



*Issue 1*

THE STIRLING REVIEW

**WINTER**

2023



For the creativity  
that sparkles.

*"Iris"*

by Winston Verdult

# EDITOR'S NOTE

**Dear reader,**

Wherever you are, I invite you—

For thirty seconds, do not move. Stop scrolling, stop typing, stop thinking. Simply look around slowly. Let your eyes fall on whatever they may wander to and allow yourself to wallow in silence and become entranced by every detail of your world; whether it be the lamp in the corner of your desk, the sheets at the bedside, or a nearby countertop. Take this moment to truly appreciate where you are. And listen. Listen to the chatter outside, the faint buzz of the lamp to your side, the breath and the heartbeat that resides in each one of us. Do it with us. Breathe.

Notice, amazingly, how the beauty of life reveals itself so readily when we slow it down. The small moments of our lives—in all their discomforts and chaos—are deserving of our utmost appreciation. Within these moments reside serenity, and some beauty, if we just stop and look.

In reading this issue of *The Stirling Review*, we hope to give fragments of such beauty, that you, the reader, can hold close to your heart as you traverse this landscape of life. We invite you to enjoy these fourteen art and writing pieces handpicked from over one-hundred submissions hailing from countries around the world. Whether you see the world through the eyes of a soldier with Willow Kang in *Clarice's Night* or explore the intimacies of a child's lost tooth in Amber Zhou's *Gap-Toothed Love*, we encourage you to resonate with these young individuals who have managed to reflect the rawest of human emotions in their works.

With that, we are ecstatic to present the first issue of *The Stirling Review*! Thank you to the Stirling Review Staff who made all of this possible and to the rising artists whose voices we aim to amplify. Here's to Winter 2023, and many more to come.

- Tane Kim and Michael Liu  
*The Stirling Review*

Winter 2023

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# *"Too Late"*



MICHELLE ZHOU

# THE NIGHTFLOWER

SAM LUO



As if overnight—the men in hard construction hats  
have begun to stare back at me in a broad trance.

Behind their shoe-shined foreheads & dripping  
brows kneel an oriental doll. At my age, I am told

there is a resemblance between the plaything & I.  
Is it my silent consonants & otherwise easy quiet

in the presence of these Western ghosts? I cannot  
ask. We are such different porcelains. From the

corner of my eyes, I watch them toil, cannot help  
but think *rouge*. I match the hue to a tiger lily

that bloomed in my grandmother's plot long before  
I was ceded here. I imagine my skin to be that freckled—

kissed so pink by the sun instead of a body's sticky heat.  
I've heard stories about American men, seen their thick

limbs, ox torsos—sisters who conceal the violent rouging  
of night with powder, like white might always be the answer.

It is not yet our time to swelter. We linger on their bristling

beards & grain-dairy diets & dream: *now that is the life.*

It is 97°F today, according to the multicultural radio broadcasting station.  
It is almost piquant: the searing, pomelo sun. I say almost

because pale pays a better price. One can always stare into  
the moon for answers. Once, I was unafraid of the dark,

braver than the American children & their fear of the underbellies  
of twin beds or slighted closets. I am the most nervous at dusk.

When are you no longer a child? Tonight, there is  
no answer from the man in my bed when he finishes.

I wish it were a clear sky this evening. The midnight silence coaxes me,  
murmurs that I am old enough to take it:

America & all of his dreams, his passions before he sleeps.



### About the author

*Sam Luo (He/Him) is an American poet from Los Angeles, CA. He has appeared on ABC7 News in a featured poem for gun violence awareness. Currently a Get Lit Player with the Get Lit - Words Ignite nonprofit, Sam travels across Southern California performing classic and response poetry at a variety of venues as a part of Get Lit's brand-new UC-Approved, Standards and SEL-Aligned online Poetry and Ethnic Studies Curriculum.*

# LAVENDER

MIA GRACE DAVIS



Lilac delicacies burst  
on the tongues of open mouths.

My mother  
once crushed these bristles  
into my palm, told me to smell.

Aromatherapy  
at its finest, she said,  
and the feathered edges  
proved it so. Inhale,  
Exhale.

Tuck the scent away  
and later call it  
mine,  
call it home.



## About The Author

*Mia Grace Davis is a high school senior from San Diego, California. A 2023 National YoungArts Finalist in Writing, she is a U.S. Presidential Scholars in the Arts nominee and an alumna of the Sewanee Young Writers' Conference. Her writing has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists and Writers, and her latest work is forthcoming in The Tusculum Review and Ice Lolly Review, among others.*





***"ALWAYS ABOUT YOU"***

WINSTON VERDULT

# SCENERY

BLANKA PILLÁR



I forgive him for the little lies. The little fibs that slip away and the broken promises that go unkept. He always tells the same lies, and sometimes I believe him because the story paints itself like a vivid oil portrait; first, the figures are painted, then the background, then the corners, edges, contours, and finally it becomes as if it were a real scene on the canvas of life, but only the immensity of human imagination has made believable what could never be real. It tells me what I most desire, and so I reach for it with all my heart, stretching out the arms of my soul to preserve all that its lips say, and to hold it within me for eternity. I love him with all my heart, but when my reality is keen-eyed, it sometimes smells like the scratch of jagged-edged infidelities in the dawning dawn or the wistful night. The cold realization slips into bed beside me, or touches me as I walk.

Today we take it into our heads to walk around the riverbank. We get caught in the cool January breeze and he starts coughing. I take off my thin pink cotton scarf and wrap it around his neck with careful movements. He gives me a weak half-smile and walks on. My chest gets hot, even though my whole body is shivering from the winter's minus temperatures.

Sometimes we stop. We look at the broken-legged seagulls on the slippery waterfront stones, the sloppy sidewalk ahead, the footprints of giddy pedestrians. As we spy one of the old buildings covered in melted snow, he rubs his hand. His fingertips are almost purple, so I tug off my black fabric gloves and slip them on his frosty palms. He thanks me quietly. His silent words creep into my consciousness like angelically soft notes, wrapping my trembling body in a gentle embrace.

Barely perceptible, the milky-white sky opens and it begins to drizzle, but we are unperturbed. We sit down on a stinging bench and stare silently at the glistening toes of our boots as they tread the snowy ground before us. Somewhere in the distance, expensive hand-painted china plates clink, light pages of newspapers crinkle in the city breeze, the iron bells of a dilapidated church jingle, a delicious golden-skinned duck roast in a warm oven is being prepared. He sways back and forth with folded arms, while tiny particles of dripping snowfall on his knitted flame-red angora sweater. I slip my thin arms out of my expensive loden-lined coat and place them on his back. He looks me in the eye. At the sight of his delicately delineated perfect face, my tongue curls and confesses humbly the truth it has admitted so many times before, and hopes. It hopes that for once its love's answer will not be a lie. But once again he replies, I love you too. I-love-you. He utters each elaborate detail of the gracious lie in a wordy way. The first syllable is trust, the second is passion, and the third is loyalty. He feels none of these, yet he testifies to them. He savours the shape of the voice. First bitter, then sour, then finally swallowed. After all, it's only one word. But for me, it's so much more: I put myself in his hands.

Maybe that's not how it all happened. I've been sick for a while now; my lungs are weak from the January freeze. Every time I close my eyes, I try to remember our last story. Embellish it, add to it, rearrange it, change it. Maybe one day I'll grind it to perfection and that word won't ring so false. Or the memory will turn yellow, like old letterhead, and no longer matter. Or maybe "I love you" will become just another fluffy word to be whispered in the harsh winter, bored, picked up by the wind, carried far away, across the world, to where it means nothing. Far from the eager, greedy arms of my soul.



### About the author

*Blanka Pillár is a sixteen-year-old writer from Budapest, Hungary. She has a never-ending love for creating and an ever-lasting passion for learning. She has won several national competitions and has been a columnist for her high school's prestigious newspaper, Eötvös Diák.*

# GARDENING

NAOMI LING



You opened your hands like leaf fronds,  
    & I snipped the stems. The way I love is fragile—  
unbreak me, day by day. Spring we spent  
    swooning over worlds of dirt, coaxing to life  
heirloom tomatoes, tiger lilies, hardy  
    dahlias abreast a molehill. You taught me the cycle  
of a plant—from mitosis to meiosis—  
    & each word I breathlessly caught, watering us  
whole. Your parents loved me at Easter  
    or rather, my blackberry pie that hushed any  
side-eyed quips.

    Still, we forgot the rainstorm.

    June barely broke us, blisters on trousered thighs,  
when you knelt over a bud  
    & called it selfish for wanting, as if existence  
burdened itself like a question.

    At that moment our world stunned you—  
how precious, how porous the  
    good earth gave at your fingertips. Maryland weather  
be damned.

    The tomatoes we gnashed with our teeth,  
spit-painting each other with pulp:  
    a crime scene with acidic aftertaste. Meanwhile,  
I kept tilling the land as it tilted,  
    our bodies crashing over & over in crescendos.

What was blooming was no longer.  
Tell me where, or when, we failed.  
July & I observed a barren garden, loveless.  
My parents asked where you went:  
I raked up the roots & said *yes, Ma, that's the truth.*



### **About the author**

*Naomi Ling is a Chinese American student on the East Coast who believes strongly in the power of storytelling for change. A 2023 YoungArts Finalist in Poetry and winner of the Patricia Grodd Poetry Prize, she has been recognized by the National Student Poets Program, Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, and Best of the Net, among others. If there was one dream she could make true, it would be to ride along the French countryside with a baguette under her arm.*

# "Frostbite"

LUKE TAN



# SELF-PORTRAIT AS AN AMPERSAND

AMBER ZOU



allow me to become  
a junction for desire

hand me the ability  
to be straight-backed

& flair my curled tail  
i would like to be cut short

to take up minimal space  
*and and and*

i yearn to ask for more  
quietly though

so quietly like my mother tells me  
so that words teeter on tongue tip

praying to be etched, to return  
to the slender build of my child self

*amber, you've gained weight, your face is chubby,* my mother chides  
peering at my face through her phone camera

*and and and*  
afterwards, i stare at my facial moon

dilated blood moon dollar eyes staring back  
*guasha*-ing until my jaw is tinged red and warm with swell

i am the byproduct  
and fusion of two  
the child of my parents' kingdom  
and heir to a tyrannical queen

my mother often jokes  
that i was picked up from a dumpster on the side of the road

that i was adopted out of the goodness of her heart  
that her pregnancy was a mistake

*amber, she snaps, don't be so sensitive  
and and and*

a wishing well of heat  
behind my eyes

*and and and*  
i am begging desperately to be '&'

to lose the want to disappear  
and to exist in full flight

i lack the abundance of being more  
and i am exhausted with being less

give me more & more & more  
make me whole and make me more

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❖

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*(Author bio on page 14)*

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# GAP-TOOTHED LOVE

AMBER ZOU



as if i was like those white girls  
with their mothers  
full of western stories and wonder

i pulled out my pink glitter tooth box  
rattling with remnants of baby's breath  
and ran to you, mama  
six-year-old uncallused feet  
slapping against hard tile

i pushed piggy bank pennies toward you  
explaining the tooth fairy procedure  
you nodded with an *mhm*  
eyes occupied by your phone

i knew better than to believe  
falsities and folklore

you had taught me young  
to not place faith  
in unattainable whimsies

chest of teeth  
is pushed under pillow  
i pray for rusted coins

copper tucked under linen

a cocoon of unshadowed fantasy

eyes of nickel  
eyes of baby bird sing song  
eyes of taut plums  
with flesh holding in the liminal  
space of juice and meat  
until hitting pit

where is the crunch of ripped purple skin  
and the gush of maraschino  
that drips so sweetly down black bears' claws?

where are the cubs who suckle plum-filled mothers'  
milk tasting faintly of fruit?

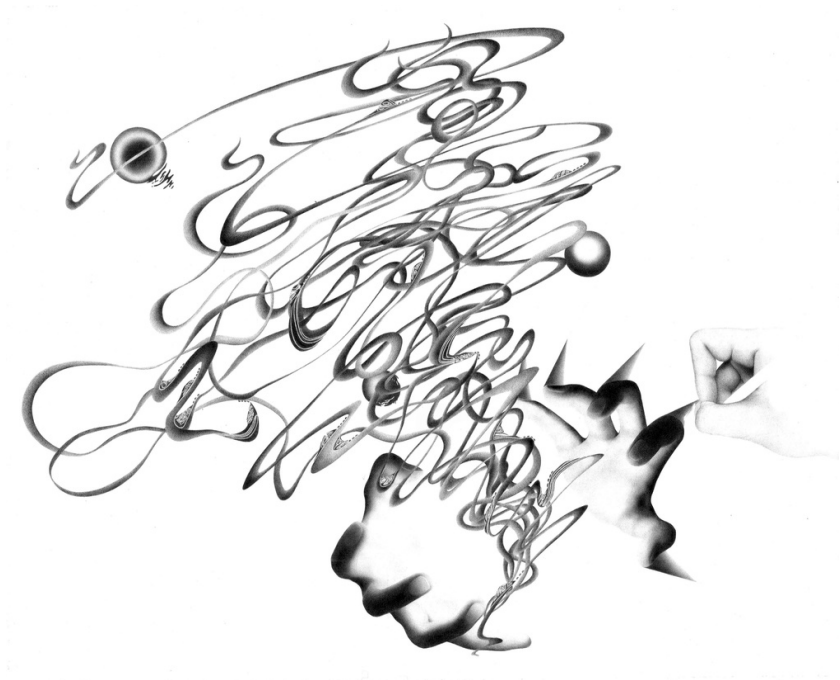
i long for the caress of soft undercoat  
i beg for your touch  
knowing that each time  
it comes with the kiss of flames

look at all that fire  
inside of that tangled chest  
of yours  
look at what you are capable of holding  
and still,  
you can't hold me.



### About the author

*Amber Zou is a junior at Phillips Exeter Academy originally from Houston, Texas. She is an alumna of Sewanee Young Writers' Conference, and has received recognition for her poems and prose through Scholastic Art and Writing Awards and school prizes. She is a lover of lowercase letters, her dog, and La Croix.*



## **A RECOLLECTION: DISSONANCE**

MAX BOYANG

# FIRST DAY OUT OF PRISON

WILLOW KANG



*For Chloe*

It is strange to glimpse  
this likeness of a bestial shaman  
    *(or is it my own flesh?)*  
in the streelight's greasy brightness  
    *(a firefly's arch-nemesis)*  
Behind me are shapeless walls  
colored in yellow wallpapers  
& I can walk through them  
as I can through the thundercloud on the streets,  
the mammoth on the rooftop

shapeless,  
amorphous

no—they have always been intangible

still I yearn for the cynical warmth  
of the heart-hearth that smolders inside,  
the green-clad worker sprites  
    *(policemen wear the ghoulish coverings of a bluebird)*  
who pull me back to my deathbed

from underneath, pulling  
from above, spitting

& devouring,  
with mint-misted tongues

*a salix babylonica* is what sprouts from my teeth  
(*saliva as waterfalls, free-flowing*)  
tangerines hanging in my lungs  
like alveoli, east of my fingertips

Here, a seraph approaches me  
in raven bones, lightning branches,  
bearing a totem of oblivious ambitions  
tells me to cut an oracle from my mouth

& I do:  
the sky retches in carmine tides  
tides that churn shipwrecks into wights  
finally, will the moon reciprocate the mammoth's love

I too, love

& love  
& love

in undulating violence,  
my chrysanthemum fields never be bled dry  
(*yet cannibalism is a crime worthy of hellhounds*)

earth, what a beguiling illusion  
from lavender to marigold  
I will see you to cataclysmic ends

But I must go now,  
for the muffin man is waving his harlequin pistol

*(can't you see those oceanic sirens?)*

& what a funny one too,

eager in its sanguinary lusts,

*(quick, someone seize my last bag of souvenirs)*

a shooting star dozes between my feverish breasts

*(sculpt them into statues fit for an eternalist's garden)*

I must hurry to finish this unwritten act

of anything, anything

already, the embracing night eclipses the azure skies

oh skies,

bringing to me sapphire slaughterhouses

gemstone coals fall

weep not—



*(Author bio on page 21)*

# CLARICE'S NIGHT

WILLOW KANG



*\*Clarice' here refers to the fiance of Leonard Siffleet, a dead soldier of special significance in world war 2.*

a night at Quayside Isle morphs  
into a journey to the rabbit mortuary

I stand in the afterglow of a post office & return  
your inky omens to the hallowed cenotaphs.

Somewhere, a star weeps, or perhaps not. Perhaps even  
this earthly inferno is a mortal triviality to the gods.

A comet descends & ascends just as fast,  
long enough to be another ephemera  
in my collection of glittering long-lost sprites

I tell the jacaranda to bid you farewell, but  
the jacaranda refuses. Says its branches cannot reach you  
across the Arafura sea. Get a stray dolphin instead.

but what of the countless slain jellyfishes?  
the bombs can steal even their gossamer veils.

Over the ocean, a chorus of artillery sings your dirge  
& corals synthesize to form your tombstone

soon, the pageboy will return  
your salt-stained bones to my closet.

thus during teatime, hushedly talk  
of those who continue to haunt the radio static

burn offerings as thanks for Victory Day,  
even while you rattle the marrows of this manor.

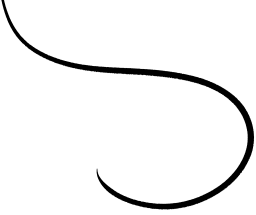


### **About the author**

*Willow is a writer from Singapore, where she is studying. Her current preoccupations include taking naps, and taking naps. While not in school, Willow reads a copious amount of fairytales and writes the same way to keep herself sane. Coffee breaks are also on her mind.*



# About Our Artists



**Margaret Donovan** (*Drowning - Cover Page*) is a high school senior from Massachusetts. She enjoys reading and acting in plays, creating art, and running her school art and literature magazine. Her piece “Drowning” is from her AP Art Profile, for which she scored a 5.

**Michelle Zhou** (*Too Late - Page 1*) is a sophomore at Irvington High School. Her passion for art started when she was 6 years old, and it has continued to this day. She has created various mediums of art, including sketches, paintings in acrylic and oil paint, pastel artworks, and art with colored pencils. Her artwork “Too Late” has received national awards from the Congressional Art Competition and is currently hanging in the U.S. Capitol.

**Winston Verdult** (*Iris - Cover Page // Always About You - Page 5*) was born and raised in Southern California to a generational family in the fine arts and antiquity. Growing up surrounded by eclectic works, Verdult has drawn inspiration from a myriad of artists and eras. As a multidisciplinary polymath, Verdult finds his expression through editorial photography, filmmaking, digital art, and piano. In summer of 2022, Verdult was accepted into the prestigious USC SCA/Warner Brothers Program to study the cinematic arts. By dedicating himself to the development of his artistic range, he has prepared himself for a creative career in Los Angeles.

**Luke Tan** (*Frostbite - Page 10*) is a high school writer/photographer from New Jersey. In his free time, he enjoys sleeping, browsing eBay for bad deals on vintage camera lenses, or telling himself he is “thriving”. He hopes you have a wonderful day!

**Max Boyang** (*A Recollection: Dissonance- Page 15*) is an artist from Michigan. Since the start of his professional career at the age of nine, he has accrued numerous national and international awards and exhibitions in places like the Tubac Center of Arts, Brighton Art Guild, and Art Fluent. In his free time he likes to write, bike, bake, and play with snow. He also hopes to someday travel in time.

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