

RIVERMONT | VOL. 01 | ISSUE 1

# THE PAW PRINT



2025 Beginnings



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# Editor's Note

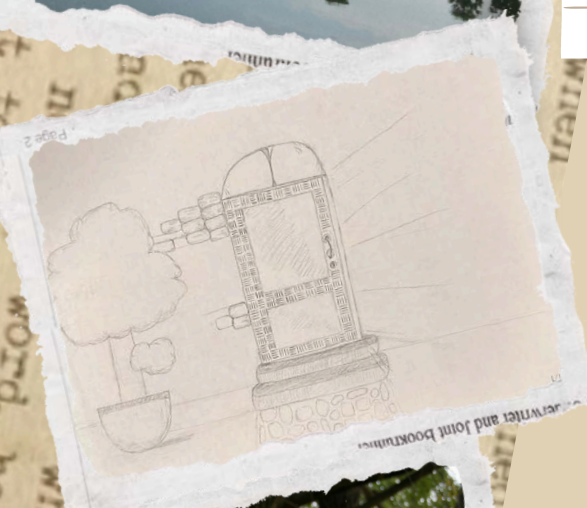


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*Everything must start somewhere, and in the first issue of *The Paw Print*, the Rivermont editorial team seeks to explore the meaning of such beginnings. From finding courage in fresh starts to the beauty in a day's new dawn, the subject of beginnings allows for uninhibited creative exploration and offers a compelling foundation for unforgettable literary pieces. Turn the page and experience your own beginning as you are introduced to Rivermont's very own literary magazine, *The Paw Print*.*

Stella Ashdown  
Editor-in-Chief





# Opinion Pieces

## Works

- Book Reviews: Where “The End” Becomes a Beginning - Stella Ashdown
- Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind Review - Samia Hazil



# *Book Reviews: Where “The End” Becomes a Beginning*

Stella Ashdown

“THE END.” Flip the last page, close the back cover, and set the book down on the coffee table. This is a carefully curated routine, experienced by thousands of readers, connecting us across continents and time. What comes next? You get up and go about your day? Maybe you are the type to sit for a while, the type to contemplate and ponder the complexities of the book’s plot. Do you try to connect and reflect and make meaning of your reading experience?

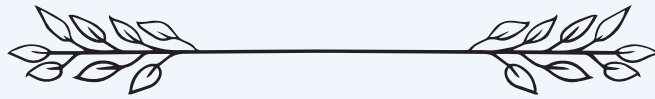
There’s no shame in going either way. I, myself, swing between these experiences depending on the book and my mood. I should clarify that I don’t mean to force a dichotomy on you either; it’s completely fine to finish a book and find yourself somewhere in between these practices. No matter where you end up, though, there’s one thing that I know will fit into your routine. A book review. Book reviews have changed the way I interact with books, and the custom is delightfully simple: every time I finish a book, I assign the book a rating—one to five stars—followed by writing a short review, which often contains my opinions on what I’ve just perused.

To me, it’s not about tracking the quantity or my enjoyment of the books I read. Rather, book reviews are about reflection and having a platform. When it comes to literature, I tend to have big thoughts and feelings—things that thrive in the open place of expression reviews provide. And I’m not the only person who understands the value of this space. Platforms such as GoodReads are filled with thousands of new reviews every day. Consider also, that these reviews mean different things to different people. That’s obvious when stated outright, but if you stop and think about what these platforms provide for people, it’s magical.

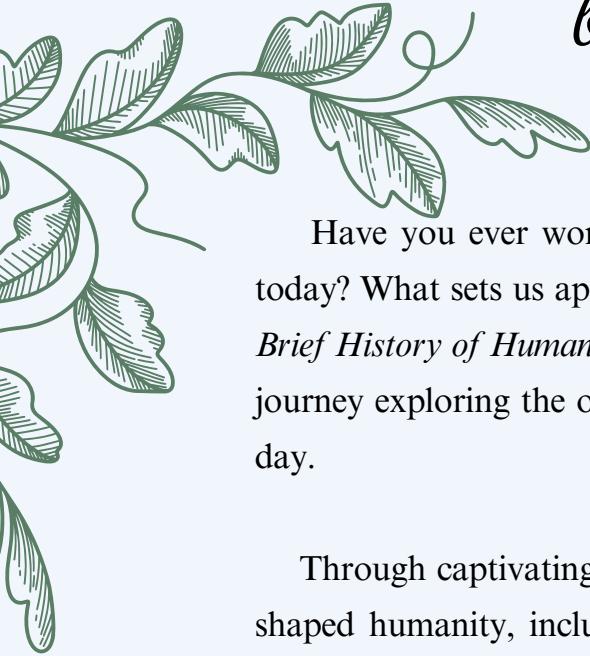
For some people, the magic comes from ranking and rating things. They love the careful consideration of how many stars a book really deserves. Some people love to rant, to release their unfiltered opinions into the sea of reviews. There are others, however, for whom reviews mean a little more. If you're an avid reader, you'll know what I mean when I say there's a certain empty feeling the last page of a book can leave you with. For many, books are an escape which takes them to a different, fuller, and brighter world. Finishing a book, leaving that place, makes the world seem much more dreary and dull. For these kinds of readers, book reviews serve as a place of transition. For them, taking the time to write and reflect on a meaningful book can reconcile their mind; it can commemorate the world they've just left behind and allow them to feel closure at the end of that fullness. If you don't read this way it's hard to grasp the sorrow of ending a book, but for some, reviews are a special cushion which softens the blow of life.

Maybe you don't need that though. That's okay. In the end, despite what it has the potential to be, a review is still nothing but a step in someone's post-read routine. I hope, however, that you, a reader, have come to see what a useful tool this seemingly arbitrary step can be. I hope that it's earned your respect as a meaningful practice. But mostly, I hope that the next time you finish a book, you flip the last page, close the back cover, and set it down on the coffee table. This time, though, I hope that you find yourself letting "THE END" lead to the beginning of your review.





# *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind,* by Yuval Noah

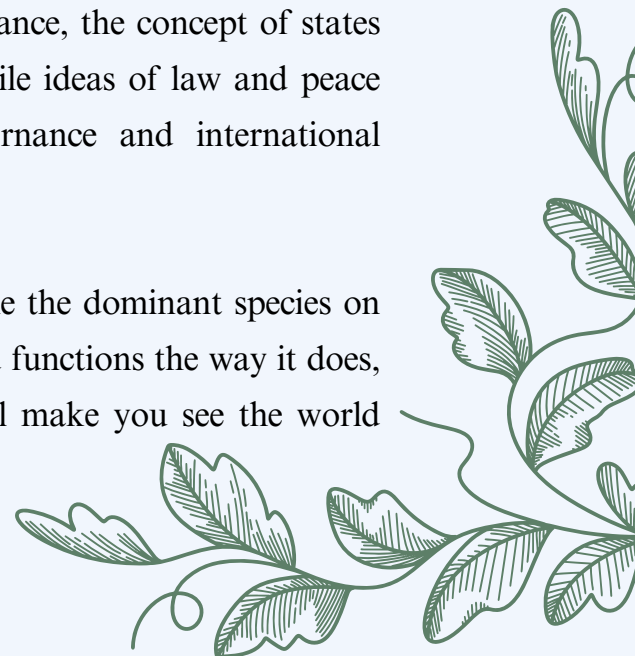


Have you ever wondered how we, humans, came to be the way we are today? What sets us apart from all the other animals on Earth? In *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari takes us on an unforgettable journey exploring the origins of our species from ancient times to the present day.

Through captivating storytelling, Harari delves into the key moments that shaped humanity, including numerous questions such as how early humans evolved, discovered fire, developed language, and built societies. He also shows how myths, religions, and money played crucial roles in shaping civilizations.

One of the most fascinating parts of the book is the author's discussion of the "Cognitive Revolution," which refers to when humans first gained the ability to imagine things that do not exist, like nations, laws, and peace. This groundbreaking evolution allowed us to cooperate in large groups and create complex societies based on shared beliefs. For instance, the concept of states led to the formation of countries and empires, while ideas of law and peace supported the development of systems of governance and international treaties.

If you have ever wondered how humans became the dominant species on Earth despite being the weakest and why our world functions the way it does, this book offers an insightful exploration that will make you see the world through a completely new light.



Samia Hazil

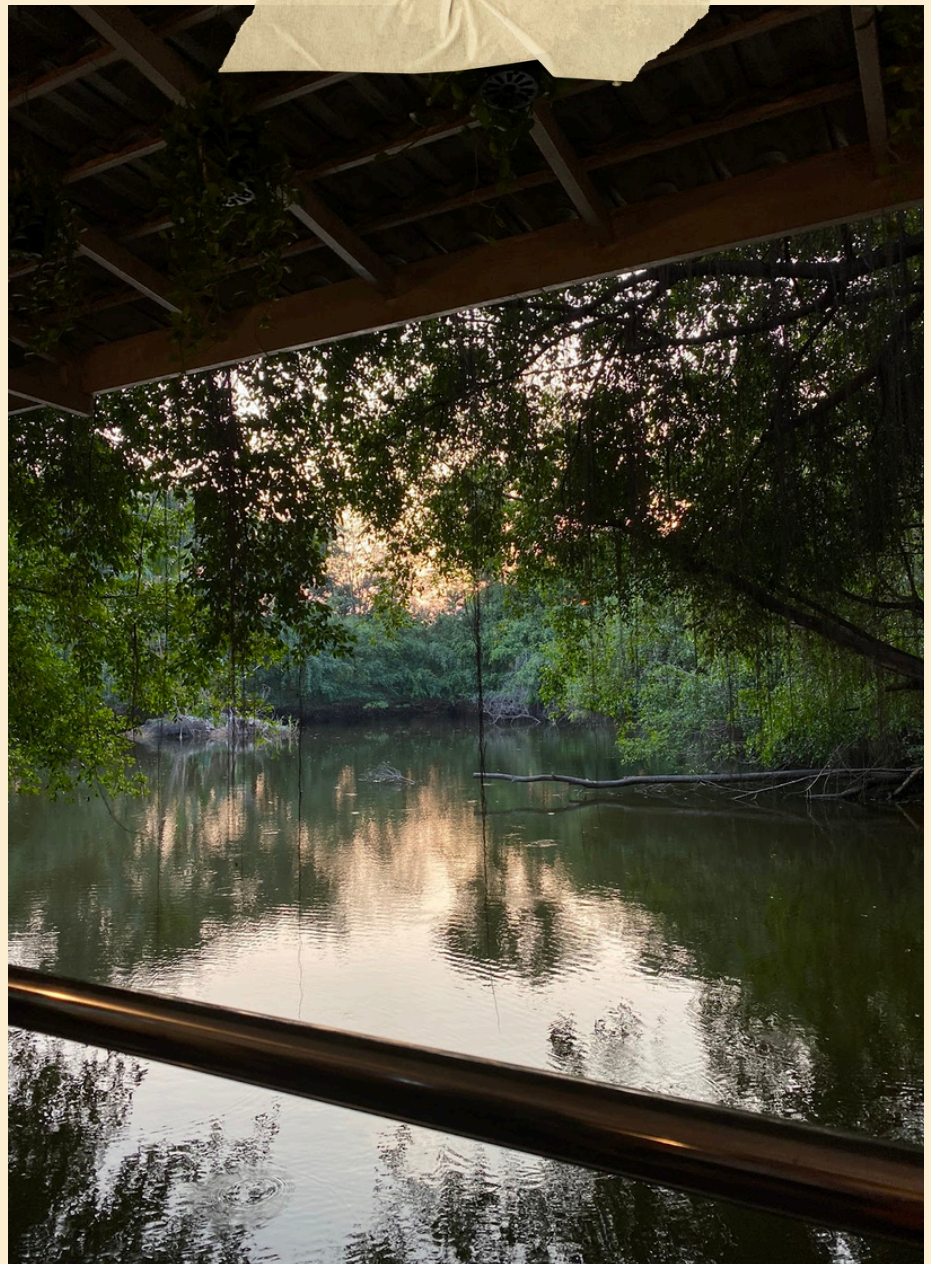


# POETRY

## Works

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- Beginning Speaks, Kayleigh
- Meeting Inspiration, Kayleigh
- Fear's Caring Embrace, August Leinart
- New Beginnings, Samia Hazil
- The Beauty of Beginnings, Jasmin De Jesuz
- Bird's Eye View, Eleanor Carver Ball



*Photograph by Jasmin De Jesuz*







# Beginning Speaks



By Kayleigh

I tell no story of loss, nor the hopes that faded when truth came  
To light.

I sing no song of regret; you can't meet it yet.

But maybe you'll find me when

The babe catches his breath for the first time,

When the green leaf sprouts under sun and moonlight—

Maybe, maybe

You'll see me under a new sky,

When golden rays kiss the horizon to end a dark night.

Or when the pencil rests while ideas fly,

When you finally caught the glimmer in a loved one's eye...

See me or not, I'm in it all, and I'm the start of life.



# Meeting Inspiration



By Kayleigh

Not a moment beyond, not a second too far

Before it'll come to be...

I can feel it through my fingertips,

Dancing and teasing me

But it's just not here yet.

I fiddle the pencil between my fingers,

And a pensive expression masks my face

As my eyes glance around to trace

The shapes and shades around me:

Forest green parrots fly in a ring,

A large-eyed praying mantis stares at the sky in wait,

A flowering tree glows,

And a boy, palm on cheek, sleeps in a quiet corner.

Silence makes way for the keys to speak,

So they click and they tap unceasingly.

There's a sweet elderly lady observing me.

Sitting at my side, she leans closer to say,

"Do tell, dear, what you are doing."

"I was looking for something."

"Did you find it?"

"Yes," I smile.

But I didn't find it,

Inspiration had found me.





# Fear's Caring Embrace

August Leinart

Fear is venom to Desire,  
A blight on Motivation.  
It softly coaxes you to remain stagnant.  
*After all, you're in no rush.*

There's Fear of overcoming Fear,  
Because what comes after that?  
Fear is a self-constructed torture chamber.  
*But also, a familiar shelter from the frigid  
unknown.*

Sit by the fire, stay a while.  
There's none more inviting than Fear.  
You don't even need to lift a finger.  
*Just rest in that stiff, rigid bed of loafing.*

You'll have the same meal every day.  
It's a meal you don't quite like,  
But why would you risk asking for new  
foods?  
*After all, you may dislike them more.*

Sometimes you think of going outside,  
Nothing's stopping you, the door's right  
there.  
Find new things, explore the unknown.  
*But Fear is always there to dissuade you.*

Why would you ever run from Fear?  
It welcomes you with such obsessed  
embrace,  
It tells you what you want to hear.  
*It only wants to keep you safe.*

But break out of the unassuming tendrils  
of Fear,  
Into that cold, bitter tundra of risk.  
For Fear has told you naught but  
falsehoods,  
To keep you from ever going out that  
door.

You do not have to know where you are  
headed,  
Nor what you will do when you get there.  
Put on your coat of Ambition and mittens  
of Courage,  
**And take the first step into that frigid  
Arctic of unfamiliarity.**





## NEW BEGINNINGS

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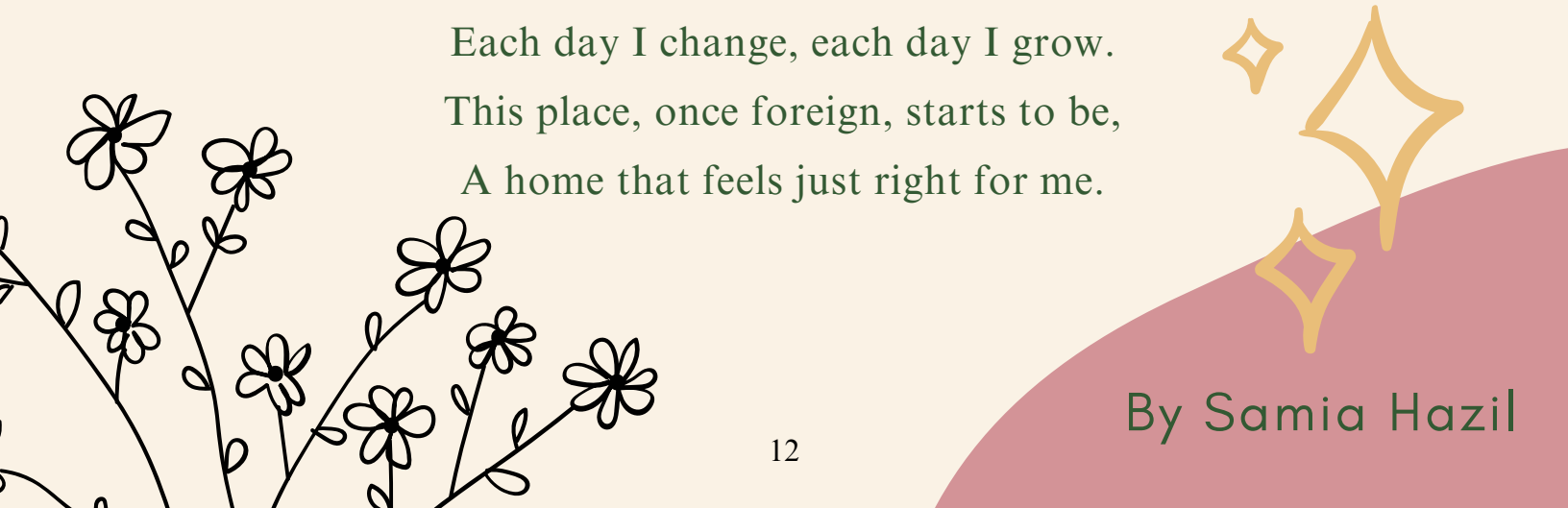
I packed my bags and said goodbye,  
A new place awaits, an unknown sky.

My heart is heavy, yet I go,  
To find a new life I'll come to know.

New faces, voices, streets, and ways.  
I count the hours. I count the days.  
Each step I take feels strange and new,  
But I hold on and see it through.

Beginnings feel strange, the rules are new,  
I miss my home, but I push through.  
Though fear still lingers in my mind,  
A stronger me is what I find.

I learn, I fail, I take it slow,  
Each day I change, each day I grow.  
This place, once foreign, starts to be,  
A home that feels just right for me.

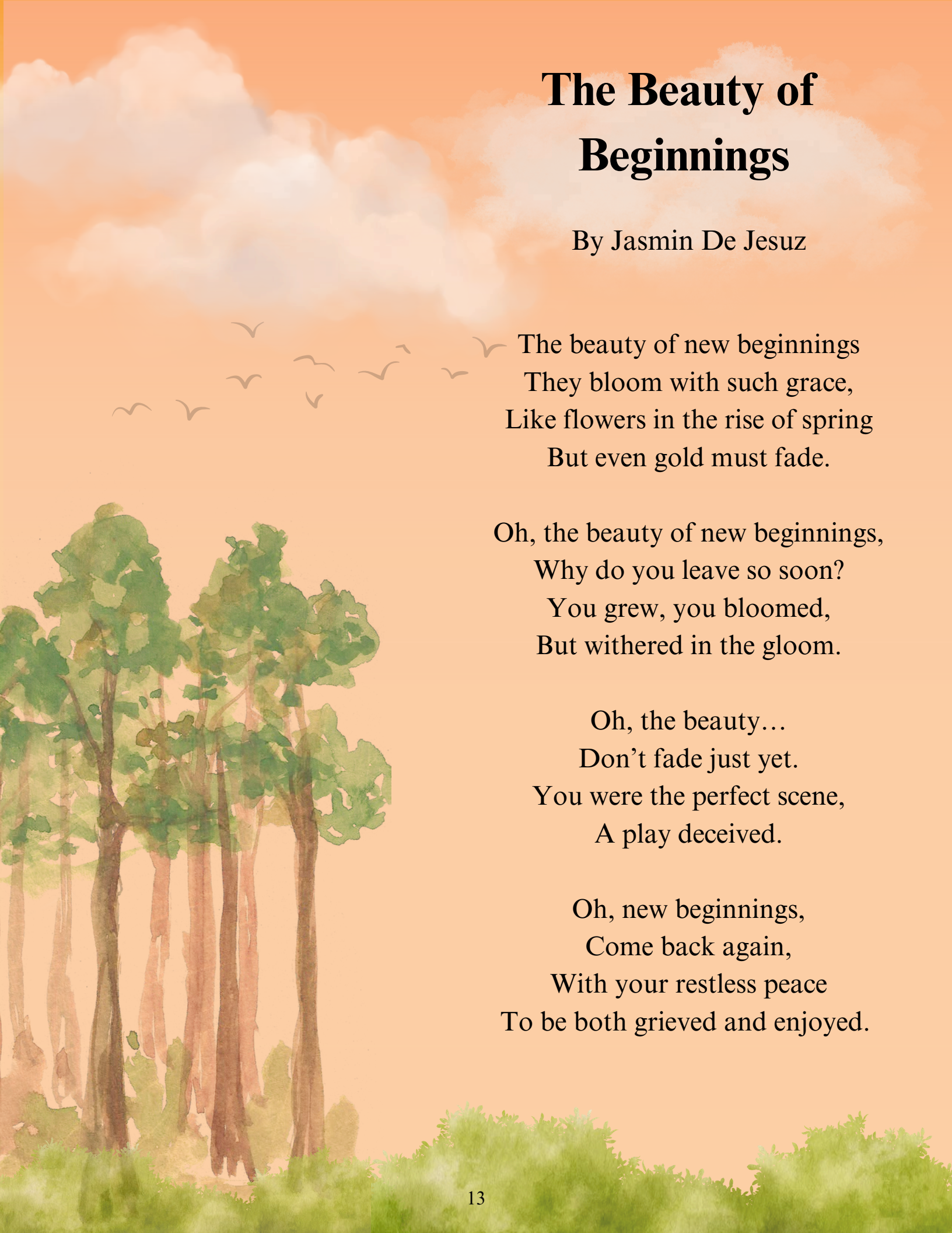


By Samia Hazil

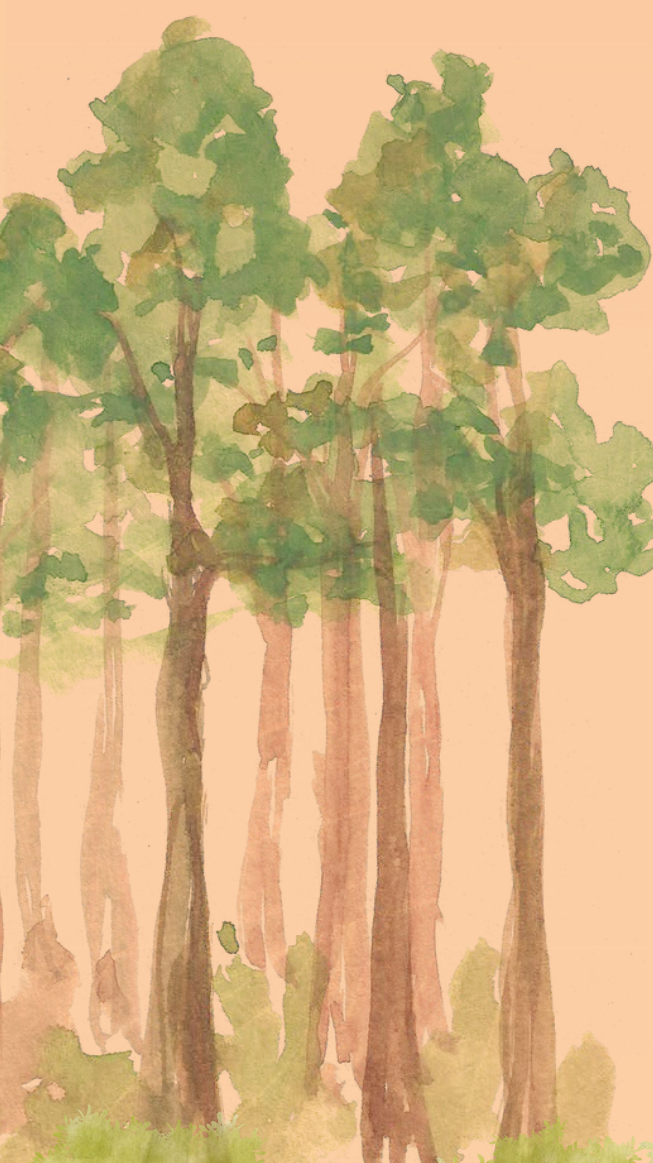


# The Beauty of Beginnings

By Jasmin De Jesuz



The beauty of new beginnings  
They bloom with such grace,  
Like flowers in the rise of spring  
But even gold must fade.

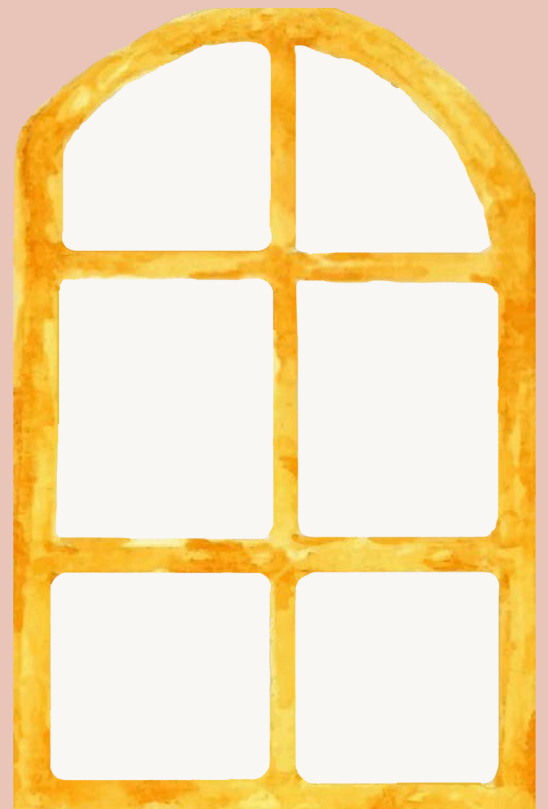
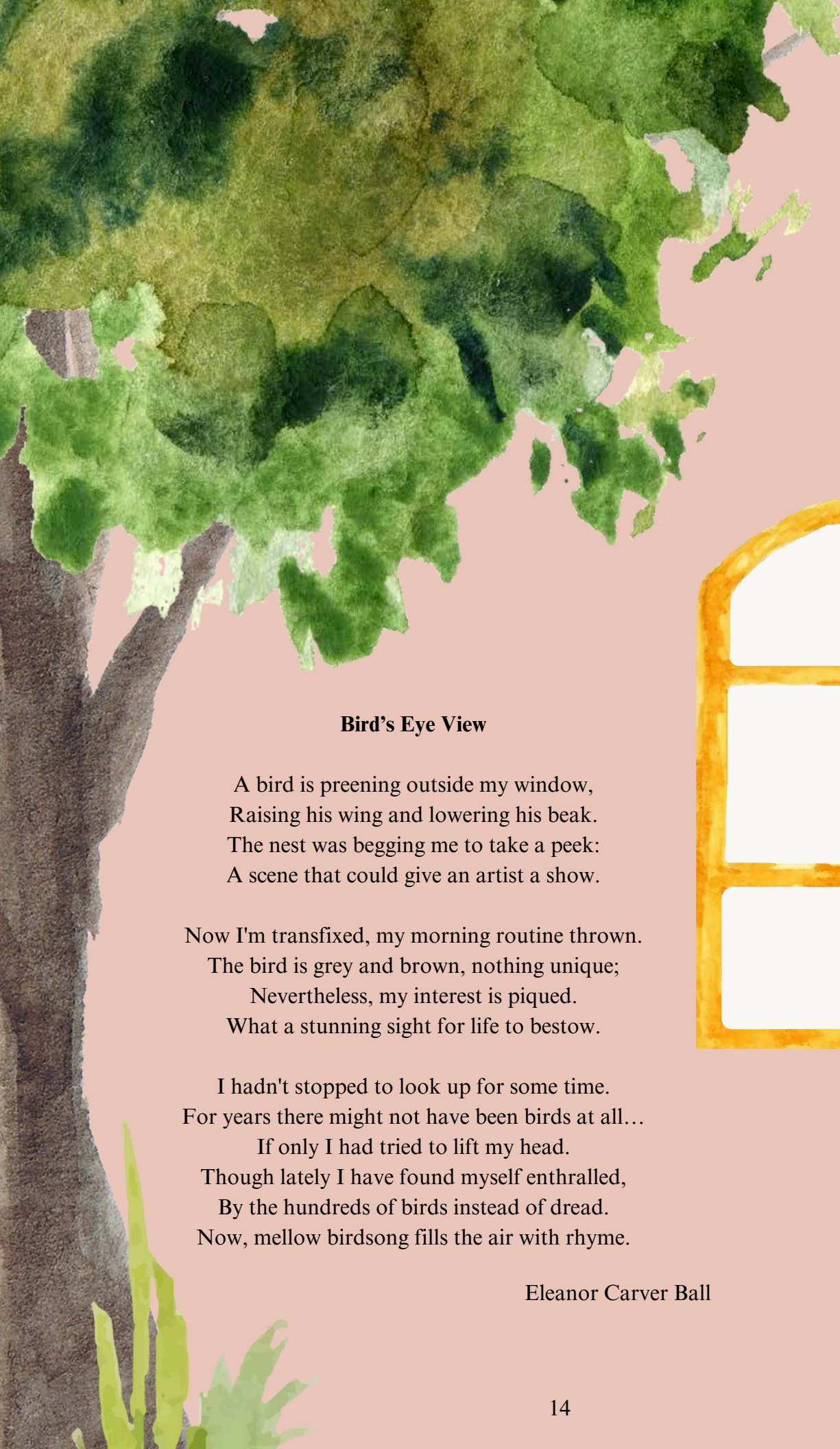


Oh, the beauty of new beginnings,  
Why do you leave so soon?  
You grew, you bloomed,  
But withered in the gloom.

Oh, the beauty...  
Don't fade just yet.  
You were the perfect scene,  
A play deceived.

Oh, new beginnings,  
Come back again,  
With your restless peace  
To be both grieved and enjoyed.





### **Bird's Eye View**

A bird is preening outside my window,  
Raising his wing and lowering his beak.  
The nest was begging me to take a peek:  
A scene that could give an artist a show.

Now I'm transfixed, my morning routine thrown.  
The bird is grey and brown, nothing unique;  
Nevertheless, my interest is piqued.  
What a stunning sight for life to bestow.

I hadn't stopped to look up for some time.  
For years there might not have been birds at all...  
If only I had tried to lift my head.  
Though lately I have found myself enthralled,  
By the hundreds of birds instead of dread.  
Now, mellow birdsong fills the air with rhyme.

Eleanor Carver Ball



# SHORT STORIES



- To Be Shown the Light, Ethan Cortez
- The Stranger and the Lesson, Jackson Lindsey
- Let Me Have a Restart, Danielle
- The Beginning, Axel Nguyen
- The Town, Alistair Coomber

*Photograph by Jasmin De Jesus*





# *To Be Shown the Light*

Ethan Cortez


All he wanted was to forget, to start anew, but oh, how she was a cruel one, maiden of the night. So many would have leapt at the chance, the chance for something new. Instead, he wept. She had played him; it could never be so simple with her. He had come to her begging and wishing to forget, for a start, rid of his past sins. She allowed him to forget, but this beginning was not the truth.

Some people may wish for new beginnings, but others will never get the chance. But what if they were to be given all the choices? To never worry about a beginning ruined? To know that one could do all as seen fit? No wrong was possible. Any beginning one could want.

He was a simple man at the start. His family—a loving spouse and two kids—looked up to him. Many would say his life was enviable, that his family was the greatest gift one could have. That may have been true; it was true, but he did not see it. He was afflicted with a terrible pain, a pain that he alone remembered. A war fought long ago, brought back to life every day for him. He could not unsee those who fell protecting him. He thought himself cursed, only able to see the darkness. His family could only watch, trying vainly to pull him from the grasp of something they could never understand.

Then there came the time that he could bear it no longer. The sounds of pain and visions that spelled a night of sweating, howling, waking those dearest to him, had won. He realized that he could no longer suffer the burden.





His wife stood at the window of their home as he made his way through the streets, sparing no goodbyes. The road lights seemed to usher him along. He had run to the one who claimed to make it all disappear. She had granted him what he wanted: the possibility to forget, no more nights of unending torment. Now he could truly part with those memories. But it was never so simple with those of her kind. To be relieved of memories, he was to forget his only joy as well. Broken as he was, the moments of his family trying to help were his lifeline.

The gift of forgetting had made him understand that the memories with his family could not be put out, that they were the candle in a dark room. He pleaded with her to stop the growing void. She complied, giving him not the gift of forgetting, but change. If he truly wished to push past those memories, he had to be shown the light. Who better to help than his kin? To try and be rid of the dark was foolhardy, for every time the night blankets the sky, the sun will rise to wash away the darkness.

So goes the story of the man who almost gave in, but instead, began anew.

# The Stranger and the Lesson

*Jackson Lindsey*



I barged into my room infuriated, slamming my door shut, rumbling my door sign off. It fell to the ground, making a loud “CLANG!” noise. I looked down, glimpsing at the words “Jackson Lindsey’s room! Stay out!” I kicked it aside, frustrated with yet another annoyance. I hopped in bed, still covered in sweat and tears. My body ached and was sore. I lay there mumbling to myself, cursing, crying, and sobbing. I kept asking myself, “Why did I lose?” I had trained so hard, yet I still lost, I failed. “What a waste of my time!” I yelled. I wanted to quit at once, but then there was a knock at my door. ‘Oh great,’ I thought to myself, ‘Here comes Dad.’ “Come in,” I said, still sobbing. I was looking down at the ground waiting for the words; instead, I was greeted with clinking sounds, what sounded like medals clinking together. ‘Had my father come to mock me?’ I wondered. I looked up, and to my surprise, a stranger had entered. A tall, athletic man wearing a US Olympian jersey walked into my room and took a seat like he lived there. I was left speechless.

I had no idea who this stranger was. He was wearing more than a couple dozen gold medals around his neck. The weight looked unbearable, yet he sat there tall and strong. “You know kid, yelling at the top of your lungs at ten o’clock at night may be a little disruptive to your sibling’s sleep,” he said while chuckling to himself. “Who are you?!” I began to shout, but before I could finish, he shushed me and stared at me like an older brother whose secrets were revealed at the dinner table to his family. He eased up and sat back down in my chair.

He looked out the window for a moment, as if he were admiring the streetlamp. He then brought his attention back to me and started to speak. “When I was a boy, losing was distasteful to me. I truly hated it, resented it, you could say.” He paused and took a sip from his mug. “One day,” he resumed, “one day after losing for what felt like an eternity, I was ready to quit. But then, my coach told me, “Quitting is a permanent solution for your dreams and a temporary solution to your failures.”





“I didn't understand what he meant at first. But over time I came to understand that losing was the biggest contributor to winning,” the stranger said, looking at me. “Do you want to know what I did from that day forth?” he asked. I was intrigued, now wiping the tears from my face. “What?” I asked. “You got to get up and try again,” he replied. “That’s the difference between a learner and a loser, kiddo,” he said. I looked at him, tilting my head, confused. “What do you mean?” I asked in curiosity. He glanced at me and gave me an odd look as if he were questioning himself. He sat there waiting with the silence of the room; I started to wonder what it would be like to have so many medals. He was either a lucky man or a madman who was obsessed with winning. “How did you do it?” I asked. “Would you like to see, child?” he responded. “Show me,” I asked, captivated by the thought. He stood up and reached his hand out and pressed his fingertips onto my head. He closed his eyes and winced as if he were in pain. His arm lit up bright gold like the sun, and streaks shot down his arm and into his hand. The room rumbled like an earthquake; everything started vibrating and buzzing. My head struck back and everything went dark.

I awoke; I was in a rowboat. I was looking down at my hands, which were sizzling as if there was acid being poured and eating away at my flesh. The blister fluids ran down my hand and it burned; I was soon greeted by the freezing sharp cold 5am air. I wanted to scream in agony, but this was one of the many. My legs ached, my arms burned, and my eyes were heavy from the little sleep I got. I was older though; I was taller and muscular. “Was I hallucinating?” I questioned myself. The cold silence was interrupted by a loud voice yelling into a megaphone. “Everyone! Last piece of the morning! We will race; last place will be kicked from the team.”

I could not see where the voice was coming from, somewhere behind me, my eyes too full of sweat and too dark to make anything out. I noticed there were a full ten boats spanning to my left and right sides. I had not noticed them; the only light source was coming from the moon’s rays and the small green lights strapped to the rower's chest. Boats of eight, filled with boys who had come here for the same dream. I now realized I was stroke seat at the front of the boat; seven more accompanied me behind. “Rowers! Prepare to start!” The voice yelled. I wiped my hands and gripped the oar, slowly sliding up to the catch with my legs compressed as a tight spring ready to launch. I placed my blade into the water and looked back to see everyone else doing the same. I looked down at the stroke coach. The distance was set to 2,000 meters (about 1.24 miles). I wiped my brow of sweat with my shoulder.

My feet strapped tight into the shoes, my arms extending the oar outwards, my hands gripping the handle for dear life, I was one with the machine, I was one with the boat, I was one with the team. “**ROWERS! ATTENTION! READY! ROW!!**” the voice said, so loud it echoed into my ears. Like stallions running from the stable, the compressed legs of every rower released and pushed with all their might. The first stroke shoved our boat forward. Our oars splashed into the water and ripped away the boat with such force we began to increase in speed. My brain was pumping with anxiety, excitement, and adrenaline. I started to increase the stroke rate, moving up and down the slide ever so much faster. The sound of yelling had broken out amongst the other boats; some were shouts of excitement, others of agony and pain. After sprinting the first five hundred meters, I went to settle into pace. Seven hundred meters in, I could barely keep the grip of the now blister fluid-covered oar. It was slick like a stick of hot butter. I was pushing as hard as I could. My legs started to burn ever so slightly; I could feel my lungs trying to maintain the bare minimum of air. My heart was starting to pound, throbbing from the pain, trying to keep up with my speed.





I looked down to see we hit the final five-hundred-meter mark. Pushing my hardest as if my life depended on it, the burning spread throughout my muscles like wildfire. The pain was miserable, but I wanted to persist, I wanted to win. Then I felt this deep desire within me, to win. Suddenly the pain was fading away, so I started to push harder. We had taken the lead. With the last one hundred meters left, I could hear the loud, heavy breaths of all those around me like racehorses. The screaming, the yelling, and the splashing. With the last couple meters, everyone was pushing their hardest. We were head-to-head when we crossed the finish line. Everyone collapsed, lying in the boat so exhausted. I was hurting all over, yet something inside me felt amazing. “Had we won?” I asked myself. Before I could say anything else, everything started to fade, then my vision started to peel like someone was ripping a painting apart, and then suddenly with ease I was back in my room.

The man removed his hand and sat down in exhaustion. “Pretty cool stuff, eh, kid?” the man said as if he too had just rowed the very race I was shown. Absolutely astonished. “That was incredible!” I shrieked in joy. “How do I do that?” I asked. “You don’t quit, simple as that,” the man replied, smiling. I wondered what it would be like to win tenfold. “That was the first time I had won in ages,” the man said, breaking my thought. “What do you mean?” I asked again. “Well prior to that, I had failed tryouts over a couple of dozen times,” he said, taking another sip from his mug. “I couldn’t understand what I was doing wrong,” he continued. “I spent thousands of hours training only to fail, but I kept trying, over and over again, until I became unrecognizable to myself and those around me,” he said looking down, bringing a medal up to eye level, examining its shine. “Then one day, it clicked: I became obsessed, I became unbeatable, I spent all of my spare time trying to become better.” He stood up, spreading his arms out, revealing his medals once more.

It was like looking at God; the Gold was almost radiating the room with a faint warm glow. I reached out, wanting to touch the precious trophy. Before I could do so, he began to walk away towards the door. He stopped to pick up my sign; he looked at it, chuckled, and brushed it off as if it were once his. He hung it back up, and before he left, he looked at me one last time and said, “Don’t ever quit, remain consistent kid, anything is possible as long as you try, including your dreams, just go for it!” He laughed and walked away. I caught a glimpse of his jersey name: “Jackson Lindsey” it read. He closed the door before I could do anything. I rushed to the door and yanked it open to find that no one was to be found.



# Let Me Have a Restart

By: Danielle

The day was frigid, with a high of thirty-two degrees and a low of eighteen degrees. While many would dread a day like this, Sarah loved it. “Finally, I’m done with all my errands.” Sarah had just finished shopping for groceries and started walking home. Fantasizing about all the food she could make on her well-deserved day off, her thoughts were interrupted by the buzzing of her phone. “Does he have nothing to do other than to bother me?” Sarah questioned in a defeated voice. She had been getting calls all afternoon from her brother, but Sarah refused to answer because of an argument they’d had months ago about their mother’s death.

• She said she would never pick up the phone for him ever again, but the more calls that came in, the more worried she got. She finally gave in. “Ugh, what do you want? I told you I would not answer your calls. Say what you need and be quick,” Sarah said with attitude. The unexpected call made Sarah lose all sense of awareness. The tiny blue Kia Soul flew straight towards her. By the time she noticed, it was too late. *No, this cannot happen today*, she thought in stress and panic. *I have not made amends with my brother yet. I need a restart.* Then, an alarm started to blare.

The day was frigid, with a high of thirty-two degrees and a low of eighteen degrees. While many would dread days like this, Sarah loved them. “What!?” Her eyebrows furrowed; she was back in front of the old market with groceries dangling in both hands. “Huh! How is this possible? I must have been blessed by the gods with a second chance.” Her eyebrows started to relax while the edge of her lips curled into a smile from her newfound power. Her phone began to ring. She thought to herself, *I’m not answering that*. The phone rang and rang, and then suddenly, the ringing stopped. Sarah began to sigh, thinking she was safe from her doom, but as she stood there, a large overhead sign gave way, crashing straight on top of Sarah’s head, the top of her skull breaking into millions of pieces. Then, an alarm started to blare.

The day was frigid, with a high of thirty-two degrees and a low of eighteen degrees. Many dreaded days like this, and Sarah was starting to as well. Sarah no longer felt blessed by the gods; her eyebrows furrowed as she crossed her arms. “UGH, will I continue this cycle for the rest of my life?” Her mind then flashed to her brother. “Could these loops be solved by talking to him?” Sarah waited in anticipation for her phone to ring, and once it did, she picked it up with no ounce of hesitation. “Hey, I’m coming to see you. Where are you right now?” Sarah asked. “Oh, I’m at my house, I wanted to talk as well.” After hanging up, she waved down a cab.



Once she arrived at the apartment, Sarah took a deep breath before stepping out of the cab. This time, no matter what happened, she wasn't going to make the same mistakes. She was willing to listen. No longer would she let fear and anger dictate her choices. She knocked on the door. Not even a second passed before her brother answered. Both looked at each other with so much to say, but nothing came out. "Sarah? What's going on, are you okay?" She had a lot on her mind, but still nothing came out. Instead, she simply stood there. Then finally she spoke.

"Can we talk, you know, about what happened?"

"Yeah, of course," he said, stepping back to let her in. "Come on in. I didn't expect you today. You've been, uh, distant lately."

Sarah sat down on her brother's brown sofa; it was comfortable, warm, and smelled familiar. "The old sofa?" It was their mother's favorite sofa, but she remembered it being torn to shreds and discarded when she was about ten. Her brother sat at her side. "I'm sorry," they both said in unison. Sitting there in silence made the words sting more. "If I had been there, Mom wouldn't have fallen and died that day," he said, breaking the silence. Sarah was confused; the pain of her mother was there, but new feelings grew. An understanding of her brother's feelings. The pain of not only losing his mother but also the abandonment and resentment from his sister. "I should have understood that you were grieving as well. I just ended up hurting you more," she said with tears welling in her eyes. The words she spilled were like hot chocolate on a winter day for him. He hugged her tightly. "It's okay, Sarah, it's not your fault. I could never hold a grudge against you." The hug felt as if the warmth of a fireplace engulfed her. She began to cry as the alarm started to blare, but this time she was walking back to reality. "If only I got to apologize before you left," Sarah whispered as her brother faded from view.

Today was the anniversary of her mother's death. Tomorrow would be the anniversary of her brother's. For the last ten years, she'd had dreams like these. She believed it to be a sign from her mother and brother to never forget about them and to live a happy life. These dreams helped her to live her life with more understanding and compassion.



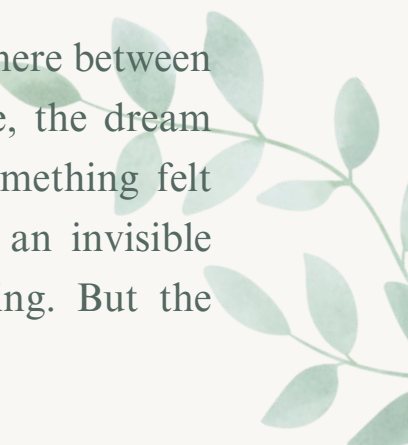
# *The Beginning*

BY AXEL NGUYEN

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Elliot stared at the blank sheet of paper on his desk. A single lamp illuminated the small apartment, casting lingering shadows on the peeling wallpaper. Outside, the city murmured with distant sirens and the hum of late-night traffic, but inside, there was only silence. And an overwhelming sense of stagnation.

He had always dreamed of becoming a writer, but somewhere between paying rent and working late shifts at a convenience store, the dream had dulled into a mere afterthought. Tonight, though, something felt different. A restless energy stirred within him, as though an invisible force had nudged him toward this moment. The beginning. But the words refused to come.



Elliot leaned back, inhaling. The smell of coffee and paper filled his lungs. He glanced at the typewriter he had bought from a thrift store months ago, hoping it would ignite some sense of urgency, of nostalgia for the greats who had come before him. Yet the blank paper remained, mocking him.

With a sigh, he stood and moved to the window, pressing his forehead against the freezing glass. Across the street, a neon diner sign flickered, and he imagined the people inside—lovely couples sharing milkshakes, lonely travelers relishing cups of coffee. Their stories unfolded in his mind, fragmented but alive. Perhaps that was the key. He needed to step outside his confined world.



Grabbing his coat, Elliot left his apartment, the chilly night air biting at his skin. The diner bell jingled as he entered. The warmth of the place welcomed him, along with the scent of fried food and coffee. He took a seat at the counter, nodding at the waitress who seemed to have worked there forever.

“Late night?” she asked, pouring him a cup of black coffee without waiting for an order.

“Something like that,” Elliot replied, wrapping his hands around the cup. He let his gaze drift, observing the patrons. An elderly man in a wrinkled suit stirred his tea with slow, deliberate movements. A teenage girl scribbled furiously in a notebook, headphones cocooning her in another world. A couple sat by the window, chattering in hushed voices. Each person had a story waiting to be told.

For the first time in months, maybe years, inspiration flickered within him. He pulled out a crumpled napkin from the dispenser and a pen from his coat pocket. The ink flowed as he scribbled down details—the old man’s weary expression, the way the teenager chewed the end of her pen, the way the couple’s hands twitched toward each other.

He was beginning.

A presence settled beside him, and he looked up to find a woman taking the stool next to him. She was in her early thirties, with brown hair that tumbled in loose waves. She ordered a coffee, then turned to him with a gentle smile. “You’re a writer,” she stated, rather than asked.







Elliot hesitated before nodding. "I'd like to be."

She glanced at the napkin. "Seems like you already are."

He let out a soft chuckle. "I guess this is the first step."

The woman sipped her coffee. "Beginnings are funny things, aren't they? They feel insignificant when they happen, but later, you look back and realize they were everything."

Elliot mulled over her words. "Yeah. Like crossing a threshold without even knowing it."



She nodded, stirring sugar into her coffee. "I'm Claire, by the way."

"Elliot." He hesitated before adding, "What's your story?"

Claire smiled, as if she had been waiting for that question. "New city. New job. New everything. I suppose I'm in the middle of my own beginning."

He found himself intrigued, drawn into her presence. They talked, the conversation weaving through books, dreams, and the weight of expectations. For the first time in a long while, Elliot felt alive, as though something had been unlocked within him.





When he finally returned to his apartment, the city was quiet, the neon diner sign still flickering. He sat at his desk, the blank sheet of paper waiting. But this time, he did not hesitate. He rolled it into the typewriter, placed his fingers on the keys, and began to write.

And just like that, a new chapter began.



# The Town

*“Out of all of humanity's flaws, emotion is perhaps the greatest. We could achieve so much if we dedicated ourselves to a single principle, yet emotional selfishness always gets in the way.” - The Original*

by Alistair Coomber

The clouds were gray in the city of Galesford. A small group of children ran through the muddy grass, probably playing tag. Wind blew across the road, picking up dead leaves and twirling them in the air. A young couple walked by, smiling in the breeze. *Then the Enlightened came.*

*We inhale a long-forgotten scent as we enter the city. All inhabitants quickly move inside, drawing their blinds. We begin meticulously checking homes, each having its own mysterious quality, which feels as if it has been with us all along. Do we all feel this way? C3 tries to ask but cannot find the words. C1 tells us to stop talking. A citizen with a badge approaches and tells us to leave. We will have to report back and resume the next day. The leader will not be pleased.*



We hear the melody but not the lyrics. We had forgotten about that song, but not anymore. It was starting to come back: the rows of children surrounding us, singing along. We sang with them, trying to forget the horrors that had happened that night. But there was no forgetting.

We were having a party for a very special day. A birthday. My 6th birthday. In Galesford. Then something terrible happened. People were in our house, they were coming for us. I heard everything, I got to the roof, Lucy was there. Then I fell, and it all went black. What happened to her? Was she safe?

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*We awoke and continued our search. The man with the star was nowhere in sight. The buildings were different now, but not in a way that could be explained. Our childhood was coming back. We had just started our search when a group of citizens showed up, surrounding us. They had many questions, yet we had no answers, and thus they drew their blades.*

Now the sounds truly came back: not just in our brain, but around us. *We ran, but no matter how much we tried to get away, the tight cloth of our robes would send us to the ground. The Enlightened began to fall. We tore off our robe, we did not. We got away, we did not.*

*We began our journey back to the shrine, needing to report to the leader, yet, the darker the day grew, the more lost we became. It was getting cold. We needed warmth. We were almost frozen when we found it.*

It was the house from the dream... our house. We slowly stepped through the empty doorframe, tracking mud across the wooden floor. We found the fireplace where it always was and started to light it. At first the fire was soothing, but its comforting light soon revealed the blood that was shed there long ago. We rushed out of the room, trying to find a place of safety, but it had all been tainted.

We leaned against a wall, hoping it would go away, that this was all another dream, and we would wake up. We tried so hard to open our eyes, but they were already open. Then we looked down, and our body went numb. Before our eyes were the bloody footprints of our long-ago assailants, next to the footprints from *our* muddy Enlightened boots, both identical.

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*When Group C did not return last night, the Enlightened knew something had happened. This morning, the leader sent Group F to search for them. All members except for C3 were found dead near the town. C3's tag was reportedly found among the debris of a burned-down house, the body most likely destroyed in the fire.*

*"I used to be Gabriel, then I was C3. Now I only live by two promises. I will find Lucy, and I will destroy the Enlightened." - Me*

# Meet our editorial team

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Editor-in-Chief

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Alistair (11th grade)

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