

**Issue Two - Hometown  
Contributors  
ii. (adolescence)**

Baillie Puckett, Pim Wangtechawat, Laura Martens, Isabella Melians, Imogen L. Smiley, Karen Steiger, Thea Wilkens, Daniel Liu, Olivia Onyekwena, Christiana Jasutan, Rex Williams, Megan Pitt, Quinn Christensen, Halle Preneta, Ellen Warren, Katie Grierson, Kelli Lage, Zoe Cuniffe, Grace Watts, Marta Špoljar, Jasmine Kapadia, Kris Hiles, Roy Duffield, Salonee Verma

**Guest Artist**  
Heidi Pickover



# The Girl Who Was Not Really A Girl



Once upon a time, in a secret magical forest, in a secret magical kingdom, there lived a girl.

At first glance, she seemed like an ordinary girl, with ordinary, pretty features, and a sweet, friendly disposition. But like so many girls in these magical kingdoms, she was cursed yet she did not know it.

After sixteen years on earth, the girl woke up one day with a terrible pain behind her shoulder. When she touched the spot where it hurt, her fingers came away with blood. For the first time in her young life, she felt fear seeping into her skin, as cold as the dead of winter.

And so she went to her mothers who were not really her mothers, women who were not really women, who lived with her in this secret magical forest.

The women took one look at her and kissed her forehead in blessing.

“You are one of us now,” they said. “We will keep you safe in this forest, for the world outside is vast and not for the likes of us.”

The curse happened day by day, little by little, like a flower shooting up from the earth and revealing its petals one by one. The girl grew taller, more slender and curved, the childishness in her flesh slowly melting away. The pain behind her shoulders became sharper, the blood thicker, and feathers began pushing through like blades until one day, like they had with her mothers who were not really her mothers, her wings unfolded.

The wings were golden in colour, deeply rich and layered. The more she flexed and spread them, the more they caught the sun and glowed. Then more light brown feathers started sprouting from her legs, dainty to the touch. Her feet, so small and shapely, began to grow long and twisted until one morning she woke up and saw that there were now talons.

She longed to weep, but somehow the tears would not fall. For the women told her that change is natural and one should not weep over things they cannot change.

“Never leave this forest,” they told her, “for the world outside is vast and not for the likes of us.”

And so the girl who was now not really a girl lived on in the magical forest with her mothers. As her wings grew larger, so did her beauty and magic. She learned how to fly across the sky at night, how to sew flowers into her hair, and how to bathe in the river when the full moon came out.

But she also learned how to hide, for there were many men who found themselves wandering into the secret forest with evil in their hearts – hunters and warriors sent by kings and princes to kidnap women who were not really women for their wives.

Hidden behind trees by the river bank, the men would wait for the women to come out and bathe, golden bows and arrows nocked and ready. But every time they would catch a glimpse of a woman, either a flash of her wings or a glance from her eyes, magic would cause their hearts to melt and their weapons to fall to the ground. No longer would the men want to return to their masters. Instead they longed to win the women’s hearts for themselves.

But every time the men stepped into the river and moved close to the object of their desire, there would be a flash of silver. Just a flash. Then the river would turn deep red.

The men, dead with eyes empty as stones, were swallowed up by the tide, never to be seen again.

“This is what you must do,” the girl’s mothers told her as they slipped a knife into her hand, “for the world outside is vast and not for the likes of us.”

One night, when the moon was full, the girl was bathing in the river when she heard a rustling from behind a tree.

There, on the bank, stood a young man.

He did not have any weapons with him. His clothes, unlike those of other men, were tattered and stained, and he held a walking staff in his hand.

Upon noticing her, he stepped into the river, his eyes wide with wonder, lost in her beauty.

“Do not come any closer!” she called.

But he, enchanted by her cursed magic, did not seem to hear.

Her hand found the hilt of her knife. When he reached her, she heard her mothers’ voice inside her mind, telling her that this was inevitable. Summoning her courage, she plunged the blade into his heart.

The young man died in her arms. But before the river could sweep him away, she looked into his eyes and saw her own tears reflected in them, for she knew then that he was not a hunter nor an evil man. He was but a lonely traveller, lost and far from home. An honest face, pained and afraid. Just a boy.

And so the girl went to her mothers with the boy's blood still fresh on her hands and laid the knife they'd given her at their feet. She spoke to them, bid them farewell and kissed their foreheads in blessing. But the women did not cry, for they believed that one should not weep over things they cannot change.

The girl left the secret magical forest when the sun began to rise, flying as high as the clouds. She felt tears on her cheeks when she saw how the trees, hills and rivers below were covered in a beautiful golden light. And beyond them, spread out before her like an endless promise, she saw valleys, deserts, mountains capped with snow and oceans that stretched on forever and ever until they reached the edge of the sky.

The girl who was not really a girl was a girl no more, for she now saw that the world was vast.



### **Pim Wangtechawat**

*Pim Wangtechawat is a writer from Bangkok with a Masters in Creative Writing from Edinburgh Napier University in Scotland. Her writing has been published in various websites, literary magazines and journals, including the Mekong Review, the Nikkei Asian Review, and YesPoetry. She is currently working on her debut novel, The Moon Represents My Heart, and is represented by Liza DeBlock of Mushens Entertainment. You can follow her on Twitter at @PimsupaW and on Instagram at @pim.wangtechawat.*

# The Girl Who Was Not Really A Girl

e when





# tutorial on conducting a waltz

## Sunset Moments

first movement strung  
patience across a bridge of  
flaccid, iron strings

cue in the cellos  
(measure 63), with your  
right hand, crescendo

orange garlands to  
fall at our heels- paint the stage  
bitter vibrato

now, suggest applause.  
caw to the masses, praying  
is most effective

I yearn for the touch of the dusk;  
When we can bask in the glow of a setting sun and gaze  
Outward to the horizon, sharing stories  
Over cold fries and lukewarm milkshakes;  
Curfew tapping its fingers on watch screens,  
But the conversation is louder than the shouts of parents,  
Inevitably grounding us for not calling to say we'd be late.  
Nothing else matters than the warmth of a ten-degree sun  
As its light caresses our features,  
The breathy voice of incoming spring whispering,  
That tomorrow will be  
A better day.

### Isabella Melians

Isabella Melians (she/her) is a sophomore attending school in south Florida. She is the vice president of her school's writing club, "The Writer's Circle", and has been published or is forthcoming in Rasa Review, Fever Dreams, K'in Literary Journal, Spillover Magazine, Ice Lolly Review, NonBinary Review and other reviewers. She is also a poetry editor with Outlander Zine and Kalopsia Literary. Insta: @isabellam\_04.

### Imogen. L. Smiley

Imogen. L. Smiley (she/her) is a twenty-three-year-old writer from Essex, UK. She has anxiety, depression and an endless love of dogs, especially big ones! You can support her by following her on Twitter and Instagram at @Imogen\_L\_Smiley.

I had fallen in love,  
as only a fourteen-year-old girl could,  
my soul all in,  
my heart full to bursting,  
and he had definitely *not* fallen in love,  
but I was okay to have around.  
So when it was time for us to go home  
after the church youth group meeting,  
I would walk him home  
in the dusk as it turned to night  
because it was a longer walk  
and I could be with him  
just that little while longer,  
time spent not holding my hand,  
not hugging at his door,  
and definitely no metal-mouthed kisses,  
but if I were lucky,  
maybe he'd punch me on the arm.  
And we walked down Miller Avenue,  
oak and elm trees lining each side of the street,  
the streetlights glowing orange,  
he was wearing his gold and black football jersey,  
and I was wearing whatever I thought  
he might notice,  
and it was the end of summer  
and the school year had just started,  
and he had a crush on some dumb cheerleader,  
and I would give him thoughtful advice,  
and we would stand awkwardly  
outside his house for a while,  
and then it really was time for him to go inside,  
so I'd tell him I'd see him later,  
and I'd walk back home alone.



# Sophomore Year

## Karen Steiger

*Karen Steiger is a poet, fiction writer, and breast cancer survivor living in Schaumburg, Illinois, with her beloved husband, Matt, and two retired racing greyhounds, Giza and Horus. She is the founder of her poetry blog, The Midlife Crisis Poet ([www.themidlifecrisispoet.com](http://www.themidlifecrisispoet.com)), and her work has been published in The Wells Street Journal, Arsenika, Black Bough Poetry, Ang(st), Perhappened, Kaleidotrope, Mineral Lit Mag, Rejection Letters, Versification, Sledgehammer Lit, Bombfire Lit, and others.*

## Tarot Reading

In a Northwest Indiana bedroom,  
three girls are bent over the deck of cards,  
bought that evening from Barnes & Noble,  
the prettiest deck they had,  
with soft female nudes,  
vibrant colors,  
shiny gold edges,  
the cards shuffled  
and arranged in the shape of a cross,  
laboriously looking up and reading the meaning  
of each card aloud,  
The Magician, The Chariot, The Four of Staves,  
The Five of Cups reversed...  
The ancient power of sight and prognostication  
being harnessed on this night  
to lay bare the mind  
of an oblivious teenage boy.

## Journal of Erato



**Heidi Pickover**  
in response to *Tarot Reading*

# becoming \_\_\_\_\_ a \_\_\_\_\_ milk carton \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ has \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ left me \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_ face.



my father has nailed every tree with “missing girl” signs.  
he gets calls every day & night & noon saying she’s been seen  
walking the campus, they saw her in a homeless man’s jacket,  
they saw her smoking a joint with some random boy.

but all the psychics know she is in some world without all the  
gunshots & fireworks, she shares smoke with eve there &  
lilith & joins them & they all cheat at cards  
& become woman turned wolf. *taking her place has  
pulled my teeth out, starting from the back.*

Death climbed through her window with footsteps  
lighter than His frame & His laugh & the freckles that used to dust His face.  
He did not have a stench or a feel, no blizzard  
passed through her room. nothing seemed to rot, only a sound,  
only the tv buzzing & a gasp of seeing a man naked for the first time  
& whispers of how nice it would be to have a jawline carved by a razor.

He took the girl in his sleepy arms & sucked the life out of her neck.  
the crushing of [her parents’] dreams along with bone  
haunts & warps my spine. no blood. no scream.  
Death, in his sweet drunken state, did not wish to leave her parents  
childless. (whiskey made Him such a sap).

He chipped a piece of His ribs off  
& molded something that might be a soul or a heart or a vibrating  
hate for everything everyone stands for. He carefully opened  
the girl’s mouth & slid the bone down to where her heart should beat.

this creates a child with mutt brown eyes & burn bible instincts.  
the universe shakes its head in pity & the knowledge that a rib does  
not make for compassion & a girl’s body does not make for a home.  
her father mourns & mourns & i tell him at least he’s got me.  
he’s my father, too, but he won’t believe it. mom hates the flannel  
& grandad’s combat boots. she hates that i dress baggy &  
kiss woodpeckers & that i’m a birdlike thing with bones hollow  
& fragile enough to be broken by the breeze. she still grieves the loss  
of her precious picture perfect daughter.

i’m not a girl, mom, i’m not a boy. i’m neither &  
both & somewhere in between all of it. i wear skirts  
& bind my chest, & no mom, i don’t think i can ever learn  
to be totally happy with what i have. i’ll carve parts  
of my malleable body off & stitch them back together until  
i’ve cobbled up some form of myself i can live with.

i am a parasite & a pandemic & something awful  
living inside my own limbs, taking up residence in this haunted  
house of a body & learning to live with it,  
learning that i sleep better when i’m under the bed instead of in it.

my father prays every day  
& the stench of an empty god fuels his heart & stinks up the house.

surely there is some deadline for grief.

*surely not. surely not. surely not.*

**Thea Wilkens**

*Thea Wilkens (she/they) is a queer teen poet from Central Texas. She enjoys writing, music, art, and most other creative forms of self-expression. They have been writing poetry, novels, short stories, etc. since she could pick up a pen, and she has never been one to listen to people who tell them they are too young. When they're not writing, you can find her outside, with her friends, or sitting with her cat, Mira. They have far too many books, and a slight obsession with thrifting, Mitski, and orchid mantises. You can find her on Instagram at @dear.the-odora, Pinterest at @muddylemons, and Twitter and Wattpad at @amelancholypen.*

# two boys

# in a



## two boys in a hurricane

*orlando never felt like home to me*  
you say with your eyes closed,  
arms broken backwards, and head turned to the sky.  
I think to myself that you must be from Pluto.  
Neptune at the least.  
*there are fewer stars tonight, I say.*  
what I don't say, is that  
it's like the moon-whipped sky  
is sucking in its belly, for you.  
it's storming but neither of us are wet.  
the earth is burning under our tongues.  
it's the end of the world.  
just when it's about to get quiet  
just then, he grabs a star  
and there is one fewer  
universe.

*things happen differently for the two of us, right?*

*what do you mean?*

### Daniel Liu

Daniel Liu (he/him) is a student and poet in Central Florida. His family is originally from Fuzhou, China and he has lived in Orlando for the majority of his life. When he isn't writing, you can find him playing Bach on the cello or crying to Taylor Swift. You can find his other works in Cathartic Youth Literary, By Any Other Name, and upcoming in Paper Crane Journal.

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# Falling in love when you're 16 feels like



SPACE[S]

I still dream of tall boys  
in their little oversized tux  
five inches taller than me  
perfect for the tippy toe kiss  
but I never ask  
and you never ask  
so we just swirl away to the music  
in between occasional eye contact  
all around, feet shuffling endlessly  
yet all I want  
is have your lips meet mine  
in an epic kind of union  
like how the girl in the movie  
gets her happy ending.

**Olivia Onyekwena**

Olivia is a writer from Nigeria who loves sunsets, sunflowers  
and thrilling football matches. When she's not writing or  
reading poetry and think pieces, she enjoys having football  
and tv shows centric conversations. Olivia has a tiny space  
on twitter @oliviaakwena

1. Committing treason. How your will parts like butter against a hot knife. Love feels like more than a mouthful of spicy Mexican food in your mouth.
2. Each person makes the air around you crackle. The lightning never tastes so sweet. You start labelling strangers based on their eye colour. Blue like the sea. Green as grass. Grey like the clouds. You stop at brown because the books don't romanticize brown eyes enough. Not if they're not hazel.
3. Your crush's name feels like a confession in your lips. Knees bump to each other as bodies huddle closer. *Say his name again, your best friend says, say it, say like you mean it.*
4. People become homes because that's what Pinterest says. But you never knew love is claustrophobic. It shrinks you, renders you off breath from your own lungs.
5. The next time you see a stranger, you exhale a made-up name like it's holy.
6. Love can feel sacrilegious sometimes.

**Christiana Jasutan**

Christiana Jasutan (she/her) is a Chinese-Indonesian  
writer who explores identity, the body, love, mental  
health, and childhood in both her poetry and prose.  
Connect with Christi on her Twitter @ChristiJasutan  
or find her on Instagram @cacaolatte.writes to see  
more of her work.

# Rex Williams

## Gold Star



### Rex Williams

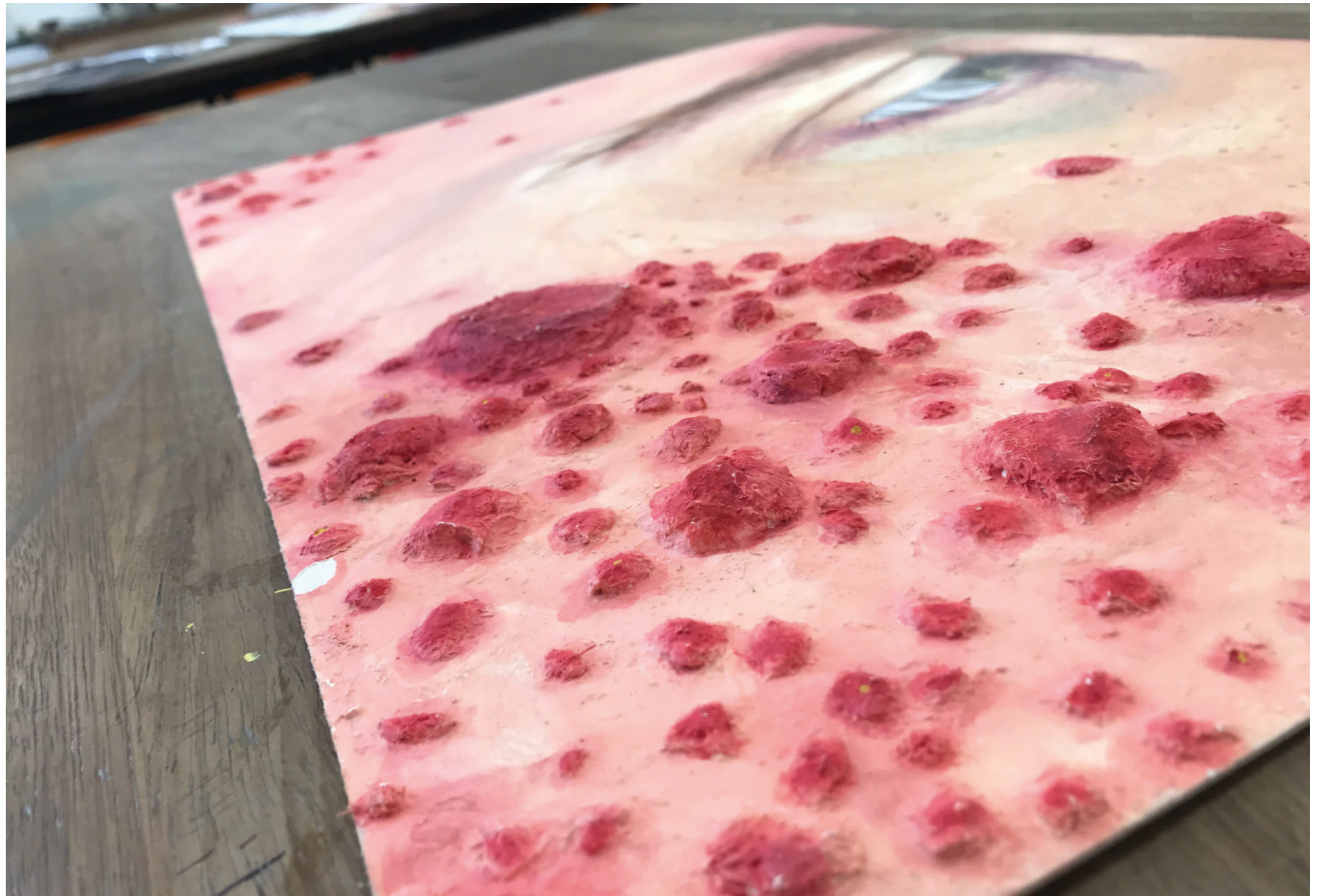
*Rex is a non-binary, queer artist who studies production arts for screen. Their creations are inspired by whatever they find around them, and in making art out of the mundane.*





**a photograph exploring the relationship between childhood and adolescence, and the complex tension felt with the idea of "good behaviour".**

A close-up painting of a woman's face, focusing on her eye and cheek. The skin is covered in numerous red, raised, and inflamed lesions, resembling severe acne or a skin condition. The eye is visible, looking slightly down. The background is a soft, pinkish-red wash. The signature 'MIRA BLACK' is visible in the bottom right corner.



**Rex Williams - Growing Pains**  
*modroc and oil paint on A2 mountboard*

a texture-inspired exploration, this is an attempt  
to demonstrate the beauty i find in the  
appearance of acne, and make people who  
consider it ugly look at it another way.



# Rex Williams Growing Pains

**Rex Williams**

*Rex is a non-binary, queer artist who studies production arts for screen. Their creations are inspired by whatever they find around them, and in making art out of the mundane.*





# tuesday night sunsets

**Megan Pitt**

*Megan Pitt is a 16 year old writer and avid reader from New Jersey. As editor-in-chief of her school's newspaper, she enjoys not only editing the work of others, but gaining inspiration from them. Writing is her passion and she hopes to pursue it in France in her future.*

Tuesday nights have the best sunsets. There may not be any science behind it, but goddamn it Adelaide believed there was.

Every teenager in this town was miserable. Saturday night curfews of 10pm and strict alcohol rules, made for many tired parents and angry seventeen year olds.

Adelaide was never angry, though. On Saturday nights, she'd be home by 9. She would waltz through the front door in skinny jeans and an oversized jumper, each night a different one given to her by a different boy. She never had a boyfriend, but she had about as many suitors as a fictional princess.

She had a way of enchanting people. She knew what happiness was, god she was drunk off of it, and everyone wanted a taste.

I fell in love with her. The beauty of her ivory skin against her bleach blonde hair. The elegance in her voice, as if Audrey Hepburn were her English teacher. The way she sauntered up to me at the supermarket and kissed me without hesitation, her dark pink lips and her gingerbread-scented lip gloss.

She never called me after the kiss. I finished off junior year, took the SATs, and kissed *other* girls with gingerbread-scented lip gloss.

I was in my best friend's passenger seat, flying down Mulberry Drive when I saw her. A mess of blonde hair, green eyes, and painted nails sitting on the roof of a white Jeep in her driveway.

“Stop the car. Stop the damn car!” I practically jumped out of the moving vehicle.

“Supermarket boy,” she slurred, high on the summer wind and the scent of suntan lotion.

She patted the spot next to her, and pulled her hair into a ponytail revealing the beauty of her neck.

We sat next to each other like that for hours. In silence. The sky turned cotton candy pink, then orange as if the Earth had been set aflame.

“It’s Tuesday,” Adelaide whispered. “Tuesday’s have the best sunsets”.

# THE FIRST CRUSH POST HEARTBREAK

## THE FIRST CRUSH POST HEARTBREAK

is strange. Feels like betrayal and redemption all at once. Feels like the first time the wind smells like spring after a long winter. Feels like the hibernation has passed and something is growing now, growing here, maybe just to spite all my worrying that nothing ever would again.

The first crush post heartbreak does not come swiftly, in a moment, the way heartbreakers do. Instead, it arrives softly, and in pieces - a dimple, a text, a joke meant just for me.

I'm used to keeping track of these sorts of things on the page. But when I sit down to write a poem about him, I find, to my surprise, that there's no need to turn this into something beautiful.

He already is.

We already are.

### Quinn Christensen

*Quinn Christensen is a writer and student from St. Paul, MN. Her work has appeared in Lunch Ticket, The Foredge Review and Amaryllis Poetry. You can find her on Twitter and Instagram @quinnjillayne.*



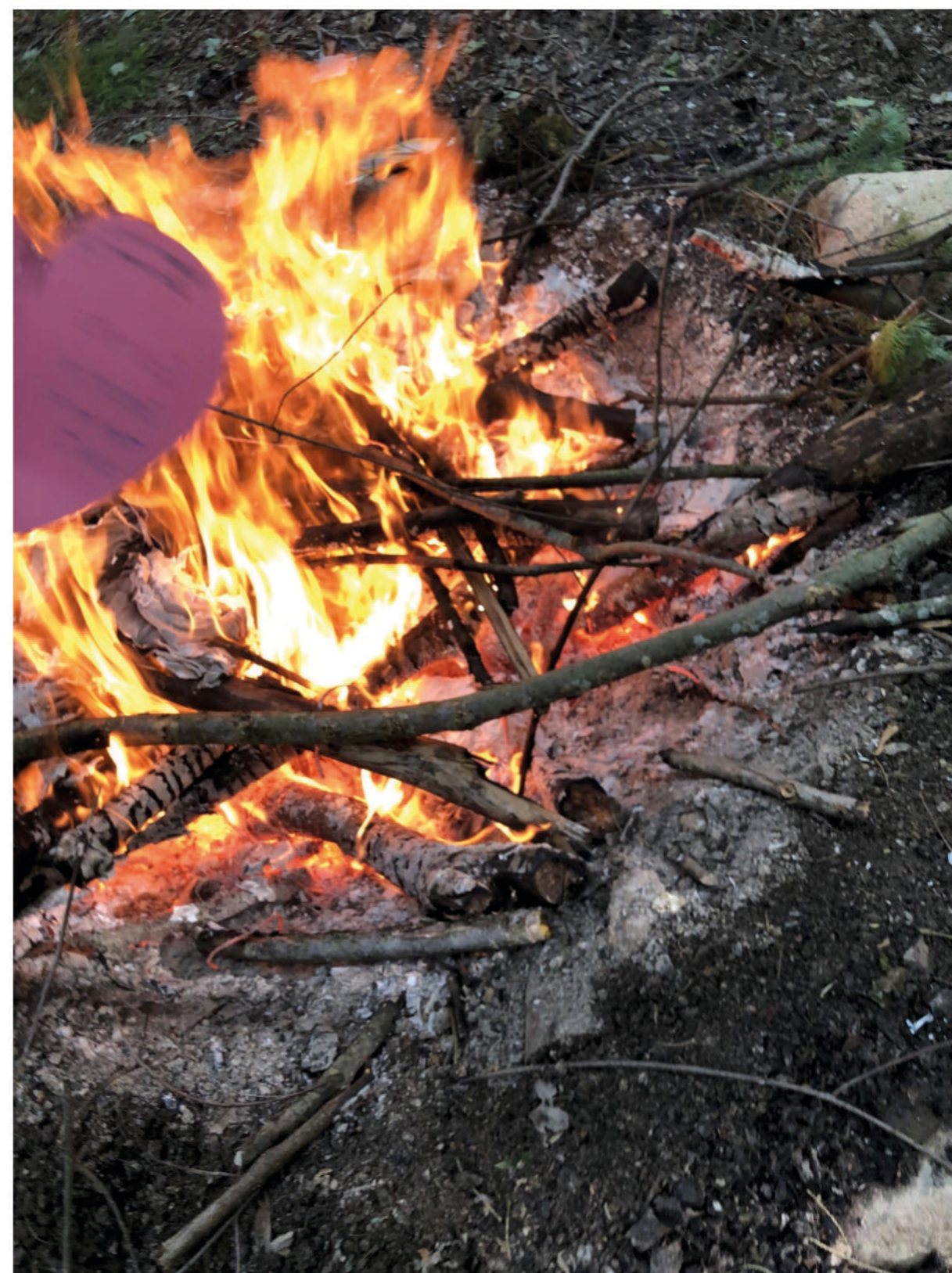
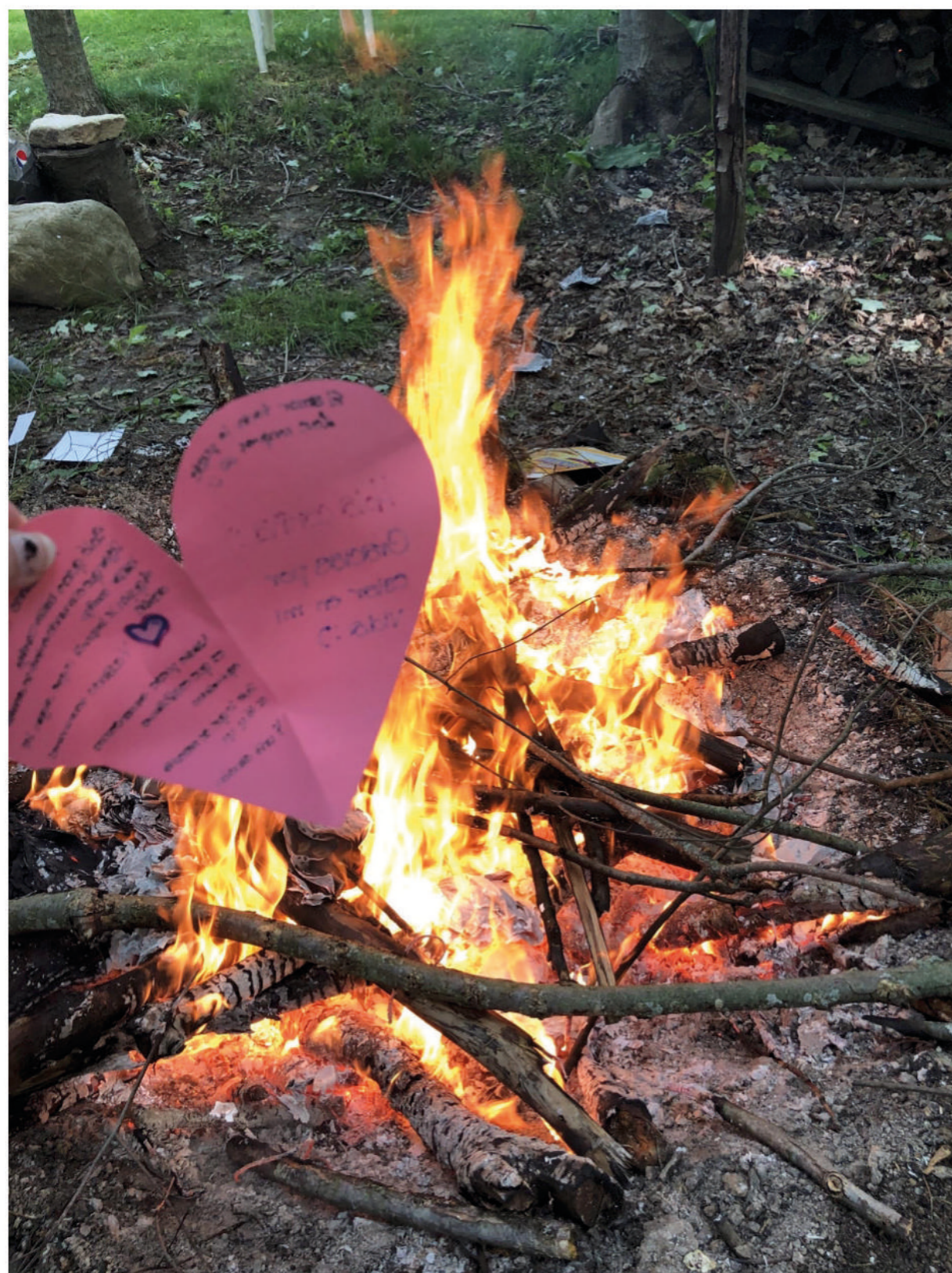
# Halle Preneta Heartbroken



## Halle Preneta

Halle (she/her) enjoys writing short romance, sci-fi, and horror stories along with poetry and gets her ideas from random life experiences and fanfiction. When she's not writing, she's either watching YouTube or playing Animal Crossing. Her Twitter handle is @YaTheatreNerd and you can check out more of her work here: <https://medium.com/@halleee>









# daydreaming my regrets

we miss being alive  
like lovesick teenagers  
doing acrobatics in the  
stars, drooping eyes  
from a bedroom window.

a special sort of  
tenderness, and simple  
human kindness made  
us fall in love every  
Monday morning.

we peeked through  
the park bushes to  
the graveyard, wishing  
that we could sleep  
eternally too –

the jealousy ate us  
whole, living halfway  
on Venus and at  
home in the darkness  
we weren't so alone.

**Ellen Warren**

*Ellen Warren is an enigmatic young writer with a passion for poetry, which she has loved since she was a child. Since graduating with a creative writing degree in 2019, Ellen has been inspired by innovative poetry and is fascinated by art that explores emotions and mental health. The poems are unapologetic and physical, reflecting the experiences in her life that have now made it onto the page. Find her on twitter @beehivepoesy*





**"Where will you go," I said, "after you get out of Idaho?"**

"Anywhere," he said.

"Anywhere else," I corrected.





# Small high school romance in e minor

I think I'm meant to be small.  
To whistle with the wind. Unheard but felt  
in the prickling of your skin.

It is the way I imagine god to be  
for that rare believer: a presence humming cleanly  
at the crumbling base of all things.

As a child I would search my skin,  
frantic to find a pulse, to be certain of life within.  
Quite alive, I'd decide to find God some other day.

Today, I sang aloud  
walking through my stolen town.  
People forget, but the air does not.  
I will stay sounding in the hum of the bells,  
felt by lonely gatherers.

Not at weddings,  
weddings are too big,  
just at funerals.

## Grace Watts

*As well as poetry, Grace Watts enjoys making art of all kinds, painting and singing especially. She tries to write truthfully to her own experiences whilst exploring within a traditional form, allowing you a look into a few of her thoughts as she works at trying to understand them herself.*

all my best friends  
i kissed and then someone boarded a plane.  
all my best lines  
i burned into your leather jacket. we hold  
half-smoked cigarettes in our pockets until our knuckles crack we  
can't share a joke because it is too cold to tell any  
and we can't go home because no one knows we are out.  
there are bottles in our school bags and hickeys under sweaters  
you let me take the first sip, we resurrect chivalry  
you hum a song and i dream over the lyrics.  
we board a train that drives through fields  
that never seem to stretch out far enough  
and none of this is a metaphor:

when we kiss it's just a kiss  
when you leave me you only left me  
when we share a wine bottle  
it's nothing but a wine bottle  
and I can spin none of it into salvation  
no matter how many new words i learn.

## Marta Špoljar

*Marta Špoljar is a translation student from Zagreb, Croatia. Her poetry has appeared in Anti-Heroine Chic and Pollux Journal and she can be found running social media for The Wondrous Real Magazine. Words she cannot put into poetry she tweets from @shhhhhpoljar.*

# Heidi Pickover

in response to *high school  
romance in e minor*





# supermoon

## Jasmine Kapadia

*Jasmine Kapadia is an Asian-American poet and high schooler. Her work has been recognized by Malala Yousafzai, KQED, Good Morning America, and elsewhere. She has work featured or forthcoming in Kissing Dynamite, the Eunoia Review, and All Guts No Glory, among others. Find her on Instagram: @jazzymoos*

overhead, the highways press their hips together,  
still scared to kiss. i rip out your throat with my teeth,  
smile through the bloody sweetness. loose a tooth  
in the process.

pick at the loose threads  
until our shadows unravel. it is still quiet,  
so you try to swallow  
my mouth;  
we both wince.

how come our bodies can pass in  
the grocery store and nothing happens?  
i take the mess on my hands to the kitchen  
and make you a sandwich.  
cut your glossy heart into thin slices  
like ham.

i wash you cherries  
and put them into my best bowl.  
you can spit  
the pits into my palms; i will eat them up.

The summer after senior year, a friend and I jumped off the roof  
into the hot tub. It started with a distressed letter. It was angst,  
and real pain, and brownies, and Goethe.

She drove three hours before I even had an answer written.  
Her mascara running down her face, dark stains and wet sunflowers  
on her yellow shirt.

Her cheeks had become a map of what she told her parents  
and what she hadn't. A treasury of grief and rage, she said,  
"I'm not sure where home is."

We held each other, shaking in the driveway, trembling,  
knowing tears were medicine, salt and symbols  
of regret, sadness, pity. Faustian emotions. Ending emotions.

We were between hell and the future in my back yard. Remember,  
in summer, a deal sounds like the Top 40. How do you choose  
a crossroads when everything intersects?

She deserved to be happy, we all did. We believed. There were no demons,  
just a pitchfork in a far field, just a stolen bottle  
of butterscotch schnapps.

She smiled, and the moon smiled a thin grin, thousands of miles away.  
The corner of her mouth, a small twitch, her hand and mine on the bottle.  
She said, "Let's run away and see the ocean."

But we settled for something closer to home,  
standing on the shingles, staring at the light  
beneath the whirlpools.

We cannonballed together. I remember splash, the cascade,  
the pain of impact. We laughed, because we were still children,  
and glittered.

### Kris Hiles

*Kris Hiles is an autistic lesbian creative. She lives with  
her partner in a dream in New England. When she's not  
busy editing GLITCHWORDS, she enjoys rock hunting,  
making playlists, dancing, and cooking. You can find  
her on Twitter @KrisHiles.*



# LEARNING TO FEEL THE HEAVEN

# years *jəpən* years *supəy* under

Alex heard me pull up and came out.

“Hey.”

“Hey. Where’ve you been hiding?”

“Want to go for a ride?”

“Where do you have in mind?”

“Nowhere in particular.”

He fired up his CG and we roared out into the night, weaving among the cat’s eyes that vanished like shooting stars in the churning blackness beneath our wheels. The eyes of a rogue fox lit up in the darkness, two green lights blazing from the shadows at the roadside, then they vanished too.

We play this game where one of us cuts our lights, suddenly disappearing, and see how long we can go without getting scared. Too long, Alex says.

We got onto the bypass and Alex really opened up. I hung back a bit, got all set up, then came blitzing past him at full throttle, laid back in the saddle like a bed, feet up on the handle bars, hands behind my head, smiling at him as I passed.

The look on his face when he turned and saw me. Worth any amount of risk.

I love these little stunts. First I tried riding one-handed, then no-handed... Now there’s this one I’m working on, the one that finally got Indian Larry. You get up some speed and then stand up on the saddle, arms stretched out like Jesus on the Cross or Rose on the Titanic.

I managed to get my feet up under me, get into a crouch, lift my hands off the bars, the cold night wind on my cheeks, howling past my ears... One of these days, sooner rather than later, I’ll pluck up the courage and stand up all the way.

We ended up – as we always do – wandering the aisles of the 24-hour Tesco in Eastbourne, looking for I-don’t-know-what. (Whatever it is, they never seem to have it on the shelves.)

I picked up an apple instead.

There’s this girl who works nights there. I’ve seen her quite a few times – always picture myself striking up a conversation, fancy myself as “the mysterious apple guy”. But I never do.

There’s always something there to stop me: another customer’ll get there first, or she’ll go on a break, or – like this time – everything is perfect but I just lose my nerve and can’t think of anything cool enough to say.

After that we rode up to Beachy Head (aren’t we lucky to have Britain’s highest chalk sea cliff, and world-famous suicide spot, just up the road from home?) We sat on the edge looking down on the deaf and distant lights of Eastbourne.

A sign told us that “the Samaritans” are “always there, day or night”.

Another said, “things can only get better”.

When we got back to the bikes there was a police car sitting in a parking bay. I could see the guy in the passenger seat looking right at me.

After a brief Mexican stand-off, they got out the car and sidled up.

“Alright, lads? A little late to be out riding, isn’t it.”

No. “Is it?”

“Yes, it is. Why don’t you head on home.”

*Because if we wanted to be at home, we’d be at home.* “Why?”

“Listen, are you ‘avin’ a giraffe?”

“What?”

“I *said*, are you having a giraffe with us?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what that means.” *Genuinely didn’t.*

“Of course you do. Don’t be lippy with me, boy. It means you’re trying to have a laugh with us.”

“On this occasion,” said the first cop, “we’ve decided not to take any action...”

*You mean, about that law we didn’t break?*

“...We saw your mate throw ‘is bottle back there, so if you’re not careful, we’ll ‘ave you for littering. Not to mention arguin’ with a police officer. Now we strongly advise you ‘ead ‘ome pretty sharpish. We don’t want to see you again tonight.”

They turned to go, then the first one asked me, “do you have insurance?”

“Yes.”

“Oh yeah? Who’s it with?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“I don’t.” *Is that a crime?*

“You’re with Europa Group. Remember that next time.” He said smugly, pointing his finger at me, then turning to get back in the car.

They’d run a check on our number plates before they’d even got out.

“Then why did you ask?” I said.

“You what?” he turned around.

“Don’t – ” whispered Alex.

“Why did you ask if I had insurance, if you knew?” They gave us a cold, hard stare.

“Don’t push your luck, boys.”

Then they got back in the car and, after a few minutes, drove away.

My adrenalin was still pumping long after they’d driven off. We ended up staying out a couple more hours, talking about the law and hypocrisy and whatnot. Alex insisted we stuck to the back roads, then we parked up back at his and walked our usual circles and figures of eight around the neighbourhood, neither of us wanting to go home.

“How come on TV people seem to be out all night, but when we do it we get pulled up by the police?”

“Maybe things are different somewhere else.”

We walked through the cemetery and up the deserted High Street, past the building site which used to be Alex’s primary school and will soon be another Tesco.

A solitary banner hung over the railings and read “Save Our Historic High Street”.

On the way back we passed a fox in the road and decided to move it into the bushes. We gave it a funeral of sorts. Nothing fancy.

We stopped in the empty playground by Alex’s and sat chatting on the swings, the see-saw, the merry-go-round. Then in silence. Anyone else and it would’ve been awkward.

Suddenly there was a racket like a snare drum and a giant flying beetle swooped right in front of my face and hit my shoulder with noticeable force. I jumped up.

“What the fuck was that?”

It was still at large.

“Just a May bug, I think.”

“What the fuck is a *May bug*?”

“You’ve never seen one before?”

“No.”

“They only live for a few weeks. Well, they spend years under the ground, then they come out for a few weeks to mate, then they die.”

“That’s sad.” I sat down again. Who was I to spoil his fun? He flew a few more runs, landing on Alex a couple of times, once on my leg, on the ground, the merry-go-round... gradually moving away into the night until he was gone.

I can’t remember what else we talked about. We always say we should record

our conversations, but we don’t have a recorder. It always feels like we’ve realised something revolutionary, ground-breaking – an epiphany so far ahead of the times that no-one else would even understand – like we’re on the verge of the meaning of life and if we only stay out for one more hour, we’ll get it for sure.

It’s probably more like just which girls at college we fancy.

Anyway, Alex started yawning and I said, “yeah, I’d better go do some college work,” and rode home and washed the fox blood off my hands.

years under  
years under

**Roy Duffield**  
*Roy Duffield is a writer, translator, and editor over at Anti-Heroine Chic, a journal that celebrates those on the outside, and calls “beauty” what others call “broken”. He was honored to be chosen to perform at the annual Beat Literary Festival in Barcelona (2019), is a winner of the Robert Allen Micropoem Contest (2021) and over the last year his writing has been seen entering the likes of creatures, Into the Void (Saboteur Best Mag, 2018), The London Reader's Counterculture issue, Fragmented Lines, Harpy Hybrid Review, Growing Up (Lifespan Vol. 2) by Pure Slush Books, and of course, the world's oldest and most prestigious publication: Instagram. (@drinking\_traveller)*

# backflipping through a coming of age

begins with you and me, lip-to-lip and beating fast.  
you lean in close and spoon hummus into my mouth,  
whispers of better futures threaded into a shawl around  
your collarbones. we are behind the korean supermarket  
where we are invisible, swirled into a bubble of our own  
making. like all bubbles, this one pops as soon as i touch  
your cheek too tenderly when i should have bitten  
hard enough to leave a mark.

a year later, we duck into the unisex library bathroom  
and lock the door, crowding up nose-to-nose. the mirror  
is cracked down the side like walnut shells littering the  
sea floor but you don't really care because you've snuck  
in some hummus and one spoon. it's a secondhand kiss  
when you lick the spoon and then give it to me, eager to  
place a thin hand over the waistband of my skirt and finally  
let go of who we used to be and enjoy our time now.

in the summer after senior year, your neck is flaming  
with sunburn as you knock back peeled baby onions like  
pearls sliming down your throat. we are thigh-to-thigh today,  
your bubbling hand around my waist & pressing into the dips  
on my hips. we do not talk about the fact that after this, we won't  
see each other for four years. instead we talk about that time  
one of those big dragon fruit seeds got caught in your braces  
and i extracted it with my tongue. you give me an anklet that's too  
tight when you kiss me and say you love me when really  
you just want someone to feed hummus to at night.



**Salone Verma**

*Salonee Verma (she/her) is an Indian-American emerging writer from Virginia. Her work is forthcoming in Backslash Lit, Pollux Journal, [sub]liminal, and more. She has been recognized in the Scholastic Arts & Writing Awards. Find her online at [saloneeverma.carrd.co](http://saloneeverma.carrd.co)*

& ariana said god was a woman. my god is either  
a woman or freddie b/c when u hold me, i feel like  
warm putty stretched out over ur fingernails so

hand in hand, we walk out, augmented,  
bickering about tv & other mundanities,  
hands drooping in the midsummer heat like

dead worms on the pavement, except darker.  
u look me in the eye once, mouthing at the air,  
shining like there's milk draping ur shoulders

but all u wanna say is that u can rub arnica  
into my shoulders next week when ur parents  
aren't home & ur sisters are out with their friends.

i wonder if they're gal pals like soccer teams or  
gal pals like us, driving our fingers into each  
other's palms & tasting the salt on secondhand sips.

u laugh at me when i say this b/c statistically, we can't  
all be gay, right? hey bhagwan, that would be too much  
for our parents b/c they can't even deal with one of us.

(freddie, can't u hear us? can't u see we cant our hips  
b/c we wanna become mercurial & proud-brown like u,  
lying together in each other's arms like a constant?

maybe then home will be a place again, a cramped apartment  
of our own where u rub the skin of my wrist while we dance in  
our own kitchen after coming home, grinning like kajol in ddlj.)

so i pull u into the space under the bleachers & finger ur acrylics  
while we eat sweetcorn together, sweating salt like the ocean  
but only half as vast. & finally we have come home.

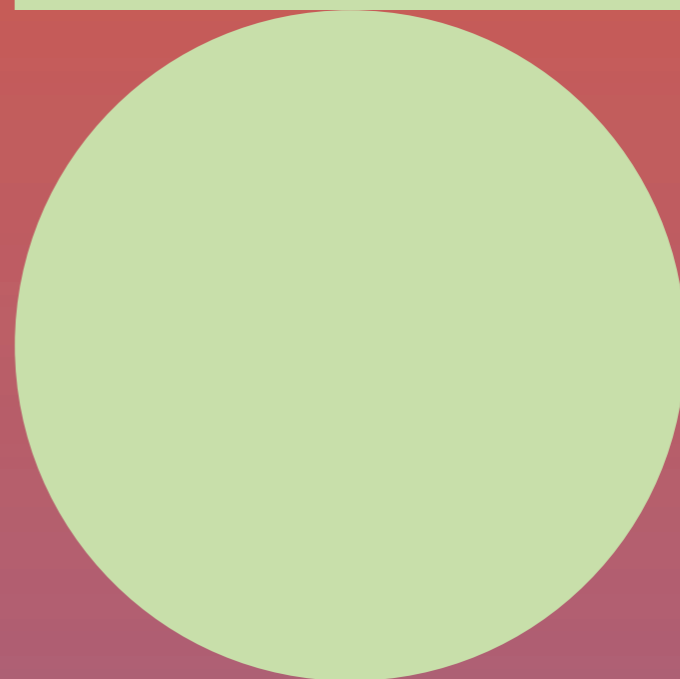
text me  
when you  
get home  
but home  
is a person



Handwriting practice lines on a green background. The lines are arranged in a series of horizontal rows, with some rows featuring a central dashed line for letter height guidance. The lines are colored in a gradient from dark blue to light blue.



ii.



(ADOLESCENCE)



**hometown**

JOURNAL  
of  
ERATO

