.

They drove in silence, though this wasn’t altogether unusual. The hum of the one o’clock news, volume below reasonable comprehensibility, was the only thing that prevented the descent into complete silence. Chul turned into a small parking lot just off the road that led to his Monday morning lecture hall. *There’s an office right near school, he had*

told her a few weeks earlier. *It works out perfectly.*

They sat, now, hands identically folded on their laps as a low chatter filled the mostly empty waiting room. June eyed the mother who sat diagonal from them, her child roaming the room unsupervised. She noticed that the mother’s socks were mismatched, and she was about to point this out to Chul when she heard her name called.

“That’s us,” Chul said. The two of them stood up and walked through the door together. It was just wide enough to fit them both.

If someone asked June two months ago what she wanted most, she would likely have responded with Gandy Dancer.

Gandy Dancer was the name of an upscale restaurant (or rather, *the* upscale restaurant) in Ann Arbor, to which well-to-do couples flocked on date nights,

“Love, however, was not static; it changed, evolved. No longer was it the rush of adrenaline that came with a postmarked envelope”

dressed in their Sunday best. June liked to make Chul drive by on their way home from church, claiming it was because she enjoyed the scenic route.

As they passed the restaurant, she would watch as couples walked hand-in-hand into the restaurant, passing under the black awning that hung over the door. She imagined white tablecloths and dimmed lights, the clinking of silverware and wine glasses, soft laughter and the brush of a hand. They would pass all too quickly, allowing her only a glance at a life that could have been. She returned home melancholy, feigning exhaustion as she climbed into bed ten hours too early.

The doctor was saying words now, smiling as he handed over a small black-and-white photograph, but June couldn't hear him. All she could focus on was Chul's hand resting on hers. She didn't remember him moving it, but she turned her hand over and held on tightly. After a prolonged silence, upon which Chul realized June was not going to be responding, he answered for her, thanking the doctor profusely and promising they would return in a few weeks.

They were still holding hands as they exited the office. June wasn't entirely conscious of their fingers, still linked, until Chul gently removed his hand from hers to open the car door for her. She climbed in, hand on her stomach, and sat down carefully.

The car ride back was quiet, as usual. Chul hadn't turned the radio on, so they sat in a quiet stillness. When they passed Gandy Dancer, June didn't even notice. Her eyes were on the silver band that hugged Chul's ring finger.

"Tired?" Chul's voice shook her out of her reverie. She shook her head twice, turning to look at him as he slowed to a stop. He glanced at her, and June watched as his gaze moved down to her belly, still obscured by the folds of her blouse. The light turned green, and she tilted her head slightly forward to signal for him to go.

The house seemed brighter when they walked in, sunlight streaming through the curtainless windows of their living room. She had meant to get around to buying curtains, but never got around to it.

In the light of the room, Chul looked at the hat on her head as if seeing it for the first time that day. "You wore it that day," he said. "At the airport." She looked at him. "It was the same color as the sky when we walked into the parking lot."

She nodded. Before she left, her father told her to wear the hat for their first meeting. *Impress him*, he'd said. *Not that you need the hat to do it*, he had added as an afterthought. She almost smiled, now.

"You remember," she said, tilting her head as she turned to him.

"Of course," Chul said. He looked at her once more. "How are you feeling?"

June fingered the ultrasound that, at some point on their way home, had made its way into her hands. Before today, it hadn't felt real. She had been convinced the doctor was wrong somehow. Though she had never explicitly expressed her longing to return home, she felt this was some intricate design to anchor her in America.

But now, as she found herself making out a head (and were those toes?), she felt a part of herself crumbling, melting a coldness she had never fully acknowledged. She decided not to dwell on whether this was a victory or a concession.

"Good," she answered Chul, her English softening to a whisper. "I'm feeling good."

He smiled for the first time that day, almost shyly. "Me too," he replied.

Later that evening as she was getting ready for bed, June caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She looked comical, almost. For one, she wore her threadbare pajamas: an old shirt of Chul's that had shrunk in the wash, flannel checkered pants sewn at the knees. However, the hat still rested on her head, giving her an almost regal look. Like the air of a royal who, despite being thrown on the streets, maintained the same dignity, the same grace.

The sound of the faucet ran in the bathroom as Chul washed up. She knew that when he climbed into bed with her later that night, he would place his hand hesitantly on her stomach. He had gotten into the habit of falling asleep this way, hoping to feel a kick no matter how many times she told him he was getting ahead of himself. Her own hand drifted to there now, resting against the bump that had developed in the past few weeks.

Her other hand went to her head, resting there for a moment before relieving it of the light but constant presence that had weighed on her all day. She fingered the soft blue edges absentmindedly, turning it in slow circles in her hands

and then resting it on the bed. Then, opening the wardrobe for the second time that day, she reached up top and slid the matching blue box off the shelf and tossed it beside the hat. The ultrasound sat, too, almost dwarfed by the hat and its box. Beside it lay a stack of letters that June had fished out while Chul had turned on the evening news.

June took the hat first and, rather than fit it into the box, hesitated a moment before hanging it behind the dresses that now seemed out of place in the room. She turned back to the bed and stared at the remaining things that lay in various degrees of disarray.

She gathered all the letters into a stack, taking a moment to let a few phrases catch her eye. With her other hand, she picked up the ultrasound and placed it carefully on top of the letters. The box, now, seemed too big. When she placed the stack inside and picked it up, she could see them sliding around.

In the bathroom, the faucet turned off. June replaced the lid and slid the almost empty box back on the shelf.

The bathroom door opened and Chul, smelling familiarly of aftershave and mint, climbed into bed. After a moment, he rested a hand on June's belly. She closed her eyes.

Deer Under Deck

Ashley Teng



Driving in Vermont

Zoe Montague

Near Chris and Annette's house
you level out and look:
a piece of the earth is missing

and a farm rests at the bottom
of a deep green valley.
One swerve out by the prison

(easy to come up on too fast)
dips deep and sideways so
the neighboring river runs

toward you at a wrong angle.
In the tree breaking through the barn,
twisted branches form

a perfect empty eye socket,
a new way.
A necessary reinvention of the wheel.

Flat fields skim past the window,
bordered by woods with
leaves so clean, becoming

brighter as the light fades,
the day broken
like the pearly leg bone

stuck out of a hit bear.

Frances

Juliette Carbonnier

I found you buried in papers and dirt
lilting tales and tongues in a burlap skirt.
My mother always said that you would have loved me.
Your fur coat paper plastic pearls crumpled parchment deep closet perfume
scribbled notes, into a frayed leather case
you little bird troubadour you ring in my ears
I found your stories
growing out of your coat my face in your fur paper and dirt mumbling dusty
language a wash of strange
you were small what could you do but sing
wandering desert hold words drowning crates and skins holy? A sin.
There was music there tucked last supper thick red fabrics of extinction
roaming around
rotting
a mouthful glass bones
pretending to put on a show
a note? Tuned
little bird drifting up on those picked through trains
a massive telephone game incinerated
somewhere.

I found you buried in paper and dirt
a recording of your voice
filtered under a warm cheap house in your oldest days
your voice was so sweet
tiny in the palm of my hand
look in the mirror
I see a little girl
swimming in your coat
your brown coat with big black buttons
a little mouse wrapped in a parachute.

I breathe in your paper and dirt
stories should not be true
my privilege, I guess, of hindsight
playing dress up
just how small were you?

Now I know I'm not so little (and never really was)
waiting for your sheet music falling into the water?
Fraying melody did you leave me a note?
Dissolve into feathers holes in a burlap skirt.

You must have been
an ancient bird for generations
you're in your attic grave now little bird
I found you buried in paper and dirt.

Delacroix Orphan Girl

Juliette Carbonnier



The Girl in Room 431

Ngan Chiem

Trigger warning: suicide

The girl in Room 431 was wheeled into urgent care at 3:47pm.

It then took the university three tries to reach her parents, and another two to find the right translator. By the time Mr. & Mrs. Trần booked their plane tickets, the fifty-nine-year-old custodian who had found their daughter's unconscious body had finished scanning her timecard and was on her way home.

The strange cold days in April had killed off the early cherry blossom buds on campus. Dead petals littered the ground, but even in the limited moonlight, the custodian took care not to step on them. Quỳnh thought it cruel to crush something that until yesterday had been flushed with life.

Ông già, her adopted stray, greeted her at the door after his own day of adventures. He could smell the turkey cold-cuts Quỳnh had brought him from the university dining hall, and despite being long settled into his twilight years, never failed to return to his kitten vigor at the taste of processed meat. Still, it didn't escape Ông già's notice that these delightful surprises had become more rare since the passing of the master of the house.

Ever since the funeral, Quỳnh's mother had been trying to get her to move back

to Việt Nam, only to be met with evasive replies. That night, however, Quỳnh finally had a strong rebuttal.

"If I had left when you told me to, that girl would have been dead," she said during their regularly scheduled call. It was morning in Bạc Liêu, a week before Tết. Soon her brothers and sisters would head to the wet market and open their bustling sap to the crowd of customers.

"She would've been fine either way," her eighty-year-old mother said. "American doctors are so well-trained, not like the quacks here." Then, remembering her original mission to get her daughter to return to the country, she amended, "but they are not so inadequate either."

She then quickly segued into her speech about why Quỳnh should return, starting with the fact that:

1. Her family was here.
2. The weather was warmer.
3. The food was better.

As she listened, Quỳnh took delight in scratching Ông già's back. Her mother's loud, passionate voice brightened up the empty apartment, and it was almost like old times again, before her husband's death.

"I'll think about it when the school year ends," Quỳnh said when her mother finally finished laying out her

arguments. It was the same non-answer she'd given her in the past few months. Every time Quỳnh said it, she felt herself regressing back into childhood, back into a time when real life only truly began after the school year ended.

But that was not necessarily true. After all, she had only finished up to 10th grade before dropping out and working full time at the textile factory downtown. It was someone else's childhood, to wait for the end of school to start living life the way they wanted.

Still, Quỳnh clung to this schoolgirl vision, as if through her repeated utterance, she could claim it as her own.

"You can bring that stray of yours here, you know," her mother reminded her before hanging up, knowing he was a reason for her hesitation.

"He wouldn't last the plane ride," she said.

Ông già purred in assent. He hated large birds.

The evening unfolded quietly soon after the call. As Quỳnh engrossed herself in Wheel of Fortune, Ông già dozed off beside her. Ever since he'd noticed a limp in her gait, the old stray was careful never to sleep on his aging mistress.

Gingerly, Quỳnh propped her legs up on the coffee table. Varicose veins and pale bruises splotched her skin like stubborn stains. It was getting to be too much, this janitor gig of hers. Still, she couldn't find the will to leave. Going home to Việt Nam felt like admitting defeat.

Even if The War had long been forgotten, another war was more important, the war of memories. In America, where the air felt pristinely refrigerated, Quỳnh felt preserved, uncontaminated by childhood fears.

Unable to sleep, Quỳnh took out her rosary and prayed to the flickering TV lights. Her stray woke up several times throughout the night, but he did not mind receiving only half of her attention as she meditated.

Ông già knew what she did not. He had delayed it for weeks now, but there was only so much those cold-cuts could do for an old feline. He decided that tomorrow, he would make his final rounds through the neighborhood and tie up all his loose ends.

* * *

At work the next day, Quỳnh tried to put the image of the girl in Room 431 out of her head. It wasn't hard. In the third stall of the fourth floor bathroom, someone had left a large, burrito-sized shit in the toilet. It took her three flushes to wash it down, and then another two to clear the water.

There was nothing outside of the girl's door. She did not know how Americans marked tragedy, but she felt that the absence of anything, as if it were just a normal day, was inappropriate given the news. For a moment, she feared she had somehow mopped away all the offerings. She lifted her mop and surveyed its spools of cotton yarn, hoping for some flowers or get-well cards. Nothing.

She made a mental note to bring something in the next day.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Quỳnh moved her cart to the side to make room in the small hallway. A tall, blonde student appeared, leisurely walking his electric scooter across the wet floor as if inoculated against the fear of slipping.

Quỳnh watched for his reaction as he passed Room 431, but the boy paid it no mind. Perhaps only the janitor knew of the incident.

“Morning,” he said to Quỳnh as he passed. He belonged to the cohort of students who were very comfortable with staring their elders in the eyes, as if the act came with the same courtesy as holding a door. She could not remember a time when the girl in Room 431 did not accompany her “good mornings” with a nod that extended into a small bow. There was something familiar in the old-fashioned gesture that made Quỳnh smile.

Near the end of her shift, Quỳnh noticed a middle-aged Asian woman wandering the halls, looking lost. She wore a too-large puffer jacket and thick wool scarf that ate up nearly half of her face, sparing only her eyes. Quỳnh greeted the woman, hoping her own accented English offered some comfort to the guest.

“Quỳnh nodded, basking in the woman’s all-too-familiar relief. In a land of strangers, kinship between two Vietnamese was a given.”

The woman’s face lit up at the sight of her. “You...you speak...” she began, then switched tongues. “Chị biết nói tiếng Việt không?” Do you speak Vietnamese?

Quỳnh nodded, basking in the woman’s all-too-familiar relief. In a land of strangers, kinship between two Vietnamese was a given.

Quickly, she led the woman to her daughter’s room and helped her scan the card key. In her eagerness to help, however, Quỳnh forgot about the horrid state of the room.

No one had been inside to clean up the vomit, which had curdled and thrived on the lack of ventilation. Piles of clothes awashed the floor in a sea of black and gray fabrics, and the trash overflowed with bright ramen packets, pungent banana peels, and small clear bottles. Near the window, a desk sagged under the weight of textbooks and notebooks and scribbled writing. Should one wish to cast their eyes elsewhere, the large posters that surrounded the room and were peeling away at the corner, gave the impression of the walls caving in.

At first, Quỳnh merely meant to open the window for the woman because she knew the latches could be tricky. But the more time she spent in the room,

the more she understood that it was a place of drowning, and no one should be left there alone.

Working silently, the two women cleaned up the vomit and gathered the clothes into a laundry basket. Sometimes, the woman would pause and look up, as if waiting for the angel Gabriel to deliver news of her child. Other times, she would carefully fold a piece of clothing and set it to the side.

“When she wakes up, she will need something new to wear,” she explained to Quỳnh.

Through her, Quỳnh learned that the girl in room 431 was in her first year of college. She was the oldest of three children and had been born in Việt Nam before the family emigrated ten years ago.

“My husband and I did not finish high school,” she said, “so we always joked that she had inherited her brain from someone else.”

The two women traded knowing smiles. They belonged to the generation of sacrifice, exerting their bodies so their children could grow up to work with their minds.

“I’m just a nail technician. And my husband works at the chicken processing plant,” she said. It felt like she’d wanted to say these things out loud for so long. “Actually, he just started. My daughter, she helped him get the job. His old job was at another place, and the new supervisor gave him a really hard time. But I think she filled out some applications and made a few calls and got him a better job. I don’t know how she felt about it. She only tells me when it’s done.”

Quỳnh avoided her gaze. The doors in the dorm were so thin that even the sniffles of a small wounded creature could be detected by passersby. Every time Quỳnh passed Room 431, she would cross herself and hope that God too was listening.

On the morning of the incident, she had heard odd sounds coming from inside the room. Alarmed, she’d knocked and called out to the girl, but when no reply came, she unlocked the door.

It shamed Quỳnh that her first instinct upon seeing the girl was to run. She had lived most of her early life in this country in fear of the authorities. The thought of talking to a police officer terrified her. What if her jumbled English was construed into a confession? Who would feed her stray if she were taken away?

But the cowardice did not last in the rush of adrenaline that followed. Quỳnh called and spoke with a dispatcher in a calm and understandable manner. Later, she reported the incident to her superior in a composed voice. Perhaps she had acted quickly and competently because in the back of her mind, she’d foreseen its occurrence. For the past few weeks, she felt troubled by the absence of the girl in Room 431. It had been so long since she’d seen her in the hallways with her good morning bows. Then, one day, she had been mopping the floor when she heard a small voice from behind her.

“Sorry,” the girl said as she moved the cleaning cart by a tenth of an inch to make room for herself to pass through. Quỳnh wanted to call out to her, to ask her how she was doing. But the girl quickly slipped into her room and wasn’t heard from again.

When all the clothes were put away, the two women discovered small pieces of candy wedged between the floorboards.

The woman got on her knees and collected the small round things in her palms. For a moment, Quỳnh thought she was going to put them in her mouth. But the woman simply looked to the trash can, and when she realized it was too full to hold even five more small sweets, Quỳnh quickly offered her an open palm.

“Here,” she said, and was relieved when the small round things were out of the woman’s possession.

The woman sat on the floor for a while, face blank, and Quỳnh did her best to protect her silence. Working quietly, she gathered the books from the floor and put fresh, new sheets on the bed.

“She’s not gonna want to come home with me when she wakes up,” the woman finally said. Quỳnh waited patiently, eager to hear what the woman had to say.

Instead, the woman turned to ask Quỳnh if she remember Việt Nam.

“I haven’t been back in a while,” Quỳnh confessed, joining the woman on the floor.

“We always said we left to give our children a better future. We said it to them every day of their lives. Leave, and you will find success!” She held back tears before continuing. “All their lives, they were taught to do one thing. How can I ask her to come back now when the only thing I’ve ever taught her to do was

leave?” The realization broke her, and she sobbed bitterly into Quỳnh’s arms. Quỳnh, who had never held a child before, tried her best to comfort the woman.

For the first time in a long time, she thought back to her past, back to when she would bike to work each morning and collapse into bed at sunset. The memory was so worn with age that it felt more fitting to call it her daughter memory. Back then, being a daughter had been her whole identity.

Every night, she would come home to leftover rice purposefully overseasoned with salt, so as to dissuade her from eating too much. Still, she and her siblings schemed for each other’s share. Her mother would pray the rosary as Quỳnh laid awake. Always, she was wedged between her and her younger siblings, unable to inhale without taking someone else’s air.

She had escaped all of that and started anew. Over the years, she had collected new titles. She was a wife. She was a pet owner. She was an American.

Hunger was replaced by cold cuts, suffocation replaced by a family-sized apartment for one.

As she walked the woman out of the room and into a taxi, it dawned on Quỳnh just how infinitesimal her existence in this country had become. Her talk with the woman had been the first real human interaction she’d had in months.

She was getting old. Her cat, too, was getting old. Tonight, he did not wait for

her by the door. Instead, she found him asleep on their sofa, curled up like a newborn kitten.

“Do you remember me when I was younger?” she asked her mother that night.

“Yes,” her mother said. “You were always hungry.”

“Would you make me cháo cá if I came back?”

There was a delay as her mother processed her implication, having almost given up on bringing her daughter home.

“Yes, of course! Anything you want.”

Quỳnh looked at her calendar. If she left soon, she could make it in time for Tết. The thought of embracing her old mother, of receiving well wishes from her nieces and nephews, and of handing out lì xì to her heart’s content pleased her immensely. Finally, the money from all those long hours of drudgery could be used to fill up those red envelopes of joy.

To return home was to return to the prosperity of the present, not the poverty of the past. She said this to Ông già, who yawned in assent. He had enjoyed his fair share of fortune cookies over the course of his nine lives.

The war was over, let it be over.

The war was over, and a mother was waiting for her child to come home.

* * *

When the girl in Room 431 woke up on New Year’s Day, the fifty-nine-year-old woman who’d saved her life had finished burying her old friend, her Ông già, next to the roses in the backyard and was on a large bird heading home.



Roadkill Sunset

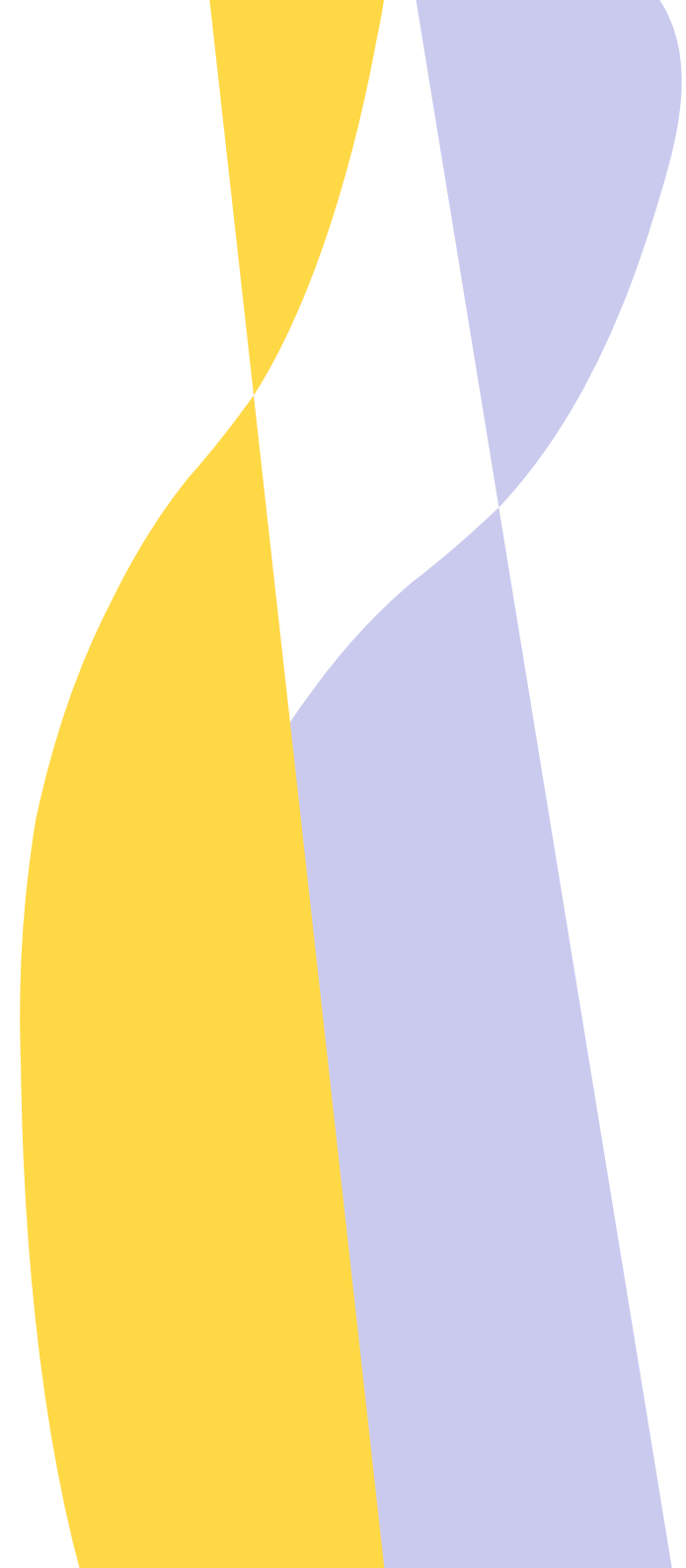
Daniel Viorica

*As gold as you can have it. Remember these rocks
just as they were before the sun cut off them
the years grandmother spent with seams in her fingers
remember again the traintracks shooting rivets
into eardrums before you fully registered
that you are looking into the same blue, the same gold
of the hills and the rocks. What's new is the
sound. Of rattling you think or else like a tin can
someone planted to break and it smells like metal.
First teaching job here, away from things, the smog and bought
her first sewing machine you've seen hidden under
milkcloth. The train begins to stop. It smells
like metal. We move again; we break again at the
station and a man walks across and smokes a cigarette
along the traintracks and I swear I can smell it through
the glass. She took me here when I was your age.
The people pass back and forth and cross
and mutter and the hours pass and
we stayed parked and the sun
reaches past where it had been, and grew upon
the traintracks as gold*

as you can—

It will be on the news, says the woman
beside us. Just you wait, it will be
all over the news. It smells
like metal. Look. She might want you to know this.
The name of the town

at least. I wanted
to be happy. I wanted to hold this.



Ghazal for Fall

Malia Chung

Men grow their mustaches out long as leaves erupt, signaling fall.
In the mirror, the hairdresser brushes my neck, lets the last strands fall.

And the birds—finches and swallows—swoop south, so I,
passing too, pack out my summer toothbrush, a suitcase for fall.

In the city, restaurant umbrellas corkscrew closed as even stragglers
stumble home. At night, when the temperature falls,

a musician performs from the inside of her parked car. The trumpet's
call is muffled, but listen, *shh*, to its rise and fall.

No matter. This season serves other food for the mind—how this time,
two years ago, he used chopsticks to prepare me grilled cheese. I fall

into bed. These days, I dream of flesh, of sun-split tomatoes, thick-hipped
squash, and raspberries, yellow and red, so swollen they fall.

But for him, my attention is fluid. Watch his torso beat the kitchen
free of smoke. Tonight, his eyes train on me, as if I am all.

Look, how we have changed since then; the transformation resides both in
and out. I breathe him in and out of being as I fall

asleep on my own. He'd say: "I've got you, Malia." Leaves,
and aloneness stuns me to freefall.



Audrey Zhang

Reflection Rendezvous

How to Steal From the U-Store

Maddy Heyler

This piece is entirely fictional.

1) Use Self Checkout

It's easy. Princeton trusts its students—the best and the brightest of the nation—to check out all items at self-checkout. But if you, a savvy student, forget to check out one or two or ten items, the cashiers will be none-the-wiser. There's even an option to forgo a receipt. Press that button.

Do you remember the first time you told someone you went to Princeton, and their perspective of you shifted? I worked at Subway all through high school, and even though I was a good employee, I am human and therefore fallible. After ringing up countless orders during a lunch rush, I charged the customer for a turkey bacon instead of a regular turkey. I apologized profusely in the proper customer service voice, said the proper platitudes, promised a refund, but the customer still shook his head, tisking.

"Are you stupid?" he asked. That was my moment.

"No, sir. I got into Princeton," I responded. Silence. The platitudes and apologies wouldn't shut him up, but a prestigious Ivy League would. When

hmm was his only response, I knew I had won. I nurtured that retort like a babe. Nine letters held more weight in other's eyes than my humanity. With the title Princeton student, I was invincible.

2) Scan the items quickly

There's two to three seconds after you scan something, that anything you scan will make a sound but not register the item. Those are freebies. Scan the most expensive items during those two to three seconds. Learn speed. Your legs are quick enough to make it from East Pyne to Frick in the ten minute passing period. Your fingers will be too.

I'm no good at speed. I ran distance track and cross country in high school particularly because I don't have the twitch muscles that facilitate sprinting. Every time we ran 200 meter sprint drills, I finished dead last. But you learn speed, especially here. With a friend's orchestra performance, another's arching, a pset due at 11:59 pm, your mom begging you to call her, 200 pages of reading due tomorrow, there's too many activities for too little time.

The Sunday before fall break, my friend and I hosted a Friendsgiving dinner. The same evening, another friend had

an acapella concert, and I wanted to go, not necessarily for the music but for support. In proper Princeton tradition, we started cooking late and started the dinner late. Only 30 minutes into the meal, I abandoned my hostess duties to run to Frist, pausing briefly to buy my ticket. I stayed for the first act, stressed about cleaning up the dinner, and ran back to the dinner. Out of breath and running dishes to the kitchen, I apologized again and again about missing half the dinner.

"The timing was unfortunate, but thank you for coming."

"I totally forgot about the concert and the date was already set."

"Thank you so much for coming! I'm so sorry I had to leave again."

It's a pattern: augmenting myself with apologies for inevitable situations. I promise to be better and faster and more put together even as the days waste into nights.

3) Scan only the cheapest items

If you're not dexterous or fast enough to accomplish tip #2, there's another option. Scan only the cheapest items. For example, if you're buying Tico's Juice, grab two ramen, and only scan those two. You pay \$3.00 for a \$11 purchase. If you're buying shampoo and conditioner, grab two Cliff Bars to scan. You pay \$4.00 for a \$12.00 purchase. If you're going to buy something expensive, buy a few cheaper things you'll need eventually. Make sure to plan ahead!

I'm good at planning ahead. One time during Japanese, when my professor droned on about the metaphor of "the blessed life" in Haruki Murakami's "The

Visitor," I redid my Tigerpath. I was a SPIA major at the time, and I decided SPIA wasn't practical enough. To whom or to what I don't know. I researched the math track econ requirements, skimmed various senior thesis, read all the departmentals, and graphed the class overlaps with the Statistics and Machine Learning, Applied Mathematics, and Environmental Studies certificate. Then I did it all over for EEB, just in case I wanted to switch majors another time. The future is uncertain, but I can plan for something: economics, EEB, and employment.

I don't feel like I'm living the "blessed life." The high school me dreamed of the Ivy League. At Subway, I wore the title in defense against rude customers, a promise that one day I'll be something great.

In Murakami's "The Visitor," the "blessed life" is a satire on high society's idea that their child is living the best of all possibilities. The main character, a wealthy housewife, believes her child was given the "blessed life" through her birth into status. (Spoiler alert for Japanese 306!) "The blessed life" is not something you earn; it's something that is assigned. Princeton, in its gamble of chance and skill, is our blessed life. Some social construct that carries weight but shouldn't. Some gold-plated parody of reality. Something you leverage against grumbling Subway customers and on LinkedIn profiles. Sounds good, right? Sounds beautiful, right? Rub enough layers away and pyrite smiles back.

4) Learn to optimize

Optimization: selecting the best element in the set of available alternatives. It's

all about what to buy and what to steal. What to take and what to leave behind.

I'm really good at optimization—I'm studying economics after all. The locus of the field, beyond grooming Goldman Sachs first year analysts, is optimization. To study for my EEB midterm, I forwent lunch: optimize the grade. To grab a meal with my friend, I Google Translated my Japanese readings: optimize my time.

Optimization requires sacrifice—you learn that quickly here. There's only 24 hours in a day, and you have five meal plans, four hours of sleep, three papers, two psats, and one friend that won't stop asking you to study together sometime. You cannot do everything, so prioritize what to do and what to leave undone.

In my family, sacrifice is a synonym for love. My great-grandparents sacrificed their homeland for America, the promise of a better opportunity for posterity. My grandma sacrificed her native tongue for a white-picket fence in the suburbs. My parents sacrificed rest, working overtime and picking up side-jobs over the years, to put their children through school. I sacrifice myself in homage to this lineage. Prioritize and optimize for that "blessed life" you were given. Sacrifice assignments for acquaintances, food for friends, calm for classes. Pack your Google Calendar with so many colors it morphs into Willy Wonka's chocolate factory.

5) Don't regret your choices

Don't ask yourself why am I buying two ramens when I have five uneaten ones back in my dorm? It's to get a discounted phone charger—only \$3 instead of \$15. The ramen is merely a

tool for a cheaper charger. A rung in the ladder of saving-money-success. You know, sometimes, I feel subhuman here. Last semester, I turned down a design job in the history department because "it wouldn't look good on my resume." I love design, and I love history, but I already have design experience on my resume, I rationalized.

I've been rationalizing a lot of things. I weighed the pros and cons of dinner at Roma vs dinner at Whitman. I chose my major because economics is practical, and you can always become a consultant. Anyone can sell out. Who needs passion when you have the hope of a McKinsey summer internship? Apply to that finance club, not because you like finance, but on the off-chance you'll network with the CFO of BlackRock. Always think of what you can gain from a club, a class, a friend. Life is merely a calculation of costs and benefits. You already know that—you're a Princeton student after all. How else did you get in unless you played the college admissions system?

I played that game, shamelessly. That reward, Old Nassau and Princeton University in my LinkedIn bio, played me. I'm a calculator: thinking in numbers, crafted only for exams. My worth is measured in percentages. My battery is low. Google Calendar, the metronome to this monotony. Each day is a to-do list of unfinished work and unfinalized plans. That's ok. That's fine. Everyone feels this way. This is the Princeton way, right?

6) Don't steal

If you have the financial ability to do so, don't steal from the U-Store at all. You don't have to worry about optimization

and regrets and your fingers' speed. My parents, drenched in evangelical Christianity, warned me that in the end theft steals a part of your soul. Maybe they're right. Maybe stealing time desecrated my life into one giant calculator, and all equations ended in the negative.

Sometimes I feel like I'm doing Princeton wrong. There's no "right" way to do college, but sometimes I'll scroll through Instagram and see everyone so happy. Smiling and content. What's the secret? What am I missing?

But I've been fighting back recently. When I feel like the sum of my appointments, I take a long walk. Passing the golf course, I reinforced an empty platitude: everything works out in the end. The universe or God or fate has a plan that I can't optimize. I'm trying to work that logic into my life, without penciling it into my planner.

When my friend asked to hang out after a night class, I did. We walked through Princeton, watching people and deer and birds. We talked about everything except our plans and the future. We stared at the clouds as the sun began her descent into the night. I felt so serene. I wasn't an amalgamation of discarded dreams and misplaced assignments and anxious thoughts. I felt like my body was just a body. Nothing more, but nothing less. Now that's a feeling you can't code in R.

7) Boycott the UStore

Wawa is better anyway.

CONTRIBUTORS

Art

Ashley Teng '23 is a senior from Camas, WA studying computer science who loves playing the flute and piano, reading classic literature, and exploring landscapes with her camera. Her favorite subject to photograph is an unplanned glimpse of nature that when captured, introduces beauty often easily overlooked.

Audrey Zhang '25 is a sophomore from New York majoring in Art and Archaeology (Art Practice Track). She also hopes to earn minors in Creative Writing, Statistics and Machine Learning, and the East Asian Studies Program. She loves exploring new hobbies, from baking to breaking to learning anything and everything.

Lauren Olson '24 is one of six juniors at Princeton brave enough to major in studio art. A penetrating curiosity deeply infuses her visual representations of the world, which toggle the virtual and the real. Lauren has just begun her artistic journey and looks forward to exploring more materials, mediums, and styles.

Annabel Green '26 is a first year from Colorado. She intends to major in Neuro as well as obtain certificates in Global Health Policy and Vis Arts. Her current obsession is walking across campus to get an iced latte.

Madison Davis '26 is from southwest suburban sprawl Florida, and if you check last semester's bio, it says that he was "undecided," but is now leaning towards the A&A studio art track (with a certificate in Architecture and Engineering). Madison is always creating something—new clothing, visual art, or writing in their indecipherable cursive. They love to share their art and creativity with others by any means they can get, and, if you try, you can play Where's Waldo with her on campus—just look for the brunette mullet violently, and oddly, dressed up (it's not too hard, honestly).

Nonfiction

Poetry

Avery Gendler '26 is a freshman from Boise, Idaho who is thinking about majoring in either English or Art History with a Creative Writing certificate. In her free time, she enjoys pressing wildflowers between books (when she isn't reading them) and backpacking with her family and two dogs, George Washington and Teddy Roosevelt.

Roya Reese '26 is a freshman from Philadelphia in the English department. She is a proud member of Princeton Club Swim and sings weekly at Coffee Club. She is always reading something, and more often than not, it's Sally Rooney.

Chisom Nwadinobi '25 is a Nigerian American self-taught poet who specializes in politics and creative writing. She is most known for her work, "The N is Not Silent" (2021) which discusses the importance of her origin in relation to her name. She writes about wrenching topics while offering an honest and emotional introspection. In her words, "Poetry is meant to provoke; each writing I publish is intended to leave the reader with the same raw emotions that I experienced while writing the piece."

Daniel Viorica '25 is from New Mexico.

Zoe Montague '24 is from Vermont. She studies Religion and likes writing poetry, playing frisbee, and taking pictures of trees.

Malia Chung '25 is a sophomore from Boston, Massachusetts. She is currently studying English and is hoping to pursue further work in both creative writing and journalism.

Juliette Carbonnier '24 is a junior from New York City studying English with certificates in Music Theater, Theater, and Creative Writing. She enjoys long walks in the rain and has recently reconnected with her passion for fingerpainting.

Fiction

Jessica Wang '26 started writing by telling bedtime stories to her stuffed animals and has graduated into short stories and partially written novels. She enjoys puzzling, folding tiny paper cranes, and watering the two-inch aloe on her desk.

Anna Chung '24 is a junior from northern Virginia studying English and Creative Writing. She enjoys green tea ice cream, sixty degree weather, and long phone calls.

Ngan Chiem '23 is a senior in the Politics and Creative Writing departments. She was born in Sóc Trăng, VN and grew up in Pennsauken, NJ. She is working on a novel about a woman falling in love and getting into trouble in 1980s Vi t Nam.

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This volume of *The Nassau Literary Review* was designed using Adobe InDesign 2023.

It is set using two typefaces. The cover, titles, and subtitles are set in Sigurd, and body text in Nimbus Roman D.

The Nassau Literary Review is printed by The Book Patch.