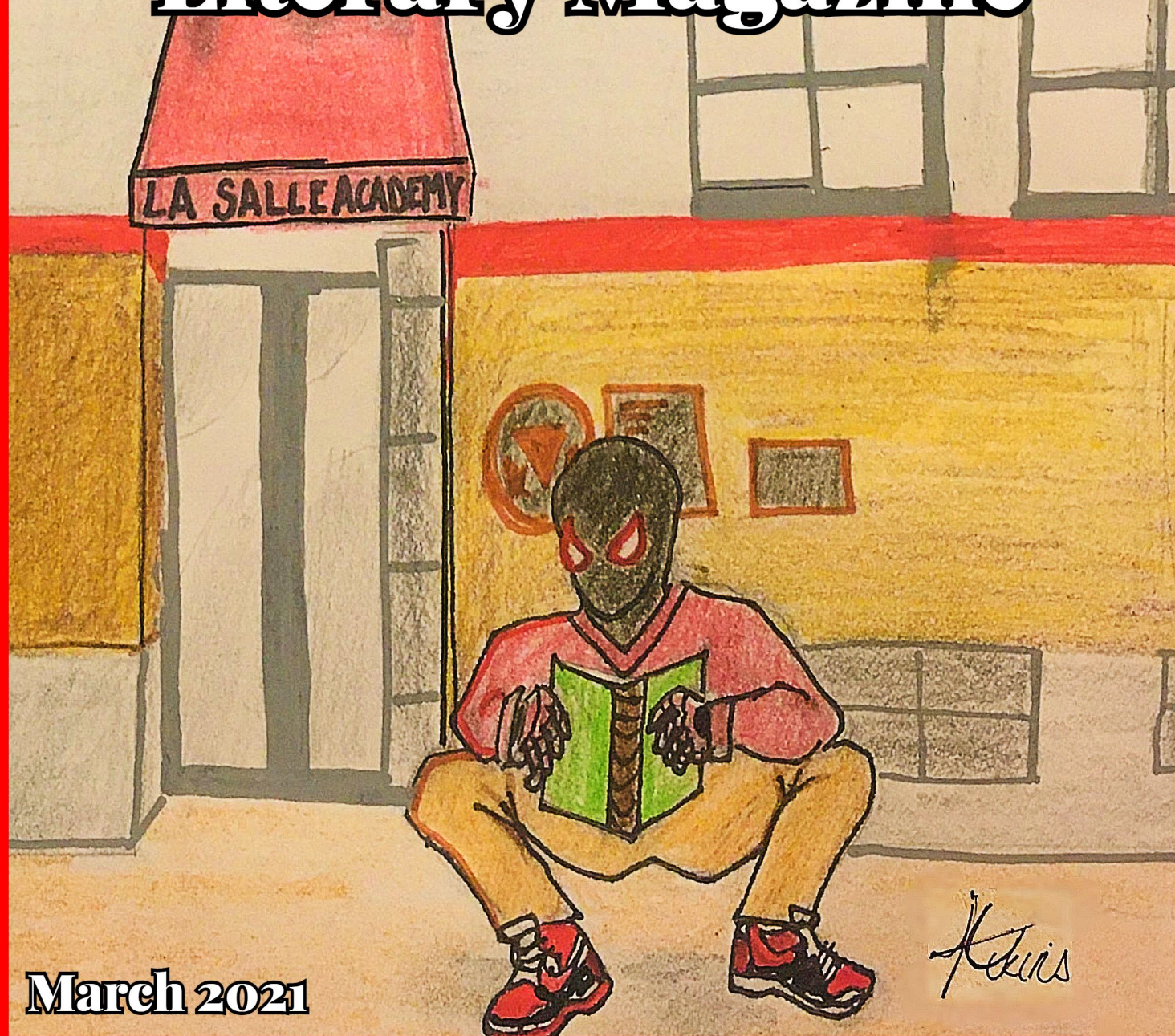


La Salle Academy Literary Magazine



March 2021

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Barush Islas-Tapia

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“The Perfect Gift” by Jeremy Reyes

Ever since Megan went away to college in the summer, I hadn't heard a word from her. I knew that would happen the second she escaped from the tyrant we call our mother. When she didn't show up for Thanksgiving dinner, Mom completely lost it. I hadn't seen Mom that angry at Megan since she sneaked out to go to that Weeknd concert sophomore year. I would tell you what happened, but I don't want Mom to give me an earful. Mom and I had a whole turkey between the two of us. I didn't mind my bratty sis not coming, but without her it didn't feel like Thanksgiving. For as long as I can remember, Thanksgiving dinner was just the three of us plus our grandmother, who died this spring.

That night I heard Mom break down into tears in her room. She hadn't cried since the last time I saw Papi. I wanted to comfort her. Maybe it was just some instinct all mammals have, I don't know. But I just knew if she even heard the sound of my footsteps, she'd yell so loud that the picture frames would jostle. Mom's crying settled down, and I could hear her regulate her breath, returning it to normal. Then I heard her call Megan. After what felt like hours of cursing her out and reprimanding her in Spanish, all I got was that if my sister missed Christmas dinner, she would disown her.

* * *

Christmas was now a week away, and if I'm being honest, Christmas season was the one month I didn't fully hate sharing a room with Megan. Besides, every year it was fun watching her bawl her eyes out to the same Christmas movies. Okay, maybe I missed her a bit more than I care to admit, or maybe I was mad she didn't take me with her when she left. I walked into the living room and dialed up Megan's number on the landline, and it wasn't until maybe the last ring that she finally decided to pick up the stinking phone.

“Hello?” somebody answered, and it wasn't my sister.

“Uh, is Megan there?”

“She's busy right now, who is this?”

“Tell her it's Derrick, I'm—”

“Oh! She talks about you!” The voice on the other line snickered, like it was laughing at me or something.

“Well, I was just calling to check in on her, tell Megan I'll see her on Christmas I guess.”

As I was about to hang up, I heard a conversation happening in the background, and suddenly she was on the line.

“Hey, buttface!” Megan said.

“I'm—”

“Listen, D.J., I can't talk now, but I'm gonna bring you a present when I'm back. You're gonna love it. Bye bye!”

How could she possibly do this to me? She knew how much I hated gifts. Now I had to get her something in return. And why'd she say, “You're gonna love it”? Probably because she wanted me to know she got me something nice, and I had to give her something equally nice. Giving gifts is so selfish.

When I searched my savings box, there was more lint in there than money. Asking Mom for money was not an option. She would just give me a lecture about how important it was to money, which was her way of saying “You're not getting presents this year.” But the worst part was I wouldn't even know what to get Megan even if I had the money.

* * *

I became so preoccupied with thinking of something to get her that I didn't pay attention in any of my classes.

During lunch, I asked Isaiah, Albert, Arad, and Ken what I should get Megan for Christmas.

"Megan's coming back?" Isaiah said, sitting up straight.

"I'll be her present," Albert blurted out, stopping what he was going to say next when he noticed Mr. Purnell was behind him.

"Get her something nice, like a necklace or a ring," Arad said.

"Just don't get her anything. Simple."

"I can't do that," I said. "If she's going to get me something then I'm obligated to get her something back, or she'll never let me forget what kind of ingrate I am."

"What's an ingrate?"

"There's no written rule anywhere that says you have to give gifts to people who give you stuff," Albert said.

"Well, it might not be written anywhere, but it's a rule."

"She's a girl, dude. Just get her a cookbook or an apron or something."

I looked over at Ken to see what he thought, but he was too busy finishing the homework for U.S. History.

* * *

Christmas was now two days away, Christmas break in full effect. I couldn't not get her something, especially if she was giving me something I'd "love." Suddenly, I got the worst idea ever. But I didn't realize that at the time.

When I got home from school, I went straight to Mom's room. I rummaged her nightstands, closets, and drawers, and found everything but the stuff I was looking for.

After half an hour of searching through nothing but Mom's arsenal of belts, I collapsed to the ground in desperation. It wasn't until I sat up that I noticed some sort of box under Mom's bed, and the lightbulb in my brain lit up.

I opened the box, which let out a loud creak. I found all sorts of old, nostalgic stuff that for some reason my mom kept. Among the artifacts, I found a gold ring so shiny I could see my beautiful mug reflected in it. I put the box back under the bed but kept the ring.

I practically ran outside and rode my bike to the pawn next to the Gold Star. Upon arrival, I realized I forgot to bring a bike lock. It would be kind of messed up to see my bike end up in this same pawn shop. I put it next to another bike so it looked like its lock protected both of ours, and I went inside.

"I'm looking to sell this gold ring right here. This is real gold."

The stout man behind the counter held out his palm. After a few minutes of silent inspection, he offered \$350 for the ring. Without hesitation, I agreed. He gave me a white envelope that I stuffed in my pocket.

I left the shop and made my way toward the mini mall by the subway station. There I saw something that I just knew would win me brownie points—an Armani handbag listed for \$225. It was perfect. After paying the tax, I even had a little extra dough for myself. I biked home, arriving mere seconds before Mom got dropped off from work. I felt so relieved.

"Hey, Mom, how was work?"

"Same as always," she replied. "You will not believe the crap I had to put up with today."

I instantly regretted asking her how her day was. I had to listen to her venting about her boss and her co-workers yet again. I don't remember how long she vented, but it couldn't have been less than 24 hours.

* * *

Christmas had finally arrived, and so did Megan.

"Merry Christmas, everybody!"

When I heard her voice, I ran out of my room and paused in the hallway. I didn't know what I thought I was going to do when I saw her.

Mom was saying something to Megan about skipping last month's dinner as she gave her a hug. That was Mom—had to include a pinch of scolding in her love.

"Te extrañe muchísimo, hija," Mom whispered as she let go of Megan.

"I missed you too, Mom," Megan said. "I'm sorry I missed Thanksgiving."

I stood there awkwardly while Megan and Mom caught up, listening to Megan recounting her college experience.

"My smart girl, first in the family to go to college."

It was just like Mom to wait until her children left home before admitting she was proud of them.

When Mom walked out of the living room, I swooped in and tried to feel out Megan for what she bought me.

"So, how's college life?"

"It took a while to get used to it, but it feels like home now. I kinda missed you, D.J." she said, which made me happy.

"So, you said you had a gift for me," I reminded her. "I got something for you too."

"Oh yeah, I did." A huge smile formed on her face.

"So, what is it?"

"I got you the gift of my presence!" she said, holding out her arms for another hug.

"That's... it?"

She nodded. She thought this was all so funny.

"I know you're pranking me, where are the cameras?"

"You didn't actually think I got you anything, right? I can barely afford Top Ramen for dinner—you think I bought you an Xbox?"

Just then, a voice from down the hall yelled out, "Where's my ring?!"

"Money Talks to Me" by Isaiah Heredia

How can I care for love

When there's money to care about instead?

It's not relationships I think of;

Money talks to me in my head.

Love can be a temporary charm,

Much like the time you lie

Awake in bed before you hear the day's alarm,

But money will stay with me until the day I die.

So take all the love you can hold in your hands and get out—

It's money, you soon will find, that life is all about.

“The Reclusive Killer” by Amir Powell

Arachnophobia affects half a billion people in the world, and when I was 574 days old, I lived through their worst fear. It was a humid evening in the Sunshine State but with just enough precipitation to cool you down. My mother walked around our house like a guard dog protecting her litter from any threats. However, this threat was sneaky. An eight-legged arachnid crept its way throughout the house undetected, the poisonous reaper ever so close to me. “Num num,” I mumbled out. My mom went to fetch me some applesauce. But what she didn’t know was that if her shoe hadn’t had come untied, instead of “Amir Powell, La Salle Academy,” my name would read “In Loving Memory of Amir Powell.”

Spiders have eight eyes, but most of the time only four to six of them work effectively. They rely on touch vibration and taste stimuli to maneuver through the world. Tiny hair receptors all over their skin feel the vibrations of anything that gets stuck in their web. Imagine you could barely see and your only way of knowing what’s around you is by touching something, feeling it in the air, tasting it, or being touched by it. And remember that you’re extremely ready to inject anything with skin-decaying venom. Unfortunately, I was the thing that touched you.

I startled you when I dropped my hand and pinned one of your appendages to the ground. You stuck your fangs deep into my veins, injecting venom into my bloodstream. I yelped out in pain, not realizing that death was so near. My mom looked up and ran to me. She saw bite marks on my hand and carried me to the emergency room. I screamed uncontrollably until I passed out from the shock of pain. We got to the hospital as my skin started decomposing into a brown, blackish color, as if I was transforming into something else.

The doctors administered a venom-curing serum and applied ice to the wound. I was in the ICU for the next week and a half. The spider didn’t act from malice. It’s not like the spider was an assassin who set out to hunt me down. Both of us were living our own lives until we got into each other’s way. And if my mom hadn’t been there for me, I would have never gotten in a spider’s way again.

“Winter’s Calling” by Oliver Tang

The winter breeze fresh like mint,
All the seasons indifferent.
Winter’s cruel nature draws me out the door.
And then winter passes, the heavens’ sorrow no more.
The shining sun grows shy and hides
And you and I think of better times.
Helios returns, Mother Gaea comes to a comatose state,
Greenery withers away, and the reawakening begins, as if left to fate.

“The Pencil” by Hunter Colón

It was a little after twelve o’clock on a spring afternoon. She was looking at the eraser on the end of her pencil, while Mrs. Busch lectured the class about the difference between exposition and scene. As she stared, she noticed the dirt covering the pink of the eraser. She put the eraser to her desk, but every time she got ready to erase, she picked the pencil up and moved it to a new spot. After seven minutes passed, she started erasing. She stroked the eraser back and forth at least twelve times, the screech of the eraser intensifying after each stroke. Then she flipped the eraser over and looked at it. A small yet noticeable smirk appeared on her face as she saw the pink of the eraser again. Her grin disappeared as a girl walked into her arm, making her pencil fall to the floor and roll to the front of the room.

“I’m so sorry, Cynthia!”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Here, let me get that for you.”

“Don’t bother. I can get it myself.”

“Don’t be like that, Cynthia. The least I can do is pick it up for you.”

“I said it’s fine, Alex.”

“You know, if you keep acting like that, people aren’t gonna like you.”

“I don’t need to hear that from someone like you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just get out of my way.”

“Not until you tell me what you meant.”

“Why? It’s not like you should care about what I think anyway.”

“Of course I care, Cynthia. We’re friends after all.”

“Yeah, me and everyone else.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being friends with a lot of people. You could stand to learn something from that.”

“I don’t need tips from the queen of shallowness.”

“Shallow? Me?”

Alex stood next to Cynthia, her left hand gripped to the back of Cynthia’s chair and her right hand pressed against the top of Cynthia’s desk. She stared at Cynthia. Cynthia squirmed in her chair slightly, but looked directly back at Alex.

“It’s not hard to see through your little façade. You act all nice and caring with everyone, but really, you just think that everyone is beneath you.”

Alex slowly leaned into Cynthia’s ear.

“You listen here, you little stugget. All you do is sit by yourself all day. You’ve got no friends and no one wants to even try to talk to you. Even the teachers don’t bother with you. Why do you think every time we have a test or an assignment, you never get it? I’ll help you out with the answer in case you’re too dumb figure it out yourself. It’s ’cause you’re practically invisible, you might as well not even exist. You could disappear and it would take a week before anyone realized you were missing.”

“Excuse me, Alex,” Mrs. Busch said. “Is there a reason you’re taking your time returning to your seat?”

“No, ma’am, heading there right now.”

“Good.”

As Alex headed to her seat at the front of the room, she turned her head to look back at Cynthia. She mouthed the words “you’re dead,” and a smile immediately popped on her face as she sat down. Cynthia was shaking in her chair, avoiding looking back at Alex’s smiling face. She stayed in her seat until the bell rang, and quickly left as soon as it did. The pencil remained on the floor at the front of the class, forgotten and untouched.

“When I First Met You” by Howin Lin

When I first met you
I had known you forever,

Telling you secrets
And what I didn’t want ever.

Over and over again
I got to know the real you,

So caring, so gentle,
With a heart so true.

You’ve survived life
With loneliness by your side.

I said I’d never leave
Because of the feelings I have inside.

I know you
Like no one I have ever known,

And sometimes I wonder
What I’d do if you were gone.

I have decided
Time answers all.

If it is meant to be,
Time will remove the wall.

“I Hate My Parents” by Eric Yang

It’s been a while since we spoke. I really hate my parents. You heard what happened, right? No? Wow. I guess I’ll tell you then since you weren’t listening.

So you know how it’s my birthday, right? Well, my birthday is the single most important day ever, and I’ll tell you why. My parents made up this rule that on every holiday such as Christmas, New Years, Thanksgiving, Columbus Day, etc., I’m not allowed to choose the gift I want. *They* choose for me, and it can’t cost more than \$1,000. Which makes no sense, but whatever. But on my birthday, I get to choose the gift I want. This year, I made my parents get me an all red Lamborghini Aventador. Sounds simple, right?

Wrong! They got me a BLUE one. They know my favorite color is red, and yet they got me a blue. Mom tried to calm me down and told me that they looked all over Calabasas and beyond and couldn’t find any that were red. So I yelled at her saying that they should’ve looked harder and threatened to call CPS. She began to cry, which I guess I kind of enjoyed, but Dad had the audacity to argue and say it’s *my* fault that *they* can’t tell red from blue.

He told me that I needed to stop being selfish and think about others. So I spit on his ugly Prada shoes. For some reason, that made Dad go mad. His face turned all red and he yelled at me in a voice so loud that it woke up Miu Miu and Pyro from their nap and said, “Yaris Supra Corolla, it’s time you learn some manners.” Then he grounded me. I began crying so hard and I grabbed my Chanel bag and my Starbucks and ran to my room. My family is the worst and my life is miserable. I want that trash on wheels to be sent to the junkyard and scrapped. Anyways, now I’m talking to you. You’re the only person in my life that understands me, my dear stuffed bear.

“My Heart” by Justin Panarella

I have so much to tell you, but I don’t know where to start.
This is the beginning of giving you my heart.

I’ve been through a lot of sorrow, endured a lot of pain.
I have had some feelings that I never could explain.

My heart has been shattered, time and time again.
And I came close to believing that love was a sin.

Now all I have are pieces of a heart that once was whole.
And I try to fix the damage from where it took its toll.

To be completely honest, I’m overcome with fear.
I’m terrified of love; it only brings me tears.

I’m clinging to my heart, afraid of handing it to you.
Will you crush it too?

“Silent Sea” by Ashtin Flores

The seas were roaring that day. A storm like none other had angered her. Waves crashed and tumbled, rocking a single stolen ship that dared to pass through. The sound of each crash of thunder shook the pirates to their core. Darkness prevailed, interrupted only momentarily by bright flashes of lightning. The rain came down like bullets. In the distance, multiple waterspouts were forming. Waves larger than skyscrapers dwarfed the ship. Nature could not have caused this. The sea had a mind of its own, and that mind had intent to kill.

The captain stood in the bay, struggling to regain control of the ship. The crewmates took cover in the bilge, holding on to the poles of the bunk beds. The waves were too strong. The ship shifted far left. One man lost his grip. He was thrown headfirst into a fire extinguisher mounted on the wall, and then bounced onto the deck. For the first few moments, before the storm cast him from side to side, he looked almost peaceful lying there, as if merely asleep. He was the fourth lost so far. Three were left.

One man by the name of Timir dared to travel to the bridge to see the captain. He moved from pole to pole slowly, as if not to lose his balance. The ship crashed over a wave, propelling them briefly into the air, and then they crashed violently back down. Timir gasped for breath and felt a strong pain in his chest. On the deck, he crawled towards the staircase using the legs of each bed to hold him.

Timir made it to the staircase. There was a short distance between the final beds and the first step. He slowly lifted himself up, fighting a deep pain in his chest. He gripped the pole of the bed with all his strength and waited. The ship rocked forward. He used the momentum to vault himself toward the guard rail of the staircase. He reached its top and passed three hallways before he got to the bridge. He felt the pain in his chest grow bigger. He put one hand on his chest to ease the pain, but in that instant the ship tilted and threw him portward. He braced his impact with his shoulder and grabbed the rail once again by some miracle. He inched his way to the bridge.

He finally made it to the door of the bridge. He grabbed the hatch with both hands and spun it to the left. Each use of force made it harder for him to breathe. He felt the click of the door open and pulled back. Then, still holding on to the door, he peered into the bridge. There he saw the captain on the deck, a pistol next to his right hand. He walked inside and closed the door behind him, then slowly let himself sink to the deck. He heard nothing. He squeezed his legs into his chest, and cried, and waited.

“Golf” by Kacper Zuraw

Why should I
With the sun so bright
Focus on a sport
With no fun in sight

“Swaying in the Wind” by Justin Barretto

The air was as thick as cement. Cars drove past, kids chased each other on the playground, birds flew side by side. The swings were too hot for anyone to sit on, the slides too charged with static. The sun seemed to slowly eat away everything it touched. In a house half a block from the park, one boy sat on a faded yellow couch by the window, waiting for the day to be done.

Without warning, and despite the lack of any apparent cue, he got up and went to his room. He glanced at his bedside clock and then his watch, as if to check whether the clock had run out of batteries. This summer was trying its hardest to be the worst one yet. No one had called him to hang out, and they had lost power twice. He heard his mom call him for lunch.

Midway down the stairs, he glanced out the window and noticed a girl and her dog half a story below and across the street. The girl, about the same age as he was, perhaps a year younger, had light brown hair and a bright-red leash pooled in her hand, unconnected to her dog, a small, short-haired maltese. Both the maltese and the girl had their noses an inch or two from the sidewalk, as if searching for a lost contact or something else close to invisible to the naked eye. He heard his mom call his name a second time, and he continued his way to the kitchen.

“What’s on your mind, Jakey?”

“What?”

“You look like you’re sleeping with your eyes open.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, it’s just—where’s the ketchup?”

“I think we’re all out. I’ll give you some money if you want to run to the store.”

Jake had moved from the kitchen to his room before his mom had time to find her wallet. He got dressed as quickly as he could, although, of course, his urgency caused him to forget where he had last left his shoes, and slowed him down. By the time he was out the door—his mom practically had to force the five-dollar bill into his hands on the way out—it had been several minutes since he’d asked for ketchup, and he saw only empty sidewalk where the girl and her dog had been. He looked toward the stores and saw nothing but cars and pedestrians. But then there she was, sitting on a bench back on the opposite side of the street. He began to cross and heard a horn and then everything was black.

Jake could hear small screams in the distance, then felt the sun eating away at his soul. A group of people, maybe two or six, stood over him in a circle. He thought one of them was the girl with the dog and attempted to stand but didn’t get far. He closed his eyes and waited.

When he woke again he was back on his yellow couch by the window, and she and her dog were just on the other side. Her lips were moving but made no sound. He felt a pain in his side but couldn’t tell what it was. Black spots appeared, like ink stains on a photograph, and he blinked to make them go away. When he reopened his eyes, she was gone.

Some time later, he woke again, back at the same window, the same yellow couch. The sun seemed to slowly eat away at everything it touched. Birds flew side by side, kids chased each other on the playground, cars drove past. The air was as thick as cement. And then he heard his mom call him down for lunch.

“A Separate Sun” by Damien McDevitt

A pen follows the mind as the earth follows the sun:
Deliberately, but in concert with each other.
And as the sun provides the earth, the mind provides the pen.
Even when the pen looks as still as night, it hovers
Until it moves again and writes
Incessantly, unwavering, hot enough to melt ice.

Each mind is a separate sun,
The center of its universe.
Some have a hundred moons, and others none,
Some big as elephants; some fit inside a purse.
But no matter how big or small, how mighty or how meek,
Each one has its own technique.

“You Lift Me Up” by Roberto Yambao III

The chair I always use
Lifts me up with ease
With his metallic arms.

He is the man
For all my sitting needs.

And he stays awake all night
Like a stone statue
Drifting in and out of dreams.