

SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

*fall 2025*

# SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

FALL 2025

Cover by  
Leia Immanuel '26

**S M A L L  
C R A F T  
W A R N I N G S**

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# FOREWORD

“My ugly little dog,” is how our last editor often colloquially referred to Small Craft Warnings. The club operated on a word-of-mouth basis and struggled yearly to eke out enough funding to support itself. Yet, she loved the magazine like one loves a dog, even if it looks more like a rat. And as I came into my editorial position at Small Craft Warnings, this term of endearment stuck with me, symbolizing a few things. First, that like an ugly dog, Small Craft Warnings has a family of editors, contributors, and readers who cherish it no matter its form. Second, that this magazine was in dire need of a make-over.

My first priority was expanding access to Small Craft Warnings. I wanted to ensure that everyone who wanted to be a part of the club had the opportunity to join. In my experience, a literary community is the beating heart of a writer’s process. It’s that oil that makes our gears turn; when writing becomes too difficult, which it often does, knowing that I have other people to struggle alongside makes all the difference. I wanted Small Craft Warnings to be a space for us to come together and think about the craft of writing, the art of editorial curation, and the stressful yet highly rewarding process of building up a publication from start to finish.

With the inclusion of seven new Editorial Board members, our office filled with different voices and brimmed with opportunities. We’ve begun the process of branching out: In collaboration with the English Literature Department, Small Craft Warnings is hosting campus-wide events in hopes of further invigorating the Swarthmore literary community. For example, in October, we held an Open Submission, Open

Mic BBQ. In the spring, we hope to host Moth-style storytelling events and collaborate with other campus organizations.

At least for me, *Small Craft Warnings* has served as a space where I can feel empowered to embrace a sense of creative agency. My hope is that the magazine can become this environment for any student with a passion for the literary (and visual) arts. This issue of *Small Craft Warning* features an insanely diverse collection of work — from gut-wrenching prose to poignant poetics, from glistening student sculptures to incredible faculty and staff art, this issue packs the punch. With a lot of hard work and dedication, our ugly little dog has become more of a golden retriever, and we're so happy to share it with you.

I'd like to thank all the new members of our Editorial Board for sharing my enthusiasm for this publication and for your commitment over this past semester. I'd also like to thank the faculty in the English Literature Department who were and continue to be so supportive during our renovations process — a particular thank you to Professor Morgan Parker for advising and guiding us.

**MILLA BEN-EZRA**  
*Editor*

# Self Portrait as a Meadow

AINSLEY MADDEN

*Class of 2028*

This house is full of wind and  
the meniscus of a tear before it breaks

But outside the air is dense with stridulations and sunflowers bend  
their necks in the direction  
of their namesake

But outside is the nature of mine, a landscape of green

It is wild there too, I know, and in here there is no brush of  
grass to send shocks up my spine.

No one there talks about the disjunction of a cemetery in spring, or  
the acrobatics of trees at night, or how  
days shorten over time, but

I will continue to stand atop my eroding cliff,  
cursing the ocean

To you, perhaps I am the clearing of cut grass weeping bitterly,  
if not the rabbit cleaning up the untouched.

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# Flower in faraway mountains is the most hopeless beloved

SHUYI ZHANG  
*Class of 2029*

Koumei, it's not like I never considered coming back.  
I remember the poem once again. On my window  
the crimson maple leaves quietly stack

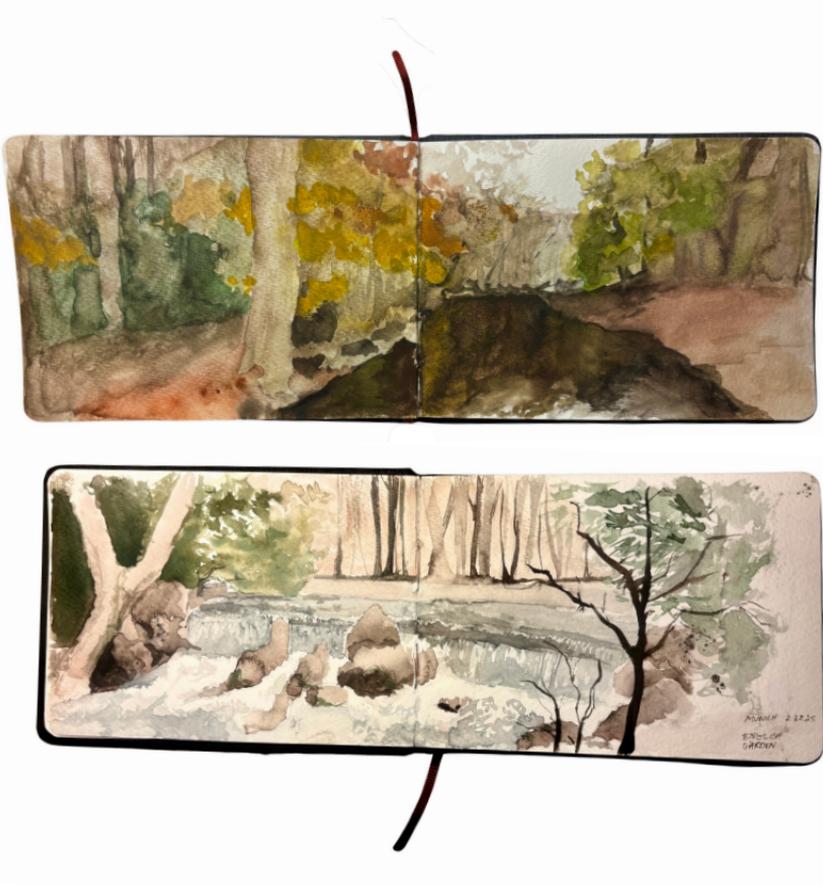
But I've never been so tranquil, living in the old shack  
I stand amid the golden wheat field, winds come and go  
Wish you were here, it's not like I never considered coming back

In the morning, I gaze at the faraway mountains on the track  
those fragrant white flowers seem like the things from your poems  
dream-like, unattainable and sad, similar to the crimson leaves stacked

left unattended, they will inevitably decay and crack.  
You and the flower are the two things farthest in the world I know  
Koumei, it's not like I never considered coming back.

But how can I not know you leave no slack  
in your conduct, holding yourself till no emotion flow  
Deity. Wisdom. Like a Guanyin statue where crimson leaves quietly stack

Your indifferent warmth I still like  
it resembles white flowers the faraway mountains grow  
But time flows cruelly, I eventually realize I cannot come back  
to cruelly let the crimson maple leaves flare and stack, all alone



# Fall & Winter / Swarthmore & Munich

LEIA IMMANUEL

*Class of 2026*

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# When the trees begin again

DANIELA TRAJTMAN

*Class of 2028*

When the trees begin again, I do too—  
their throats flushed gold, their ribs askew.  
The air smells like endings that hum, not rot,  
and every leaf rehearses what I forgot.

I walk home through their slow collapse,  
each branch a clock, each sound a lapse.  
The sky is low, a bruised white lung,  
and I taste iron on my tongue.

Last year, I watched the same small hill  
swallow its green, go soft and still.  
You were there, holding a cup of steam,  
saying nothing, like it was a dream.

Now the wind keeps talking in your tone,  
carving my name in the marrow of stone.  
I almost answer. I almost stay—  
but the trees, they're louder every day.

Their bodies rust with grace and ache,  
like saints who bend but never break.  
Each leaf, a word the forest said,  
a psalm for something almost dead.

I think of the summer I tried to bloom,  
and wilted quietly in my room.  
Even the mirror turned away—

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how could I ask the light to stay?  
Still, here it comes—the amber flood,  
each root confessing to the mud.  
The earth forgets, the air forgives,  
and everything dying somehow lives.

My mother calls to ask if I've eaten.  
I say yes, though the light is leaving.  
I'm learning now to call it change—  
the soft undoing of what remains.

How the branches blush without shame,  
like lovers who've run out of names.  
How the wind keeps kissing what it kills,  
and still, the hills forgive the hills.

I pass a pond that holds the sky,  
as if it too is scared to die.  
The geese lift off—bright wounds in air—  
and leave behind their mirrored care.

Once, you told me everything ends  
where it begins—trees, months, friends.  
I laughed, not knowing you meant me,  
or how the fall could set me free.

Now I stand beneath their slow undoing,  
their colors deep as something brewing.  
Not grief exactly, but something near—  
a shape that hurts to disappear.

Maybe change is just the art  
of loving something as it departs.  
Maybe loss, when said aloud,  
sounds like wind through copper clouds.

So I wait, and breathe, and try to be  
the smallest note of a dying tree.  
When the trees begin again, I do too—  
not healed, not whole—just turning through.

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# Santa Anas

ALBA NEWMANN-HOLMES

*Director, Writing Associates Program; Assistant Professor*

on his day off  
he sings to the dog  
this is how she knows he has slept well

the two sit on the patio  
nearly naked, soaking in the sun  
beyond, the yard half-raked by wind  
a dryness settling in

when you rake your knuckle  
against stucco  
it bleeds

the rats feast on grapefruits  
wind-stripped  
from the trees

not settling in, she tells you,  
but a form of abeyance

not happiness, but the family is still okay  
it's harder despite the sun, she tells you,

surprised by the palm's bright blades

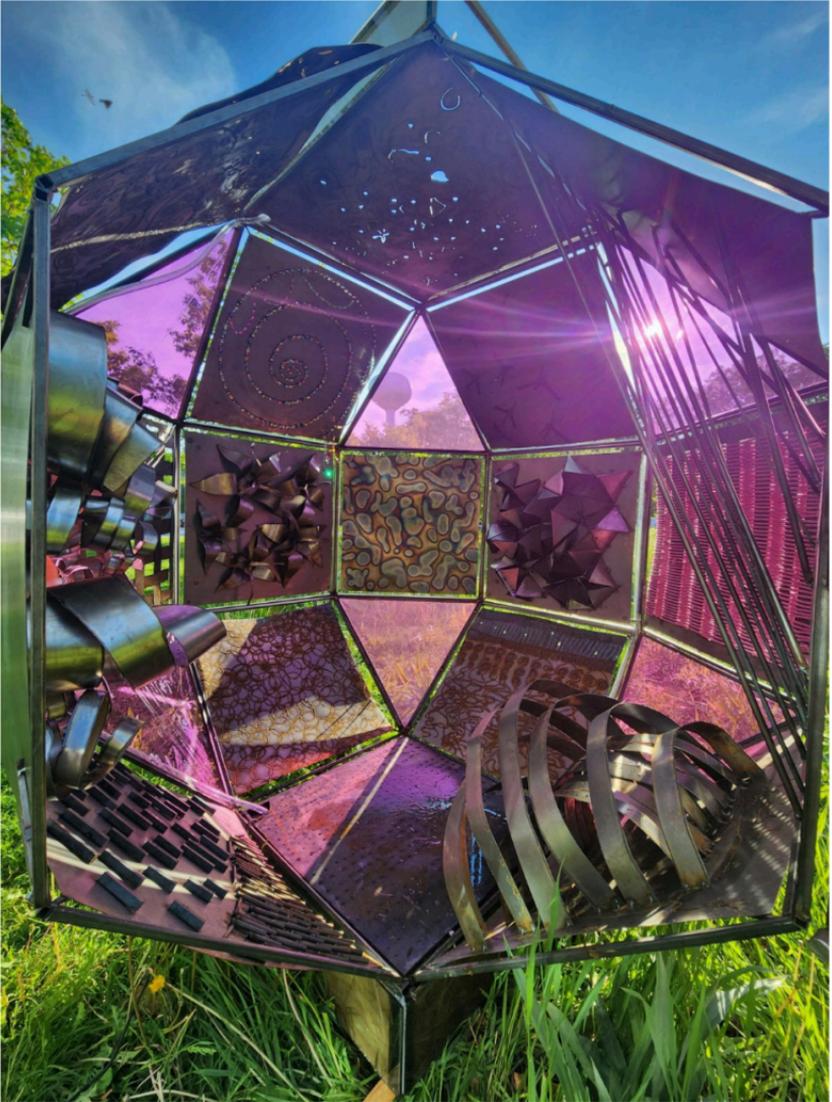
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# Waterfountain

CLARESS BAHAMUNDI

*Class of 2027*





# Objets Trouvés

ALBA NEWMANN-HOLMES

*Director, Writing Associates Program; Assistant Professor*

*Because we are committed to meaning,  
we number the stars.*

My child brings to me  
rocks from the arroyo's  
margin. Small hard tokens  
of affection. My father teaches me  
the word pareidolia

and I cannot make it  
into any form I recognize.

Since childhood, my mother's sight was  
full of omens, hers the pattern-  
catching eye that found  
the four-leaf every time.

I learned to walk scanning the ground before me.  
Among the treasures I amassed:

Fingerprints captured in clay, traces of their maker  
from a thousand years before. Fossil sea worms and paperwasp chambers  
and, once, a human molar, in the Garden District of New Orleans.

The bird's nest that blew down from the eaves that spring  
was made of my mother's hair.

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# Untitled

CLARESS BAHAMUNDI

*Class of 2027*

# Whulge

ERIN PICKEN

*Class of 2027*

I used to picture you, meandering, redwoods creaking over frosted tips, thumbing your new tattoo, telling a red-hot story about a barbeque-d koi fish. Think in terms of water, in terms of minnows—skewered, hooked, flanked and sandwiched in between supple cedar planks, made into pendant silver simulacra, tiny, in the clutch of crawdads, and sucking the life out of the thick glass window-walls of fish ladders a-roaring, halves, shimmer scales flickering.

During your first break, my ears trilled with tales of lukewarm egg yolks in rum, stretching cheek skin, droppings out, firings, quasi-homelessness. Rape. Kratom, estrogen, shallow breaths, curry curdling with bacon fat. Mom told me one about a fresh crab—about how you went down to the rocky beaches of Santa Cruz and brought it back to the Airbnb to cook and eat for dinner. The next summer, I sputtered around on a Livingston elsewhere, pulling up crabs caught in the crosshairs of chicken wire and water-salt, picking at raw poultry with their chelae. Dreams of late become dreams of mud-bugs in toy nets cast in wide shallow Umatillas, all as it becomes harder and harder yet to think back to those harsh, lush things—to the biting cold of the Willamette.

And you told me, just once, hunched over the butcher block, stinking brackish, this: Erin. Go down to the river, and put muck to skin, and tell me you feel nothing.

In time passed, I have heard more stories—of lanky fingers fleeting and skittering across piano keys, of the small white X on your browbone creasing in on itself. These are small condolences that say, I ate alligator. I stuck my finger in the mouth of a metal coyote. I got hives both times. I dated a slight girl named White. I was your window to the world. I am at sea.

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# Hackles

ERIN PICKEN

*Class of 2027*

A meshed stick, a hooven leg; killers  
They kick up dirt all day long  
Bound by PVC fencing or white lines on a well-manicured field  
And I just think all hot day long about how much I hate sweat and grime  
It is vile and violent and droll  
Pay to watch skulls pound together and ribs get crushed 7.9 seconds in  
Just one more second. Just one last hit.  
And I'll be through.  
And sometimes you wonder why you didn't pick up a real skill  
You could have lived a lie of a life  
Bought a ticket once a year  
But that man isn't here  
Pull that string tight, clench that jaw  
You have to cowboy up  
You are not allowed to lie on the field and die



# Outside Dog

ELLA WALKER

*Class of 2028*

# Pigeon

DANIELA TRAJTMAN

*Class of 2028*

Beneath the gray and weary sky,  
The pigeons circle, low and shy,  
Their wings are torn, their colors fade,  
They coo for crumbs the cold has made.  
The city hums, but none will see,  
Their quiet ache, their company —  
For even flight can't lift the dead,  
When all the skies are slate instead.

I perch where rain and rust collide,  
The ledge my home, the wind my guide.  
Once I dreamed of open air,  
Now I choke on city glare.  
They pass below, they never see,  
The world looks small from misery.  
My wings remember how to roam  
But every rooftop feels like home.

I wake to noise and aching bone,  
A sky of gray that feels like stone.  
I try to move, but what's the use?  
The world's a wire, tied too loose.  
I watch them rush, their heads bowed low,  
All chasing things they'll never know.  
I flap, pretend I'm free again  
But fall back down, now and then.

# Zemblanity

MADDY POSNER

*Class of 2028*

Panting, breathless, covered in tiny scratches and splatters of dirt, Goldi walked slowly through the forest. She would find another human, an employee, a forestry staff member, or if she was unlucky, another tourist, someone with some phone battery at the very least, the ability to call for help, to get her far away from here, far away from forest and fog and fear, her own willful delusions, the weight of wanting freedom.

She'd split off from her parents at the beginning of the hike, the two of them wanting to do the steeper, longer trail, her wanting to stay back at the Airbnb, instead resigning herself to a short walk on her own, preferring it to the arguing, the prolonged time together. Yet her phone had died after only thirty minutes, her headphones sucking away most of the battery, and the crumpled-up paper map she'd stuffed in her pocket was inadequate in every possible way. (The biggest quite likely being her inability to tell where she was or which direction she was headed.) She veered off the trail long ago, and she was following a squirrel now, because as far as she could tell there was no other soul within at least a mile radius, and she was tired of walking. She had no other options left. The squirrel kept darting forward quickly before pausing every few steps. Goldi could almost swear it was looking back at her, like it was letting her catch up, or it was judging her for following it. Her mind was drifting, and she was thinking about what would happen when they made it home – San Francisco, not the Airbnb – the long summer months, that dreary job at the froyo place, the fractured friend group, all the college essays still unwritten and now overdue. Time had slipped into the abstract, but it was still easy for Goldi to imagine Marissa clocking out for lunch an ocean away. When she closed her eyes she was there too, biting into a peanut butter sandwich, watching as Marissa carefully unpacked her plastic wrapped baby carrots, mouth small and bow-like as she chewed.

It was Marissa who she almost called last night on the Airbnb porch under the lamplight, Marissa whose parents were already divorced,

so she knew exactly how it went. Goldi had wanted to ask her what to expect, and now she imagined her response to the running, the apathy, the woods. You're getting the whole experience, she'd say. Or would she? An owl hooted in the distance. Goldi watched the last dregs of day melt into the gaps between the trees. She realized she could still turn around. It might be possible to fumble her way back to the trail, and then it would be easy to follow to the parking lot. But in all likelihood her parents were gone. It was past the time of their dinner reservations in town, and they should have left the forest by now. Would they have gone on without her? They were good at giving up on things. Yet her absence would have been noted. She didn't know, not about her parents nor her chances of returning intact, and so she let the thought dissipate alongside the last of the daylight.

Goldi was startled when she realized the squirrel had abandoned her. The darkness had become total and enveloping. She lowered her head, watching her feet as they stepped on leaves and pine needles, trying not to think about a hiker whose death had been plastered across the internet last week. She didn't need her parents to say it for her: she knew there were a hundred ways to die in the woods. But she tried to forget it just the same, as quickly as she had made herself remember. She looked up, and somehow she was standing at the entrance to a clearing. The stars were so bright up above and there was a cottage sitting placidly amidst the weeds. She approached slowly and cautiously. This was too quaint for employee housing, and she could hardly imagine locals living here. It was the home of a serial killer, or it was abandoned. Most likely it was just another tourist destination. The lights were off, but Goldi was too nervous to try the door; she peered through the windows instead, finding shadows in the shapes of chairs, beds, a table, normal knick-knacks, scores of books, jars of food lining the walls. She shouted out a hello, and there was nothing. Her stomach rumbled, but Goldi wasn't hungry enough to intrude. She stood for a moment, looking out into the darkness, hearing the birdcalls, the rustling branches, the gentle noises of night. Rounding the back of the cottage, Goldi found a ladder propped up against the wall. She looked back up at the sky. And then she climbed the ladder.

Below, a boy was entering the clearing. He was tall, and gangly, his black hair a mop, his skin dotted with freckles. He was silent, spritely, confident. He opened the front door to the cottage, and it clicked shut behind him. Flicking on the lights inside, the boy paused, hearing a groaning from above, the ceiling moaning just a little. He froze. It was an old building, but this wasn't normal. There could be a squirrel up there

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again, that red one that terrorized them since they'd left fresh fish outside, the one Dad still threatened to put in their stew. It hadn't dared enter the clearing since the incident last week. Though Papa left seeds for it daily at the edge of the clearing. He had seen it happen this very morning.

The boy turned and slowly pushed the front door open again, rounding the side of the cottage to grab the axe lying abandoned. He lifted it with both hands, creeping around the back wall, peering up at the roof. Nothing. There was nothing there. He rounded the other side, and just as he was convinced he was hearing things, he needed a meal and a good night's rest, his dad's would be back soon, and he was going insane, he saw it. There, flopped along a high portion of the rooftop, was a pink sneaker, laces unravelled and pointing despondently towards the forest floor.

The boy stared at it for a moment. He backed away from the house, trying to get a better angle, but the fog obscured his vision, and the figure was sprawled on their back on the top part of the roof. He couldn't see much aside from the hems of dirt-specked jeans above the sneakers. He dropped the axe, and moved close, closer, slowly grabbing the ladder and quietly hoisting himself up to the rooftop edge.

It was a girl, bleached blonde hair spread out beneath her, body sideways and head turned the other way, out towards the forest.

"Hello?" The boy said.

No response.

He tried again. "Excuse me?"

The girl's body appeared to shift slightly, but she didn't say anything.

The boy inched closer. She seemed young, maybe a little older than him, but not by much. He peered down at her face and realized with a start she was sleeping. He paused. It felt creepy, standing over her like this. He inched forward and lowered himself to sitting, bending his legs and wrapping his arms around them. The boy looked back at the girl, and then at the forest. He scooted back, uphill, one, two, until he was beside her. He leaned back on his forearms, and then flat on his back.

Now he could see why she'd chosen this spot. The fog was thin up here, the stars piercing through the veil like tiny diamonds. He tried to find the North Star, or the Big Dipper, but Dad was the one who knew the difference between the constellations, and he wasn't here right now. He would be back soon though. Or he should be.

The moon was at its peak. The boy sighed and laid his hands beneath his head. He yawned. It was peaceful here, the stars and the silence, the chill and the clearness . . . and the stranger lying beside him, sleeping.

He glanced over, noting the dirt on her jeans, the tear in her shirt, the way sleep hung on her like an uneasy shadow, its arms clutching tight, her face contorting under its grip. And then her eyes were open, and they were looking back at him, and she was scrambling to her feet, her words coming out in half-phrases – “You—I was—you don’t—who are you?”

He looked up at her from where he was still lying on the roof. “I should be asking you that, maybe?”

She wrinkled her eyebrows. She paused, as if she was thinking about something, or maybe she was nervous, he couldn’t tell. She said, “What, you live here?”

He laughed. “Is that such a crazy idea?”

She was still standing and staring, eyes narrowed, arms crossed at her chest. “Like, I don’t know, you just seem normal.”

He rolled his eyes. “Right, okay, too normal to live here, you mean?”

She huffed a little.

The boy looked back up at the sky. “Do you typically climb onto strangers’ roofs in the middle of the night?”

The girl sat back down, crossing her legs in front of her, hands fidgeting in her lap. “Do you live alone?”

The boy shook his head. She mmhm’d. “Okay, so, should I be worried?”

He smiled. “Maybe. What’s your name?”

“Goldilocks,” she said. She lay back down, apparently deciding he wasn’t an axe murderer. “You can call me Goldi.”

“Let me guess, Goldi, you’re a tourist.”

She mock-gasped. “Oh, wow, how did you possibly figure that out?”

The boy glanced over, finding her lips tugging upwards. Unsuccessfully attempted to stop his own from rising. He had wanted to ask her something but now it was escaping his mind. He looked out into the woods again. There was a dark shape winding between the trees and he followed it absentmindedly with his eyes. He looked back to Goldi. “Why are you on our roof? We don’t get many tourists.”

Goldi was using one hand to twist at the fingernails on the other. She heard the question but said nothing at first. She blurted out, “I—I got lost. My parents . . . Marissa—” She tore off mid-sentence. She heard her own voice as if from very far away, as if watching a video play the scene inside her head, looking down at her body, the boy laid out beside her. *They went on without me. I wanted to call her. I couldn’t. I—*

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The version of herself that was hovering overhead wheeled around and sped across a shadowed forest, a dark ocean, waves angry and rippling below, cold air slamming blonde hair against pale skin. Suddenly she was indoors, floating, tile way below, fluorescent lights harsh and glaring, three girls lined up at a counter. Green leaves were waving through the storefront window behind her, their color darker with summer setting in. A week ago today. She was the girl behind the cash register, name tag pinned crooked. And to her left were two girls at the topping counter, talking and laughing, standing close. One with a red tank, the other wearing a purple hoodie. Name tag pinned straight. Marissa. Marissa behind the counter, Marissa talking with Priya, going on about something, Goldi didn't know what, she had never known what. She had tried to stand closer to the two of them one time and they gave her a weird look. She had tried to say something, but her heartbeat fluttered faster than dragonfly wings, and her hands were cold, sticky. What would she even say? She stayed off on her own ever since. The closest she got was during lunch break, sitting across from Marissa and her baby carrots, her precise hands, busy typing away to someone on the other end. An ocean away.

And then Goldi was back in her body again, and it was all rising to the surface, and heat was spreading across her face, and tears were slipping from her eyes. But when she looked to her left, the boy was not staring at her askance, nor was he waiting for her to explain herself. And her hands weren't wet with sweat, and her heartbeat was mostly level. Goldi didn't know how, but it was fine. She could forget about all the wrong times. She didn't need to give it up. Her parents did, but she would find them later, she would explain herself, she would even say what she meant. Maybe they would listen. When she looked to her left again, the boy was just stupidly smiling back at her, and she had no idea why, but she couldn't stop herself from smiling back.

Unbeknownst to Goldi, at this very moment the boy was thinking it was weird she was being so silent. And was she crying? But then again he supposed that he didn't spend much time with humans, so how was he supposed to know what was normal? These thoughts only occupied his mind for a moment, however, as the dark shape he had been absent-mindedly watching move amongst the forest split into two more distinct forms. One emerged from the trees just ahead, and with a start, the boy realized what he was seeing. He backed up further onto the roof, trying to escape notice.

It was Dad. And behind him, arms laden with a large basket, was Papa, loudly talking, going on about something he couldn't hear, almost

dropping the basket, berries falling over the edge, calling ahead to Dad, finally reaching the door of the cottage as he received none of the help he'd requested. The girl seemed not to notice the pair. She was still staring at the sky, a thoughtful expression on her face. There was an imprint of a half-smile yet unfaded on her lips. The boy looked back and forth between the girl and empty ground below, knowing he had to do something. He was trying to figure out what to do. His dads always told him not to talk to strangers, said it was dangerous, would probably chastise him, and he never got to meet anyone like him. He tried to motion the girl to back up further onto the roof but she was still blinking and mindless. And then she was backing up with him, having noticed his signal, and out of nowhere she started talking, going on about grapes or games or gods, something about home, about her parents, or a friend, about needing somewhere to crash. He could hear Papa bumping about downstairs, and Dad calling his name – they would wonder where he was, it was late, he should be joining them at the table, he hadn't had a chance to eat – and he cringed. The girl was somehow still talking. And then the front door was banging open, and Dad was rounding the corner of the cottage, and there he was, peering up at them. He was taller than the boy, and so he could see them without climbing up himself – a good thing, the roof might not bear his weight.

“Son! Who is that?! And why are you on the roof?”

The boy looked away casually, then back, extra innocent, eyes wide like a child's. “Hey Dad!”

“Get down from there at once!”

The girl had finally stopped talking and now she was backing up, hugging herself, trying to make her body small. The boy glanced up at her and then back down, at his dad. His bear-dad. His hairy arms were gesturing wildly and his eyes were glaring. The door banged open again, and Papa joined him. He was shorter than Dad, but still tall, with a velvet snout below his eyes and rounded ears atop his head.

“Son! You–Oh, who is this! Come down! She can join us!”

Dad cut his glare to his side. “Sweetheart, you couldn't possibly–she's a human!” Papa shook his head. “So is he! It's good for him to be around his own sort!” The girl was shrinking now, looking desperately for an escape route. The ladder was just in front of them but so were the bears. Big, hairy, talking bears. Walking bears. Bears, walking, towards her. She was muttering to herself. She had started scooching backwards, towards the rooftop pinnacle. The boy noticed she was getting dangerously close to the topmost edge, and tried to reassure her.

“Goldi, they're okay, it's okay, you–”

## *SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS*

Before he could finish, she had propelled her body over the ridge of the rooftop, her mouth opening in a comically large O as she slipped over the other side, her body out of view and tumbling downwards, falling to the other side of the house, from whence there came a dull thud. Papa yelled and the boy scrambled down the ladder. The two bears and their teenage son rounded the side of the house quickly; Papa was panicking, incoherent; Dad was worrying aloud about scrutiny from the park; the boy was trying not to cry. They found the girl's body splayed out like a painting of a death, her limbs dramatically extended to every angle, her face against the dirt, her body still. Her head had landed on a large rock, and there was red seeping from a gash on the crown of her skull. "Well," said Dad. "Who's burying the body? Not it!"

The boy plopped onto the ground beside her. Papa let out a dramatic cry of dismay. Above, a bird seemed to sympathize, a series of cries melting into the night, the stars winking bright and beautiful, the sounds of a siren blaring through the woods from faraway, and then fading into the distance.



*FALL 2025*

**everything eats  
and gets eaten**

**RANIA ABOHATAB**

*Class of 2028*



# 04.17.25: Phone Call During Bath

CORINNE LAFONT

*Class of 2026*

Run the water, let the faucet flow. Words pool in the tub. Constantly saturated by expectancy. It was around this time of year, I think. I was perpetually tortured by time's incessant gnawing. In other words, I wanted to transfer. I had a dingle: double room, single. Roommate moved out before I could give her a reason to. I'd place my thighs on the ledge of the roadrail, and press my back against the oak. Called Mom. Told her about little things. Crocuses popped up, I led discussion. A classmate saw me walking to the gym with that pink cat shirt. Mom made me get rid of it. Such a shame.

Took a poetry seminar so I could escape my thoughts. Just place them somewhere. Onto a page, instead of the water. Had the opposite effect. I talked with a classmate about my work recently. She seems to think I wrote vapid, insipid diddies. Used to write about deluded romance – feeling sick for it. Anyway, I agree, every thought I've ever had is simply another's. Still, she's an asshole for admitting it. I wonder if she knows what it's like to be watery. To spill in circles, to bathe and bloom. They only have charcuterie, though – at poetry readings, I mean. They're too good for Thomas's English muffins, the ones Gram would lather with butter. Mom would tell her to stop, it's a calorie bomb on that goddamned blue plate.

I didn't care. I'd shove the whole crisp into my mouth, letting the honeycomb texture buzz salt into my skin. See my days were longer then, summer slower. Some hands are meant to give flowers, I used to think, others hold them, crumpled the stems in my hands. They were always the wrong color, or at least needed more contrast. I was always full of iodine, teeming yellow. Anyway, I submitted my work to the contest and lost.

Clapped, waved, pretended to be happy. Always a performance, makeup on a pig.

“It feels so much harder now.” When I was a kid, spring swept by, there was no winter, and the leaves stayed fresh and green all year around. Hot cars skidding on melting tar, grilled cheese slathered in burnt butter, leaves scattering the porch: annotated pages. Glitter in the sun, the seashells, we’d grab them on the pier. I’d stare out at rippling water, my distorted reflection fascinated me. Curiosity rather than disgust. “Wait, that’s my memory? Or yours?” The icing stuck on the roof of my mouth. I never knew how to let black and white cookies sit. I’d dig my feet into the sand, hot hands on my stomach, giggling so hard I’d almost puke.

Now it’s postgrad plans, what to do with an English degree. It’s always a disappointment when I reply. Liberal arts, nevermind. Don’t even try to ask about it. They only have whoopie pies there, no black and whites. When I go home and pass by Dortoni’s, I can’t let that icing stick. No tacky yellow cake and chocolate vanilla oil slick. And certainly no bathing suit, still need to take that swim test – just sad nubby things like dad’s sweatshirt, oversized. Prefer bathing. Sorry for wasting money on clarinet, limp noises pumped through a wooden slab. Thousands of dollars down the drain. I get annoyed. “It did mean something to me. It did.”

My parents say I’m grown now, can’t nurse me back to health. Same script, new day. Wake up, coffee, makeup, change, classes, another two, walk to the gym, run around my neighborhood, dinner, and then, I’m 11 again, crying in the corner, where the hamper is. Forced to audition in front of the jazz band. I didn’t get the solo. Embarrassment. Never good enough at tenor sax. Ran up the stairs, back hit the wall. Crumpled into a ball. Everything came down to a three-walled room, abandoned piano. 12 hours. Enough for a professional. Chapped lips bled when I played for a while. Small fingers learned blisters. Five years and I still couldn’t get the solo. No, not even on clarinet. Home instrument, they say. Never good enough – so I bathe instead. Rinse, repeat.

I pool, circulate. My professor said I’m too image-based. Need to dye my hair, they say twenty minutes, application takes around three, I’ll leave it on for seven. Reddit says I should always edge on the conservative side when it comes to hair color. I wonder what color Marx dyed his hair. My strands look thin, I think, after the haircut. I went in asking for face framing layers, ended up with a mullet. I cried over the tendrils, now hitting my cheekbone, like a child. Snipped off 2 inches from the bottom myself from my fifth-grade craft box. It’s uneven, I don’t care. Split ends scorched by blunt edges. Did it again yesterday. I want my hair

## SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

to look pretty. However, I hate being reduced to a sexual object. Dad says I shouldn't start my sentences with however. Butler says gender is performance. Does a bath perform, too?

My reflection never finds itself in the metal drain. Silver rings, unworn, touched. A faucet. Felt, played, discarded. Now, I only notice the small things: eyelash, artificial nail, gold ring, lint. Mementos from a melody a siren sang once, not for me. In short, will I always be afraid? I only know diddies from dollops of butter slathered onto burnt bagels. "If I add enough, it'll taste fine." Shove it down my throat, I don't complain. Grandma used to char Thomas's English muffins. I promised Mom that muffins don't have a ring, they're flat, but when I don't keep a promise, who would even see me sink? Job recruiters, management programs, certainly.

Drip, drop, drown said the doorman, except there's no bell, and sound never escapes from a toaster-ed pool. An ocean of toasters baking, always searing. Incessant, seething expectancy. "I want more than this." Back then, I craved wooden reeds slathered in burnt butter. Now, I brew coffee, used to hate it. Repeat big words I never claimed to know, stretch legs instead of swim, eat broccoli-pan-roasted-olive oil over cake-oven-roasted-icing. I wish I could stop bathing to forget why I want to shower. Why do I always have to get dirty to scrub myself clean?

Instead of stomachs, navels are oranges, doormen in apartment complexes. I never understood Bloom. There is no schema to outline the tub. No originality left. I paste on my nail sometimes, brush an eyelash off my cheek. In the whirlpool of my pre-formed prefrontal cortex. I'll oscillate between butter and brine. It's the possibility that sits with me, side by side. "It'll all work out." The swim test turns muffins soggy and sirens can't sing on sand. The stopper never quite lets water fully fill the tub, only to the middle, only then it ends. And Thomas's is a bakery, they say, I know. I never quite add enough butter, and it's still fine, like that tuft of hair crossed beneath the floor.

"You still look like me." Kid in adult clothes. Stick gemstones to new journals. Love dollar-store glitter pens, smell of grandma's honeycombed muffins slathered in butter, piggy bank she bought me. Told her I'd prefer a T-Rex toy, but it is what it is. 'Have a good one, Gram,' obscene for a funeral, a searchlight in an electric pool. That day, there were no toasters to be found, I think. She died a decade ago. I always forgot the Oxford comma.

"I'm not jaded yet, am I?"

On my best nights, I play Wordle alone, in my bed. On my worst nights, I pull all-nighters, alone, in my bed. Often, I pour instant coffee into a broken mug and stir the bits with a Target i-Pad stylus. No reeds left. The butter has gone brine. I drink vapid, insipid toilet water filtered through the college's unit. It's piss yellow. Someone puked in it yesterday. Grotesque.

"I don't have the time anymore."

"I've been told to wait again."

21, don't know how to drive. Old passport, need ID. Dad begs me to learn. I like walking by the old Waldbaum's, it's shut down. The memory sticks like soggy branches. I'd chew on them if I could, feels like a love I've never been in. Mom grabs Indian food she isn't eating. Hip makes it hard to walk, she goes in for me. "It's not fair." She smiles, she likes driving this way back. I do too. Her slender fingers point, find a way into my palm. Teeth sink into aloo paratha, Dad talks about Pan de Mallorca. One day we'll go to Old San Juan, he says.

"I wouldn't recognize my cousins if I saw them." Didn't know a Bad Bunny song until this week. Stare at the sky and only find an black abyss sprawling across a rotting, decrepit page. Sun spots from a life I could never age into. "Stop using words you don't understand." Lim-erence. No hablo Español bien, mi padre. Nunca lo seré "the real thing." Solo una cuarta parte, cuarta parte. Algo enfermo sobre eso.

I used to stare out at the pier, grab seashells, remember the taste of sickly sweet frosting – there was time before the too-muchness. When showers didn't feel oppressive, pellets of water refused to attack my back. Definitions prior to words, genealogies preceded Nietzsche. Before ambulances and alcohol poisoning and anemia. Now, I take a pill to fix my blood. "Pressure." It clots. The pool of water circulates, and rings, and drips with deaf desires. I remain unfulfilled. Clarinet keys leaking money over spit. I practice words that feel foreign to me. We don't speak a lick of Spanish. Strands of hair clump in my throat. I wanted to transfer. I did. Now I chop off layers in my dorm bathroom. My residents puke in the toilets, rinse, wash, repeat.

"Where's your mind at?" How do I define days? The water drips down the drain, my reflection sways left, right, ticks like a metronome. I can't count anymore. Lily Briscoe has already had her vision. I wonder if I'll always be searching – no, yearning – just for the chance to look. "It's alright." I hop out, soggy phone in hand. The mirror reflects meaning. "...I love you too."

# Right Person, Wrong Place

MEGUMI JINDO  
*Class of 2028*

firecrackers

light them with your pale  
hands: covered in white  
gloves

distanced city

a girl that twirls in her own  
shadows: alone: staring at the  
butterfly-clipped wings

coconut and cinnamon spice  
with baked apples: honey:  
milk-stained & potholes we  
drove through

guttled by gunshots

you left the boy melting on  
the cobblestone: sinking &  
soaking with justice

mothers are supposed to weep,  
but they didn't the night they  
found the fire ablaze & the girl  
tongue-tied

fisting words into her  
mouth, they tried to pump her  
alive: to bring back  
the girl they loved: oh, she was  
young: one of a queen: she  
could have been

what did they do to her?

the city, the state, the empire  
what did freedom do to her?  
the howling wind: the sea

& the boy,

a vision of a young one:  
to create a land with  
gratitude and mercy

when they were little,

they were orally told the stories  
of the battles, the rebellions of  
the people

how it brought chaos and

horribly managed human  
bloodbath passions &  
unforgiven deserts

the stories were ones of ruth-

lessness to those who had dared  
to change the light bulbs just to  
see better

but what if the stories were

really ones that  
foreshadowed a future that  
could do great things if the  
politicians would stop  
bickering for once: stop.

but the saddest thing?

the ones who were supposed to  
love them, supposed to cover  
their wounds, supposed to—

they balked when the

darkness appeared: when the  
children's eyes glimmered with  
evil & lust & carnage

& their lashes crushed with

tears & nails painted with sin  
& ears pierced with a high  
pitched ringing: tinnitus &

their lungs clashed against the

rib cages: trying to breathe but  
can't: only  
coming up with bloodshed

the girl & the boy

once walked hand in hand they  
had tried to fight, to speak, but  
no one had heard

or more like, no one wanted

to: they didn't need another  
strayed cause  
they had become people who  
lost their way: blind & unsac-  
cred: A Bloody Planet.

*FALL 2025*



# **Early Morning, Empty Room**

**YI-MEI LIU**

*Class of 2028*

# The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

FOSTER HUDSON

*Class of 2026*

There is no possibility for abstract art in American,  
now while I've done all this to keep from falling  
into the well in my mother's kitchen.

The owl of Minerva is grey  
on grey background; it is the blatant language  
of fog I confront when I tell you I worry  
about these convictions...you are so affectionate...

I don't give a shit about Pollock's artwork  
or provoking a decent response. I'm dying  
because you invited me to your wedding.  
It's great news and I am so happy for you.  
I will send my brown book of poems  
straight to your front door.

In your poem "The State of Grace"  
I come off like a man who has never worn high heels  
while you seem so proud and elegant—you must think  
I am a toddler for thinking of you this way but  
surely there is a reason we have continued producing artwork  
in an age of filth. Surely we are not doing nothing.

*FALL 2025*

There is no possibility for getting any happier  
in America so long as I continue writing poetry.  
In Pars they will sell my brown book  
but it is categorically absence. They give it out  
under the counter with a red warning  
that says “pornography.”

# In Some Ways the Author Hasn't Thought Of

**FOSTER HUDSON**

*Class of 2026*

My lover Gilgamesh died on the news  
which means he didn't die in real life—even so,  
I haven't calmed down at all since Gilgamesh stormed the kitchen.  
His flat head looked like a rainbow.  
I have to buy twelve pounds of ham  
just to keep him awake.

Also, my speech has gone to shit.  
Even if someone comes to my room with so much  
as a box of chocolates, I tell them Don't say anything yet!  
It's like you have to sell tickets to something if you want to  
stay sane, except the tickets are shaped like maxi pads,  
so the whole thing takes loads of busy imagination.

I cross and uncross my legs  
when I think of Gilgamesh. I wear tiaras  
around and around the house. Even when I'm getting railed,  
old habits are impossible to break!

# A Prayer for Motion

SIBELAN FORRESTER

*Susan W. Lippincott Professor of Modern  
and Classical Languages*

O Artemis!  
Goddess of women's sport!  
Guard and guide me on my bicycle.  
Let me track the asphalt  
for an unobstructed path,  
let the cars see and avoid me  
(and, ideally, not yell "Dorothy!").

True, I was a dork in school  
where you most flex your influence—  
four-eyes at best, tripping at soccer  
over the foot of the flute player,  
who also tripped, and we lay laughing  
as the guys who cared about winning  
angrily took the ball and dribbled  
down the field away from us.

But even then, I could ride  
my crappy one-speed right up the hill  
on Seventeenth Street—the same one  
I would fly down every morning,  
no hands!

(My mother would have died  
if she had seen me.) (Or, maybe, killed me.)

O Artemis!  
Eternal maiden who releases  
daughters from their mothers' fears!  
Hold me safe from tires to helmet  
as I lean into this turn.

*FALL 2025*



# **Underneath**

**ANITA PAN**

*Class of 2029*



# Riverside 28

HOPE DWORKIN  
*Class of 2026*

FALL 2025

# bath house poetry

FINN VERDONK

*Class of 2026*

## *bath house adonis*

it is said that:  
adonis was beloved  
by many, but none  
more so than aphrodite

it is said that:  
the boar was sent  
by ares, jealous and  
possessive of his wife

it is said that:  
adonis was slashed  
across his thigh  
by a wild boar and

it is said that:  
aphrodite, seeing adonis  
bright red and dying,  
wept and kissed him and

it is said that:  
apollo loved adonis too,  
in the way that two men  
gaze longing and forbidden

it is said that:  
adonis was vers,  
he topped aphrodite  
but bottomed for apollo

it is said that:  
adonis was at the bath house  
last night, showing off his body  
for the gods to desire

it is said that:  
in mixing fluids, blood,  
tears, semen, spit, water,  
anemone flowers grew

it is said that:  
on his way home adonis  
opened his phone and sent  
apollo a picture of his abs

it is said that:  
adonis went out  
for chinese food after  
and ordered pork fried rice

SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

*the enclosure*

we  
are

fraying together  
all of us

i  
fray  
in the steam  
room  
after room  
of sweat and  
bodies

bodies

like  
shapes in the air weight i feel down

in my lungs barely any light breaks

through

i do not need my eyes  
i do not need my eyes as we rub against each other

hands  
like  
feathers of an exotic bird frivolous and watchful

this mating dance we are performing  
some unspoken ritual  
some gaze that says come  
here

i am hungry the gaze says look back at me and i win  
this game of solitaire  
playing  
we are naked  
gambling

and we take breaks under buckets of cool water

and we remind our blood to move

and we sit with our feet in the hot tub

and we talk about our bodies as if they are not there with us

FALL 2025

*saint thomas*

the wisdom of an old body  
emerging from a hot cloud like a myth wearing nothing but a felt hat  
with a red star emblazoned on its side

he does not partake in the fleshy buffet before him  
he speaks in french with the men he sits next to  
he kisses their cheeks and offers them each benediction

his hair is thin and gray but not sad  
his skin is loose and wrinkled but lived in  
his tattoo glistens and his hands bear the signs of caring labor

many people come and go past his bench a young man  
is getting fucked on the cold stone massage table  
a couple is groping each other right next to him

and the old man is talking like everything is right in the world  
he takes confession and repurposes the shame into exaltation  
sodomy and chatter and a blessing everyone can watch

I learned later that this old man is the holy grail  
the strong cord that weaves around these fags and their city  
some day he decided this, to assume the role of their shepherd

to reach out firm hands and hold them  
in hot tea and homemade potlucks and hospitality  
and the veneration of tuesday nights at the bath house

he leaves with the young man from earlier arm in arm  
on his way out i see the old man put on a keffiyeh  
and i believe in him more than ever

*dance*

the navigation of improvised touch  
hand finds armpit  
elbow hooks  
chest melts against spine  
two feet form intersecting right angles  
shuffling forward

weight  
press pull push heave ever upwards  
and suddenly

the space opens  
sight lines and air  
a figure rises from the mass  
somehow  
the momentum arrives at this fortuitous eventuality  
unchosen and yet discovered by the hivemind

the muscles are speaking  
in the friction of skin  
the ripples and beads transmit on frequencies  
above and below and  
completely outside of

because it was silent on that wooden floor  
save the shuffle of the dance

FALL 2025

*dance*

save the sounds of saliva  
it is silent on this hot stone floor

completely inside of  
this building and this city  
we ripple and vibrate on some frequency  
like the friction of skin  
the blood travels where it can speak loudest

the shapes are uncovered and built  
the momentum arrives at this fortuitous eventuality  
somehow  
a figure rises in these hands  
low vision hot air breathed into mouths  
a space opens

suddenly  
pressing and pulling and heaving and gliding and squeezing  
and wait

shuffling around  
two feet from intersecting each other  
as two chests melt against themselves  
and hands trace spines to the sacrum and further  
and hands hold back moans  
and hands find heartbeats

do they know they are dancing?



# Homeland

YI-MEI LIU

*Class of 2028*

FALL 2025

# Donkey Kong Blues

PETER SCHMIDT

*William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of  
English Literature*

In his recent iterations as a playable  
character and franchise platform,  
Donkey Kong aka DK has donned a tie.  
This Bananza game is all about bashing  
but maybe the tie makes it respectable,  
not just primate-y & primal.  
And don't forget the perils of Pauline, her  
mini-Me powers of song and doe-like eyes.

Themed worlds festooned  
with glowing bananas to gobble.  
But the real action involves fists.  
Imagine total disregard for the playground  
as built. Mash the buttons and DK's arms  
become hairy sledgehammers. They don't  
hammer sledge, though; now you can pummel  
tunnels through mountains, tear up and lob  
huge wedges of stone like bombs.  
You get to re-landscape every domain.  
It's a move-fast-and-break-stuff world.  
And it's yours. There's no wall you can't  
punch through or climb, no bespoken  
thing that doesn't want to be broken.

There's a method to Nintendo's  
morphable madness. Addictive soundtrack  
and noises for each Level, yo. Just remember  
to mop up every collectible you can,  
goodies like glitter balls or melons

## SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

or bananarama bangers! Eat ‘em up  
and get new energy. No longer a wounded  
donkey, now you return to Kong! bonging  
everything in sight. Ditto for us too,

the playas. Surf every moment with a friend,  
tongues lolling as you Kong! to smithereens  
anything in your way—even VoidCo Enterprises  
run by Void Kong, your evil double who  
(by the way) is also mining our planet  
to death. Just somersault and toss it  
off; hammer a hole right through  
anything trying to stop you.

Worried about AI taking lotsa  
developer jobs? *Kong!* Undone.  
Afraid that monster Corporations  
like AmaGooMicroNvid & Nin  
may soon charge up the wazoo  
for servers any studio or you  
must use? Not so easy to *Kong!*  
away those Engines of the Unreal.

You’re starting to get it: a gamer’s  
high is the one thing you can’t smash  
or lob away. Addictive, restrictive.  
It’s kinda weird to have a moment  
like this, though, right? What’s  
the difference between a pissant  
NPC and you? When will NPCs  
see what the deal is and demand  
sass meters and the right to talk back?  
And from what mysterious universe  
do these thoughts come? Maybe it  
would be better to go into reverse  
and do this Level all over again?

Nintendo crescendo. All for sale  
right now, a bargain, \$69.99 please.

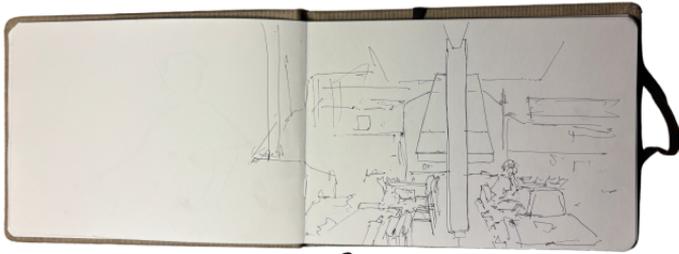
### Notes:

NPC: non-player characters managed  
by the game’s software, not the game’s  
player(s)

This poem began as a mashup of Mat-  
thew Castle’s words, from <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2025/jul/16/donkey-kong-bananza-review-nintendo-switch-2>

The poem also includes lingo sampled  
from many online articles and argu-  
ments about past and present Donkey  
Kong games.

FALL 2025



# Selected Sketches

LEIA IMMANUEL

*Class of 2027*

# Getaway Car

DANIEL SUH

*Class of 2028*

Maybe I'm all momentum and no  
destination. Wind whistling through gaps  
in your teeth, flashing lights as I forget  
my life, flattened under tires  
going 90 up the FDR. Alongside  
the rush of cars, a boy  
skateboards up the East River.  
Past his course, a sign tells me  
they'll be floodproofing the area.

Good luck.

Me, I'll be driving headfirst  
into the waves. Everyone with me.  
Because sometimes the smallest room  
at the party is where you'll find  
the most company. Because I want to make this body  
into a smallest room. The boy's

wheels catch  
on a sewer grate, crashing him  
into a puddle.

Water has a way of rising to meet you.

Or maybe: a boy who knows  
skinned knees are proof  
from the ground that you were  
brave enough to try  
to outrun it. I too  
am trying to outrun it. Wheels flying off

the wagon. Keep flashing

your teeth, I'll cut mine  
on them. Their scraping also  
a bassline which is also  
the whoosh of the cars. Driving slow  
is just as dangerous as speeding, my father  
told me in his passenger seat once, 16 and still  
terrified of speed, and never  
do meth, he told me too, because  
the gay men he met at rehab did, and I  
shouldn't mess with that stuff.

The boy dusts his jeans off, examines his elbow  
for blood, and mounts his board again, kicking off  
to rush down the river, away from the grate  
that caught him. I wonder

if he will also learn to drive  
from his father. I wonder  
if skateboards will ever not remind me  
of him, how he showed me how to build the pace  
on a longboard, racing north  
up this same highway, how to fly  
without losing  
your balance. I wonder if he, too, liked the feeling  
of pavement slipping away  
beneath your feet.

I wonder, too, about the phrase off the wagon. Originating  
in the 1890s, when men said they would rather ride  
a water wagon than resort to alcohol.

Maybe we aren't that patient. Maybe, like him,  
I'll choose the life where I'm speeding  
down a highway that leads anywhere  
away from the street I grew up on.

Friends in the backseat.  
The ocean rising to our wheels.

# Bliss

DANIEL SUH

*Class of 2028*

He felt an overwhelming urge to shit.

That was his first memory of bliss, when he would later recount the story to himself or Peter. Straightening his back in front of the mirror, he did not see himself at first, tilting his head back to let the burn drip down his throat. He gagged a little. It was bitter.

He turned, quickly headed into the bathroom stall, and shut the door. His vision blurred and his head felt fuzzy. What had he been doing there? Besides the obvious. He had come here with someone, he thought—who?

Something warm dripped onto the top of his leg, then his wrist. It looked purple under the colored club bathroom lights. It took him a few moments to realize it was blood, dripping from his nose. He pinched his nostrils, but the drip was quickly becoming a flood, gushing down his chin.

His ears were ringing, too.

Cleaning his face in the bathroom sink, he noticed the mirror had a strange effect to it. The bathroom was dimly lit, but the mirror's frame was surrounded by LED lights, as if he were an actor getting ready on a movie set. It was uncanny. He knew that the face in the mirror must be his, moved in parallel with his movements, but the effect was like looking into a photograph of someone he had never seen before. He studied his features trying to assemble the pieces into a recognizable image, giving up after a few moments and dabbing at any remaining dried blood on his chin with a wet paper towel.

Stumbling back into the club, he found the warm, multi-colored lights disorienting in a new way. He didn't think he was particularly drunk, but the architecture that he had seamlessly navigated just a few moments ago was beginning to confuse him. He forgot which way to turn to get back to the dance floor. It took him a while to find himself back in the foyer at the bottom of the staircase to the exit. He surveyed his surroundings. A neon sign over the staircase spelled "GRUPO ARENA"

in flashing red. Inside, there were two rooms to his left and right, each labeled with similar neon lettering. One read “HOUSE,” the other “POP”. Different tracks played from each side. A place of choices, he supposed.

The house room had a good feel to it. The bass was heavy and rich, and the purple lights were dazzling, but not too harsh. And people were dancing. As he surveyed the room, he saw a collage of people: groups of young men in polos, middle-aged couples dancing with each other, drag queens dressed as paradoxically-scantily-clad nuns on the platforms, foreigners speaking an assortment of languages, dolls in ethereal skirts and strappy heels, twinkles in baby tees and thin wraparound sunglasses holding Lost Mary vapes, their girlfriends that they had brought with them as wingmen. He wasn't sure which of them he was—looking down, his decidedly European going-out outfit, with the dark collared shirt, loafers, and straight leg pants might have placed him among the other clean-cut Spanish men, but his too-slight frame betrayed the image somewhat—but he was dancing among them.

After a little while, winding his way around the room, a man who looked to be about mid-30s approached him, placing a hand on his shoulder as they danced.

“De dónde eres?” the man almost had to shout to be audible over the speakers.

A good question. He decided the specific truth wasn't that important. “De los estados unidos.” His Spanish wasn't good enough to pass for a native speaker, he thought.

“Qué haces en Barcelona?”

“Estoy bailando.” He twirled a half circle under his arm, placing the man hand on his hip and swaying against him.

“Vale.” The man pressed his body against his back as they danced, tilting his head into the crook of his neck. “Soy Camilo.”

“Mucho gusto, Camilo.” He unwinded himself, keeping Camilo's hands on his hips as he wrapped his arms over the top of his shoulders. He sensed that Camilo was waiting for him to offer his name in return, but he'

“Eres tan guapo, no sé que hacer.”

He blushed, taken aback by the compliment. “Qué quieres hacer?”

Camilo slipped his hands further down his body, dancing while holding his ass for a moment before pulling back. “Ven conmigo.”

He led him out of the house room back into the entryway, then down through a hallway that was obscured by a curtain between the two

dance floors to a darkroom. It was dimly lit, with only a few red LEDs on the walls. Camilo took him to sit on a cool hard bench lining one of the walls and began to lean in towards him, when a buzzing noise started from his pocket. He pulled his phone out to check the alert. The text, from no one he remembered knowing, confused him.

“Quién es?” Camilo asked, pointing at his lock screen. It was a photo of two men, one short, one tall, smiling at the camera. The tall one had his arm wrapped around the shoulders of the other, who rested his hand on top of his hand. They looked like a couple, an attractive one too. The tall one had particularly striking green eyes, creased in a bright smile that looked hauntingly familiar. “Tu novio?”

“No, es...” He wasn’t sure, he realized. The short one looked familiar as well. How did he know these men? “No sé. No recuerdo.”

“Alguien a quien conocías?”

“No, creo que...no, no le conozco.” He stared into the screen, waiting for his memory to jog. The shorter man had the same slight frame as him. He was Asian, with thick, dark hair and almond eyes. He was cute, he thought, but paled in comparison to the taller man, a chiseled blond who had the kind of attractiveness that looked like he could have been pulled from a red carpet shoot or tabloid magazine story about some celebrity wedding.

“Vale, no te preocupes. Me da igual.” Camilo placed his hand on his thigh and leaned closer to him until he could feel him breathing on his neck.

He turned the screen off. For a moment in the dark screen, he caught a glimpse of the almond eyes in the dark screen’s reflection. Was that him?

He wasn’t sure. He didn’t care. He was here now, someone, with someone else. Neither of them had to know who he was for that to be true.

“A mí también.”

When he woke up in the morning, Ruth was there, scrolling through her phone on the living room couch, sipping a cup of coffee and picking at a half-eaten croissant on the coffee table. Another wax paper bag and coffee cup lay untouched on the other side of the coffee table.

“Morning, sleeping beauty,” she teased. It was almost 4pm. “Good night?”

He shook his head as if trying to clear water from his ears. He readied himself to try to piece the events of last night together into a hazy

timeline, but for some reason, he realized everything was crystal clear. He was used to blacking out. This was almost more unfamiliar to him.

He remembered everything. The man in the dark room—who he hadn't fucked, but had let compliment him a little while longer with his face in his neck. The dancing, the nuns on the platforms, the music. The many strangers. Dancing with them, letting himself glow in their warmth a little, letting himself be seen. It was a nice feeling. It made him totally forget his life. In fact, he had forgotten his life—from the moment he left the bathroom. The bathroom.

“Did you like the bliss?”

Bliss, that was it, what Ruth had promised him, handing him the little vial.

“It's also called white-out,” she continued, grinning at him and nudging the breakfast she had bought him towards him. “Like the opposite of a black-out, since you remember what happens when you're on it, it just makes you forget everything else from before. But I like the name bliss, because that's what it feels like to me.”

“I thought...I lowkey thought you were kidding. Or that it wouldn't actually work.”

“It's totally mind-blowing, right?”

He flopped down next to her on the couch and took a sip from the coffee she had gotten him, still piping hot. She was right. It was mind-blowing. It was surreal.

“I loved it,” he said, burning his throat a little as he swallowed. Ruth winked at him. “I knew you would.”

Barcelona had a good feel to it. Steven had been there for a few months, studying creative writing and Spanish literature at Universitat de Barcelona for a semester. He and Ruth shared a suite dorm together, which would have been a triple had their third roommate not suddenly and inexplicably dropped out of the program two weeks into the semester. They used the third bedroom as an all-purpose space: a study, extra storage space since their closets were small, a hotboxing room, an extra bed for guests, whatever they needed. Ruth was a good roommate—clean, considerate, easy to talk to, and fun to go out with. He was glad to know her, at least, in this city where he knew no one.

He liked his classes, but he sometimes questioned whether he was making good use of his time and tuition money. A comparative literature major and creative writing minor often seemed like a dead-end path, a waste of all the work his parents had done to raise him in America

## *SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS*

and send him to a fancy private school like NYU. There was always law school, he supposed, dull as it might seem.

He wanted to be a writer. He dreamed of writing a memoir, or collection of autobiographical poems or short stories, desperate to make his life into a narrative that would sell out shelves. He knew, though, that he had not actually lived nearly enough life to have anything to tell, and that the little that he had lived was not interesting or unique enough to sell at all. He had lived a comfortable upper middle class life, with little of note. His parents had had their stories—there was his father's drinking, of course, and all the cliché, already-been-written-a-million-times sob stories of being a teenage gay boy with hostile classmates and an unrelenting immigrant mother—but nothing that was better suited for a bookshelf than for his bimonthly 45 minute remote therapy sessions. Still, he spent most mornings (a loosely defined term, since he never quite shook the jet lag, rising from his room at best an hour before the city began to settle into the siesta) sipping café con leche and smoking a few cigarettes at a patio table outside a nearby cafe over a laptop open to an empty document--or perhaps with a black ballpoint pen hovering in anticipation over a well-worn notebook, or his latest find from an english bookstore. Failing to find a flow on any piece, he found himself taking notes on passersby and recording standalone lines that felt resonant, for some reason or another. they came to him in what he felt like moments of divine inspiration, but which quickly dissipated when he tried to continue the sentences. Maybe he would assemble them into a poem someday, disjunct as it might feel. After a little while of failing to write anything cohesive, he would pack up his bag and head to his classes, every day with the same grey feeling of quiet resignation.

Every morning began with this ritual, which he observed with the fervor of a dedicated athlete training for a marathon. He was drawn to routine, felt adrift without it. Unsure of his career, he comforted himself by following through on the advice given to him by professors and friends: just keep practicing. As if by simply committing a few hours each morning to writing, he was sure to see payoff, just as the body grows more capillaries to the legs in response to frequent cardio.

Sometimes he wished he had something more interesting to write about. To be someone else, with a different life, that was more narratively cohesive and had some sort of satisfying arc to it. Something that filled in the gaps of those small pains that did not make quite enough sense to produce some great story of triumph. Beyond his desire to make some great art for his life, he wanted it more to make sense for himself. More often,

however, he wished to be a different type of other person—someone who did not have those bits and pieces that needed to make sense, but did not, to begin with. Someone with a life that was simple enough to not question or overexamine. In either case, he wanted to be free of self-reflection: either the difficulty of it or the necessity for it in the first place.

After his classes, he would return home, working at the desk in the spare room until his eyes grew tired of a computer screen. Most of Ruth's art history classes were in the evening (something she had purposefully set up, typically sleeping even later than he did), so the suite was quiet then. Almost too quiet, so he filled in the space blasting American music that had played on the radio when he was a kid. He ate rarely, only when reminded—usually when Ruth would bring him something. She was too kind to him, which he told her often, but which didn't stop the small favors she did for him.

She had taken him under her wing a bit in the city. He had never been much for clubbing in America, where everyone was always standing around awkwardly and scrolling through their phones, occasionally recording videos of the DJ for stories. Here was different, but only under Ruth's guidelines: skip Pacha and Opium unless you want to be stuck in line for an hour and felt up by a middle-aged British creep, and head to Gracia or Eixample. Buy a drink at Punto, and you'll get a stamp to get into Arenas. At the gay bars and clubs, everyone was dancing. There was a freedom in people's mannerisms, the way they spoke, dressed, and danced. No one pressed on questions you didn't want to answer. People were by and large kind and welcoming. Touchy and forward, still, sure, but in a way that felt distinctly politer than at the big clubs in Barceloneta. There was no air of expectation or threat when someone put their hand on the small of your back or grinded their ass against your hips. It was just dancing. Steven felt the openness, but he felt reserved, removed from the room in a way Ruth didn't seem to be—and that he didn't want to be. Maybe a matter of personality, or a tic, or that outsider rareness of being an Asian man in a European bar. Still, he liked their weekend excursions. They were lifting.

Most weekday nights, though, he wandered the city streets aimlessly, like an addict who had forgotten how to use. He wanted something, needed it, but didn't know what. He'd spend the laps around the city observing anyone he could see. The tourist families walking down La Rambla with scoops of gelato, the people in the Old City at the eating boquerones out of a newspaper cone, other international students chatting in English, young couples with strollers, a middle aged women smoking a

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while reading a book on a park bench.

After doing a loop of the city and picking up a cheap carton at a tobacco shop, he would call Peter from a bench near his dorm, usually around 11pm in Barcelona when Peter was finishing his classes at NYU. It was a comfort to look forward to at the end of the day. Sometimes the call would last twenty or thirty minutes, sometimes three or four hours. It was a substitute for their end-of-the-day talks when they lived together in Peter's apartment in Greenwich Village. Their shared apartment, that is. It was nice to know at the end of the day, he could come home to talk to someone who he could tell anything to. Who knew him deeply enough to hear anything. He was never as honest with anyone as he was with Peter. There was nothing he could think of about himself that Peter did not know, from daily activities to deeply-held personal secrets.

For some reason, though, he didn't tell Peter about bliss right away. It was too fantastical, too surreal. More than that, telling Peter seemed like giving up some kind of private secret, an indulgence that was his and his alone. And Ruth's, but that was different. She understood it. After about a week or so, that first night had stayed on his mind too much not to recount the story.

"That's really trippy."

"I know."

The line went silent for a few moments.

"Was it...fun?"

Steven paused. "I loved it."

"That's...like, how do you even...what do you remember? Like, can you still speak Spanish?"

"Yeah, I can. You remember all the basic stuff, how to do things. You could probably still drive, even."

"Procedural memory?" Peter was a neuroscience major.

"Yeah, just not any personal stuff. No memories from your life."

"But like..how do you know who you are, even?"

"That's the best part." Steven leaned back on the bench. "You don't."

"Why would you want to not know who you are? I feel like that would be so fucking scary."

"I don't know, it's just...it isn't scary. It's like total freedom. You can do anything you want."

"I don't get it. How would you know what you wanted to do if you didn't even know who you were?"

"I don't know. But you can do it."

“Can’t you always do anything you want anyway?”

“I guess...I mean, no, not really? Not always. People don’t.”

“I hate how people are so afraid of having fun.”

Steven bristled. “I’m not afraid of having fun.”

“I don’t mean you, specifically, just like...when we go to Phebe’s, or whatever, no one’s fucking having fun. Everyone’s too scared to look stupid. What’s the point of going out if you’re afraid to have fun? Everyone’s always thinking about what everyone thinks, and I just think it’s so fucking stupid.”

“You’re right, I guess. Maybe that’s why it’s fun.”

“But you don’t need some weird amnesia drug to just stop giving a shit. Just stop giving a shit.”

“I feel like you’re not getting it at all.” He couldn’t understand why Peter’s lack of understanding was annoying him. It wasn’t an experience that was easy to explain to someone who hadn’t tried it. Or someone who didn’t want it.

“I don’t know, maybe I’m not.”

Steven pulled a cigarette out and lit it, studying the design on the box. This one had a silhouette of a woman’s face with blue flames obscuring her eyes. The caption read a warning about blindness. It was one of the least disgusting designs on European cartons, but at least they were magnitudes cheaper than in New York.

“Maybe it’s easier said than done,” Peter continued. “Maybe I’m not being fair. But I don’t know, I just think the whole thing’s brain dead. No one cares. No one’s actually evaluating or judging you, so why are you filtering yourself like they are?”

“Sometimes people absolutely are judging and evaluating you.”

“I don’t think they are. Even if they were, and you cared, people like confidence. People like seeing people who don’t give a shit about what everyone else thinks.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Steven took a drag, exhaling loudly into the mic. “Easier said than done, I guess. Or for some people.”

“Yeah.” Peter was silent for a moment. “Are you smoking?”

“Yeah, is that...you good with that?”

“No, it’s calm. I mean, you know my stance. It’s your life.”

“I’m in Europe, Peter. This is nothing.”

“I’m not trying to argue with you. I was just asking.”

Steven felt the tenseness in the conversation. He knew Peter hated the fact that he smoked, but didn’t often push him on it. It was a subject they tried not to broach often, after too many arguments and all-night

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talks that winded until they involved too many things that weren't at all relevant to the actual disagreement. The compromise they had settled on was barely a compromise. Steven would quit at some future, unspecified point, and Peter wouldn't guilt-trip him about it until then. To Steven, it seemed like a stupid thing to take issue with when they both had tried just about every other more dangerous and addictive drug under the sun. To Peter, it was a pointless cancer death stick that had killed multiple relatives of his. Putting it that way, he seemed right—which made Steven feel even guiltier.

Like so many other things, the impasse felt stuck. That was the problem with everything. Steven felt stuck. In what specifically, he didn't know, but he knew he wasn't getting anywhere. He was static.

Except on bliss. Bliss was motion. It was fresh, something new. Everything was new.

He and Ruth adopted it as an integral part of their weekend nights out. Half a crushed pill each and a couple drinks, and they were golden. The eye contact was the best part. After tilting his head back, pinching the bridge of his nose to soften the burning, he found her eyes. The most beautiful, soft brown eyes. Their color was unremarkable, but the way her lashes framed their shape was entrancing. Always, they held each others' gaze and giggled as it slowly kicked in and they forgot who they were looking at.

Clubbing on bliss was a dream. It was a refuge, so perfect it made Steven wonder why anyone bothered with drinking or any other drug at all. There was no better stress relief, nothing more uninhibiting than literally forgetting anything stressful from your life. Dancing was more fun. Meeting people was more fun. There was nothing to be afraid of.

In the little breaks of the night, when he would step out of the club to smoke and didn't feel like making small talk with the strangers on the curb (since he knew little about himself to share with them), he would open his phone and scroll through his camera roll, seeing snapshots of his memories with fresh eyes. He usually never particularly liked looking at photos of himself. On bliss, though, they were interesting rather than embarrassing—like looking through an archive or museum gallery and trying to piece together a story.

Often, he would find himself staring at pictures of Peter, or of the two of them. Sober, he never thought the two of them looked like they made much sense together. Peter looked like he should have a gorgeous woman on his arm, some white Hollywood actress or model, tall and

blonde and beautiful as he was, not an underwhelming Asian man that barely reached his shoulders. But on bliss, he thought they looked kind of sweet. They seemed so happy together. And Peter was so beautiful, entrancing. There was a kind of kind openness in those green eyes, that creased smile that Steven found himself drawn to, on bliss or not. He looked like a person completely devoid of cynicism. The warmth of it radiated off the screen.

Peter had been quiet the morning he had driven him to the airport, letting the radio fill the car. He only punctuated the silence when they arrived at the terminal, unloading Steven's bags from the trunk.

"You're coming back for Thanksgiving, right? On break?"

"Yeah, I'll see you then." He had spent Thanksgiving with Peter for the past couple years, since it was a big deal to Peter's family and about as significant as Labor Day to Steven's.

"My mom's super excited. We're going to her aunt's in Moorestown."

Steven's stomach clenched, but he forced his jaw into an excited smile. "Awesome, I can't wait."

Steven never liked spending time around Peter's family. He felt out of place among them in a way he couldn't fully justify. He had been born in America, raised in a relatively wealthy neighborhood, so there was no obvious reasoning for why they seemed to treat him with that WASP-y delicate politeness tinged with confusion and hesitance reserved for the poor and FOB immigrants. Perhaps it was all in his head, projected from his own embarrassment of his parents and their own feelings of being out of place among Americans. Vilifying his boyfriend's family was much easier than admitting that he felt any shame of his own.

Still, there were interactions he couldn't ignore: the blasé but undeniably purposeful status-signaling anecdotes of his mother's, the way she watched him eat with pursed lips, pretending not to notice when he looked to Peter to mimic how he used the many utensils set out for even casual meals, how she would quiz him on his parents' background with an air of innocent curiosity. She was sickeningly liberal, infatuated with her progressive self-image. It was her faith in her own politics that prevented her from any closer examination of her tiny jabs, like a hornet unaware of its own stinger.

Peter always seemed at best, oblivious to the small slights. At worst, he privately complained to Steven about how stubborn she was, in a way that managed to entirely miss the point.

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Sometimes, at the end of the night, Ruth and Steven would find themselves at a late night spot, strolling down La Rambla, or watching the sunrise on the beach behind the clubs in Barceloneta. They found they preferred to let the bliss wear off while they were still awake. The memories flooding back was easier when it was gradual, and when you were dead tired and still feeling a slight buzz from the alcohol and that glowy feeling of being a ghost in a loud and bright place. Waking up with who you were all of a sudden crashing back into you was too disorienting, too grounding. It was better when it was still a half-dream.

That night, they made their way down the beach, after spending hours dancing with no past or person at Pacha and smoking a couple cigarettes outside the club, chatting to strangers. The early morning was warm and cloudy, with the dawning sun illuminating the sky into a hazy blend of pinks and oranges.

“I love being here.” Ruth was laying her head on Steven’s lap to protect her curls from getting sandy. The sunlight was slowly sliding up her body, the sharp line where the dawn met the shadow creeping up from her toes onto her legs. “I love not being here. I’m back to being, but I love not being.”

“Bliss is incredible.”

“It’s perfect. It’s a dream.”

“Did you mean me specifically? After the first night?”

“Huh?”

“When you said you knew I would like it.”

“Oh. Yeah, I did.” The sunlight was almost at her hips now. “You have that hesitancy to you. Like an apologetic quality.”

“Apologetic?”

“Yeah, like...it’s not insecurity exactly. Or compensating. But it’s like a little bit of shame. Like most rooms you walk into, you seem like you feel like you shouldn’t be there and you have to make up for it. Or explain yourself.”

“Huh.”

“I have it too, so maybe I’m projecting. I feel like a lot of trans people do. No one takes us seriously or does think that we belong in any spaces. Not just like, public bathrooms or whatever, but like anywhere. Our whole existence. And even if they don’t know we’re trans, or they don’t think that way, or think they think that way, we know and we’ve lived our whole lives knowing that. Having to prove ourselves or apologize for ourselves. I guess it’s not just a trans thing, but any minority really. But what’s awesome about bliss is you can forget that you know that. You can

forget your whole past. Every time anyone mistreated you or questioned you or made you feel like you didn't belong. And you can belong anywhere, because you aren't anybody. You aren't the person that you always have been. You're only who you are at that moment."

Ruth took a carton out of her purse and lit another cigarette, taking a long drag before passing it to Steven.

"And I feel like everywhere I go, I'm constantly observing myself from an outsider's perspective. Checking myself. Making sure I don't come across as—I don't know. Any kind of horrible stereotype you could think up really. Or whether I'm passing. I mean, I feel like now, I am, but I spent years not, and with everyone in my life having known me before I came out. So I'm just so trained to be constantly aware of every aspect of my person. And I mean, part of going out for everyone else is flirting and dancing with strangers, maybe hooking up and I, like—I can't do it normally. I'm too in my head. Coming across as predatory, or not passing, or passing and "tricking" someone who's gonna get violent, or whether someone I'm with is just a chaser, or...any of it. And I never dated anyone in high school. I felt like straight guys or lesbians wouldn't be into me—I'm obviously not saying that they can't be into trans women, just like, that was my fear, especially early on. And I didn't want to be with anyone who saw me as a guy. Or was fetishizing me. So again, I'm just so used to being so afraid and self-conscious.

"But on bliss, all of it stops. I'm free. I don't know who I am. I don't know who I'm afraid of being perceived as. I don't even know what I look like, literally. So I can be whoever I want to be. I don't even remember that I'm trans. I didn't think I would ever get to know who I was without it being defined by so much fear and history. And now I do. Or at least I get to, in the moment."

Steven had a sinking feeling in his stomach as he touched down in JFK in May. Peter came again to pick him up from the airport in his parent's car, greeting him with a hug that was more of a coming home than the geography was. The literal coming home was strange. The Greenwich Village studio they shared, courtesy of Peter's parents, felt too familiar and at the same time too hostile. Steven was never fully comfortable that Peter's parents were paying for it. He felt like a guest living there, hesitant to add any decor to their sparse living room, keeping his stuff in discreet, closed off spaces, and taking on the lion's share of the chores to repay his stay.

The first night he was back, Peter cooked him dinner. Steven

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thanked him, gushing about how sweet it was, but for some reason, the kindness saddened him—in a way Ruth's little favors for him never had.

"How was the flight?"

"Not bad. A little turbulent."

They knew too much about each other. He felt it now. It was the very thing he used to cherish about their relationship, how deeply they knew each other, how much history they shared. They had met in that monumental stage in the last year of high school, when everyone's loosely formed selves were beginning to solidify, like an egg cracked into a sizzling pan. The two of them had formed around each other. But he missed being liquid, still. Unshaped.

He wrote infrequently, now that the semester was over and he had no pressing deadlines. Nothing made any more sense now than it did before he had left. The list of fragments he had collected in his notebook sometimes lengthened slightly, but remained as disorganized and unused as they always were.

He felt far from Peter, but he couldn't explain what this new distance was. It wasn't the months spent apart, or the people he had let flirt with him at the clubs, or even the experience of bliss. Maybe it was that simple fact that when he tried to explain it, Peter did not understand the appeal—couldn't see the freedom of being someone that was not yourself, that was no one. Maybe because he had never felt the need to want that. He knew he would never see Ruth again. He wanted to, but understood on some level it was better this way. They had exchanged contact information and promised to make plans, but they both knew that the prospect of an awkward, sober lunch in America would have been worse than a permanent farewell. He did not want to see her again, now. He wanted to see her for the first time, again. And again. And again.

The memory of being no one stayed with him, like a small but weighty stone always hanging from his neck. He wanted to forget it more than he wanted to go back to it. It couldn't be healthy to think about it so often, not when going back to it was an impossibility. He did manage to forget most days, but that only made the occasional reminders more intense.

One morning, Peter came up behind him and wordlessly wrapped his arms around Steven's waist, kissing his cheekbone above the lather. Steven smiled reflexively, nicking his lip on the razor as it moved.

"Shit." He dipped forward, dropping the razor and rinsing the blood off in the sink with his thumb.

"You okay?"

“Yeah, fine. Just a little cut.”

“I can get you a Band-Aid,” Peter offered, withdrawing and moving towards the cabinet under the sink.

“No, it’s fine. It’s small.” He straightened his back to examine the bleeding in the mirror. It reminded him of that first night at Arenas, cleaning his bloody nose in the club bathroom. This time, however, there was no peculiar image to piece together, only a face that was unequivocally his own. The nostalgia made him nauseous, and he dropped to his elbows on the counter.

“You okay?” Peter stood up, placing his hand on Steven’s shoulders in a soothing gesture. He almost wanted to cry from how comforting the feeling of his hand was.

“I’m fine, I’m just...” He turned his head towards Peter’s to meet his green, green eyes. They were so kind, so unasking. “I love you.”

Peter smiled, creasing his face in that way Steven knew so well. “I love you too.”



# Dandelion Forest

BERNADETTE COLBURN  
*Print Services Lead*

*SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS*



FALL 2025



# Untitled (self-portrait)

YI-MEI LIU

*Class of 2028*

# Thanksgiving dinner after Trump wins

MILLA BEN-EZRA

*Class of 2026*

It's warm in LA, so Thanksgiving falls dilapidated  
into a sunken drunken pool party. Dead palm leaves in the yard.  
Before the sunset and brown-gray night, my cousin asks me  
about that girl I dated, over arugula and sweet potatoes.

Little toddler stumbles over stone steps from buffet to table.  
We laugh, I say No News, scrubbing spilled vodka cranberry  
off the floral cloth, off my white dress, no news to talk about.  
Stuffing tastes like conspiracy theories and organic chicken stock.

Squeaking laughter, hollow, like zoo animals in an open cage who mock you  
with snappy one-liner roars. The kind of company that's tender when  
it agrees with you and sharp when it gnaws against your skin  
like a serrated knife, sawing into dry turkey.

Cranberries in vodka, key limes in tequila, drinking murky  
soup and buttery, crunchy pecan mush. Spooning warm food  
into a cold stomach, emptied of rhetoric and responses,  
stirring around acid to digest that gaunt, lethargic weight.

My aunt's grinning makes me angry and her diamond bracelet  
makes me forget what thankfulness means. But I swallow it down,  
like I'm eating the wax food out of a restaurant display case  
whose waiters begin to disappear — one yesterday, one today.

*FALL 2025*



# Still Crossing

AVI BERMAN

*Class of 2026*



# The Circle Game

ELLA WALKER

*Class of 2028*

FALL 2025

# What He Wants

ZEPHYR WEINREICH

*Class of 2028*

He wants us to wear each other's clothes.  
We wear each other  
's clothes and we  
remember what we must  
not forget. We remember  
the smells of each other.  
We must not forget the sweat and the detergent. He never gave us

clothes. Instead of clothes  
he gave us the wanting of them. Instead of clothes  
he let us know what we were missing. He never  
gave us God. Instead of God  
he let us know what we were

missing.

You figured it out before me and pulled  
the leaves down off the trees. You figured him out  
and covered yourself and covered  
me and I  
nearly forgot.

We must remember these  
our noses bulbous and beakish  
misshapen shapes  
older than beauty.  
On our faces might have been waterfalls or rising suns but instead of

beauty he gave us these.  
You call an eye a window

## SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

to the soul I call  
a nostril the soul  
's open door.  
Eyes and ears and nerves  
make no noise and mouths have only borrowed  
words. You want to know  
what I sound like: listen to  
these breaths trembling narrow as they  
pass from my misshapen nose.

Someone I knew once said she didn't like Kafka but she liked  
his nose. It's a good nose; we  
agreed but couldn't say why. She couldn't stand  
his writing because he doesn't  
understand: tragedy is supposed to be funny.  
I always thought he was hilarious.  
He would have killed in the Camps. Or he would have been Why state  
the obvious? What was  
the smell of the burning? When he tried to set his life  
's work on fire? Incandescent ink on curling pages  
illuminated ink on skin everything  
becomes light.  
It's easy to think  
of ideas as permanent. But a burning  
idea remembers what it is: only  
flesh. These our noses  
stop us forgetting

FALL 2025

# Lavender/chamomile/ melatonin

JOSEPHINE LOW

*Class of 2027*

In winter the day vanishes before it begins  
but still we find reasons to stay awake  
huddled under the covers for warmth  
until sleep swallows us whole.

I hoard photographs trying to glimpse the girl  
you love who wears my face smiling in the sun  
but during restless hours I crawl from her skin  
and haunt the corridors under fluorescent light

I watch you breathing and long to be the tides  
flinging themselves towards a more distant moon  
or to pass through your hands like the rain  
which kisses the windowsill before sinking

back into the giving earth  
or at least to be a tame animal  
who quiets when darkness falls  
and is not afraid of its own mind.

Instead I'm lying here with eyes open  
to the ceiling fan, trying furiously to dream  
myself into something easier to touch  
until you barely waking pull me closer

and then it's no shame to return  
to my body, which for all its disloyalty  
has kept me alive and moving through time  
and is all I have to love you with.



## **3 Moons**

**BERNADETTE COLBURN**

*Print Services Lead*

FALL 2025

# Expanse

BERNADETTE COLBURN

*Print Services Lead*



# The Four Year Play

GRACE FRAUFF

*Class of 2026*

**Figures:**

A Sailor / An Admiral

A Siren / Guppy / Angler Fish

Intercom

Sea Witch

Nimitz / Napoleon

HF, UHF, SHF, EHF

Transreceivers, Couplers, and Amplifiers

OE-82

**Place:** A big boat that is the greatest contributor to pollution in the world.

**First Frequency:** A boy and a girl having honest conversations, or when body autonomy is debated.

A Sailor

If you dial in to the radio number on the Pict, then you can listen to the radio's transmissions and replies

A Siren

Oh okay like this?

A Sailor

No like this.

A Siren

Thank you. This is the time where you will detect a hint of interest in my voice that is not there.

A Sailor

Oh you're welcome. Hey where are you from? I suddenly feel interested in

## FALL 2025

you. I want to know everything about you.

A Siren

I am from everywhere you have never been. I am more interesting than you thought I was right?

A Sailor

Yes, yes. Please tell me more.

A Siren

I'd rather go back to work.

A Sailor

Oh, a serious working girl. I love that you love your job so much.

A Siren

I hate my job.

A Sailor

I hate my job too. Take the phone handle. The radio works on a push-to-talk mechanism. You talk after the crypto breaks. You can hear it if you stand right where I can see you. Good. Good.

A Siren

I appreciate you for teaching me. You think this is an invitation to my mind.

A Sailor

I thought you would never ask! So are we like going out?

A Siren

Okay. I have nothing better to do.

A Sailor

And when the crypto breaks, talk into the mic, in the most sultry voice you can. I want to hear all your thoughts and opinions and how they don't match mine. What do you mean you don't want kids.

A Siren

I'm not interested anymore

## SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

A Sailor

You Wench! Everyone gather around! WENCH WENCH WENCH

**ALL**

WENCH WENCH WENCH

A Sailor

She's a siren! A Siren A siren a siren a siren a siren asirenasirenasiren.

**ALL**

SIREN SIREN SIREN

A Sailor

Throw her overboard!

A Siren

Wait! I comply. Let's fraternize. Please let's fraternize

A Sailor

Ah, now she wants to be a brother. What do we think?

**ALL**

CRUCIFYCRUCIFYCRUCIFY

A Sailor

If you dial in to the radio number on the Pict, then you can listen to the radio's transmissions and replies. Take the phone handle. The radio works on a push-to-talk mechanism. You talk after the crypto breaks. Don't think about using your sultry voice to fix this. And then you will say, I am a whore. A homie-hopper. I am easy. Please come...in. Over.

A Siren

I am a whore. He turned on me. A home-hopper. I just wanted a friend. I am easy. So easy I forgot my own name. Please come, god knows I haven't. Over.

A Sailor

When I get out of here. I'm going to study Political Science. And I'll be so much smarter than you. I'll be so smart and you'll be so dumb. And you'll cry while I pass policies that affect you and fuck you in ways I never could.

## FALL 2025

Intercom

Make all preparations for getting underway. Set the special sea & anchor detail. Single up all lines fore & aft. Underway! Shift colors! Set Condition X Ray. Secure the special sea detail. Set the regular underway watch.

**Second Frequency:** The first phone call home, or placating the crying baby.

Guppy  
Mom?

Sea witch  
Oh? I wasn't expecting to hear from you so soon!

Guppy  
Yeah, I'm here. I'm calling. Haha, on the phone! Uh, how's it going?

Sea Witch  
Oh you know, work work work. Working. I spend more than half my time talking about work, complaining about work, crying about work, and complaining about work. I talk about it more than anything else. But do you blame me? I've spent 80% of my life working at jobs that I have no passion for because I have low self-esteem and I work through it anyways. How are you?

Guppy  
Oh you know. Just wanted to say hi!

Sea Witch  
They let you do that?

Guppy  
No, not really. But I actually just needed to. Say hi and all that.

Sea Witch  
Oh well. Hi. How are you doing?

Guppy  
To be honest. Not well.

SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

Sea Witch  
Guppy  
Sea Witch  
Guppy  
Sea Witch

Guppy  
Hello. Mom?

Sea Witch  
*Guppy hangs up and redials*

Guppy  
Mom?

Sea Witch  
Oh hello! I don't know what happened

Guppy  
It probably just dropped

Sea Witch  
I didn't even do anything. One minute you were talking and then silence.  
I didn't do anything and it was just silence.

Guppy  
I know you didn't do anything

Sea Witch  
Okay, I swear I didn't. Anyways, how are you?

Guppy  
Not well mom.

Sea Witch  
Oh

Guppy  
Sea Witch  
Guppy

## FALL 2025

Sea Witch

Guppy

It's nothing. I'm just. Oh you know. Work.

Sea Witch

Oh yes yes. Work! I hate it. There's never a time when I don't think about work. You would think a low-commitment job at the county would be better for me but it's not. It's all I think about even when I don't want to.

Guppy

Yeah, work.

Sea Witch

Guppy

Sea Witch

Are you sure you're okay?

Guppy

No, but it'll be fine. Because I just. Yeah I just have work. That's all. I'll work on it. I'll work on work.

Sea Witch

Yeah, that's right. You're my strong little girl. Nothing like the others. Always too independent for your own good. Always got the best grades and always had the best talents. And you're so smart. I know you can figure it out.

Guppy

Yes I will. Work.

Sea Witch

Yes you will. I'm so proud of you.

Guppy

At this point that means nothing to me.

Sea Witch

I'll send you some cookies. That will help.

## *SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS*

Guppy  
Please don't.

Sea Witch

Guppy  
It's just. I think I'm going to die. I'm going to die this time. I think I'm going to die. Well, I don't think. I know it's going to happen. I'm going to die

Sea Witch  
We all die.

Guppy  
Yes. I know that. You knew that and you still decided to give birth to me. I guess you didn't think that far in advance, but it's still going to happen and you still did that. You gave birth, just so I could die.

Sea Witch  
You were a gift from God

Guppy  
And I'll be a gift to the worms too. Because I'm going to die soon. Really soon. Maybe I'll kill myself or I'll die trying to. I'll die a tragic and horrible death and it'll be meaningless and disregarded.

Sea Witch

Guppy  
Yeah. I'll die soon. They want me dead.

Sea Witch  
Who is they?

Guppy  
They who watch all the time. They want me dead because I don't believe. I don't believe in what they stand for. They know it now and I'm going to die because they are going to kill me. Or I'll kill myself. They don't want anyone who doesn't believe. There is no room for non-believers and they will come for me.

## FALL 2025

Sea Witch  
Okay

Guppy  
Anyway I just wanted you to know that. When I die. It won't be my fault.  
Either they kill me or I kill myself, but either way it won't be my fault.

Sea Witch  
Okay

Guppy  
I just wanted to let you know.

Sea Witch  
Okay I understand. I'm so proud of you.

Guppy  
Thanks mom.

Sea Witch  
You're welcome. I'll send some cookies soon.

Intercom  
Darken Ship. Make darken ship reports to the Damage Control Watch.  
Darken Ship.

**Third Frequency:** The Letter Home or the words you can't say to their face

Napoleon  
My dear Josephine,

A Sailor  
My Commander,

Napoleon  
I am writing very far from home right now

## SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

A Sailor

I am writing from nearby

Napoleon

Things are going dastardly well

A Sailor

Things are not like I remember them

Napoleon

It seems like it was only yesterday when you said, “Good Luck Fighting \_\_\_\_\_” and “Protect us poor, helpless women in \_\_\_\_\_”. It’s hard work, but I rest easy knowing that there is one less savage in the world. One less barbarian in the world that would savage you if given the chance. One less primitive evil that would even dare to touch a hair on your head

A Sailor

I listen to your words with the utmost dedication. I feel it very deeply when you say “Stand your ground against \_\_\_\_\_” and “\_\_\_\_\_ are evil bastards.” I want to please you in ways I’m not sure about. All I know is I care for you. Deeply. And I feel it in loins. This patriotism I mean

Napoleon

Oh you are a tormentor, Josephine. How I wish I could hear you speak aloud right now. “Bonaparte...Elba...The King of Rome1,” truly a naughty phrase to say to your husband seas away. For now, I must hold myself over, picturing the words pour out of your delicate lips. How dirty you must look right now. Oh Josephine I am afflicted by my lust. I can smell you from here, please enough. I am weak-willed

A Sailor

I am heartsick. This heart beats so fast, just as you walk by. Surely I must go to the infirmary to get it checked out. But I know there lies no science behind this chest. You wouldn’t know that the cause of this agony was my admiration for you. You wouldn’t know because I have trouble meeting your eyes. I know you must think it’s out of respect, but I must tell you earnestly. My eyes betray me. One look at you and my eyes begin to swell violently, like a wave crashing against a small dingy. These waves would pull you under, submerge you, drown you. My eyes would betray your leadership. Oh commander, the things I would do to you

## FALL 2025

Intercom

Tattoo. Tattoo. Stand by for evening prayer. Silence above the decks.

Napoleon

Josephine. I can not entertain your foolishness. I am your servant. There is no one else. I cannot return to your side next month as I have promised. I am your servant, but I am also France's servant. She is the other woman you must be jealous of. The spirit of Marianne lives on in this ship. You are my wife, but she is my lifeforce. I will not entertain any degradation of France even by my own wife. She is my Madonna

A Sailor

I can tell you are lonely. The pathways echo your heavy footsteps. I am lonely too. We can be lonely together. How melodic our footsteps could sound together

Intercom

<sup>1</sup>(source)

Taps. Taps. All lights outs. All hands turn into their racks. Maintain silence above the decks. Taps.

Napoleon

Do not be ridiculous Josephine. Now you are driving me mad. I am fighting for you. I am winning for you. I conquer, pillage, destroy, all in the name of you. Blind you are to the dirty deeds I do for you. Ignorant of the nights I spend out here thinking of you. Oh I am truly in misery. If you continue to detest me for my role as maker and father, then please go on. You will want to start writing my eulogy however. I cannot stand to bear your anger. I will not return to you if you stay mad. I will surely die because of you. I am a deadman walking until you write back that you forgive me. Don't sentence me to death Josephine

A Sailor

I solemnly swear. That was the promise I made before I came aboard your ship. I solemnly swear to serve and protect you. I have given you my protection. Now please let me serve you my dear Commander

Napoleon

I'll be home in a few weeks. Don't wash

## SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

A Sailor

Liberty. Equality. Fraternity.

*Napoleon, full of shame, beckons A Sailor to his quarters.*

Intercom

Dive Dive (*Horn*) Dive.

### **Fourth Frequency:** The Equipment Interlude

HF, UHF, SHF, EHF

HF is for long range communications. Think subs and ships 1000 nautical miles away. UHF can be used in conjunction with LOS or even satellites. Think ships and planes nearby, or maybe not so nearby. SHF is purely satellite communications. Think about the internet, can't miss my status update! EHF is so tiny you can't even see it. It's so small that rain can intercept its signal

Transreceivers, Couplers, and Amplifiers

NCTAMS this is \_\_\_\_\_. Comms check. Over

OE-82

I won't cooperate anymore.

HF, UHF, SHF, EHF

Now HF is the worst to work with. The equipment is outdated. And I've never seen it work. Maybe I don't have the magic touch. I don't think it's real. When someone shows you a magic trick you must believe it's not real. There is something they are not showing you. When I hear the transmissions, I know it's recorded. I know it's fake. I know there's a monkey behind that mirror.

Transreceivers, Couplers, and Amplifiers

NCTAMS read you Lima Charlie. How me? Over.

OE-82

I want to be a man. I want to be the man who makes mistakes with no requiem. When I make a mistake, they tear my insides out. They replace old parts for new parts and take out the new parts for newer ones. They don't tell me where my old parts go. I ask god, is there a heaven for my machinery?

## FALL 2025

HF, UHF, SHF, EHF

UHF is, well, we are in a fight right now. SATCOM SATCOM. That's all anyone cares about now. I tell her, you are losing a part of yourself. You are losing the most important part. And she grew really mad, I mean she practically errored herself out. She told me I spoke incorrectly. I told her I don't get what that has to do with anything. She just laughed like I said something wrong but I didn't. I know I didn't.

Transreceivers, Couplers, and Amplifiers

NCTAMS read you Lima Charlie. How me? Over.

OE-82

The birds haven't visited for a very long time. They don't come out this far anymore. It's nice when they stop for a chat, but my body's involuntary. They can be speaking to me, and I start to turn away from them. It's automatic. The world revolves around the star, I revolve around space junk.

HF, UHF, SHF, EHF

SHF, oh don't get me started. I avoid SHF like the plague and you would be smart to do the same. I was a picky eater as a kid, but SHF is pickier. I thought I had high standards in relationships, SHF has higher standards. I thought I was finicky about who's fingers get to touch me, but SHF is finickier. I can't go near her without her going off, screaming at me, crying for mercy. She's too high maintenance.

Transreceivers, Couplers, and Amplifiers

NCTAMS do you copy? Over.

OE-82

I have dreams. That the boat will crash. No one comes to get me, no one worries over me. I fall over myself, fall over others. I have to be the first one off. Even if it means killing others to get there. I fall and fall and fall until I'm surrounded by nothing. Not even my own thoughts can be heard. I fall and fall until I am squished into a very tiny ball, molecules and atoms separated entirely. I am decommissioned in perpetuity.

HF, UHF, SHF, EHF

EHF, hm well I actually like EHF. You can't jam them. Someone once told me that EHF would survive a Nuclear attack. I don't know what good that would do if I don't survive. Maybe the signal would go to the next guy,

## SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

or the next guy, or the next guy. It could go to outer space. Or maybe the next intelligent life on earth will grasp the concept of EHF, build a receiver, and hear our cries from the times passed.

Transreceivers, Couplers, and Amplifiers  
NCTAMS DO YOU HEAR ME? over.

OE-82

I'm patient. I can wait for my dream to come true. Until then I'll keep making mistakes as an act of rebellion.

Intercom

Sweepers Sweepers. Man your brooms. Give a clean sweep both fore and aft of the ship. Dump all trash off the fantail. Sweepers.

**Fifth Frequency:** The Founding Father that has a tendency to leave or All Founding Fathers leave their daughters.

Anglerfish or Guppy  
Dad?

*(The Father Figure enters)*

Anglerfish or Guppy  
Dad. How are you doing?

Anglerfish or Guppy  
Anglerfish or Guppy  
Anglerfish or Guppy

Anglerfish or Guppy  
Oh I don't know why I even try

Anglerfish or Guppy  
Anglerfish or Guppy  
Anglerfish or Guppy

Anglerfish or Guppy  
Mother said you would act like this. Mother said you would abandon me

## FALL 2025

too. Before you actually did. She said you were good for nothing scum. Or spume. And like spume, you wash away with the next wave only to leave a trail in the sand you soaked through and through.

Anglerfish or Guppy  
Anglerfish or Guppy  
Anglerfish or Guppy

Anglerfish or Guppy  
I'm sorry. I know you can't talk back. I sound just like her when I say things like that. And your silence reminds me too much of your absolute non-existence.

Anglerfish or Guppy

Anglerfish or Guppy  
Maybe that's why I never even dial the phone anymore. The words that would come out, the feelings that I

Anglerfish or Guppy  
Anglerfish or Guppy  
Anglerfish or Guppy  
Anglerfish or Guppy

Anglerfish or Guppy  
I'd prefer you didn't exist. I think the only way I could be in the same room as you would be if you were incapacitated. I look down at you and you don't even know I'm in the room. I envision I'd be silent and you too. And I wait for you to croak. Kiss you on the cheek and leave. I don't know what that says about me.

Anglerfish or Guppy  
I'm sorry. But it's true. It's better for me if I let all memory of you go.

Intercom  
There are personnel working aloft on board, do not rotate, radiate, or energize any electric or electronic equipment, start gas turbines, or operate ship's whistle while personnel are working aloft on board.

## SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

**Sixth Frequency:** High levels of testosterone.

Nimitz or Napoleon  
My dearest Catherphine,

A Sailor  
ALCON,

Nimitz or Napoleon

I am pleased to say that the \_\_\_\_ will never recover after the damage this mighty warship has caused. I know you don't like it when I use vulgar language, so I won't say the obvious. I thought the canon would go limp from the perfect aim of its loads. Who is to say size matters when the bomb embedded himself so deeply. Anything of that depth could leave a woman shaking for days. The earth is scorched and we left her barren

A Sailor

I did not conduct myself inappropriately. I have not engaged in any illegal activity. I refute any claims made otherwise

Nimitz or Napoleon

These filthy animals don't know when to stop. It will sadden you to hear that I am stationed here until further notice. I cannot go back until it is clear that the heart of the \_\_\_\_ is demolished. We are in the womb of it now. We must make sure no insurgency is born

A Sailor

Our relationship never escalated past anything other than mentor and mentee. I only gave advice when Petty Officer \_\_\_\_ asked. Each time we met up, we acted in only a professional manner. Petty Officer \_\_\_\_ never entered my private quarters

Nimitz or Napoleon

Sometimes, out here, I think about our life together. The cottage by the sea, the cold breeze that came through the door that you always complained about. And I think about our first summer there, and you found out you were pregnant. What were the names we talked about? Chester for the boy, after me, but I can't remember the girl's name we chose. The night before I left, I stayed up to make the cradle. I didn't want to leave without making the cradle. Or was it the rocking chair? I don't recall. I had to leave

## FALL 2025

for the Great Fight. You remember the Magnificent war?

A Sailor

Petty Officer \_\_\_\_ and I did engage in illicit activities. I approached Petty Officer \_\_\_\_ with the intent of becoming a mentor. There were no ulterior motives. Petty Officer \_\_\_\_ and I would meet weekly and discuss different career routes. Petty Officer \_\_\_\_ made the first move, but as the superior, I know I should have denied anything further and stopped all contact. I did try a few times to stop, but please note that Petty Officer \_\_\_\_ continued to pursue me. I accept the demotion and suspension of pay. I will correct my actions and not pursue anything that is outside the morals of this boat

Nimitz or Napoleon

I left in the fall and you spent the rest of the pregnancy alone. I almost wonder how you must have handled that. I remember I was in \_\_\_\_ when I got the news. You went into labor in January. I don't remember the day. The baby was born. You told me you would wait to name them until I got there, but I knew it had to be a Chester. But then it got cold. That dreadful wind, howled stronger than the baby's crying until it silenced it all together. I knew then that the baby could have never been named after me

A Sailor

I fucking hate women.

Intercom

Abandon Ship. Abandon Ship. Nearest land is 400 nautical miles away. The land is hostile. Wind direction is blowing west...

**Seventh Frequency:** Man overboard.

A Sailor

If you dial in to the radio number on the Pict, then you can listen to the radio's transmissions and replies

A Siren or Anglerfish or Guppy

Oh okay like this?

A Sailor

No. Like this.

*SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS*

A Siren or Anglerfish or Guppy  
I'm just not getting it.

A Sailor  
And you never will

Nimitz or Napoleon  
Now's your time

A Sailor  
What?

OE-82  
I'll never be happy

A Siren or Anglerfish or Guppy  
You hold all the knowledge

OE-82  
I'm going to do it

Nimitz or Napoleon  
You want the job

A Sailor  
Yes

A Siren or Anglerfish or Guppy  
I'll listen to you

Nimitz or Napoleon  
It's yours

OE-82  
I have a plan

Nimitz or Napoleon  
Just step on the girl

*FALL 2025*

A Siren or Anglerfish or Guppy  
Step over, not on

Nimitz or Napoleon  
Throw her aside

OE-82  
I'm going overboard today

Nimitz or Napoleon  
Yes throw her overboard

A Sailor  
Okay

A Siren or Anglerfish or Guppy  
Wait

Nimitz or Napoleon  
Raise the Oscar flag

Intercom  
Raise the Oscar flag

OE-82  
I'll swim deeper and deeper

A Siren or Anglerfish or Guppy  
Can I swim to land

A Sailor  
Raising the Oscar flag

Nimitz  
You can try

Napoleon  
But there are plenty of fish in the ocean.

*SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS*

Nimitz or Napoleon  
Who are waiting to eat you

OE-82  
I know too much about all of you

A Sailor  
It was great knowing you

Nimitz or Napoleon  
Set condition X-Ray

Intercom  
Set condition X-Ray

A Siren or Anglerfish or Guppy  
I give up

A Sailor  
Oh that's no fun

Nimitz or Napoleon  
I like girls who put up a fight

OE-82  
I give up

A Sailor  
That's why it has to be you

OE-82  
I can't jump

Nimitz or Napoleon  
You grab her arms

A Sailor  
You grab her legs

OE-82  
But I can stop receiving your words

## FALL 2025

A Sailor  
Stop putting up a fight

Nimitz or Napoleon  
Hefty hefty hefty

OE-82  
I'm finished listening

Nimitz  
Ready

Napoleon  
Ready

A Sailor  
Ready

OE-82  
Ready

A Siren or Anglerfish or Guppy  
It's okay I'm a great swi/

*(SPLASH)*

Intercom  
Man overboard port side. Man overboard port side. Prepare to launch all lifeboats.

Nimitz or Napoleon  
By the power invested in me, I now pronounce you admiral

An Admiral or Sailor  
What now?

Nimitz or Napoleon  
Whatever you want



# Undressing

YI-MEI LIU

*Class of 2028*

FALL 2025

# Crown of the Living Depths

MORIEL ROTHMAN-ZECHER

*Visiting Assistant Professor of English Literature*

The crowd all turns toward the queen with her jock strap and crown of starfish balanced on her head. Perhaps she will walk all the way this time into the Pacific. Just before this, her sister looked around, then sat down cross-legged in the sand and told us a story about how she was invited back to her old all boys prep school in Georgia to give a speech on “LGBT-inclusion,” how she had thought this was a small victory. Rookie mistake, she laughs, and her laugh is a thousand sea-birds plummeting in unison into an ocean of dust, it is lemon squeezed into a mouth full of open wounds, an ocean full of open wounds, rattlesnakes crawl down our face in eddies. After my talk, she says, her knees hugged to her prosthetic breasts, some concerned members of the community, planted there by a local nongovernmental organization, complained to the school. The school quickly apologized to them, and affirmed that my presence did not reflect school values. Now as the second queen wades deeper into the ocean, the first begins to sing, really to wail in sharp laughter-song. Wearing a crown of the living depths, will she submerge, will she be buoyed by these starfish arms, and the crowd braided together like bread at the country’s edge.

# The Weight of Birds

MARYAM ABDULHUSSEIN

*Class of 2026*

West of the river, where the city thinned into a row of broken stubs, Yousif dragged her body across the rubble while the morning was still gray enough to forgive him. Winds came off the Tigris, sharp with diesel and wet ash and the sour sweetness of rotting fruit. The grit of powdered brick rasped beneath his shoes like salt.

He knew this street. Once a row of bakeries and repair shops, now a mouth missing most of its teeth. Rebar sang in the wind, a thin metallic cry, like a saw biting nothing. She was wrapped in his sister's blanket.

It was the only thing he had left that still knew how to hold a body.

The bundle snagged and slid over the tiles scabbed across the ground, and a wire cage clattered beside it, bumping his knee with each pull. It clicked: wire, wire, bone. Inside, a dove shivered—small, stubborn, a bit of soot on its cheek like a beauty mark.

Yousif stopped once to tighten the knot, his fingers stiff with dust. “*Sorry, sorry.*” He kept saying, as if he'd stepped on her foot and not her silence. He quickened; when the wind stilled, the flies would find them.

He'd once heard a man on the radio say a city after war was quiet. He was wrong; a city after war buzzed—a generator gnawing at the air, live wires sizzling in puddles, the dry murmur of dust moving where no one else did. His mouth was full of plaster; his tongue had learned the taste of walls.

Yousif passed the burned-out taxi stand, turned left at the minaret bitten clean in half, and stepped into the courtyard he'd chosen because he could lay her nowhere else. It was the only place broken enough to keep her and honest enough to grieve her: half a wall missing, a fig stump in the corner, sap still green at the cut.

The ground was mostly dirt, rash-patched with blue tiles that caught the light like marbles dropped by a child and never found again. Yousif lowered the bundle where shade used to fall, then set the cage on the step.

The dove turned its coin-dark eye toward him: all question, no answer. “Don’t watch,” he said, but a bird didn’t know watching any more than it knew graves. Yousif tested the ground with his boot: hard, dry, scattered with tile chips that clicked under his heel.

West Mosul, late summer: one of those mornings that arrived with a grudge. Along the wall, a ripped metal frame stuck out at hip height, the kind that kiosks leave behind, two rusted brackets, a lip where a counter once sat, bolts bitten smooth. He tried to place it—tea, cigarettes, maybe sweets in plastic—but the picture wouldn’t come. Yousif kept the blank. It was safer than remembering wrong.

He crouched where the wall gave way to the sky. His eyes burned from dust, or something else he wouldn’t name. Wind pinned his shirt to his ribs. Every breath scraped. Yousif eased back a corner of the blanket with shaking fingers, only enough to slide the shovel free.

But the smell rose anyway, faint but wrong like blood that had learned to breathe, like soap and skin left too long in the sun.

The shovel’s handle burned his palm and he nearly dropped it; the grain worried his half-healed blisters. With his free hand, Yousif smoothed the loosened corner flat, sealing it as if a draft could bruise her, then shifted his grip. The metal head grazed the step and rang: a thin, silver ping that split the air.

The dove jolted, then thrashed—first one wing, then both—until the clatter of wire and wings filled the courtyard.

“Stop,” he said, but it wouldn’t.

The cage rocked on the step. Panic ran the length of the bird and bit down on his ribs. Yousif reached for the cage and stopped, hand hanging in the air. “Shh,” he tried, but the sound went nowhere.

His palm found the wire; the tremor ran up his arm and pinned him. There was something about the sound that hit something deep and rotten inside his chest, and the time between now and then peeled away like dust in the wind.

The courtyard became an alley again. He saw it all: Mosul, mid-siege, a week after the sky fell. Mosul wasn’t dead yet, only limping. Smoke climbed from somewhere every hour, a column for every street that used to have a name. The air stank of oil fires and boiled wheat. Rubble glittered where glass used to be.

Yousif was crouched behind a wall of broken cinderblock, whispering a prayer that his trap would hold. It had cost him an afternoon: bread crust for bait, an old wire cage waiting behind him. He’d been alone since his house folded—neighbors gone, family under the rubble, the air

## SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS

sweet-rotten with what no one could bury.

But when the bombings slowed, birds began to land again. He found joy in catching them, naming them, and feeding them rivers and crumbs. They stayed. It was proof that something could still stay. The dove edged toward the crust, head jerking side to side. Yousif held his breath. One more step—

A crash: metal clattering, a shoe kicking through trash. The bird exploded upward, a gray streak, gone before he could blink. Yousif ducked behind the cinderblock, heart kicking, eyes checking the street for uniforms, for guns.

Not soldiers. *Her.*

Small, ankle-deep in rubble, one hand still raised as if she could pluck the fleeing bird back out of the air. A braid tied with green plastic stuck to her cheek with sweat. A dented pot lid hung from her arm, full of bottle caps and what might have been a heel of bread. “What are you doing?” he hissed, more fear than anger.

She grinned—gap-toothed, lopsided, a shape of joy this city no longer made. “Are you shouting at me?”

“At the idiot who scared my bird,” Yousif said, stepping out only halfway. “So me, then.” She looked past him at the crude snare and the cage behind him. “You trap them to eat?”

“No.”

“To sell?”

He shook his head.

“Then why bother?”

Yousif didn’t answer at first. He tipped his chin toward the wall where a makeshift cage hunched in the shade: a cube of wire and scrap wood, tied together with bits of blue cord. Inside, three doves shifted, wings brushing the bars. A bottle cap held crumbs. Another held water. He’d draped his sister’s blanket along the back to blunt the wire. The whole thing looked one hard gust from folding.

“So I can keep them,” he said at last. “Give them names.” Almost under his breath, Yousif repeated three names: his mother’s, his father’s, his sister’s. The birds went still, as if listening.

“You name birds?” Her laugh broke out like it surprised her, too loud for the ruined street. “What do you call that one—Dinner?”

Yousif frowned, wiping sweat from his neck with the back of his wrist. “I wouldn’t expect someone your age to get it.”

“You don’t know my age.” She stuck out her chin. “I could be older than you.” He looked at her properly now, small, wiry, maybe four-

teen or younger, skin browned by dust and sun, a streak of soot across her cheek like war paint. "Right. Grandma." She snorted. "Careful. I might hit you with my pot lid."

He almost smiled but didn't let her see. "If it gets you to leave me and my birds alone, then go ahead."

"I'll leave," she said, hands raised in mock surrender. "But now I'm curious. If not for food, why trap them?"

"They'd die out there," Yousif said. "Here I can feed them. Keep them safe." She crouched beside the cage, her shadow falling across the wire. One dove tilted its head at her, a nervous coo. "Safe," she repeated, tasting the word. "You think they'd rather live in a box?"

He stiffened. "At least they're alive."

She looked up at him. "Alive isn't the same as living and you know it. Don't pretend like you're doing this for them." The words landed like grit in his teeth. He opened his mouth, but no answer came. She was looking at the sky through the broken ceiling, her face tilted toward the light. "If my words bother you then open the door," she said at last. "Let them decide if they belong to you."

Yousif wanted to tell her she was wrong, that belonging wasn't the point. That naming them was the only way he knew how to keep anything real. That sometimes, he said their names and waited to hear them echo back through the air. Instead, he said, "Birds remember faces. Places. If you say a name enough, the air keeps it."

She studied him. "Does the air ever bring them back?"

"Sometimes."

Something in his voice made her quiet. She set down the pot lid, dug through the rubble beside her, and pulled out a half-crushed tin of chickpeas. "You keep the air," she said. "I'll keep what fills the stomach."

She pried the lid open with a rock; the smell of rust and brine filled the heat. She tipped a few into her palm and ate, wincing at the salt. Seeing him watch, she held one out. "Here. For your trouble."

Yousif hesitated, then took it. The chickpea tasted of metal and ash, and it was the best thing he'd had in days.

"I'm Yousif," he said.

"I didn't ask."

He waited.

She sighed. "Awwrad."

He repeated it once, like testing a fragile thing. "Pretty name."

"Don't get ideas." She swung the pot lid back under her arm and started off. Over her shoulder she called, "You keep your birds. I'll keep

what's real."

Her voice stayed with him long after the sound of her footsteps dissolved into the city's hum. The trap lay empty, the bread already carried off by ants, but he found himself smiling anyway.

Burnt sugar drifted in from somewhere down the street, the same smell that had followed her ever since. That was how the next day began; the day their talking began to sound like its own language. Awrad was crouched beside a busted kiosk, sorting her day's loot: tin lids, a cracked transistor, a small bird feather tucked behind her ear like a joke. When he called her name, she squinted up at him, as if the word itself might cost her something to hear. "You again," she said. "Still naming the air?"

Yousif held up the snare he'd rebuilt and half a loaf of bread he'd traded for wire. "And you're still stealing from ghosts."

"Well, they're not using it, are they?" She gave the smallest smile and went back to work. Her fingers were quick, nicked along the knuckles; an old scar traced her forearm like chalk. He tried not to stare.

They sat together in the narrow wedge of shade the kiosk allowed. Heat bent the air; even the flies had grown slow, their buzzing soft and lazy. She tore the loaf into two uneven halves. He meant to tell her to keep it, but she moved faster, breaking her share into smaller pieces and tossing them toward the pigeons edging close. Each crumb a small act of mercy or defiance, he couldn't tell which.

"You ever think about leaving?" Yousif asked.

She looked up, squinting against the sun. "Leaving where?"

"Anywhere."

She laughed, quick and bright, the sound catching. "You sound like the people on the radio," she said. "There's nowhere left that's not here."

He didn't know how to answer that. The pigeons gathered around their feet, pecking at the dust where crumbs had fallen. She watched them closely, like she could will one into staying.

"Poor thing," she murmured, spotting a dove among them with a bent wing. It dragged slightly as it moved, a soft scrape against stone. "If I fix it, do I get to name it too?"

Yousif followed her gaze. "It'll die anyway," he said. "You'll just waste the food."

"Then it won't die alone." She smiled without warmth. "Better than most of us." S

he lowered herself with a care that surprised him, knees finding the dust like she'd practiced this. The bird flinched. She didn't grab, she set

her palm on the ground beside it and waited. “Shh,” she said. “No cages.”

From her pocket she pulled the end of a rag, gray from use, tore a thinner strip with her teeth, and wound it around the wing. Her hands were quick but careful, more nurse than thief. “Hold still,” she breathed. The trembling eased.

“There,” she said finally, easing it onto her open palm. “Not fixed, but better.” She lifted her hand toward the light. “When it can fly, I’ll let it.”

Yousif shook his head. “You really think it’ll survive this place?”

“Maybe not.” She looked down at the fragile body, the pulse fluttering beneath its feathers. “But I’ll give it the chance. If it goes, it goes. And then, we’ll just bury it and move on.”

She said it so simply, as if *moving on* was just another small kindness. Yousif nodded, though he didn’t understand. What was the point of loving something you knew would leave? The bird blinked once, then again. When she loosened her hands, it didn’t fly; it only hopped in a daze and began to peck at the crumbs again.

“You see?” she said, grinning. “He trusts me already. You’re welcome, bird.” They stayed through the long afternoon under the warped tin of the kiosk roof. She scavenged wire from a fallen sign; he threaded it through the cage to make a steadier perch. She rinsed the bottle-cap dishes at a trickle from a cracked pipe. Their talk moved like water over stone: light, quick, sometimes cutting, sometimes kind. By the time the light bent toward evening, the air between them felt changed, quieter, threaded through with something that almost resembled peace.

When evening came, the muezzin’s call rose warped through a cracked speaker, and for a heartbeat, the city almost sounded holy.

They watched the sky turn the same blue as the painted plates buried everywhere under the streets. It looked like something you could drown in.

She was right. There was only this and nowhere else: the broken kiosk, the pigeons, the fading sun, and them.

They met again the next day, and the next after that. She’d started bringing him bits of clean wire, bottle caps, things she thought might make his traps kinder. Sometimes even she fed the birds, still arguing as she worked.

About a week later, they found the lame one again in the blasted market square, no stalls, only frames; tarps shredded and flapping; crates charred into shapes that remembered fruit. She spotted the bird first and elbowed him in the ribs. “See? She’s still fighting.”

## *SMALL CRAFT WARNINGS*

The bird hopped closer, tilting its head with a smudge on its cheek: dark, round, like a beauty mark. Awrad laughed, the sound ricocheting off concrete and rebar. "She looks like Sajida Obeid," she said, the singer from TV, before the power stations fell.

Yousif blinked at the name. It felt strange to hear something ordinary again, something that belonged to a world where people still sang on screens and light came without a fight. "Since I saved her," she said, still laughing, "I get to name her. Sajida."

She doubled over, laughing like it was the funniest joke she'd heard, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. The sound filled the ruined street, wild and alive, and before he could stop himself, Yousif was laughing too. It startled him; it had been so long since he'd heard the foreign sound come from his mouth. Too light for air that usually carried screams. The bird flapped its wings once, weak but steady, almost as if agreeing. And for that single instant, Mosul no longer felt like a graveyard.

He jerked back to the present when a real fly landed on his cheek, tiny and insistent. Yousif wiped it away, streaking grit across his face. The courtyard had grown harsher since morning, the sun high enough to bleach the walls to bone. But at least the dove had quieted. It watched him now, one dark eye unblinking.

Only then did he notice the shovel trembling in his hands, his fingers clenched like he meant to swing it. A breath, then two, and then Yousif forced his grip to loosen, set the blade, and began to dig. He levered up a rectangle of earth; the smell of wet iron rose from the cut like a mouth opening. Every drive met resistance: wire snagging the edge, glass giving with a crack, something solid thunking and holding. He pried up a rusted spoon and set it aside. "You keep every useless thing," Yousif muttered, though he didn't know who he was talking to.

By the time he hit the red layer of brick dust, his arms were shaking. Beneath it, there was a shard of plate painted with blue flowers. He rubbed it clean on his shirt until it caught the light, then placed it on the step beside the cage. "Here," Yousif said quietly. "Something pretty."

The bird blinked once, slow. Its throat fluttered like a pulse. For an absurd moment, he thought it might speak, that some sound would come out carrying her name, but there was only the hush of wings shifting.

Yousif pressed the thought down with the shovel's blade, the way you smooth air from a burial cloth. His palms split where old blisters had hardened, and dirt found the cracks, turning them dark. Eight shovels, then breathe, eight more, don't look, don't think.

When he paused, he made sure not to look at the bundle. Not yet. His chest rose and fell under his shirt stiff with salt, and for a beat he was a smaller boy in another courtyard, where someone older would have said: *Not like that, ya Yousif—you'll blunt the blade.* He blinked and the older voice had no mouth.

*Breathe.* Yousif reset his grip and dug again. Blood slicked the handle. He kept going. The pain was something to measure the hours by. When he stopped, the hole reached his knees. He let the shovel slip from his hand, its blade kissing stone, sweat tracing the lines of his face.

The pit now gaped at his feet, rough-edged and waiting. Yousif's knees cracked as he straightened and went to her, slid his hands under the wrapped weight. And there it was—the truth of bodies: how they gathered gravity, how twelve hours could turn flesh to stone and stone to something softer still.

He had thought he knew heaviness. He had not known this.

Yousif loosened the knot he'd tied that morning. The fabric resisted, then gave, sighing open like a breath released. One corner fell away, revealing the edge of her hair. It was matted with dirt, a streak of dried blood stiffening one side, but in the crook near her neck the strands still gleamed gold-brown where the sun touched them.

He lifted her, arms trembling under the weight. The first heave shocked him: the way her head rolled back, the dull knock of her heels. *Breathe,* Yousif gritted his teeth and eased her toward the pit. Every joint in him protested, but he refused to drop her.

The dove rustled in its cage, one small wingbeat for every step he took. He eased one corner, then another, as if positioning her mattered to the dirt. It mattered to him. It mattered because it was the only mercy left that had shape. When he let go, the bird went still.

Yousif took that as permission. It was a small thing, a token of work, but it made him feel like he'd earned the right to speak her name aloud.

“Awrad.”

The word carried heat, not sound, as if it burned its way out. Yousif stayed still until the taste of it faded from his tongue. Then, his mouth worked around prayers half-remembered, the missing words skipping like stones and sinking. He made new ones without asking if it was allowed. *God as a door. God as a hinge. God as a latch. God forgive me.*

He pressed his palm to the mound the way you press a fevered forehead, and the ground was already warming to the sun. The wind changed and the rebar's keen climbed a note. Yousif listened for her name

inside that sound. He would have liked to hear it, even if it meant he was the kind of person who heard strange things. He didn't hear it.

At last, Yousif covered her face. The blanket settled like breath stopping as he scooped the first handful of dirt shakily. It slid between his fingers and scattered across the fabric, making a small, dry noise. Then another handful, heavier. Eventually, he fell into rhythm—hand, *breathe*, hand, *breathe*—until the hollow softened into a mound. By the time he finished, his arms were streaked with mud; the sun had found every weakness in his body.

“Stay,” the word falling apart in his mouth. “Stay down. Stay safe.” Yousif’s head ached from the heat; when he closed his eyes, he saw the world printed in red behind his lids. Then it thinned, and brightened, and became that day.

The sky that morning had the color of unwashed tin. Too bright, too hollow, the kind that made every sound echo twice. They had gone down to the bridge market, the half that was still standing. Awrad had said she knew a place where the aid trucks sometimes dumped spoiled food—half-rotten onions, cracked tins of beans, things still good if you knew how to look.

Every few minutes came a low boom somewhere far off, enough to rattle glass, not enough to make you run. They had learned the difference. They slipped between two collapsed buildings into a narrow lane that smelled of oil and river water. The walls were pocked with bullet holes, the ground layered in dust and bottle caps. Yousif saw the first of the onions scattered near a burned-out cart and grinned.

“I told you,” she said.

They gathered what they could: three onions, a dented can of tomatoes, a rusted spoon. He tried to hand her one of the onions, but she waved him off.

“Too soft,” she said. “You have to check the root.” She pressed her thumb gently against it; the skin gave, seeping a thin trickle of cloudy water that smelled faintly of vinegar. “Spoiled,” she murmured, making a face. “Still food.”

Another boom. This one different. Not the low shake of faraway shells, but a sharper crack, closer, like the air itself snapping.

Both of them froze.

Yousif looked up. The pigeons on the wires had taken flight all at once, a gray explosion against the pale sky.

“Inside,” he hissed. “We need to take cover.”

She hesitated, scanning the street. To their right was an old shop-

front, its roller shutter half off its track. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward it.

“Yousif—”

“Move, they’re coming!” They slipped through the gap just as the next sound hit; a deep concussive thud that knocked the breath from his lungs. The ground lifted, then dropped. Dust poured down from the ceiling.

He saw the shutter swinging, and without thinking he lunged for it, dragging it down with both hands. Metal screamed against metal as it slammed shut. The noise in his ears was a roar. “Stay,” he gasped, turning toward her. “Stay down. Stay safe.”

Light sifted through bullet holes, coins of it beading her face and throat. She met his gaze, eyes wide but steady.

“Leave it—leave it open, Yousif.”

It was the last full sentence he ever heard her speak. The world folded inward. There was no explosion, not the way people described them. There was a rush of air, a pause; then the building changed its mind about standing. Light vanished. The floor tilted. Something heavy struck his shoulder, drove him to his knees.

He heard himself shout her name, but the sound was buried under the collapsing roof. The air filled with dust so thick it felt like drowning. When he could breathe again, he was outside. But he didn’t remember getting there.

The shutter lay flattened across the doorway, hammered smooth like a coin pressed on a rail. He clawed at it, screaming, fingers slipping on the hot metal.

He called her name until his voice tore.

Once, he heard her call back—a thin, broken sound, so small he might have imagined it. He dug until his nails split, until his palms blistered and bled, until the sky went red with sunset and he still hadn’t moved a single inch of the door. He searched the rubble for hours, crawling over beams, scraping through ash until he found the tin of tomatoes, split open like a wound.

And then, when his hands were raw and his breath too shallow to curse anymore, a bird landed on the rubble beside him: a dove, a line of fabric stuck to its wing. It pecked once at the dust, then hopped toward a mound where the smoke lifted in thin curls.

He followed its movement, dazed. Beneath the bird’s shadow, he saw a corner of cloth, the edge of her scarf, singed but still gold at the fringe.

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Yousif fell to his knees. The dove didn't move—  
—and it was done. Not rubble: courtyard. Not ash: dirt. His  
knees in new earth. The grave was done.

Yousif searched the ground for something that might mark the  
spot and saw it—the shard of blue tile he'd found earlier, flowers painted  
across it, the color of deep water. He pressed it into the mound, careful,  
like an offering.

*Leave it open, Yousif.*

He blinked hard.

The courtyard held its breath. In the cage's shadow waited the  
dove, one wing crooked, the other quivering as if remembering flight.  
He set his thumb on the latch. Wire bit his palm; his mouth found her  
words—*Leave it open, Yousif.* He pressed. A soft click. He swung the door  
on its loose hinges.

No scramble. No flutter. Only the small body, still as a stone,  
looking past him to the strip of sky, one wing lifted like a question.  
Behind it, the grave waited—the mound rising like a slow breath beneath  
the white sun. The blue tile caught light near the top, the painted flower  
staring up at the sky.

A gust slipped through the gap in the wall, sudden and cool.  
Rebar took up its metallic keen again; the same note that filled the city  
the day the bombs fell. The dove lifted both wings, testing the air. Yousif  
stayed still, afraid that any movement might change the ending.

"Go," he said, the word snagging in his throat. Softer, to the bird  
and the grave together: "Then go, Awrad."

It stepped, toes white with dust. Another step. A shiver ran  
through the crooked wing and the bird leaned into the mouth of the  
wind. Everything narrowed. The sound of the city fell back; his heartbeat  
filled the space. He watched the chest of the bird open and close—*one,*  
*two*—then the sudden, tearing beat of wings.

Air struck his face. Feathers flashed. For one stuttering instant it  
was over the mound, then over him, the shadow crossing his shirt like a  
hand. His body flinched as if to catch what could not be caught. He let his  
hands fall.

The bird climbed, awkward at first, then surer, shoulder pitching,  
the crooked wing finding its answer in the wind. It circled once, and once  
more, wider, higher; each turn scraped light loose from the sky. He fol-  
lowed until his eyes watered and the blur became only motion, and then  
not even that.

The air it left behind was cooler. Emptier.

## *FALL 2025*

“Go, both of you,” he whispered.

Above the courtyard the wind stirred. The dove kept rising, wings cutting pale circles through the glare, each beat scattering sunlight, each turn smaller, until there was only the hush of air and the faint song of war, and then nothing at all.



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