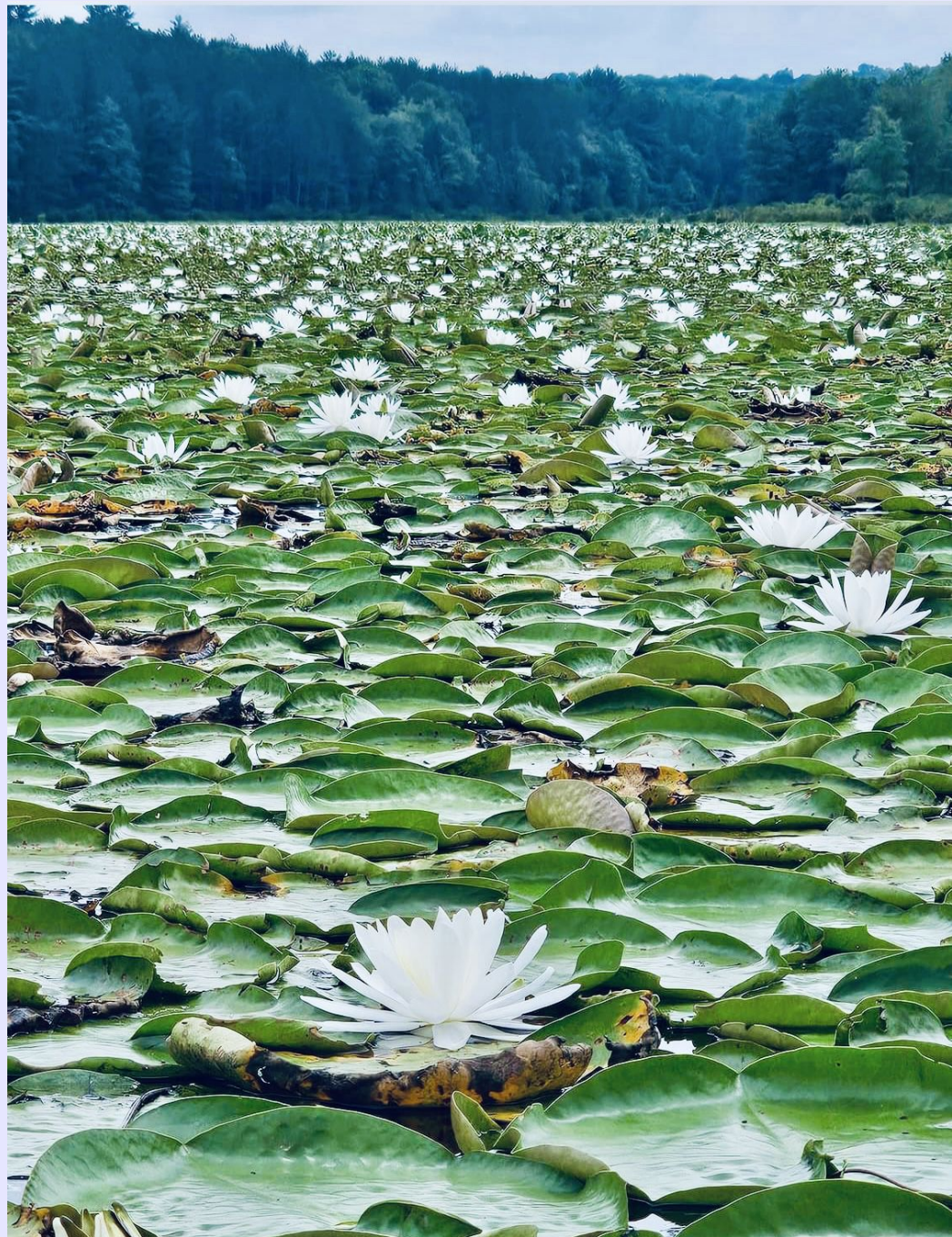


[Alternate Route]

Issue 17 Spring 2025







# [Alternate Route]

#17, Spring 2025

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Thank you for reading.

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## **William Ogden Haynes**

is a poet and author of short fiction from Alabama who was born in Michigan. He has published several collections of poetry and many of his poems and short stories have appeared in literary journals and anthologies. <http://www.williamogdenhaynes.com>



## Cherries

As a child, he didn't know, but he later learned that the proper accompaniment for a Manhattan

cocktail is a Bing cherry. But his father always used Maraschinos, which were cheaper and more

available. In fact, his father wasn't concerned about cherries at all because when he came home, he

just wanted the bourbon, vermouth and bitters to wash away the workday. He only put cherries in

his drink as a daily ritual with his son, giving cherries to the boy after he finished each of his three or four

cocktails. The boy remembers the sweetness of the cherries coated with the taste of smoke, oak and

alcohol. He would put each red orb behind his front teeth and pull on the stem until the cherry was

uncoupled before chewing it. Then, he would watch his father mix another drink and wait for more cherries.

And now, thirty years later, his father is dead. He  
regrets that as a child, he had never heard of

alcoholism or enabling. But back then, he thought  
it was just a game he played with his father.

## The Cabin

They dated in college, but it never came to  
anything that lasted. They went hiking and

found an old, abandoned cabin in the woods,  
where they spent the night in sleeping bags

and cooked over a campfire. That evening,  
her hair was combed back, sleek as an otter,

and the moon's deepening pearl was reflected  
in her eyes. And the next morning, as sunbeams

swept through the forest trees, they drank  
steaming black coffee from tin cups on the

cabin porch. He remembers the spill of sunlight  
on her blouse, the way they laughed, kissed,

and talked about the future. But after graduation,  
they went their separate ways. And now, years

later, he's back on campus for a football game.  
He thinks about driving to the woods and finding

that cabin from so long ago. He wonders if she  
came to the game this weekend, if she remembers

the sweetness of that night. And if he found that  
cabin, he wonders if she would be there, sitting

on the porch waiting for him. But that only  
happens in poems and dreams, doesn't it?

## Afterlife

Oh, connoisseur of curbs, excavator of lawns, analyzer of leaves,  
marker of territories, sniffer of steel-belted radials, you left me  
far

too soon. But I believe that there's a paradise waiting for you,  
where

you'll never grow old. It's a place where there are no fleas or  
ticks

and lots of tail wagging. Everyone you meet will pet you, call  
you a

good boy, and scratch behind your ears. There'll be lots of full  
bowls

with fresh food and water. Up there, they let you sit on the fur-  
niture,

beg for food at the dinner table and have a lick of their ice  
cream cone.

There are no illnesses or diseases. Your angel is always nearby  
with

treats, commanding you to come, sit, stay and roll over. You'll  
spend

evenings with crackling fireplaces and soft rugs nearby. It's a  
place with

no closed doors, and there's no shortage of chew toys, chairs to  
curl up on,

belly rubs, and tennis balls. You can walk in the rain without a leash.

Your angel is there to throw a stick or play tug of war with a rope. A large

bed upstairs easily accommodates a dog and his angel. You'll find ample

things to investigate like trash cans, jackets, shovels and shoes.

Children are up there to try your gentle patience as they dress you up in hats, shirts and boots. There are couches for sleeping,

trusting your angel with the weight of your head on his lap. And as

you dream of your days on Earth, I hope you'll remember there's a

human down here that you loved, who still thinks about you every day.



## **Matthew McAyeal**

is a writer from Portland, Oregon. His short stories have been published by "Bards and Sages Quarterly," "Fantasia Divinity Magazine," "cc&d," "The Fear of Monkeys," "Danse Macabre," "Scarlet Leaf Magazine," "Bewildering Stories," "Tall Tale TV," "Fiction on the Web," "Quail Bell Magazine," "MetaStellar," and "Kaidankai." In 2008, two screenplays he wrote were semi-finalists in the Screenplay Festival.



## Across the Wall

I was born the year they built the Wall. It was a hideous monstrosity of concrete, barbed wire, and guard towers. They said that the Wall was there to protect us, that the people on the other side were “fascists” and “revanchists.” But everyone knew the truth. They didn’t build the Wall to keep out dangerous enemies. They built it to keep us in.

Ever since I was a little girl, I felt drawn to a particular section of the Wall at a particular time of day. Every day that I could, I went to that part of the Wall at that time of the day and stood there, just for a minute or two. Of course, I had to be careful not to get too close to the Wall or else I’d be shot by the border guards who were there to “protect” us.

“What do you stand there for, Comrade Heidi?” I was sometimes asked.

“I don’t know,” I could only reply.

I couldn’t explain it. I just had this vague feeling that there was something on the direct opposite side of the Wall calling to me. It was like I was meant to be joined to it, but was cut off instead. Even if I could have explained this feeling, I wouldn’t have dared voice it. There was probably a Stasi file on me as it was. “Comrade Heidi Baumann is daily engaged in suspicious counterrevolutionary staring contest with the Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart,” it probably said.

As I grew up in the shadow of the Wall, under the flag of the hammer and compass, I continued to visit that section of the Wall every day that I could. Some of the details changed over the years. The Young Pioneer uniform I often wore during my visits to the Wall gave way to an FDJ uniform. My method of traveling there changed as well, from a child’s skip to a clunky Trabant. On the rare days that I couldn’t manage a visit to the Wall, I felt a sharp stab of guilt, as though I had abandoned someone calling for help. But what sense did that make? I wasn’t making a difference just by standing there.

So it went until the twenty-eighth year of my life. Following reforms in the Soviet Union, Poland, and Hungary, our own hardline government finally began to bend to the people's will. Erich Honecker, our intransigent fossil of a leader, was ousted. And then, on the evening of November 9, 1989, Günter Schabowski announced on television that the border with the West was now open. After all this time, could it really be true?

I went to see if it was. It wasn't exactly an original thought. Huge crowds were gathering at the checkpoints in the Wall to see if the border was really opening. The border guards seemed to know nothing about any change in policy, but they eventually gave in and let the people pass through. They were greeted warmly by the people on the other side, the people whom our government would have us believe were "fascists." Soon, people were climbing over the Wall, but no one was shooting at them. The Wall had become harmless.

I ran to the section of the Wall to which I had always been drawn. A hand reached down to help me up and I took it. As I came up onto the Wall, I gazed into the face of a twenty-eight-year-old woman. She was... me. A different me. A Western me, with a mass of curly hair atop her head and a most peculiar outfit composed of bright, neon colors. We embraced as we came together on top of the Wall.

As I would soon learn, she was Marlene Baumann, the identical twin sister I had never known. She had been with relatives in the West on that day in 1961 when the Wall was built. No doubt hoping to spare us the pain of separation, our respective guardians had both chosen to never tell us about the other.

And yet, we had somehow been able to sense the other. For as long as we could remember, we had felt the same pull. On every day that we could, we had stood directly across from each other, as close as we could be with the Wall in the way.



## **Emma Galloway Stephens**

is a neurodivergent poet and professor from the Appalachian foothills of South Carolina. Her poems have appeared in Catfish Stew, The Windhover, The Nature of Things, and Ekstasis Magazine. She dreams of earning her PhD in gothic literature and then disappearing into the Blue Ridge Mountains.

## **This is How to Burn a Haunted House:**

The pine bones aren't everlasting.  
They will burn after one bite from the forest fire  
that starts when justice strikes the woods like lightning.

Its rooms are like a vacant, gaping mouth.  
They choke on smoke curling upwards like a question mark.  
The rust-stained roof melts in the heat.

Its doors collapse inwards, dropping like heavy hands.  
The waiting woods' incendiary arms embrace the skeleton house,  
a legacy of pine swallowing a legacy of pine.

Let its great glass eyes close forever.  
Let it lay its ancient head on a bed of pale brick.  
Let its walls of ash and sand sleep for generations.

## Walking in the House

Wear shoes in the old house,  
or you'll get a splinter  
big as a nail in the sole  
of your tender little foot.

You'll get a splinter  
if you go into the back rooms.  
Your tender little foot  
cannot bear the old house all alone.

If you go into the back rooms,  
don't go where Granddaddy sleeps.  
Don't walk in the old house all alone.  
Stay where we can see you.

Don't go. Granddaddy sleeps  
where your uncle walked barefoot, once.  
Stay. We can see  
the sliver in his foot, a silver wound.

Your uncle walked barefoot once,  
alone in the woods.  
The sliver in his foot, a wound  
earned from walking under the moon.

Don't walk alone through the woods  
to your uncle's house.  
Don't walk under the silver moon.  
Stay where we can see you.

Your uncle's house remains  
a nail buried in the sole.  
Stay where we can see you.  
Wear shoes in the old house.



Living in Happy Valley,

**Michele Mekel**

wears many hats: educator, bioethicist, poetess, cat herder, witch, and woman. Mekel has more than 150 poems published, as well as a recently released chapbook (*Under a Quiet Moon*). Her work has appeared in various academic and creative publications, including being featured on Garrison Keillor's *The Writer's Almanac* and nominated for Best of the Net.



## Route 322

Fencerows, riverbanks, leeward slopes  
line rural highway,  
winding through Upper Appalachia.

But there's a stretch  
where the road spreads sloppily,  
runs flat.

There, poles—  
of treated wood,  
supporting power lines  
along mountain ridges;  
  
of stainless steel,  
supporting nearly nude women  
inside squat, windowless buildings.

But so, too—  
of concrete,  
supporting a shrunken simulacrum  
of Staten Island's Lady,

cast from white plaster.

Liberty—

writ small,  
out of place  
amid rushing waters,  
strip club billboards

—intent on dragging  
her, her sisters  
into the undertow.

Yet, she stares

firmly ahead,  
lifting her lamp.

## Childhood's Summer

At dusk, we raced gleefully  
along chip-and-tar lanes  
shadowed by stolid oak and elm.

Enveloped in fog  
trailing from mosquito trucks,  
we popped wheelies,  
rode on handlebars,  
stood atop seats—  
before wiping out.

We knew nothing  
of helmets or protective pads—  
aware only of the rough-and-tumble ways  
of our feral child tribe.

Scarred knees, palms, elbows  
became pitted with loose gravel  
once more.

Pebbles, dirt, tears

washed down the drain  
by fizzing hydrogen peroxide rivulets.

Injuries wrapped in gauze  
and stripes of surgical tape  
served as bright white medals  
won in the evening's fray.

Sent out again,  
we collected bikes,  
splayed on pavement  
where they—we—had fallen.

Hobbling home in twilight,  
a cricket chorus  
was our dirge.

*A version first published in Muddy River Poetry Review (2022).*

## David

After a week of texting,  
you tell me  
I don't seem engaged.

I tell you  
it's true.  
You've seen through me,  
as I've seen through you.

You accuse me  
of failing  
to ask about your life.

So I do.  
I ask why  
your gym-work-Netflix-repeat life  
is so small?  
I ask if  
you're seeking to bookmark  
indistinguishable days?

You retort  
I'm pushing  
—just another pushy woman.

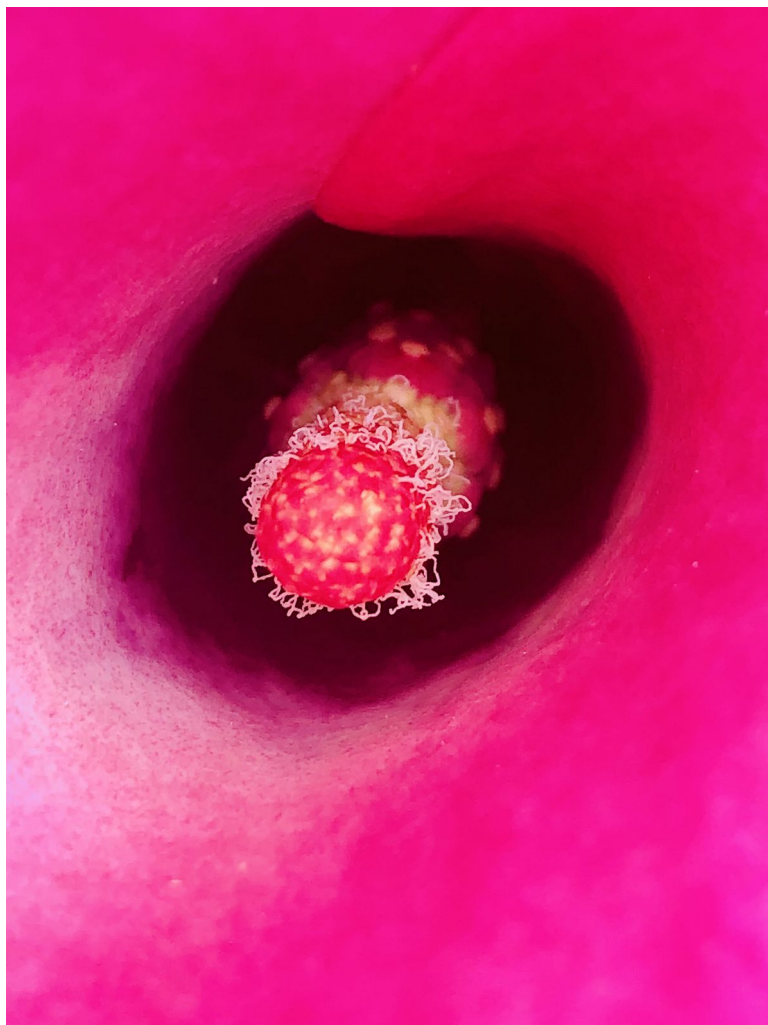
Yes, you're right—  
yet again.

Like Adam,  
you prefer Eve,  
made of your rib—  
a substrate you know,  
can control.

I, though, am Lilith,  
possessed of her own mind  
—dispossessed of you—  
and bored of your limits  
on living.



*Untitled*



*Untitled*

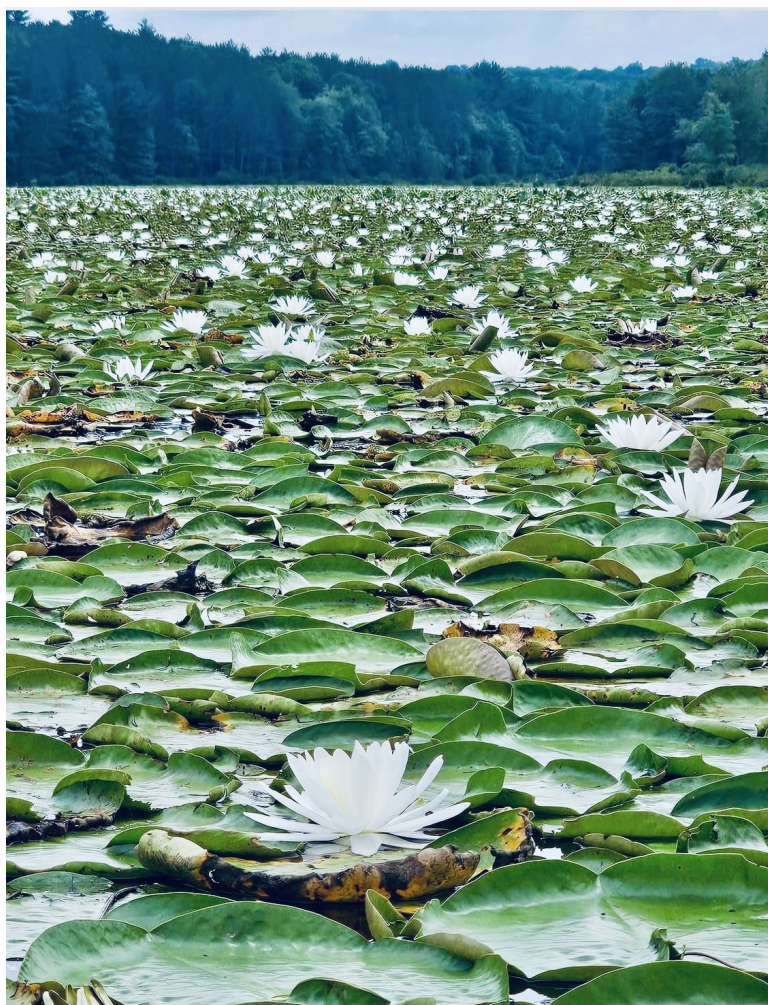




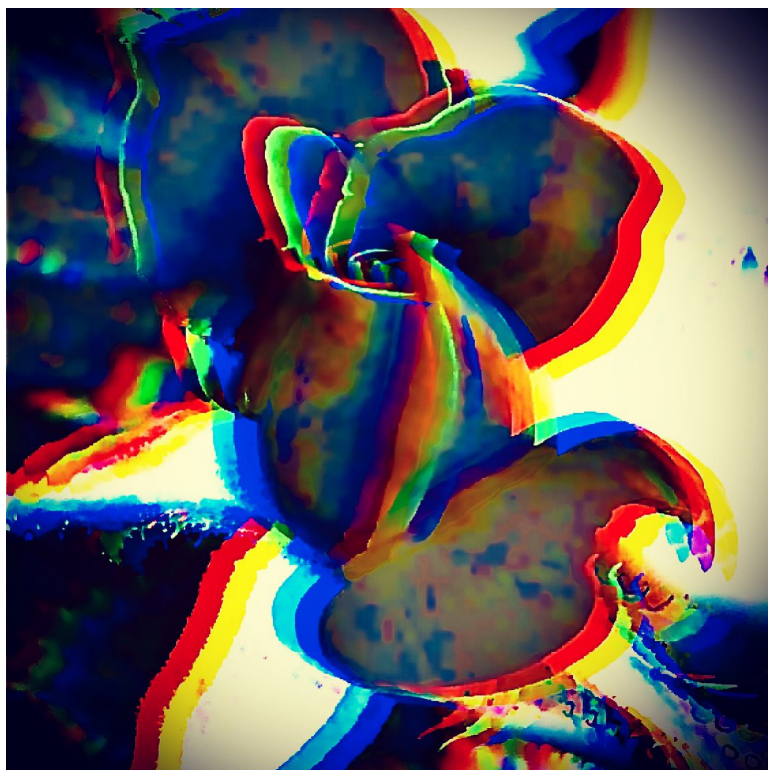
*Untitled*



*Untitled*



*Untitled*



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*Untitled*



## **Holly Day**

's writing has recently appeared in Analog SF, Cardinal Sins, and New Plains Review, and her published books include Music Theory for Dummies and Music Composition for Dummies. She currently teaches classes at The Loft Literary Center in Minnesota, Hugo House in Washington, and The Muse Writers Center in Virginia.

## Bones

The electricians quietly lift the loose bones from the hole  
pass them up to be boxed, there's a procedure for this.  
Six feet down, there isn't room for anything but multicolored  
cables  
a square black box that attaches to the foundation of the house  
where it will bounce signals back to the main power station  
regarding the power usage of each particular house.

Even further beneath the electricians' feet are more bones,  
but they won't be disturbed, not this time. There are bones  
all the way down, centuries of people dying  
and being shoved into the dirt, this is just how it is.  
When the next electricians or gas men or telephone repairmen  
come  
and dig up the next layer of bones,  
they, too, will have a procedure  
of removal and disposal that will attract little attention,  
not even warrant a line in the local newspaper  
not register a blip in the evening news.



## The Gift

The necklace lay on the sidewalk, shiny against the dirty ice,  
clasp broken as though it had either caught against a scarf  
roughly pulled off,  
or ripped off and tossed away in anger, perhaps in an argument,  
frustration with the presenter of the necklace, if it had been a  
gift,  
there were so many scenarios to consider.

My son brought the necklace home and fixed the clasp  
wrapped it and gave it to me for Christmas. It was obviously  
an expensive necklace, at least more expensive than my ten-year-  
old  
could have bought, so I asked him where he got it  
praising it lavishly as he helped me put it on.

He told me he found it, just lying in front of our house  
a look on his face as though he thought maybe he'd done  
something wrong  
as though admitting he'd found the necklace, lying broken in the  
dirt  
would make it worth any less to me. My mind raced through  
all the scenarios that would result in a necklace like this  
just lying in the snow, tried to recall any late-night fights  
in the street, anyone who had slipped in the ice in front of our  
house

anything out of the ordinary that would add a layer of guilt

to accepting this gift from my son,  
his eyes already brimming with tears.

## The Final Days

I can see our liberation so clearly, feel the joy  
that will come the first time we step off the plane into a new  
country  
or off the deck of a boat, knowing everything we had  
is so far behind. I can feel the sunshine on my face  
the way my heart will feel light as air when I turn to tell you  
this is where we were always meant to be, this is how  
we were always meant to be  
I can't believe it took us so long to find our way back to love.

I try to tell you how things are going to be for us  
when our last child has left the house, when the dog is dead  
when our cat is dead, when we have nothing holding us here  
no responsibilities any more, you tell me that time will never  
come  
there will always be something weighing our feet to the earth  
I just don't understand how things work, I just don't get it.

I try again to tell you about the sunshine on my skin  
in my dreams, how something that real to me  
must be real somewhere  
all we have to do is live long enough  
to make it there.



**Nathaniel Tok**

is a high school writer from Washington State. His work appears in The Bangalore Review, Half & One, Beyond Words, and others. Discover his community work at [futurescholarfoundation.org](http://futurescholarfoundation.org).

## Chicken Rice

Every weekend, your father would labor away, alone, in your family's kitchen, accompanied only by the solitary hiss of the simmering pot and gentle swirl of steam rising from the rice cooker. Now, so many years later, you finally understand why.

Salt grains tumble and dance as you work a whole chicken vigorously with fine sea salt in your new kitchen. You submerge it in boiling water with beautifully golden ginger and mellow green onion, and carefully watch the submerged bird poach for exactly eleven minutes and twenty-four seconds. Just as your father taught you. Once your egg-shaped timer dings, you turn off the heat and submerge the chicken immediately in an ice bath. You do this with care, perhaps with some nostalgia from childhood days long gone, but that's okay. They say that nostalgia nourishes the soul, anyways.

Your mind drifts back to your childhood. Long, reaching afternoons lazily spent outdoors in the Clementi Mall Hawker Centre, as its faded sign weakly proclaims. The orange sign has Chinese text in ugly green blocks underneath its English name, but you struggle reading it because you've been adamantly refusing to learn Chinese since you were just three years old. A gloriously sour collection of smells from the hawkers' stalls blend together, lifted wetly by the hot humid heat of the afternoon Singaporean sun. You notice the gossiping aunties nearby stare at you, smile widely. *Wah, your cheeks so rosy ah*, they exclaim, Singaporean tang thick on their tongue. They mean it as a compliment, so a polite smile is offered, followed by a darting look away. You seem odd there, an eight-year-old boy, sitting alone on a stained plastic bench. Your aunt has told you to wait while she went to buy your favorite duck rice, drenched in so much dark sauce the meat becomes indistinguishable from the grain. You peer around anxiously, searching, though knowing you shouldn't worry. After all, Singapore is safe.

You barely notice yourself moving to prepare the fragrant chicken rice. Almost automatically, you wash the grains until the water runs clear and remember. Those afternoons, the laughter of you and your family echoing in your mind. You've taken care to save the flavorful fat from your tender poached chicken, cooling on the countertop now. You'll sauté the fat with oil and garlic before pouring it over your rice sitting plainly in the rice cooker later, toss a few thick slices of ginger and several cloves of garlic into the rice cooker before closing its lid and pushing start. You give in to the dull ache in the soles of your feet from standing for so long, your right foot starting to throb just a little more than your left. *I'll rest*, you tell yourself, *just for a while*.

A green bridge. It's heavy with an earthy rust and stories forgotten decades ago. The brief caws of magpies echo from the surrounding trees—they've been there for as long as you can remember. You know you won't take too long to cross the bridge with your grandmother to the bus stop on the other side; you're supposed to call her *nai nai*, but "Gran" has always come more naturally to you. Grasped in your tiny right hand is a stretchy plastic bag of week-old-bread for the fish below in the river as you and your grandmother slowly walk towards the railing.

Time lies still. It has no meaning—not here.

She tells you to pinch small pieces of bread and toss them into the water below, and you glance at Gran as you see small ripples and shapes darting near the river's surface. Groups of fish, big, small, have come to nibble on the bread. *Nice, hm?* She smiles at you. Her wrinkles accentuate her eyes, pools of kindness forged by years of hardship and suffering and loss you know you can never imagine. You feel yourself break into a grin, lost watching the water below. *Wow*, you breathe. The river turtles, so rarely seen, have come for the bread too.

You're jolted awake, awakened by the unnecessarily hurried beeping of your rice cooker. Each grain of rice, seemingly spun from the very same sunbeams that now make their way through your blinds and onto your countertop, appears swollen with the flavors of chicken and ginger and garlic. You breathe in the fragrant smell of the rice, deeply. Slowly but surely, you cut beautifully unsymmetrical pieces of soft, succulent meat from your now cooled chicken. They fall into place on the plate with a certainty you've worked hard to ensure. A mound of hot, steaming rice is scooped on the other side, garnished proudly with crisp strips of scallion and fresh coriander. Though the specks of vibrant green are much different from the rusted bridge you know, you can't help but feel the sticky Clementi breeze upon your neck.

You stare at the plate before you thoughtfully. Thick curls of steam curl up from the flavorful poached chicken, stretching towards the ceiling, and suddenly a peaceful silence has settled across your kitchen.

And so you begin to eat. The kitchen fades around you, leaving only the faintly sour-sweet taste of heritage on your tongue, a touch of memory somewhere within. You exhale as your spoon quietly clicks against the now-empty plate of chicken rice.

Because just for a moment, so many years later, you were young and carefree and full of wonder. You were home—Singapore.

*An alternate version was first published in Gemini Magazine, September 2024.  
Will be published, as well, in Eunoia Review in June.*



## Mother

The only thing you could never bear about your mother was that she'd always been a terrible liar, an atrociously unconvincing one. She'd only half-look into your eyes as she told you the things, never acknowledging that her son was listening, really listening.

*The moment a man's heart betrays him, you can almost feel the universe pause. Just for a heartbeat.* She sets down her chopsticks before intensely fixing her hazel brown eyes upon you.

Distractedly, you mumble a response as you take a large bite out of a steaming hot *siu mai*: "How nice, Ma."

The prawn inside the *siu mai* is almost bitter, not quite sour. You can't quite place its flavor - but it stirs something deep within you, an ache that threatens to swallow your chest into itself. Reaching for a cup of tea you gulp, hoping - begging - to wash the taste away. The bitterness intensifies as you drink, but the tea is deliciously metallic.

Your mother continues: *I was your age. Your grandmother and I had just discovered that the man had been the one stealing for years from our-*

Her lips are pruned together tightly. You realize she must see the smirk that coyly threatens to show itself upon your lips and suddenly you feel a sharp sting on your left cheek. Instinctively you jerk up and your eyes meet hers.

*He was wearing a green polo shirt when he collapsed,* she's saying softly to nobody in particular.

Her right palm is bright red.

Your mother is a lover: she describes how she had grown up in her cousins' house, *a condescendingly big one in Singapore* - a laugh - while Grandmother had given her life to her little shophouse in

Malaysia and Grandfather gave his to alcohol and Marlboro cigarettes and younger women.

Your mother won't tell you how she struggled to lift heavy boxes of Tiger beer to Grandfather's room whenever she could. *Summers were so hot and so wet you could almost feel the ghosts of your future choking your skin*, she says to you instead.

A pause.

*Do you remember your father and I at eighteen?*

"Yes," you say. "*Young and naive and you - so blissfully unaware -*"

*We were so poor*, she sighs wistfully. *That summer your father took me on a date at the fanciest restaurant in Singapore just so we could feel some air conditioning together. We could only order the cheapest: a singular sizzling prawn served on a stone hot plate. The stares from other diners were unbearable.*

She releases a slow breath as if having overly exerted herself from remembering.

*Your father didn't care. He held my hand and laughed as they looked. In that moment I knew deep in my soul I had found the man who I wanted to die with.*

A nod; your knuckles are white, clenched. It's odd to think that the balding foul-tempered ashy spitting man you know was once so valiant; kind, even. Maybe with another family.

Your mother glances at you. *Every time he walks out our door, a small part of me still wants to follow him into the unknown, just to see if he turns around to check if I'm there*, she says softly. And all of a sudden the tablecloth in all of its fine cream grain is more interesting than anything in the world.

"Why?"

Your ask is desperate, embarrassingly primal. The miasma of sickly sweet alcohol threatens your nostrils, and the scar on your left arm pulses with a sudden, sharp pain.

Maybe the summer heat has opened it again.

Your mother is you and you are Mother. Bunny-toothed, soft noses. Round, friendly faces that made Swensons servers and old uncles you both had never known smile widely and swear they knew you from *somewhere-just-couldn't-remember-where*. The mole barely behind her right ear is hers just as it refuses to leave your left no matter how hard you scrub. You are her stories unafraid and her worries released and her fear and her pleasure and all her pain in this world. *Pain, more than anything else*, she admits one day, still half-asleep.

The odd ache that siu mai had given you that day so many years ago has long gone, but its taste has remained at the back of your palette all these years, spreading. Permeating almost every portion of yourself: permanent, painful, protective.

One night you're hunched over at your desk cluttered with spreadsheets and stuffed animals collected over the years when you finally realize the siu mai's taste and collapse into your chair, eyes wide. Remember its bitterness, swallow the sourness, realize the prawn's... sweetness.

Two hearts beat together until one is drifted away by time forever.

You can feel when its pumping will cease soon, when its flow will begin to ebb. Older, but young now as you feel your years fade away for the last time. You've made sure you're there with her, alone.

"Why?" you ask again, softly. As if understanding the question for the first time.

She squeezes your hand. *Bitter, sour*, she whispers. *Sweet. We savor it all at once.*

*As family.*

Your mother's eyes are open - faded taupe, fierce. They hold  
yours - a thrumming hazel - steadfast into the Great Beyond.

*First published in The Bangalore Review, August 2024.*

