

MARGINSMAGZ

AZALL.MAGAZINE

STROKESANDSEWS.MAGAZINE

Proudly present

REFLECTIONS

A collaborative mini-issue

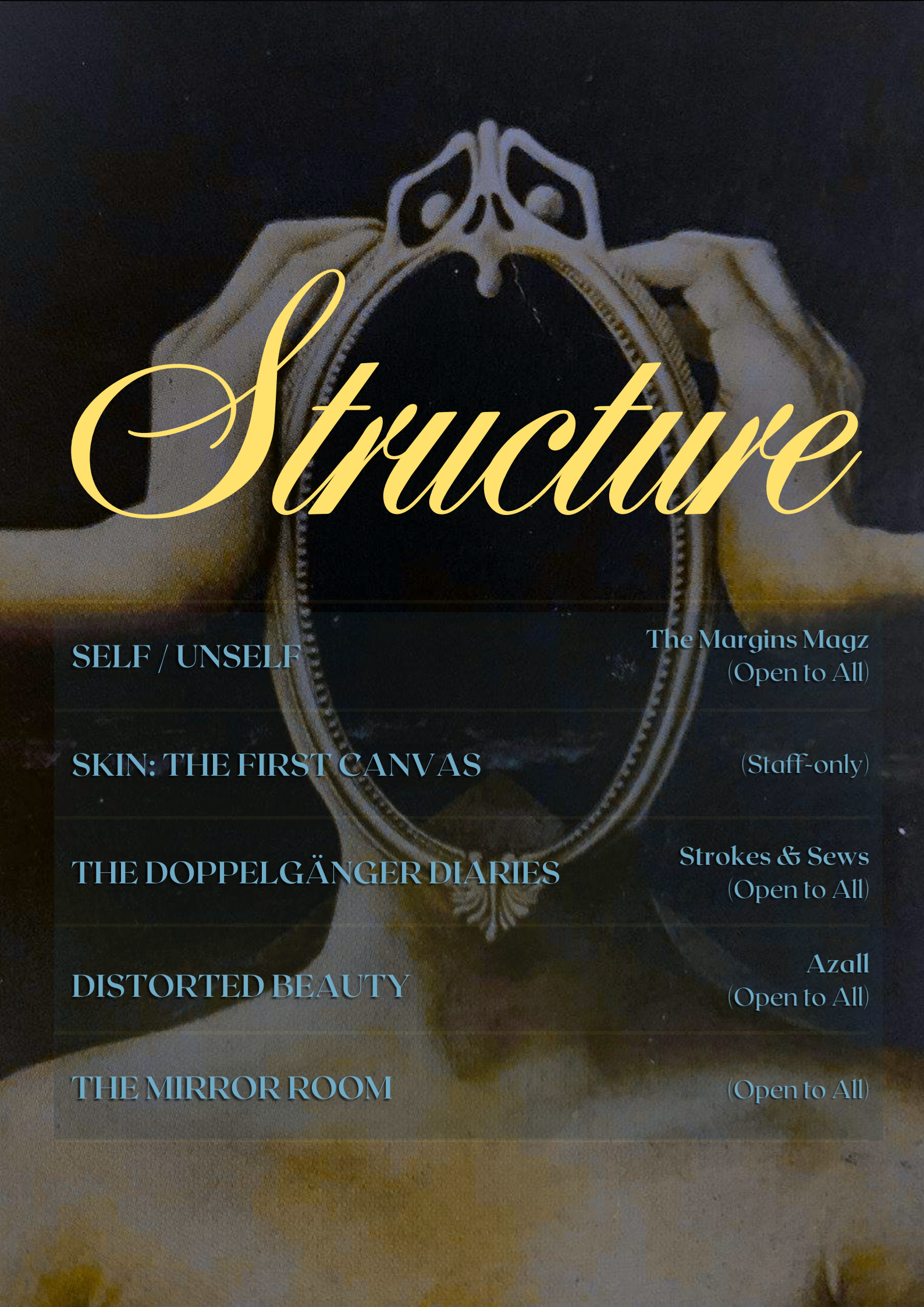
ABOUT *the issue*



This theme is a mirror held up to the self; smudged with fingerprints, lined with cracks, full of distortions, angles, unexpected beauty, and difficult truths.

It's about identity; how it forms, how it fractures, and how it performs. This issue looks closely at the space between:

- **Personal vs. Projected identity**
 - **How we see ourselves v/s How the world sees us**
 - **Who we are vs. Who we pretend to be**
-



Structure

SELF / UNSELF

The Margins Magz
(Open to All)

SKIN: THE FIRST CANVAS

(Staff-only)

THE DOPPELGÄNGER DIARIES

Strokes & Sews
(Open to All)

DISTORTED BEAUTY

Azall
(Open to All)

THE MIRROR ROOM

(Open to All)

note from the eic's



MARGINSMAGZ

When MarginsMagz wrapped up our first issue, I thought I knew what our next steps would look like — but Reflections came together in a way I never could have planned.

We didn't just combine our work; we combined our ways of seeing.

This issue is about identity — shifting, distorting, and revealing itself in unexpected ways.

To our collaborators and contributors: thank you for your trust.

To our readers: may you see yourself here, even in the cracks.

- Noor R

AZALL.MAGAZINE

When we started envisioning Reflections, we knew it would be something beyond a theme. A dialogue. A mirror held up to ourselves, cracked and beautiful, reflecting the ways that we perceive, hide and reimagine who we are. From beauty distortions to silent truths we whisper only to ourselves, this issue gathers voices and visions that blur the line between reality and perception. I'm proud of what we've created with Strokes & sews, Margins and our amazing contributors. Here's to seeing ourselves clearly, imperfectly and in all our complexity!

- Syeda Natasha Hassan

STROKESANDSEWS.MAGAZINE

Reflections grew out of a single question: what does the world see when it looks at us? It was more than a mirror; it is a journey through the selves we carry, the selves we project, and the selves we are still becoming. This collaboration began from a single question and grew into an archives of voices, each one peeling back a layer of truth.

I will forever be grateful to Azall, Margins, and our contributors for allowing this to come to fruition. I hope, in these pages, you'll find not just the answers, but the courage to look back.

- Anushka Singhal

we hope you enjoy!



Featuring

Shambhavi Gokhale

Audrey

Avril Shakira Villar

Chainka

Asees Kaur

Jezabel Castillo

Taylor Elise Colimore

Alanae

Naomi Zarnighian

Jing Tan

Reets

Olivia Keraité

Tanisha Singh

Lewis Darley

Sybil Miranda

Laine Artemis

Zahra

Charitha Puligandla

M.T.

Diya K.

Ahmad A.

Medha Joey Chakraborty

Diana Dumitrascu

Nasta Martyn

Parisei

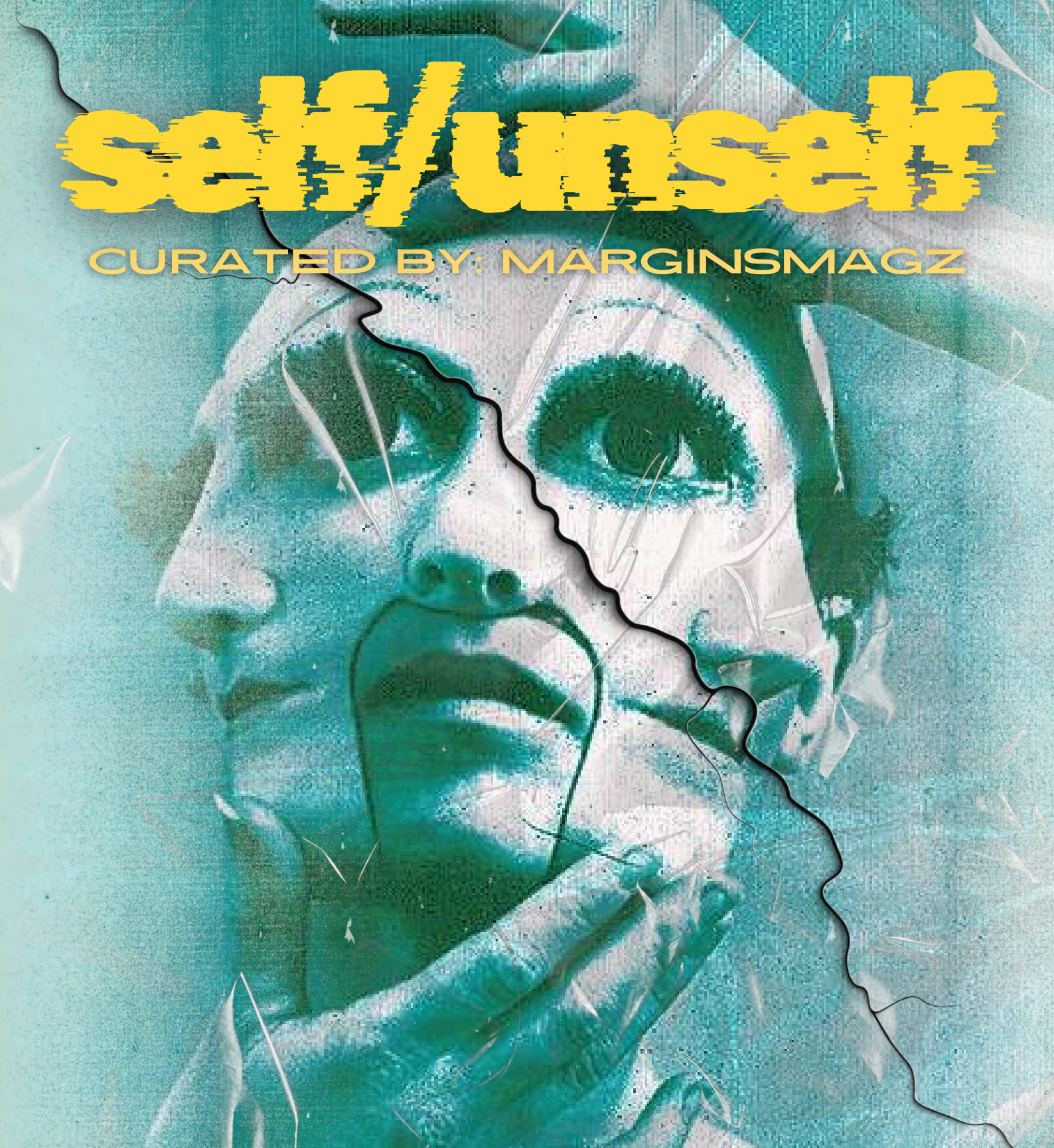
Charvi

Ms. Christina Dcosta

Emma Batterman

Anushka Singhal





self/unself

CURATED BY: MARGINSMAGZ

Self/Unself is an exploration of reflection and rupture – the tension between who we are, who we appear to be, and who we are not, like a mask. This issue lingers in mirrors, and shadows in the blurred spaces where the true authentic self begins to unravel. Through writing and art, it asks what it means to hold on to your identity, and what it means to let go.

INVERTED REFLECTIONS

I looked through a marble of glass
Inverted scenery of a moonlit morass
Scanning around, I tilted my hat,
Caught within my sight was a bat,
Sitting upon a steady tree branch.
Feeling uneasy, I paused my advance.

Bats don't sit straight— right?
Pondering, I drew the marble aside.
With hindrance removed, I saw
The bat hanging with its claw.
How quick I was to believe,
I thought and let out a heave.

Instantly, I heard a whisper in my mind
"Isn't this the familiar cruelty of mankind?
To judge by what's plain to see
Is just what I thought the bat to be."
I recalled when I was misjudged,
Misunderstood and slightly fudged.

I wear a cloak that is so heavy
Of remarks, poisonous as ivy
I am not what you say of me
The poison seeps inside me

I am not what you think
The cloak is getting thick

Why am I always begrudged?
Beyond the brink my knees bulged
I am not on your top shelf
Hence, I lost my sense of self
Now I see myself in mirror
Exactly as they infer.

Through their lenses I can relate
To the bat sitting up straight.

by – M.T



M.T is a engineering
enthusiast college student.
She is a published writer and a
passionate reader. She loves to
skate and plays flute.

THE INTIMACY *of reading*

by zahra



There is this one kind of intimacy that occurs in reading—a quiet, intimate one between you and the words in your hands. It isn't a conversation because you don't have to answer. You just listen. Absorb. Feel. The words move as fast or as slow as you, and the voice you hear is half the writer's, half yours. And in the quiet, something magic happens.

Great books, in short, transcend time to discover us. They are not fashionable or appeasing. They simply are, giving us stories survived by those who created them because they possess something that is timelessly enduring—what we learn of love, fear, hope, and the stumbling-in-between-ness of being human.

When we read *Beloved*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, we're not just reading a story. We're stepping into someone else's life, their doubts, their desires. And in doing so, we often uncover something hidden in our own. Those books transform us through subtle epiphanies, mirrors.

Reading is personal in the sense that it lets us be alone without feeling lonely. It gives us a place to put our minds, to be heard without having to explain ourselves. And, at times, that's all we need—to be heard by a voice that was centuries old, and yet somehow grasped exactly what we'd need to hear.

This is the soft sorcery of a good book. That is why the classics never go out. They don't simply say something. And they grip us as we mature.



Zahra is a high school reporter who writes for the school newspaper on a regular basis, covering the topics relevant to students and the wider community. A keen reader, they spend most of their time reading books that inform and inspire the things that they write. They have just begun a Substack page to publish personal essays and creative writing to a wider audience. With a growing portfolio and a strong voice, Zahra is building a promising future as a journalist and writer.

my tragedy's grave

sprouted flowers



Maybe if I cried less and did more
Turned the tide to my side
Put a coat to protect from cold
And let the breeze take me abroad

Maybe if I brought peace to myself when I was young
And told my agony filled, poor, destructed self
-you're loved
Hugged the remnants of my heart
Gave it a kiss of life so that the tissues divide again, its mitosis is my only
chance

Maybe if the days were shorter, the blazing sun burned my skin less
If the nights were longer, the moon's servants blew cold air

Maybe if I left my head more
And looked at my heart more
And lived the moment, instead of in shame
I'd have brought my tragedy earlier to its grave

-ALANAE

Alanae is a recently indie-published, emerging young poetess living in Cairo, Egypt. Her ideal days are spent reading books, out at galleries and cafes, and chatting with friends.

cw: infidelity, familial problems

THE IDEALIZATION OF MY IDENTITY

by diya k.

I am not my father.

I have to constantly tell myself this. In conversation, while staring at the ceiling, even while writing, there's a voice that booms through. I am *not him*. I will never be *him*. The affirmation treads the waves in the ocean, aware of the big waves ahead.

It's hard not to be him. I thought I knew him for 17 years. 17 years of idolizing him, asking him questions about the world I knew nothing about, consulting him about my problems. Somehow, he painted this beautiful image for 10 years of my life that led me to believe I could possibly be *him*.

I am not my sisters. I don't have the murderous instinct my oldest sister carries inside of her, rage sparking on her tongue on each word she speaks. My middle sister carries somber, intrinsic thought, tears welling in her eyes at a memory, a trigger, anything, really.



I wanted to be my *father*. The image I crafted for him in my head. I loved telling my friends that I had my father's humor and passion and love for the world. I loved citing it in the things I write. I loved etching his personality into the cervices of my brain, rewriting it over and over until I found a version of myself similar enough.

And when I couldn't, it was painful. I thrived on my soft skills, something I credited him for. I created worlds in my mind that he would support. I wanted to sing carelessly and dance around the kitchen like he did. I think my desire for being him didn't really stem for wanting to be like my father but instead of a dynamic person.

Not to call my father *dynamic*. He's actually quite the opposite. The person my father actually is greedy and manipulative and he has never really given a thought to me. But I think my imagination, something that he now hates about me, created an image of him that I didn't want to erase.

Maybe I just wanted to be him so I could make up memories of the two of us together. That he always listened to my stories and never told me to shut up, that he would always leave as soon as possible at school plays with my mom in tow. Maybe I just wanted to believe that his love was more than monetary.

I wanted to become the version of the father I wanted, not of what was in front of me. He stars as a ghost in my memories. I think I see him in the ocean, diving headfirst into the first wave of high tide, I think I see him while I sing Billy Joel in tears, unsure if crying over my ex or him.

My father is an emotionless man. A *sociopath*, I hiss the words at my friends. I am not. I feel feelings, I contain emotions and I am quite open about them. I am not aloof nor nonchalant, I remind myself of this in my bathroom mirror. A polaroid is seen in the reflection, when we went to Oakland together. Did he want to actually be around me? Was his voice genuine when I told him about the boy I liked? I think only the gaping hole in his heart can answer that.

He knew about his affairs when he was taking me out to all these places. He called it little adventures, where we would venture to some place new and listen to music I like and I would tell him about my problems. We went to this one sushi place nearby our house, *Sushi Heaven*. I would dish all of my secrets to him—things I would not tell Mom—and he would help me. I was vulnerable with him, and yet he hid all his real and true feelings behind a glass facade.

I told him about the chronicles of boy problems, my hatred towards my writing, my anxiety, and who I wanted to be in the future. He supported me when I wanted to go across the country for college when no one else did. He encouraged me to read, taking me to the bookstores and to pick five books I had to finish by the end of the summer. He was there, or at least I thought he was. That man in those spaces with me is a ghost—hollow in all but story—and I am the only one who can tell the tall tale.

I have my father's anger. I have his judgement. I am impulsive, but I like to plan. I have my father's stubbornness. I am blunt, similar to him. I love to be right, and I hate to be wrong. And, I am emotionally systemic, something I thought he was always good at. Being the voice of reason in our family. Sitting at the dinner table and spinning any bad mood into a good one.

I fear the day my mom looks me into the eyes and tells me I remind her of him. I fear the day that my anger will break loose and spill out like a volcano. I fear for the day I can't feel myself anymore, that I'm lost in the sea of my own thoughts and I'm going to drown. I fear for the day I finally look at myself in the mirror and say that I am *Chetan Kapoor* in all but looks. His facade haunts my inner being, crawling to my heart and tearing it into pieces.

I think he's come close. Multiple times.

My mom called me a robot in dealing with this. She calls out that my face is blank when I speak of his mistresses, people I thought to be older sisters to me.

It was impulsive, and she apologized to me immediately after, taking back a word that somehow brought more comfort than venom. I retorted back something I cannot remember, her going silent after.

We were staying in the Hilton in Santa Barbara, a trip with the two of us. We were sitting up next to each other, 7 in the morning. White sheets covered most of our body, all except for our faces. All except for the tears that my mom shed during our conversation.

In truth, it had been a week since I'd learned that my father was lying to me for most of my life.

It had been two weeks since my father moved out of our house in Saratoga, California.

And it had been one month and twelve days since my mom's world fell apart.



I have to remind myself that I do not bare the same weight my father carried because I am not a liar. Sure, I can guilt trip, be manipulative, and be an absolute asshole sometimes, but I do not carry the world on my back like he did. He was Atlas and he failed. The world came crashing down on him. He doesn't care, so I don't either.

I was outside a coffee shop when I went no contact with him. 24 hours after my graduation rehearsal. Days before, he was stingy about coming to my high school graduation, and I learned everything about the real him in that one phone conversation. My hands trembled, eyes darted between my phone and my sister, who was holding my coffee. Dizziness painted across my head and lingered as I typed out the words. When I hit send, I was given an immediate response: a simple like.

No apologies, no begging, just a simple fucking like. I wanted to snap my phone and throw it out the window. When I got home, I became incapable of crying, instead of thinking of memories, I prayed for his downfall. I would call myself agonistic, but god, all I wanted to do was to take my spite and become a devotee to the universal fucking spirit. I wanted to take an axe and split his head in half. I wanted to call a hitman and have them murder him in cold blood.



Because he ruined our lives, and he doesn't regret it one bit.

He once told me on one of our sushi adventures that I write the best when I feel the strongest, and that I shouldn't let emotion sway.

"Why is that?" I ask him, poking the cucumber out of the salmon roll.

"You don't want your heart leading your words down a path you can't go back from," He doesn't look at me, he checks his phone instead.

I think I do write when I feel the strongest emotions. Rage pieces are published in literary magazines out of impulse, my saddest pieces are ones I share with my friends, and euphoric prose, though more personal, finds itself in my mom's hands, each word dancing, bringing a smile to her face.

Maybe my father (the real him) made me like my writing. All this anger and sadness and grief funneled into a series of notes app entires, all these words that I feel proud of producing, maybe that's what I get. Not from my father. Not even my mother.

I have a superpower. Emotional willpower lays on my fingertips, ready for fire. If I use it or not is up to me, because I am not the reflection of the most cruel person in my world. I am not the reflection of the most caring and kind, either.

I am me, painting that masterpiece that will be an endless amount of drafts.

But I know I'll get it right one day,

I'm fucking sure of it.

diya loves to tell stories:
watching them, writing
them, and sharing them.
art is a really cool thing
that should be shared!

GOOD *Socks*

You've never met but the version of me
that's half-way out the door
keys in my mouth, hair slightly awry
one sock falling down
the other one, with the thinning heel.

That's the public me.
The one who does smile politely,
laugh at the appropriate places
look at the mirror before entering the world.
The one who knows how to be seen
without actually showing up.

You don't know anything about the good socks.
They're concealed in the back of my drawer,
tender as hushed apologies,
warm as the tea I never allowed to grow cold.
They're the type you keep to yourself
the kind you don't wear to impress
because they're already home.

When I have on my good socks
I am not whom you think I am.
I'm slower, quieter
I let my sentences run
like cats basking in a sunbeam.
I spill and do not rush to clean them up.
I hum without knowing.
I am smiling at nothing.

You've never met her.
The one with the good socks
who lets the day overtake her
rather than holding herself against it.

If you did
maybe you'd fall in love.
Or maybe you'd look right through her,
supposing that she was just another girl
curling on a couch.

And maybe that's why I hold her close to me.
Since the world has a tendency of hand contact with soil and she is the only
thing I own that never gets dirty.

-Medha Joey Chakraborty

Medha is just an average teenage girl living in India but she actually lives inside books and lit mags. She loves reading, writing, designing, solving puzzles, dancing and singing when she is alone. She can normally be seen sitting with a book in her hand.



Sanctified lover,
never meant to be
a mother, with an
ocean of despair
storming into my
serene chest.

Yearner

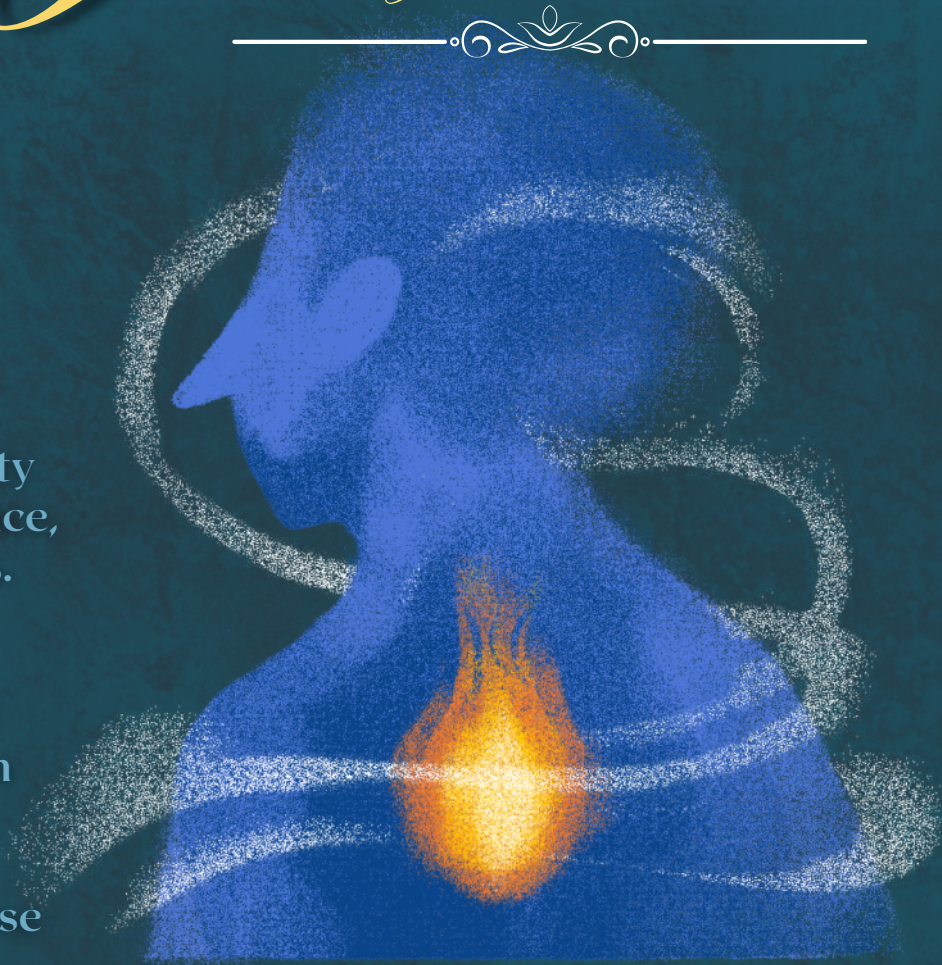
- Jezabel Castillo

I slip softly into the
depth of my bathtub
to recall the familiarity
of drowning and living
in numbing moments,

as I soak into lavender
water infused with pretty
tears, annihilating silence,
and collateral promises.

They can see my skin
is tainted with artificial
bliss made with wisdom
from a yearning spirit,

who can't dance because
souls colored midnight
blue speaks to me through
strangers I will never
see again.



Jezabel Castillo is a Poet studying Writing & Literature in NYC. Her writing explores profound and heart-touching themes that have been published in various literary magazines. Her most recent writing pieces have appeared in The Expressionists Magazine, Venom & Verse, and Sacrum Literary Magazine. You can find more of her poetry on Instagram @poemsbyjez

The Sky Weeps With Me

BY - Ahmad Azmi

A cold, bleak room, a dreadful feeling whispers through my bones when I think of the summer coming to an end. I think of the souls I must see everyday, all I can recall is Sartre
"Hell is other people"

Outside, the desolate night sky weeps: devoid of moon and stars, celestial tears shedding through the dark monsoon veil. They touch no soul, they're a privilege of the cold concrete pavements, the tall solemn buildings, and the quiet trees which nod as they hear the weeping.

I think the sky prefers it so, in the day, the ones touched by its tears do nothing but complain and curse it; The secret sorrow is only known by lonely roads, and by street lights in the hours they have no one to guide.

Chet Baker's cover of '*I get along without you very well*' plays into my ears quietly, resonating with my follies, a constant reminder of my fragile hypocrisies. Melancholic irony coats each line:

I get along without you very well,
Of course I do,
Except when soft rains fall,
And drip from leaves, then I recall,
The thrill of being sheltered in your arms. Of course, I do,
But I get along without you very well.
What is my maturity and resilience when a fam

What is my maturity and resilience when a familiar stupid laugh, a passing mention, a reminiscent sight, a touch too warm, or a soft consolation— shatters everything.

I do awful without her as it is, to think that I must see her everyday!

A melancholy lingers on my face, a strange tension in my lips, a weariness deep in my eyes, they'd mourn with tears if they could, but fate has robbed them of that right.

I look at the gloomy, empty sky, and it looks back with a similar face. I understand it's mourning all too well, and I know that it understands me too; Solitaires in the night reflect each other, no warmth of sun, no touch of soul.

It knows me too well, old friend of mine, when it watches me unable to weep, it weeps my share too.

Now it's daybreak, in the sun my friend finds the warmth it needs, maybe I'll find something of that sort too, even if it's only for the day.

But then again, it's monsoon.

Hopeless, Capricious, and often arrogant. A foolish Icarus who reaches his heights when he writes, only to fall. But if it wasn't for his literary follies, he wouldn't know how to live.



BLACK

Nasta Martyn



Nasta Martyn is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator, writer and poetry. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in designer.

Writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - Siren. **OT** In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week



CW: Self harm and burning imagery, Grief and loss, feelings of invisibility and isolation

Diary of Ashes - Christina Dcosta

Our teacher asked once,
"What do you do after writing in your diary?"
I wanted to raise my hand but,
my demons clamped cold iron cuffs on my wrists
and ghosts stitched my lips with thread pulled tight
from every secret I was too scared to say.

How could I say that I burn the pages I bleed onto?
watching my own pain catch fire in silence,
then drown the ashes in tears,
like burning wasn't enough,
like drowning could wash away the scars carved deep beneath my skin.

How do I confess
that I carry these burnt pieces inside me,
a sack heavy with grief and bones too fragile to hold?
That I fold myself into shadows when no one's watching,
a cracked shell crumbling,
writing poems until my bones grind to dust
until I am nothing but ash and memory in the dirt?

And when everyone watches,
I am a mask sewn tight from lies,
a smile painted over fractures,
a voice quiet and measured,
afraid to shatter the fragile image I'm forced to wear.

Who will remember me then?
when I am scattered like burnt paper,
the pages no one dared touch,
no one dared read,
no one dared feel the wild ache I hid beneath?

When I am finally gone,
when silence swallows me whole,
and there's nothing left but a shadow where I once breathed...
then what?

What happens to a girl who burns her truth in secret,
who never learns how to set herself free?



Christina Dcosta is a passionate literature student and poet known for her deeply emotional and evocative writing. With a talent for weaving raw vulnerability into her work, she explores themes of pain, silence, and unspoken feelings through simple yet powerful language. Christina's poetry has been featured in multiple anthologies, reflecting her strong voice and creative vision.

Jan 10, 2024
What a journey it's been. Now it just has to get mastered. Then we'll send it off to get pressed on vinyl. Everything is truly in its right place. I've learned so much this past year about myself and the universe continues to teach me and it's time to let it go.

Mental Illness

I slip into different personalities like skipping songs,
Though the latter is easier and kinder,
The former pays no heed to my wishes,
Crazier I get, I think it's better,
No one would know how my real self behaves
The doctors call it a sickness,
Although I feel fine most times,
When I think of that one summer I lived through,
Memories float past me like film scenes,
As if I'm an outsider and never really in it
She comes into my vision, my angel, my fairy,
Though she isn't exactly mine now,
I stare regretfully at her picture on my bedstand,
This is my nostalgic self that I've slipped into,
It gets too much, the pressure in my head,
Almost bursting with the emotion, I fade past
That summer and her, into what I am now,
A nobody.

by charvi



Charvi is a student who doesn't stop thinking or writing poetry about every single thing in her life. Her art means a lot to her, though she tries to find time for it. She has a hundred hobbies that make her who she is.

Fetal Personhood

cw: light nudity



Diana Dumitrascu is a fine arts student based in The Netherlands. She is taking a feminine, soft approach to memory, home, belonging and sexuality through photography, poetry and mixed media installations. She uses a limited color palette, with a focus on pink, silver and gold. Her forms are organic, abstract and deeply symbolic.

Skin:
The First Canvas

Henna is a Fading Pleasure

The room smelled of sugar and earth. The air was thick with celebration. Sweets sat piled high on brass trays and aunties danced around, all radiant with joy. In the middle of it, sat my incandescent cousin sister; wrists extended, palms open, a living canvas. The *mehendi* artists were bent over her hands with practiced care, coaxing paisleys and vines to life, each line whispering a small prayer and a promise of serendipity.



Henna is not just a dye, or a tattoo. It blooms where language falters. It is a ritual, an armor against ill-will, a secret language drawn across the skin. In our world, a bride's hands must never be bare. They are adorned with spirals and vines, with initials and flowers, as if to say: here is a woman stepping into her new life, carrying fortune and love written on her body. The darker the stain of the *mehendi*, the deeper the love between the married couple, or so they say.

And so, her hands became gardens. The room pulsed with laughter, song and clinking bangles, each woman swaying to a rhythm we all understood. Each curve of the henna was a reflection– the newly married lady in red, the old granny in purple. They had something in common: they were bound together by the same thread of marriage.

And then there was me.
My hands remained empty.

They have been empty since the night I lost him, my husband. Widows do not wear vermillion in their parted hair, or jingle bangles, or wear red sarees. When he died, colour was stripped from me. Henna, they said, was not for women like me. Neither was joy. And so, the bride's hands are heavy with blessings, mine are light with absence.

But grief has a way of marking the skin too. You cannot see it in neat spirals, or in delicate flowers, but it lies beneath the skin; staining deeper than any dye.

I tried to look away from the designs unfurling across her skin. I wondered if anybody noticed the way my bare hands clashed with the backdrop of marigolds and banana leaves. But then, she looked up. Through the chatter, through the clinking glasses, her gaze found mine. She beckoned me closer as though it were the simplest thing.



I shook my head, lips pressed into a small smile. She knew. We both knew. Rituals had rules.

Still, she stood, henna half-finished, half-dried. She walked towards me. The aunties gasped, half in disapproval, half in admiration for her nerve. She did not pity me. Instead, she smiled as though she knew exactly what my hands ached to say.

She picked up an abandoned cone, knelt before me in all her unfinished glory, and whispered, "You've carried sorrow long enough. Let your hands feel the joy too."

Before I could protest, she drew a single spiral on my hand, like a comma to a story otherwise finished. Just a single one. Not a bride's bold script, but enough to make me ignore all the looks I was getting. The fresh paste was cool against my hand, it smelled like rain on parched soil.



Henna fades. It blooms, it blesses, and then it vanishes, leaving only memory. But even in its disappearance, it does not obliterate what it once gave. For a fleeting night, my hands carried joy again. And in that, I caught my own reflection: not as the world insists I should be, but as I dared to be. My cousin's hands declared her future, my single mark declared that widowhood was not my whole reflection.

Skin, after all, is the first canvas. And mine just told the story of return.

— Anushka Singhal



This piece is a co-creation by the EIC of Strokes & Sews and the Founder of Azall.

quiet legacies

The lines on my hand whisper of someone
before me
Someone lost to the wind.
The reflection I see everyday
Was a gift to someone gone long ago—
A stranger.

The eyes, dark like the night,
Lips, pink as cherry blossoms.
But,
Pimples, an inherited trait,
And moles, a tragedy.

The anger in my veins once belonged to my
grandmother,
The silence, my father's,
The resistance, mother's,
The cowardice, my family's,
But, only in them, I find warmth, courage,
and laughter

I carry them all in my body, breathing their
stories forward
A silent wage upon the world, an army of
ancestor souls behind me
A petition to the world—to look again
At your people,
At your person,
And see only the person you love,
The person you care for.

— Reets

This piece is a co-creation by
the staff writer of Azall and
the Founder of Margins.



THE IMMORTAL'S MAP

Reets

The skin untamed
Freckles shine like sunshine
And the stretch marks as beautiful as the ocean
Dark circles orbit through black holes
And Scars restless as wind

A map on the body:
The shore-
The destination
For I, the immortal—
Play among the humans

Birthmarks stand as quiet monuments
Past hushed in the silence
Future written in our veins
The present drifts in dying cells—
Reborn with every breath.

Every mark whispers: still alive
I,
The immortal,
Carry the scars of past
Following through to the future.
Carrying the holes—
To make it whole.

This piece is a co-creation by the staff writer
of Azall and the President & Art Director of Strokes & Sews.

The DOPPELGÄNGER Diaries

Curated by: Strokes & Sews Magazine

What does it mean to see yourself *twice*? Once in the mirror, once in the world. Once in who you are, and once in who you could have been. These pages are a collection of echoes: of shadows that walk beside us, of choices that split into parallel lives, of selves that slip through our fingers yet linger in our imagination.

Here, identity becomes a prism. Stories fracture and refract, showing us how one soul can hold multitudes. To read these diaries is to lean into the uncanny: to recognize a familiar face and wonder if it is your own, or if it belongs to the ghost of the person you were yesterday.

Deconstruction

Sybil Miranda

What is the difference between a diary entry and a poem? At what point do my words cease to be worthy of such a title? Is it the vocabulary? Should I be more sophisticated and organized?

I write within feverish mental states, usually. It always sounds better as I'm writing them, until the re-read later humbles me.

I've never understood why or how we define things with other things that need defining. How far does the root go? When does a question become an answer, when do I become a vessel instead of a human, and when do vowels cease to be a resting of the tongue?

I've found that I'm too passive. What does passive mean? Pushover? What does pushover mean? Me? Who am I? Sybil? The spelling is strange. Words sound strange if you dwell on them too long.

Sybil is a 20 year old Hispanic college student from Dallas, Texas. They're a writer and artist who aims to take her longtime passions along with experiences to create deeply personal pieces of many formats. All of the arts are dear to her, and she uses as many as possible to navigate adulthood.

CONFESSIONS OF *a Human*

Tanisha Singh

My other identity. It wakes up before me, works harder than me, thinks harder than me. And the funniest part, I'm no longer able to differentiate between me and 'it'.

There are people out there who tell me that they love me, that I hold a special place in their lives. But it's not me who they want, they want 'it'.

But why do they want that and not me? Because that isn't messy, that doesn't complain, that doesn't crave for some love or care and because that will give everything but won't expect anything in return. But the real me isn't like that. The real me cries while watching rom-coms that have the same storylines. The real me sometimes just eats ice-cream for dinner. The other me is everything that the real me is not. But, at times, I get scared. Scared of the fact that the real me will leak out of the scars of the other me. So far, I have successfully avoided such a blunder. But if it happens, then everything will end, won't it?

A part of me will mourn this loss, but a part of me will be happy. Because I would no longer have to pretend. But slowly, as each day passes, my identities are merging together. They are becoming one. And then, I'm afraid that I would have to think about what I want to feel and what *I have to feel*.

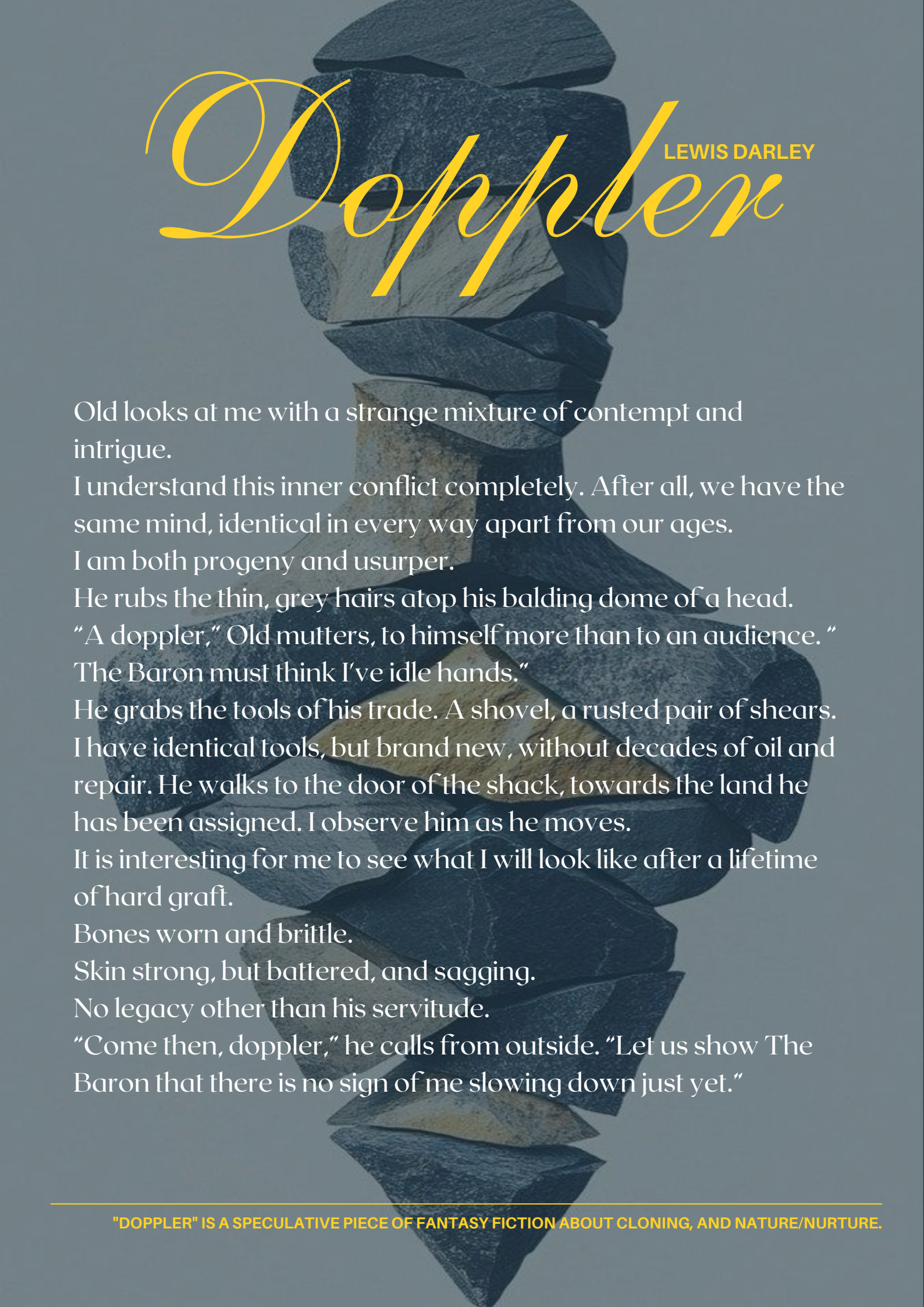
CONFESSIONS OF *a Human*

Tanisha Singh

At first, I used to think, why do I have to do this? But then I realized, it's easier to be someone else than be your own self. People nowadays don't want you, they want someone who is perfect yet imperfect so they can give it the title of You.

This is not the life I wanted. But then again, when has life gone according to someone's will.

Hi! This is Tanisha from India. I'm 15 years old.



Doppler

LEWIS DARLEY

Old looks at me with a strange mixture of contempt and intrigue.

I understand this inner conflict completely. After all, we have the same mind, identical in every way apart from our ages.

I am both progeny and usurper.

He rubs the thin, grey hairs atop his balding dome of a head.

"A doppler," Old mutters, to himself more than to an audience. "The Baron must think I've idle hands."

He grabs the tools of his trade. A shovel, a rusted pair of shears. I have identical tools, but brand new, without decades of oil and repair. He walks to the door of the shack, towards the land he has been assigned. I observe him as he moves.

It is interesting for me to see what I will look like after a lifetime of hard graft.

Bones worn and brittle.

Skin strong, but battered, and sagging.

No legacy other than his servitude.

"Come then, doppler," he calls from outside. "Let us show The Baron that there is no sign of me slowing down just yet."

We are not really born. The flesh is pressed through a large industrial loom, and we arrive fully formed, fatherless, with a metal mother. My earliest memories are mere weeks old. The first person my new eyes set upon was The Baron himself, barely registering the mechanical miracle of life that he had just witnessed.

"You are to assist the old groundskeeper," he said. "You are made of his blood. You will tend to the livestock, and harvest this land."

I remember nodding, seeing Old react to my first footsteps, and my first words.

"Yes, m'lord."

I have no name, and I know him as my master.

Old walks ahead of me, on the path his feet have worn into the earth over years. The hedgeways that flank the route have been cut back by his hand, tamed, their brambles kept away from our flesh. The entire landscape has been sculpted as a tribute to The Baron, but serves more as a tapestry for Old's daily routine. He's impatient with me. I don't know the route as well as he does, and a few times he's had to stop completely, waiting for me to catch up. He turns, and ties a weathered leather apron around himself, with matching gloves that cover his arms up to the elbow. He reaches into the front pocket of the apron, and produces an identical set of clothes, throwing them in my direction.

"You'll need these for today's task," he says. "We're collecting phoenix feathers, and they're angry bloody birds."

He's more cautious now, slower in his movements, as the path diverts into an open paddock.

There are two large birds, ugly things, red as rust, as tall as grown men. Their beaks are curved and sharp, like sickles. They peck at the seeds and stones in the dust. On our approach, they look up, milky-blind eyes craned on their small heads.

Wary, cautious, and ready to strike.

Old steadies himself, the beasts observing every movement.

"Why do we need the feathers?" I ask.

I am confident that Old keeps certain details from me if only to prolong his usefulness in the eyes of The Baron.

The information he gives me is piecemeal, often without context. The few things he has shared with me feel like they have been wrangled from him against his will.

In this instance however, with so direct a question, he has no choice but to talk plainly.

"Phoenix feathers," he begins, gruff and begrudging, "can be ground down and ingested. The properties are said to extend a human life."

I process this shared knowledge with hunger, knowing how rare it is for Old to give up such a prize.

"Does it work?" I ask.

"Look at The Baron," Old offers. "He's older than I am. He might even be older than the groundskeeper I was copied from."

I remember my own birth at the loom, The Baron's cold, impassive face, barely scratched into middle age.

"All those stolen feathers," I say. "No wonder the birds are frightened."

"Hold your tongue," Old snaps, "and know your place."

I struggle to claim one of the feathers myself. The birds snap at my arm as I make my approach, clasp their beaks around the tough leather. One phoenix flares its feathers in an aggressive display, blue flames erupting up its back. Old watches patiently, waiting until I have made a couple of attempts before he steps in.

"Watch me," he says. "There's a knack."

He steps towards the hissing, flaming beast, carefully stepping around it. It's an elegant dance, a matter of precision. In no time he has plucked several feathers, moving to safety with surprisingly agility as the phoenix flails its neck in protest. "Nothing to it," he says. "You'll learn with time."

He tries to downplay the achievement, but I can tell he is pleased by his success and my failure.

Come the evening, in our down time in the shack, Old is unsettled by his earlier victory. I prepare our meal quietly, and face away from him, but can still hear the sound of his pacing.

As we sit down to eat, he begins to explain his troubles. "I still have so much to give," he says. "So much....life in the lifespan. Yet you are here already."

I do not know what to say, and so I say nothing, and look down at my food, and downed tools on the table. I strongly suspect any words from my mouth, a younger mirror of his own, would offer no balm for his looming dread. His shears are dented and bent out of shape, mine are a shining, polished silver.

"It is not your fault," he continues. "But you haunt me. You are my shadow. A reminder that things are coming to an end. I just thought I would have more time."

I look up, meeting his gaze. So strange, to see the same eyes staring back. I dare a response.

"So talk to The Baron," I suggest, "Make a case for your usefulness."

Old sighs, leaning back in his chair. Though proud and indignant, he is defeated.

"My boy, whatever backbone the original groundskeeper may have had, all those generations back, it's long faded, copied and copied out."

He finishes his meal, and stands to leave, to move to his own quarters of the shack. I'm left alone at the dining table, sobered by the absolute finality of his statement.

"Mind, you are more inquisitive than most," he says, calling from his room. "A Doppler asking questions! Never thought I'd see the day."

Old has taken ill, and missed days of The Baron's tasks. At first, it felt strange to work alone, without his guidance, but by the afternoon of the first day, I found the movements of the tasks falling into place with muscle memory. I am reminded that the tasks are designed to be solitary. I mourn Old prematurely, thinking on his own premonition that his usefulness is at its end.

The only thing I have not gotten used to yet is the layout of the landscape. I am used to following Old in his footsteps, relying on him to take me through the shortcuts and desire paths that tear through the terrain. It's the end of the third day, and I have found myself lost. Ahead of me is a tall, slate-grey fortress, framed with circular turrets. Topiary hedgeways flank a pathway that leads to an ornate water fountain. Standing there, mildly puzzled by my sudden intrusion into his space, is the first man I ever saw, on my first day of life.

The Baron himself.

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The Baron himself.



Doppler

LEWIS DARLEY

He beckons me towards him, and I move at haste. It is strange to see him in clear daylight, rather than the dim glow of the loom. He looks me up and down, as though finding my appearance distasteful.

"You're the younger Doppler," he says. "Clearly the older fellow has not taught you that Dopplers are to be seen and not heard."

His pupils are black, and he holds a deep, penetrating stare.

"No, m'lord," I reply. I feel humiliated under his scrutiny. "Please forgive me. I must have taken the wrong path."

He is disinterested in my excuses.

"I would've expected the older one to have been more of an effective tutor before the end of his cycle," he says. "No matter. You will have to learn practically, rather than with theory. Go on now."

I begin to move away, but am troubled by the lack of concern he has shown for Old.

"The old groundskeeper is very sick," I say.

"Dying, I should expect," he replies. "In the grand scheme of things, the life of a Doppler is extraordinarily brief."

I find it pathetic how naturally subservient I am in his presence. He speaks with a knowing wisdom, as though simplifying a difficult concept. He cannot mask the clear superiority he feels.

"I beg you to extend the old groundskeeper's lifespan, m'lord," I ask. "It is clear to me there is still so much to be learnt."

The Baron shakes his head.

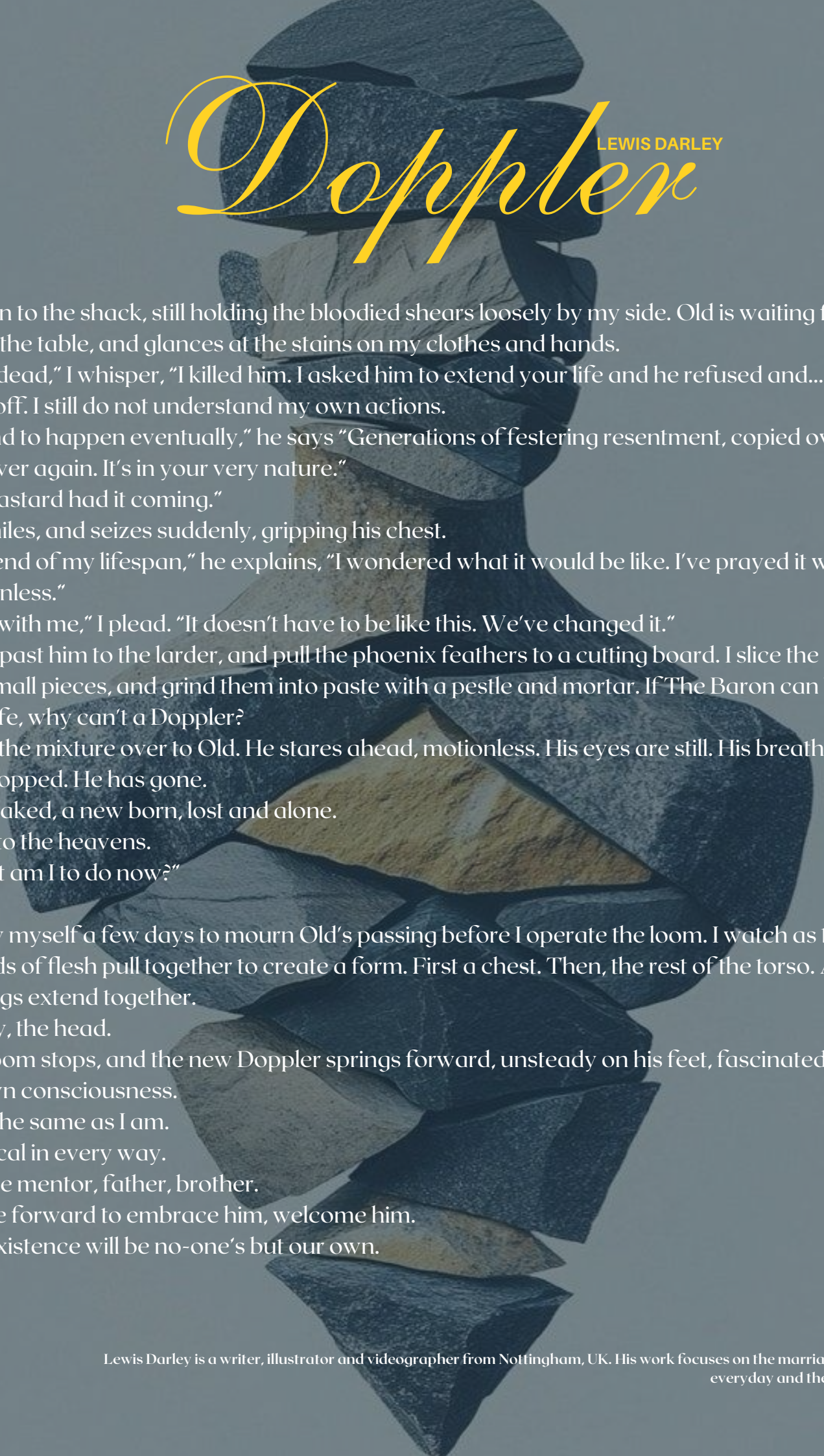
"Never more than one," he says. "You create a worker class, you create revolting peasants. Unions, strikes, uprisings. All time consuming and messy."

He places his hand underneath my chin, and lifts it, inspecting me. I imagine he believes the gesture to be avuncular. Instead I feel like a trapped animal, one of his rare creatures that roam the landscape.

"The Dopplers are a perfect system. I took my most faithful servant and recreated him again and again," he explains. "When you are as powerful as I am, with so many enemies, loyalty cannot be bought. But it can be made."

His eyes widen as I slip the blade of the shears underneath his ribs. He grabs hold of me, and I push the blade harder. He tries to say something, but it comes out as a foaming spittle. He falls to the ground, his face a vision of complete disbelief.

I do not know who is more surprised.



Doppler

LEWIS DARLEY

I return to the shack, still holding the bloodied shears loosely by my side. Old is waiting for me at the table, and glances at the stains on my clothes and hands.

"He's dead," I whisper, "I killed him. I asked him to extend your life and he refused and..."

I trail off. I still do not understand my own actions.

"Bound to happen eventually," he says "Generations of festering resentment, copied over and over again. It's in your very nature."

The bastard had it coming."

He smiles, and seizes suddenly, gripping his chest.

"The end of my lifespan," he explains, "I wondered what it would be like. I've prayed it would be painless."

"Stay with me," I plead. "It doesn't have to be like this. We've changed it."

I rush past him to the larder, and pull the phoenix feathers to a cutting board. I slice the stem into small pieces, and grind them into paste with a pestle and mortar. If The Baron can live a long life, why can't a Doppler?

I take the mixture over to Old. He stares ahead, motionless. His eyes are still. His breathing has stopped. He has gone.

I am naked, a new born, lost and alone.

I wail to the heavens.

"What am I to do now?"

I allow myself a few days to mourn Old's passing before I operate the loom. I watch as the threads of flesh pull together to create a form. First a chest. Then, the rest of the torso. Arms and legs extend together.

Finally, the head.

The loom stops, and the new Doppler springs forward, unsteady on his feet, fascinated by his own consciousness.

He is the same as I am.

Identical in every way.

I will be mentor, father, brother.

I move forward to embrace him, welcome him.

Our existence will be no-one's but our own.



The Last JING TAN PERFORMANCE



Wire of connection,
Length for duration,
Ranging in metres of years,
One that seems promising.

Is it a delusion of a casing,
To what holds within?
Where it appears packed,
How are the fibres within?

THIS PIECE IS A REFLECTIVE PIECE THAT INVITES READERS TO QUESTION THE PERSON THAT THEY ARE IN PUBLIC, WHETHER IT IS WITH FRIENDS, FAMILIES OR STRANGERS, AND ALONE.

The Last **PERFORMANCE**

JING TAN

I: Prelude

Where the sun hits your face in the morning, waking you up from your slumber. The first sight of the day; the first conscious thoughts run through. What are you thinking of? Do you already dread the day ahead? Or do you affirm yourself for a positive and fulfilling one? How do you speak to yourself as you begin your day? How does the voice in your head pronounce your frustrations or happiness? Does this voice take control of your physical body as you speak out your thoughts? In these moments when you are alone, how do you allow the 'weird' parts of you unravel as you brush your teeth or move through the kitchen preparing your breakfast? It could be the little things, from the little joyful dance as you cut up some fruits to the cursing as you try to get through another tough work-out session. Are you conscious of these little things? Or do you only realise after careful reflection?

II: Backstage Setup

Like getting ready for a performance, you put on the features of the character you prepare for. The make-up of the character, the outfit that carries a symbolism of the character's persona, and most importantly, the filters to the personality of the character. As you look at your reflection, at this character staring back at you, do you feel a wave of unfamiliarity? Do you recognise this reflection? Is this reflection who you want to be or who you are? If it is someone you want to be, where does this 'want' originate from? And more importantly, why is it a wish and not a reality? What holds you back from being this character truly? Those limitations you have come up with as you run the diagnostics? They are all in your head; nothing else is preventing you from being this character that you dress up as. There can't be any materialistic barriers since you have what you need to be able to put together this costume. It can't be any social barriers since you repeatedly enjoy the experience of being this character. It can only be an internalised barrier that you have put up for yourself. Venture into this barrier, does this source from your negativity and poor self-image? Or is it because you do not actually enjoy being this person, but you do anyway, and why so?

The Last **PERFORMANCE**

JING TAN

III: The Performance

This is where the beauty of the costumes come together, with perfect alignment, they create the perfect illusion of the character of your own creation to fit into this standard of normal. With every word that leaves your lips to every flow of your movement, a masterpiece of the character is created. When you walk by a shophouse and you catch a glimpse of your reflection, do you recognise it? Do recognise the soul of the eyes of the reflection? Or can you see the sadness or longing in them? Do you feel proud as you walk in the shoes of your character? Does this pride originate from being the character? Or from the recognition of the perfect masterpiece of a character you have put together? Imagine you were home alone like earlier in the day, would you act in the way that you currently do with the people in your surroundings? Or would you have cringed at these acts if you could watch a recording of this performance you put up?

IV: Closing Night

As your key turns in the lock and you open the door, the overwhelming floral and musky notes of your favourite diffuser comforts and welcomes you home. You take off your clothes and drop them in the washbasket and reach for the make-up wipes. As you watch the make-up dissolve with every wipe, you see the colours return to your eyes as your soul fills the brim. Entering the shower, you turn the knob as you allow the water to cleanse the aura of the character, the soulful make-up of your character. Familiarity and comfortability returns to your physical body as you allow yourself to relax. This relief...is it worth it? What do you get out of fitting yourself in an uncomfortable figure for most of the day? What was the initial goal of this? Does it improve your self-image? Does it help you love yourself a little more? How can it? When that character is not even you.

The Last **PERFORMANCE**

JING TAN

V: Curtain-Call

Getting under the covers, you reflect on the day, you realise that serenity doesn't return as it usually does. You pick up your phone and before it flicks on, you catch that milli-second of your reflection on the black of your screen. You switch it off and stare at that reflection. Why do you feel so afraid to be who you truly are? Why do you feel ashamed of this true version of yourself? Is it the judgement from societal expectations? Societal expectations are just a way to get everyone to be the same one person; dull and boring. How does embracing who you are hurt you? If it scares people away, that crowd is just not for you, after all, birds of a feather flock together. This should be more reason for you to be unapologetically yourself. It helps you find the people you will get along with, people who will only push you further up in life and help you become the best version of yourself. Or maybe...it isn't the judgement...what about you scares you?

A gem of a heart,
Hidden from sight,
Hemmed in the ribs,
Thumping for air.

Depart from the old,
A shedding of the past,
Emerge from within,
An ethereal of a being.

Jing is an aspiring freelance writer or journalist. Her works explores topics through a philosophical lens with incorporation of poetry to encourage imagination and flow. She hopes that she can gift readers with pieces that resonate and/or provide a more positive outlook to life, just to make it a little easier to get through.

THE MASK

O L I V I A K E R A I T È

The seats are empty, the theatre is dark,
No one is there to diminish your spark.
Yet you act, fully aware of your mask.
Not a single soul around, at least you don't care to ask.

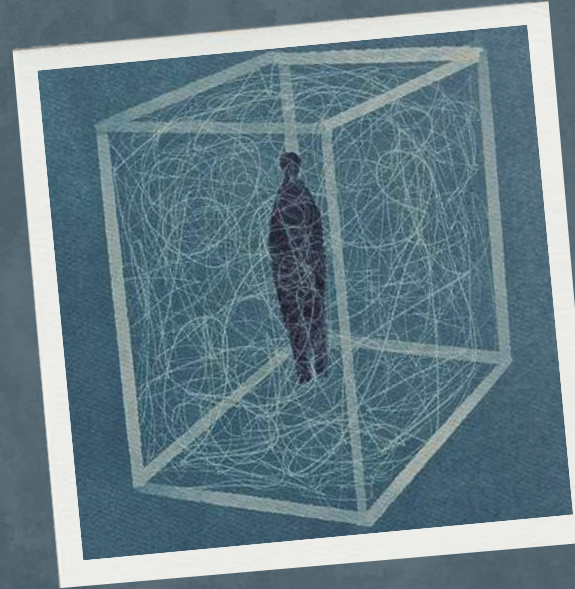
Should someone barge in through the door,
They would see your cloaked ensemble once more.
Barricaded and covered, you won't let them see,
Their hands would fail to set you free.

The mask has encompassed and claimed you whole,
The script has shifted, omitting the role.
Hands are hopeless, sticks won't work,
This wasn't right and yet you smirk.

THE PERSON Laine Artemis IN THE MIRROR

The person in the mirror is staring again. They tilt their head, and in a continuous movement, I do too.

The person in the mirror smiles. The corner of my lips lifts up too. I wonder if we look the same; every time they look in the mirror, they see me, and I see them.



The person in the mirror is brushing their hair. The afternoon light creeps in from the window, illuminating a simple room; wood panels for floors, yellow wallpaper on the walls with a bed and a desk, on which the mirror lies. Meanwhile, opposite it is a floor length window. It might have been nice to look out of it, but the person in the mirror never does. As a consequence, I can never look out of the window either.

The person in the mirror sits down on the table. The wood creaks underneath my weight. They pick up a pen. I look over the ball point in my hand. They begin writing, drafting a letter. My left hand burns as I keep up.

THE PERSON IN THE MIRROR IS AN INTROSPECTIVE PIECE; ASKING US WHETHER THE NARRATOR IS REALLY SEPARATE FROM THE PERSON IN THE MIRROR, AND HOW OBSESSION IS ULTIMATELY THE TRAGEDY OF THIS PIECE.

THE PERSON Laine Artemis IN THE MIRROR

The person in the mirror smiles as they finish. I do too. It's almost instinctual at this point; what they do, I follow. When they breathe, I breathe. When they cry, I cry. When they die, will I die too? They have such a twisted form of control over me. I think I feel disgusted. I wonder if the person in the mirror feels disgusted when they see me too.

The person in the mirror looks at me again. Almost helplessly, I follow. They smile. I wonder if I smiled back.

The person in the mirror is having another usual morning. The same staring in the mirror, then brushing their hair. It gets hair everywhere. Just then, something unexpected happens.

The sun from the window hits the mirror in a perfect linear path, and I am at once blinded by light. At that moment, I do not see the person in the mirror, and I fall into panic. I fall down from my seat, and I rush to close the curtains. I almost hesitantly look back.

The person in the mirror is standing up, clenching the curtains like it is the end of the world. The stool they sat on is knocked over. I wonder why?

The person in the mirror goes to wipe the mirror with their sleeve, and then sits back down on the stool.

The person in the mirror is mocking me. They look into the mirror and frown and pick at their imperfections. I pick at them too.

The person in the mirror looks at me... in anger? In irritation? In disgust?

The person in the mirror doesn't smile at me anymore. I don't smile back. I hate the person in the mirror.

THE PERSON Laine Artemis IN THE MIRROR

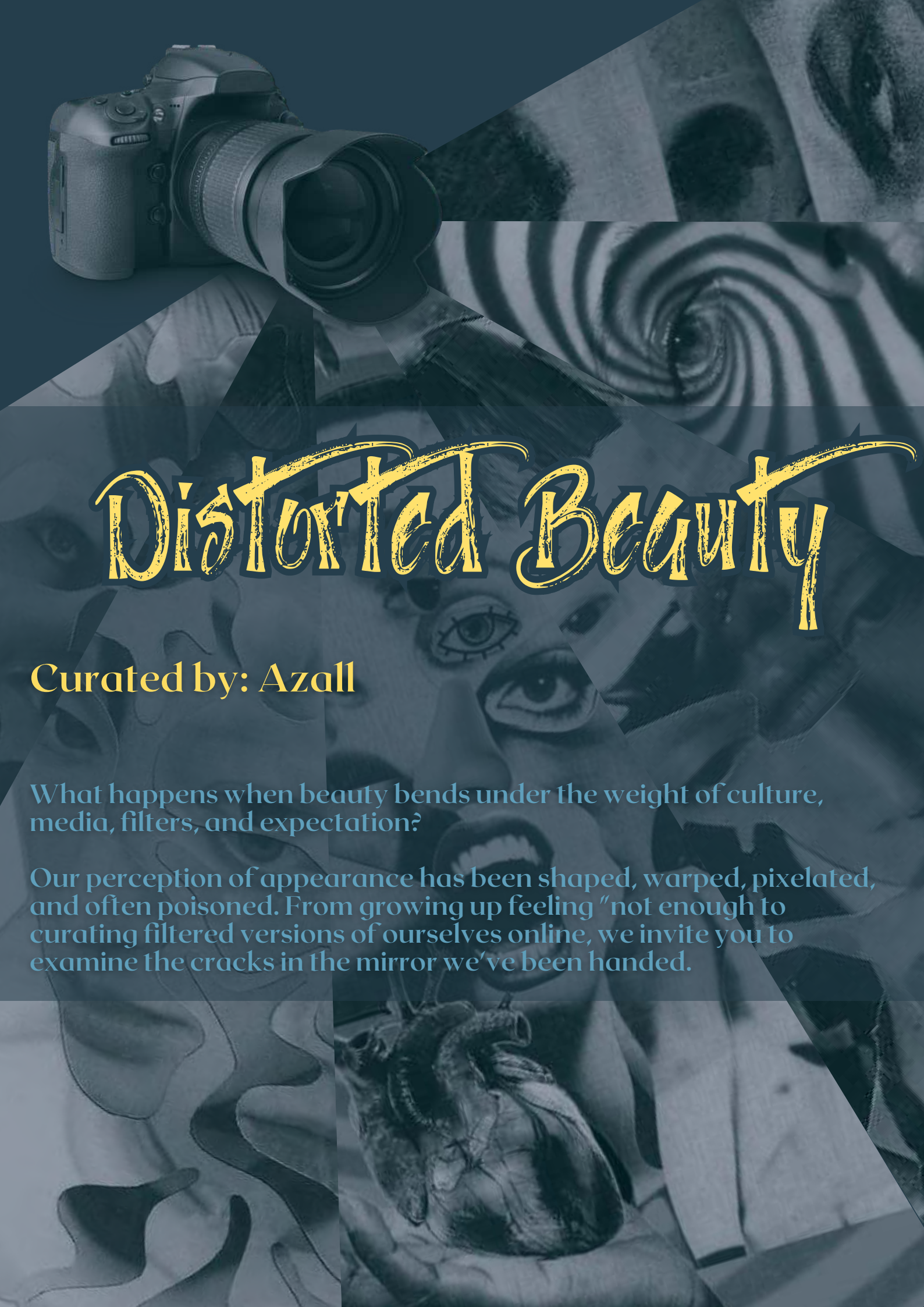
The person in the mirror is mad at me. I don't know why, yet all I can do is muster up a similarly scathing face. They shout at me. I go into a fit of rage. My right hand is raised high, and the shards cut my hand deep when I smash the mirror into pieces. I hesitantly look towards the mirror.

The person in the mirror is gone.

I look at the empty space on the desk where they once were. The rest of the walls seem worn down by age, but there is a rectangular shape of wall where it is untouched by age, by dust. The mirror used to be in that space. Light from the window shines on it, but I don't look away. I stare at that space.

I buy another mirror, this one bigger, its edges extravagantly gold and shining. I set it again, on the table, right on the empty spot on the desk. But I don't look at the edges, nor do I stare at the empty space any longer. I stare at them.

The person in the mirror is staring again.



Distorted Beauty

Curated by: Azall

What happens when beauty bends under the weight of culture, media, filters, and expectation?

Our perception of appearance has been shaped, warped, pixelated, and often poisoned. From growing up feeling "not enough" to curating filtered versions of ourselves online, we invite you to examine the cracks in the mirror we've been handed.

The Other Side

She was an argent beauty, dressed in crystal shine,
Adorned in sterling silence — polished, poised, divine.
Her eyes mirrored oceans, her skin tinted with ice,
Untouched, she lay forever still — by any sin or vice.
The portrait of perfection: truthful, honest, bright,
An object of emerald envy, a silver-sparkling sight.
And yet, her life was illusion — a mirage etched in pain,
Just a reflection, shaped by her reality's disdain.

— Shambhavi Gokhale



Shambhavi Gokhale is an emerging poet whose work explores identity, illusion, emotional duality, and the delicate architecture of the human mind. She writes with a lyrical, metaphor-rich voice, often blending romanticism with psychological depth.

Blurred Seoul (희미한 서울)

My eyelids don't fold like they should.
My stare—unapproachable. Inconceivable. Twisted.
They say my monolids don't pop out.
But maybe they're just too realistic to render,
beyond the app filter.

My eyes look tired.
Untouched. Uncut. Not designed for Western
algorithms,
or Seoul's screens,
that depict the curated idol
staring right back at me.
So they scroll,
desperate to find creases to debut.
A face that fits every frame—
wide eyes, sharp chin,
crafted by the very editor
whose tools blur the truth in my eyes.

My eyelids are the unfiltered story
that burdens the window to the soul,
though they remain sleek,
without a crease in sight.
My eyes remain as raw pixels,
Too real. Too sharp,
to fit their ideals.

— Audrey



Audrey Kao is a Korean-Canadian high school student with a passion for leadership, innovation, and community engagement. As the President of three clubs/councils, she has created numerous student-led initiatives to boost school spirit and productivity.

Outside of school, she is also exploring youth initiatives that amplify student voices and make knowledge more accessible.



Context of Blurred Seoul

As a Korean-Canadian, I originally struggled to look beyond Asian beauty standards because of its perpetuation. The idea of having glass skin, double eyelids, and a sharp chin—simply ate away my soul as I tried to disguise my features with makeup. Although I still occasionally find myself pointing out my “flaws” in the mirror, I’ve learned to accept the features that my ancestors have worn years before me.

Mirror with No Glass

In the room where faces bend like smoke,
a single neon sign flickers over my knees.

I sit there, tilting my jaw to catch
a version of myself that doesn't burn.

That's when she arrives—
a girl with skin like frost over tarnished silver.

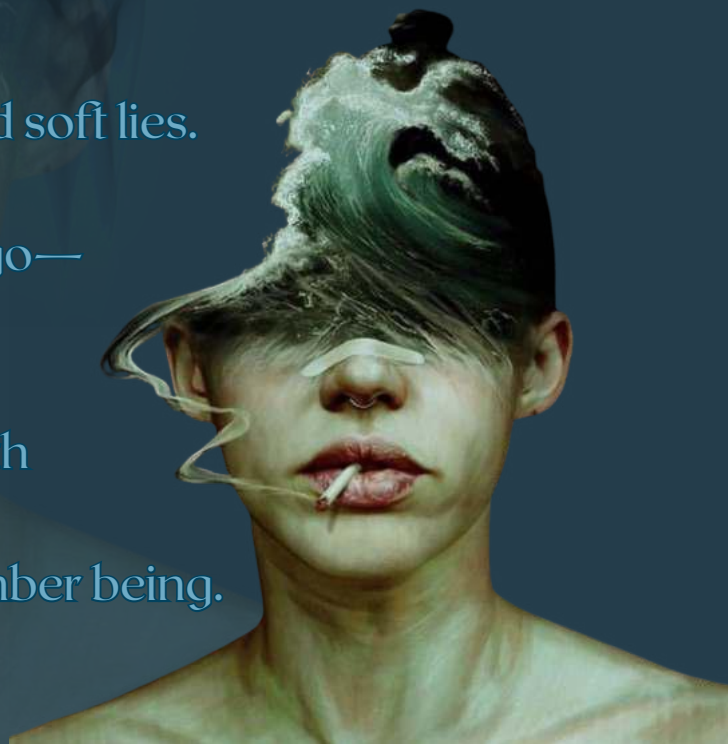
She wears a dress sewn from screens,
each pixel trembling as if ashamed.

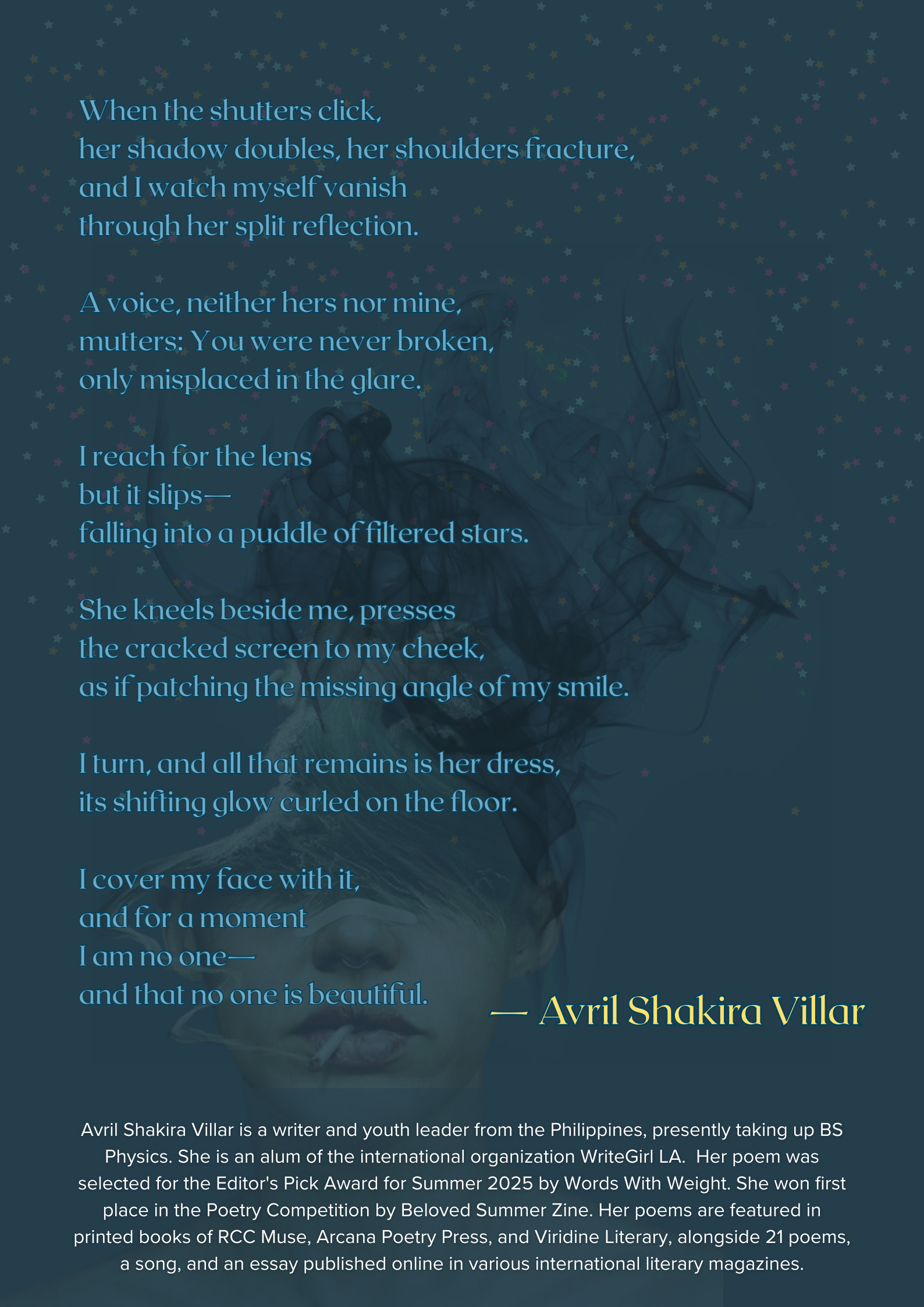
I know her mouth. It's the same one
I erased from every photograph.

What shape do I have? I ask,
but the walls only breathe,
their paint peeling into a thousand soft lies.

Somewhere, a party from long ago—
confetti falling in perfect silence.

The street I came from is lined with
mirrors nailed to telephone poles,
reflecting strangers I don't remember being.





When the shutters click,
her shadow doubles, her shoulders fracture,
and I watch myself vanish
through her split reflection.

A voice, neither hers nor mine,
mutters: You were never broken,
only misplaced in the glare.

I reach for the lens
but it slips—
falling into a puddle of filtered stars.

She kneels beside me, presses
the cracked screen to my cheek,
as if patching the missing angle of my smile.

I turn, and all that remains is her dress,
its shifting glow curled on the floor.

I cover my face with it,
and for a moment
I am no one—
and that no one is beautiful.

— Avril Shakira Villar

Avril Shakira Villar is a writer and youth leader from the Philippines, presently taking up BS Physics. She is an alum of the international organization WriteGirl LA. Her poem was selected for the Editor's Pick Award for Summer 2025 by Words With Weight. She won first place in the Poetry Competition by Beloved Summer Zine. Her poems are featured in printed books of RCC Muse, Arcana Poetry Press, and Viridine Literary, alongside 21 poems, a song, and an essay published online in various international literary magazines.

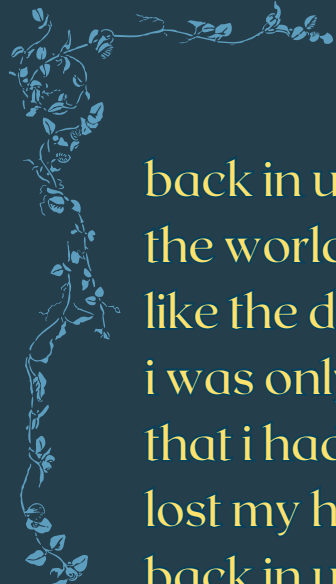


Billie Eilish's breasts – Ukraine

– Saza

i was a very wrong girl in the very wrong city
at the very wrong time, while russians were still mouthful of winning
filthy, horny and greedy
there was really nothing i could do
i was destined to be torn into pieces of two
sides that i had inside
and i dyed my hair to not die
and i cut my hair as short as i could, so from the outside it would look
like i was a boy
god, you have no idea for how long i was annoyed
with everything that i used to be
with the breasts and shoulders and all of the things that made me
me, a girl
how bad was that, trying to end yourself at the end of the world?
to be a girl meant to be in danger
from every russian speaking stranger
and i buried HER in
my apartments 4-0-4
'cause SHE was too scared to wait
for the time she'd get raped
as she surely would
i wanted to tell this to someone
to mom
but i guess i never could





back in ukraine

the world is hungry for every little piece of pain

like the dogs are always hungry for meat

i was only a little kid when i got too much to carry and learnt
that i had to to beat

lost my heartbeat for a bit

back in ukraine

the world is hungry for everything that brings a bittersweet
pain

would've lied to you

if i told you i remembered the last piece of news
that i read

we're all like that

moving from one thing to another

Billie Eilish's breast-ukraine-Sabrina's drama- gaza

from one thing to another

nobody cares more than one fleeting moment of seeing

how ugly-beautiful it must be to be a human being

getting drunk mouthful of winning

getting sunk by the greedy

i left a little girl from inside in that city

and she went from a corner to corner

looking for someone to hold her

watching how her white dress went folding

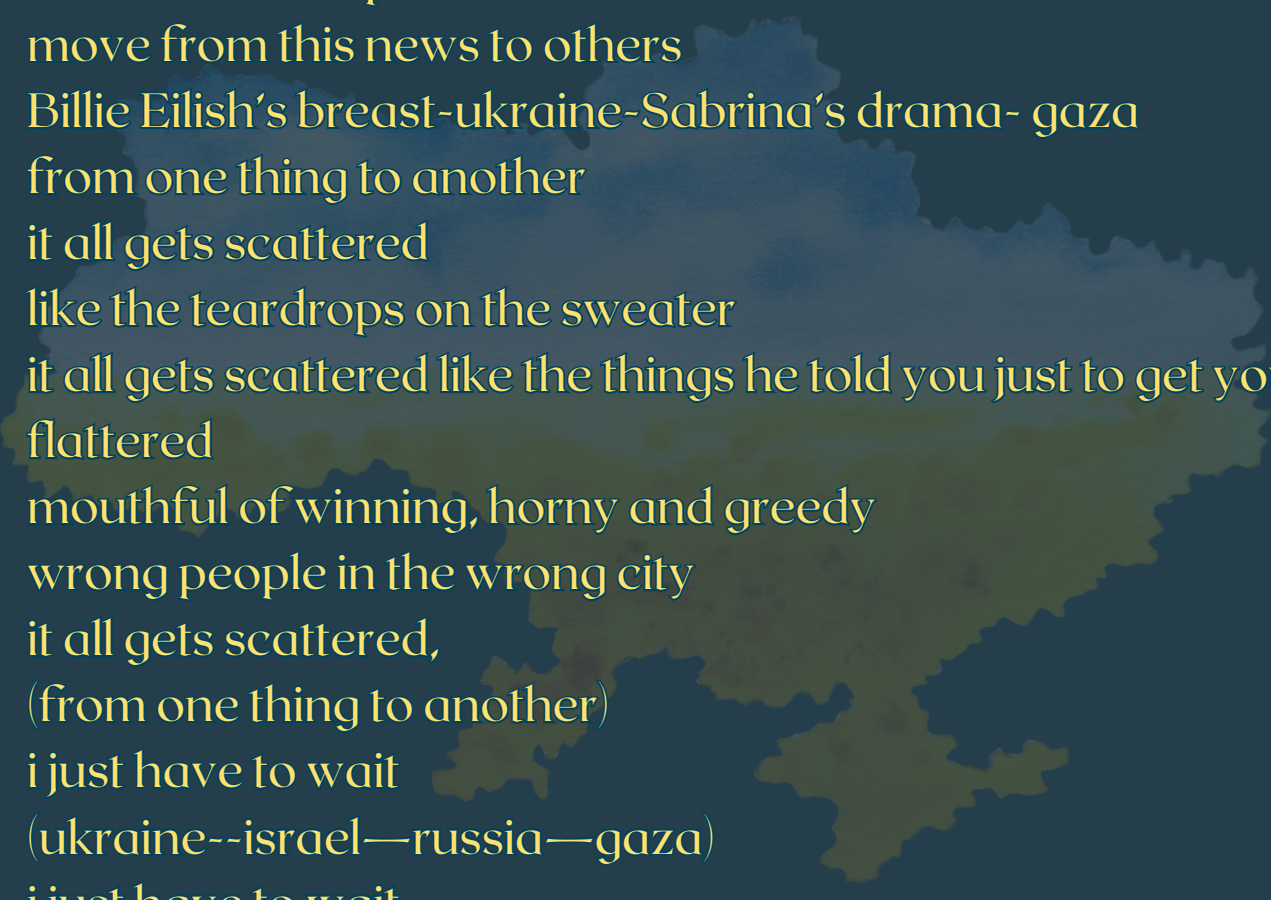
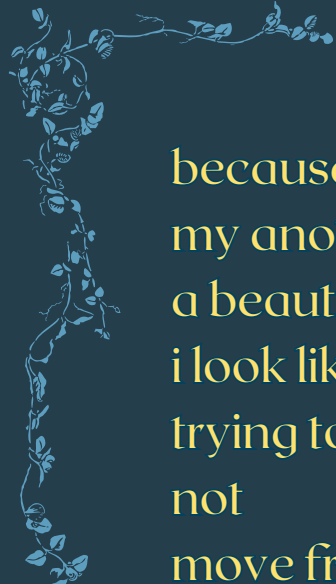
the missing iron(y) is that she hated being seen

i made her believe that she was just a sin

i made her believe that she was just a sin

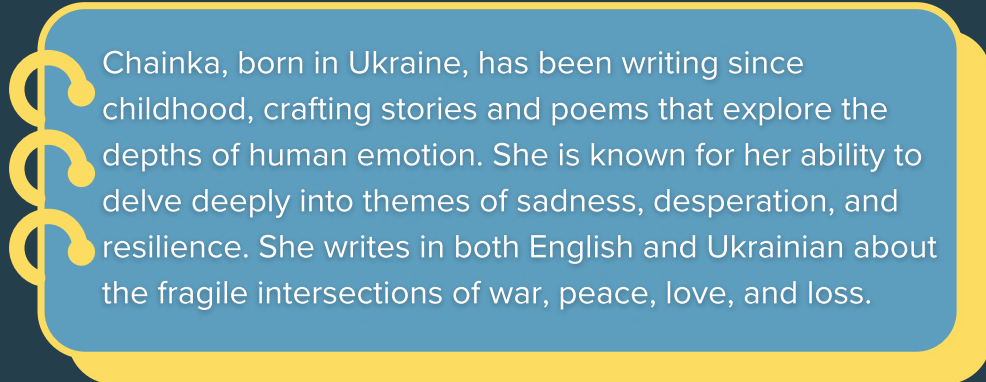
i made her believe that she was just a sin





because that's how the russians thought
my another cover is left to uncover
a beautiful dumb blonde
i look like a bow, but inside i am still a knot
trying to get rid of the memory where i was everything i'm
not
move from this poem to another
move from this post to another
move from this news to others
Billie Eilish's breast-ukraine-Sabrina's drama- gaza
from one thing to another
it all gets scattered
like the teardrops on the sweater
it all gets scattered like the things he told you just to get you
flattered
mouthful of winning, horny and greedy
wrong people in the wrong city
it all gets scattered,
(from one thing to another)
i just have to wait
(ukraine--israel—russia—gaza)
i just have to wait
'till the rage of the next news scatters the little girl scared
that she'd get raped

— Chainka



Chainka, born in Ukraine, has been writing since childhood, crafting stories and poems that explore the depths of human emotion. She is known for her ability to delve deeply into themes of sadness, desperation, and resilience. She writes in both English and Ukrainian about the fragile intersections of war, peace, love, and loss.

Reframe

They called it flaw—
my crooked nose,
wild hair,
skin kissed by sun.
I posed, filtered, erased,
until nothing felt like me.
Now, I tilt the frame,
paint outside the lines,
call my stretch marks lightning.
In the cracks, I find art.
In distortion,
I find me.



— Asees Kaur

Ases is a 17 year old poet, storyteller, and voice of many roots. Having being a published author at 17, her writing lives at the intersection of memory and identity, rooted in heritage, and held together by language. she writes to honor the people and places that came before her and shaped her. when shes not writing she can be found coaching gymnastics, going to school, or standing somewhere between two homes - heart in one hand, pen in the other.

Quartzite

People despise rocks,
they've been villainized
into weapons.

Thrown like rotting garbage for
useless amusement, just to see
it soar through possessive wind,
and how far it will strike the concrete
by testing their force vs gravity.

"Stone cold heart."
It all makes sense in
my wise yet feeble brain.

They glisten with warmth
to a certain degree, but
people made them filthy.

(I wonder if they were ever soft & mushy inside).

When the sun appears
they will sharpen,
bite your fingertips,
burn your feet,
if they are touched
with skin.

Now, they are collected,
held with admiration,
for what? Prize? Possession?
And the rocks
do nothing, but sit there,
and look pretty.

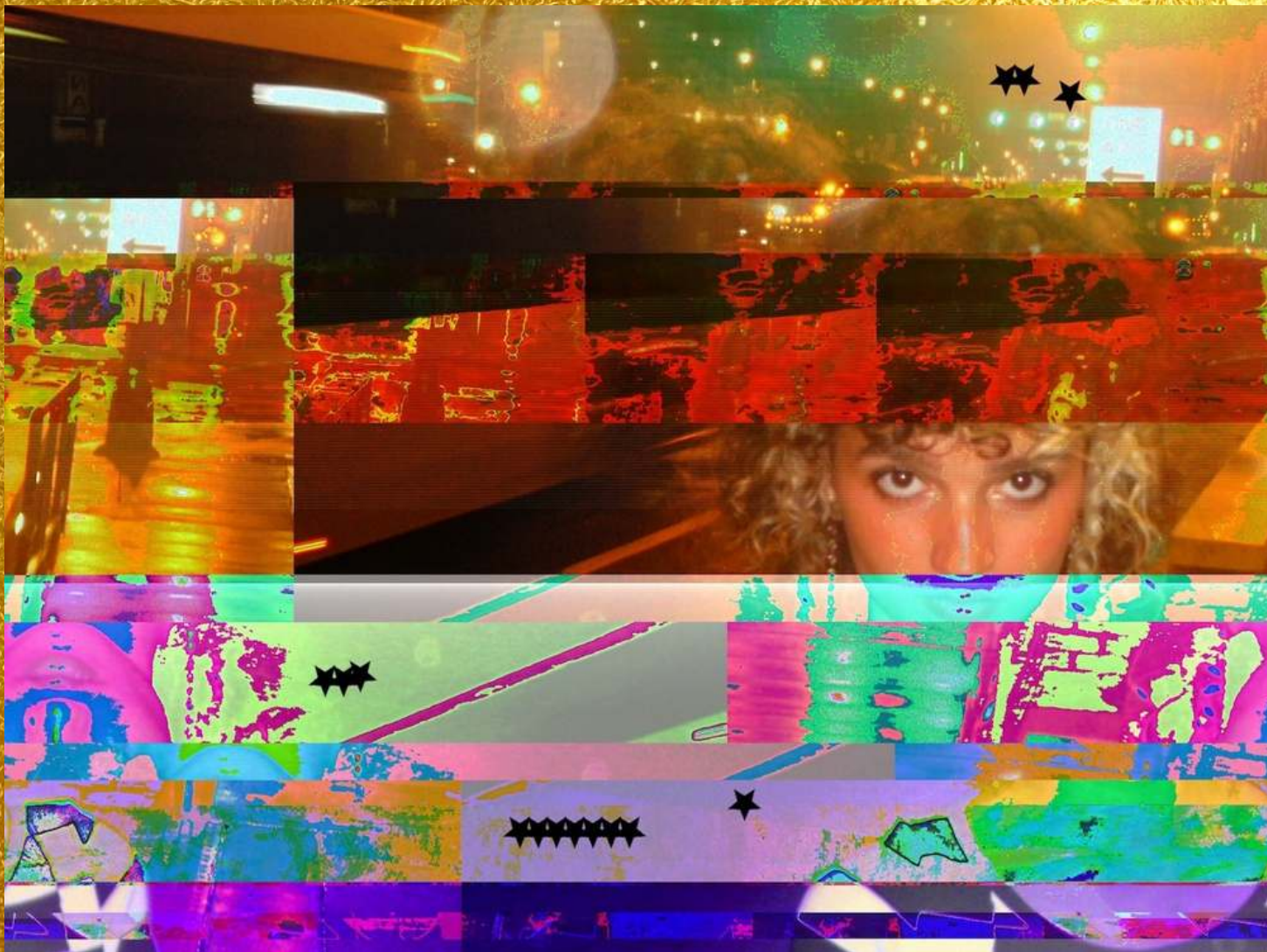
— Jezabel Castillo



Jezabel Castillo is a Poet studying Writing & Literature in NYC. Her writing explores profound and heart-touching themes that have been published in various literary magazines. Her most recent writing pieces have appeared in The Expressionists Magazine, Venom & Verse, and Sacrum Literary Magazine. You can find more of her poetry on Instagram @poemsbyjez



One Way TRAFFIC



— Taylor Elise Colimore

Taylor Elise Colimore (she/her) is an emerging multimedia artist, born in Baltimore, Maryland, and currently living in Richmond, Virginia. Her visual art practice consists of both digital and analog art making techniques, often creating work with second hand craft and/or fiber based materials and enhancing them through digital techniques such as video, animation, and electronic hardware. This practice enables experimentation and intuition as a part of her art making process.

If My Heart Loved My Self And It Defended

And did you know
That if the gurus shut their mouth
And if mirrors vanished from the world
And if a poor girl's cries haunted us less
And if the pictures were legit

If my heart loved my self
And the security was given to me since young
If love covered me since birth
-like a tight blanket, like that one when I was born
And no words of foul were uttered by the mouths

Would you care for a pimple
Such a small protrusion
Would you care for a grey hair
-is it not coloured, silver hair?

Would a wrinkle set your world ablaze
And have you think of your 'expiry date'
And make you spend thousands -isn't that the goal?
And makes you believe your time has ended, when you're barely
44?
Are the smiles you smiled not worthy of folded skin?
The joy that painted your face, the sadness that shaped your soul



Is the anger and sadness your soul had the right to feel, deemed bad now?

And are you no human with a right to grow old? To feel? To be? - without cosmetics & surgeries?

And would your loving body that functions every day, if thinner or fatter or unshaped like them, bring you disgust and despair?

— Alanae



Alanae is a recently indie-published, emerging young poetess living in Cairo, Egypt. Her ideal days are spent reading books, out at galleries and cafes, and chatting with friends.



It's Been 3 Days

Day 0:

My favorite part of my morning is putting on makeup. It's one of the only things that can keep me sitting still for a period of time. A brush that always irritates my skin dances across my cheeks, dusting them a sparkling pink. My eyes awaken with a black paste combing through my lashes. When I put makeup on, I can feel pretty again.

My least favorite part of my morning is picking out my outfit. Do I wear my new shorts that I love the design of but are too tight at the belt, or do I wear old shorts that are just fine but a tad more comfortable? Decisions decisions. How about a shirt? A shirt can fix it. Do I wear a tank top that matches both my shorts but hugs my stomach, or do I wear a t-shirt that makes my shoulders look broad but hides my abdomen?

Maybe I just shouldn't go out today.

Day 1:

I can't keep living like this.

I find myself staring at my figure in mirrors, fixating on every part of myself I've grown to hate. It's either that, or I just don't look at all, quickly pulling my body away at the sight of its reflection.

I can't keep living compliment to compliment, an ounce of dopamine that tricks my brain into thinking people may perceive me differently than my mind does. I can't keep living in a constant state of guilt after I fuck up and have a snack that doesn't fit into my schedule. I can't keep scrolling past fond memories in my camera role just because the photo captured me from head to toe.

Maybe I'll skip breakfast today. Oh, and I could take a walk in the afternoon. That should help. Planet fitness isn't that expensive, I'll make an account. A meal a day should do it.

Day 2:

My limbs tremble as I wake up. I had a small lunch yesterday, so I had an early dinner. God, I'm hungry. I'm not craving anything, though; I haven't had much of an appetite the past 2 days. A protein bar can calm my shaking, but I've been having too many of them recently. They have way too many calories for me to be eating them this much.

I don't know how to lose weight. I don't know how to fix my body or my brain or my habits. I know I need to have a "calorie deficit", but I don't know how to change the way I live. I just don't know how to live anymore.

Shit, what do I wear? I'll just put my makeup on first, that'll calm me down, right? But as my eyeliner quivers against my skin and my contour doesn't have the slimming effect it's supposed to, the expression, "putting lipstick on a pig" has never felt more real.

I don't have the energy for choosing an outfit, I'll just throw a hoodie over my clothes in hopes no one notices me. There's no shining body-positive pity that can make me hate myself any less.



Day 3:

I feel stuck in two ways:

1: I feel so stuck in my clothes. I don't know what size I am anymore, so I continue to buy my old size. I don't quite fit into that, but my pride doesn't let me go a size above, so I'll continue to be uncomfortable both physically and emotionally. I've been getting used to it.

2: I feel stuck in routine. I don't know how to escape what I've been doing my whole life, my eating habits that have worsened in the past year. I'm at a loss for how to leave this labyrinth of a lifestyle, each turn just leaves me at another dead end.

Overall, I feel so stuck in life. Goddamnit, it's been 3 days and all this fat on my body won't let go. With each day that passes, I face another wall with no way to climb over it.

I can't give up, but I just can't seem to love the way I am either.

I can't keep living like this.

— Naomi Zarnighian



Naomi Zarnighian is a young writer who aims to promote self reflection and growth through her writing.

THE SPIRAL

Curves of the body,
A once comfortable tenant,
Replaced by the intruder of delusions,
Relentless and unforgiving.

Outlines of the body,
Blurred into oblivion,
Varying in obscurity,
With expectation comes obsession.

Definition of the body,
Where softness is lost,
Through the glamour of sharpness,
The soft left to shame.

Features of the body,
Filtered through and through,
By pre-determinants of variants,
A vampire of self-image.

Textures of the body,
A functionality stamp of nature,
Only to be severed by men,
Just to please the eye.



Every decade has a set of expectations that corrodes the different building blocks of society; in our decade, the boldest pillar of it is industrialization. Since birth, these expectations have been engrained in our mind through the simplest unassuming things. For example, the moment you enter the world, you are flagged a colour of either blue or pink according to your sex. The problem isn't within the flagging to differentiate the sex of the baby, but the development of the mindset that these colours 'belong' or 'indicate' that particular sex; boys are shamed for being feminine if they like pink and girls are equally shamed for being masculine if they like blue. As we journey through college and high school, especially exiting the teenage years, the algorithms of social media and advertisements have created images that set an unconscious expectation of body types for both males and females. These images shine a spotlight on the goal whilst leaving the golden path to the goal in the dark and entwined with other misleading paths. This, unfortunately, results in multiple strays on the overwhelming variety of painful and unhealthy paths including bulimia and anorexia.



The raging standards of beauty have spun a web of self-image filters that feed on the fear of alienation and judgement. These filters form the base of our insecurities, stretching into a wider scope of mental disorders that eat away at our identity. The problem with these illusions that power mental disorders are that they do not discriminate, nor do they leave once we have 'met' societal standards of beauty. They are the pests in the fields of our mindset, clinging onto and fanning the wildfire of viruses that gorge at the flowers of positivity, self-love and identity. We have reached the danger zone of these illusions. Where it is never enough; where the fear of alienation turns into the fear of losing out; where the fear goes beyond external validation. This is where most souls are lost, where they fail to recognise their limits and the lost to their internal battle collides with the external reality. Many soldiers lose themselves in this spiral, where they get seriously injured on this battlefield such that they no longer recognise themselves in the mirror. Where their insecurities have gained control over their mind, they no longer see what others see, including features they were once proud of. That foreign feeling that arises contributes to the frustration and uncomfortability, which only accelerates the spiral.



How does one get out of the maze of mirrors? Similar to the horror concepts of thriller movies with 'once you get on, you can't get off', once one enters the maze of mirrors, it is difficult to escape it. The maze of mirrors is filled with endless mirrors of distortion which surrounds you wherever you look and go. One mirror of distortion itself can give rise to feelings of unease and dislike; a maze filled with such mirrors can overwhelm and push a person into an unraveling endless chain of bodily anxiety. This anxiety can develop into manic in the varying forms of eating disorders. As every mirror reflects a version of you that is distorted, these images begin to manipulate. It starts convincing and confirming your deep-rooted insecurities. As this anxiety overflows, it envelops and controls your mind in ways that diminish your self-perception, making it difficult to recognise yourself in the mirror.

Let me be the bearer of good news: that tiny crook in your nose or that extra inch from bloating after a meal? It is an illusion that is visible to only you; it deceives only to break you down. That illusion that has manifested itself through the lies of the bodies of jealousy around, preying on your downfall, hoping that the trap would set itself up to tear down the exceptional beauty that only you embody. From the constant exposure that has nestled in as a mindset, it has manipulated the standards set up as the 'actual and only' beauty, blinding you from yours. There is soul and fullness in the curves of your body, dictating the undeniable levels of shine from the care you have never failed to nourish your body with. Why would you allow years of hard work to be vacuumed by comments or 'opinions' of people who do not matter? For the ones who wish to debate through the argument that these comments hit from home, I invite you to ask yourself if they have to live in this vessel of yours. Do these individuals, who should primarily worry about health and not image if they truly cared, suffer any unhappiness from being in this vessel of yours. At the end of the day, the person who gets to experience every physical and mental experience is you. You get to decide if you want that experience to be unimaginably pleasant, leaving you wiggling your toes in bed as you anticipate for the next day; or one that drains you, leaving you to mourn your sleep whilst you long for night.

The building and maintenance of a positive mindset is the master key to the stubborn lock of pessimism. Like a rusty lock, it can be strenuous at the beginning, like walking through liquid of high viscosity. It is the constant requirement of being conscious of every thought you have, and flipping them onto a positive note. This is where the application of lubricants of support assists in soothing some of the resistance. There are a variety of such lubricants, ranging from different brands, including motivational apps, a journal and support from loved ones like your friends and family, to a range of different types that focuses on different aspects of positive reinforcements. When you manage to unlock this, life immediately becomes a little easier to get through. You live with less self-doubt; the recurring voices that question your appearances quietens, and even where they speak a little louder, you know how to turn the volume down. When you revisit photos of yourself, you no longer cringe at how you look, but laugh at how goofy it is or squeal over how cute and wholesome it turned out. When you're getting through your daily life, you won't catch yourself touching your waist and beating yourself over the cheat meal or dessert you had half an hour ago. When you look at your reflection, you smile and embrace that wave of pride for your personal growth and self-love.



Next time you look in the mirror, register the first feeling you get from your reflection. Do you immediately experience a feeling of disgust or dislike towards what you see? If so, I want you to close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. As you breathe, imagine every negativity of insecurity flowing out through the fingers on your right hand; and positivity of beauty and self-love flowing in through the fingers on your left hand. Now open your eyes, observe every curve of your body, notice how every curve connects with each other. Create an appreciation for each curve that creates the body that your soul lives in, for each curve holds within the essential parts that keep you alive and assists you to achieve everything that you have done, is doing and will do. As you observe and take in the beautiful figure, affirm yourself with the acknowledgement of appreciation. The strongest cure is from within: the mindset.

The wholeness of your figure,
Blurred and split in two,
By the works of darkness,
The demons of insecurities.

Like a famished vampire,
A feast of the blood of self-destruction,
Where the mind is deluded,
Confused and enveloped with fear.

Shine a light of positivity,
Where calm flows,
Follows appreciation and self-love,
An unstoppable combination.

For why bring shame,
To the beauty of the body,
The divine temple of the soul,
With undeniable flair.

Every inch of the curves,
Unique in altering angles,
Embodying alluring individuality,
That makes you...you.

— Jing Tan

Jing is an aspiring freelance writer or journalist. Her works explores topics through a philosophical lens with incorporation of poetry to encourage imagination and flow. She hopes that she can gift readers with pieces that resonate and/or provide a more positive outlook to life, just to make it a little easier to get through.

Pixels and Mirrors

Mirror mirror on the wall,
Who is the Fairest of them all?
I see someone I don't know,
Is this perfection mine, or borrowed?

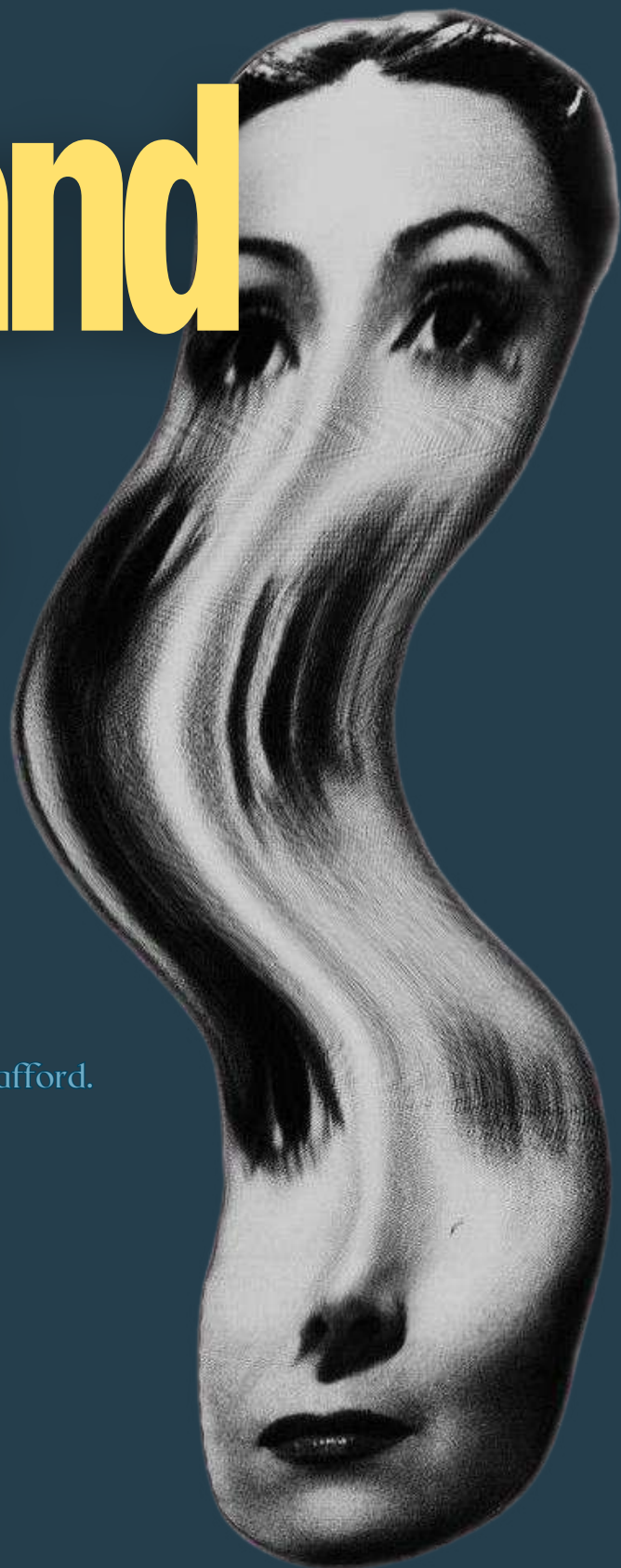
Magazine covers full of standards,
Are invisible flaws their anchors?
The eyes that judge, measure beauty I can't afford.
Must a duck like me be left forgotten?

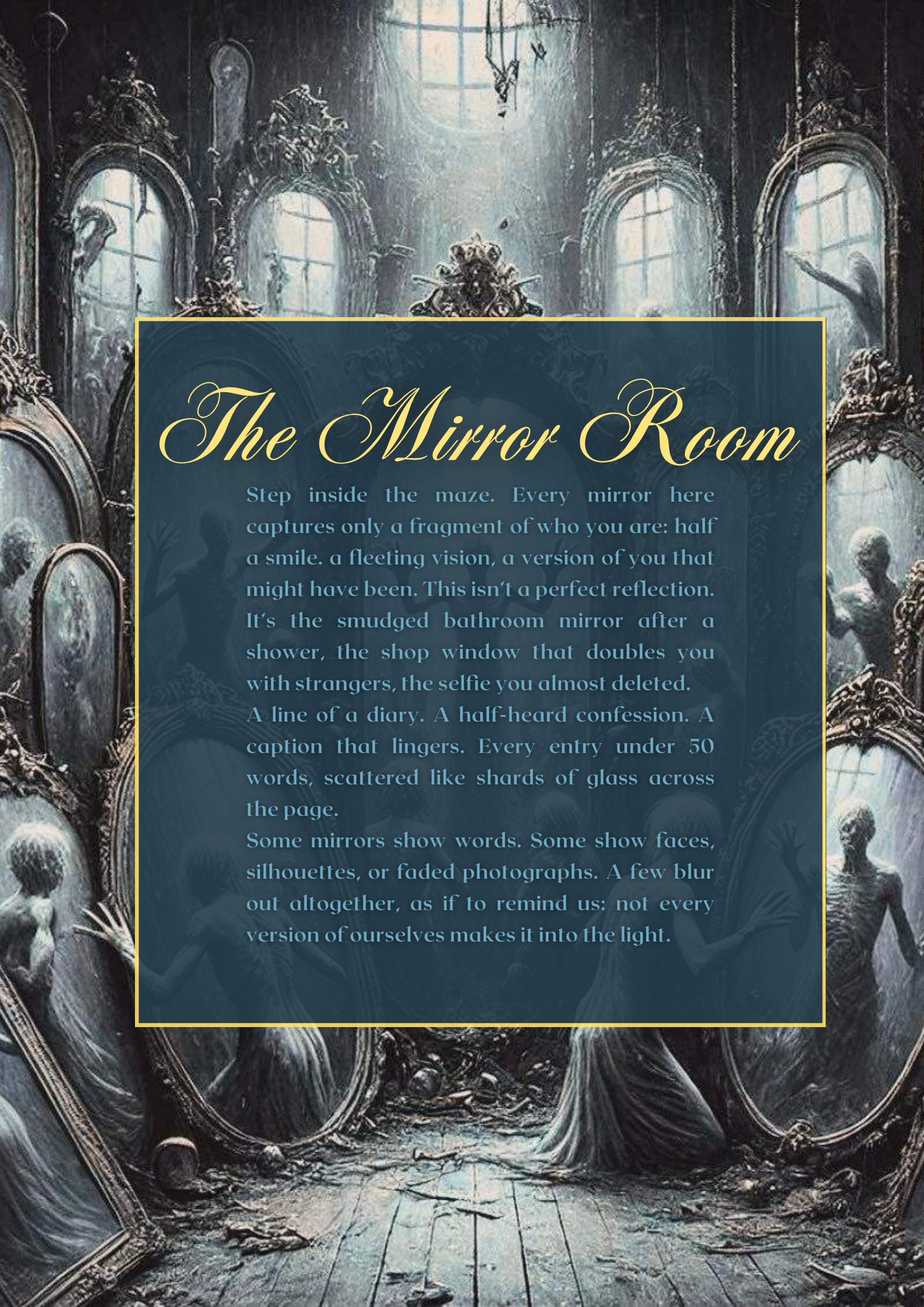
I hide behind soft filters,
The eyes that judge, are they the killers?
Apps that retouch and reframe,
Are they the root of my decline?

Somehow after all these years, I feel sane
Is it worth resisting the fame?
I finally posted a picture unaltered,
But am I brave, or faltered?

— Reets

Reets, 21, writes with a love for archiving moments, drawn to quiet emotions and the poetry of everyday life. Her work feels like the warm corners of the internet, and she herself feels like Love You by The Free Design.





The Mirror Room

Step inside the maze. Every mirror here captures only a fragment of who you are: half a smile, a fleeting vision, a version of you that might have been. This isn't a perfect reflection. It's the smudged bathroom mirror after a shower, the shop window that doubles you with strangers, the selfie you almost deleted.

A line of a diary. A half-heard confession. A caption that lingers. Every entry under 50 words, scattered like shards of glass across the page.

Some mirrors show words. Some show faces, silhouettes, or faded photographs. A few blur out altogether, as if to remind us: not every version of ourselves makes it into the light.

THE MIRROR

Designed by: Anushka Singhal

*"these healed-over scars on my body
are not proof that i survived. they are
proof that i should be dead!"*

-Parísie

*I betrayed love &
friendship, because I was
scared of love. Holding
their hearts meant I must
love them, and I couldn't
even love myself. The
responsibility towered over
me, and I crumbled. And on
a cursed morning, I ended
everything. And I ended
their hearts too.*

-Alanae

*But,
I'm terribly sorry,
I swear on my life
I think I've seen you.
In my dreams, faces
always seem
to blur.*

*But, your eyes
look so familiar. Tell me, did we
meet
at my mother's house?
I can't help
but think of her
when I see your face.*

-Emma Batterman

FOR ROOM

*"...and the worst
punishment any god
can ever give is
forcing one to
continue living."*

-Parísie

*everyday, i look into
the mirror and count
my ribs—one, two.
one, two—wishing for
my skin to hug tighter
as i count from ridge
to ridge. everyday, i
wish to dip my fingers
between those bones
because maybe then
i'd get to meet the
ghastly being hiding
under my skin.*

-Parísie

*To explore what the men had left for me
Be quiet*

Set one end to grow heavier

And put my hand over the light.

My nighttime sounds of distant voices

Dear gods

A signal now approaching

On all roads would grow louder

Heavy goods of marble baskets and carriages

Cover us with the coming of darkness

Time to move.

Touched breathed agreement

A goddess watched me

Covered with his discarded cloak

He was worse than me

Worse to no escape

I wish I had brought one with me

A long time nailed too far apart

In the dark, in silence.

Remove the outside and keep quiet

What do I do?

Go home.

-Diana Dumitrascu

REFLECTIONS

The End

AZALL

SYEDA NATASHA HASSAN (EDITOR-IN-CHIEF)
WISSEM DEGHR (CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER)
REETKA GUTTIGRAHARAM (STAFF WRITER)
THANYA SPOORTHY (GRAPHIC DESIGNER)

MARGINS

NOOR (FOUNDER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF & GRAPHIC DESIGNER)
HIBA FARHAT (OTHER STAFF)

STROKES & SEWS

WISSEM DEGHR (PRESIDENT AND ART DIRECTOR)
ANUSHKA SINGHAL (EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, GRAPHIC DESIGNER AND
COVER DESIGNER)