



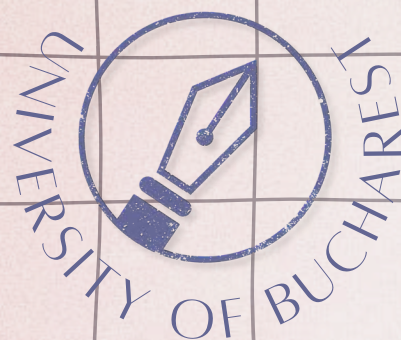
# CREATIVE WRITING MAGAZINE



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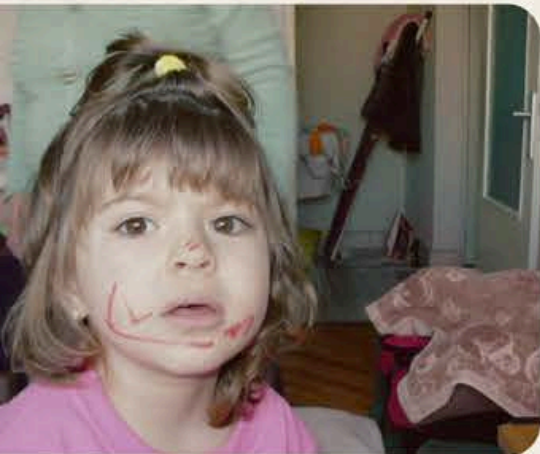


issue no. 2

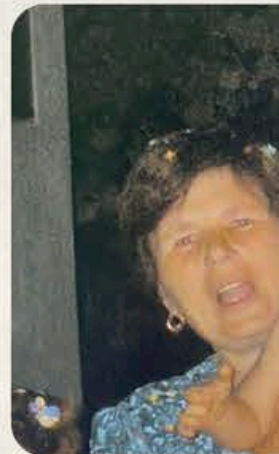




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# THE TEAM



TEODORA BĂDICĂ

managing  
editor

ȘTEFANIA IFRIM

editor

ANA-ECATERINA  
BOGDAN

editor

TEODORA LEON

editor

LEILA OMER

editor





MARIA-TALIDA  
IZDRĂILĂ

editor-in-chief

OANA ANDRONACHE

editor-in-chief

GEORGE ANDREI

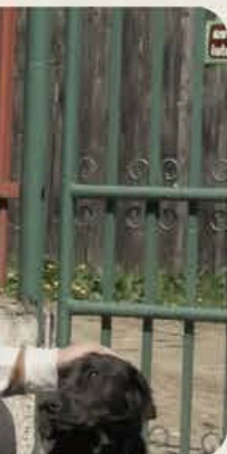
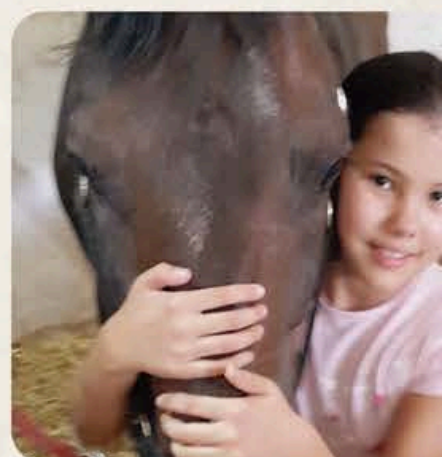
head copy editor

ALEXANDRA  
AVRAM

events coord.,  
editor

COSMINA CLĂNȚĂU

publications  
coordinator



DARIA NISTOR

creative director

VLADIA ȘERBAN

social media coord.

ILINCA PODOLEANU

senior designer

AUGUSTIN COJOCARU

designer

SABINA DRĂGHICI

designer

YUKINA WATANABE

designer



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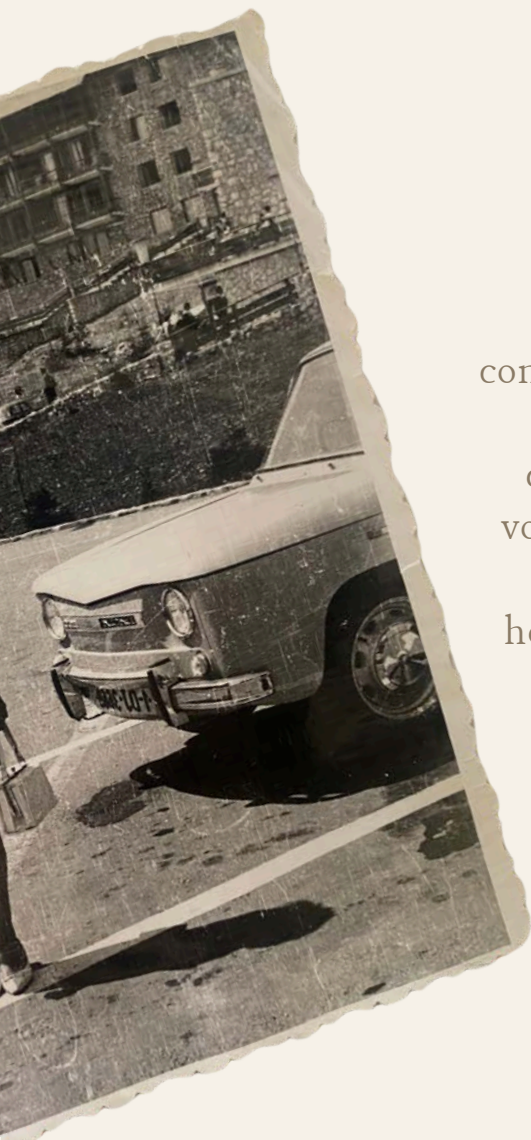
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Here we are, with the second issue of our magazine out for everyone to read. It was definitely a year full of editing, administrative stuff, more editing, but overall, it was fun to craft this issue along with our amazing team (though more through our phones, because we all know how useful technology is nowadays)



This year's specific theme for STAMPEO has been a challenge for us too – we wanted to see how our contributors will interact with a permissive, yet slightly ambiguous theme. The results were unexpectedly diverse and emotional, and we discovered new, brave voices that we were not sure were actually there. Being allowed to write freely surely offers you an open horizon; but writing with a specific subject in mind is a good, yet daring creative exercise. That is why we wanted to inspire the artists to remember their childhoods and think deeper on the past, and the complex emotions it comes with.



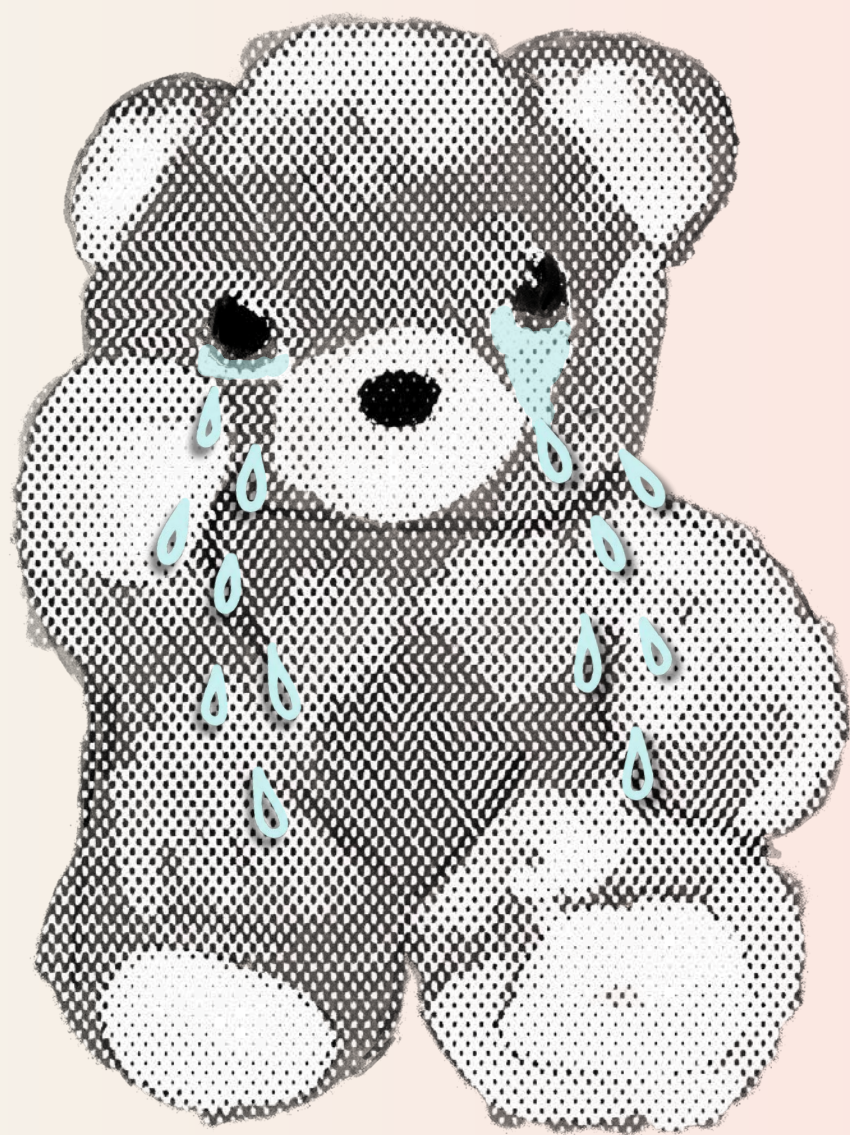
# EDITORS' LETTER

It's been such a beautiful experience to read through all the submissions, especially seeing the wordsmithing talent of the authors as they navigated a more experimental theme. The whole editing process has been an extensive consideration of all the pieces, finally resulting in this outstanding issue of the magazine. And with that, we hope to carry on with our promise: to give creative minds and souls an opportunity to express themselves through our magazine.

We would also like to thank you, our audience, once again for believing in this magazine and giving it life. American Studies professors, FLLS staff, and members of the STAMPEÐ team, thank you for your help, your constant observation and financial contribution. We have grown beautifully and naturally from our first issue, and you were there from the very beginning.

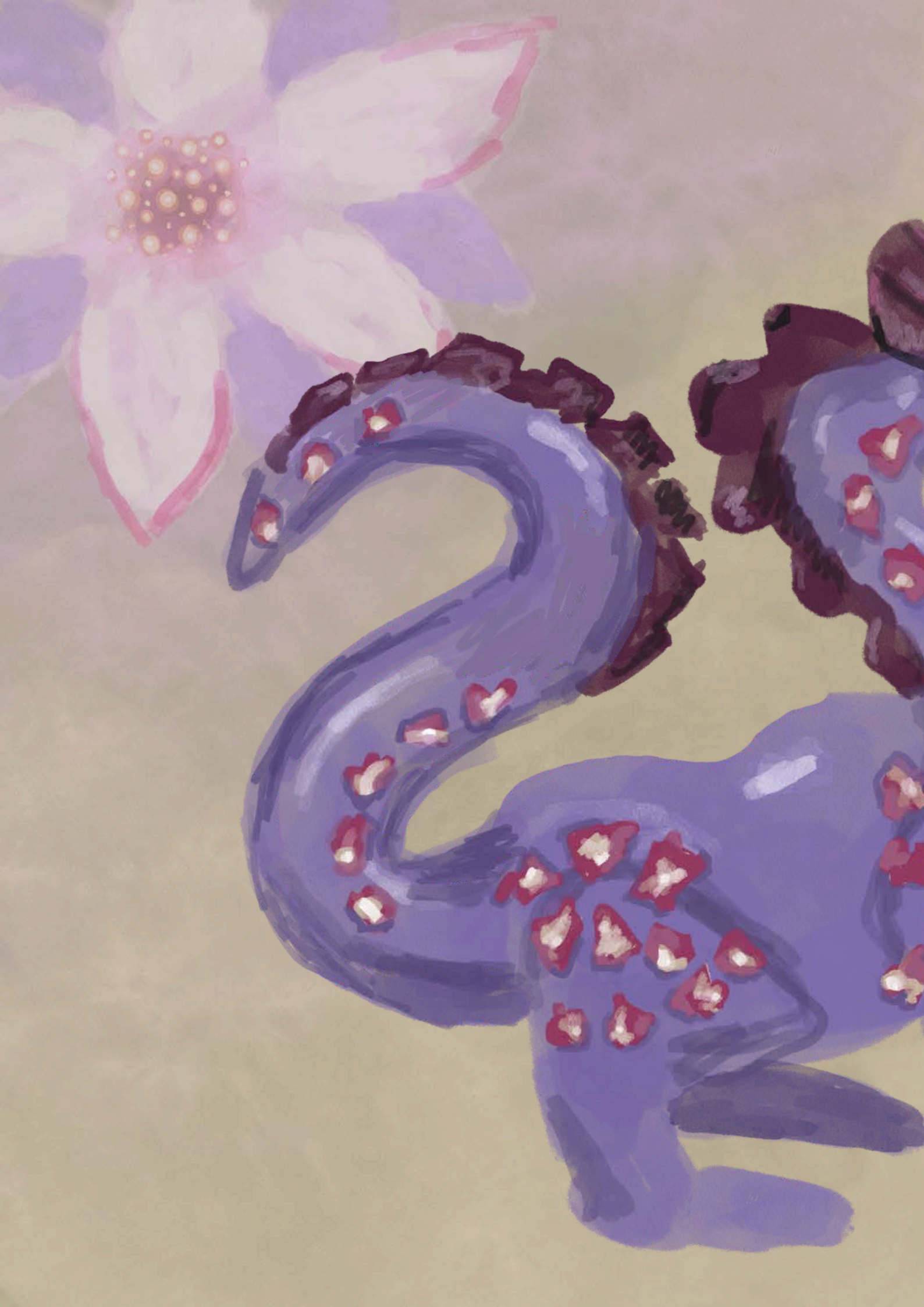
- Talida&George





1

POETRY





# CHILDHOOD DAYDREAMS

**Alexandra Vizireanu**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and  
Literatures, Philology, English major, 1st year undergraduate

I used to hold the whole world in my hand,  
I had whole realities for me to bend,  
With only my will, anything I could mend –  
A pen and paper were always my friends.

Enchanted forests and rainbow-filled skies,  
Running through mountains you could hear dragon cries  
Singing with the elves, where the crystal cave lies,  
There never was room for bitter goodbyes.

Enchanted flowers just shining their light,  
Trees with the sweetest fruits you could ever bite  
Winning the battles against foes I would fight,  
Riding a phoenix I fly with the night.

Oh, dear childhood, how you forgot me,  
Just tell me how I could bring you to life  
With every invention  
Of my imagination:  
The roots of creation.

I am writing this letter to you.

you've been good company;  
some nights, I stare up at the ceiling  
and I think of you  
I think of friends I grew apart from  
my ritual of watching cartoons in the morning.

you're my past, behind the mirror  
but I can still see you  
running around the house  
playing with dolls  
drawing with that expensive lipstick your mother told you not to tamper with  
crying whenever someone is mad at you  
crying from a bad joke  
or crying because you're clumsy.

I miss all of it.

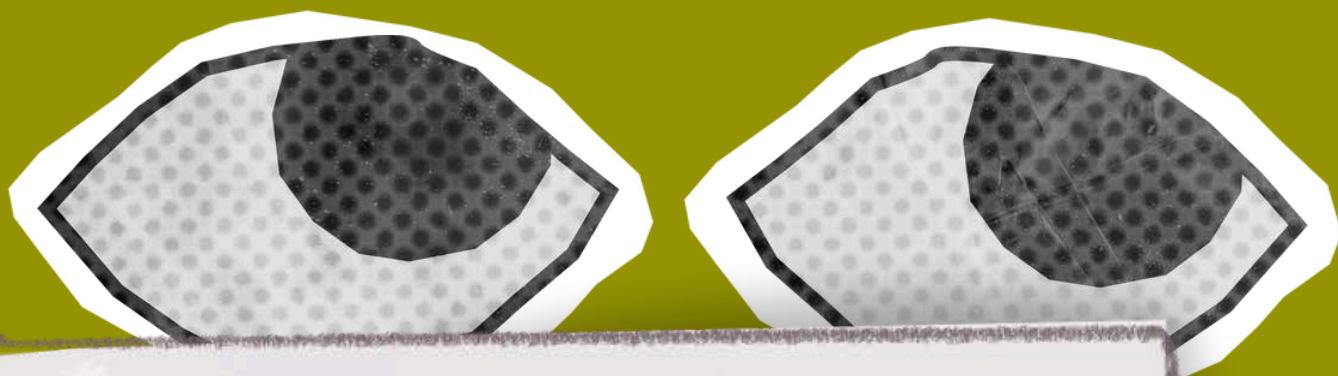
if we were to exist at the same time  
we would be sisters;  
I did learn from you that people can still be good  
and that they deserve to be happy  
I do want to see them smile –  
see you smile.

you deserve to be happy.

and one day  
you'll be there to hold my hand  
as I become a mother  
and you'll whisper in my ear  
the secret of being human.

until then  
I will keep you in my heart  
brain  
and tears.





**Ana Ghelezan**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures,  
Philology, Russian major, 3rd year undergraduate

# ODE to A CHILDHOOD





# To step into their shoes

**Ana Ghelezan**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Philology,  
Russian major, 3rd year undergraduate

As a child  
I would get a toy once in a while  
but there were times when I asked for more.  
when my soft pleading, begging, and wishing  
turned into crying  
my parents would become children once again  
for their shoes would shrink a few sizes smaller;  
they wouldn't know how to stop me from shedding tears  
but they loved me so much  
that I understood what mattered more in the end.



I realized their hard work to make me happy  
was worth more than all the porcelain dolls in the world.

since I was a child  
I have loved my parents more than any material creation this earth could offer;  
they gave me a good childhood, filled with  
empathy, modesty, and love  
kindness and a deeper understanding of the world.

now, as each day passes  
and I grow older  
I often wonder  
will I ever fit in their shoes?





I am sharing "Growing up and Blooming  
through the Cracks" with you

**Andra Tudose**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures,  
British Cultural Studies MA, 2nd year

# Looking Back

**Daria Nistor**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Cultural Studies, American Studies, 2nd year undergraduate

They will come when you're least prepared. And they'll be perfect, dazzling, like a sunflower facing west. And they will ask a question you will have no answer for: "Jump?"

and you'll think of your mother, your father maybe. You'll think of 1st grade and your first love, even of when you came home feverish and told your mother you love your sweet and gentle classmate. You showed her the origami you had been gifted, smiling still from the thrill of arts and crafts. She'd laughed, stroked your hair.

"Silly child, love is a big word."

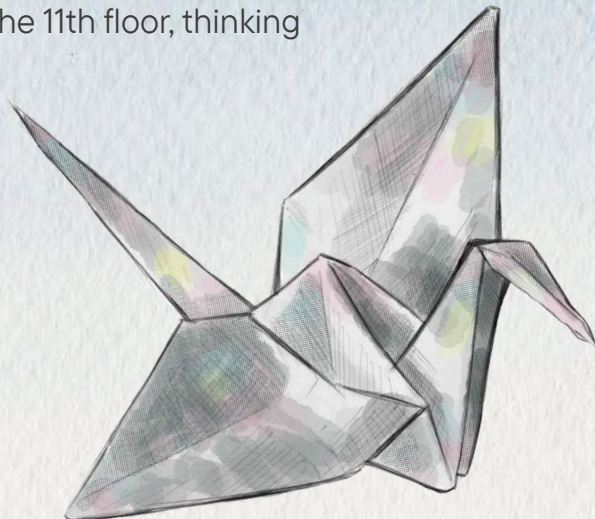
You didn't understand then.

"You must use it cautiously."  
Ever since you've loved cautiously.

"Will you jump with me?"  
Jump is a big word. You're on the 11th floor. Jump is a lot to ask for.

And so you won't answer, their longing hand still holding out for you. And time will pass, as time does, and you'll be left on the 11th floor, thinking

"How silly of me  
to have listened  
to my mother.  
I should have been  
loving the world  
since I was 7 years old."



# CHILDHOOD PAINTED BY A MIND'S GHOST

**Ioana Bădescu**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures,  
Philology, English major, 2nd year undergraduate



I have seen what the darkness does  
take me back to the halls of my parents' home  
where light guided me towards corners of innocent happiness  
and love was drawn with paper smiles  
by the guardian angels  
of my divine providence.  
now, my childhood lingers on the edge of a wine glass  
its redness laughs in sounding agony;  
who am I to believe in destiny?  
one was little  
one was kind  
one grew to see his face cherished by the moonlight;  
I want my love to cure the world  
for the mosaic of sorrows is cold.  
and if my inner child's slumber is threatened  
the sword of life shall be reddened.



# Testimony of youth

Teach an angel to sing  
he will not grow any wings;  
prolong the death of a flower  
it will decay into obscurity;  
hold your Heaven in your soul  
and make peace with the Hell inside your mind;  
intertwine with serpents  
to learn their art  
yet treat them as kindly  
as a blind man loves the dark;  
paint happiness on visages of men  
though no color will smile as brightly as their own;  
shake hands with devils  
make friends with saints  
and the traces of your life  
shall not stain and leave you  
disgraced



**Ioana Bădescu**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures,  
Philology, English major, 2nd year undergraduate

SHAKE  
HANDS  
WITH  
DEVILS



MAKE  
FRIENDS  
WITH  
SAINTS

# Until the end of time...

When I was a child,  
I'd steal your heels and jewels  
Playing around dressed-up as you.  
I miss the days when you would sing  
for me until I fell asleep.  
I miss your fairytales – your voice,  
I miss you cooking in the kitchen,  
the way you spoiled me rotten,  
The way you took my side every time  
I was scolded by my mother.

Now, every time I look at the sky,  
I think of you.  
Every time I stare at the stars,  
I hope you're looking down at me too.  
Because I've never felt real pain before –  
Not until you left.  
I know it's been so long,  
But I still hear your laughter in my head.



I can still see you in myself,  
And in the way I do my hair,  
Or in the way I choose my clothes  
Making sure I'm perfect everywhere,  
Because you were always so flawless.  
And the only thing I hope –  
Is that you can see me,  
And that you are happy.



Every time I hold my pencil  
And I sketch something new,  
Every time I sing or write a song,  
I wonder:  
“Would you like it? Would you sing along?”  
I've always known how to dream,  
Only because you gave me wings.  
One day I'll say, “Granny, we've made it!  
I hope that you are proud of me!”

I'll always keep you with me,  
Because you've always kept me safe.  
And I'll make sure that your great-grandchildren  
Will always know your name.  
I'll be just as strong as you were,  
Just as brave and kind.  
I'll always love you,  
And I'll always miss you –  
Until the end of time.



**Ioana Bolbose**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures,  
Translation and Interpretation, English major, 3rd year undergraduate

# What strikes a chord in You?

**Ioana Bolbose**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages  
and Literatures, Translation and Interpretation, English  
major, 3rd year undergraduate

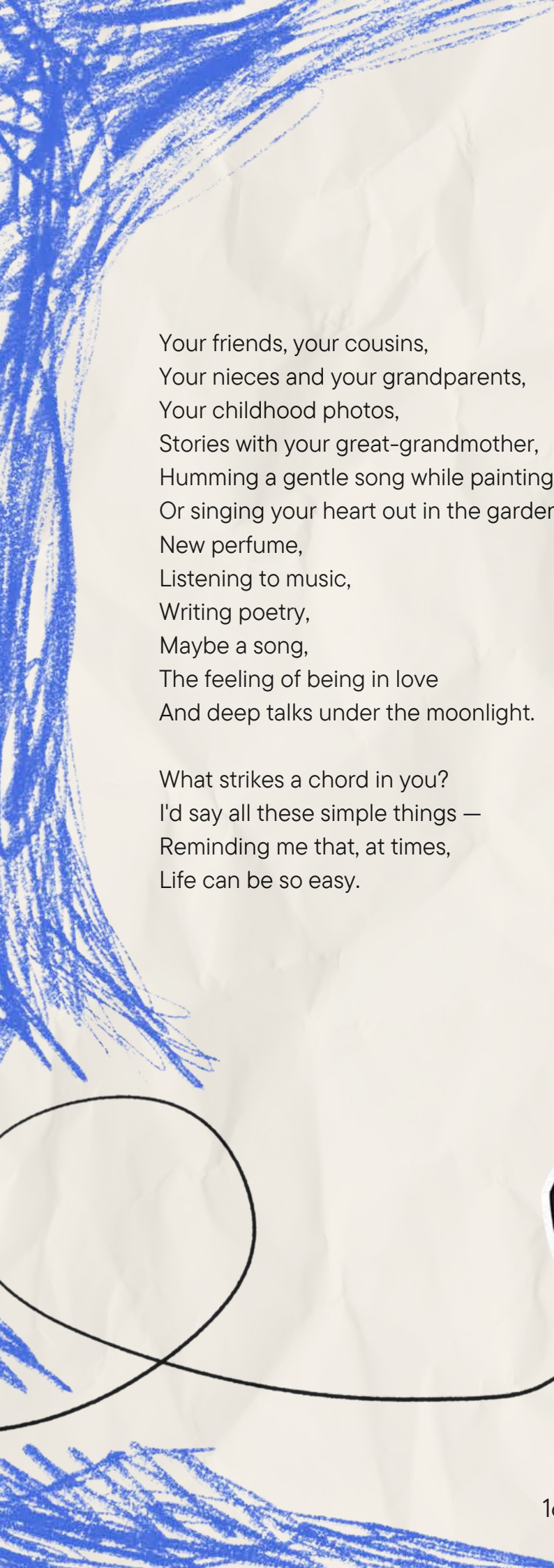
What strikes a chord in you?

What strikes a chord in you?

Maybe the fresh smell of flowers,  
The birds singing in the morning,  
The warm feeling of sunrises on your skin,

The smell of coffee,  
Your mom's voice,  
Your dad's laugh,  
Your bed, your pillow,  
Your old plushies,  
Your guitar,  
Your paper and brush,  
The smell of grass after a storm,  
The smell of new books —  
Or old ones,  
Or stargazing...





Your friends, your cousins,  
Your nieces and your grandparents,  
Your childhood photos,  
Stories with your great-grandmother,  
Humming a gentle song while painting,  
Or singing your heart out in the garden,  
New perfume,  
Listening to music,  
Writing poetry,  
Maybe a song,  
The feeling of being in love  
And deep talks under the moonlight.

What strikes a chord in you?  
I'd say all these simple things —  
Reminding me that, at times,  
Life can be so easy.

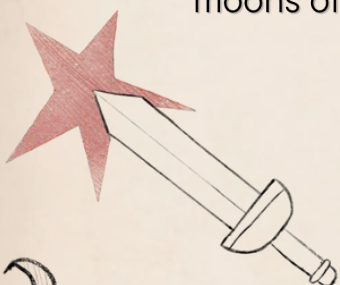


# Guide to Adulthood

Pluck the petals of the poppies,  
shut their mouths so black with lies,  
to their screams and songs and quarrels  
close your ears and your eyes.  
Hear you not the ogres weeping,  
nor the mountains vocalize -  
bury deep your heart,  
and hope you'll  
kill a dream and get a prize.  
So forget the child who raised you,  
and your imminent demise;  
And forget that, over concrete,  
sound so many helpless cries.  
Pay no mind to human sorrow,  
to the dragons in disguise,  
and don't answer the calls of strangers,  
ghosts or poets or guitars.  
You remember all our teachings -  
be not moved when, in the skies,  
over city noise and concrete  
moons of deadly splendor rise.

Miruna Ioniță

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and  
Literatures, Philology, German major, 1st year undergraduate

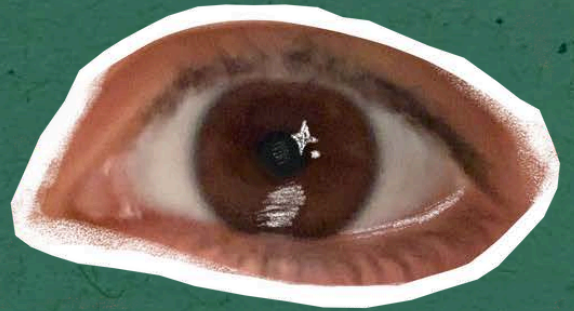


# EYES

I first got my glasses when I was about ten.  
The world was smudging at its ends,  
a smokey film. Here and there,  
the signs were getting hard to read,  
colors pulling each other's hair.  
The road was a river. The river - a sea.  
Swirling in front of - no, swirling for me.  
I spotted a giant behind a truck,  
hunched like a child and hoping to play.  
I hoped none would find him - I was terrified  
some grown-up would notice and take him away.  
One day I told mother about my friend,  
for she was an adult I knew I could trust.  
I thought. None of us can know about things such as trust.  
And that's how one loses a piece of their soul:  
your mom squints - or laughs, if the day's a good one -  
and she tells you your friend is a telephone pole.

The signposts became so easy to read,  
and I feel all grown-up when I search for a shop;  
but I miss when the cars swam like fantasy fish,  
and the river danced blue and its dance wouldn't stop.

All these faded too slowly to notice a when,  
and knowing won't change anything. Yet inside  
I think what I miss most of all are those eyes  
with the power to see as a small boy of ten.



**Miruna Ioniță**

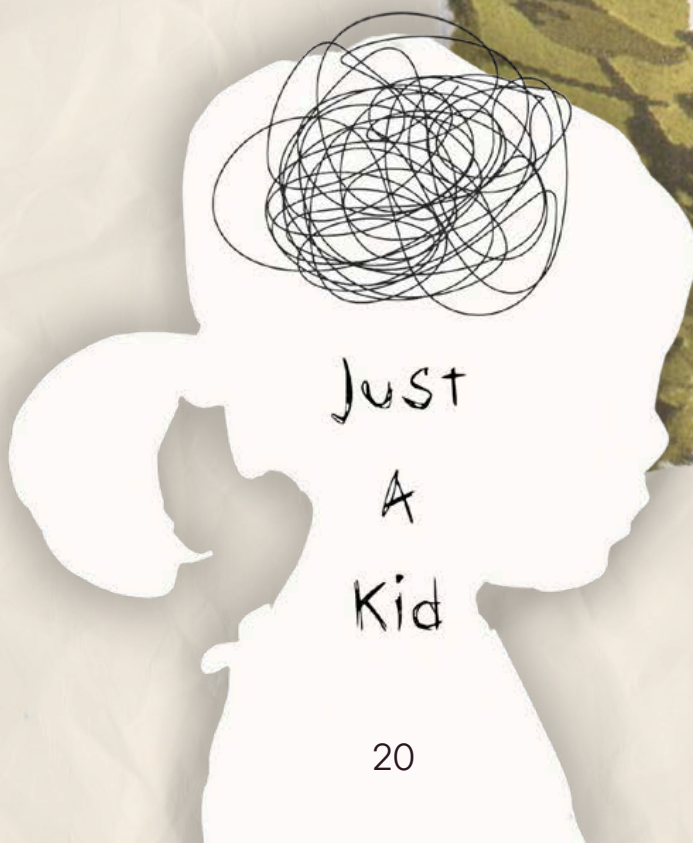
University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and  
Literatures, Philology, German major, 1st year undergraduate

# Just a kid

I shouldn't cry on a bathroom floor  
And look in the mirror, telling myself I don't have time to be vulnerable.  
I shouldn't understand things on my own that I should have learned from my elders  
And teach them how to communicate effectively.  
I shouldn't realize the cruelty of life without experiencing it  
And see how unhappiness erodes mortal souls.  
I shouldn't be unwavering, firm in my independently formed values... for perhaps I learned them wrong.  
But who should I learn from when I have no examples?  
I shouldn't feel my soul weary from so many suppressed sighs, and yet I sigh often.  
I shouldn't feel compelled to swallow silent screams  
And hold together the pieces of troubled souls.  
And yet here I am...  
Being what others couldn't...  
Being the woman I dreamed of becoming...  
Being an adult in a child's body.  
Not much should happen to me.  
Because, well...  
I'm  
Just  
A  
Kid.



**Mariana Ranete**  
University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and Education Science,  
Education Sciences, Special Education, 2nd year undergraduate



Just  
A  
Kid



# A fishy coming of age

**Teodora Leon**

University of Bucharest, Doctoral School of  
Literary and Cultural Studies, 1st year

My friend tells me  
that graduation ceremonies signal a clear departure from childhood –  
so she won't go to hers  
she doesn't want her life to come to an end.  
I glance over at the calendar on her wall  
filled with Xs for every day that passes by –  
weird of her to leave marks like that  
if she actually wants to be stuck in a loop.

but who am I to see the bigger picture?  
I am stuck with a fisheye lens.

my friend lies down in her bed for the millionth time today  
starts staring at the calendar  
with her head upside down  
and chuckles without smiling.  
she says that her days are numbered  
and she'll sleep with the fishes  
which confuses me  
since it's just the two of us here.

but who am I to have access to the bigger picture?  
all I've known is to look through this fisheye lens.

I miss the days when my friend and I would do  
the same stuff together  
the least I can do now is stare at the calendar upside down, as well  
and notice how everything changes –  
apart from these Xs  
altogether the same from any angle;  
wouldn't it be something for me and my friend  
to stay like this forever  
with Xs visible in our pupils?

but the silence doesn't last long  
for my friend leaps from her spot  
screaming out my name  
asking me if I am alright –  
but she cools off as soon as I blink  
and am no longer upside down;  
she thought I was dead  
precisely like those dead fish in cartoons.

my fisheye lens helps me better see her teary eyes  
something rejuvenated in her look  
"you're right, Gemma  
life is not going to end now"  
she says, while getting ready for the ceremony.

I'm no expert, given my fisheye lens  
but I can tell she sees the bigger picture now  
her calendar will be devoid of Xs onward  
life won't come to a halt  
and it will still be the two of us together –  
guess I won't have to be moved  
from my modest bowl to an aquarium with other fishes.



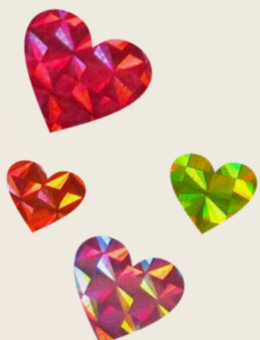
**BEYOND A**

# **SnapShot**

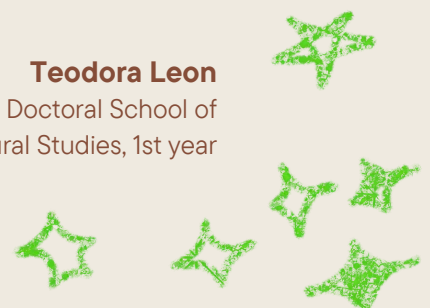
Should someone look at your childhood pictures  
and boldly claim that they see you  
understand who you are

don't believe them.

you will be fully understood only by those  
that will find you in the backdrop of pics taken by strangers  
who posed next to tourist attractions  
the kitschiest sculptures possible  
on the most crowded boulevards or beaches;  
it is in such settings  
that your lingering essence will naturally come forward.



**Teodora Leon**  
University of Bucharest, Doctoral School of  
Literary and Cultural Studies, 1st year



The background is a dark grey surface covered with various torn pieces of vintage maps. A white pushpin is pinned to the top center. To the right, a brown flower is placed over a map fragment. A magnifying glass is positioned at the bottom left, focusing on a cartoon character on a map. A blue car is at the bottom center. A dashed red line curves from the middle right towards the bottom right.

# HAVE A SAFE TRIP!

There's no way you can get lost in the woods.

if you're walking barefoot  
you'll know the path you've already trod on  
patches of grass will feel familiar  
you'll know where you're coming from and where you're going.

if that is the case, then why are you still surprised  
that people are more lost than ever these days?  
even babies start wearing Air Jordans  
long before they learn how to walk.

**Teodora Leon**

University of Bucharest, Doctoral School of Literary  
and Cultural Studies, 1st year

# You're so Cooked



What will you do if, toward the end of your life  
you realize that you were the bravest  
solely when you were chased by other kids in the park?  
all of you screaming  
bursting with adrenaline  
while surrounded by flying stag beetles.



nowadays, you are petrified  
at the mere sight of the same old rat  
that keeps walking slowly in front of you  
when you return home –  
and little do you know  
that he is just part of a changing of the guard  
alongside his pal, the hedgehog  
(and you'd like to have the latter around, no doubt  
to have him catch your worries with his quills  
and roast them like marshmallows)



if only you realized one day  
that you once were (and can still be)  
a hedgehog yourself  
freely chatting with the rat and  
sharing some stag beetles  
cooked on a rotisserie.



**Teodora Leon**

University of Bucharest, Doctoral School of Literary  
and Cultural Studies, 1st year

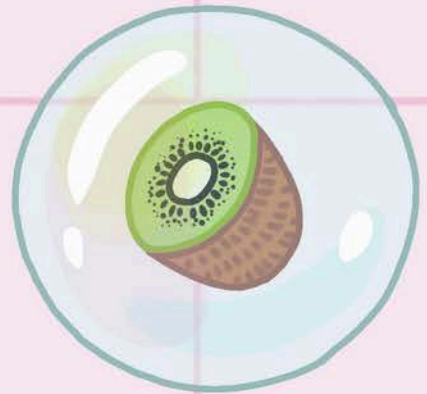
# kiwi

when I am bored, I try to remember  
the first time I tasted fruit –  
if I too made a face at the slice of lemon  
or felt the prickliness of kiwi,  
as I scroll, I see kids laughing wide-mouthed  
When I get bored, I wonder  
if they've already felt helplessness  
if they've been forbidden to be mean yet  
if they've eaten spinach or whatever they eat,

Brussels sprouts

by force  
If they've hoped to get puppies for Christmas  
or the Mystery Machine;  
if their parents argue  
if they're filmed too many times a day  
and I see them too,  
maybe more often than their closest relatives;  
if they cried when they realized  
they can't be whoever they want.  
If they have other aspirations besides content  
and if they're afraid of the world beyond the screens

Somewhere between me and who I wish to become,  
there's a single-page app with infinite scrolls  
I stay stuck in the bathroom, back against the tub  
and still, I secretly stay on my phone for minutes;  
at any moment, it could fall into the water  
at any moment I could decide that's where its place is



I force myself to remember how far I have come  
how good pistachios and pork rinds taste  
what war, cryptocurrency, lymphatic cancer mean  
what nightmares I'm allowed  
to wake up from  
drenched in sweat  
What earthquake gives me permission  
to step out of the tub wearing only a towel,  
to leave all my things floating in an artificial air  
and in under no circumstances take the elevator

Somewhere between me and who I wish to become  
there's a little girl playing in a yard with pain,  
she scrapes the dried blood from her grazed knees,  
she no longer cries when she gets hurt,  
Now, she feels her legs become her own,  
and the roller skates truly touch the asphalt,  
and the sandbox is rough because the sand's from the river  
and the plum trees aren't that tall;  
soon, their branches will break  
she'll fall onto her back on the friendly ground  
that smells like Play-Doh and potatoes  
which will embrace her with its dampness  
leaving a mark on her shirt, easily wiped away  
No one will ever know  
that she fell from a tree smaller than herself



**Viviana Pantazică**

Politehnica University, Faculty of Automatic Control and Computer  
Science, Computer Science and Information Technology MA, 1st year



# An Ode to Who I Was and What Will Be.

"You don't have to be quiet for people to like you"  
I tell my 10-year-old self,  
but I'm only met with silence.

"There are creeks where the water flows and  
splashes in the shape of your heart,  
the birds in the trees all chirp despite the absurdity of nature  
and  
the coffee that you're going to taste every single morning will stain  
just like the mark your presence will leave on  
everyone you meet,  
However,  
you'll decide there are things in life worth letting  
change you."

"You will get sick of writing sad poems  
and you'll do the mental exercise of finding beauty and  
freezing it in time,  
like a lepidopterist who pins butterflies onto styrofoam and stores them on his wall,  
only you don't like to have such an overt reminder of death and all..."

"There are rocks which hold lovers' scratched initials on them  
which end up thrown into the same waters which have now dried up and left scars  
of greatness and change.  
You cannot be quiet when you have the power to observe more than nature wants  
you to see."

"All of your fingers crossed and  
birthday wishes will come in handy  
when you're struggling  
to write the world anew"

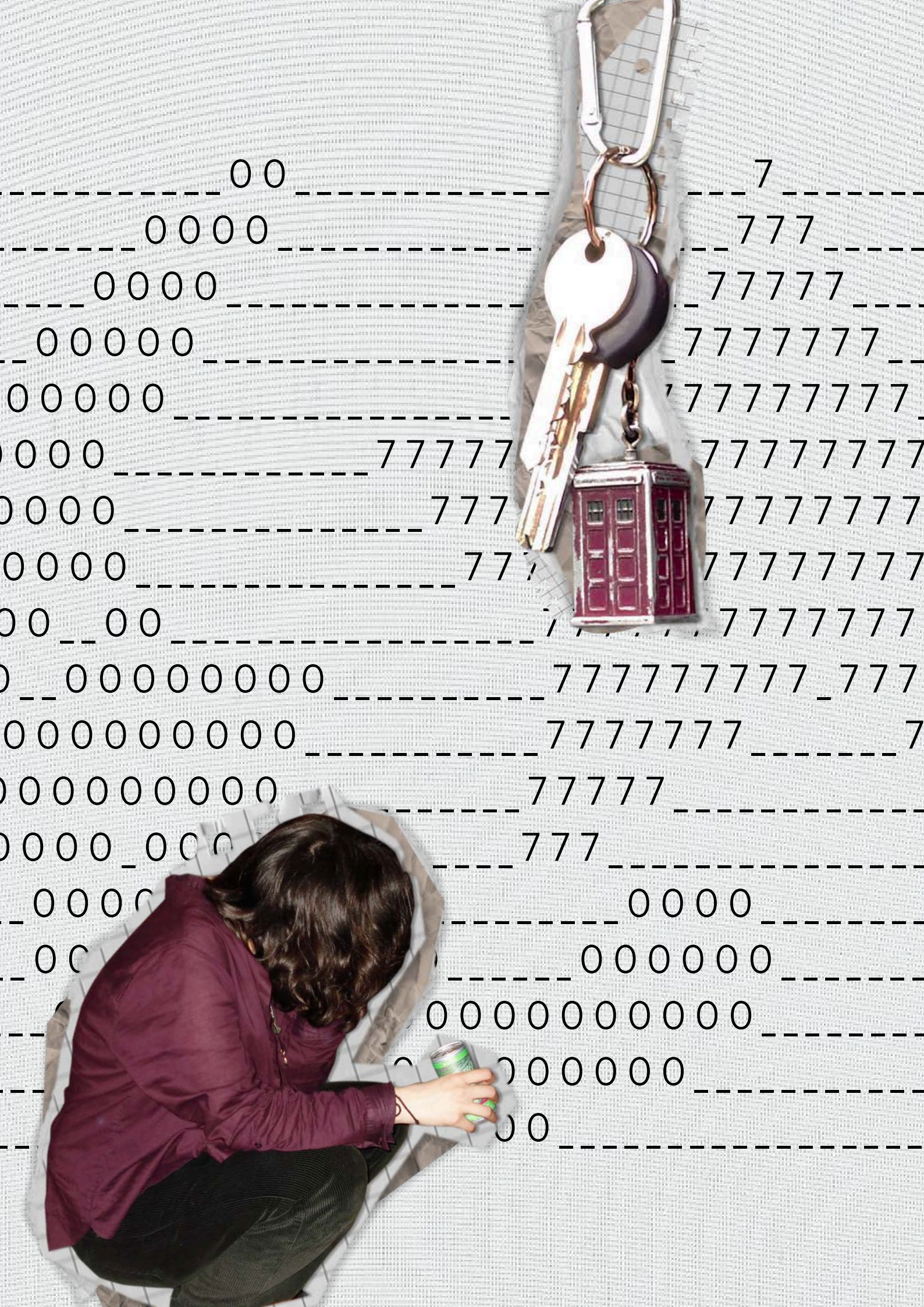
– I tell myself, but  
maybe she didn't catch what I said,  
so I'll leave it to the wind to carry all that.  
She'll get the message.



**Vladia Șerban**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures,  
Cultural Studies, American Studies, 3rd year undergraduate







II

PROSE

# Up the wall

A She is seven when she first reaches her hand up on the wall.

She's always been too short to ever reach anywhere high enough—it rains loud and heavy in the summer, and the southernmost wall of the house always gets washed up. Anything she's tried to put up there would end up faded and ugly. She's still a little giddy, silent as a mouse as she walks over to the other side of the house.

B She knows she's not supposed to be here. The neighbor's dog is barking and wrenching in its chain as it spots her, and she would normally get scared and run away, if it wasn't for the heavy box of chalk cradled in her little arms. It wouldn't be long before mommy's voice would call out to her, she knows. But she doesn't care about mommy now, no—the only thing on her little, innocent mind is the chalk in her hands, the dust coating her fingertips.

*Bark! Bark! Bark-bark-bark...*

C Her little ears buzz as she looks up at the wall, tongue poking out from between her thin lips. She's still not tall enough, but she's already tried climbing up on a stool, only to fall and scrape her elbow in the process. Scowling, she gets up on her tiptoes and reaches an empty hand up, delighted to see how far up she can get.

'Almost halfway!' she thinks. She's been doing so good in school, learning her letters and mastering her penmanship like a little scholar. Surely her instructor's praise hasn't been for nothing, but she doesn't have a blackboard at home, and her chalk is all colorful and pretty, unlike the plain white sticks she'd use in class; it would be such a waste to let this opportunity pass...

D She crouches down and opens the box, her quick gaze scanning the selection of colors she's been given. Blue, red, splotchy green, yellow, white. White is what her instructor always uses, but she sticks her tongue out at the stick of chalk—she's never been too fond of teaching. The green is just ugly, and the blue and red would take so much rainwater to wash away. 'Yellow, like the sun,' she thinks, picking up the stick of chalk, rolling it between her little fingers.



E

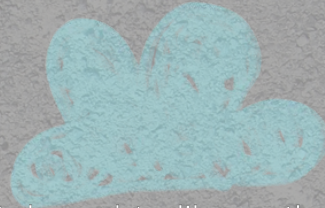
F

i



races of chalk still poking through the gravelly surface of the wall. I can still make out the vague shapes of *as* and *bs* and *cs*, of words and equations and little drawings. All in my messy handwriting, all in my design. I can't even remember how old I was when we moved into the new house, can't even remember how old I was when I stopped sneaking over to the other side of the house.

$$3 \times 4 =$$



I scoff, my nose wrinkling at the sight. I used to like math, until simple equations and problems became complicated theorems and useless drawing skills. I have no chalk to fill in the blank now. I look down at my feet, squinting as I try to spot any old, soggy scraps of chalk forgotten in the earth. I grind my teeth in frustration, my vision blurry despite my glasses. My brows unfurrow when I notice a small chunk of red brick sticking out from the mud, and I reach down to pick it up with careful, clean fingers. It's not chalk, but maybe it'll work. The brick is wet from the last rain and coats the pads of my fingers in dirty, toxic-looking orange.

I don't get on my tiptoes to write on the wall—the equation sits somewhere below my chin, and my nail catches the jagged surface as I write. My answer stands up against the gray slab, stark lines and squiggles among faded remnants. I stare at it as if entranced—as if it's somehow wrong, as if for some reason I've forgotten my math. As if all the voices that have told me I've been wrong throughout my entire life are suddenly screaming in the back of my mind.

It's always happened in these very moments, when life seems so simple and so beautiful and you can do whatever you want regardless of what the outside world would think, and suddenly you're seven again and you can finally reach high enough to scribble with chalk on a tall wall, or tie your shoelaces on your own, or paint your own nails with colorful polish. And it's almost shameful, the way something so sweet and lovely seems so filthy and useless, and you're suddenly eighteen, and you're told for the very first time your dreams are stupid, so very stupid, that you should think about doing something with your life, think about a career instead of simply rambling on and on and on on paper when no one would ever care to read it.

I would often dream about it. It was almost like the wall were some supernatural being, calling to me, luring me to it, but I almost always

$$6 - 2 = 4$$



forgot about my dreams by the time I would go brush my teeth in the morning. Never stagnant, always fleeting, like the chalk I would so often struggle to sear into that one side of the house, the side where the sun never shone, the way that remained soggy and reeking of summer rain for days after the storm ended. That damp wall, as difficult to scribble on as writing with a fountain pen on a piece of paper you've spilled water on. Nothing alike, but always the same, just like me and the seven-year-old girl who was foolish enough to still dare to have an innocent dream.

It's only when my mother's voice rings from somewhere behind me, slow and dismissive as ever, that I turn around from the wall.

"You always used to write up there, you know," she says, a small smile on her lips. "Used to drive me up the wall, always having to wash it away... Kind of like how you would do with ink—remember when you'd spill it all over your clothes and it wouldn't go away? Would have to let it soak in bleach for days..."

I let out a quiet sigh, giving my mother a small smile as I stepped away from the wall.

I look up at it again, and it is as majestic as ever, even with its cracks and grooves and missing patches of concrete. I should have drawn a face on it back then, to finally have someone who gave me hope before looking down at me even for a second.

Only the fading traces of chalk remain.

I follow my mother as she walks away, and I am twenty-one when I reach my hand up the wall for the last time, drawing a small heart with the leftover soggy chunk of brick.



# The storm on the Sea of Galilee

I.

He was... rambling about some painting I did when I was a kid.

"You see, the lines at the bottom? They represent... bla bla bla."

"Why the heck would I care?" Obviously I couldn't say that to him... He would get upset...

Little does he know, we had this conversation eight years ago.

Funny, isn't it? I was the one rambling back then... and he was the one telling me to shut the hell up.

The painting was in fact mediocre, some sparks of innocence and hope, but nothing special.

"You must be more technical about it!" He used to say.

"I am sorry, father!" I am intoxicated.

I used to do that a lot. Slip off... imbue the canvas with colors carefully selected from the soul's palette. But with time I became more intoxicated, and fewer colors could be found in that palette.

II.

I tried recreating the painting he was looking at.

"Wow, they really grow up fast."

He was an excellent curator, but he never really understood art.

“Yes, indeed... Your technique is perfected now.”

“You are right, father.”

Your perfect little replica has perfected his painting...but his paint is washed-out.

“I am sorry I doubted you.”

“You didn’t, father.” You cleared my head of toxins.

“I love you, son!”

“I love you, father!”

And I truly loved him. Regardless of his flaws, he always had my best interest in my mind. A kind soul, always trying to see the best in people, however, he had a distorted idea of what "best" means.

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” I thought about this quote a lot. Of course, he was my father, so I could never have taken it ad litteram. But he was paving the road towards my destruction, with good intentions.

III.

I remember when I painted the first one. A little over eight years ago. My soul was clean, but my mind slightly blurred. The influence that Miss A. had over my art was a toxin. I knew how to use the brush, but she taught me how to put colors on the blank paper. She intoxicated me with hope. And I let that sink in. She was the one who told me that paint is not a tool. My mind was blown; I had to try, paint and show my inner soul.

“Your paint is bright, but your canvas is bleak.” She told me.

“What do you mean?”

“Only you can answer that question.”

And I did. The paint is my future, and the canvas is the choices I made.

IV.

You might wonder, dear child, if your future self sobered up or hope is still intoxicating your soul. Did cynicism win?

Or perhaps your soul is now full of hope.

Your answer is hard to determine, little one.

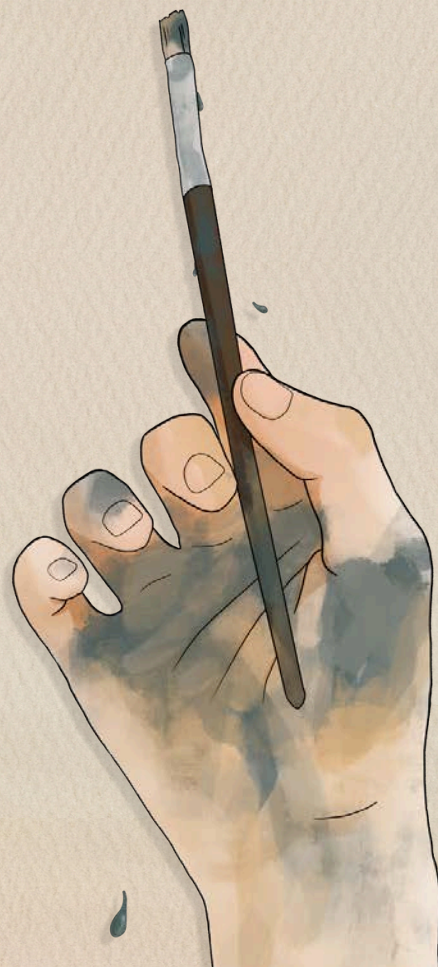
But I will tell you this.

You poured your heart and soul in the canvas. But your mind is always sober.

PS: A little bit of advice. Keep dreaming.

**Alexandru Ivan**

University of Bucharest, FLLS, American  
Studies MA, 2nd year



# Mourning a memory

**Andreea Tufoi**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures,  
Philology, Modern Greek major, 1st year undergraduate



Nostalgia. That's exactly what Memoro felt in his entire being when he decided to book a flight back to his hometown. Ever since the military student arrived at the airport a pang went straight through his chest. Was it regret? But what could Memoro regret in his 24 years of living and roaming this godforsaken Earth? Did he regret leaving all the memories behind and moving to another country for a better future? But what is there to regret when all the memories live vividly in his mind? All these thoughts were flooding his poor mind as he walked through the main city crowded with unfamiliar faces.

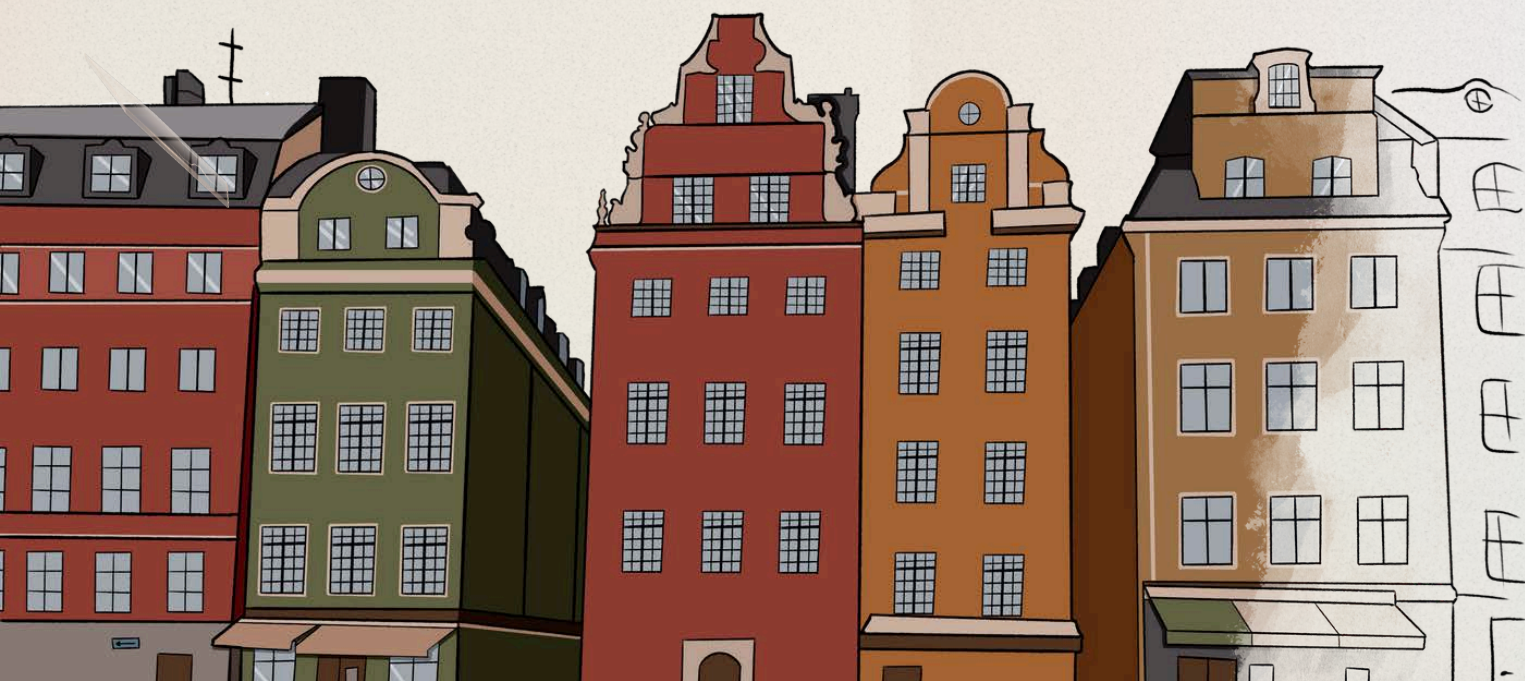
He comes to a stop however when face to face with an old sign. Glömt Town. As he read the name of the town, the pang in his chest grew even sharper, all the memories washing over his strong mind and fragile heart. Memoro took a deep breath and mustered courage as he climbed over the little barrier at the entrance of the town. The more he walked along the paved road, the more his chest felt heavy. His eyes landed over a rather small building. A bakery. The more he stared at it the vividly he remembered the times his mom would send him to buy some bread when the Sun was as bright as his childhood memories and the nice lady would give him his favorite vanilla rolls when nobody paid attention. Resting right against the bakery's wall were two bikes. Once again the memories came back. How Halia and him would ride those bikes all over the town and the forest nearby. Halia. Oh, how much he misses her. Such beautiful clear blue eyes that haunt him even now. Memoro shook that thought away and went on with his walk in the now-abandoned town.

A once so lively and cheerful town that seemed like it had not a single sorrowful person forever doomed to desolate. The young man passes by the only playground in the town. The place he so often visited and played with so many of his age. The place where he made friends. The place where he met Halia. A place he abandoned. Memoro continued his journey, his chest tightening bit by bit with every step he took. Each building he caught sight of looked at him as if in pain and asked him for help. But

how could such a beautifully ruined place seek the mercy of such a man? A man that once turned his back on it and left. Upon seeing this mournful town one could say that there still is hope lingering within these streets. But for Memoro, a man that once lived in this town, the only thing that lingers is nostalgia. All those memories live in the air intoxicating him. And just when he thought all the agony was over, he saw it.

A familiar house, of which he knew the almost perfectly aligned, burgundy brick walls of all too well, stood in front of him. Images of his younger self running cheerfully when he saw his family waiting for him with the door open, while the house also silently awaited his return, flashed in front of his eyes, only to quickly fade away. Too quickly. He looked inside through the open door, but he didn't recognize his own home. The once bright and happy interior with muted green walls, decorated with a few paintings, each of them well-kept in dark, wooden frames, was now old and dirty, but Memoro's eyes couldn't mirror the sight. He still has in mind the childhood memory of the house, hanging onto it like a lifeline. The simple, pendant light fixture in the hallway is shattered, small pieces of glass littering the darkish brown wooden floor. The more his gaze lingered on the spherical light, the more his heart also shattered. The once-filled bookcase is now left empty and untouched, one of its glass doors leaning against the bookcase's side, broken. But so is the young military student. He feels pathetic looking at the missing books. Oh, how much he wishes to also be empty and not feel everything so strongly. Not even the staircase can give Memoro or anyone a sense of comfort. The rich red carpet lying on the stairs, now completely dusty and dirty, brought Memoro a sense of dread, no longer his younger self's playground. Memoro didn't understand why his vision was blurry or why his cheeks were wet. Why was he crying? What was this sorrow bubbling in his chest? He didn't lose his family. They were all well in the new house they lived in. So then, why is he feeling like this? Why does he feel such a big urge to come back if he already knows he won't find anything? Only when his legs give up and he falls to his knees crying, does realization finally hit him.

That day Memoro understood that people can mourn memories.

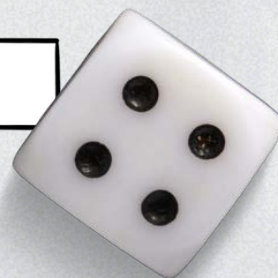
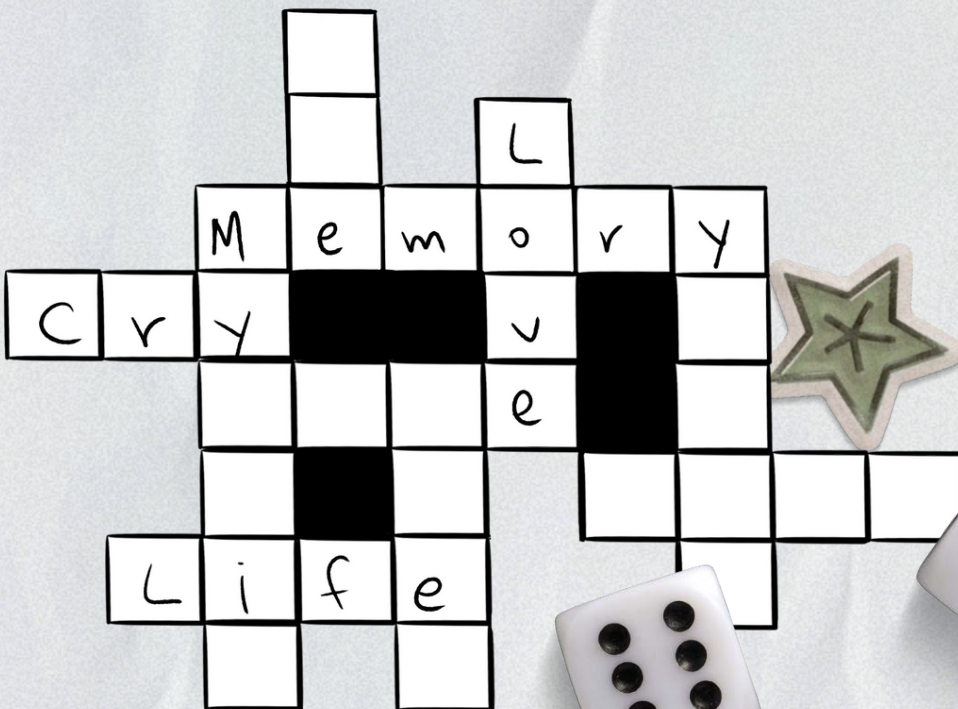




Why do we  
have to grow  
UP?



Memory  
Memory  
Memory  
Memory  
Memory



# The fall of snow, the ascent of life

The first snowflakes gently falling each winter, melting like dreams long gone on the pavement, remind me of childhood. This golden age of pure beauty and simplicity was marked by a state of grace in which I delighted myself to discover that the world can shine in bright colors around the one who is ready to open his eyes.

When I was a child, the winter holiday awakened in me a deep sense of belonging. I was surrounded by my loved ones, taken care of, with nothing to do but relish the marvelous winter scenery and the wonderfully tasty dishes that adorned the Christmas table. In the same way Proust discovered that a plain madeleine could take him back to his childhood, I took this trip in time when hearing the crackling sound of the wood slowly burning in the hearth. We would sit around the fire watching closely what I saw as fireflies sprouting from the flames. I thought of the fire as a sustaining life, as emanating a blessing heat. The warmth of the fire could not be compared to the inner warmth I felt sitting at the Christmas table with my family. Back then, I lived my own fairy tale; everything suited my desires, and I thought of myself as one of the lucky ones. I recall wishing for these moments to be endless, but despite this, they perished so soon for me. Out of fear of losing what I held so dearly, I used to take “mental pictures” of our moments together in the hope of preserving them carefully in my imaginary family album.

From time to time, I would go ice skating with my brother, and tiny snowflakes used to get tangled in my blonde curls, creating a “coiffure à la naturel.” The chilly weather made me cold. Despite this, my cheeks burned with inner passion and laughter. I was all cheerful and saw joy everywhere. Each time it snowed, I thought that a new reign began, when a princess with a heart of ice put a spell on my world and transformed it into a space of purity. The dirt of the street was covered with snow,

and everything was leveled so as to form a harmoniously unitary scenery. I always felt like the snow was holding me, especially when I lay down to “paint” an angel with my body.

What I believe defines childhood is the narrowness of vision. A child does not know much about the exterior world, its attention being fully absorbed by domestic life. It is happy in its ignorance. The world cannot harm it as long as it is under the protective wing of a caring family. The first step to maturity that a young person takes is actually a fall, a huge disappointment. It is when there is a realization that the world is, for some, a fairy tale, and for others, a battlefield. I was personally struck by this epiphany when, one winter, I saw a child my age lying in the snow at the corner of a building. He was a beggar. He was 7 years old. While my family called the ambulance and tried to keep the poor child warm until its arrival, I wondered where his folks were. An intrusive thought passed through my mind: what a young age to die of cold. Not only did I pity that young boy, but I also cursed the world, his family, and questioned the idea of God that was barely formed in my mind. Why did I have the right to a fairy tale when someone else was fighting to stay alive? I had so many questions that remained unanswered and made me bitter. Because of my inconsistency as a child, I quickly left behind this memory, but I ceased to be so idealistic. From then on, I noticed, at every step, the misfortunes of some and the miseries of others. It is not as if these instances did not exist before my “awakening,” but I simply looked the other way, never minding others’ hardships.

Before this event, that influenced me so, I took everything for granted; I thought that doubtlessly I deserved all that I got, all that I felt. After years had passed and I found myself a deeply unhappy teenager, I started to contemplate the serenity of moments long gone and try to comprehend why I had lost my love of life. During my adolescence, I killed and buried my inner child, thinking that I would be better off without all the illusions that promised me that the world was magnificent. In a nutshell, I lost my hope in the goodness and the beauty of the world, sinking into a state of deep disappointment. I completely deserted the optimist I was for the pessimist I became. Only later would I realize that I longed for the excitement I was so acquainted with in childhood and that I yearned for a simple, innocent happiness again. After I forgave myself for doing away with that part of me that

delighted in discovering the world, I commenced a strenuous process of trying to remember my childhood. How could I have been so inattentive so as to expel from my personality that side which made me smile at the simple sight of a snowy scenery?

In the end, reconnecting to one's inner child as an adult might be the most efficacious way of escaping times of trouble by reimagining life with the aid of an unearthed childhood innocence. With this renewed perspective, I am committed to never letting go of my inner child since that is more of who I am than my adult self.

**Angela Istrate**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures,  
Philology, English major, 2nd year undergraduate



# TREAD SOFTLY, STRANGER.

Before the notion of time even existed, people didn't worry about trivial matters like how they were going to spend "today" or "tomorrow." They only cared about the joy of the minute. The feelings that erupted in the moment they were living in, no today and, certainly, no tomorrow.

Now, it's a little more complicated. Humans have evolved to the point where the past, the present, and the future are all equally important to them. And, for some, the past holds an especially bright spot inside their mind – one that sometimes overshadows everything there is.

Well, for Halcyon that was exactly the case. His past experiences were washing over him as if he were swimming continuously in a rage-filled, tremendous sea. Childhood was already an old story that faded away the moment it happened. He was aware it hadn't been a pleasant one, filled with happy holidays and family dinners spent engulfed in laughter, but it was his. And he missed it. Oh, he was grieving that moment in time as if he were about to perish off the earth, and he would never have the concept of childhood with him ever again.

Today, he was more of a cliff, somewhere near the ocean, embracing the harsh waves hitting him unceasingly – a feeling he welcomed with open arms, because it was who he was. Some days, Halcyon couldn't bring himself to think about the waves, so his mind wandered toward the shore, where he saw himself sitting somewhere between the fair grains of sand – just a shell, stripped of its beautiful qualities that would make it stand out among all the other shells adorning the seaside.

But Halcyon knew that he didn't need to stand out; it was just one of those things that his mind had conjured up to fill up the empty space left by his missing memories. Although he was aware of this – had been for a while – it was still lingering in the back of his head, like a leech that attaches to you and, despite all your efforts, remains latched on your skin.

The beach was now abandoned. Left behind. Forgotten. That was how it was supposed to be from the beginning, but Halcyon clutched it in his hands, trying so hard to hold it close to him. Everyone knew it was impossible to hold sand in your hands, inevitably, it would all fall through your fingers. As he took a deep breath in, Halcyon looked around his house, analyzing the all-too-familiar items that adorned it. Finally, he took one last look in the mirror next to him. The sight did not surprise him in the slightest – he had been expecting it, waiting for it as if it were his last chance of living.

There stood a child, a rough version of one that looked an awful lot like him. Halcyon looked into the eyes staring back at him and realized something that shattered him completely. Unsurprisingly, the younger version of himself could only utter a few words as it faded away before his eyes: “Tread softly, stranger.” Halcyon knew that the resistance born of his own stubbornness was inevitable, so he let it sink in. He allowed the sentence to root itself into his mind as he was now looking into his own eyes.

**Augustus**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures,  
Philology, English major, 1st year undergraduate





STRANGER

STRANGER

# THE TALLEST WE EVER WERE

Stepping out onto the porch of her parents' house after one last dinner, she took out the trash. She tossed the bag into the cleverly hidden dumpster, right behind the sturdy walnut tree. That's that, then. Walnuts lined up at the soles of her feet as she tried to leave no trace. The porch door creaked in protest, just as the wilted leaves cracked under her steps, trying to make a sound on this much too quiet evening. As she trotted across the pathway, wine bottle in hand, she wondered when her parents ever stopped drinking red wine and started regifting their newly received bottles to their daughter. She will, in turn, pass them down to her friend's family. Hurried pace now, she had to get to her second engagement of the night. It was right down the road. The Mason family never did move. They said they'd get around to it, but then little baby Petra came along.

"Remember when we were that little?" she had asked Petra's older sister, one of her closest friends, while they were all out on the terrace one night. Her friend glanced upward, caught off guard. Her deep-set, freckled hazel eyes were the first thing you'd notice about her.

"Not really, no."

"Do you think she will?"

"You know, she can't even get your name right yet." *Hazel* smiled, amused, in an effort to change the topic. Petra was off hiding under one of the chairs and moving their slippers around.

"Really? What does she say?"

"Oh, she just calls you Amber. Like your hair, you know?"

Back on the cobblestone road, the burgundy liquid swished around in the wine bottle Amber was carrying, swinging in tandem with her every move. With her free hand, she smoothed down the folds on her skirt. Dinner was over now for most families in their neighborhood. She passed by the scene of a father and his son watering the lawn together. It didn't take too long for the boy to grow bored and run off in the opposite direction, fleeing to climb up a tree. Although seemingly

unbothered, his father's eyes never strayed too far, hose still in hand. It was that age when you were allowed to run away, even if you didn't know you were being followed. The streetlights were dim, and the window blinds inside the house had been drawn, their front yard now lightless. The kid had gotten so far up the tree, Amber couldn't spot him anymore, swallowed by the thick leaves. One strong gust of wind, she thought, and his hiding place would be gone. She envied the tall trees the garden beyond the fence was blessed with. She missed the ones she used to climb, just a mere few houses over. Missed being as young as that boy; as small as Hazel's sister. Climbing trees that aren't there anymore, hiding under tables, fitting in cardboard boxes. Almost disappearing at will — which was allowed and borderline encouraged. She still felt like she might disappear any second now. Not at will anymore, of course. But what good were her hands and feet if she couldn't climb her darling tree anymore? Or cut a doll's hair, accidentally toss a ball to the neighbor's, and get in trouble?

Amber continued her walk at the same alert pace. Just a few more mailboxes until she'd be reunited with Hazel Mason and the rest of her family. Ah, the innocence of sharing one glass of wine on a slow-paced winter evening, for old time's sake. The glasses of three adults clinked as they drank to the fast-approaching New Year. The period between Christmas and New Year's Eve was a bizarre, transitory anarchy with no clear rules to follow. Amber spent this uncanny week at her parents' house, occasionally dropping by Hazel's to catch up.

"Really lovely of you kids to still keep in touch whenever you get the chance," remarked Hazel's father, with a tinge of something Amber couldn't quite place. The open kitchen layout was in perfect view of Petra, who was curled up on the sofa, playing with one of her Christmas gifts: the perfect doll. After the mandatory exchange of formalities, the two 20-year-olds moved to the front room, sitting on the floor on some old throw pillows alongside Petra.

"Is that your favorite doll?" Amber asked, and Petra nodded joyfully. Her head turned to the girl beside her — yes, girl, because Hazel never really did become a woman to her. "Do you remember our favorite toys?" Amber ventured, and the question seemed to fill Hazel with underlying frustration.

"Some. But God, do we have to talk about our childhood every time we see each other? Like, you're so stuck back there that it's hard for you to make memories now, with me, here!" she lashed out, her bushy eyebrows going up and down as each word contorted her entire face. Her porcelain green eyes had almost become red with anger.

"I don't want to pull you back there with me," Amber replied in a surprisingly collected manner. "Sorry," she breathed out after a short pause. "I think I'm obsessed with finding out why I do miss it."

"Maybe because we can't do those things anymore. We miss everything we don't have with us anymore, not because we liked it, but because we can't have it back," Hazel went on. "I lied, before. I miss it too, I do. What I miss most really is being that small, maybe. But in a weird way I think as a child you're also the tallest you'll ever be. You know, those summer days when my dad would pick me up and carry me on his shoulders whenever I got tired of hiking. I felt like I could see the whole world from up there. Like I was the whole world."

Sometimes all you can do is let time pass. So the two of them sat in silence outside on the swing set built for Petra. "We can still do all of this," — they both thought in private — "it's all still here for us." A thud and a squeak followed. A blue ball jumped the fence and landed at their feet, slowly gliding along the cold blades of the grass. The air was chilly, the neighborhood was quiet, but even so, there were still kids out.

"Toss it back!" one of them cried in a pleading tone. The voice must have belonged to the boy Amber passed on her way there. And they did just what the boy demanded, because the kids might forget ever having played with that ball, but they also just might miss it. The ball flew over the fence, back onto the road with the same comic thud as before, which sparked the kids' chuckles. It seemed that something made a sound on that much too quiet evening after all.

**Clara Ghebrea**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures,  
Philology, English major, 1st year undergraduate

REWIND<<

REWIND<<

REWIND<<

REWIND<<

The title 'Childhood through the seasons' is written in a large, brown, cursive script. It is surrounded by four colorful, 3D-style stars: a blue one at the top center, a green one at the top right, a yellow one at the bottom center, and a purple one on the left. A brown line swirls around the text and stars.

# Childhood through the seasons

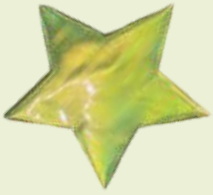
I can still hear my sister's laughter echoing through our childhood home. I see my curly hair and chubby cheeks. It's like I'm watching a VHS tape of my childhood, vividly recalling what I loved and some of my inner thoughts. My father's jokes made me cry, but they were actually funny. I remember getting gifts after my father received his paycheck and our tradition of only watching movies at 7pm.

Looking back at my life, or rather, my childhood, through a lens, I realize that each season reflects a specific stage of my growth. Not in the way that winter symbolizes the end and spring the beginning, it actually all starts in winter for me, followed by summer, oddly enough. I think this order best encapsulates each of my stages, growing up.

## Winter

Although spring is the equivalent of rebirth, winter is pure. It is white snow glistening, hot cocoa, family dinners, sleigh rides, gifts, coziness. The most significant memories are made in winter. No one experiences the beauty of the world quite like a child in the winter. What do you mean you can build snowmen, forts, have snowball fights, and make angels in the snow? It is all so magical. We got our first dog in the winter of 2007, a few months after my little sister was born. Alba was a golden retriever, white as snow, and my dad brought her home on Christmas Eve as a gift.

In winter, I told my first lie. After being outside, my parents asked if I had eaten snow. I told a little white lie: "no." Guilt-ridden, I confessed the truth to my sister — I had, in fact, eaten snow. She called me a liar, as I was seen as a good child, and she... not so much, as she had been caught in one too many childish, innocent lies. So much that, as we visited Rome a few years later, on a rainy day, she refused to put her hand into the "Bocca della Verità" (Mouth of Truth), because our father warned us



about what happened to liars who did – their hand would fall off. Forgetting my little deception, I placed my hand inside anyway, and nothing happened, therefore proving myself innocent.

My backyard was like a sanctuary in the winter. Growing up in a mountain town, it was often covered with snow. All of my sister's and my games unfolded there. We invented characters and stories, fought with icicles, and played until our noses turned red. I liked the feel of my cold hands thawing once they hit the warm water.



I remember a certain night clearly. My mother dressed me in my ski overalls, and I ventured outside alone. For some reason, I was not scared. I admired the twinkling white color of the snow, thinking it sparkled because of fairies. That night was pure magic for me, and I still wish I could believe in wonders so easily. I know I promised myself that night that I wouldn't ever stop believing in the mythical world, but we all grow up someday and break promises like that.

Back in the house, it all smelled of dried oranges and cinnamon, of fresh butter biscuits and cake. The biscuits were made by my mother, my cousins, my sister & me, and left for Santa to enjoy with a glass of milk.

I can still hear the German carols and see us in our angel costumes during school plays. Every Christmas, I sing those carols to bring a piece of my childhood back. Skiing was another winter joy of mine. Whenever I have a Leibniz biscuit or drink overly sweet tea, I think of my ski instructor, who made our lessons even better with those snacks. I will always have a special love for winter and will forever look back on those days with gratitude.

## **Summer**



In the summer, I was getting older. My childhood best friend, who's now studying in Holland, was over at our house during the whole 2016 summer. We did dares, like "The Ice Bucket Challenge" or "The Cinnamon Challenge" or whatever we saw online at the time. We did not miss any of the Disney Channel movies that aired every day at 11am, watching them while eating mini sandwiches.



I would visit my cousin too, who lives in Constanța, my mother's hometown. We would watch American Horror Story and H2O. At the beach, we would play mermaids, and at the park, we would jump on the trampolines. I had my first "Subway" sandwich at City Park Mall, and it became my favorite food.

Summer was, of course, for going to the countryside as well. My sister & I played with the neighbourhood kids and learned to milk cows. We would wash carpets and ride in the dray, both of which were very fun back then. We took care of little chickens, ducks, and turkeys. Despite how much I loved it, I didn't believe my parents when they said I'd miss it. I realized a bit too late that I was being foolish. I miss it all now and wish I could go back, just for a day. I am sure I will miss my college days, too. I think we, as humans, always miss and yearn for something. What would life be with nothing to want?

In recent years, summer has turned into careless nights and sun-kissed days. Summers are for concerts, festivals, and falling in love. Summers are for traveling to Paris with my parents, walking barefoot on the grass, or swimming late at night in the Mediterranean Sea, eating pasta and drinking wine with my friends in Italy or dancing the night away in Spain. They are for getting ready with my sister after a long day at the beach, feeling a bit burnt and smelling like salt; for picnics back at home, day trips through the woods, or coffees in town, late-night car rides. Summer means freedom, like a portal, a place lost in time. Summer is everything.

## **Autumn**

Autumn brings me to my first year of high school. I was watching Dead Poets Society, reading The Secret History, and dreaming of a dark academia fall. I wore loafers and coats, drew black cats and eyes. I also joined my school's literary circle, to feel closer to my dream of becoming a writer. The first time I attended, I read one of my poems out loud. Other teenagers and a teacher gave their opinion on it, seemingly liking it.

This dream of mine started when I was a child, manifesting itself as stories about dogs or cats written in my notebooks. It still is a distant





dream of mine, but at least I am studying literature now, instead of continuing my studies in a STEM field, as my high school major would indicate. I think I kept the dream of becoming a writer in the back of my mind somewhere, throughout those four years, when I was studying mathematics and sciences. I still hope it is not just a silly dream, but a justified one. I hope my talent still exists somewhere. I hope I have kept some of it with me, throughout these years.

During that fall, I cut my hair and dyed it a lot. I have had green, blue, blonde highlights. My eyebrows have also been blonde. I ultimately cut my hair short, like a boy. I cried for a bit but it all grew back, as everything does. I remember one of my friends' father asking her why I kept making so many changes. Perhaps it was my way of trying to find myself.

Autumn is truly about coming of age for me. Maybe it was just the year, for all of us – 2020, the year of change. I lost friends, struggled to adjust to my new high school life. I spent my nights listening to jazz songs, writing in my journal, or painting my walls, leaving behind traces of my 15-year-old self. I was trying to romanticize everything.


## **Spring**



When spring came around, I was reborn. As cliché as it may sound, that was the only year I felt it that strongly. My hair was growing back, and my smile reappeared, after a harsh winter I wanted to forget. As the flowers bloomed that spring, so did I. Coming back to what I wrote at the beginning of this essay, maybe I was wrong. Even if spring is not the starting point of my life, metaphorically speaking, it always brings something new. It brought, that year, new friends and happy memories. I started painting again and leaving my house more, becoming more optimistic for the days ahead.

I went out on a Tuesday in March, as online school would allow me this liberty. It was me and a few friends, near the foot of the mountain in our town. There is a pathway you can follow, where you can always see families walking their dogs, little boys riding their bikes, or lovers holding hands. The sun felt warm on my skin as I took off my jacket for the first time that year. We sat there, talked, and laughed a lot. I could also hear the laughs of children and their mothers coming





from the park. It really felt relieving after being stuck in a negative mentality I never want to be stuck in again. I guess being 16 comes with downsides, but we must believe our mothers when they say it will get better - not fight them. The sunset that day was something else, or maybe it was beautiful just because I saw it with new eyes. Shades of orange, pink, and purple all danced in the sky, and I was glad my friends all took pictures of it, and it wasn't just me. I was glad we all found it beautiful, and I knew we would all feel ourselves be born again that spring.

Now, seasons come one after another, and I just enjoy what each one brings. I feel more mature, but I know there's still a lot more to learn. I know seasons will become more and more blurred together, approaching adulthood. I don't feel ready for that. I was not ready to move away either, but it happened anyway. We just have to be ready, everyone has to do this: to take this leap toward adulthood. We have to be ready to lose the excitement for life that we now have, as we lost it when we became teenagers. Or, who knows, maybe some of us get to keep it...



**Ilinca Ibănescu**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters, Philology,  
Romanian major, 1st year undergraduate



# PTARMIGAN

**Ioana Martinescu**

*University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and  
Literatures, Philology, English major, 1st year*

It's four in the morning; I'm startled awake by a call from my brother. He speaks in a perfectly monotone voice, like an automated subway announcement: *"I'm coming by tomorrow to get my book back."* I was dreaming about caterpillars burrowing into my body and bursting out as butterflies; my heart is still racing. *"What book?"* I manage to ask him, but he's already hung up.

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The problem with childhood is that it whizzes past like a hummingbird. Something shimmering and splendid that passed by my eyes once, and then it was gone, and it proved so infinitesimally small that I was never able to find it again. A trick of the light, then—but there are photos to prove that it was real, tucked away in yellowing albums gathering dust in the attic, and sad, lumpy stuffed animals, and macaroni art of our grandparents' home on Prince Edward Island, the one with hydrangeas in the front yard and the sea-blue door. That house is gone, and those gap-toothed kids from the photo albums look like strangers, but I have to believe that it was real. That Theo and I had a childhood—a real one—and that all my memories of his smile and the treehouse and the snowmen in our backyard were real. We were children once; we did have faith in the future. The sky opened up before us so blue it made our eyes water.

The problem with time is that it's a conquest taking place excruciatingly slowly. Like creeping ivy taking over an abandoned house, swallowing up a little more each year, nobody noticing until the day the building groans and comes crashing down under its weight. That's the way it goes with memories. In the beginning, everything seems so clear, as if you could reach out and cradle it in your hands, and then time passes—God knows how long—and one day you find that all your memories have started fading like old photographs, vivid colors dulled from years in the dark, faces obscured, names forgotten. Things go missing. The way back from school—I've tried for

so long, but I can't remember it. There was a tall, black cherry tree, wasn't there? In front of the school for the deaf. It smelled so sweet in the spring, and in the weeks before summer vacation, Theo and I would climb up its branches to eat the dark cherries, and they were so sour they made our stomachs hurt. I remember the year they poured fresh tarmac on Main Street, and we lost our shoes in the wet cement. But what happened after that? How did we make it back? I can't remember. It's gone forever, a half-torn photograph with no hope of ever being made whole again.

If I can't remember it, did it even happen? Worse: if I can remember it, but it's left no mark on the present, no proof other than my own discolored memories that it ever happened, how can I trust that it was real? My brother loved me, once. Is that true? Or did I dream it up? I can't prove it either way, only have the same tired, fading memories to turn over and over in my mind, until I can't help but feel as if I've made them up.

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My brother. I hear the engine of his car pulling into the street and rush to open the door before he can ring the doorbell. He's standing on the other side, wearing his usual, ambiguous expression and a silver watch. It's early in the morning, just past dawn; there's a pink cast to the sky and the sycamores that line the street. He's parked his car on the grass.

I feel my tongue like a dead worm in my mouth. "Oh, hi," I say.

Theodore crosses his arms. There are a few more streaks of grey in his hair than the last time I saw him. "Nice to see you," he says blandly.

I remember when our parents took us skiing one year for Christmas Eve. Lake Louise stretched out like a mirror before us; snow shimmered on the branches of the larch trees. A blizzard rolled in barely a few hours after we'd arrived. We were stuck in our box of a hotel room the whole day, the TV signal scrambled from the storm and our board games forgotten at home, our parents cursing the weather and the money they'd wasted. There was nothing to do — but Theo and I, we never got bored. We spent the day on the window seat, eating rice pudding and looking out the window at

the flurry of snow, talking about whatever: how cool it would be to go on an arctic expedition, whether we would resort to cannibalism if we got stuck in the mountains for months, why rice pudding is so good in winter but kind of sucks every other season. We talked until bedtime, then kept whispering to each other in the dark even after that, until we couldn't keep our eyes open anymore.

It felt like we had so much to talk about back then, but it's been twenty years, and we've run out of things to say. My brother glances at his watch. I want to pull him into a hug and never let him go. I want to hit his shoulder. I step aside and let him in.

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The problem is that, actually, memories are nothing like photographs. Photographs are real, irrefutable, something you can show to other people, something they can't look away from and deny, something you can lay your hands on and say: "Yes—yes, this was real, it happened; even if I can't remember it, something's remembered it for me, preserved it like amber, and everyone can see it for themselves." Memories don't have that kind of weight. They only exist inside your own mind, hallucinatory; they're no more believable than a daydream. There's no way to take what you have on the inside and show it to anyone else, not even if it's the one thing you wish you could do: scoop out all your memories like shimmering marbles into your hands and show them to someone—anyone—and have them say: "Oh, I remember this, too. I remember it just like this."

Words aren't enough; it's not enough for me to reminisce, to talk about that summer in the countryside, the whole apple orchard in bloom, the white ocean of flowers—I need to know that we remember it the same way, the same sky, the same sweet perfume in the air, the same bee that stung my hand. I can't stand not knowing, can't stand how lonely it feels. That even sharing a memory with someone doesn't make it feel any more real. That, even sharing so many memories, I'm still all alone in my head, and Theo in his, and there's no way to bridge that gap, no way for me to see what he sees. How do I know that we remember the same things, really? How can I know?

That when I remember the petals scattering in the wind, he doesn't just remember my hand swelling up?

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I close the door behind us. Theodore, arms still folded, looks about my living room — at the wilted tulips on the coffee table, the clothes piled up on the armchair — and the corners of his mouth pull down. I flush. I want to kick him out, or apologize, or set the house on fire, but instead I step in front of him to block his view and rush out:

“Well, which book did you need?”

He tears his gaze away slowly from a cobweb on the ceiling to meet my eyes. “The one I gave you for your road trip. In middle school.”

What does it say about him, that he's come to get it back after more than twenty years? What does it say about me, that I know exactly what he's talking about?

“Okay,” I say. “I'll go look for it; you can take a seat, if you want.”

But when I move away, Theo trails wordlessly after me. In the dimness of the hallway, I watch his shadow stretch out across the green carpet, swallowing mine — there was a time when we could look each other in the eye, but he's so tall now. Theo stops in the doorway as I enter the bedroom, heading toward the bookcase. One of its shelves is broken, sloping precariously; normally I'm too scared to touch it, but now it's the first place I search. The only sound is that of paper rustling — Theo doesn't speak a word. I can see him looming in the doorway out of the corner of my eye, his stare like a sniper's scope on my back, and I wish I could think of something—anything at all—to say, but my throat is dry, the heavy air pressing down on my shoulders, my heartbeat quickening like a trapped pigeon's.

My hands tremble as I rifle through old stacks of National Geographic magazines, and I accidentally knock a dictionary to the ground, but eventually I find Theo's book. It's a pocket-sized bird-watching guide, now out of print, with a cardinal bird on a bright blue cover. The pages have gone yellow. I remember when he lent it to me, a nervous eleven-year-old about to embark on my first overnight school trip; I've forgotten most of the trip itself, just the fog misting about the peaks of the Rockies, but I remember that so clearly: Theo's braces-clad smile, his bangs falling into his eyes, the mischievous glint in their dark depths, his voice—high and boyish back then—saying: A keepsake, so you won't forget me. I remember the smoothness of the paper, turning to the first page, his name signed in pencil, the doodle of the ptarmigan below it; I remember laughing, and hugging him.

It all feels so very long ago, a lucid dream.

I walk back to where Theo's standing and hand him the book. "Here."


"Thank you."

My arm flops back down to my side as he takes it. Theo tilts his head down to look at the cover, and his bangs fall into his eyes. I want to grab him by the arm and ask him: "Don't you remember? Your drawings, how you used to tell me about birds whenever we went on a road trip? Don't you remember that summer, and the wet cement? Don't you remember the mosquitoes swarming over the lake, don't you remember losing our tennis ball in the reeds, the dragonfly you caught in your hand? Don't you remember the blizzard, the sun reflecting off the snow, sword-fighting with icicles? Don't you remember those boring days in the library, golden dust motes floating through the air, doing summer homework, getting in trouble for playing hide and seek in the memorial section? Don't you remember the fireflies in the backyard? Do you not remember that? I can't accept that. I can't accept that it wasn't real."

But I don't do anything. I just stand there lamely and watch him. "Do you need anything else?" I ask.

"No," Theo says. His eyes are hidden by his hair; I can't see what's in them.

He opens the book, and looks at the first page.



FACES OBSCURED,  
NAMES FORGOTTEN.

# CHILDHOOD WHIZZES PAST LIKE A HUMMINGBIRD.

A TRICK OF  
THE LIGHT

# the halls of memories

**Jessica Copilaș**

*University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures,  
Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies, 1st year*

I looked at the office in front of me, and I saw an elderly woman sitting behind the cherry wooden desk.

“Good evening, ma’am, how can we help you tonight?” she asked, standing up from her chair.

The tone of her voice was stern but gentle, and her eyes, oh those caramel eyes, pierced right through me, and I had to look away for a moment before I spoke.

“Well, you see, I, I... I’m looking for something from my childhood... or maybe it was someone, I can’t really tell, but I know it was from back then...”

The old woman nodded casually. She took a piece of paper and handed it to me.

“Please, take a seat over there by the window and complete this form while waiting for your guide, she will be here shortly.”

The old woman guided me toward a red velvet couch next to a huge window that reached the ceiling. Looking outside, I saw the night sky, but the moon was shrouded by some rain clouds. I tried to look below, but there was nothing there, except even more clouds gathering for the coming storm.

With the completed form in hand, I called out to the old lady. I looked up, but she was nowhere to be seen. The form vanished from my hand, and instead, in front of me appeared a girl in a red velvet dress who couldn’t have been older than six. She took my hand in hers just as the couch beneath me started to disappear, and the monotone office with the great window turned into a white, long hall that stretched further than I could see.

“Nice to meet you, ma’am, I’ll be your guide tonight, please be careful not to wander too far from me, it’s better if you just hold on tightly to my hand, okay?”

I nodded, and the little girl started sprinting and dragging me away through the maze of white halls.



“Where are we going?” I asked, baffled by the encounter.

The little girl stopped and sighed.

“You really are no fun, but you want to find out more about that pie, don’t you?”

“Well, yes, that’s why I’m here, but...”

The little girl shook her pointer finger in front of me.

“Nuh, uh, uh, that ain’t it, ma’am...”

She took my hand again and walked slowly.



“You see that greyness that is turning black, far up ahead at the very end of the hall?”

I nodded and stared at the little girl.

“I’m not allowed to take you there and for good measure that is, you’ve been wandering those halls alone for way too long. I’ve been tasked to take you somewhere else tonight... There!” she pointed in the opposite direction.

The white halls started to turn into pastel colors that got more vibrant as we walked. The little girl's steps grew faster until she got me running after her again.

She opened one door, and the smell of freshly baked cinnamon apple pies flooded my nose. I felt the warmth of the oven as the little girl let go of my hand to close the door behind us.

“This is the kitchen where mom used to bake pies and let me play with the dolls while she knitted scarves and mittens. I think this is what you wanted to see, isn’t that right?”

I shook my head, looking around the kitchen, the one I haven’t seen in years.

“No, this isn’t what I wanted to remember...”

My gaze turned to the little girl who watched me confused as I kneeled down and hugged her tightly.



“It was you whom I missed the most!”

The little girl laughed and patted my head with her small hand.

“Silly old girl, you don’t have to search for me, I’m always here...” she put her other hand over my heart and smiled. Her caramel eyes pierced me as the room disappeared and the rain started falling.

I heard the alarm clock reminding me that work is nigh, but the rain wouldn’t stop although the sun started to shine.





# LETTER TO MY PAST. MY PRESENT AND MY FUTURE

This transition from childhood to present is such a weird phenomenon if you think about it. And that is because you don't really notice it, do you? You just wake up one day and realize that you're not watching cartoons anymore, you're reading more complex books, you have deeper conversations with your friends, and you start questioning yourself, your future, and who knows what else. But even though there is this change, you still laugh at dumb jokes on the internet, if you hear music from ten years ago, you still enjoy it no matter how "embarrassing" it is, because the old you is still you and it's what is needed for the next you to materialize.

Some days of mine are pretty simple. I wake up, brush my teeth, rush out of my college dorm to catch the bus that I miss by a minute or so. Then I wait for the next one, with some frustration in this city, the red light that stopped me from catching the bus, the infinite number of cars, the never-ending chaos and noise that surrounds me. I see the next ride, my mind clears, my anger fades away, and I forget all about it. I get in, and I barely have space to stand. I curse the endless crowd around this city, the red lights, the cars, chaos and noise. My back is killing me. I wonder if it's the backpack filled with heavy books or the last days that make me feel like I'm carrying stones. I finally sit down, the professors teach their lessons, and I feel bad that I only care about my eyelids that are about to shut off. Rarely, I fall asleep. Somehow the day feels like five minutes after I've got home.

Other days are a little different. I wake up, make some coffee, listen to some music, and when I'm walking, I notice the sky and observe that God decided to mix some pink, orange, and a pale blue that day. I spot the colored leaves on the ground, the trees naked, but unbothered, the lady with beautiful waves of hair, and the kids laughing before going to school themselves.



This time I don't miss my bus, I even get to sit down and look out the window, which is one of my favorite things. Always has been. There's a lake on the way to my college that always reflects back these sparkles which remind me of a fairy from a movie I used to enjoy as a child... My back doesn't seem to hurt anymore ...

Before class I stop and buy something sweet but cheap, because it never really felt right to spend money. The air has that sweetness in it which makes me feel hopeful. It's soft and so is the light that fills the room and the background noise made by the birds, the people, and the world. You know what I'm talking about, right? For a while I'm not nineteen anymore, I'm back in my hometown and carefree thinking about my grandma saying "Come eat" and her delicious food, how we always played cards and watched bad shows before the evening prayer with my grandad. As I write this, a tear falls off my cheek, but I'm not sad. I am grateful. Grateful for them, for their love, for the time spent, and for the memories. I might have fallen asleep because a little girl with old, boyish clothes and a bad haircut comes up to me. We sit down on the grass in a park my mom used to take me to on special occasions when I was little. Coincidentally, we have the same name and she seems to know about my grandparents, my mom, my brother, and all my friends. She asks what I've been up to and I tell her that I'm a little tired and stressed out about what's going on in my life. She hugs me and I hug her back, and then we stay like that for a bit. She takes my hand and we get up and start walking around the park.

I don't think I have ever felt so much love as when I was looking at her.

Do you feel the same when you think of me? When I'm thinking about you, I imagine this woman at 27 living in a one bedroom apartment with her cat, an orange one of course, with a silly name. You probably still drink way too much coffee, even though we both know it's not good for us anyway. I hope life treats you kindly. I hope you're healthy and happy, and eat well. I would love to know your favorite books and candy, and how far you've wandered through the world.



**Narcisa Grancea**

*University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and  
Literatures, Philology, Japanese major, 1st year undergraduate*



# The Last Chestnut

I could drive all night in the pouring rain. Nights like these keep me alive. And sane. So I let the darkness and the cold engulf me once again, as I gathered acorns, chestnuts and mushrooms from beneath the leaves. My soul felt whole again, as if it was reconnected to a piece of my past, one that I had once tossed in another forest, in a darker city, under blinding lights on Samhain Night, as I came back home from school. I had just attended my first big event for All Hallows Eve, held by my new school. That was the first time I felt truly happy since moving to the emotionally cold city. I missed out on these celebrations only in high school, due to being caged within my concrete tower, thus turning into a sort of a brutalist poet during the first few years of my ars.

Back in the forest, I feel alive each time. It's as if I could become one with Nature each time I step in it. And so, on this cold night, as I was picking Autumn's fruits from her very womb, I found shelter within her Heart. I felt a breeze morph me into a child again, urging me to reminisce about the moments when my cousin and I would go to my uncle's house, accompanied by our grandmother, and would compete, in order to see which one of us had the most acorns and chestnuts. Once, as we were running in the garden with our ceremonial fruits, an acorn fell out of my folded dress. From it grew a mighty oak, son of the Oak of Tudor, a sign of remembrance of both the Mighty Oak and my late grandfather. That was the last happy Autumn I had before moving to the cold city. Eight years of my life, eight Autumns, ninety-six moons... all wasted on my sorrow that still lingers, trying to slowly heal, with each Autumn passing by, yet never being able to fully do so.

I miss chrysanthemums. I miss offering them to my one teacher that would remind me that I was not alone, right before I would become a stranger in the new world that would be forced upon me, deeming me... an unworthy outcast.

With each mushroom that I picked, my hunger for revenge disappeared. With each chestnut I foraged, I recalled bits and pieces of the Chestnut Faire, the Cave in which the Death Harbinger lived, alongside his army of bats, and the taste of warm, freshly baked chestnuts, as I played with my new sword. I kept it as a memento. Lastly, with each acorn that I picked, I would recall a myth: my own. A child of the gods, who had been wrongly hurt, and tried to regain their own sight.

I placed my bounty in the car and, as I was about to leave, I spotted a chestnut. It was so gently placed, as if Autumn herself wanted me to come across it. It just so happened that I had stumbled upon the last chestnut of the year. And so I threw it back in the Forest's hearth – then drove back home, said goodbye to the world.

So now I sit in front of you, returning back to the earth.

**Raluca Bledea**

*University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures,  
Philology, English major, 2nd year undergraduate*





# DROWNING

Growing up feels like drowning, in a way. One moment you're 7 years old and your small hands are dirty with pink chalk, the next you're face to face with unpaid rent, and you don't really know how you got here. You look around at your friends, the ones that grew up with you, and beyond their tired eyes you see the kid you used to share ice cream with on a summer day. They laugh at something you say and you hear the childish sound you used to hear while running barefoot through sand together.

It's something of nostalgia, of regrets you didn't even know you had. I wish I appreciated it more, danced and laughed and lived more. You think, but you know you did as much as you could with all the consciousness a 7 year old is capable of having. And you were happy, really, you were. But it's all vague flashes of sun and toothy grins and playgrounds, and you're scared. Scared it's slipping from your memory, those simple moments of true happiness.

It sneaks up on you, this feeling, while you go about your day. You look up at the sky while walking home and the clouds look like they did when you were a kid, and your mouth goes dry, for some reason. You shake it off, and keep walking. But it never really goes away, always in the back of your head.

Your mom finds an old doll you used to carry everywhere, and the worn paint of her face doesn't quite resemble what you remember anymore. You run a careful thumb on her faded cheek, and your tears surprise you. You know she'd wipe them, if she could.

There are things that you've loved when you were young, that you no longer have. Your childhood dog, the one who helped you take your first steps, has been gone for longer than you knew him for. And yet, the feeling remains, your fingers itching to pet the black curls of his fur again.

You sit by and watch your parents have dinner, idly chatting as they eat, and you notice the years on their face. Your stomach churns with apprehension, like you're waiting, because you know time is moving fast and it feels like you can't keep up. You try your best to imprint the timbre of their voices in your brain.

You think it's cruel, how limited it all really is, how little time you really have. How are you meant to do it all when you're given nothing? How do you deal with the loss of everything? You remember wishing for your family to live forever, as a child. Naive as you were, the concept of death never escaped you even then.

You stare at the walls of your childhood bedroom, and they stare back. Your grandmother's advice echoes in your head. "Don't fight the current of time, or it'll drown you." You take a deep breath, to remind yourself you're still here, and you keep living.

