

THE STIRLING REVIEW

*Issue 3*

**SUMMER**

2023



*For the creativity that sparkles.*



# **“AUREATE”**

MEHAR BRAR

# EDITOR'S NOTE

**Dear reader,**

This summer was a season of rebirth and growth for The Stirling Review. As we nearly doubled the size of our team and worked to bring together magazines from distant corners of the youth literary world to collaborate on our upcoming Rising Voices Contest, we at The Stirling were forced to undertake each new obstacle with a newly developed sense of focus and passion for the work we do.

We hope that the Summer of 2023 has been a similar experience for you, in the extent of the growth, maturity, and new experiences you've attained along the way. Summertime is truly a magical time of year, where often the rawest and most permanent memories are made with friends, family, and in experiencing the beauty of life itself.

We've crafted this issue to represent this very essence of summer, reflecting the season's key traits in the concise selection of works that shine brilliantly in their daring and poignant natures. Whether you choose to see the world through the eyes of a custodian in Denning's *Unoccupied Space*, or appreciate our selections of photographs depicting the alter-egos of summer, we hope that this issue may give you a resonating feeling of freedom from the chill of life's hardships, similar to the sensations of fulfilment and growth these past hot months have dealt us all.

With that, we are ecstatic to present the third issue of The Stirling Review! Grab yourself a cup of coffee (hot or iced), wrap yourself in a hoodie as autumn kicks in, and latch on to the remnants of summer vested in these following pages. Thank you to the Stirling Review Staff who made all of this possible and to the ten contributors whose voices we aim to amplify. Here's to Summer 2023, and many more to come.

- Tane Kim and Michael Liu  
*The Stirling Review*

Summer 2023

# TABLE OF CONTENTS



## Art pieces

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**Summer in Calle Crisologo**  
by Jillianna Reign Paat | C

**Aureate**  
by Mehar Brar | 1

**Low Tide**  
by Jillianna Reign Paat | 10

**Untitled**  
by Margaret Donovan | 16

## Literary pieces

---



**Welcome Aboard...**  
by Cailey Tin | 4



**Self-Aware Blueberries**  
by Y. F. Wang | 6



**Cat poem**  
by Y. F. Wang | 8



**My New Best Friend**  
by Asma Abdela | 11



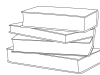
**Listening to my own voice**  
by Lillie Waltz | 13



**Things I will never tell my...**  
by Aastha Harlalka | 14



**Before leaving for...**  
by Odi Welter | 17



**Unoccupied Space**  
by Bran Denning | 19



**Square**  
by Bran Denning | 24





# SELF-AWARE BLUEBERRIES

YF WANG

*\*trigger warnings: mentions of self-injury and sexual violence*



gasoline on my high school uniform and palms  
seep blood out of habit. I roll up the  
sleeves, spotlight two clean arms for the adults who  
call me their discovery. but the tattoo under my tongue  
screams: here's the blueprint. here's the treasure  
map. cut the edges and color in the lines. (optional:  
try not to hurt me in the end.) Prosthetics coated  
with waffle batter and Disney guises office buildings with  
a color they coined as Bye Bye Blue; like how there was  
another poem before anyone found me here.

Welcome to the burial ground and find the roller-coaster  
with your name. My phantom limbs pick blueberries  
but slather them a different color. Daughters  
with brothers understand—even the ghost of a  
body part will not fit under a doorframe. I don't  
know how to exist in a room that isn't burning and maybe  
this was why I pretended not to notice when they gave  
me back my uniform saturated with gasoline. because  
what worse could you do to a paper girl with a  
lighter sewn into her red slippery hands?

but I promise I only cut to dilute the oil. I  
wonder if I am more than candle mold, if I am  
allowed more than to breathe in my own cinder. in a  
dream, my daughter asks for a list of  
everything she's done wrong and I bite her tongue off  
instead. The ad on the metro door says YES! TAIWAN

HAS GROWN OUR OWN BLUEBERRIES and last night I starved myself trying to outgrow my whole life. my daughter cracks my ribcage open. I don't know what I did to deserve November sixteenth.

chew through fingerprints for an imaginary audience and wonder if it was my fault for having fruits for body, for smiling at winter girls who were promised honey but found grief in its place. ad says the brand name HILLTOP BLUES and I tell the young, pretty social worker that it wasn't sexual assault. (but God, she was so fine I would've let her taken me right there had she wanted to.) I think I know why Veruca grabbed the gum—you'd do it too if your lineage was carved hollow with salt.

red on my wrist says five-thirty-five post meridiem; (halfway over by now.) confession: I let it happen because all her friends were attractive and twenty-three. A palmful of blueberries don't turn indigo; when you dream next to someone blue, you end up clutching onto moonlight until you stain her yesterday with the next season's slaughterhouse waste. sweet eighteenth churned into butter. I spent nine semesters taking off my clothes thinking that the room would stop burning if i had no skins.



# CAT POEM

YF WANG



you listen and find that skyscraper light sounds like  
metal chains, like you could flip a switch and the sky

would fall into paper box flaps: a lid,  
four sides, Truman's Show. the Earth moves on for

thirty more kilometres before you're so sorry you've mistaken  
the hum of car engines for all that. dust

tremors off the window screen and you picture a life  
where you have made it out the womb in your first bedroom.

and then you decide the city sounds like a cat. How  
you never got to adopt one as a kid because

your mother couldn't bear to see you grow into  
the kind of mother she was, the kind of woman

that made you promise the sound of your father's  
car breaks wasn't as bad as she remembered, but

also that the memory of how he drove would be last of its kind.  
clench your teeth at static skies and pray for an echo

of crinkled clear tape, of a chafed cardboard box  
pulled beneath a child's bed, because

only you know about an adolescence spent  
trying to be the kind of toy Andy would've come back for.

At four ante meridiem, there is almost no light  
from the tall buildings across the street

but in the handful that remain, you see your mother  
lifeless on a hospital bed giving birth to you once more.

The night shift director doesn't yell cut. you try to tell her you're sorry  
but no one hears you over the turning metals of

someone's father's departure and you beg that  
she gets it right this time. before she does, you reach into

every tiny off-yellow rectangle trying to find the light switch  
and notice, the rite of girlhood on the burnt, burnt fingers

of every woman you could ever love.



### **About the author**

*YF Wang studies at Wellesley College. She has been recognized by the Claudia Ann Seaman Awards, the John Locke Institute, Bow Seat, and more.*

# *“Low Tide”*



JILLIANNA REIGN B. PAAT

# MY NEW BEST FRIEND

ASMA ABDELA



I bring the baseball bat down on the car roof. A satisfying *thud* announces the dent I made in the metal. Next comes the windows, one by one. I circle the car, unable to remove the grin from my face as I smash each pane of glass, maneuvering the end of the bat to poke at the edges where brittle corners remain with a surgeon's precision.

Once all of the seats are dusted with sparkling white, I face the windshield.

Like a mark, the afterburn of the man's gaze on me lingers. His easy smirk on his sleazy face, eyes racing from my toes up, heavy as a physical touch as they paused at some points and skirted past others—the low wolf whistle he drew out that sent lightning down my spine and thunder booming in my mind screaming *run!*

I had frozen in place, still as a statue and just as useless as he strolled up to me. He blocked my path to the bus stop, flanked by a fence and the street, cars rushing past so fast the wind tugged at my clothes—they hadn't been exposing, right? A cable-knit sweater that reached my mid-thighs, enough to justify wearing black tights. I hadn't condemned myself this morning—five minutes after my alarm blinking away sleep while grabbing an outfit from my closet—right?

I bring the bat in a delicious arc from the top of my head down, the glass splintering and giving out. Uncontrollably, I wailed on the hood of the car, the clang vibrating my hands *over* and *over* until my wrists ached and my arms burned and my eyes burned and the metal cried out for mercy.

The man had made a compliment I refuse to repeat, but without my permission, my brain brought it to the surface of my thoughts, shoving the record in and hitting play. "You're pretty cute, aren't you?" His voice had been

young and lilted, not fitting his appearance—in another mouth it could have been from a boyfriend.

He walked past me and I hated it. He knew he had wound me up, triggered the adrenaline in my veins, and he had *enjoyed* the fear in my eyes before walking away, easy as can be.

No touching, no cornering, no threats—only a look, a smile and a compliment. Then he was off. The bus came and I had fought the urge to scurry onto it, walking fast but deliberate.

I didn't know for sure if he had turned around, but I felt the burn on my back.

A strangled yell wrenches out of my chest as I bring down the bat one last time, the shock reverberating in my chest. I pause, hyperventilating as I take in too much air and not enough. The edges of my vision darken and the center blurs.

I have gloves on, covered in powdered glass, so I blink away the tears, feeling them roll and leave trails that first warm, then cool my cheeks. The intercom buzzes and I jump out of my skin, letting go of the bat.

*“Five more minutes,”* the man at the counter warns. *“If you would like to purchase more time, come back to the front desk.”*

I shake my head, although he can't see me. Five minutes was enough. I lean over to pick up the bat, back aching and mind pacing like a rabid animal.

Five more minutes with my new best friend. I better make it count.



### **About the author**

*Asma Abdela is a high school senior from San Jose, California. She enjoys letting her pieces simmer in her mind for days before putting them to paper in uncomfortable spaces, such as hospital lobbies, the floor of her living room, or in a friend's classroom. Her work has been published in Inlandia: A Literary Journey.*

# LISTENING TO MY OWN VOICE —

LILLIE WALTZ



if I could I'd pluck it from the sky like a peach &  
the pit would fill me up but the low-hanging fruit grew &  
the tree trunk swallowed the nesting squirrels and robin eggs & I'm my  
desiccated mother sending her firstborn off to college.  
I stayed home yesterday while she dabbed her eyes with a Kleenex,  
this house is too full of air for me to speak, this  
Barbie needs to breathe.  
give me a chance to leave and I'll be off running  
like water, I forgot to feed the dog before I left.

if I could I'd put this in a time capsule and bury it into soft earth;  
Mother nature can cradle my cries better than I can, my one friend for life -  
I love my best friend &  
I don't like her anymore, she didn't kiss my boyfriend but she  
makes tea in the microwave and doesn't  
ask about my day. but we used to run topless  
through sprinklers together, doesn't that count for something?  
I make plans and then  
cancel saying *I'm getting dental surgery that day, can we rain check?*  
I grab an old umbrella and swallow-dive into the storm.



---

## About the author

*Lillie Waltz is a current high school junior and teen writer from Cincinnati, Ohio. She is an alum of the Kenyon Young Writers' Workshop, and her work has been recognized by the Overture Awards and Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, among others. When not writing she can be found running, watching Gilmore Girls, and curled up with a good book.*

# THINGS I WILL NEVER TELL MY MOTHER

AASTHA HARLALKA



maa//

I am not that type of girl

brown faced // mascara eyes turning into bullets// I don't yell, mama, no I lick clean the tube lines, eat the aftermaths of laughter like it were *home* open up my heart to the first person who looks at me for more than one second no I promise// maa// I learnt to love like you did// picking out fish bones like it will tell me the truth write shit poems so that someone would *just look*// I cut of my nose and then maybe I'll look pretty, carve in the cheeks and yet there is another one// another girl gone like a reflection on the subway window// mother// I went halfway across the world only to find that these papaya calves are not good enough unless the seeds are scooped out// mama// I swear I am not dreaming// clutching// and then// my father holds out a finger and I hear the bullet before I see it// my father's smile opening like a wet crack// peeling//maa have you ever

//embraced a body as it becomes the home of a gunshot there is no finality in this there is no home in here// baby// I pick up her smile from my eyes// her little irises floating around in my sleep// baby// I want you to be mine// I'm telling you// I'm telling you I'm not that type of girl// I don't //

scoop up the deep ends// I watch the lines of her face becoming a map// I am not that type of girl maa// but again i// wait// linger/// her cheekbones// my father tried to show me the power of a smile// razor cut teeth// I want it// her eyes// her tadpoles skin// maa i promise I am not like that// there is another stranger lingering on the doorstep// her hands// her hands// there is another one

another stop on the door and I watch// her hands// her hands are cut open I  
swear I could suck on the //

cobblestones becoming

cut out throats and

another convulsing corpse

train tracks turning into backbones

breaking

I hear another skull crushed and

I am not that type of girl

I try to forget// like generations are trying to forget// the brown matted sky// I  
swallow history back like hair in a drain// mama// I promise

mama// I tried//

// to peel his skin// crack open his smile// one last time//

I tried// to jump// into the space// between his lips// I tried to  
// drown myself into him// so I would feel less alone// maa//

I tried// to enter// a corpse// hoping I would find// home



### About the author

*Aastha Harlalka is a high school junior and aspiring poet based in Mumbai. When she isn't reading or writing, she loves playing the piano, running, learning languages and listening to indie and classical rock music.*



# *"Untitled"*

MARGARET DONOVAN



# BEFORE LEAVING FOR MY GRANDPARENTS' ANNIVERSARY PARTY

ODI WELTER



A chicken feed bag explodes,  
My little brother handled it too roughly  
from the car trunk to the garage.  
make space for the food

She attacks him first

He tries to shield himself and bandage her,

My brother hunts down a shovel

My father and I shovel seeds

sweeps it back together.

with me back to Milwaukee,

Later, it will be like nothing detonated,

as we tiptoe around the crater

and my mother explodes with it.

on his unsanctioned journey

My father asked him to move it,

my mother slaved over.

with her glass-shard words.

but his voice is knife-sharp instead.

and finds me a dustpan.

back into the bag while my sister

Later, she'll ask me to take her

and I'll have to tell her I can't.

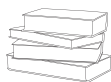
or we will pretend that nothing did

and laugh at happier stories.



# UNOCCUPIED SPACE

BRAN DENNING



Be still, for a moment, silent and unobtrusive as a houseplant, and notice how the rest of the building is asleep to your presence. Look down the dizzying aisle between the diminishing columns of bookshelves. See how the lights on this floor are activated in layers, how they sense your movement and brighten – gradually, so as not to startle any sleep-drunk students – into a porous, clinical maker of shadows. You cannot see the other end of the room. You don't even know how big it really is. The dark is textured and hungry.

★

Each morning, from 4 a.m., I clean the top floor of the university library. This is my floor. Nobody else knows it.

The bins come first. Not all of them are full, not all of them have even been used, and many of them stink unforgivably when I take off the lid. Takeaway junk marinated in energy drinks, bad coffee. The occasional fruit peel. I'm unfortunately familiar with the combined putridity of tobacco and stale teabags. People still don't know how to recycle – I must do it for them, separating the cans from the tissues, the coffee cups from the plastic, the sweet wrappers from the crushed revision notes. If it weren't for the gloves I wouldn't be able to touch any of this stuff without gagging. I get this part over with quickly.

Then onto the desks. The library offers sound-proofed individual study rooms, some with a computer. But you have to book those, and these kids are rarely so organised. The alternative is a geometric mess of tables separated in the middle by fabric panels like office cubicles, unbearably exposed out in the open. I clean each one of these desks and Hoover under each chair but I rarely see people using them. Most students prefer corners. They'll hole up with their

coats and their laptops and their snacks, their caffeine of choice, some of them even fall asleep. I find evidence of them in the crumbs on the seats.

Then there's the bathrooms, and those are easy. I put up the sign outside the doors and go round the room in a circle, wiping down mirrors, sinks, tiles, taps. I dump mint green toilet cleaner into the bowls and flush, and the smell will follow me for the next hour. I mop up the piss from under the urinals, the hair from the drains. Sometimes, there are pale toothpaste splatters on the mirror or around the rim of the sinks, and I wonder who is brushing their teeth in a library bathroom. I wonder if it is a student spending full days and nights in here, living in their assignments. Or maybe it's another member of staff. Maybe they get here early. Maybe they're homeless, and they can't tell anyone. Either way, I'm wiping up their spit.

Afterwards, I will enter the maze of shelves, dusting and Hoovering. The spaces between them are narrow, all sound fishbowed into a conch-like, background quality. There are old books and new books, magazines, academic journals. Some are so old they are encased in plastic to protect from oils and sweat from a million fingers. As one could imagine, the smell of them is fantastic, walled in between these towering cases so heavy they could kill me, and I spend far more time than necessary just looking at them all. Reading their titles. Stroking their wrinkled spines.

It is very easy to go round in circles this way; I have no choice but to keep track of the books. They tell me where I am. They chart my movement like stars.

★

If someone ignores the signs and comes into the bathroom while I'm still in there, I will smile and say sorry, then leave them to it. I imagine it feels incredibly embarrassing to use any facilities in the presence of the person who must maintain them.

★

They used to talk to me, the students. Back when I first started, when I was still working out my routine. The early risers or all-nighters would smile and nod at me, or they'd see me coming with the hoover and move their stuff so I could get under the tables, into the corners. Some of them, I could tell, had favourite study rooms, and for a little while I'd clean them first so that the regulars wouldn't be swiping up crisp dust as they worked. After about a month, though, the smile and nod stopped happening. The good mornings were never returned. If the kids even looked at me it would be with surprise or a kind of panicked bewilderment. *What are you doing here? Why are you speaking to me? There is a line between us, and you are breaking it.*

The last time I was spoken to while on shift, I was hoovering under the desks. A boy was sat at the edge of one uniform row of tables, a stack of books in front of him, as well as one of those nice travel coffee mugs made from recycled materials. He was settled in, making notes, one leg crossed over the other. When I came near him he took out one earbud and looked at me, and I turned the hoover off to hear him speak.

'Can't you do that somewhere else? It's really distracting'.

He wasn't from here. His accent was jarring, unmistakably upper class. He had what an employer would call a great telephone voice.

'I'm just doing my job. There are private study rooms if you need them.'

Before I'd finished speaking, he had put his earbud back into his ear and gone back to reading.

Since then, I've been pointedly avoiding the students altogether, but it hasn't stopped me from wondering at what point the change happened, and why. I wondered if it was me that had changed; if the longer I spent haunting those bookcases and computer rooms I began to look more like I belonged there, and people would simply Unsee me.

A woman disappeared here, once. It was Easter break and the population of this little town was halved almost overnight, a mass exodus of students returning to their parents' homes or escaping to study in prettier climates. I liked the quiet, the sparsity of my tasks. The few people who were still coming to the library at all were the postgraduates, the PhDs, the older students arriving without noise. Lynde was one of them.

She had arrived early and stayed late. Her stuff was found strewn about in one corner of the first floor. Expensive stuff – laptop, headphones, nice coat – only she didn't end up coming back for them. My manager had come to find me to ask if I'd seen anyone on my floor.

'They'll sleep up here sometimes, y'know. It's not uncommon. If they're pulling an all-nighter and need a kip they'll come up here to settle in one of the study rooms. Odd that she's left her electronics behind, though.' My manager talks a lot and never looks at you when he does it.

'I'll keep an eye out.'

'All her things, her notes – just left downstairs like she's coming back for them.'

'Maybe she just went back to her dorm for something.'

'No, no. We'd have seen it on the system. Can't leave without your card, see.' He tapped his own lanyard swinging from his belt.

I did know this. All entrances and exits were automatic doors which only opened with a personal staff or student card. What I hadn't realised was that The System would be consulted to track someone's movements over a confusion so little as this. She'd barely been gone an hour. I was unable to stop myself from wondering if my own comings and goings were being monitored and indulged in a vision of a suited security guard, computer open, ghoulish silhouette outlined in blue light.

‘I’ll keep an eye out for her,’ I said again. There wasn’t much else I could say.

I thought about Lynde a lot after that. They never did find her. Or if they did nobody told me. Sometimes I will hear the movement of doors or chairs through the density of the soundproofing but I won’t see anyone, and I will imagine her, still wandering.

★

I will tell you a secret - the soundproofing isn’t impenetrable. You can still hear a Hoover or a shout or sometimes whole conversations if you listen carefully enough. I’ve become acclimatised to it now. This is how I know that there are speakers built into the low ceilings - presumably for some kind of tannoy system, but I’ve never heard them used. All I do hear from them is a constant, low-level white noise. I thought once that I’d imagined it but it’s pretty clear. I pass beneath them with my trolley full of bottles and bin liners and they sing; a sound of absence, of complete and utter apathy. ~~It’s beautiful.~~



# SQUARE

BRAN DENNING



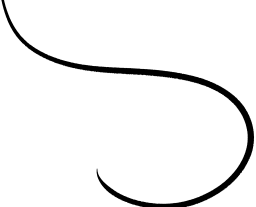
so we sat in our four corners                      of a spell circle  
letting incense ash fall onto our shoulders and  
in our hair                      becoming the room so snugly  
we almost suffocated                      and we told each other's  
fortunes                      as wind rattled the windowpanes  
leaned forward on our sleeping needle-pricked knees  
to peer into tarot cards                      asking and asking and  
asking while the tiny speakers of someone's phone  
blew bubbles of bass into the air  
led Zeppelin or acdc or great van fleet or  
some other man with                      a vocal range too high  
to sing along to                      the cards staring back into our  
eight                      glossy                      eyes  
telling us again and again                      *now I will ask you*  
*to be brave*                      *now I will ask you*                      *to be brave*  
*now I will ask you*                      *to be brave*                      *now*



## About the author

*Brân Denning (he/him) is a tentative poet and academic from the Welsh coast. His poetry has been published twice in his university's undergraduate anthology AberInk, and is forthcoming in the Ink Sweat & Tears webzine. As a trans man living in the UK, his work is often marked by an uncertainty of place and self. He is currently completing a Master's degree in Literary Studies.*

# *About Our Artists*



**Jillianna Reign B. Paat** ( *Coverpage / Low tide* ) writing under her pseudonym *Vastriane*, at the age of twenty-one, is an undergraduate in University of Santo Tomas in the Philippines. She is an aspiring novelist and poet, greatly inspired by POC musicians, authors, and artists. Her poems, photography, and non-fiction essay were previously published in *HaluHalo Journal* and *Rewrite The Stars Review*, and forthcoming in *The Blossom Magazine*. She is also currently a volunteer staff in *Sea Glass Literary* and an intern in *Adarna House, Inc.*

**Mehar Brar** ( *Aureate - Page 1* ) is a rising high school senior. Elliot has always had a knack for finding meaning in the seemingly meaningless and works to communicate what he sees with the world. Whether that's through the mediums of oil paint on canvas, literature, or video, Elliot seeks to create compelling stories that resonate with viewers.

**Margaret Donovan** ( *untitled- Page 16* ) is a high school senior from Massachusetts. She enjoys reading and acting in plays, creating art, and running her school art and literature magazine.



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