



# *NOSTALGIA*

The Writer's Den

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## The Fall

I wiped the tears from my eyes as I packed up the last of my clothes and belongings. I took a look around my empty studio apartment, it was small but it had personality, and I did all I could to make it a home for myself over the last few years here. How blessed I feel to have been given the opportunity to live my dreams in New York City, even if just for a while, and I am shattered to be leaving, to have to go home and start all over again.

“I’m sorry but we have to let you go,” my supervisor sighed as he informed me of information I’d been expecting for a while now. I had been dreading the moment, but don’t get me wrong, I knew I had it coming. I haven’t been the best intern lately, and to be fair, I haven’t been a great friend, daughter, sister, or anything lately. I had been so burnt out from everything, I haven’t found it in me to call up my friends or family, and I couldn’t even bring myself to go to my internship most days. I had constant pressure on my shoulders to keep this spot in a well-established publishing company in New York City, my dream city. Very few people were chosen for this spot, and I was lucky enough to obtain it. But it proved itself to be too much.

I was 22 when I left my hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio to come here for the internship. I had recently finished my undergraduate studies when I was given this opportunity, and my young, naive self didn’t realize how difficult it would be to keep up with the fast-moving lifestyle of NYC. My parents were supporting me for the first couple of years, helping me with rent, groceries, and everything I needed to live as minimally as someone could in New York. My parents aren’t the richest, so they provided what they could, and I am so grateful for their contribution. I also worked a waitressing job on the side to provide for myself as much as I could. I had expected and hoped to be bumped up to an employee after the first couple of years, and my parents were unable to support me past that. There were just not enough spots opening for me to be given the employee slot, and it is a miracle I was even kept on as an intern. They said I was a hard worker and efficient, so they weren’t planning on letting me go, even though they had to lay off quite a few of the interns around me. I was doing the best I could for the longest time, but at some point, my best didn’t seem to be enough anymore.

After my parents stopped providing for me, the New York expenses caught up to me fast. On top of waitressing and interning, I took on another job. I took up an easy retail job, but even with two jobs, I was barely making ends meet. My mental health crashed, and I was unable to tend to any of my relationships. Neither my friends or family were getting my attention, and I wasn’t even getting any time to myself. If I wasn’t at one job, I was at the other, or my internship. Aside from that, I was eating or sleeping, but there were never any moments I just had for myself. It was starting to show in my face: my eye bags were large and dark, I started to appear pale to those around me, and I just felt physically defeated during all moments of the day.

There was just not much left I was able to do to keep up. My time here in my dream city has just simply come to an end.

I zipped up my final bag and slung it over my shoulders, taking a deep breath as I started heading down the stairs, going slowly as my suitcase smacked each stair on the way down. As I approached the lobby, I gave a wide smile to our apartment receptionist, Lydia. I’m sure my

smile didn't reflect the sadness that shined in my glossy eyes. Nonetheless, she gave me a wide smile with her pearly white teeth. Lydia was a single mother, raising two kids on her own as her children's father left them to go be with a younger woman. She had the best attitude about her situation though, working to keep her kids happy. She has a very beautiful face, and though the stress and age were slightly starting to reveal themselves, her beautiful features were still very prominent. She's been the apartment receptionist since long before I moved here, and every resident can agree that she's an angel. When times were tough for me, I would sit with her and we'd keep each other company. I could tell we both really needed the one-on-one time. She is resilient, determined, persistent, hard-working, loving; She is everything you can think of as someone you'd want in your corner. I got the chance to speak to her about going back home, and she gave me all her love and support. It made the idea of leaving a little bit easier, and she gave me her number so we can keep in touch.

I approached her desk and she stepped out from behind her desk with her arms extended. As soon as I embraced her, I felt my throat tighten up and I let out a choked sob as I held her tightly in my arms. As of now, I think I had been in true denial about having to leave, but holding Lydia made it sink in that I was finally letting go and going back to my family. I felt broken, like my independence was being taken away. I was going back to living under my parents' roof, to working minimum wage jobs to catch up, to being stuck in the hometown I was so desperately trying to get out of. Lydia held me tightly, telling me she'd miss me and I'd always have a place in New York if I ever wanted to come by. She pulled away, wiping the tears from my face, kissing my forehead, and letting me go on my way. Over my years here, Lydia was a mother figure to me, and I appreciated all that she has done for me.

I stepped outside into the crisp November air, letting out a sharp exhale. I waited for a taxi and waved one down to come get me from the front of my now-former apartment building. A taxi soon came to my feet and the driver exited the vehicle to help me place my bags into the trunk of the small yellow sedan. We arrived at the airport quickly and I took a deep breath as I made my way inside. I barely managed my time correctly, and I had only enough time to get through TSA and make it on the plane, as they were already boarding when I got to the terminal. I got myself on the plane and in my seat, regardless of the disapproving looks I was getting from the staff at the terminal for barely making the call time.

The two hour flight felt nowhere near long enough for me to contain all the thoughts running through my mind. I grabbed my stuff and exited the plane, making my way to baggage claim to grab the bulk of my belongings before making my way to the pick-up area. I found my parents rather quickly, and they engulfed me in a hug, bombarding me with questions about how my flight was, if I needed anything, and all the other micromanaging details parents need to get out after not seeing their child for several months. It made for a very talkative ride home, which was difficult as I was not feeling very talkative at the moment, but I managed the short car ride home until I was able to shove myself in my childhood bedroom for a few hours of quiet while I unpacked. I got through most of my New York belongings, putting them in their respective places in my childhood home, before taking a long break and just scrolling through my phone. I

only had my clothes left to unpack and I decided I needed to get out of the house for a little bit just to recharge and get my body and mind used to the idea of being back in Cincinnati.

I gave my parents a hug and kiss as I grabbed the keys to my old car and went on my way. I hadn't told any of my friends back home that I was coming back. I held off on it, as I wanted to get myself situated mentally before jumping back in with everyone I knew. I was feeling lost and I didn't want any distractions while I was adjusting.

I drove around for 15 minutes aimlessly, not knowing exactly where to go. I drove around familiar parks, local grocery stores, my favorite shopping centers, and my old schools, yet none of them felt like the right place to go. I parked at the back of the parking lot at my old middle school and rested my forehead on the steering wheel out of frustration. I know the adjustments wouldn't happen overnight, but I was expecting to feel at least a little bit excited to be back home, to be around my childhood friends and everything I have ever known. I thought for a little bit longer of where I could go; I wanted to just explore on my own for a while.

I remembered this cute spot at the top of a small hill, it was high enough to see some of the major lights of the city and it was calm enough for me to sit down and breathe some fresh air. We were entering nightfall so it was the perfect time to watch the sunset and see the city lights emerge for the evening. The spot was introduced to me by an old boyfriend from high school. We were together for three years and things were going well, until college. We dated for junior and senior year of high school, but he went across the country for college and it became too much for us beyond the first year of college. We decided to split and I haven't really spoken to him since we had broken up.

I started up my car and made the short 10 minute drive over to the hill. When I arrived, I parked at an awkward angle to get the back of my car somewhat facing the city lights, hoping to be able to sit on the back of my car and look that way. I popped my trunk to retrieve the blanket that I always had on hand and shut it tight before hopping on top of my trunk, finding a comfortable position while wrapping myself in the fluffy blanket.

The lookout into the city was brighter than I remember, and I was thankful. While everything in my life was feeling a little dim, the brightness of my hometown did nothing less than to impress me and uplift my spirits even slightly. I laid against the back window of my car and stargazed while getting lost in my thoughts. Some thoughts were good, some bad, others reminiscent. I was beating myself up for ending up back home after all the work I put into getting my dreams to come to life. But nonetheless, I had an incredible and fulfilling time in New York that I will forever be thankful for. I watched the sky get darker and the stars get brighter. The lights of the town were becoming more prominent as well, but I hadn't moved my eyes from the sky in a while. I didn't see a reason to, until I heard what sounded like a car coming in my general direction. My eyebrows scrunched in confusion as I finally found it in myself to get up from the comfortable position I was in. Nobody ever really came by whenever I was here, so I was a little disappointed that my spot had been discovered by other locals.

I couldn't see much of the car that was heading my way, as I was staring directly into its headlights, but the car found its way next to mine, parking much straighter than my attempt.

I checked the time on my phone and realized I'd already been sitting here for over an hour. I didn't want to crowd the area as it was really small, so I folded up my blanket and hopped off my car, not paying mind to the person who had joined me. I walked around my car to the passenger's side to put my blanket in the passenger's seat, not looking up as I was still lost in some thoughts when I almost walked right into the person who just arrived. They were tall, I was standing head-on with his chest. I looked up, and my eyes were met with the prettiest hazel eyes which were familiar to me. It was my ex who I used to come here with, and as I looked up, he held the sweetest smile on his face which caused his dimples to reveal themselves to me the way they did several years ago. I couldn't help but let out a soft smile back. He spoke my name softly and he extended his arms out to me, engulfing me in a tight, warm hug that was the same yet different from those he used to give me. He had been working out and it was clear in his stature. This was the best I have ever seen him. He held me and we swayed in silence for a moment together before he asked me how I had been. I had answered into his chest, also not making a move to break our embrace.

He asked if I wanted to sit with him awhile to catch up, and I didn't hesitate to agree. It wouldn't hurt, and it was surprisingly nice to be confronted by such a familiar face. I thought running into someone I knew before I was ready would have driven me insane, but I was accepting this opportunity with open arms. He got a new truck since I had last seen him, and he opened up the truck bed for us. He laid out pillows and blankets, and I brought mine to lay overtop of us. We spent the first hour catching up, some space between us, as he told me about his days in university and how he came back home to help his parents when his father fell sick. He went to school for engineering and found a good opportunity close to home so he could assist his family physically and financially. His drive and love for his family always impressed me, and I held a soft smile as he spoke.

For a moment, it felt like we'd never been apart, though I'd never entertained the thought of getting back together since we had broken up. He asked how I've been, and I was honest about everything. He was the same supportive and understanding man I remembered him to be, and he pulled me in for a tight hug and told me I was going to be okay and figure things out. I thanked him and he pulled away but never took his arm off me, so I leaned into it, and he held me for the first time in five and a half years. It was the same, but different, yet holding each other still felt just as right as it used to. I cradled my head into the crook of his neck, taking a brief inhale and humming in satisfaction at the scent of his cologne. It was the same cologne he used to wear, and I feel like I was just brought back in time: to before college, before adulthood, before any of life's stressors had presented themselves to us. It was just me and him.

After we caught up with all the new stuff that had gone on in our lives, we started reminiscing on the old stuff. We spent years together, and even though we were young, it was a true first love we shared with one another. The moments we recalled were vivid in my memory, even with all the years we've had apart. Our first date, our first kiss, going on trips together, meeting each other's family; He mentioned that his parents still ask about me and it warmed my heart so much. The memory that stuck out the most to me was the day he asked me out.

It was December 8th, 2017 and he took me on a date to the aquarium. I loved sea animals so it was such a special and thoughtful day for me. We'd been seeing each other for a few months already, and I thought it was just going to be another casual date for us to get to know each other. We got to pet the manta rays and jellyfish, see the sharks, and took photo booth pictures. When we got to the car, he brought out a bouquet of red and pink roses and asked me to be his girlfriend. I have never experienced such a surprise in my life, and I jumped into his arms, crushing a couple of the flowers on my way to him. I said yes more times than I could count and kissed his lips and cheeks a couple times. I had been content with us seeing each other, it hadn't even crossed my mind to make things official, but I was incredibly happy to do so.

He has been the most respectful man I have dated since, and I admire him the same way I did back then. The thought of that day gives me so much nostalgia, as it was so simple back then, yet the hard moments felt like the end of the world. If only younger me would see me now.

We ended up talking for just over three hours when I told him I still had some unpacking to do and should probably head home. It was clear he wasn't ready for the night to end and like the gentleman he is, he offered to give me a hand. I knew I didn't need the help unpacking, but I was enjoying his company and agreed to let him come home with me to unpack and say hello to my family. He followed me home, and my parents were surprised at my guest but greeted him with smiles and hugs. With his help, we were done unpacking my clothes in about 20 minutes and then we just took some time talking in my room before he decided it was time to go.

Before he left, he proposed that we go out on a coffee date soon. So we did exactly that. We went to our local Starbucks and had a small coffee date and caught up even more. Then we went to the movies together a few days later. We continued going on small, casual dates: dinner, the arcade, amusement parks, and many more. He was getting more creative with them and I was having a hard time keeping up with him, just like old times. He let me come over and see his family. His father looked frail, but he's definitely fighting. I discovered that he was diagnosed with skin cancer. The treatment was helping though, and they said he has a good chance of beating it. I was so glad to hear. Their family was always a second family to me, and I was so grateful to see them and receive big hugs. They are just as sweet and loving as I remember.

After about a month of being back home, he asked me if we wanted to revisit the aquarium, since I was always so intrigued by the sea creatures. I said yes ecstatically, and the aquarium was bigger since the last time we came. They had new exhibits, new types of animals, and more interactive activities, causing us to stay maybe twice as long as we did last time. We took more photo booth pictures, bought some keychains, and finally, we called it a day. We made our way back to his car, and he opened the door for me as he usually did. As he came around the car to get in the driver's seat, I smiled at him, feeling thankful for the amazing day we just had. Before I was able to express my gratitude, he pressed a finger to my lips, reached in the backseat and pulled out a beautiful, familiar bouquet of red and pink roses, and asked if I was willing to give things a second shot. I smiled widely and accepted, and in that moment, even when I wasn't sure about anything else in my life, I knew I was sure about him.

hometown

By Umiemah Farrukh

I wore my coat today  
Pretended the crunch  
of leaves under my boots  
was snow on the ground

and the chill in the air  
made me look up  
at the horizon, searching  
for white-capped mountains

but I didn't hear their voices  
the last time I went home.  
black is my betrayal  
that still runs deep, and  
forgiveness has not been extended

My hometown stopped speaking to me  
but I keep reaching out  
hands clasped together,  
in solemn prayer  
for the person I used to be

If I was still her  
would my hometown want me?

## The Last Prius

The last Prius had been made in 2032. Kelsey had bought it during its 12th year of existence, with just over 100,000 miles already on the counter. Thinking ahead, Kelsey had bought a lifetime extended warranty for the old thing, expecting frequent repairs until she could buy a new car.. but that day never came.

In 2050, the Unilateral United Nations (UUN for short) had banned all cars. This was in response to lousy followthrough on the Paris climate accords. It was released after not *quite* enough people clapped at the UUN chairman's 17th inaugural speech. It had banned all personal motor vehicles larger than an 11-year-old's electric scooter (The chairman had recently given his grandson one such vehicle.)

Unfortunately for the UUN a minor bureaucratic error on Kelsey's warranty had classified her Prius as a "scooter" rather than "car" on the 7th page. It followed that Kelsey had the only car remaining in the world. Transportation was fine thanks to the UUN rollout of mass transit and more trains than a middle-aged dad's hobby collection. This suited Kelsey fine, she never liked driving anyways, but there was a slight problem.

Kelsey's warranty personally guaranteed the vehicle would be maintained in working order until the customer purchased a new vehicle. This contract had been subsumed when the UUN internationalized every car manufacturer, insurer, and company. Now the global government was bound under obligation to follow that contract.

But Kelsey wanted it gone, there was no parking anymore and the lack of roads rendered it basically useless. She'd tried abandoning it of course. Leaving her car at the junkyard, donating it to museums even one particular time driving it off a cliff with a brick on the gas. Every time though the UUN had replaced and refurbished it, even helicoptering it out of the sea.

The entire world government rested on following a series of documents to the letter or it would collapse: The Global Constitution, the Dissolution of Nations, and the Bill of Powers. Now Kelsey's warranty was one of those documents. So she would just have to live with the super swat breaking down the door and shattering the windows while shouting "We've been trying to reach you about your car's extended warranty!"



## Goodbye, Big Dipper

You were wearing that sweater when I met you.  
You were wearing those pants when we met.  
You were smaller then. The nighttime had not yet built its home inside you.  
You were wearing those same shoes  
and you were smiling at them, down at the floor,  
and I laughed because I already  
knew you were beautiful.

After I met you I  
couldn't see the stars anymore. I was the last person to think you could  
find them in Los Angeles  
but you can't, they're gone, I was wrong. It's all streetlights and dusk and rusty morning  
sunshine.  
You were laughing then, kicking those same shoes in the dirt, and I went sick to my stomach  
wondering how I could've been fool enough to think there was life out there at all.  
The whole history of my world, my faith, was tied up in your shoelaces.  
The rest was a vacuum,  
a cityscape,  
a plane's wing scraping the ink of an empty sky.

One night I traced your skin with my pinky and pretended I could see the constellations of your  
heart.  
Ursa major, I said, Ursa minor.  
Taurus, and the scales, and above your shaking lungs  
there's you.  
Your sweater, your pants,  
your smile-lined eyes,  
those awful old sneakers you never take off.  
You were grinning up at me.  
Where are you? you said. I shrugged.  
You just kept on smiling.

I wanted to kiss you to keep you quiet but  
that has never quite worked out.  
The first time on the porch steps, the second on my couch,  
you always talked through it, pulled away giddy,  
told me some sweet thing that I already knew.

The third time under the streetlights, a neon sign across the road, kissing until I saw stars beneath my eyelids and

opening them to the nothingness.

I wish this worked for you, you said, your hand still in my palm, breath working itself back into your chest.

I wished so too but I couldn't find a shooting star to make it true.

Fourth time in that same spot, arms around each other, you giggling as we separated because we missed our chance to cross.

You were wearing that sweater when I met you and you looked swallowed up by it, small-framed and hungry and the most beautiful creature I had ever seen.

And there it was again, tighter now, that old pair of jeans, those white teeth, those laces.

I kept squinting up at the night like I might find something new and you kept on mumbling, fingers on the hem of the wool, humming something about loving me and growing old and growing tired.

Fifth time sitting at a bus stop steeped in cold and winter.

The traffic light was blocking my view and it kept blinking out *I love you*, green-yellow-red -green-yellow.

You kicked those old sneakers into the Earth.

Stop worrying about the stars, you said, they're not going to run away from you.

Sure, I told you. They don't have shoes on.

You laughed. I just wanted you to keep on laughing.

You are still so beautiful, I said, words like prayers from my tongue,

You are still as lovely as the day we met.

Then I pressed my lips to yours to shut me up.

You were silent when we parted. It was December and your eyes were filled with snow, your fingers featherlight on my skin.

There I am, I said. You twisted your head to see the traffic light, spelling out love in morse code.

Behind it a skyline, the bus that was running late, a single star, a city, my heart.

On the bench there was a carnival, a parade of kisses, your smile, your shoes, the moonlight fireworks, the Big Dipper, the moon.

## Seamstress

The thread is coarse to the touch, fraying as Tenshi pulls the tip of the strand through the eye of her needle. She presses her tongue to the pad of her forefinger before sealing the ends back together, palms sticky. Wiping a hand on the side of her trousers, she resumes her work, dipping in and out of the fabric so quickly she nicks herself on the point. Cursing, she presses one trembling arm to her chest, heart pounding against her clavicle, ears ringing so loudly that the only thing she is sure of is the feel of her own skin. She traces the lines of her palm with the needle, following them to where they intersect, blood welling up in the crevice as she stops to puncture the skin at the junction.

Masao had come to her the day before it all changed. Sheepish grin painting his round face, hair a rat's nest upon his head, a shallow scrape running from cheek to chin, vermilion knees peeking through a hole in his pants that hadn't been there when he'd left. He'd come scampering over, white streak falling over his eyes before she reached out to tuck it behind his ear, chuckling as she pulled him over to her sewing kit, already taking out the black thread. She propped one leg in front of him on a chair as he hobbled on the other, giggles spilling out from between his lips. A few deft strokes of the needle, a few sprays of antiseptic and a couple of bandages later, and the two of them stood in front of their mother, lips sealed by a pinky promise. If he leaned a little too heavily into her side when he went to sit, if his steps were a little uneven and he made sure his hair fell over one side of his face, well, no one had to know.

That was the last time she'd seen him smile. That same scrape had still been on his face the following night, the night the firelight cast him in a ghastly glow, turning their home to embers and their family to ash. The night their mother had denounced them, fear dancing in her eyes alongside the flames, eyes plastered open with a terror stronger than her love, a terror that manipulated her limbs like a puppet, that left her begging, knees pressed into the dirt, arms held out in a silent plea. A terror that got her nothing except a slap across the face and a rifle barrel slammed into the back of her skull as her tears mingled with the damp earth. A terror that left her husband in front of a firing squad, shielding their children as they clutched each other, her daughter's knees buckling as a cluster of red dots converged on her forehead. As shots rang out, sending another body crumpling to the floor, an anguished scream ringing out in the ensuing silence.

Tenshi kneels again now, years of practice leaving her fingers sure, her needle true, even as her shoulders shake, as droplets spill down her face, clutching onto the edge of her chin for a moment before falling. She wipes roughly at her eyes with the

corner of her sleeve, desperate that her vision be clear, even as the cloth in front of her blurs into a stream of unidentifiable colors.

Masao's face appears before her again, this time streaked with blue and green, the white of his hair a vibrant red as she draws her hand back from his scalp, palm stained the same shade. He slides his fingers through the paint palette in front of them, emerging with each finger a different color, grasping for her but falling over as she steps back, just out of reach. They chase each other, socks slipping on the tile, sliding around corners, leaving streaks of paint on door frames and countertops until they fall on top of each other, laughing until their breath comes in wheezing gasps, arms clutched around quivering middles.

He'd grasped so tightly to her arm that night, tiny knuckles white around her wrist, even as she fell, even as the growl crawled its way from between her lips, as she rushed forward, vengeance thawing her bones and setting them afire. She saw the plea in those gray eyes, felt it in the way he yanked her back, but she'd pried his fingers away one by one, blind to reason, blind to peace. The knife clutched in her other hand burning hot against her skin.

The needle falls from her palm, clattering against the concrete and rolling away from her, the thread tangling as it goes. She watches it, eyes blank, shoulders slumped, the unfinished work still cradled in her lap. She sees the pity in Keisuke's eyes as he crawls over to pick it up, as he douses it in antiseptic, rolling it between his gloved hands a few times before offering it to her, and she hates it. Hates his hesitance. Hates it even as she snatches the tool back, making sure that it pricks both of them as she does. As he pries the latex from his fingers before turning her face towards him, wiping the moisture from her weeping eyes with a tenderness that causes them to well up once more. He draws back, braid swinging over his shoulder as he settles beside her, drawing out his own kit.

"You don't have to do this," he whispers, as if speaking any louder would shatter her. She's never seen his hands so still. Hers quake so much that she feels the vibrations tingling up her arms.

"I can take over." He reaches out to take her hands in his, running his thumb back and forth over her knuckles as they spasm in his grip. "You don't-

"It has to be me." She clenches her jaw, tearing her eyes away from him, letting the cold steel in her hand ground her as she allows herself to see what is truly in front of her. "It has to."

She chokes back a sob as she drags her fingers through the white strands, stiff with crimson. It's not paint this time. Neither is the stickiness on her palms, the coating of scarlet on her needle. Yet she still pulls it through the flesh methodically, wincing at the extra push required to stab it deep enough to loop across the gash. One empty eye socket stares back up at her, slick with blood and bits of metal, some parts still whirring

faintly. The other is shut, eyelid covering the empty slate left behind. She's glad she can't see it.

She smiles despite herself as she feels the familiar scar along the wrist.

Evenings of laughter, of joy, of stories told under the light of the moon, lasting until the sun peeked up from the horizon to bathe the world in pinks and purples. Days of skipping rocks across the pond, of betting on who would toss it farther, of arguing what the winner would get. Twin white streaks glowing in the darkness, a beacon by which they always found each other, even when the lights in the house went out for the fifth time that week, as their father struggled to get the grid back online, sighing as he clanked his wrench against the wiring in their generator.

A slip-up with the kitchen knives. She was supposed to be teaching him the ropes, like their mother had done for her. But she'd looked away, and when she looked back, there Masao was, gushing blood. She'd reduced the two of them to tears in her panic, though it only took seconds for their mother to patch him up. In the end they'd laughed, with watery smiles and one throbbing wrist. They hadn't had meds that month. So it scarred.

She's not cradling a shirt in her lap. It's not a piece of fabric, easily mended. What's before her cannot be fixed. She knows that. Yet still she tries to take the pieces and knit them back together, to make everything as good as new. Like she always did for him in the past. There was nothing she couldn't remedy.

That's not true anymore. It hadn't been true since the night she'd let them take him away. This was just the first time she'd had to face that truth. There was no refuting this, no way to claim that she still had time, that she'd swoop in to save him later. Her strength hadn't been enough then. And it still wasn't now.

So she pretends, with a needle as her sword and thread as her shield, that she's defending him in death, when all she's doing is making him presentable so that the same officers that gunned down their father can offer her condolences as pressure builds behind her eyes and shame finds a home in her heart.

The seamstress, forever sewing. First to mend herself, then to mend others, and finally, to thread together the pieces of her brother into something that could at least pretend to be human.



**Requiem**

I wish I was a poet,  
From the shining days of old.  
When moonlight still had magic,  
And writing still was bold.

In those days, there was power  
In hope, ideas and pen;  
In melody, ferocity,  
Real love was valued then.

In those days, sunlight shined,  
And novels leaped off shelves,  
And melodies, laced with harmony,  
Fought bravely for themselves.

Yet, now, there's no more wonder,  
Or tongue left to describe:  
I wish I was a poet  
Before poetry had died.

**October**

The new year's old,  
No longer bold:  
It's freedom now has died.  
We've settled in  
Down to begin,  
Finding reasons to have cried.

I miss my hope  
That did elope,  
Fast hand and glove with sin.  
A victory lost,  
But at what cost?  
So pyrrhic in the win?

Yet caution, caution  
Clever one,  
So ready with your way:  
Poor chaos is too fair  
A woman  
To so quickly slay.

**Remembrance**

A grove alone,  
Of friends who've known  
Each other far too long:  
Stand by themselves,  
All in, or else,  
Too hypnotized by song.

They know too soon,  
They'll meet their doom  
And never will escape.  
Their youthful cry  
Is doomed to die:  
Their lives must soon take shape.

But they should not  
Regret a lot,  
When sadness pangs their heart.  
Though nights narrow,  
And fear does harrow  
When, all you do is part.

For memory  
That effigy  
Of loving days of youth,  
Will carry you  
Permit you to  
Make happiness your truth.

**After Dawn**

The electric scorn of sadness,  
Long craved but ne'er demanded  
Haunts those who do most often  
Lust after it when lost.

That reprimand, so joyful,  
Which frequently is needful,  
Steals away, in subtle sorrow, from  
The deep regrets of night.

Still, lurking in the shadows,  
Beyond the pale of sunrise,  
Sits the hard-won lessons that are  
So loved but seldom learned.

Yet, think me a creator:  
Starting world anew.  
Would I so far project away  
A consequence of glee?

Is harmony so bitter?  
Love so ever fleeting?  
Spark too hard to capture,  
And bank away in box?

Can't we just remember:  
Without the tinge of pain,  
The things that we did last night,  
When morning comes again.

**In Hope**

Baptisms of vinyl,  
Anointments of stardust.  
Yet the city's a urinal:  
Left with naught by our lust.

The Romantics lie engraved,  
Buried below a mount of dirt.  
But could they all have been saved  
With single truth behind a flirt?

Hearts were made for breaking,  
Nights beyond for old regret:  
And vows for still forsaking  
In faith, we seldom bet.

Still, I wish upon a star,  
Of days of people sly:  
That love that seems so far in past  
Will yet soon seem closer by.



# Madagascar

Elizabeth Lee Wong

The island of Madagascar lies only about 416 km off of East Africa. In truth, however, it is much farther than that.

From above, Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar, was a beautiful paradise, boasting colorful houses placed into the hillside. Each morning, the sun cast a warm orange glow on the city in a way that distracted from the peeling paint on the walls that overlooked the telling detail that the reason the houses were colorful is because they were being held together by painted sheets of spare metal.

By mid-day, the city came to life. Dusty cars inched along the barely-paved roads, honking at one another through the traffic. Cars broke down, and little boys in dirty clothes pushed them, digging their bare feet into the ground. Some women sold fruits and vegetables and beans in the market, swatting away flies and shouting their prices at passersby. Other women made their way to the rice paddies, where they'd squint all day under the sun.

Orphaned children begged and stray dogs wandered. Young girls carrying their siblings tapped on cars' windows, asking for spare change.

When it rained, it *rained*, and water poured from the sky as if the clouds themselves were desperate to rid themselves of the burden of holding in so much water for so long.

And then there were the cyclones. Three or four times a year, the sky would turn violent and tempestuous, untamed and unruly, like a pack of rabid dogs. It was the time of year when people were easily irritated; it was the time of year when lives started to unravel and things lost their sense of reason. I remember huddling with my family one time during a category four cyclone that had shut down the city and flooded the streets. I watched the traveler's palm trees outside thrash about and the winds moan as if they themselves feared for what threatened to come. All school and work had been canceled; all life had been put on pause to bear witness to the wrath of the skies.

I happen to know of such things—of the houses being held together with sheets of metal and the women squinting in the rice paddies under the sun and the category four cyclones—because a great deal of my childhood was spent in Madagascar, in the same city and under the same sun.

When I look through my memories, I experience a multitude of senses that mean nothing to anyone but myself. I feel the warm, southern hemisphere sun, different from any other, though the same star. I taste the sweet juice of the fruit from the pibasy tree in my yard. I see the red dust on the dirt roads and the chameleons that lived on the edge of the rice paddies. I smell the store down the road where we bought fresh baguettes and I hear the cicadas shrieking in the dead of night.

When I take myself back, the sun's light filters the city into a colorful wonderland... and I let it. I don't see the peeling paint or the hollow-cheeked children tapping on my window. The sweet scent of pibasy fruit distracts me from the bitter taste of French colonialism; the bright smiles of the women in the rice paddies draws away from the sadness they hold in their eyes, captive by the poverty that plagues their country.

I let time and childhood color my memories in rose, and take me to a place that may only exist in my mind. Even as I write these words, I rewrite my memories.

Sometimes, I fear that they are all I have. I fear that if I returned one day to my childhood home, I might threaten to shatter the image of happiness that I've manufactured. I face reality knowing that it is constantly being rewritten, knowing that everything that happens is already being forgotten, misremembered, lost.

I will never know how accurate my memories are, which ones have been colored in which light, which details I have convinced myself to overlook. I am haunted by the color prism of my past.

Perhaps there will come a day in the distant future when I am forced to confront the reality of my perception; perhaps there will come a time when I return to the land of rice paddies and strange cyclones, to the land where time was lost in the days and choices held little weight and I played with chameleons under the Southern Hemisphere sun. But until then, I will settle for my memories.

## The Cactus Lamp

Sabrina Youn

My abuela gave me a lamp.

Upon moving into my very first and own apartment, the whole family decided to pitch in and gift one piece of furniture per person to fill the empty barren desert of my living room. The bedroom and kitchen were all taken care of, bathroom too. It was just the living room where things seemed, ironically, a bit lifeless.

Mama told me that the living room was most important because it's what greets the guests first. Bare, plaster white walls and grayed out acacia planks for the floor is what greeted my family on their Sunday afternoon invasion.

Papa brought in a big black TV to "watch the game son" and mama hauled in a red sofa to watch the game on. Tia Andrea and her husband Jose gifted me a sturdy wooden coffee table, accompanied by a large coffee mug.

"A full house is a good house."

Every aunt and uncle marched in with their deposit, refusing to even indulge in our traditional dance of polite denial and inevitable acceptance. Tio Mario and Tia Lea presented bookshelves, Tio Dante the books, making sure to place the fat Bible front and center.

"At least a verse a day boy."

And so on: crimson rugs and cheeky welcome mats ("You're welcome!"), a keyboard piano and guitar from my musician cousin Toby, abstract oil paintings made by my other cousin Annabelle. Tables and chairs, an emergency radio, Christmas hearths to hang on my door in spite of the scorching July--strange one that nephew.

Soon enough, my living room grew crowded, but not cluttered. Tilted, yet not messy. It was good.

Then my grandparents came. Grandpapa gave me his old rocking chair to match the floors now that he'd gotten his massage chair. And abuela, gave me a lamp.

"What's the use of all this if you can't see them?" She cackled as she set it down.

Now, all the furnishings my family brought in were normal. Practical. But abuela's lamp was something else. Special somehow. Maybe it was her scent, clinging to the long pole like an ancient snake, forever reminiscent of barbecues and empanadas dripping in hot grease.

Or, it could've been the fact that it looked like a cactus.

Yes- the pole was but the trunk of a long cactus, made of green wood and glass, topped off by a flowery lampshade. It was all warm--no--vibrant, with its amber red and sunset orange and gold. Another "branch" stemmed out the main pole, curving upwards like a hand waving hello, begging for a coat or hat to hold.

Abuela presented this to me last (for dramatic effect most likely), and after everything was settled in, I pulled at the string dangling from the lampshade. Clicking twice, the light bulb lit up.

Suddenly, my living room was an aurora borealis. Light seemingly hit every patch of darkness in the space, subtly casting everything in a soft hush of light green, minty and diluted. It still largely lit the room up in a bright yellow as most lamps tend to do, but anyone could catch that tint of grassy lime and grandmother to it.

It was gorgeous. The entangled amalgamation of my relatives mashed together suddenly made sense. Perfect sense. Warmth, oozy drippings of contentment poured into me slowly, like thick honey syrup. Finally, I turned to my abuela and said the same phrase I'd been repeating all day, over and over till I lost count.

All of them were sincere, but this one was a little different.

"Gracias."