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WEEKEND

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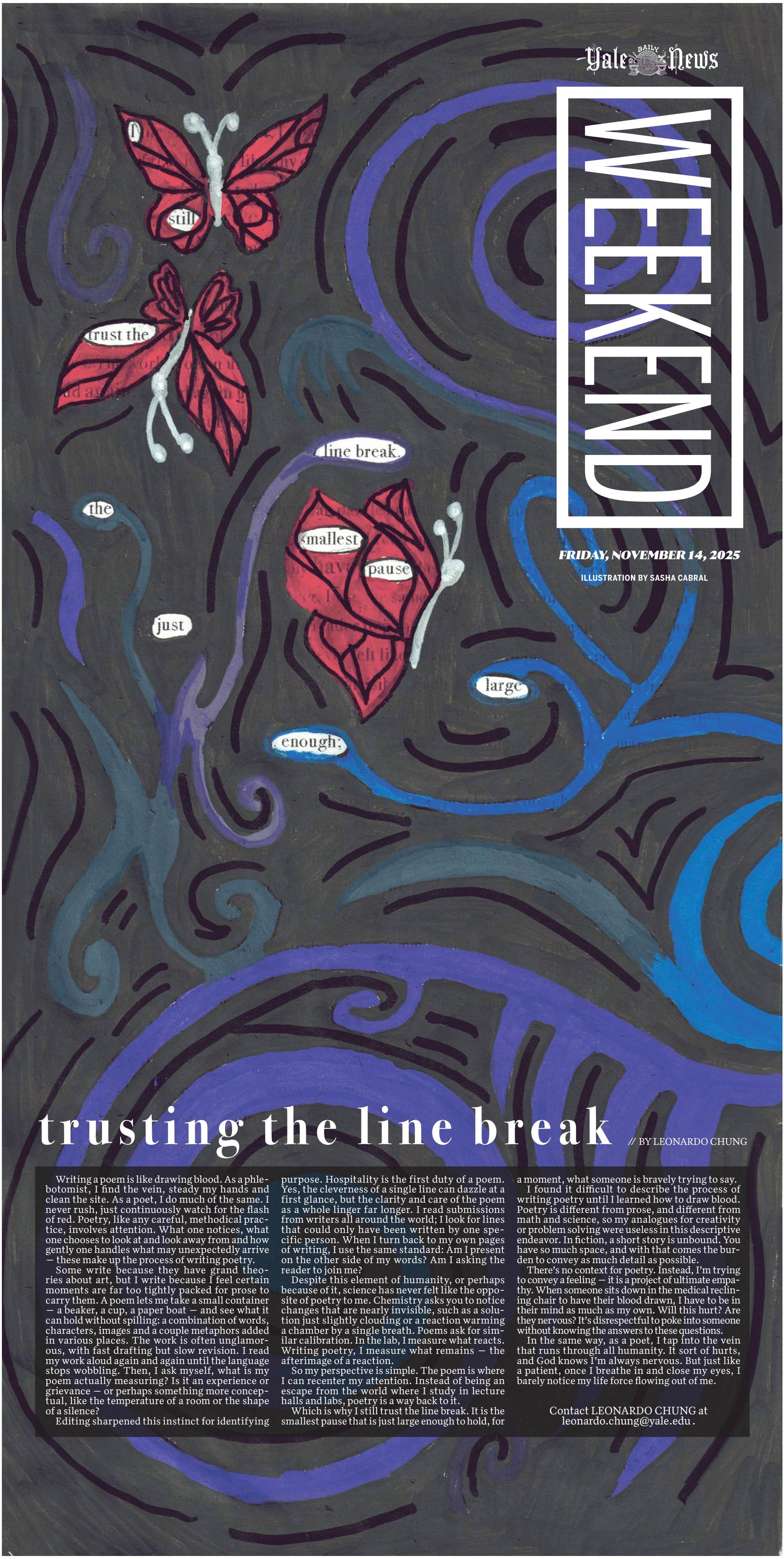


ILLUSTRATION BY SASHA CABRAL

trusting the line break

// BY LEONARDO CHUNG

Writing a poem is like drawing blood. As a phlebotomist, I find the vein, steady my hands and clean the site. As a poet, I do much of the same. I never rush, just continuously watch for the flash of red. Poetry, like any careful, methodical practice, involves attention. What one notices, what one chooses to look at and look away from and how gently one handles what may unexpectedly arrive — these make up the process of writing poetry.

Some write because they have grand theories about art, but I write because I feel certain moments are far too tightly packed for prose to carry them. A poem lets me take a small container — a beaker, a cup, a paper boat — and see what it can hold without spilling: a combination of words, characters, images and a couple metaphors added in various places. The work is often unglamorous, with fast drafting but slow revision. I read my work aloud again and again until the language stops wobbling. Then, I ask myself, what is my poem actually measuring? Is it an experience or grievance — or perhaps something more conceptual, like the temperature of a room or the shape of a silence?

Editing sharpened this instinct for identifying purpose. Hospitality is the first duty of a poem. Yes, the cleverness of a single line can dazzle at a first glance, but the clarity and care of the poem as a whole linger far longer. I read submissions from writers all around the world; I look for lines that could only have been written by one specific person. When I turn back to my own pages of writing, I use the same standard: Am I present on the other side of my words? Am I asking the reader to join me?

Despite this element of humanity, or perhaps because of it, science has never felt like the opposite of poetry to me. Chemistry asks you to notice changes that are nearly invisible, such as a solution just slightly clouding or a reaction warming a chamber by a single breath. Poems ask for similar calibration. In the lab, I measure what reacts. Writing poetry, I measure what remains — the afterimage of a reaction.

So my perspective is simple. The poem is where I can recenter my attention. Instead of being an escape from the world where I study in lecture halls and labs, poetry is a way back to it.

Which is why I still trust the line break. It is the smallest pause that is just large enough to hold, for a moment, what someone is bravely trying to say.

I found it difficult to describe the process of writing poetry until I learned how to draw blood. Poetry is different from prose, and different from math and science, so my analogues for creativity or problem solving were useless in this descriptive endeavor. In fiction, a short story is unbound. You have so much space, and with that comes the burden to convey as much detail as possible.

There's no context for poetry. Instead, I'm trying to convey a feeling — it is a project of ultimate empathy. When someone sits down in the medical reclining chair to have their blood drawn, I have to be in their mind as much as my own. Will this hurt? Are they nervous? It's disrespectful to poke into someone without knowing the answers to these questions.

In the same way, as a poet, I tap into the vein that runs through all humanity. It sort of hurts, and God knows I'm always nervous. But just like a patient, once I breathe in and close my eyes, I barely notice my life force flowing out of me.

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