



# Stomped

issue no. 3


Creative Writing  
Magazine






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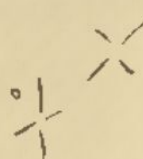
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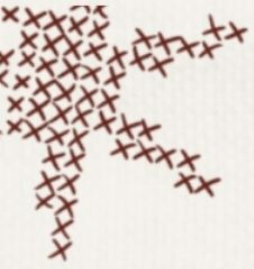
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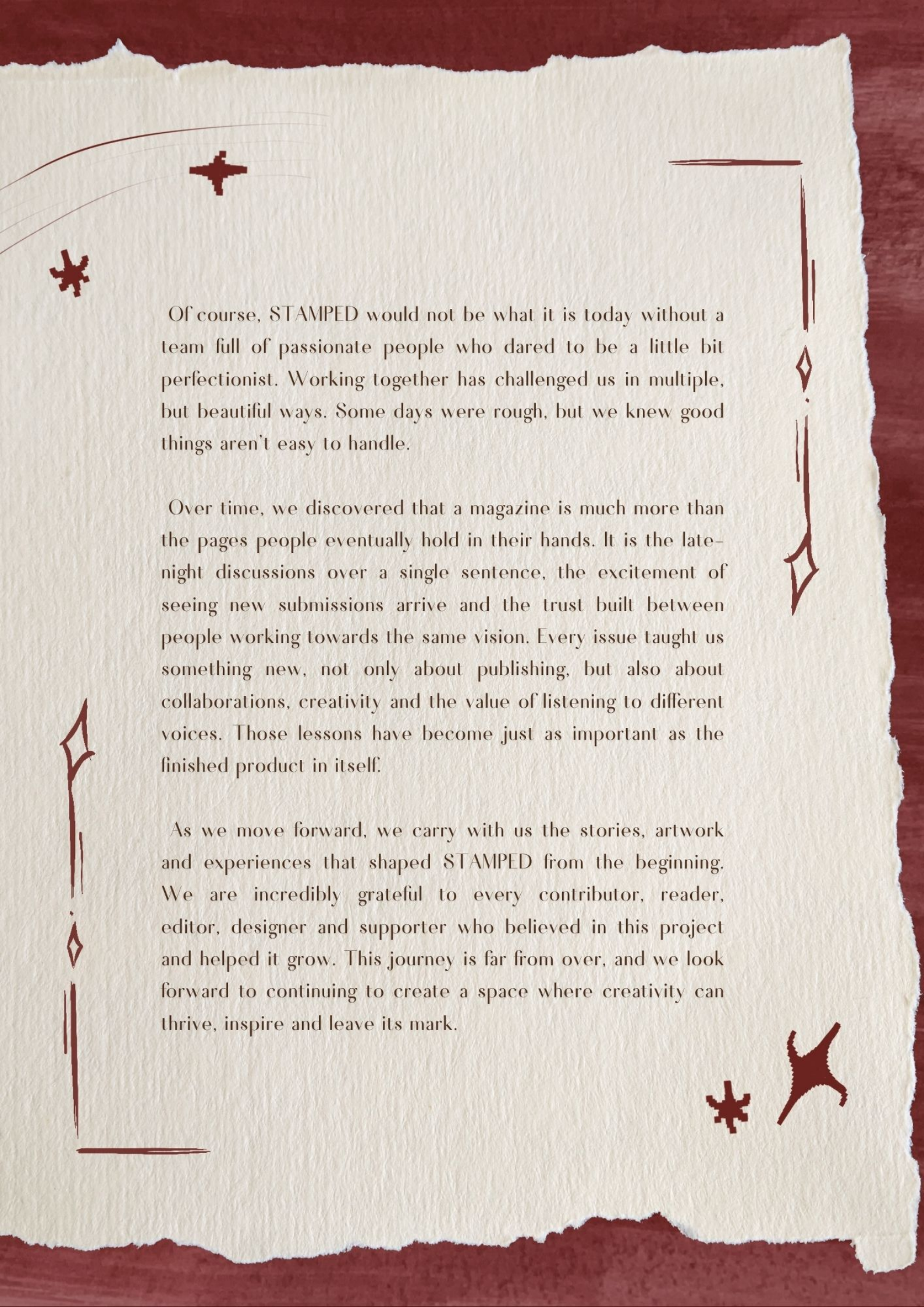
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# Editors letter



A well-crafted magazine is never an individual work. Behind every issue of STAMPED, there are around 48 hands carefully shaping and refining each content to create something that resonates with its readers. Looking back at our first three issues, what moved us most is seeing how many people chose to share their art to a larger audience. The fact that STAMPED became a safe space to express ideas and stories and change perspectives on creating art is among the most rewarding parts of our journey.





Of course, STAMPED would not be what it is today without a team full of passionate people who dared to be a little bit perfectionist. Working together has challenged us in multiple, but beautiful ways. Some days were rough, but we knew good things aren't easy to handle.

Over time, we discovered that a magazine is much more than the pages people eventually hold in their hands. It is the late-night discussions over a single sentence, the excitement of seeing new submissions arrive and the trust built between people working towards the same vision. Every issue taught us something new, not only about publishing, but also about collaborations, creativity and the value of listening to different voices. Those lessons have become just as important as the finished product in itself.

As we move forward, we carry with us the stories, artwork and experiences that shaped STAMPED from the beginning. We are incredibly grateful to every contributor, reader, editor, designer and supporter who believed in this project and helped it grow. This journey is far from over, and we look forward to continuing to create a space where creativity can thrive, inspire and leave its mark.



Poetry



**"Love Drowned in Red"**  
**Ioana-Raluca Muntean**

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

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fore u! 10.04.2023

BOARDING PASS

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# Debut

I remember, it was you  
The night we kissed beneath a half-formed moon  
A hand covered the back of my neck  
The other held on to my waist  
As if you were water, I was salt  
It made me think you were terrified I might dissolve.

The next day when we met up,  
This time, sobered up  
We acted like nothing had happened.  
But I noticed you staring at my lips  
Perhaps craving another kiss.  
Will you pull me in?  
Or wait for me to speak?

You've asked me once if I ever wrote about you  
Well, darling, here's your debut!  
A love poem, as demanded by your heart  
In the same way I demand a new wave of touch.  
A poet's declaration of love...  
What could be more obvious than that?

**Alexandra Postelnicu**

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

# FALLING IN LOVE



I remember when the goodbyes were short,  
A time when you could've cried on my shoulder,  
Back when we'd stay up until midnight  
Talking until the wine ran out.

**Alexandra Postelnicu**


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

Falling headfirst can leave a scar  
You try to cover it, but it never fades.  
And love can be a harmless thing  
If you fall for the right person, at the right time.

My mom came by the other day.  
She pointed to your things in the doorway.  
I told her that it's for the best,  
But she thinks that by letting you go  
I am making a mistake.

Falling in love is both tragic and ironic,  
When you say "I would never let her go",  
But now she has taken everything and is walking out the door.  
And I stand there with my hands behind my back  
Watching the future turn into the past.  
And whatever hope you had that she might turn around  
Dies last.

Falling in love comes naturally  
Sometimes it ends in heartbreak and regret.  
And falling in love is like drinking out of a bottle of wine  
Until there's no drop left at the bottom.




I've been here, done this before  
Shivers when our eyes meet.  
Chains on locked doors,  
Walking until my feet hurt.  
Kiddie rides, bumper cars,  
Insert a coin and press start.  
If you want to hear his voice  
Follow the engine's noise.

Long walks, manners,  
Words, and eagle feathers,  
Chaining patterns,  
Admiring the wildflowers.  
On his pillowcases  
Smearred red eyeshadow.  
Sunrises on the coast,  
I'll love you until the sea dries off.


Sonnets and red wine,  
Inappropriate words,  
Be in bed by 9  
P.M., passing moments.

**Alexandra Postelnicu**

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



The Moon,  
the Sun and  
Everything  
in between



the window of my room teases me  
to get up and watch the moonlight dance

breath in  
1, 2, 3  
and release it

I get up and touch the cold handle,  
and the moon is tingling my face,  
crippling again, hiding traces of today...

a look, a shout, a hit —  
*come downstairs, we have to eat*  
*why are you so upset, talk to me*  
I'm fine, just homework, can I leave?

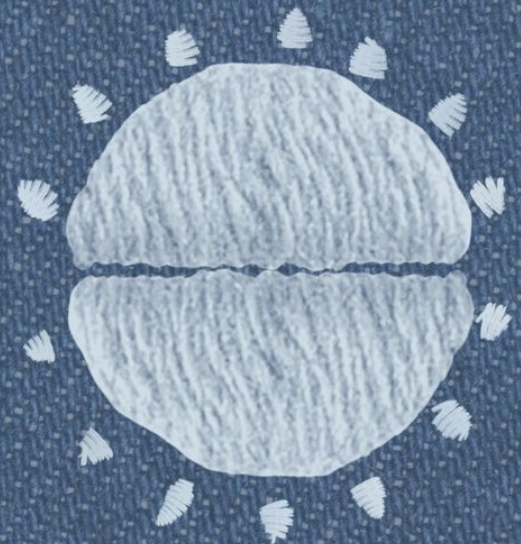
and I live and wish  
to never exist  
I shut my eyes and all I see  
is a cottage surrounded by greenery  
and my lover at the door  
and she smiles and says  
*finally, you're home.*

all this time, the moonlight holds my hand  
1, 2, 3 am —  
the sun seems so far away  
4, 5, 6 am —  
I see a ray and as I hold out my hand  
I finally understand.

I ran out of an excuse  
and the only proper word to use  
for what you called pure love  
is abuse.

**Ana-Maria Sandu**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages  
and Literatures, American Studies MA, 1st year



# Eternity

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let me spend eternity with her  
 let my kisses turn to hieroglyphics on her skin  
 let me be the clarity after her life of blur  
 let me be her innocent, recurrent sin

let her play her guitar to me forever  
 let her smile become my sun  
 let her be my summer in December  
 let her eyes become the light of dawn

let her voice be my forever lullaby  
 let her body become my religion  
 let her hand always melt into mine  
 let her touch turn into our sacred tradition

and let me live all that is she  
 let me become her sanctuary  
 let our love blossom in secrecy  
 let her remain my eternity.

**Ana-Maria Sandu**  
 University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages  
 and Literatures, American Studies MA, 1st year

zzzzzzzzzz  
zkRKHHHHHHJLetourlove  
S1vxzzxs@WJHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHblossomin  
HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHG5secrecy  
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# again in spring

Ana-Maria Sandu

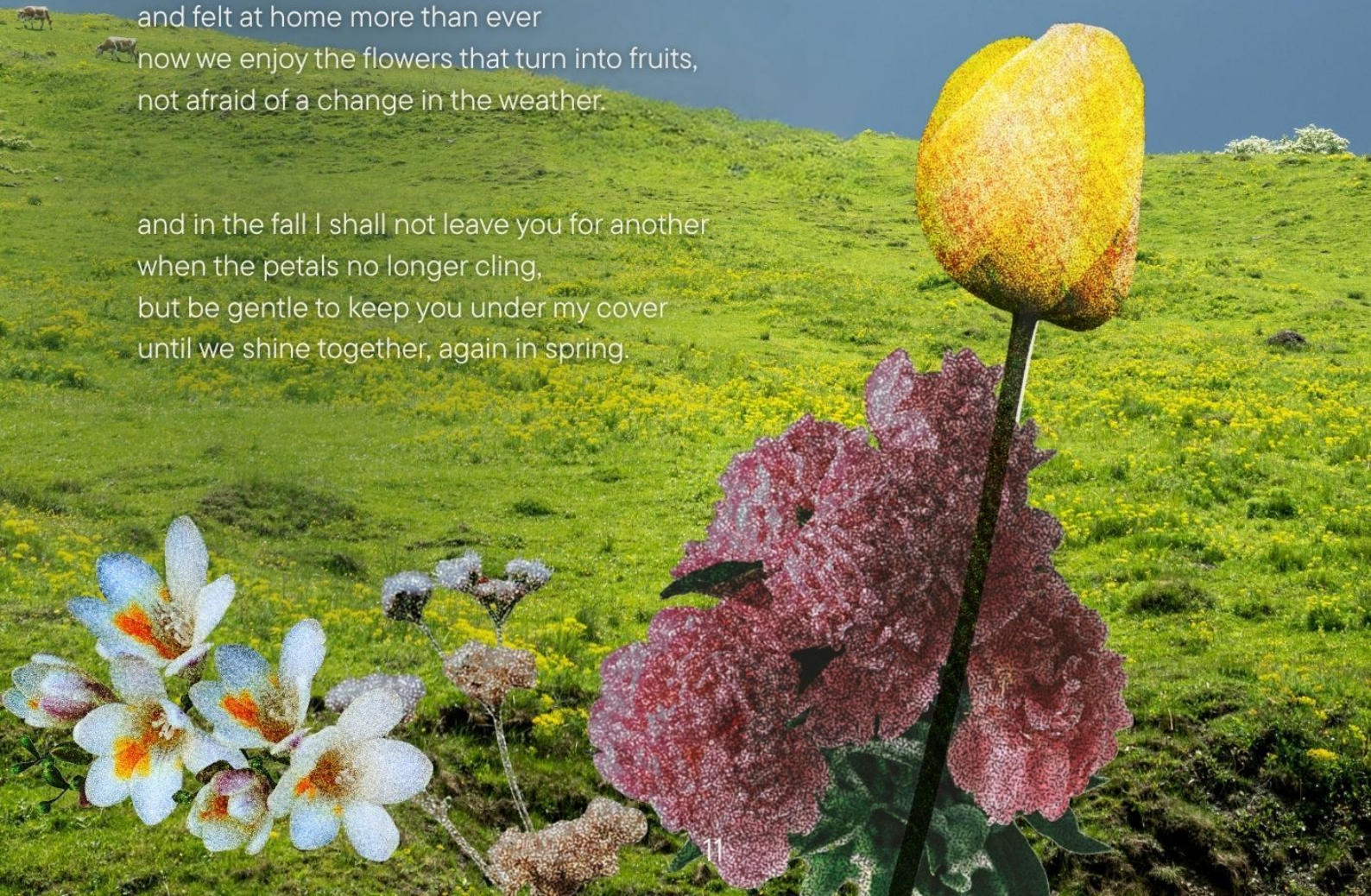
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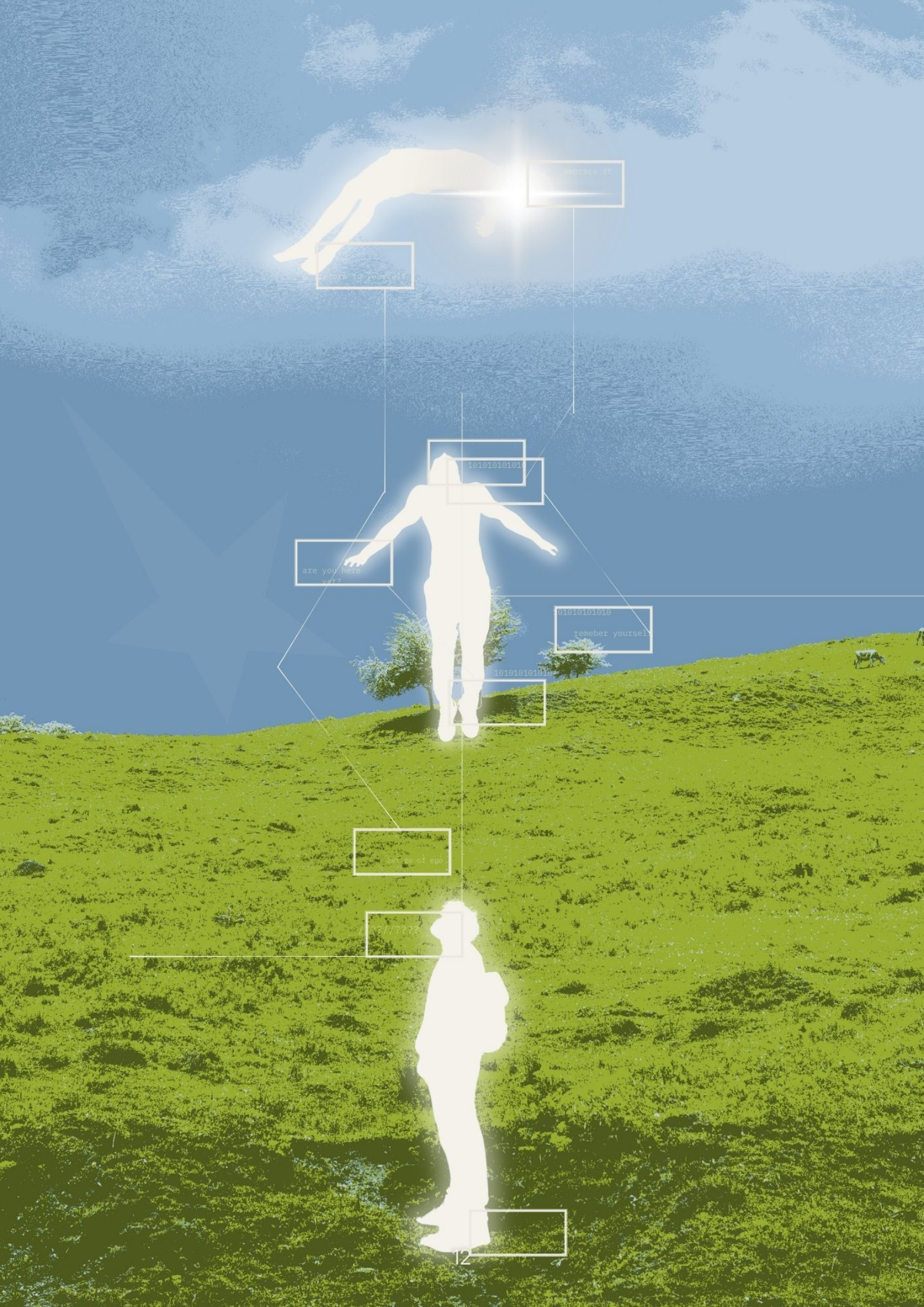
I fell in love first with your flowers.  
it was spring and you were in bloom  
in the shy beams of sunshine showers,  
wishing I could create a habitat for you in my room.

one day you're a red rose,  
the other a pink peony.  
as I watch your floescence, i froze  
and had twice a day an epiphany...

slow enough I saw your roots  
and felt at home more than ever  
now we enjoy the flowers that turn into fruits,  
not afraid of a change in the weather.

and in the fall I shall not leave you for another  
when the petals no longer cling,  
but be gentle to keep you under my cover  
until we shine together, again in spring.





embrace it

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are you here  
101010101010

101010101010  
remember yourself

101010101010

101010101010  
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101010101010

# Left in a cold room

David Eftimie

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

Specks of dust float in the sunlight,  
like little possibilities, little worlds.  
Sometime—somewhere else—  
you would say that you love me back,  
and draw my portrait as a burning flame.

Here, all that you've left me with are  
torn pages, golden candy wrappers,  
and bleached words. Fantasies on my lips  
that taste like cotton candy.

I hold my hand up to the ribbon of light.  
The warmth of the sun feels like a promise.  
It hurts. I should hold it anyway.

The cold linen feels ancient.  
It seems that I've been sitting here  
since the blue hour, since the other dawn,  
since my other Echo walked this near-perfect earth,  
white knuckles as I grip my blanket.



Invisible snow has buried all my dreams.  
When is spring coming? When is summer coming?  
Thawing my frostbitten hopes;  
gentle flowers growing on my body.  
I put my hand under the pillow.

Looking out the window, there's nothing  
but weak clouds, white light.  
I keep waiting for heaven to bend and break,  
to crawl into its slits, and sit awhile.  
Or else I'm waiting for a meadow full of shadows,  
or maybe for just a dark-enough corner,  
where you'd finally hold my hand and smile.  
I keep waiting, waiting, waiting.

I pull the bedsheets over my head.



# PURPOSE

What does a candle feel?  
A question much too difficult to break,  
As tough to break as steel.  
When it burns, does it ache?  
And does it despise the flame?  
Vanilla-scented, wooden-wick,  
Not lighting it would be a shame.  
Is melting a fate it would pick?  
Does it have any other purpose than to burn?  
Does man have any other purpose than to love?  
Questions like these make me toss and turn  
In my bed of roses, in Eden's grove.  
And once its task is complete, what then?  
When the sweet scents are in the air,  
Should hatred put an end to all men?  
Should I keep burning in despair?  
If only this smooth candle could speak,  
I'd have her hold me in her arms to sleep.  
But would it have the answers I seek?  
Would she wipe my tears as I weep?  
And if it asked me to snuff it out,  
Would I orphan my eyes of the light?  
Such questions, they cripple me with doubt.  
It's too dark and the air too stale tonight.

**Denis Barisevski**

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



# Librarian


**Denis Barisevski**

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

Confined among the dusty papers and leathers  
That disdainfully say I've been left by no mistake  
To know that someone somewhere remains awake.  
Steadfast, my thoughts have become morning,  
Thoughts of a cartographer mapping my yearning.  
Surely it's better this way, alone and unforgiven;  
Where's that thing that's kept me driven?  
Where's the siren that once lured me with her call?  
There must be a reason why I tend to this collection,  
But these poems are such a terrible presence...  
Sonnets and curses and ballads with no essence,  
All written when wooed by a nightly sensation.  
I keep them all inside and outside of my blurry sight.  
Who is it that graced me to store these blasted tomes?  
Who condemned me to forever dust these lovely bones?  
It is in these rooms where I clearly see my plight;  
The plains in the maps here described  
Have nevermore been so imbibed

By the adoration of adoration,  
And the damnation of damnation.  
I wish I could walk the path, smell the scent of air,  
Feel starry eyes all looking everywhere  
And compare this love to that love,  
As if looking to a memory above.  
I wonder if a single soul resides in these plains,  
And whether or not sorrow is their sown grains.  
What can I do? What can I say? How can I pay?  
Who have I wronged? Who have I cursed?  
To read the myth of love onto the walls  
And yet to never hear her calls.  
Surrounded by nothing but wisdom  
And yet the only things I produce are questions...  
What can I do? What can I say?  
Choose your love and forget the next day.  
All I've ever done is to forget; but a fable  
Should end with love carved into maple.  
I tire of being prisoner to these papers.  
Confined no more, I will see the world for myself  
And swim and breathe and walk the acres.  
Before I go, I'll take a ballad off the shelf  
To sing to the first fairy I should come across  
So we may rest with our napes on the moss.


# LETTER TO LOVE



Love and life are left bereft  
Of liked longing and forgiving,  
All that's left is a mean meaning  
Which means for you to feel the unfelt  
Scaly pelt of Cupid's crafted wings  
Used to gather twigs and meagre things  
To forge purple tipped spears  
Aimed at the echoes of my chest  
That force me to care for her every caress.  
Ripping off my skin and looking at my fears,  
Eyes arise around my vain veins,  
They gaze in so many ways at the maze  
Of chains and pains coiled coldly upon  
Unclean hands that speak of twisting  
This twisted tapestry of unreal reals.  
Hands stretched out as far as they go  
Reaching for a real unreal feeling  
And cryptic rhymes rhymed some time ago  
In a carnal reincarnated carnival  
Where I always, always take center stage.

**Denis Barisevski**

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



I answer the curtain call frightfully,  
Though I may not like it, even with no voice,  
I know that somewhere she hears my noise.

I swear, dear me, I hate the noise and  
Love no voice, living and leaving  
Senseless words and looks and touches  
Behind me, so that the senseless may chase  
Behind you too, for thy reckoning is due,  
You selfish monstrous monster.

You, who fosters joy and peace,  
Why do you keep away in the unreal real  
Forcing me to stay here in the real unreal?  
I'm no Atlas, and you're no Dionysus,  
You're an unfair god that dictates  
What I feel and what I never feel.  
You're my mirror on the wall, forever  
An error in my mind that just won't die,  
Dooming me to look Heaven in the eye  
And dooming Heaven to look into Hell.  
Both doomed to share the same heart.

But what's a heart anyways?  
Is it tears and steel and paper?  
Or smiles and hair and cherry scents?  
Nonetheless, I am heartless more or less;  
Regardless, you are heartless more than less.

It's getting late, my dearest dear,  
Let us part ways, cast me into the moon,  
And I'll exile you into the sun.  
Go, repeat your repeated repetitions  
As I compose decomposing compositions.

I swear, this trek is taking too long.  
Is this sulphur-scented beach endless?  
I feel the crystal river stringing me along,  
But I still must search for what I do not possess.  
Even memory failed me too long ago...  
(The beast I saw, was it swan or swine?)  
No matter, for I still can't help but go  
Along with the dust; is it coarse or fine?

And, concisely, a journey  
must have an end,  
But what's my  
destination? I must have  
forgot.  
Was it a grand wedding  
feast I won't attend  
Or my aorta, where I  
should find a knot?  
Then, after all, I suppose  
this is no adventure,

No quest, just an aimless kicking  
of the sand  
Which I foolishly wish wouldn't  
last forever.  
These tastes of sorrow have  
become so bland...  
My green skies and lilac sands are  
so quiet,  
Now it is only my heart that stirs  
within  
Only butterflies and a void that  
keep me company.

**Denis Barisevski**

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

# Along the Styx



To whom am I enemy? To whom am I kin?  
Who holds my hand and who runs from me?  
Riot within, riot without, riot in all,  
Silence enamored, entangled and unraveled.  
Hear me, once I stumble and fall  
Let my grave be this sand and gravel,  
My grave mistakes be ash and snow.  
And the brave kind fool that once did adore,  
Let him crave, and let me woe  
For now I roam the nothing forevermore.

i, always right behind you  
i, dragging a dead weight, right behind you  
i, trying to catch a glimpse of us from behind you

and i could never look into your eyes  
they shine too bright  
and i'd never dare to ask  
but there are countless sketches of us  
of you looking behind and finally catching my eyes  
of you seeing me for who i am  
of me being to you  
what you are to me

# etch a sketch



and the sketches –  
they live in my mind  
there they also die  
forever burned into  
my brain  
my eyes  
my fingertips

our future is much sweeter there  
where we don't need a map  
since we've memorised etchings of each other's souls  
where there's an 'us'  
and where you always happen to be warm  
and kind  
and mine

i'm stuck there  
but you are not  
so you can go ahead  
and though i've yet to find a map  
to guide me to your sparkling eyes  
i'll be right behind you  
endlessly sketching you in my mind  
endlessly listening to the echo of each step  
as you climb away from me  
endlessly hoping  
that you'll turn around

trust me  
i'm always right behind

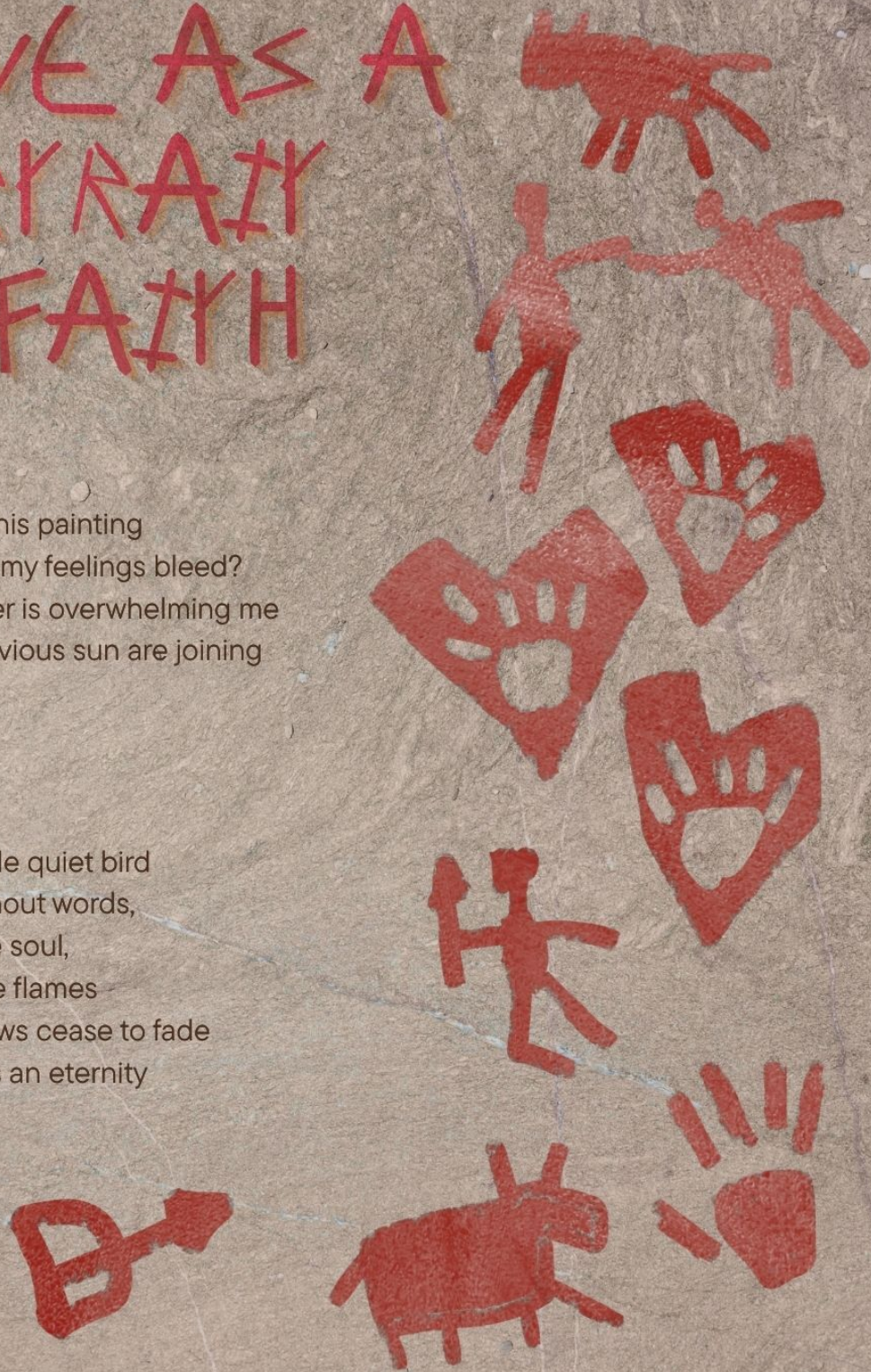
**Ecaterina Dima**

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

# LOVE AS A PORTRAIT OF FAITH

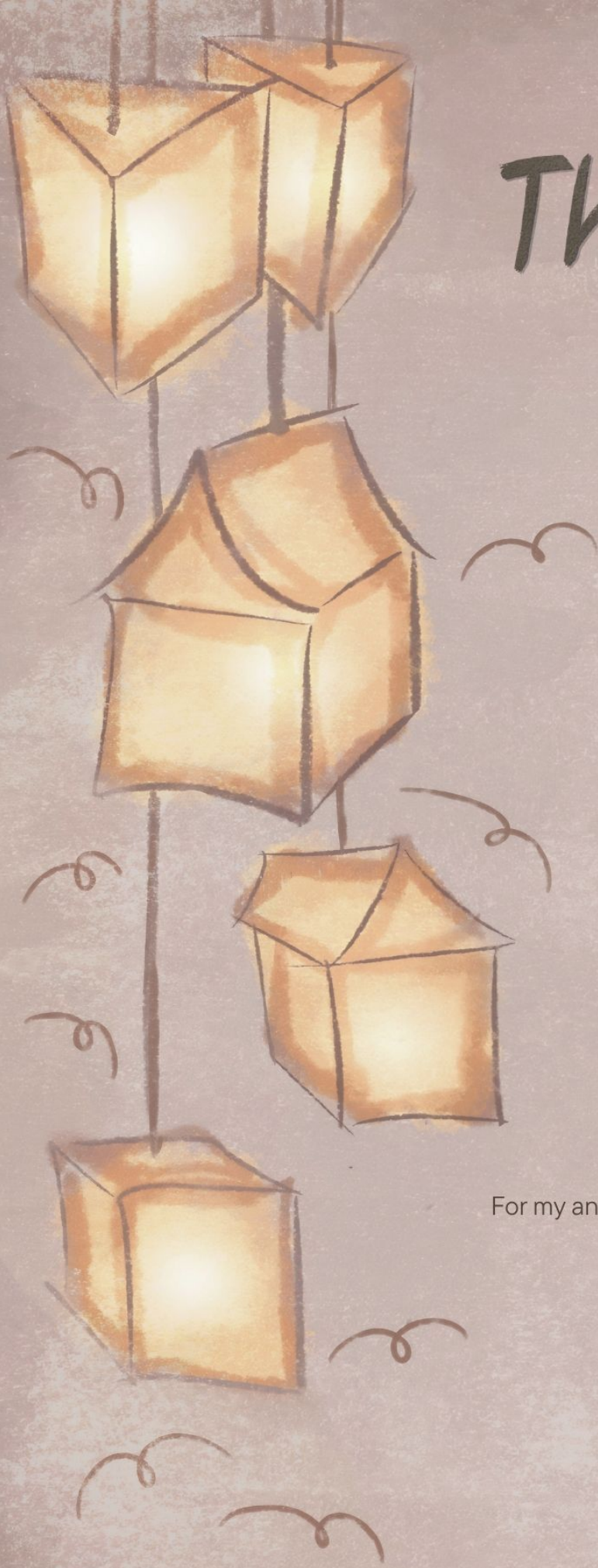
Dare I splash this painting  
With the color my feelings bleed?  
A ritual of anger is overwhelming me  
Rays of an oblivious sun are joining  
This anarchy.

Love is the little quiet bird  
That sings without words,  
It scorches the soul,  
Twists it in blue flames  
Until its shadows cease to fade  
And all is left is an eternity  
Of faith.



**Ioana Bădescu**

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



# The Eagle's Lullaby

The quiet humming of autumn leaves  
Still remembers your name  
For my love for you lives only  
In spring's forgotten rays.

A path of hope is yet to be found  
Deep in my unredeemed mind  
Were you only a fantasy?  
A sweet lullaby which screams tragedy?

The wind is in a hurry to wipe my tears,  
Eagles of the night are hiding me from sight;  
You have betrayed the loyalty of love,  
I shall snitch to the Above.

But, darling, you are divinity.  
I must not reveal myself to you.  
For my angels and sins will be seen by your graceful eye  
And in the midst of all the chaos  
You'll see, they were never mine.

How come terror has the taste of innocence?  
Where raindrops are the same as snowflakes,  
I forget I'm only a traveler  
In the vast land of your soul.

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# all-consuming

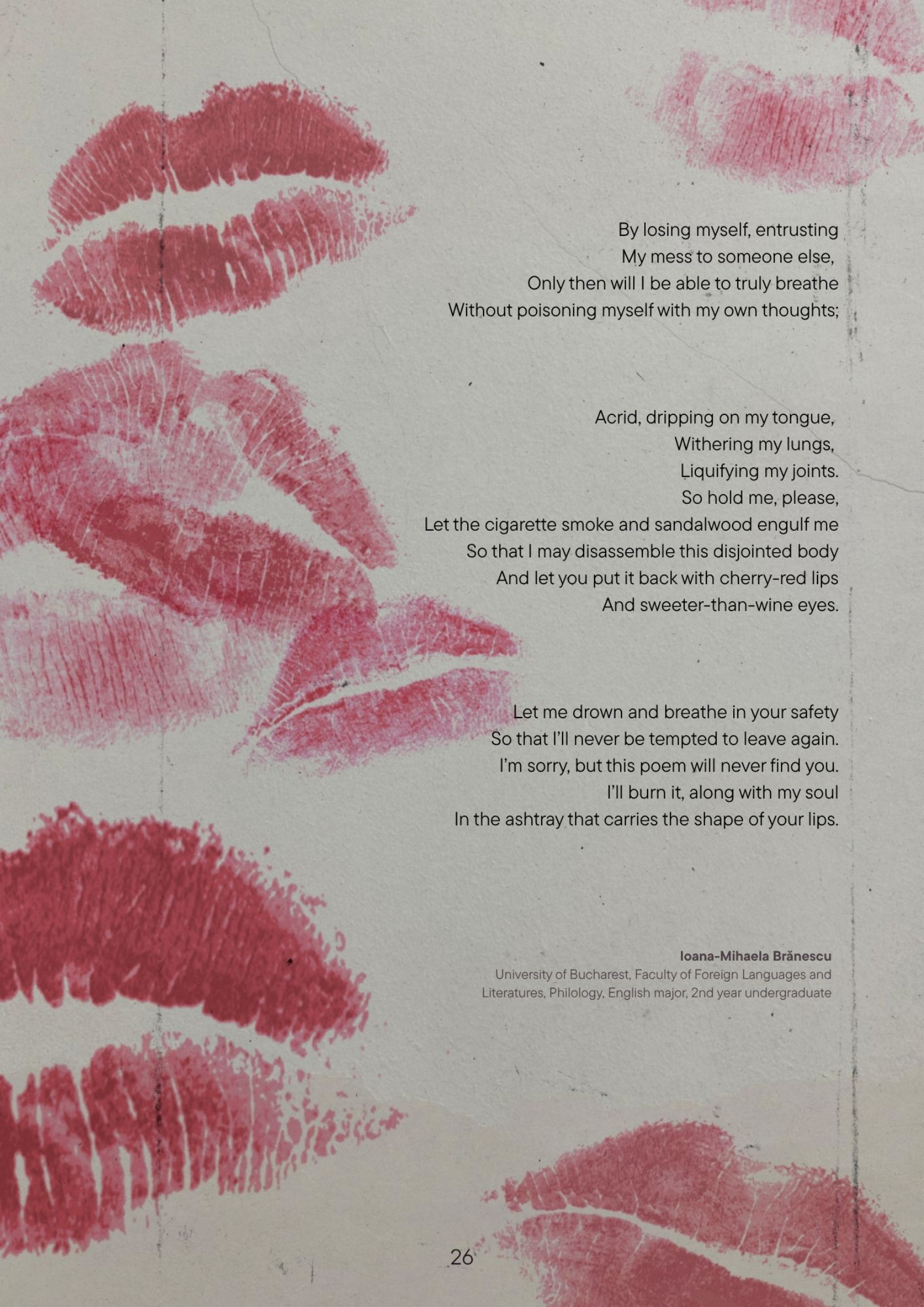


I want an all-consuming love;  
Slow drags of hand-rolled cigarettes,  
Smoke staining my hair for days;  
I want to feel you with me  
Even when you're too busy to think of me.

I want to smell your perfume  
On every piece of clothing I own  
So you can be with me even  
When I don't want you there.

I want your lipstick to stain  
My hands, my neck, my eyes  
So that all I can see will be  
The pieces of you scattered through my life.

I need to lose myself in the  
Smoke of your breath,  
To drown in your favorite liquor,  
To choke on the color of your worn-out lipstick  
So that my heart will ease behind my ribs.



By losing myself, entrusting  
My mess to someone else,  
Only then will I be able to truly breathe  
Without poisoning myself with my own thoughts;

Acrid, dripping on my tongue,  
Withering my lungs,  
Liquifying my joints.  
So hold me, please,  
Let the cigarette smoke and sandalwood engulf me  
So that I may disassemble this disjointed body  
And let you put it back with cherry-red lips  
And sweeter-than-wine eyes.

Let me drown and breathe in your safety  
So that I'll never be tempted to leave again.  
I'm sorry, but this poem will never find you.  
I'll burn it, along with my soul  
In the ashtray that carries the shape of your lips.

**Ioana-Mihaela Brănescu**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and  
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THE

NAME

OF

THE

**Ioana-Mihaela Brănescu**

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

You pin my hands,  
Your coldness seeps into my bones,  
But your eyes are warm.  
I never thought that stars could look  
So beautiful in someone's eyes.  
Your fallow violin sits silently  
In the corner of the room;  
Its song echoes in my mind.  
The russet notes mix with my blood;  
They're part of me now,  
Just like you have always been.

I've met you before  
In indigo sunlight and silver rays,  
In pale seas and, time after time,  
Your eyes are all I know.  
Those stars stare back at me,  
Plucked from the velvet sky to be mine.

Heliotrope sunsets with you are timeless.  
The dust settles over dragon's blood carpets,  
Centuries pass, lives are lived, and in each one  
I find you. And you find me.  
Somehow, we relive the same love story.  
And in each one, our love settles between my lungs  
Filling every crevice of my being.

It never leaves.  
You never take it with you.  
I once asked you why:  
You said it was mine to keep, to hold;  
A keepsake of you through lifetimes,  
So that we can find each other in every last  
Life we live.

As you held my hands in your icy ones,  
Stars staring back at me as though I were the sky  
They belonged to  
I realized  
This is how Fate fell in love with Time.

# Fallen citadel

Pry my fingers apart, tear them from my bleeding  
heart,  
Why they grasp at the last vestiges of a forgotten  
blooming field;  
Dreams, love, hope.

Scream in my ear everything you hate about me,  
Until my eardrums dissolve into a sea of unheard  
waves;  
But whisper to my soul everything tender there is to  
love,  
Until my lips are forever shaped around your name.

Save me, and let my lungs bloom into the wilted  
flowers  
That you picked from my soles;  
Plant the thorns of your roses into my palms  
And let my blood turn purple from your sweetness.

Always commanding and ever frozen,  
I stare at your shadow projected on my irises  
And every sky I glance upon is suddenly colored by  
your smile.





I'll never meet you, but you're always one step beside me,  
Out of reach, but so close to touch.  
Please, bring your breath closer to my mouth and  
resuscitate  
All that's died on my tongue;  
Words, tears, profanities.

"There will be nothing left of you by the time I'm done,"  
I scream.

You smile, a sunset-scented breeze. "Then we'll be one."

You have no idea what you're indulging, but I'm ignorant.  
I hurt and hurt, in turn.  
You comply.  
I destroy.

There is nothing to rebuild.

**Ioana-Mihaela Brănescu**

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

# Undesirable

I need a tender love, one that does not speak,  
But moves  
In uncharted depths, toward my soul.  
A love that does not appeal to my heart,  
But to the very fiber of my being;  
Appeals to everything I am, was, and ever will be.

I need a love that murmurs, that searches peace,  
Not grandeur;  
Our quietude to fit together like the chambers of a  
heart.

I am anything, yet always fall short of "everything,"  
A mould with no principle behind.  
Everyone likes me, but no one loves me.

Am I too little?



Do I want too much?

Have I searched enough? Or not nearly enough?

I want love, I need the tenderness of a lover,  
But I'm afraid I don't deserve it.  
I never will.





DO I WANT TOO MUCH?

**Ioana-Mihaela Brănescu**

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

# THAW

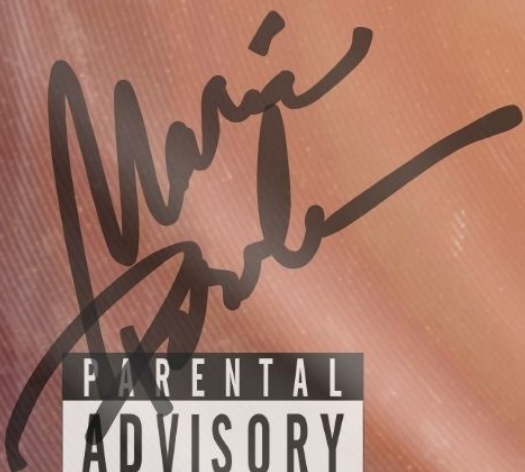
It's the solstice,  
And I find solace,  
In the silence in which,  
Thoughts reverberate.

I won't succumb to this numb ache,  
Make no mistake,  
With each step I take,  
It's a rhapsodic languor,  
A blinking splendor.

And painfully slow I'll ascend,  
This is my manifest,  
I refuse to surrender,  
I'll lift the curse myself.

I'm standing on the edge,  
And hereby I solemnly pledge,  
That I'll fall  
And together we will fly.

Sometimes I still hide under my covers,  
I've yet to find my trust,  
Abandoned it like an old trinket,  
But when I do,  
I'll keep trying to clean all the dust,  
I'll polish it like the finest jewel.



**PARENTAL  
ADVISORY  
EXPLICIT CONTENT**

I love you so,  
I'll put my weight on the lever,  
Let's find a way to bounce together,  
A state of flow,  
This time  
I'll try not to let go.



It's been so long,  
Yet it's still snowing in my mind,  
Everything I tried to leave behind,  
Is frozen in crystal dreams,  
An ongoing song,  
And I forgot the lyrics...

Suddenly I felt my eyelids flutter,  
Vision hazy from sleep,  
I take my heart out of the fridge  
Frostbitten  
I microwave it and feel my breath hitch-  
A new chapter,  
Is being written.

**Maria Preda**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social  
Work, Sociology, 2nd year undergraduate

# Poor little knight

there, there...



MOM!



I

I

A

A

A

A

A

A

A

A

**Mariana Cristina Ranete**  
University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and  
Education Science, Special Psychopedagogy, 3rd year

Go ahead and tell your momma  
I get high on marijuana –  
All the things you left unsaid  
Are gonna kill me in the end.

Is it the end? Is it the end?  
An empty bottle of Daniels?  
I lost a friend, my lovely saint –  
My blood is boiling in my veins.

The cigar isn't gonna help  
Nor the drugs wreaking havoc  
Yet I'm still here on the floor  
Wishing you could've said some more.


It's not a secret I was a fool,  
A sucker for a love untrue,  
But go ahead and tell your lies  
About the way I broke your heart.

Don't spare a glance  
In my defense!  
The guiltiness is a sharp sword,  
One a fearsome knight like you  
Will never have a chance to wear.

So go ahead and tell your momma  
That her son is all drama,  
Full of lies and broken wishes  
Playing damsel in distress.



# order of things




The muse takes it all  
And the poet has to fall.  
This is the only order of things  
When it comes to art.

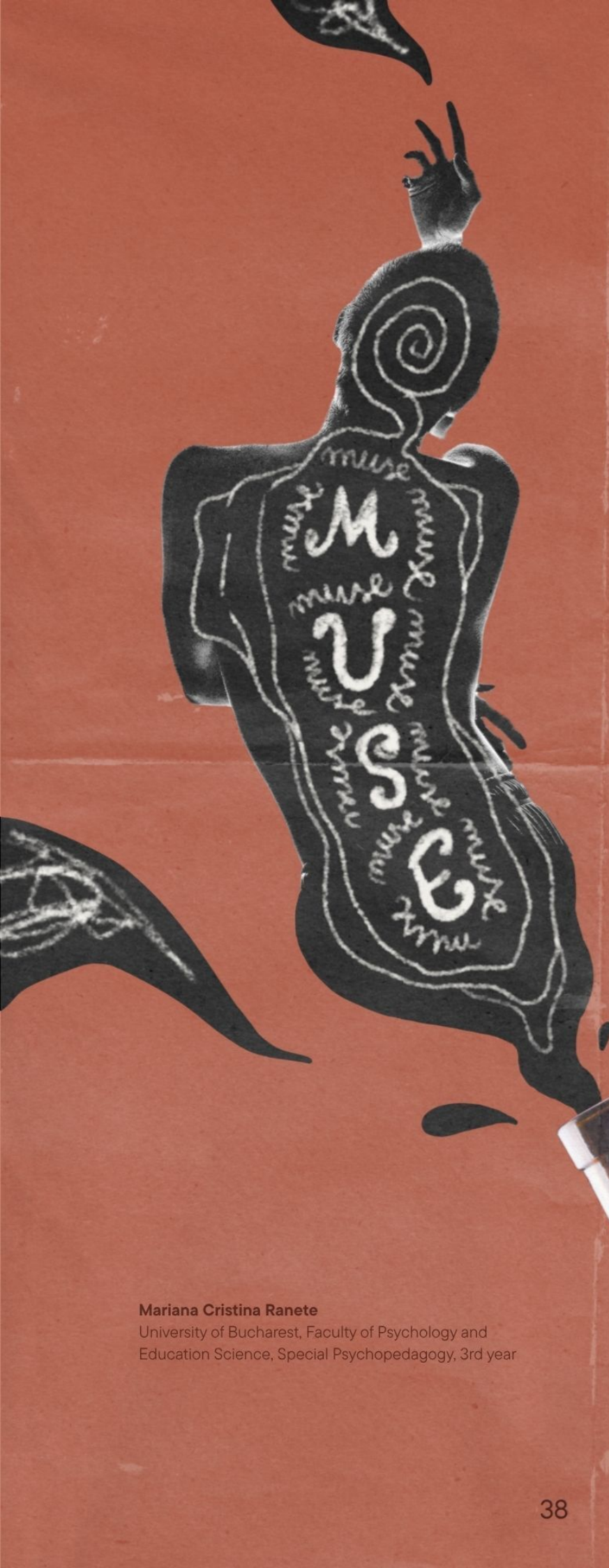
The tale is old, told a thousand times  
Yet it's still alive in every poem, in every word  
A writer gets to bring to life.

Crumpled paper, faded ink  
And empty bottles on the floor,  
The man who always loved  
Longs for the one who never did.

Sunny days, wicked grins,  
And pride worn upon his sleeves,  
The one who got to get away so easy  
Is walking now towards his future.

The past is past, that's what they say  
But they are liars in disguise  
Because the papers will last longer,  
A thousand lives  
And hundreds more.





Damsels, knights, forbidden lovers,  
Even jesters and some queens,  
They all took hold of this  
And made it their legacy.

Now I sit and stare ahead  
At the letters in my hands.  
I searched for love and just went blind,  
Broke my heart for one manchild.

He took it all –  
My love, my pride, my gentle smile,  
And left me here, just to fall.

My heart aches for the tale,  
For the pain within their chests –  
No one deserves this damn old curse  
Of feeling left without your soul.

**Mariana Cristina Ranete**  
University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and  
Education Science, Special Psychopedagogy, 3rd year

EXCLUSIVE  
INTERVIEW

# “WHY IS

# STILL

My love, my dear

I see you standing there

A little lost, in a sparkling dress,

A perfect little face

With rosy cheeks and bright red lips.

You smile and laugh,

And then you cry,

You sing and dance

But you don't fall

And yet you never dare to face

The dazzling light that hits your eyes.

You're just too stubborn, too afraid

To put an end to your career

And you're still moving, still pretending

That the flowers will appear.

I stay still and long for you –

For the girl I used to love –

Behind this curtain in the back

Like a memory you now

Don't wanna know it's still alive.

I watch you with a broken heart

For the way you hold on tight

On the show you wished for

But I ache to the core

Because, my love, my Monroe,

You're long past your final act.

*No audience? WHY? HOW?*



# SHE ACTING?"



## GET THE LOOK!



**Mariana Cristina Ranete**  
University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and  
Education Science, Special Psychopedagogy, 3rd year

And you're spinning 'round and 'round  
While you happily say your lines  
And when the last one hits its rhythm  
The theater falls into the dark.

No applause, no falling curtains,  
No flowers to put behind your ear  
And you still bow to the empty chairs.

I always wait to see you fall,  
Giving in to your lovely role.  
Yet you still refuse that peace  
And force a smile and start the show,  
Like it's your personal haunting void.

I miss the wild girl with green eyes  
And the way she always wore  
Her heart on her sleeve.  
Now I just can't stop wondering  
Why my love, my lovely girl  
Is still acting  
When no one's here to see her fall?

-  
Except myself.  
I will always be here  
To catch her when  
She'll fall apart.



# THE GIRL WITH A LOST CAUSE

My love, my ghost,  
My girl with a lost cause  
Do you know how beautiful  
Are your sad eyes when you  
Curse the moon?  
Do you know that, if I had a heart,  
I'd rip it out  
Just to show you the way  
It beats just for you?  
How could you not be aware  
Of the way the flowers are  
withering  
Every time you walk past  
them  
In the graveyard of all the  
hopes that I lost?  
And at midnight, when  
you go right there  
How could you not see  
the way  
The clouds dissipate  
Just to let the moon  
Cast its silver light right on  
your porcelain face?  
And the wind? Oh, my girl,  
I love the song it sings for you,  
The way it chants your sacred name  
Like the most beautiful prayer  
Even the graves tilt when you pass by them  
And the fog clears your path  
As if it were its job to guide you home –  
To my grave, next to the willow tree.




Mariana Cristina Ranete

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and  
Education Science, Special Psychopedagogy, 3rd year

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3:33



How could you hurt me like that,  
Not knowing the way Death yearns for you  
And the things I'd do just to love me, too?  
It's something in the way you walk away  
That's enough to make the dead switch  
graves,  
Seeking Life and Death at the  
same time  
Even if the pulse is long  
gone.  
You're the most  
beautiful nightmare  
I've ever had in this  
after life  
And I long for the  
way you haunt me –  
Even though it  
should be the other  
way around –  
But it doesn't matter  
Because without you  
I wouldn't have flowers  
growing  
Among the bones of my  
lungs.  
I wouldn't have a dream,  
A love so dark and beautiful  
That the crows tell stories of it during  
the day  
Trying to keep alive the memory of a  
long-forgotten poet  
And the legends he created  
Writing about his ghost, the girl with a lost cause  
With empty eyes and a broken soul.

# Should I let you in?

quietly  
patiently  
I've been waiting for your eyes to linger with care

soft  
cautious  
for your soothing voice to come and conquer the air

my peripheral is sore from anticipating your stare  
the seat's fabric is cutting deep into my bare skin  
truth is threatening to tear apart my ribs

I'd melt if you smiled at me, and I think you are aware  
we lock eyes, you peer with no certain expression  
I can't fathom the genius of your imagination

collarbones caressed by the rays of sun escaping from the blinds  
your hair down, kissing where your shoulders carefully lay a necklace  
i swear i've seen this picture before

in Babylon and in the Louvre  
near the gates to my peace of mind  
you're waiting for me to dare to invite you in

while I'm cautiously daydreaming  
about an oxygen-proof moment  
honoring the spark

But stopping short of lighting the match



**Mihaela Costache**

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



+

AT HOME

+



+

I was a squatter  
hidden in the attic of your heart  
never coming close to touching  
the smoothness of your love.

The gallery of lovers decorating your walls  
had never framed my portrait  
nor did the tomes in your library  
ever know my name.

I took shelter  
between old forgotten memories  
and dusty out-of-season clothes  
to fall asleep by the shadow of your scent.

Wooden beams  
were pulsing with life  
and the rickety floorboards  
took turns expanding and contracting.

I was the only one dancing to the rhythm of your heart  
yet downstairs was forever too raucous for you to hear my  
footing.

+

+

+

+

**Oana Alexandra Băcescu**  
University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and  
Literatures, Japanese major, 3rd year



# THE CUP OF WINE, FROM WHICH WE DRINK

is but an ashtray for our thoughts.



**Raluca Bledea**  
University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Philology, English major, 3rd year undergraduate

If I were a shooting star,  
Would you make a wish,  
or would you wonder why I am collapsing?  
And when I collapse,  
upon impact,  
Would you wish me a merciful death?

## -IF I WERE A shooting star...?



# An Eye for AN EYE

An online friendship test  
might ask you what my eye color is

but the enmity test that I have prepared for you  
asks you what you would pierce my eyes with  
just to spite me –  
and your answer is “light”

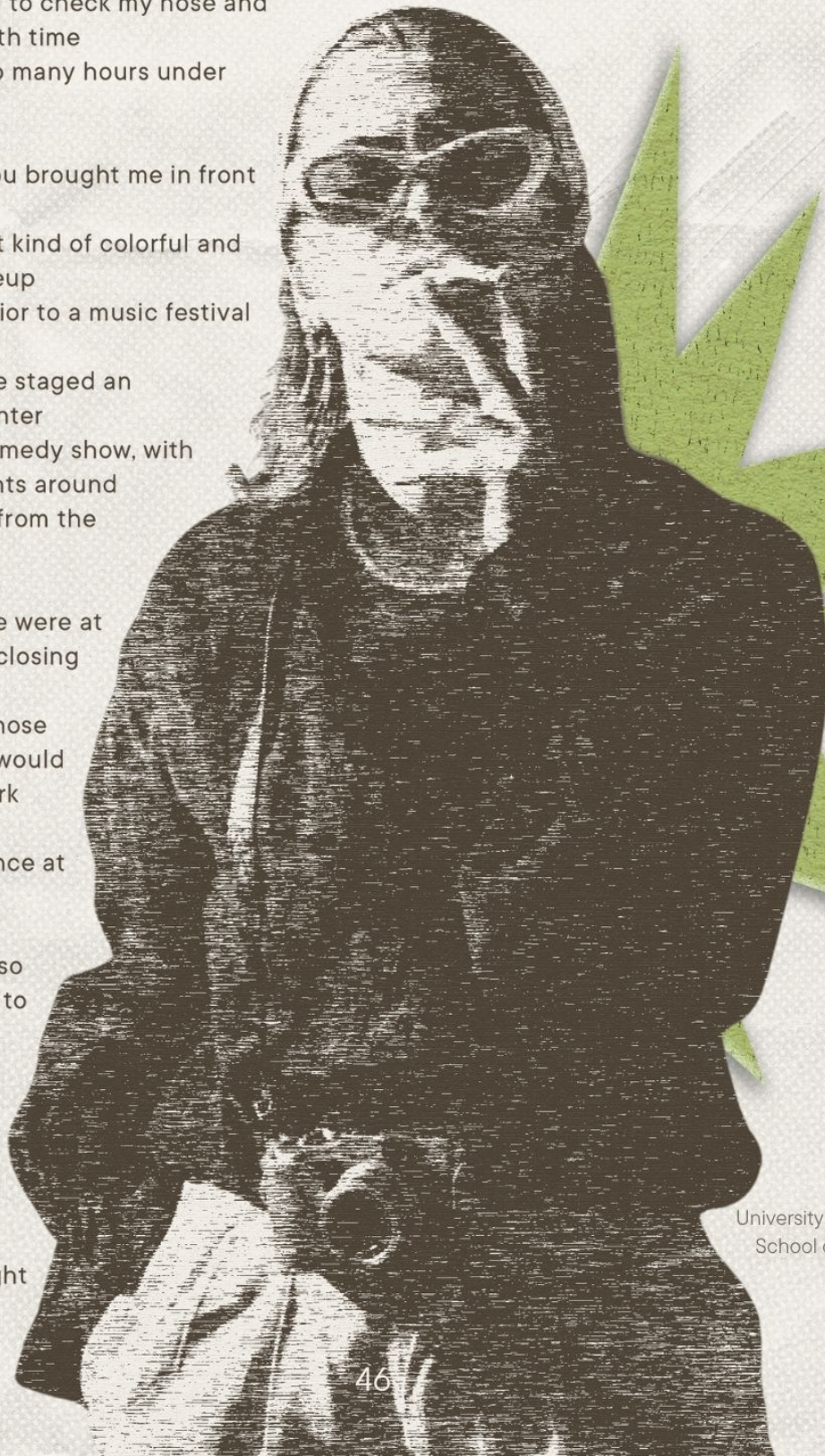
just like when you studied my face with your phone's flashlight  
after I asked you to check my nose and  
cheeks for the nth time  
having spent too many hours under  
the sun

just like when you brought me in front  
of an LED mirror  
to show me what kind of colorful and  
playful eye makeup  
I could go for, prior to a music festival

just like when we staged an  
over-the-top banter  
in a stand-up comedy show, with  
multiple spotlights around  
for the children from the  
non-profit

just like when we were at  
the library until closing  
time  
next to lamps whose  
flickering lights would  
interrupt our work  
flow  
and have us glance at  
one another.

I'm your enemy, so  
keep me closest to  
you;  
I stare at you as  
the enemy  
whose pupils  
manage to dilate  
even when the  
most blinding light  
hits our faces.



**Teodora Leon**

University of Bucharest, Doctoral  
School of Literary and Cultural  
Studies, 2nd year

# Counter cliché

We're not the only people here on Earth – quite a stark reminder for both of us when the street we're walking on is no longer deserted all of a sudden.

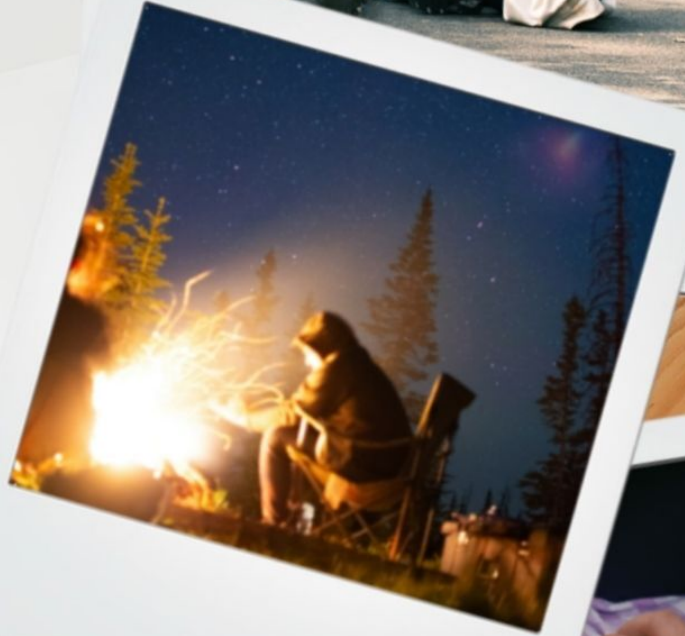
haven't you ever had the impulse to greet a stranger or at least nod to them so as to reassure them that you know they're leading their life in the best way they can? how come we're all alive at the same time and nonchalantly pass by one another?


“does that make any sense?”  
“no, yeah, it does,” you reply  
“after all, there was a time when we ourselves were strangers and perhaps we would have been as nonchalant towards each other on a random street.”

forgive us, we were this close to holding a predictable conversation – but I suppose all of our actions stem from the same banal desire to be simply acknowledged by someone else; afterwards, it is our job to customize clichés.



Laps





so this is why you go on to say:  
"in order for me to have had the courage  
to approach you on the street  
I would have had to picture you standing at a  
counter  
and believe that a mere transaction would follow.  
but given how long I would have lingered in front  
of you  
I'd have ended up with a whole queue behind  
me -  
one that would have included all those strangers  
on Earth  
even those returning from space missions  
those who have died  
those who haven't been born yet -  
because I was never set on completing any  
transaction  
at that counter of yours."

**Teodora Leon**  
University of Bucharest, Doctoral School of  
Literary and Cultural Studies, 2nd year



# It's a Date!

In the future  
we'll still have people  
who will believe they either have wasted their  
lives  
haven't lived passionately enough  
or simply can't go on.

but all these individuals will have the chance  
to alleviate their pain once and for all  
and go out in style;  
they will go through the same experiences  
as their favorite characters from action movies  
in 4DX cinema halls  
used for legal and revolutionary procedures of  
euthanasia.

and yet  
time and again  
characters from the audience will retreat to  
nearby stairs  
engrossed in conversation with other cast  
members  
in their own spin-offs –  
and they will no longer feel like cowards  
on the sidelines of the battlefield with motion  
seats.



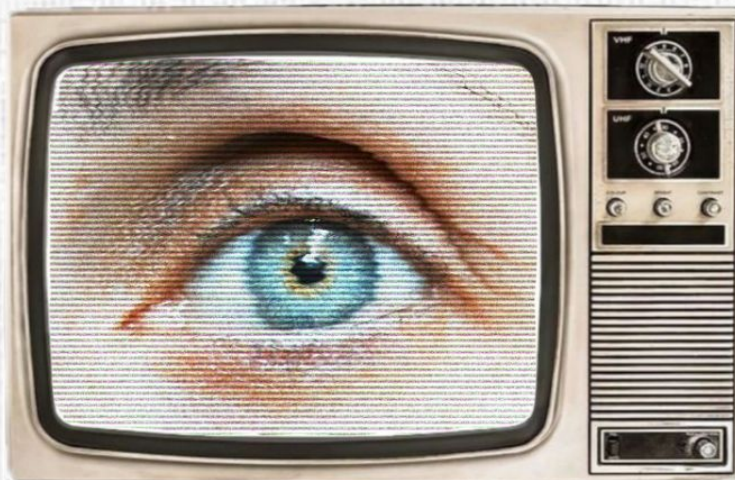
**Teodora Leon**

University of Bucharest, Doctoral School of Literary and  
Cultural Studies, 2nd year

# IN DIFFERENT ROOMS



at times I forget to remember  
but then I do again  
past scratches are shallower by the minute  
and softest brush cleans each crevice you  
forget the feel  
enough sweat will make sweaters your own  
and benches were never just for the one two  
people  
put up furniture over washed out bedroom  
stains  
hold a pillow that you still trust



I am I am I am I am I will be  
you will be too  
in different rooms  
flown out of the sun, grown out of the ground  
this sunflower's opening again  
i still don't know the names of other flowers  
this sunflower's opening again



at times I forget to remember  
but then I do, again  
this summer I've held more mouths than I  
deserved  
so I'm locking my hands up in my pockets  
again  
my waves want whitely for each last shore  
sometimes one from nine months ago  
lovers with common nouns for names reappear  
in common man language  
I am I am I am I am I will be  
You will be too  
In different rooms

it's harder when you stop running  
i thought i'd take your last name  
now you're my friend and i'm your stranger  
as it stands true love has a long-gone face

**Victor Gavrilă**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages  
and Literatures, American Studies MA, 1st year

# Woundman

I cannot be your mother anymore  
you always fall and hit the ground  
and take it on the chin an end to your begin  
the future that we planned is now passed  
and it's eating me alive  
biting at my ass  
wherever I lay, whoever I lay

I heard robbers in your house again  
I heard 'em through the wall  
there's nothing more that I can do  
there's robbers in your house again  
there is distance and then a wall  
I cannot hang your clothes anymore

you've been searching  
for fake walls to be  
climbed  
there's a cushion on  
the floor  
a stretch of your soles  
still flailing for support  
the future that we  
planned and now  
passed  
is it eating you alive  
biting at your ass  
wherever you lay,  
whoever you lay

I heard robbers in your house again  
I heard 'em through the wall  
there's nothing more that I can do  
there's robbers in your house again  
there is distance and then there's you  
I cannot wash your hair anymore  
I guess I'll play the mouse again  
and look for nothing sweet  
this is not my home anymore

**Victor Gavrilă**

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Foreign Languages and Literatures,  
Philology, American Studies MA, 1st year

# *A seaside Dream*



My ink bleeds sorrow, writing of the sea...  
My mind, still callow, a dream finds me.  
A dark, foreign wave scattered to shore  
The moon, once brave, let her clouds pour.

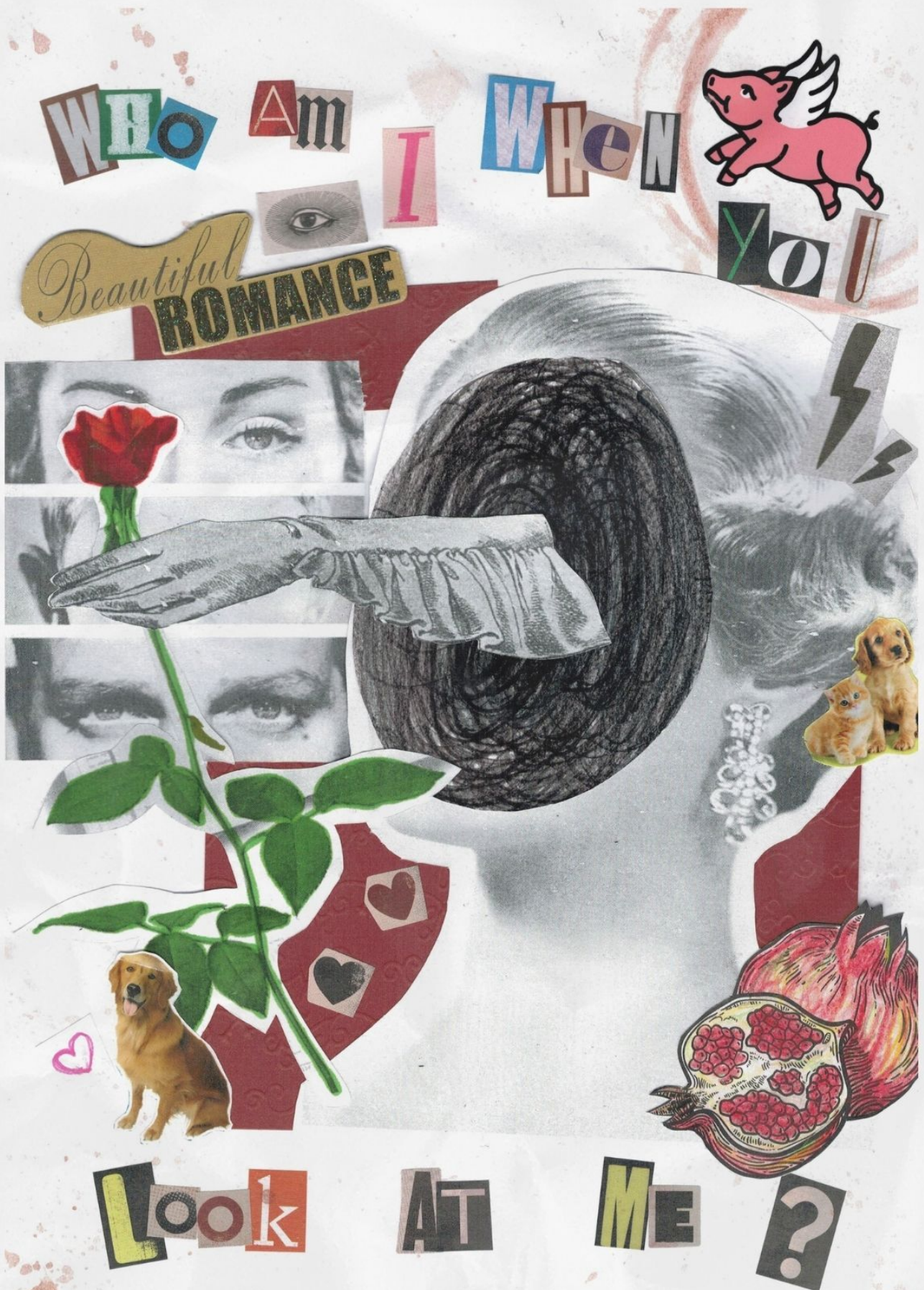
Icy tides mask my sailor from the night;  
Yet my drowsy heart still quivers at his sight,  
He guides his old boat to the distant port,  
Midnight winds breathe as memories retort.

Our love, lost to time, faintly aware,  
Of souls coated in rime, yet paired with care.  
Yet numb I stand, should love now claim,  
My heart lost at sea, calling out your name.

His eyes meet mine, his glare akin to a sire,  
O sailor, be good to me, praise my desire!

**Xena Dorobanțu**

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



Amalia-Iuliana Spinoche  
University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign Languages and  
Literatures, American Studies, 1st year undergraduate

"I Love You (pleaselookaway)"



# Prose

# PERMANENCE

In my dreams everything is idyllic. My dreams are quiet, wet and cold. There is water and there are fountains and mirrors. I have never been fond of water in any particular manner, but in these dreams, it is not the water that hurts me, chokes me or makes me drown.


I find myself walking along an unmarked path, yet one that I have strolled down so many times that I remember exactly where to step without getting cut. The surface is smooth and icy to the touch while the water just barely reaches my ankles. Something about either the ground or the water makes it look as though I am stepping through silver, but that is merely an illusion. At first, it is not difficult to push the water with my feet, but the more I walk, the colder it becomes and the more it hurts.

Beside the path, the water seems warm and inviting. It truly is a pity that the surface below is all shards of glass and broken mirrors. I would not wish to stain my dreams red.

As I stroll, I am surrounded by the murmur of fountains and waterfalls, though I can never see them. The sound is soothing, as if to prepare me for what I might find at the end of the path.

The walls are also water or silver or mirrors, I can never tell. They stir and whisper as I advance into this land of illusions and impermanence. Sometimes I believe I glimpse my reflection in them, but I am a bit silly to think that, for one can never see one's reflection in their dreams. So, it is not me. It is you in different shapes, it is how I remember you every time we depart from each other. And every time I realize who is looking back at me, I feel empty inside. I wonder how you feel when you see me or if you truly see me at all, but before I can receive an answer, the walls stir and the image fades and I forget. I forget it all. And you appear in another form, in another wall and I feel empty; I wonder and then I forget again. I keep forgetting. But, at least there are slivers of time when the waves reflect the light just right for me to remember. Though, I believe it is better to forget multiple times than to forget once and for all, for that means I have remembered multiple times. The idea of you forgetting me only once haunts my every step, but it is an uncertainty I bear nonetheless.

At last, the path comes to a stop. The water feels like chains of ice around my ankles, something that keeps me anchored in the pain among a series of ever-changing elements. It is almost as though that is the only thing that is eternal. Before me stands a mirror, or an unsettlingly smooth waterfall, with its origins unknown. High in the sky, if there is such a thing here. Above me and beyond my existence, at the very least. I step toward it and the figure in front of me follows my movements with precision. Then I take another step until I am right in front of it, of you. Yes, you, because one cannot see



one's reflection in their dreams, remember? You are always the reflection, a part of me that is physical and separate from me. An extension of all my wishes come true, of all my thoughts and feelings, all my soul. A side of me that is perfect and that I do not possess anymore. No, you are free and I am the one that is trapped.

I cannot resist the desire to touch perfection, to touch freedom, to touch you, so I reach out. My fingers feel a smooth surface at first, hard and cold, similar to the one I had been walking on before. But then my hand passes through that border, akin to a ghost wandering the halls of the human shell. And I touch you, but my fingers slip through you like water. You are here but not quite. I am here but not quite. I can feel you, yet I cannot. Can you feel me? I turn my hand to grasp you, to make sure that my eyes do not deceive me. No, they do not, but perhaps my sense of touch betrays me. I become desperate, I reach farther and farther over the invisible border. My arms are submerged in the mirage of the senses, my shoulders tremble from the cold and the weight of not feeling you anymore. The more I try, the quicker you evaporate and the less I can feel you. *Come back, please, come back*, I beg and I cry, but I am only heard by my echo, which mocks me for eternity and one more night.

It never gets easier.

Now, to pass the last moments of my slumber, I sit on the beach. I hold my knees close to my chest, and I ponder the night sky. There are many stars, but no moon. The sand is wet and cold, but the more I bury my feet in it, the more pleasant it becomes, paradoxically or not. The wind is unforgiving and it makes a mess of my hair as it does to the waves. It mocks them like my echo mocks me, it stirs them for its own entertainment. I feel the sea's contempt, I know how the white foam feels. It is warm, for there is comfort and familiarity in loneliness. I do not think the sea realizes it is not alone, though. That I am right there, by its side, listening to its murmurs and curses that I know are no more than cries and pleas.

We are like the sea, you and I. When I ebb, you flow and when I flow, you ebb. This time, however, you have ebbed where I cannot flow, where I cannot follow. We were never meant for permanence, I am aware of that even in my dreams. Perhaps, the only forever we will ever have is the perpetual chase and the never-ending anguish of fruitless pursuit. We now sit on opposite shores of the same sea and no cries could ever bring us to the same shore again. We are looking at the same moonless sky. Can you see me waving in the distance? Let me know. Send me a message in a bottle, for you know where to find me. I say this because even though you always tell me I know where to find you, I never do. I am bound to wait for you.

I don't reach out anymore. I wait for us. How much longer? I press my cheek to my knees and close my eyes. I don't think you will ever come.

**Alessia Cristachi**

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## What even is love anyways



The Writer stares at a blank page.

The blank page stares back.

The Writer childishly wishes that the blank page had eyes.

Perhaps even a mouth...

Then, the blank page could tell The Writer what kind of story they should write.

The Writer's hands hover over the keyboard.

They land on three (un)ordinary keys:

>:(

With eyes and a mouth, the page still refuses to speak.

Surely, it, too, finds The Writer's indecision infuriating.

After all, all that The Writer has to do is write.

They only need to punch in letters on a keyboard in a predetermined order.

An order which is meant to confer meaning.

The meaning of love.

The Writer should know what that is.

How could they not, when they were raised surrounded by love?

How could they not, when they so boldly call themselves The Writer?

How could they not, when just meeting with friends makes their days so bright?

There are many things that The Writer loves.

Many more that they do not.

It's only par for the course then, that they choose one and start to write.

...

...

*[Character A] sits on a bench in the middle of Nowhere. The bench is blue, just like the bus sign, and feels tacky under their touch. In spite of this, [Character A] still sits down.*

*Next to them, a child idly swings their feet over the edge of the seat while humming to themselves and tightly clutching a teddy bear to their chest.*

*«Is that a gift?» [Character A] asks, nodding towards the teddy. Its fur is painted in a horrendous oil spill of neon pinks, blues, greens and yellows. Its large black eyes seem to gaze far beyond the horizon.*



*The child stops swinging their legs and draws out a low hum (or at least as low as a preschooler's voice allows them to get) to show their consideration of an answer.*

*«It's special.»*

*«I see.» [Character A] nods sagely. Truth be told, they've never been good with children, but something about the situation is so bizarre their mouth just seems to want to run off without them. «The person who receives it will surely be really happy.»*

*«I am.»*

The Writer's hands hover hesitantly over the keyboard.

This is not the story they want to tell.

They pause, then, with the resolution of a man facing the gallows: they erase the text.

Once more, the page is blank.

Once more, they start to write...

...

*A charcoal rabbit sleeps atop Grandfather's fireplace.*

*Auntie Karynn loves to tell the story of how when you first saw the critter curled up in its lacquered frame you burst into tears at every family event. How Grandfather had to lock it away in a small storage room any time you and your parents came by in order to appease your cries.*

*«Mr. Rabbit is dead!» she'd say tearfully, in a high-pitched voice that feels like nails on a chalkboard to your ears. It makes you wonder if this is how she saw you back then.*

*Holding the drawing in your hands now, as an adult, you can clearly tell the rabbit is sleeping. Some part of you even wonders how you could ever think something rendered so softly and lovingly could appear to be dead. It holds a tenderness that your gruff Grandfather could never replicate, though not for a lack of trying.*

*The storage room that once homed the little rabbit is sparsely furnished with only an easel, a desk, and two chairs. Any other space is filled with sketches of rabbits: some in pencil, some in oil paints, some running, some still drunk with fatigue, some on paper, some on canvas or even magazines. No matter where they are drawn, there is no more than one rabbit per piece.*

*The odd format makes your heart ache.*

The Writer frowns as they read their words over and over again.

The metaphors are too opaque.

Or maybe too transparent.

The story is too sad.

This still isn't the story they want to tell.

They erase the text and start again.

...

...

*Narcissus walks into a gay bar.*





*The phrase alone seems like the start to a bad joke, yet ask any man in Athens and they will swear you up and down that it is the truth.*

*The story is usually something like this: On an average Saturday night, a man walks in. He is stunningly beautiful, each curl of his hair swaying with his gait as if purposefully placed by the hand of a master painter. His clothes are undeniably modern, a thin layer of iridescent fabric casting an ethereal glow over his lean yet broad-shouldered figure, but when paired with the flowing white fabric and intricate detail brought upon by the addition of a slit here and a ribbon there, he looks nothing short of a living myth: a man who stepped right out of a fresco.*

*It is only to be expected, then, that many men and women alike fall in love with him at first sight. Still, if looks are not enough to sway one's heart, not entirely, then surely they would find themselves enraptured by his smile, his charm, and not the least his wit. Even while carrying cordial conversations or recounting second hand tales, it's as if the whole world shifts on its axis to revolve around him, swirling along the liquor in his glass.*

*In the face of such a man, anyone would be inclined to endlessly fawn over his virtues rather than scrutinize his flaws, but there is one aspect everyone who has met him seems to agree upon: Narcissus, in all his good will and brilliance, simply cannot help but delight in a good hunt. In the push and pull between two individuals sat besides each other at a bar. In the chase between bodies with arms raised as if reaching out for the presence of a God suffused within the sound. In the red staining his hands, so undoubtedly alive it makes him crave his next quarry.*

The Writer clutches their head and sighs, anxiety stirring in their chest.

Almost shamefully, they have always loved the myth of Narcissus.

They have always feared it too, for reasons they couldn't place.

Not for a long long time, at least.

This is a story that The Writer wants to tell.

"You'll understand it once you've grown up."

To them, the myth rings with the same curse as this phrase.

The Writer has long turned 18.

Has long turned 21.

After so many years, The Writer naturally has an idea what "it" is supposed to be.

"It" is something that visits them every now and again, like a mischievous breeze.

"It" is something that they have never quite felt like they need.

"It" is something that is expected of them.

Many find "it"s absence a tragedy, like Narcissus' death.

The Writer finds "it" to be simply too bothersome.

After all, The Writer loves their family.



The Writer loves their friends.

The Writer loves writing.

The Writer loves Narcissus.

The Writer loves telling tales in opaque ways.

And The Writer loves telling tales that are far too transparent.

The Writer lives, laughs, loves in strange ways.

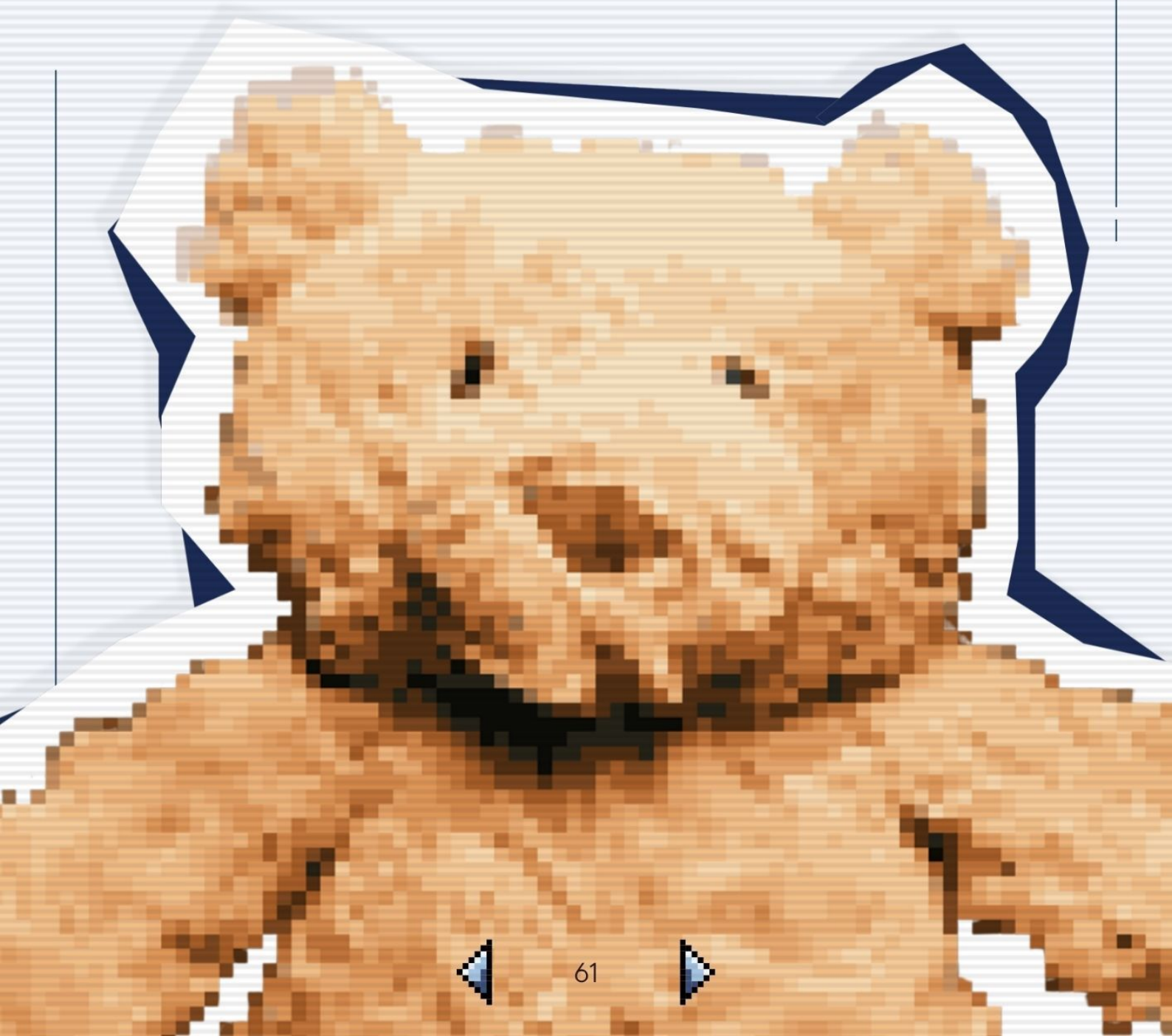
The Writer is not particularly inclined to change.

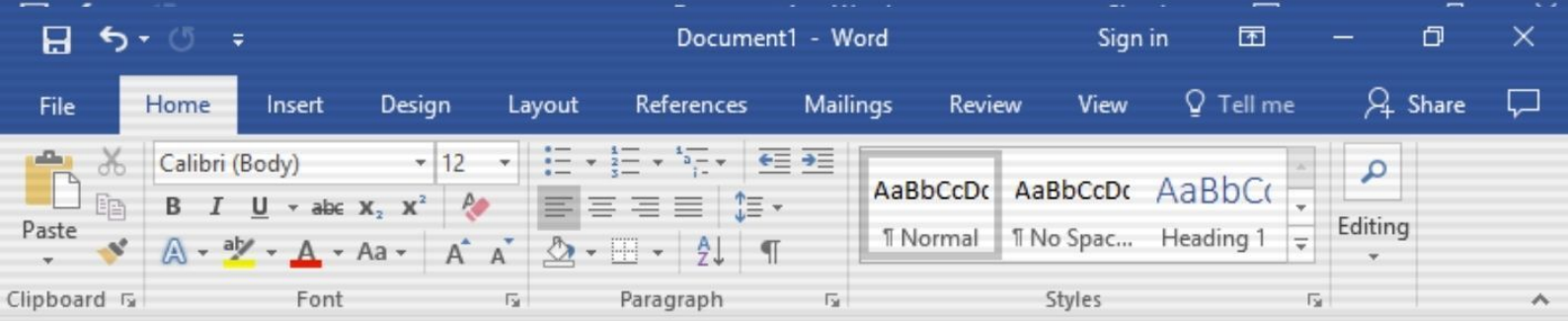
The Writer decides that maybe they should try to write about themselves.

The Writer stares at a blank page.

**Amalia-Iuliana Spinoche**

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Foreign  
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The Writer frowns as they  
read their words over and  
over again.



# Lost on You



Somewhere inside his bruised ribs, Halcyon found a place carved out of little mice running around, stuffed animals hanging from his bones, alongside small traces of claws that were just the right amount of playfulness, tattering over to a bit painful.

That small place was dedicated to none other than the small soul he found lying in a random alleyway, while he was preparing himself to step inside his house – a place that made misery look like a hopeful dance and not just a tragedy with golden wrappers.

Beyond his thumping heart, beating rapidly against his ribcage, Halcyon could feel the slight vibrations of purring, of barely-there meows that somehow managed to fill every crevice of his body.

The sweet melody of the calming purr is always sitting somewhere in the back of his mind, slowly relaxing every part of him, as he recalls the little paws that would constantly knit every soft surface they would find, including Halcyon's own skin – the only thing that would bring a bit of laughter into his life as he would squirm around a bit, getting used to the idea of constantly being tickled.

He would glance inside his own body, quickly making note of the windows showing the outside world, and, every time, he would find Scar following the birds with his eyes, as he would make the loveliest noises in a poor attempt at imitating them. Halcyon would shake his head, a small smile capturing his lips as he placed another toy on the windowsill near the cat – another ball with bells that he knew all too well would end up under the furniture – alongside the multitude of olives that had somehow found their way there as well.

At the beginning of fall he brought home Scar, a small bundle of anger that chased everything that moved, filling the house with constant noises of jumping, running and meowing – the perfect scenery.

And somewhere in March, Halcyon wished for a miracle – for the possibility of wrapping his cat up, sizing him down and hiding him close to his heart, a space where he knew his cat would be protected from all that is evil.

Even in sickness and in death, Halcyon would keep that small space carved just close enough to resemble the form of a small body, ears perked up all the time, with a spiral tail that swished from side to side constantly.

With memories flooding his memory, filling his body and soul to the brim, Halcyon let out a choked sob, his throat seizing up against the lump that was ever present. He glanced around his room, letting the feelings wash over him as if he were swimming in between the never-calming waves that pushed his body to its limits. As he closed his eyes, he felt himself submerge in the water, deluging every crevice of his body with salty water. It was pushing him deeper, and deeper, and as he opened his eyes, he met another smaller greenish pair that blinked slowly at the intrusion of a stranger in its space.



**Augustus**

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# Of flames and swords and darker hours

They told me that darkness has a soul.

I thought they were mad, sick. To have a soul, one must have a heart – that beats, that feels, that moves. Darkness would have to live or be itself a heart.

I told them so, and they only traded those long, wary glances. They took my hand and led me to the mouth of a cave. They gave me an old lantern and a blunt sword. Then they left me there.

When I turned, I saw her. A girl.

She looked like me – enough so that a blind man would have sworn we were twins, but any wise one wouldn't have even thought of us as sisters. She carried an unlit torch and a sword shorter than mine, light enough to wield in one hand.

"Torches burn fast," she said. "Let's use your lantern first."

So I led the way.

The light showed me the threads of water running down the cave walls like tears, the small bundles of food they had left behind. When she was hungry, I gave her parts of my share. I held her hand as we slept, huddled close, and I sang small, trembling songs to chase away her fear of the dark.

Day by day, the veins of the cave branched deeper and deeper. No path led us out.

One night, I dreamed of light, so much light, so much color. In the center of it, a man was weeping.

"Your mind misses the world above," the girl explained to me when I told her of the dream.

She was right. She always was. There was always a reason, a logic behind everything. She carried them all in her sharp voice.

We rose from our corner of stone, took the lantern and walked on. The air did not flinch. Not a whisper of wind. Not a breath. The ceiling above us had grown fangs – stalactites, the first ones few and small, then thin, sharp, glinting like claws. They grinned down at us, cruel and patient.

I told my sister – my new sister – that everything would be fine.

"You're lying. Your words are for my ears alone, but your true thoughts stay hidden, I can feel it."

It stung me, but I never said a word about it. In that place, she was afraid, perhaps more than I was. That kind of doubt was normal, I told myself. But at night, when she thought I slept, she cried. The cave grew colder with every sunrise we would never see.

Then, something changed.

I had lost the sense of time long before – hours, minutes, all swallowed by the same heavy darkness – but the memory of that dream still burned in me. Those colors seared my mind. That man’s sorrow unsettled my bones.

How could someone, wrapped in the bright net of youth as he was, cry with such grief?

I was lost in that thought when my lantern stirred. Its flame began to pull, tugging toward a narrow passage. My sister said we should go left – but curiosity flickered in her eyes when she saw the flame move right as if it had a will of its own.

So right we went.

“Look,” she whispered.

On the wall there was a painting – small, strange. A man drawn in strokes and curves, caught mid-movement, a sharpened staff in hand.

The flame stilled.

I stood close enough to feel the cold pulse of the stone, lantern raised, staring at that crude image as if we knew it, as if we had seen it before, as if we remembered who it was meant to be.

A soft clash of metal broke the silence. My sister had touched her sword to mine, teasing me into a duel. We did that sometimes, tired of walking, sparring with our blunt blades. They had given them to us for protection, but not to draw blood.

“So we don’t stain our hands,” she said.

And of course – she was right.

Each step in that cave drained us, yet we still laughed, our laughter echoing down the tunnels like the brief flash of a distant star.

“You’ll die faster walking like that,” a voice suddenly said.

The voices of our blades shut up.

From the darkness, a man emerged, young and fair-haired. Soft-faced, he held a lantern and a sword just as mine. My sister flinched when she saw him – she shrank, she changed. On her face, her shadows began to draw emotions, her eyes turned hard and narrow, and her lips pressed into a thin, guarded line.

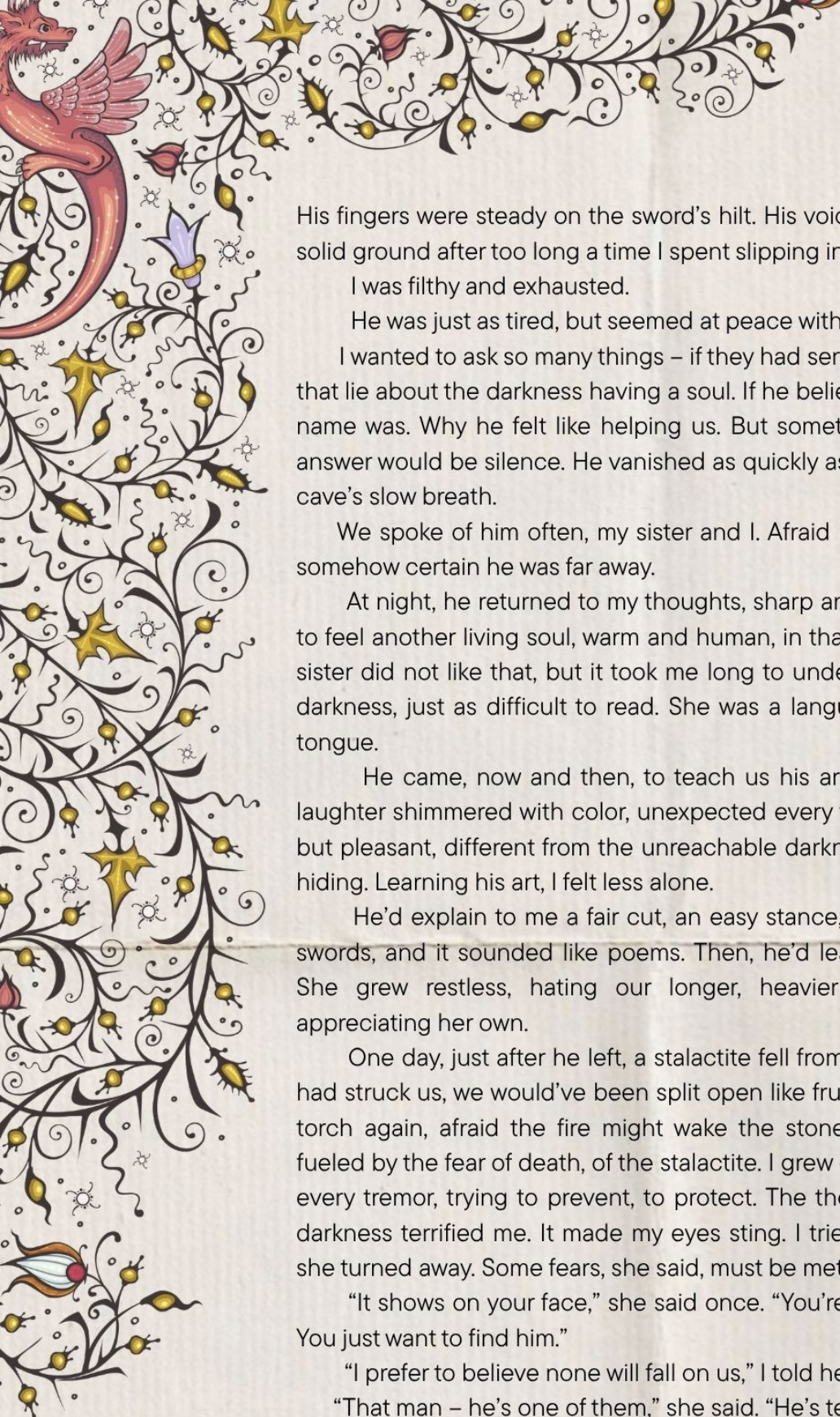
The man pointed to my legs.

“Don’t step that way, you’ll slip.” The ground glistened with wet stones and mud. Truly, we had never learned how to walk in such a place without bleeding.

“And your grip on the sword’s all wrong.”

I studied him quietly. Maybe it was the dim light, maybe my own fascination, but I couldn’t tell what color his eyes were. One moment green, the next – gray as cooled ash.





His fingers were steady on the sword's hilt. His voice was calm, balanced, feeling like solid ground after too long a time I spent slipping in mud.

I was filthy and exhausted.

He was just as tired, but seemed at peace with it.

I wanted to ask so many things – if they had sent him, too, to put the lie to the test, that lie about the darkness having a soul. If he believed there was a way out. What his name was. Why he felt like helping us. But something in his eyes told me his only answer would be silence. He vanished as quickly as he'd appeared, swallowed by the cave's slow breath.

We spoke of him often, my sister and I. Afraid he might still be listening and yet, somehow certain he was far away.

At night, he returned to my thoughts, sharp and near. I longed to see him again, to feel another living soul, warm and human, in that maze of stone and coldness. My sister did not like that, but it took me long to understand – she was just as deep as darkness, just as difficult to read. She was a language that didn't want to know my tongue.

He came, now and then, to teach us his art. Sometimes he laughed and his laughter shimmered with color, unexpected every time – he was just as hostile, cold, but pleasant, different from the unreachable darkness my sister had and insisted on hiding. Learning his art, I felt less alone.

He'd explain to me a fair cut, an easy stance, he'd explain the geometry of the swords, and it sounded like poems. Then, he'd leave me and my sister to practice. She grew restless, hating our longer, heavier swords; despising me for not appreciating her own.

One day, just after he left, a stalactite fell from the ceiling, huge and deadly. If it had struck us, we would've been split open like fruit. After that, my sister never lit her torch again, afraid the fire might wake the stone above. She fought and argued, fueled by the fear of death, of the stalactite. I grew quieter, listening for every whisper, every tremor, trying to prevent, to protect. The thought of her crushed in that cold darkness terrified me. It made my eyes sting. I tried to hold her, to comfort her, but she turned away. Some fears, she said, must be met alone.

"It shows on your face," she said once. "You're not even afraid of the stalactites. You just want to find him."

"I prefer to believe none will fall on us," I told her. "It's just... how I cope."

"That man – he's one of them," she said. "He's teaching us to fight, so we won't die helpless when the monster at the bottom of this cave finds us. We're not getting out alive, I'm telling you."

Perhaps she was right, as she always was.

Later, loneliness made me bold. I began to wander without her, guided by the whispering flame of the lantern – it had begun to speak to me. Sometimes, I'd find the man I found hidden in the tighter veins of the heart-cave. He danced alone, his sword cutting through the air in furious, precise circles. His lantern's light never stirred, even when mine trembled with life.

When he noticed me, we talked. We'd sit on cold rocks, forgetting that conversations are meant to end. He feared the stalactites, feared the sight of blood. I saw myself reflected in him – and as he spoke, the flame in his lantern leaned curiously toward mine.

He told me of his life before the cave, but never how he came to be trapped here.

"They told me darkness has a soul," I told him once.

When I returned, my sister would always be awake, her eyes saying that she knew where I'd been.

Another time, he told me, "They said I'll escape the dark when I finally decide to look for the way out."

Deeper and deeper, my sister and I pressed on. Every day she sharpened her sword, and every day she struck harder. Bruises bloomed on my arms, faint cuts traced my skin. But I knew she didn't mean to hurt me.

"If you find a way out," I told him, "look for us too." He rose, touched his sword to his forehead, and bowed. Noble as I've never seen before.

"Maybe his way out isn't ours," my sister said.

She was wrong. Of course she was.

On the last day, we found him at a crossroads.

We said nothing. We watched the flames of both our lanterns pointing the same way. My sister's torch pointed to the other.

"When you, my sister, walked away from me these days," she said, "no stalactite ever fell near me anymore. Now that there are two of you, they'll fall above your heads. I'm alone now. Loneliness is safe here, don't you see?"

I pulled my collar up to hide the cut above my heart, the one she blessed me with during our last sparring.

She left toward the place where her torch seemed to drag her.

I'd thought they were mad when they said darkness had a soul. For that, it would need a heart – to move, to laugh, to dance. It would need to be a heart, like a cave, with veins, with blood, with feeling. It would need to live like a flame inside a lantern, to feel the warmth of a shared hope. To love deeply enough that the thought of one's own death tastes sweeter than the death of a friend.

With solemn grace, the man brought his sword to his forehead once more and bowed before walking where his lantern led. Then, in the shadows, he stopped, a kind smile on his face. He waited.

And from the other tunnel – where that one girl disappeared; once my heart, now a stranger; once a sister, now just danger – came the unmistakable crash of a falling stalactite, followed by the wild, echoing sound of her laughter.

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# THE GARDEN OF THE HEART

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Love blooms like flowers.

From the inside to the outside. We all have an empty space in our heart—a place where all the dark thoughts and problems weigh us down. It can't be seen, but it is slowly eating away at us out from the inside. If left unattended, it can become extremely harmful. It pokes at us until someone comes and plants the seeds. The seeds of love. And each kiss, each caress, each nice word, each whisper and laugh is a drop of water. Then the seeds break, they turn into flowers, standing tall. All kinds of flowers grow, from red to blue, from violets to sunflowers. It fills the hole, it makes us full. For once in a very long time we feel whole again, because when we look in our beloved's eyes we see the world, a reflection of the universe, and when they touch us it leaves traces of stardust behind. It is so intense, for sure no one else has felt such a type of love before, or so we like to think.

The heart becomes a garden, each flower bending slightly in the wind. It is peaceful and sunny, but it is not fully protected. Sometimes a storm might come, an argument or a breakup, destroying the carefully planted flowers. At first, it feels hopeless, like every effort was for nothing, and silence fills the heart. The garden is nothing but simple traces of love and the devastating effect it can have on everything, on life. But other seeds replace what once was, faster than we think. At first, we won't even feel it, but the warmth engulfs our body, signaling to us that the heart didn't give up. Drinking a coffee with your best friend, listening to a story told by your grandfather, cooking with your mother—little by little, the seeds get planted again. Feeding the pigeons in the park, hearing your favorite song in a store, a stranger smiling at you, a classmate complimenting the shirt you just bought. The flowers slowly grow again.

You look at yourself in the mirror, and you see the love that shapes you, the heart becoming a beautiful garden again. The purest love hides in the most ordinary things, even when we don't pay attention to them or notice them. All the storms in the world, and there will be a lot, can't erase the traces of what was truly there first, a love so infinite that it surrounds us, it engulfs us. There is love in sadness and in happiness, there is love in grief and longing. It shapes us, we need it, as it is the starting point.

No matter how much it hurts, how much it breaks, the heart still yearns. Yearning for the beauty and the memories. The memories that give birth to stars, full constellations above the garden of seeds planted by the love surrounding us.

However, there are parts of the heart that remain abandoned, far away, into the shadows. It is where the most painful memories and experiences hide. They rarely get visited, but sometimes we are reminded that they exist. Pain is part of love, intertwined in a bittersweet dance. Love follows after pain, and pain follows when it's over. It is part of creation, of art and of who we are, how we think and how we show the love inside of us. No matter how far away we keep these abandoned parts, they are still shaping the heart and sometimes the wind of nostalgia takes us there.

There are parts that remain unexplored, something we have yet to experience but we know is out there, just waiting to be found. We don't know what these parts look like, how they feel or whether they will become full of flowers or abandoned, yet we take the risk. We venture in the wild and untamed parts, those that have never been discovered before. It might be the need for knowledge of our own heart that takes us there, or maybe just the need for love. There will be jungles, oceans to cross, and even mountains to climb. At first it might seem hard, but in the end it's worth it. To explore and get to know love, to experience it raw, is the most beautiful thing to do.

We are born from love and die surrounded by it. The heart keeps everything safe, from the pain to the beauty. From the destroyed gardens and the tallest and most beautiful flowers, to the brightest stars and the ones that died. It reflects the world around us. As it is around us, so it is inside us. Much of it is hidden from others, but sometimes when you look closely enough into someone's eyes you might just catch a glimpse of that world. The world of the heart and how many gardens it has, how many places are abandoned or not discovered yet, and the storms that happened or are happening.

While you are giving a compliment, petting a cat, hanging out with someone, helping a neighbor, you are planting a seed. A seed into someone else's garden. You are loving and being loved. That is the point of life, what the heart is all about.

**Miruna Vodă**

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# Devotion

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been a week since my last confession." She briefly paused, eyeing Father Jareth. The man was sitting still. A plum stole hung loosely around his neck. The material was stained with something sticky. If he was aware of the spot, he gave no sign of it.

Father Jareth was new to the parish. He was young, even younger than he seemed. He kept his fair hair long and tied up and his beard shaved, making him look more like a seminarian than anything else. She took notice of his rolled-up sleeves and well-defined arms.

"To be honest, I knew Father Peter wouldn't be in today. It is you I wanted to speak with." She let out a sigh. The two of them were sitting in a sheltered pavilion, near the church's

playground. It was currently deserted, given the early hour.

"You needn't hide from Father Peter. It is common and encouraged to go to a different priest than your regular confessor, especially if the matter is a particularly grave one." He did not ask any questions as to why she wanted him specifically and waited for her to continue.

"Father, I... there's this man. He is a dear old friend of mine." She glared down at her own long, pale fingers as she explained. Her nails were bitten and the red polish on them was chipped. "He's a devoted Catholic and I wish to marry him."

"Holy Matrimony is a sacred covenant between a man and a woman." Father Jareth's expression remained neutral. "It's one of God's greatest gifts, representing the very foundation upon which the family is built." His voice grew warmer as he added "Marriage welcomes challenges that only the strongest and most faithful pairs can overcome. As long as you love each other, as well as God, there is nothing to be concerned about."

The young woman winced. "I love him. And he loves me. But-oh, Father! I have committed an atrocious sin that I am most ashamed of." She blinked away tears, constraining herself to resume the confession. "The circumstances we find ourselves in make it difficult to elope, as of now." With that, she burst into violent sobs. "Oh, I know he loves me, so why must he torment me like this? He won't marry me, Father. He has been the sole object of my pure affection for years and I have given up everything to remain by his side and please him.

Instead,

he vowed to me that he will find a solution to bind ourselves before God as well."

Her confessor did not attempt to comfort her. In fact, he did not move an inch, nor breathe another word. He was simply taking in the sight of the disheveled woman, so small and frail.

Her body shook as if it were about to break apart from guilt. Tears streamed down her cheeks, dropping to the ground without making a sound.

She was bleeding in front of him.

She was bleeding in front of Him.

"We have laid together many times," she finally admitted, barely audible. "I could not refuse what he asked of me. I thought...I thought it would not matter once we...but there is no silver bullet for my misfortune. Now I am sure of it. Father, I do not want to, no, I cannot continue living like this. It eats at me, bit by bit, day by day."

The woman dropped to her knees, staring up at the sun-kissed priest, and begged him for guidance.

"Woman," he said, not unkindly, "succumbing to fornication is not your mortal sin, but your devotion to this man. You have made him your god. You have served him and been faithful to him, forgetting your duties to your Father. Your love, pure as it may be, has caused the greatest of offenses: violating the first commandment, Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

Father Jareth raised his heavy hand and placed it on the poor thing's head, caressing her

knotted hair. "For your penance, I ask you to cease seeking out this man."

Her shoulders slumped. "Yes," she whispered.

"You may pray your Act of Contrition." He drew back his palm and readjusted the purple stole.

"O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you, and I detest all my sins because of your just punishments, but most of all because they offend you, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin. Amen," she uttered almost mechanically.

The young priest raised his hand, his voice booming in the empty courtyard. "God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins. Through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of

the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

"Amen."

"Your sins are forgiven. Stand up, daughter." Then, softer, "Goodbye, lover."

With a sound resembling a wounded wail, the woman got up, brushing off the dust that had settled on her dress. Without sparing him another glance, she spun around and left, defeated. Father Jareth removed his stained stole.

