



# *genesis*

*literary & art magazine*  
*volume fifty-five*  
*2026*

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# Letter from the Editors

It is with the highest honor to be able to share the *genesis* Spring 2026 issue with you all. Despite being a part of this magazine since we began our time here at IU Indianapolis, each year, we are still in complete awe of the talent and beautiful minds of our contributors. Being able to serve an outlet for student voices has been, and always will be, a privilege that we oath to never take for granted.

The work presented to you in this year's publication undoubtedly serves as a time stamp for the 2026 academic year. Our contributors amplify the feeling of what it means to be human, in every form we walk this earth in. From heartache, denial, and from grief to joy, we are able to find solace in one another's company and in one another's words.

Thank you to all of our contributors who have kept our magazine in mind throughout workshops, major revisions, and finalizing portfolios. We thank the contributors who walk away today with a handful of copies for everyone they love. We thank the readers who hunt for the artist they know—the ones who flip vigorously through the pages to find that very special someone. This issue is built on support, and you are the foundation. We would also like to thank our fantastic staff of editors, our faculty advisor, Sarah Layden, who embodies guidance and wisdom, and every single contributor who loves *genesis* just as much as we do.

We invite you to feel the weight and power of our student body in the pages following. Lose yourself in the art. The words. The blank spaces in between. The world around us lies within this issue, and we know it to be captured with such beauty and bravery.

Without further ado, *genesis* Volume Fifty-Five.

Sophia & Savanna  
*Managing Editors*

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# Baby

*Evan Allee*

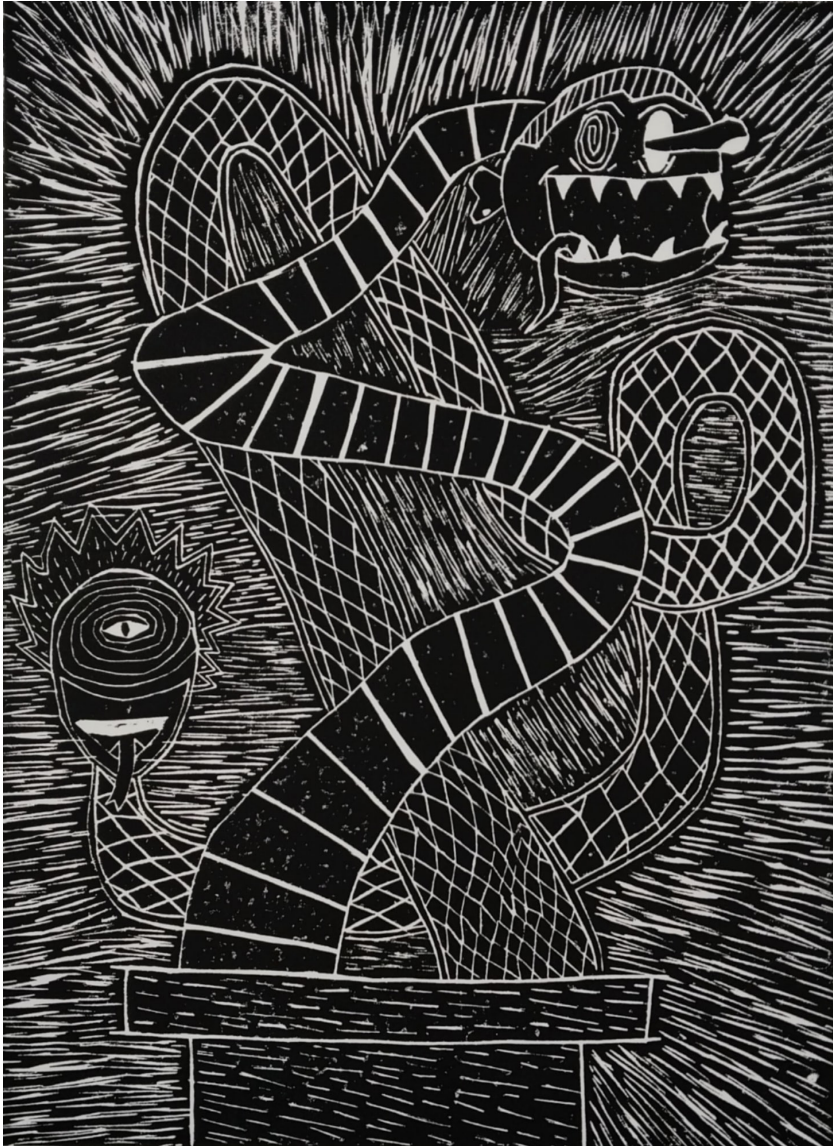
*after the “What Were You Wearing?” installation*

That’s where you went wrong, baby,  
wearing a skintight dress  
in a bar darker than a serpent’s cavity—  
lighten up. We’re just joking.  
More uptight than integument, you are.  
Molt for us. Smile, without the hissing.  
We are charmers; charismatic, slipping magic  
into bubbling flutes—and God,  
look at you,  
    asking for it.

That formless dress conceals  
your pubescent shape—perfect  
for force-fed hips to grow childbearing  
under. You are such a young  
woman floating in the fountain of youth;  
we are bottomfeeders sniffing out blood  
in the water. Your lover, a connoisseur  
of acquired tastes;  
    your firsts,  
    and childrearing  
    not you, but our baby.

Your round belly filled out  
that floral onesie so quickly.  
Precarious snaps popping  
with toddling steps. Tread lightly.  
Fall into me—good. Girls,  
    with their silent languages  
    and goo-goo eyes, always  
    have ways of asking  
    without speaking.

Don’t you,  
    baby?



## **Serpent's Gaze**

Gabriella Hanquier

*9" x 12" Linocut*

# American Emesis

*Eris Hembree*

Praise me! I am your Saint!  
Partake in my flesh,  
Drink of my blood!  
Yet the flesh, is Dirty!  
So reject my unclean wine.  
Down your Molotov cocktails!  
Swallow your Tide Pods!

Fuck me like you love me!  
Throw me in your closet,  
Dirty and used.  
Your mother would be ashamed!

I am not who kills your children.  
Children kill children,  
with guns and pills,  
with cars and booze.

So, give them to the pastor,  
who puts his “God” inside them,  
or give them to the military,  
who gives them guns and septic wounds.

Sink your teeth  
into pollution and plastic!  
Does genocide taste better than DEI  
when served on slave-labor silver platters?

Kiss your saint of emesis!  
The bitter draught  
that falls twice upon your tongue.  
bitter to start,  
burning in its parting.  
Pick me from your teeth!  
I ruined your carpet.

Eat all you want!  
This will never sate your hunger!  
Avert your eyes!  
Enjoy your colonialist hotdog!  
Maybe its rotten meat  
will taste better with ignorance!

# The Elevator

*Kira Jansen*

Splat.

The rainbow swirled lollipop hits my freshly cleaned tongue.

Today was Sunday, and Sunday meant deep cleaning. The steam cleaner had been used, my tongue scraped clear of granola crumbs, gum wrapper, and other debris tucked into corners, no longer recognizable.

What a clumsy child. I shouldn't judge too harshly, after all they are only a child. The mother quickly glances at the lollipop, taking a break from their phone, but does not crouch to pick it up. She tugs her child's arm away, as they try to reach for their lost prize. As it lays on my tongue its yellow, red, blue, and green stickiness start to seep into the fibers. I've never had a sweet tooth, so the experience is not pleasurable. I wish I could spit it out, but alas I am only an elevator with no bodily motion except to run up and down and open and close my mouth.

Ding, I open my mouth to let out a groan as I reach the ground floor. The family of two hurries out, the child looking back longingly at their sweet sweet lollipop before being whisked away by their mother. I watch them walk away and close my mouth seeing no other visitors to board. I stay suspended in the pitch black elevator chute. I start counting the hours to when the building cleaners will make their rounds. No steam cleaner today, but at least the lollipop will be disposed of. My home is an elite establishment, no rainbow lollipop would be left to stay for too long. The Royal Hotel is what the people call my home. I do have to say myself, the name gives it justice. The hall I can see from my domain is lined with gold pillars standing on each side carrying the large expanse of ceiling arched over in a dome shape. The pillars have it better, sure they have more to carry but at least they have each other.

Shimmering white marble encased the hotel. Marble desks, marble floor, and marble winding stairs. Who wanted to use the

stairs, am I right? The addition of myself appealed to the more contemporary folk. My lightning speed is an added bonus to the hotel for all impatient guests, which I find most guests to be. Speaking of my lightning speed, I really should be ready for more passengers by now. I wonder what the wait is. I yearn for the light. It gets cold in this dark chute. I rarely ever have to sit with my thoughts for too long. Business men and women, couples on their anniversaries, and families on vacation are constantly boarding me as they rush in and out of the hotel eager to fulfill some purpose in their lives.

Then I hear it.

Gunshots. Screams. The sounds break through the once eerie silence and pump adrenaline into my body. I race up to follow the sounds. Whatever could be happening out there? I open my mouth at the twelfth floor, revealing my home in disarray. Before I am able to take everything in, a tall lean man dressed all in black rushes in and presses my ground floor tooth. I can't see his face but I know right away. He breathes heavily, and leans over trying to catch his breath. Whatever chaos had befallen the hotel, he was the perpetrator. He fidgets with his bulky tote bag, puffing out quick short breaths. The smell of cigarette smoke wafts off him into my vents and lingers so strong I can taste it.

Bang!

The man hits the side of my mouth out of frustration with how slow I am moving. I usually am so quick to let off my passengers but today I seem to be taking my time. It's not within my functions to be able to decide whether to speed up or slow down. Why am I taking so long? I finally drop to the ground floor and pause. Hmm. I can't open my mouth. The dentists really should come take a look at me soon, I seem to be wearing down. My gears need oiling, my appointment should be coming up soon. My passenger lets out a banshee-like scream when he realizes the doors aren't opening. I feel his coarse hands pry at my jaws to no avail. For what is human strength compared to machines? I feel nice, glad, happy? Yes..I feel happy at this moment that the man is trapped. Better in here than out there. Out there where the hurried mother and clumsy child might still be. Perhaps eating a bright pink bubblegum

icecream, a hotel favorite for young newcomers. Or visiting one of the many brightly lit gift shops with plushies the size of the child. I ponder on this scenario for a while before coming back to the situation at hand.

The man paces back and forth muttering to himself. His shoes scuff my tongue as he makes sharp turns. My tongue burns as his pace quickens and hardens. Suddenly the passenger drops into a crouch, cradling his head in his hands. His eyes flit up to the lollipop stuck on my tongue. I see, no, I'm imagining it. For a moment I thought I saw a slight smile run across his face. Did it bring back memories for him? He then curls up into a fetal position on my tongue and rocks back and forth, as if to comfort himself. I sigh, well not really, as I am just an elevator. I feel at peace seeing the man become more and more passive as he lays trapped in me. His breathing slows down.

He'll be alright.

The sound of sirens intensifies, thuds of rushed footsteps follow. Gruff shouts sound over the ruckus. Then miraculously my mouth opens up as it should have done ten minutes ago. I grow heavy with the weight of many passengers and then in a few minutes I am empty again. That couldn't have been my doing, could it?

After all it is the fate of an elevator to only watch over the people that board them. But it seems today that was not the case.



## **Mourning Dove's Stave**

Marcus Z. Ramey

*4032 x 3024 Photography*

# Jackdaw Daydreams

*Marcus Z. Ramey*

Jackdaw daydreams died,  
on a power line, left  
alone, powerless.

# Scotomaphobia

Jay Loperena-Martin

“You ready, sweetheart?” Nadia asks, brushing my hair away from the back of my neck. I offered to let her cut it to make all of this easier, but she’d said since it won’t grow back naturally it’d be a pain to replace, and she likes it long anyway.

I’m *not* ready. Androids don’t feel pain the same way humans do, but it’s not exactly pleasant having someone peel back your synthetic shell and tamper with your spinal cord. I’m sitting on the table in front of her, hands gripping the edge of Nadia’s workbench as I lean forward to give her a better view. Her workshop is cluttered, heaps of trinkets and scrap metal scattered across the cracked linoleum at my feet. I told her I would organize it for her one of these days, but she claims to know exactly where everything is. Organized chaos, I think she calls it.

I offer her a rigid nod.

“Alright,” she murmurs, pressing a kiss to the nape of my neck as she pulls on her goggles. “Alright love, I’ll be quick.”

Nadia pulls back my plastic skin, reaching for the small handheld buzz saw at her side. She cuts through the soldered edges of the metal panel between my shoulders, sparks shooting off and landing harmlessly on the table beneath me. I have to manually disable my motor functions to keep myself from flinching under her hands. She notices, of course she does.

“Baby,” she says, “It’s okay, honey, just relax.”

*Just relax*, she says. You try to relax when someone’s taking a scalpel to your neck.

Nadia’s trying. She doesn’t understand, but she’s trying. She goes in with her wire cutters, snapping nerves until my vision goes dark.

It's been a few weeks of this, her coming back from the scrapyards with some new trinket to fix me up. First it was my voicebox, shattered and only able to speak in garbled static, then my battery, sputtering out on its last legs and only able to keep me upright for a few hours at a time, and then my hands, too clunky for most fine motor functions. I never get used to the trust fall, letting her open me up and tinker with the most delicate parts of me.

As she slashes more wires and my senses blink out one by one, my system starts to buzz with anxiety. Like I said, it doesn't *hurt* exactly, but I'm hard coded to go on high alert when my diagnostics pick up that something is *wrong*, and that urgent maintenance is required if I'm meant to keep functioning like this and damnit, I'm *getting* maintenance already so why can't I just turn that *off*—

Nothing's wrong. Nadia's working on it. She's helping. I'm okay.

The thing about human brains is that they're fundamentally evolved to keep track of things like where predators live and what plants are poisonous and the fact that fire burns and stabbing hurts and walking off a very tall ledge is a quick way to a very bad time. Fear is an instinct made for survival— and humans think their fear is so special, as if it's any different from a limping prey animal hiding from wolves in the woods. If anything it's worse, actually. The wolves can kill you, but a dentist appointment won't. Human fear doesn't know the difference.

The thing about android brains is that they aren't worried about any of that. An android's arm can be replaced. An android's skin is purely decorative. An android never has to worry about blood loss, or disease, or heart failure. Even if you were to rip away every shred of their body, they could just as easily have their mind transferred into a new model, and the only cost would be monetary. Theoretically, the only damage an android brain has to fear is to the software.

The thing about humans is that they make things a little too similar to themselves. The thing about androids is that their fear

doesn't always know the difference either.

I can't see what Nadia's doing back there, and my head's too flooded with shrieking alarm bells for me to keep track of what exactly is wrong, multiplying faster and faster every second as she tampers with my circuitry and every corner of my mind screams in synthetic terror. She could do anything and I wouldn't even know, she could pack up and leave me blind, deaf and paralyzed, lost in a sea of meaningless noise until my battery gives out. Suddenly then idea of it feels all too real and I'm overwhelmed by the irrational instinct to *run*, leave, shove her away and stumble blindly out the door just to find some way to make it *stop*—

And then her hand closes around mine, tangible and solid. The noise doesn't stop, but there's something to focus on apart from the dark. I don't breathe, but I feel less like I'm drowning.

Nadia's helping. She won't hurt me. I'm okay.

When she pulls back my head is still spinning, my hands still twitching with the all too human need to chase the contact, but I don't. I stay still with the knowledge that it'll be over soon, I just need to let her work. I lose track of how long I've been out, my internal clock is scrambled. Just a little longer.

“--kay, there we go! Should be all done, sweetheart, there you are.”

My faculties come back in waves. First my hearing, then my limbs, then my eyes.

And the monochrome world bursts into vibrant color.

At first I frankly have to wonder what all the fuss was about. Black and white seemed perfectly serviceable before, with Nadia's workshop making the jump from a blur of greys to shades of rusting copper. The other times she's suggested something like this it seemed perfectly reasonable; a functional voice box makes for more efficient communication, prolonged battery life gives me more time for maintenance around the shop before I need to recharge,

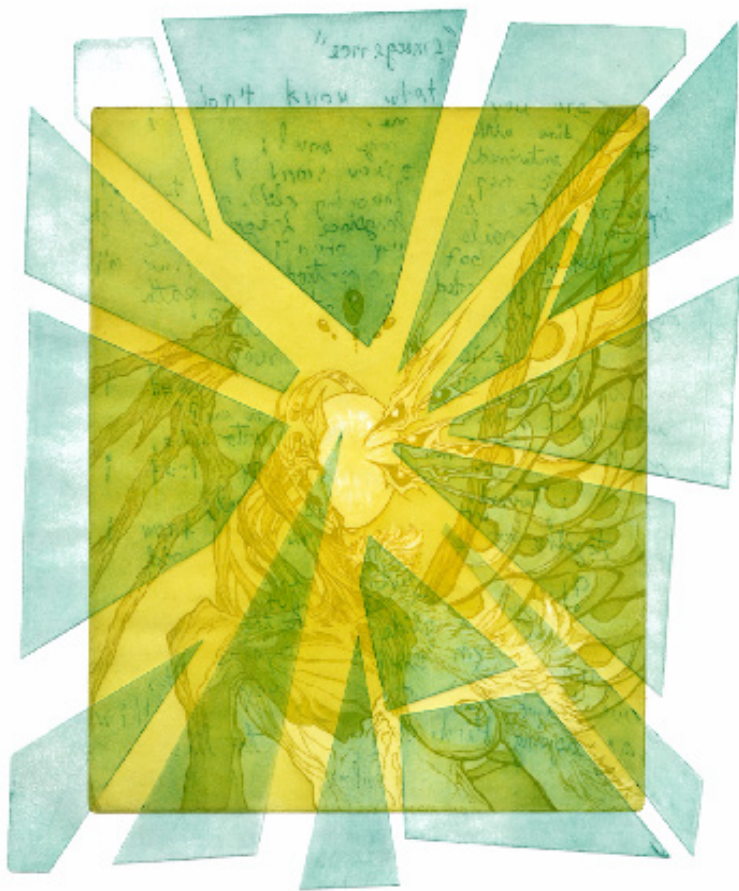
and more precise control over my motor function opens up a wider variety of tasks I can get done without asking Nadia for assistance. In comparison this feels... frivolous. I can't help but feel just a little annoyed that I'd gone through all that trouble just for a slightly more varied arrangement of dullness as she folds everything back into place, wires neatly tucked away and sliding my protective plating back over it. She makes quick work of putting me back together, soldering the panel back into place with practiced ease.

And then she rounds the table and enters my field of vision, and all at once I understand. Her olive skin, her dark curls framing her face in tight coils. She pulls her goggles down to hang around her neck and I see her eyes, shimmering green with specks of liquid gold.

“Mel,” she says, taking my face in her hands, “Mel, baby, you okay?”

The world's a little brighter than before.

“Yeah,” I answer, “Yeah, I'm okay.”



## **"emergence"**

Remington Brown

*18" x 24" Aquatint Etching Print*

# Brushing Shoulders with a Long Lost Hero

Jacob Venable

## 우연한 만남 - *A Chance Encounter*

I walked into Golden Corral, ready to stuff my face with all the free food I could stomach. It was packed with old people wearing military regalia. The restaurant's annual Military Appreciation Night, held every Veteran's Day, was a popular one, where all service members, past and present, were treated to a free dinner buffet. I arrived alone, as always, so they sat me down at the first available seat; a small table with two chairs. The other was occupied by an elderly black man wearing a Korean War hat. I sat down.

We did not exchange names. Instead, we talked about our experiences in the military. Right away, it felt like we were already friends, brothers-in-arms. He told me about his service in the Air Force and his time in the Korean War. He served along the 38th parallel, where all the action was. Over a plate of steak, fried chicken, and various greens, he retold his heroics with enthusiasm and a friendly grin.

"I was a supply sergeant," he said. "We were always under attack by the northerners."

"The 38th is now a demilitarized zone," I said, "but they still fire shots across it now and then."

For the briefest of moments, I saw a familiar face upon his, one I had not seen for a very long time. It was the face of a man I long looked up to, one that bore the warmth of the Sun itself, in both love and wrath. A man I admired greatly, a man I aspired to emulate: my grandfather.

## 할아버지 - *Grandfather*

Born in 1925, Richard Eugene Venable grew up in California. He joined the United States Navy young and served in three foreign wars: World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Though he retired shortly after I was born, I could see that professionalism every day.

He stood straight, was always well-groomed, and maintained a discipline within his home that I ensured I never broke. He and my grandmother were always welcoming when I visited. My grandfather took my child self on long walks around his Sonoma community, where I picked flowers for Grandma, and then we would venture into the groves where we picked ripe figs to bring home. These were the happiest childhood moments, and I always looked forward to visiting them.

He had always seemed tall to me, though in my adulthood, age had shortened him to below my height. But in my youth, he had been a larger-than-life character. I recall how he and Grandma took me to Train Town, a small theme park revolving around trains. It was a place I enjoyed a lot as a child, for there was much to explore. My favorite thing to do there, though, was to sit with my grandfather and grandmother and ride the train around the park. It was such a peaceful time, when I could forget the troubles at school and the drama between my mother and father. A time when it was just the three of us, me and my grandparents, on a train ride I wished would never end. As much as I loved the sound of the train, I dreaded the final toot signifying the end of the line and we were forced to disembark. I did not want to.

“Can we go again?” my five-year-old self asked with big pleading eyes.

Grandpa smiled down at me. “Before we leave, we’ll take one more ride.”

“Yay!” I cheered and hugged his leg.

Grandpa was of French heritage, but for a long time, I thought he was of Mexican descent. I knew between him and Grandma, I inherited French and Mexican genes. I thought Grandpa was the Mexican one because he had a fairly red face. He also yelled in Spanish when he was angry. Many times I witnessed his finesse in Spanish while watching a movie or when I had upset him. A vivid memory of us watching Terminator 2 plays frequently in my mind: Sarah Connor blasting the T-1000 with a shotgun, knocking it back toward the molten steel, only to run dry just as it teeters on

the edge.

“Throw the bloody shotgun at it!” Grandpa shouted, with a string of angry Spanish right after that I assumed was an explicit rant he did not want me to understand.

A silly moment, but it amused me. It was not until after my grandmother passed away did I learn she was Mexican, not Grandpa. Her passing broke my heart, and I know it broke his too. Though he put on a brave face, I could see it in his eyes. He did not deserve to be alone.

### 마음은 어디에 있는가 – *Where the Heart Lies*

The Korean War veteran asked me about my service. I explained I served eight years in the United States Army, and how I was stationed in Korea for two. I joked how Korea was probably the worst years of his life, while Korea was the best of mine. He laughed. Korea changed a lot between our visits, from a war-torn nation of brother fighting brother to a prosperous nation of modern sensibilities interwoven into tradition. My visit was much different from his, but he made it out alive and in one piece, which was a great achievement in its own right. He liked the people and the culture, but did not like the war. His time there was at the tail-end, so fighting was not at its worst. Still, making it home alive was an accomplishment and as he sat before me, he looked good for being 93.

I told him all about how Korea has changed. Between the monolithic skyscrapers that replaced the rubble of Seoul, the vast rail system weaving through much of the northern regions of South Korea, and the rapid economic growth the nation experienced afterward, the nation practically became an overnight success. I talked about meeting a lovely Korean woman and falling in love. We broke up when her mother said she did not want a foreigner for a son-in-law.

“Her name was Mi-Hee,” I said. “She was lovely and a perfect sweetheart. I didn’t deserve her.”

With my words, I painted a picture of Seoul Tower, the COEX Mall, EverLand, and the beautiful beaches. He marveled at my tales, amazed at how vastly different our visits had been. Seoul Tower sat atop Namsan (a small mountain in the middle of Seoul), lit with a collage of colors at night. The COEX Mall was a massive complex filled with stores, a convention center, an aquarium, and a hotel. EverLand was the *real* “happiest place on Earth,” a theme park I thought was much better than Disneyland.

Alas, his food had run dry. With his plate empty, he rose to fetch himself another and I found myself sitting alone with my own food and my own thoughts.

### 줄다리기 - *Tug of War*

Korea had a turbulent history. When World War II ended in 1945, the Soviet Union and the United States freed the Korean peninsula from Japanese occupation. These two nations divided it along the 38th parallel and worked to rout the Japanese. However, when it came time to create an independent Korea, the two sides could not come to an agreement. Thus, the United States established a government with an elected president in the south, while the north was rebuilt with communism and an appointed dictator by the Soviets. Both sides claimed sovereignty over the entire peninsula.

On June 25th, 1950, the north attacked the south. The north steamrolled through the south, as they were more militarized. The south pleaded for the United States to aid them, and just when the north had all but won, the United States Marines landed in Incheon. They made quick work of the northern military. The United States and South Korean militaries pushed through to the Chinese border. Just when victory was imminent, China entered the fray. For three long years, it was a war of attrition, with neither side making any significant gains. It was one big game of tug-of-war, with two foreign powers using the Korean people as the rope. Families were broken, brother fought brother, and people died for the whims of foreign entities.

The Korean War resonated with me. I stood before *The Stat-*

*ue of Brothers* at the *War Memorial of Korea* in Seoul. A giant statue depicting two soldiers embracing in a broken battlefield towered over me. The older was an officer for the South Korean army; the younger was an infantryman for the north. When they encountered each other on the battlefield, the two dropped their weapons and embraced, long lost brothers reunited in the midst of combat. It was a moving story. It resonated with me because, like Korea, I was used as the rope in my divorced parents' game of tug-of-war, both pulling me in opposite directions, using me to hurt each other. Eventually, my father gave up; he let go of the rope and abandoned me.

My grandfather, like the hero he was, swooped in to ensure I still had a strong male leader in my life. He was angry with my father for abandoning me and went out of his way to visit me often. We played catch and went on walks. He even moved closer when Grandma passed away, buying a beach home in Arroyo Grande, a place I visited often.

When I got married, Grandpa attended my wedding, even when my own father would not. Apparently, my father's Hawaiian vacation was more important than seeing his first-born son get married. I did not know it at the time, but Grandpa had fallen ill, yet still managed to travel across the country to see me. That was the last time I saw him alive.

### 추억은 아름다운 기억 - *A Beautiful Memory*

The Korean War veteran returned with his dessert. He sat down and I told him about my grandfather. I explained how he served in three foreign wars and what a respectable man he was. He was my hero. The veteran nodded and said he was pleased I held him in high regard. He asked where my grandfather was now, and I explained he passed away in 2010. When he finished his dessert, he got up, thanked me for keeping him company, and left. I wished him well and watched him leave. When he walked out the door, something came over me. As I looked down at my plate, tears dripped onto my steak.

When my grandfather fell ill, I was stationed on Okinawa. I did not have any leave left over, so I requested emergency leave. My

mother sent them a Red Cross message to aid in the process. My grandfather requested my presence, as he wanted to see me one last time. The Army, however, refused. Emergency leave was granted for immediate family, and my grandfather was not considered immediate family. I tried to fight it, but I might as well have fought the wind. They refused to budge and I was stuck on a tiny island in the middle of the ocean, thousands of miles away from my dying grandfather.

“Sir, is it all right if I seat someone here?”

I looked up from my plate to the server standing beside the chair the Korean War veteran had just vacated. Her smile disappeared when she saw my red eyes and tear-streaked cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice small. “I’ll leave you alone.”

I told the tale of his encounter to Darius, my best friend since high school. While Darius does not believe in God, his exact words were “You’re in a very stressful situation, man. And you got to sit with someone who very well may have crossed paths with your grandfather, giving you a short time with his memory in a situation as close to in-person as it can come. It’s understandable. It may have been like brushing shoulders with your grandfather for one last time. If there is a God, maybe He was giving you a gift.”

I want to believe this. I never got to say goodbye to my grandfather. The day after my fight with the Army, I came home to dreadful news: my grandfather had passed. I knew it was coming, but it hit hard all the same. The man I had admired, aspired to be like, and viewed as a hero, was gone. No more walks to the fig grove. No more flowers to pick. Only one last visit to the beach of Arroyo Grande to watch the sea swallow his ashes. I rendered a proper salute.

Just as the Korean War has yet to end, so too does my internal war rage on. Just like the Marines landed to save the day in the Korean War, my grandfather landed in my heart to save me. But he has long since passed, so the battle must be fought with my own army. Whether it is strong enough to win the day, only time will tell.

Until then, I look to his memory for guidance.



# Mirror Man

*Gerardo Garcia-Merida*

There has been this thought that has lingered in my mind. It stuck with me since that day. Since the beginning of man. War has existed for thousands of millenniums alongside us. When the first man committed murder. Sticks and stones were used to wage wars in our primal age. As periods of humankind progressed. Old men became the shepherds, while the young boys were cattle sent to their damnation for a nation. Armies trained soldiers with discipline, but can you really instill discipline when it comes to taking another's life? At the end of the day, I ended up surviving. Forgotten by the country I served under. They don't know what I witnessed. I look at the bureaucracy that is my country who sent me there with disgust. Questioning why we did what we did. And how pointless it all really was. My head is splitting with doubt about everything I have gone through. And I want it to stop.

~

The floor's square tiles were cracked and chipped. The tiles were ivory in color, left in a yellow hue. Dry mud caked all over the cramped bathroom floor. The toilet, sulfur pigmentation and scuffed; the bolts loose on the base. The shower tub's glaze peeling off with rust that will soon take its place. The sink is soiled, left with countless amounts of cigarette butts and ash, leaving the smell of copper in the air.

Across from the bathroom, an equally horrid bedroom. The sounds of white noise can be heard from the busted television.

“Here at Channel 33 news, we are currently witnessing the withdrawal of the U.S. military at Kabul Airport in Afghanistan. Many Afghanis are chasing down one of the last C-17 aircraft from this pullout. All seeking refuge away from the Taliban.”

The TV continues its droning.

The bathroom mirror was the only appliance not damaged or

dirtied. The silver glass gleamed brightly from every angle. It reflects the exact image of whoever is gazing upon it. With the sound of frustration, the mirror is suddenly hit with the quick impact of a clenched fist. Shiny shards and jagged cracks reflect the crater that is left on the surface of the looking glass. The fist stays its hand on the broken surface. Blood crawling between the cracks. The faucet handle turned, running water. Red essence dripped onto the clear liquid. Swallowed into the void.

The damaged soul bear witness to his misery. He asked himself, why is he having this feeling now? He stared at the shattered mirror, disgusted with his peering scowl. The hand slowly recoiled back from the damaged reflection. Flesh wounds and silver shards made themselves known on the knuckles.

The bleeding hand is put under the sink. The pain was baptized by the running water.

Mateo was a young Hispanic man. In his mid 20's. Hair was black, grown out and frizzy. His complexion was a caramel skin tone. His face was a mix of maturity, rage, and stress, while retaining his youth under all the strain.

Draped over Mateo's shoulders are his green Army field jacket from his time in service. Patches from 1st Battalion of the 75th Ranger Regiment, and medals from deployment adorn the jacket. Underneath the outerwear was a black tank top, soiled and damp with dank sweat.

Mateo's smartphone suddenly rang from the front pocket of his grey cargo pants. He didn't bother to check and confirm the caller. But he knew who was reaching out. Simon always looked out for his brother-in-arms. They maintained contact after their tour of Afghanistan.

Simon was an African American man. A bit older and more put together than Mateo. They both served under that same unit that is 1st Ranger Battalion. Both promised to live around Carmel, Indiana after getting out of the Army, for what they've gone through. Mateo in recent months has been speaking less in phone

calls and conversations with Simon overtime. Both promised if one doesn't answer, assume the worst.

The phone's ringing soon became silent.

Mateo began to move with purpose into the disheveled bedroom. Looking under the bed frame, he grabbed a bulky, black plastic case and laid it upon the mattress. The trembling hands unclashed the case. A lethal weapon with a matte, smooth design and mechanical function was in full display. The tool's finish was coyote brown in color, perfect and polished. Still reflecting the distant deserts of Kandahar.

Mateo gripped the weapon and walked back into the bathroom. Checking if the weapon was ready and loaded. He stared long at the broken image of himself. One last time.

*“Sergeant Fields? What are you doing?”*

A sudden omniscient voice can be heard but not seen. The voice was deep and echoed throughout the bathroom's claustrophobic walls. It reverbed with sounds of multiple voices speaking in unison into one. Mateo's gears in his head only gave out the only response he could muster. None. Dread took over instead.

“Wha—”

The shattered mirror with its broken shards began to shake with violence and morphed back into its former pristine state. The reflective surface returned with no crack in sight. The mirror in its silver reflection then spawned in a shadowed humanoid silhouette behind the mirror. It was covered in silky smoke with fire embers floating and drifting around the figure's presence. The silhouette was bulky in its proportions. The dark outline of the figure looked to be wearing a full set of tactical military attire. The assumed head had no eyes visible, only clouded by dark fog bellowing out. The mysterious figure spoke again.

*“Sergeant Fields. Do you see me?”*

Mateo's instincts kicked in. His body is shot full of adrenaline. Gripping the weapon. With conviction, pulling the slide of the firearm and release. Aiming at the mirror. Three feet away from the reflection, the pistol's sights align with the shadowy being. The trigger is pulled. Primed bullets were struck by the firing pin. The violent rounds met their target but got lost in the void of the silhouette.

Multiple sounds of clicking from the pistol trigger filled the silence of the bathroom. The firearm ran out of its fury. The man in the mirror spoke again.

*"You still retained your training, Sergeant Fields."*

"W-What the hell are you!?"

*"...You, Sergeant. I'm where you think of yourself to be. Still in that desert."*

"T-This can't be real! You aren't fucking real!"

*"You know this to be true, Sergeant. That I'm very real, to you."*

Mateo still has his iron pointed at the figure. Strangely, being referred to his rank from his time in service evaporated the feeling of despair and gave him the confidence to speak up and argue with the reflection.

"It's Mateo, shitbag! I don't want to be addressed by that fucking rank anymore!"

*"But I see you still stew in the past. I can see it in your fickle mind. In your nightmares. Of the things you witnessed. Asking yourself the same damn question. What could I have done differently on that day? Could I have seen it coming before it happened?"*

As the shadow kept Mateo in a state of petrification. Distant sound of a roaring motor engine traveled ever closer to Mateo's

house. The screeching of heavy-duty tires can be heard through the walls of the household. Mateo already knows it is Simon rushing to check if his battle didn't clock out early. Sounds of twisting of the doorknob transitioning into loud and heavy slamming can be heard from the front door. Mateo glanced out for his moment to escape and sprinted out of the bathroom. Closing in on the front door to let Simon in to assist with this supernatural encounter.

*“You can't run away from what's about to happen, Mateo!”*

The silhouette reached his arm out through the pristine mirror. Into reality. The arm stretched out as if it was reaching out from the ocean. Leaving chromatic waves on the surface of the mirror. The limb slithered through the bathroom, bedroom, setting its fangs around Mateo's right arm. Mateo's forced stop from the shadow's death grip caused him to drop his empty pistol and trip onto the hardened wood floor of his living room. He looked to see that this apparition was physically real. Mateo was soon dragged through the household, attempting to loosen the grip of the black limb with his strength.

The front door went from wood thudding into cracking. The swinging open of the door was distinct. Heavy footsteps close in on Mateo. Simon's eyes witnessed the predicament.

*“What the fuck Mat!? What the hell is going on!?”*

Simon rushed to grab ahold of Mateo's torso to pull him to freedom; the added strength was insignificant. Simon found himself being dragged along, unwilling to let go of his friend in need. Both men were gritting their teeth, arms flexed, legs buckled, sweat beading. They can see that they are being dragged back into the bathroom. Toward and into the mirror. Mateo's arm sunk through the reflection; the rest of his figure quickly drowned into the silver tar.

~

Mateo opened his eyes to a cramped and metal interior. Green lights piercing from above. Many men adorned in muted

grayish-green military camo and advanced gear, sit side by side in a long, squeezed tight line. Sounds of rhythmic pulses of blade cuts can be heard from outside the interior. The atmosphere of the room felt weighty and unbalanced. The black MH-47G Chinook was headed to its destination for a night operation.

A realization soon worms its way into Mateo's mind. He's returned.

Mateo stood and frantically looked at his figure to be wearing his military fatigues, helmet with full battle rattle. His M4 rifle slung around his shoulders. The men all looked puzzled at this action. His commander walked up to him.

“Hey Sergeant, is something the matter?”

“Yes! I know what's going to fucking happen! This mission is a bust! We need to turn this fucking aircraft around sir!”

The commander looked in confusion. He turned to look at the other soldiers sitting.

“Look Mat. I don't know what is going on with you, but you sit down and let me handle my op.”

“No! No, sir! We are all fucking dead if we let this chopper near that building!”

“Sit down, Sergeant Fields! You are losing it!”

Another soldier quickly stood up and guided Mateo to sit down.

“Hey Sergeant Fields, I know you got the jitters, but it'll be fine. We got this.”

“No Sergeant Pattinson. We don't 'got this'. I know. They won't make it.”

The dark voice of the mirror man creeps into Mateo's mind.

*“They won’t listen or change their minds. This night has been set in stone.”*

The commander walks toward the tail end of the interior and pulls a large lever near the ramp of the craft. The ramp slowly opens to reveal the arid terrain under dusk. He gives the order.

“We’re almost at the destination! Remember to rope down at my command! Quick and easy! We’ll be above the target in one minute!”

All stood, lined up. Ready to deploy. Mateo was near the front of the line. Still erratic. The Chinook soon hovered in place of the landing zone. The men soon fast roped off the chopper one by one. It was Mateo’s turn. He soon rappelled down from the craft knowing this event, beat for beat. Right on queue, the sound of a loud, high-pressured hiss was quickly traveling toward the helicopter.

Mateo looked up to see the Chinook hit with an explosive projectile and spun uncontrollably from the impact. The mess of metal and flames took Mateo for a ride as he clung to the rope.

~

The perception of the world was black for a moment. The sound of crackling from flames was heard through the darkness. Mateo’s vision was blurry, blinking with slow repetition. His vision soon cleared, looking at the arid ground covered with glass, scrap metal, and blood. Ears were ringing, smells of ash and gore floating in the air.

Mateo was stuck under the wreckage of the MH-47G Chinook helicopter. Smoke and dust found themselves in Mateo’s lungs as he breathed and crawled his way out. As Mateo stood, the cut wounds and bruises around his waist made him bend down to lessen the pain. Looking around the black fog of the sandy terrain, under the night. Mateo remembered the ebony smoke from the crash, and where it landed in the middle of the road leading up to the target’s homestead.

“Help! Somebody! Help!”

Mateo limped his way toward the cries for help. He sees a fellow specialist lying on the ground, near the destroyed aircraft.

“Help! Sergeant! Help! It fucking hurts!”

“I’ve got you man; we’ll call in a medevac and get you outta here.”

Upon looking at his condition, both of the specialist’s legs were gone, up to the knees. Mateo quickly checked his med pouch and ties a tourniquet around the ranger’s missing limbs to stop the bleeding and cares for other scrapes and cuts. A hand is placed on Mateo’s shoulder.

“Mateo! I’m one of the few who ain’t hurt too badly! Everyone from the bird is either a casualty from that blast or is raiding the building! You continue helping the man, I’ll call in the cavalry!”

“Roger that Simon!”

Mateo knew the result of his attempts to help the soldier were futile. He looks back at the ranger; his head tilted down with no movement. He shakes the specialist to wake up. Nothing. Mateo grieves for a moment of another loss. He checks to make sure his M4 is still slung around him and limps his way toward the mud-brick homestead. Bullets rang out from the building as Mateo moved closer. Checking if the magazine has rounds; Mateo pulled the charging handle, loaded, and released. The house was dusty and dark; the only way to see was from the muzzle flashes of rifles being shot or having night vision goggles.

A few rangers were able to rope down to engage the target, but with little support. With his NVGs down, Mateo witnessed his comrades lying on the ground of the house as he walked through, some panting in pain while others lie motionless. Mateo can hear footsteps from one of the bedrooms. He readies his M4 and is trained at the bedroom door. The door rapidly opens and a man dressed in a brown tunic and a black turban wielding an AK-47

comes out. The man yells and shoots in the dark. Mateo ducks and falls to the ground, aiming at the man. Rounds struck the man in the chest and neck; he falls with quick movement.

Mateo continued toward the bedroom. Whisper behind his ear from Simon catches him off guard.

“Hey Mat, I called in for support. The bird will be arriving soon. But I don’t think we found our target.”

“I think he’s in this room. Waiting for us to barge in.”

“Okay, we both rush the room and take this fucker out.”

Both men steadily traveled down the hall and kept sight of the bedroom door. The door was ajar from the previous encounter. Glass being stepped on can be heard from the opening. Both know some idea of where their target is hiding. The door is kicked in, and both aim at the corner of a sparse bedroom, pulling their triggers. The man that is their target was hiding behind a shitty wooden table in the corner of the room. As the bullets impact, the corner wall behind him reflects brain matter and gore. The table is covered in countless holes. Simon walks toward the corpse.

“That’s the target. We got the bastard.”

“But. What for? At what cost Simon?”

As Simon turns to look at Mateo. Simon evaporates in front of Mateo’s eyes. The rest of the vivid retrospective is blown away by the desert winds.

Mateo stands in the middle of a dusty road, surrounded by mountains and rugged terrain. Quiet. Empty. Under the moonlit sky of Afghanistan. Mateo could only hear his heartbeat with how still the air stirred. Distant dunes for miles. No end in sight. The only landmark of note to Mateo was a desolate oasis near the road. He stared long at the pond in the middle of a desert.

Sounds of whistling gusts were heard behind Mateo.

*“You and Sergeant Pattinson were the only ones who made it in that fateful day.”*

“Why. Why am I...”

The shadowed figure took steps closer behind Mateo.

*“The mission was a night raid, transporting 15 rangers of 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment to take out a hiding Taliban leader located at an uninteresting mud-brick house at the side of a mountain. It was going to be routine, that’s what the command said. Not knowing how many insurgents are waiting alongside the target. Many died from an unexpected RPG projectile hitting the tail of the Chinook, resulting in a crash. A few died and some survived the firefight to assassinate the leader, but they soon succumbed to their wounds. Leaving you and Simon to remain. This is what you keep reminding yourself. Everyday.”*

“I already know. Why did I have to be the one? To remain alive? To be haunted?”

Mateo takes his steps toward the distant oasis. Crunches on the sand are heard with every step taken. The shadow follows behind. Mateo turned his head to glance back at the mirror man.

“You gonna keep following me?”

With no reply from the figure, Mateo turned to continue his walk. Only Mateo’s shadow is cast under the moonlight from the two. Every step taken felt heavier than the last as he got closer to his destination. The feeling of salvation was sensed when Mateo looked upon the crystal blue water. He bent closer to the edge and stared down at the oasis. Reflections of his band of brothers’ side by side with him.

Mateo fell to his knees.

And once again, a hand was placed on his shoulder. Mateo’s eyes begin to glisten.

“Hey Mat. I know what you are going through. I’m here with you. You are no longer there anymore. You are here. Present. With me.”

Mateo plunged into heavy sobbing. Head tucking into his knees. Under his tears, he spoke.

“They took them away! They’re fucking gone Simon! I didn’t deserve to get a chance! Why me! It should have been me to...” Simon kneeled next to Mateo and wrapped his arms around his head.

“I know. I know. I think about them too. We got each other, Mat. For so long I held it together. I didn’t ask for help. And now being here with you, it made me realize that you also held it in too. They would want us to keep going. Enjoy life. Salute their sacrifices.”

Simon wept with Mateo. Both men wrapped each other in a rocking embrace. Looking upon the lone oasis. The dark figure behind them bowed his head and is soon wisped away by the gusts of wind. The vivid world is blown away into a white flash.

~

Mateo opens his eyes to the bright light bulb above the bathroom. Holding him tightly is Simon. Mateo is confused. Asking.

“What happened?”

“I saw you freaking out and moving like you were possessed or something. I tried to hold you down, but you dragged me into the bathroom and hit your head against the mirror. You knocked yourself out and talked somewhat while you were out.”

“But the mirror man that pulled me in... And before, I tried to, I tried to take my own.”

“It’s okay Mat. You are still here. I heard what you were saying and guided you through what you were dealing with. I don’t

know what you saw, but I think it's gone now."

Police sirens crawl toward the household. Neighbors open their front doors to see what all the commotion was about. They feared a resulting tragedy within the walls of the veteran's home.

"Listen Mat, I will help you along the way. Because I need you too. I know we can't forget, but we'll move forward. One step at a time. It won't be easy, but we have each other."

Mateo may never be healed from what happened. But he no longer feels alone. Simon leaves words that will stick with Mateo.

"I will be here for you. Always."

# Beautiful Stranger

*Heather Mandel*

I take a step up onto the muddied floor of the 220 bus  
Where the feet of thousands before me have left echoes of their life  
Scattered on the floor.

A beautiful stranger is sitting in the seat next to the one I take  
Long nails tapping a symphony against a cracked screen.  
Soil-dark eyes glance up to pierce through my pounding heart  
for a single moment  
And in the same blink, she looks away.

Beautiful stranger, what lives have you lived?  
Your experiences are as much a mystery as mine are to you.  
Will you think of this moment after it's passed?  
Will you remember the girl who sat next to you on the bus?  
Will I be your beautiful stranger?  
Or will I fade like a dream as soon as you look away?

We are two leaves in autumn, dear stranger  
Brushing past as we flutter with the wind to the forest floor  
So too do we meet at this single moment  
Before we're swept into the next

The bus reinserts itself into our minds with the screech  
of the opening doors  
And you rise like the sun into a horizon beyond me.  
In the moments before our paths uncross, I think to myself;

Beautiful stranger  
It has been an honor  
To share this moment  
With you.



**Mother in the Garden with Hydrangeas**

Olivia Daniels

*18" x 29" Oil Paint on Panel*

# Sunlight You Can Hold

*Julieta Blanco*

The first thing Enzo remembers about the gym is the sign.

It was the summer of '76, heat bounced off the asphalt in waves, he and Paulie stood side by side on the sidewalk staring up at their brand new neon miracle: GET BIG, glowing bright blue against the dusk. Except the “G” at the front already flickered like it had doubts. Enzo told Paulie he’d fix it tomorrow. Tomorrow never came. He liked it better that way. The stuttering letter reminded him of the candles in church, the ones that sputtered but never fully went out.

Paulie had laughed that day, all swagger and twenty-year-old optimism. “People are gonna think we’re geniuses,” he’d said. “Real businessmen.”

Enzo had just shrugged, hands still taped from his last fight, sweat drying into his shirt. “We just gotta keep the lights on.” And for a long time, they did.

Now, from above, his gym looked like an island—fluorescent lights flickering against concrete walls, a radio murmuring in the corner, and a ring sitting at the center like a relic. The ropes sagged slightly, taped at the corners where they’d split open over the years. Metal and sweat seeped from the faded foam mats. Out in the lot, the last rays of sunlight hit the windows in fractured orange, and the street beyond hummed with traffic. The city moved forward, always in motion, but inside everything felt frozen in time, stagnant air suffocating, and thick with dust. Sometimes Enzo swore he could still hear metal plates clanking long after everyone’s gone.

Enzo rested on the edge of the ring, elbows glued to his knees, a frayed towel draped around his neck. He was in his late fifties, face rough but still handsome in a way that suggested a fight survived. His calloused hands rest on his thighs as he studies the worn rubber tiles, tracing invisible lines in the cracks.

His gaze drifts across the room, catching on the photos hung on the opposite wall: him holding a championship belt in '71, grinning like someone who had never been hit by anything he couldn't punch back; a photo of Paulie wiping down a counter in their opening week, both of them looking way too young to own anything, and a few shots of boxers he coached over the years, kids he'd trained, pushed, patched up. Some stuck around. Some didn't.

From there, his eyes dropped to the trophy case beneath them. Dust gathered in the corners of the glass, catching the fading sun. The belt inside still looked leaded, heavier than it should be. Even behind the glass case, it pulled him in.

The bell cracked through the smoke-thick air, and the whole arena seemed to lean in at once. *Ten seconds.* That was all that stood between Enzo and the championship belt, but the world had shrunk too small for thoughts like that. It was just heat, breath, leather.

Across the ring, his opponent lurched forward on legs that didn't look like they could hold him. Sweat and blood had glued his left eye nearly shut; the other burned with a kind of feral brightness, the look of a man who'd stopped thinking about technique and slipped into something rawer, animalistic. He swung wide, reckless, the punch carving a wild arc that would've gotten him chewed out in any gym on the East Coast. Enzo felt the wind of it as it missed by inches.

He didn't think. He stepped inside, shoulder brushing the man's chest, and sent a left hook up along the jaw. Clean. Controlled. Just enough.

The man's body folded before the sound even registered in his ears.

*Nine seconds.*

The canvas thudded beneath him, a dull, final sound that echoed in Enzo's ribs. The ref dropped beside the fallen fighter, fingers slicing through the haze, voice lost under the crowd's rising

howl.

*Eight.*

Enzo kept himself still, ready. Breath poured out of him in hot bursts he couldn't steady. Across from him, the man tried to push himself up, but his arms slid, trembling, as if they were no longer under his control. His face was twisted—not with pain exactly, but with a stunned, hollow confusion, like he'd arrived at a version of the night he hadn't prepared for.

*Seven.*

Someone in the stands shouted his last name. It cracked in the air like glass.

*Six.*

The man's good eye flicked up toward Enzo, swollen and shining. Not angry. Not pleading. Just... lost.

*Five.*

The ref made the call, waving his arms. It was over.

The arena broke open with applause, stomping, a thousand voices smashing together. Somebody threw a program in the air like confetti.

Enzo exhaled once, slow, and only then let himself look away from the man on the mat. Trainers were already rushing in, kneeling, lifting his shoulders, trying to assess the damage and blink him back into the world.

He lifted the belt when they handed it to him, managed a grin when the camera flashed. The gold plate caught the lights, too bright to stare at for long.

But while the shutter clicked, he checked—just a quick glance—to make sure the man was getting to his feet. His legs

shook. His head hung low. He didn't look at Enzo.

Even while the crowd roared for the new champion, Enzo knew he'd remember this instant more vividly than the photograph. The moment the cheering blurred and the night split in two: the one he stepped into, and the one that left somebody else behind.

The clock above the door fell into rhythm with his breathing, a quiet metronome marking time now that the noise was gone.

From the front desk, Paulie cursed under his breath. "Damn thing ate another card."

Enzo looked up. "Use the spare reader."

"Already tried. This one's just pretending it's broken so it doesn't have to work Mondays."

Enzo smirked. "Like you."

Paulie grunted in response. "You're hilarious."

"Say what you want," Enzo said, tossing him a screwdriver, "but that butter knife's not fixing anything."

"Worked last week."

"Yeah, and Ma's lasagna spoon worked for changing fuses. Didn't mean it was smart."

Paulie chuckled then sighed. "You going tonight? Bruno's thing?"

"Yeah. Soon." Enzo wiped his face again. "Just need to shower."

Paulie gave him a look—half teasing, half genuine. "Don't chicken out."

"I ain't."

“You get weird at parties. You talk too much or not at all.”

“Then I’ll do both,” Enzo replied, finally climbing out of the ring.

Paulie went back to muttering at the machine. He was visiting for a week before the wedding—his life’s in Arizona now—but it’s moments like this that made time feel paper thin again, like you could poke a hole right through it, and get a glimpse of the past.

Enzo slipped into the aisles to finish his locking up ritual, emerald tracksuit whispering with each step. He fixed a crooked dumbbell someone left behind, wiped off fingerprints, tapped a treadmill button like he was checking for a pulse. Routine made holy through repetition. Lights clicked off row by row. Darkness didn’t fall; it crept, climbed, filled the gym from the floor up.

The cracked mirror by the free weights stopped him like it always did—a spiderweb in the corner from a dropped plate years back. He always said he kept it because it gave the place character. Truth was simpler and harder: it reminded him that some things break and still get used. Some things don’t need fixing to keep going.

He stared at himself the way people look at old pictures when no one’s around. The crack sliced his reflection into uneven pieces; forehead off, mouth split, gold chain scattered in fragments. Under a flickering fluorescent, he could see the years plain: the thinning hair, the stubborn softness in the jaw, the lines carved by sun, pride, and time.

When the light died, the crack caught a thin line of moon, holding the broken pieces together for a second. Then it faded, and the room sank into silence. Everything stayed where it was. Everything waited. He blinked, the weight of the moment settling, and headed for the locker room.

The locker room echoed with the faint, rhythmic sound of dripping faucets. Enzo changed into a crimson button-up, the kind that still smelled faintly of a cologne he hadn’t worn in years. His

reflection stared back from the foggy mirror—same face, different light. The years showed up mostly in his eyes. He adjusted his collar and looked down at the open laptop on the bench beside him.

“Module 5: Conducting the Ceremony.” The course narrator’s voice droned through tinny speakers. Enzo rewinds, scribbling notes on a yellow notepad: *Pause between vows. Maintain eye contact. Smile naturally.* He underlined that one twice.

He’d been at it every night for weeks. He and Patrick—Bruno’s fiancé—planned it together in secret. Enzo was going to officiate the wedding. Bruno didn’t know yet. The kid had once said, “You’re the closest thing I ever had to a Dad,” and Enzo had felt something shift inside him, something he didn’t know how to name. Maybe this was his way of showing he felt the same.

He shut the laptop and scrutinized his reflection for far too long. Examining the scar running along his cheekbone, a parting gift from Bruno’s biological father. Then there was a peppering of bruises at different stages of healing around his eyes, he still trained like he was ten years younger. The collar still didn’t sit right. He smoothed it for the umpteenth time anyway.

Outside, the city was a patchwork of neon and cracked asphalt. A bus rolled by, its windows flashing dull reflections of tired faces. Enzo locked the gym door and clipped the keys to his belt loop with a carabiner. He headed down the block, past the same liquor store, same laundromat, same bulldog barking from behind a rusty gate.

His phone buzzed. Patrick’s name lighting the screen.

“Yeah?” Enzo answered, voice low.

“You’re still coming, right?” Patrick asked, voice broken softly by the background noise of music and chatter.

“On my way. You got the music?”

“Got it. And the cake. And about a hundred balloons Bruno

pretends not to hate.”

Enzo cracked a smile. “You’re good for him.”

Patrick laughed. “He says the same about you, you know.”

“Yeah, well. Don’t tell him I said that.” Enzo said through a smirk.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

The call ends. Enzo slipped the phone back into his pocket and kept walking. The night smelled faintly of petrichor and worms. He picked up the pace, it was bound to start storming any minute.

The flower shop sat on the corner; its windows fogged from the humidity inside. Through the glass, tulips, lilies, and carnations lined the counter like soldiers standing in formation. The bell above the door chimed when Enzo entered.

“Evening, Enzo,” the florist greeted. She was an older woman with silver hair pinned back in a sunflower clip, hands always damp from the stems she trimmed.

“You’re still open.”

“Always for you,” she said, kindly. “What’s the occasion?”

He looked around, suddenly unsure. “Engagement party.”

Her face softened. “Yours?”

“Kid I know. Feels like mine, though.”

She nodded knowingly. “Then tulips. Yellow ones.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Why those?”

“They mean cheerful new beginnings. Besides, they look like sunlight you can hold.”

He nodded. "Yeah. That sounds right."

Enzo watched the florist wrap the stems in brown paper, careful, practiced. Then she tied off the yolk-colored tulips with a shiny white satin ribbon. The way her fingers guided the ribbon made him think of another pair of hands he had once tried to teach, another body stiff with uncertainty.

Bruno had been seventeen, all elbows and nerves. He held his gloves too tight, shoulders locked like a kid bracing for a storm. Enzo circled him in the ring, the canvas creaking with their foot-steps.

"You wanna beat a bigger guy?" Enzo said. "You don't out-muscle him. You out-think him. Big guys fall hard when you take their balance."

Bruno nodded, sweating through his shirt.

"Try." Enzo tapped his own chin. "Come at me."

Bruno stepped forward, threw a shaky jab. Enzo slipped it easily.

"Again."

Bruno tried. Faster this time. Enzo deflected, guided him by the elbow.

"You're flinching," Enzo said. "You can't fight someone you're scared to touch."

Bruno swallowed hard. When Enzo stepped in, Bruno reflexively jerked away, eyes squeezing shut. "*He was terrified,*" the thought ripped through Enzo like a lash.

Enzo stopped instantly.

"Hey." His voice softened. "Look at me."

Bruno blinked up at him, eyes wet with something he tried to blink away.

“You ain’t him,” Enzo said quietly. “You hear me? You’re not him. And I ain’t him either.”

Bruno’s breathing steadied. Enzo rested a hand on his shoulder. “We go slow. We go smart. And when you’re ready, you’ll hit back. Not outta fear. Outta control.”

Bruno nodded, jaw tight with determination. The kid learned quick. By the end of the month, he wasn’t flinching anymore, he was hitting back.

The bell chimed softly as Enzo stepped back onto the street. The bouquet felt good in his hands—alive, solid, grounding.

Outside, he paused under a streetlight. The tulips glowed faintly against the dark. He looked at them like they might tell him what to do next. For a moment, he almost turned back. Maybe Bruno won’t like the surprise. Maybe it’s too much, he never knew him to be sentimental.

He imagined Bruno’s face when he found out—surprised, maybe embarrassed. Then Patrick’s grin, the way he’d said, “*He’ll love it, trust me.*”

A raindrop landed on his wrist. He laughed quietly to himself. “Alright, alright,” he muttered, as if someone up there was pushing him along.

Bruno and Patrick’s place sat at the end of a quiet street, porch lanterns glowing a soft yellow, like mid-afternoon sunlight. Laughter spilled from inside. Enzo hesitated at the gate, listening. Through the window, he spotted Bruno in a white shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbows, pouring drinks and smiling in a way Enzo didn’t see often. The kid had grown into someone steady. Someone who’d found their place in the world.

He stepped up to the door and shifted the tulips from

one hand to the other. He could hear music now, something soft and old. For a second, his throat tightened, a quiet swell of pride warmed his chest. He thought of that first night years ago—the kid sitting in the lot behind the gym, eyes bloodshot, hoodie soaked clean through.

“You runnin’?” Enzo had asked then.

Bruno shrugged, voice tight “Guess so.”

“Your old man know you’re here?”

His body stiffened, “He doesn’t care.” hesitating before he continued. “Not since he found out I was...y’know.”

Enzo had known. Everyone in the neighborhood knew what the man was like, even if no one had the guts to say it. They used to spar in the ring, Bruno’s father was well known for his explosive temper, worsened by his tendency to overindulge in drink.

“Alright, you’re welcome to stay as long as you like” Enzo said, tossing him a towel.

“Start by cleaning the mats, then we’ll go get some grub.” Bruno nodded, shoulders still tight.

And somehow that had been the start of everything. He blinked the memory away, the hint of a smile tugging before he could stop it.

Now, standing on the porch, Enzo felt that same quiet pull, the one he’d felt that night behind the gym—the sense that something cracked might finally be mending.

He raised his hand to knock, but the door swung open before he touched it. Bruno stood there, startled, smile slowly spreading.

“Coach,” he said. “You made it.”

“Course I did,” Enzo replied, holding up the tulips. “For you

two.”

Bruno accepted them gingerly, eyes glistening in the light. “They’re perfect.”

Inside, laughter swelled. Patrick waved from the kitchen, mouthing *thank you*. Enzo nodded, a small, private smile.

For a moment, the noise faded. His heartbeat ticked calm and steady—nothing like that frantic clock back at the gym. He felt the years between them collapse into this one small, quiet joy.

He finally stepped inside, letting the warmth settle into his chest.



**Diva Pose ;)**

Sophia Sturgeon

*24" x 36" Oil on Stretched Canvas*

# ELEANOR REALLY

*Maggie Hoppel*

we used to huff sharpies / sludge antifreeze  
down our ears / swallow sponge water /  
clip our fingernails too short / lick  
elevator buttons / glue our faces together  
with peanut butter

we were building a house / big house  
with doorways like loader jaws / we washed  
our hair with vaseline and sink water / i liked  
your staple gun / grape bubble gum in hot  
weather / there was a mama cat under our porch  
/ and you saved her

i recall you as a time traveler / nondescript  
clothing / sleeping in swamps / chewing your finger  
in absentia / back teeth like a herbivore / thresholds  
laid and misdiagnosed / rough hands sprouting mouths  
and talking / with my voice / giving quite the speech

i want to write you songs / like a scream /  
scooping out your idiolect in loving spoonfuls /  
calcified in the kitchenette / i bought all the skim  
milk at the grocery / sorry / it waits like a body  
in the fridge / for a reincarnation that is,  
presently / unachievable by science

# Bardolomew and the Chords of Power

*Jacob Venable*

EXT. THE OUTSKIRTS OF COPPER TOWN - NIGHT

Night sky. Waxing crescent moon. Forest on the horizon. Volcano in the distance. A lone tavern, quaint and rugged, with lights shining from its windows. The words “Iron Tap” spelled out in sheet metal scraps fixed to a wooden board nailed above the entrance.

INT. IRON TAP TAVERN - NIGHT

Various animals enjoy food and beverages. A table with a gorilla, lion, hippo, and rhino playing cards. A tuxedo cat, BARDOLOMEW, with a bard hat sits in the corner upon a stool, playing a relaxing melody on his lute.

RHINO

You filthy cheat!

He slams his fist into the table.

GORILLA

How dare you! I won that hand fair and square!

GORILLA grabs the money, but RHINO grabs his hand.

RHINO

No winnings for cheaters!

LION and HIPPO cast nervous glances at each other. GORILLA and RHINO stare each other down for a moment before resorting to punching each other. Cards and coins fly about. HIPPO and LION look at each other, shrug, and start fighting too.

The cat stops playing and looks up at the fight. He slips off his stool and calmly walks up to the brawl.

BARDOLOMEW

Pardon me.

The four large animals continue to fight, ignoring BARDOLOMEW. BARDOLOMEW speaks louder, to no avail. Finally, he draws his claws and rakes the strings, producing a loud, ear-piercing noise. The four fighters stop mid-fight, RHINO gripping GORILLA by the throat, and they glare at him. BARDOLOMEW retracts his claws.

BARDOLOMEW

Now that I have your attention, would you kindly take your spat outside? You're disturbing my patrons.

RHINO stomps toward BARDOLOMEW, each step a loud thud against the floor. He glares down at the cat.

RHINO

Or what?

BARDOLOMEW

Or I will remove you myself.

The four large animals laugh.

RHINO

What're you gonna do, little bard? Lull us to sleep?

BARDOLOMEW

If that's what it takes.

RHINO swings at BARDOLOMEW. BARDOLOMEW leaps back, avoiding the punch. He readies his lute, draws his claws, and strums a heavy metal power chord. The music forms a shockwave that shoots toward RHINO. RHINO gets knocked off his feet.

GORILLA, LION, and HIPPO rush toward BARDOLOMEW. BARDOLOMEW leaps around the tavern, dodging their attacks while playing a heavy metal tune. Blasts of air burst from his lute, battering the four animals around. Finally, when all four are lying on the ground, BARDOLOMEW lands in front of RHINO. He grabs a stein of cream soda from the nearby table and takes a drink.

RHINO

Wh-who are you?

BARDOLOMEW

I am Bardolomew, and this is *my* tavern.

TRANSITION TO TITLE SCREEN

INT. IRON TAP TAVERN - NIGHT

BARDOLOMEW slams the door to his tavern and cleans his paws. In the corner, a white macaw, BELLE, eyes him from over an upside-down menu. BARDOLOMEW approaches her.

BARDOLOMEW

Good evening, m'lady. Welcome to the Iron Tap. My apologies for that disruption. Rowdy customers always ruin the atmosphere.

BELLE

O-oh, yes, of course. Thank you!

BARDOLOMEW

I take it you're not here for the good food.

BELLE

What? O-of course I am! Just deciding what to order! What makes you think that?

BARDOLOMEW

Because you're holding the menu upside-down.

BELLE'S eyes widen and lets out a nervous laugh as she turns it around.

BELLE

Whoops! Hard to read it that way, haha! Let's see, how about the nectar stew?

BARDOLOMEW

It'll be my pleasure.

The tavern doors swing open. A pack of five dogs and a wolf enter, followed by a Dalmatian, BALBOA. BALBOA wears a black leather jacket, a spiked collar, and a red bandanna. He bears a sneer and looks around.

BELLE'S demeanor changes from nervous to frightened. She ducks behind the menu.

BELLE

[Murmurs] Actually, I need more time.

BARDOLOMEW notices her demeanor change and looks back at BALBOA. His whiskers twitch, as if detecting trouble. He approaches BALBOA.

BARDOLOMEW

Welcome to the Iron Tap. Please, have a seat, get off your paws, and rest. I'm Bardolomew. What can I get you? Root beer? Cream soda? I highly recommend the cream soda.

BALBOA

We're looking for a friend of ours. We believe she came in here. You seem like an observant fellow. Have you seen her?

BARDOLOMEW

Many patrons pass through here. You'll need to be a little more specific.

BALBOA

White feathers, black beak, annoying voice.

BALBOA'S ears twitch at the mention of BELLE'S voice.

BARDOLOMEW steals a glance toward BELLE'S table, but she is gone.

BARDOLOMEW

You are free to look, but do not disturb my customers, or I'll have to ask you to leave.

BALBOA

Noted.

The pack is already spread out through the tavern, bothering customers. BARDOLOMEW notices the doors to the kitchen close. He goes into the kitchen and finds BELLE hiding.

BARDOLOMEW

What kind of trouble have you brought into my tavern?

BELLE

Please, don't let them find me! I promise, I'll tell you everything. Just don't let them know I'm here!

BARDOLOMEW frowns. He gives her a long look, then exits the kitchen. The dogs get louder and some customers get up and leave. BARDOLOMEW approaches BALBOA.

BARDOLOMEW

That's enough.

BALBOA

I'm sorry, did I hear you correctly?

BARDOLOMEW

You come into my tavern, harass my customers, and you haven't even the courtesy to introduce yourself. Bad dog.

BALBOA bares his teeth.

BALBOA

What did you say to me?

BARDOLOMEW bares his own teeth.

BARDOLOMEW

I didn't stutter. Bad. Dog. Now get out of my tavern.

One of the dogs approaches BALBOA and hands him a white feather.

BLOODHOUND

She was here.

BALBOA takes the feather and sneers.

BALBOA

Where is she?

BARDOLOMEW

Leave now.

BARDOLOMEW readies his lute. BALBOA readies his own lute.

BALBOA

Not without the bird, even if I must tear this tavern apart.  
You want an introduction? Try this on for size!

BALBOA plays his lute, a metal tune with a fast tempo. The other dogs gain a red aura around them. Their muscles grow larger and creep toward BARDOLOMEW.

BALBOA (SONG)

From the shadows of the mountains,  
Across the broken mounds,  
I come baring ivory fangs,  
Along with my Hell Hounds.

We eat your fear and drink your soul,  
upon your bones we'll feast!  
You wanted to know who I am,  
Well, meet Balboa the BEAST!

The Hell Hounds lunge toward BARDOLOMEW while BALBOA plays. BARDOLOMEW leaps around, dodging their teeth and claws. When BALBOA finishes his lyrics, BARDOLOMEW lands and strums his lute strings, blasting BLOODHOUND. BLOODHOUND slams into the wall and slides to the floor, whimpering.

BALBOA

What the...?

BARDOLOMEW (SONG)

You do not know who you face,  
An error you have made.  
Take your fangs and your hounds,  
And leave this place I bade.

You make demands, invade my space,  
My respect you failed to earn.  
For my name is Bardolomew,  
And this is my tavern!

BARDOLOMEW sings as he attacks the other dogs. He leaps around, dodging their attacks, and retaliating with his own. Soon, all the dogs are sprawled across the floor, in pain.

BARDOLOMEW

Collect your friends and leave now, while you can still walk.

BALBOA eyes widen, a sinister grin spreading across his face.

BALBOA

He possesses... the cords of power!

BARDOLOMEW

Say what now?

BALBOA laughs.

BALBOA

Oh, this is too perfect! All these years I've searched, and this whole time, the cords of powers resided in this shoddy shack in the middle of nowhere.

BARDOLOMEW

Hey!

BALBOA approaches BARDOLOMEW, his stride confident and purposeful.

BALBOA

Tell me, cat. Where did you get that lute?

BARDOLOMEW stands his ground, peering up at the Dalmatian that towers over him. He grips his lute and sneers.

BARDOLOMEW

It belonged to my father. What's it to you?

BALBOA spreads his arms.

BALBOA

Why, before you stands the greatest bard to have ever lived! ...or I will be, once I get my paws on that lute of yours. Now hand it over, and I may spare whatever lives you have left.

BARDOLOMEW

Are you mad?

BALBOA leans down, nose inches from BARDOLOMEW's. His lips curl back, revealing his large fangs.

BALBOA

I just might be.

BARDOLOMEW

I've heard enough.

BARDOLOMEW strums his strings and blasts BALBOA in the face. BALBOA closes his eyes against the blast, his ears and lips flapping in the wind. Then it ends, and BALBOA opens his eyes, still standing.

BALBOA

Is that all you got?

BALBOA grabs BARDOLOMEW by the throat and lifts him off the ground. BARDOLOMEW chokes beneath his grip and kicks his legs about. BALBOA casually removes BARDOLOMEW'S lute from around his shoulders.

BALBOA

I'll be taking this.

BALBOA throws BARDOLOMEW across the room. He marvels at the lute in his paws.

BALBOA

At last, the cords of power are in my grasp.

BALBOA readies the lute, raises a paw, and prepares to strum the strings. The room suddenly erupts in a piercing screech. BARDOLOMEW winces, closing his eyes against the pain. BALBOA seems affected too, dropping the lute and covering his ears. From the kitchen, BELLE swoops in, grabs the lute, and then helps BARDOLOMEW to his feet.

BELLE

Cover your ears!

BARDOLOMEW obeys. BALBOA barks at BELLE and charges toward her. BELLE lets out another bloodcurdling screech, causing BALBOA to drop to a knee. BELLE helps BARDOLOMEW outside of the tavern. Dazed and confused, BARDOLOMEW takes his lute from her, grips it by the neck, and passes out.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. A COZY BEDROOM

A young black kitten, BARDOLOMEW, sits with an older cat. The older cat, FATHER, holds a lute. He plucks at the strings, a soothing melody playing.

BARDOLOMEW

That is great, Father!

FATHER

Thank you, Bardolomew. Now you try.

FATHER hands the lute to BARDOLOMEW. BARDOLOMEW plucks some of the strings, but the sound is terrible. BARDOLOMEW sighs.

BARDOLOMEW

I wish I could play as good as you.

FATHER

It takes years of practice and patience. Try again.

BARDOLOMEW plucks the strings. Another terrible sound comes out.

BARDOLOMEW

Ugh, it's no use! Something's wrong with this lute!

BARDOLOMEW thrusts the lute toward FATHER.

FATHER

Son, music does not come from the instrument, but from the heart. You have to mean it. Feel it. Only then will it come out.

FATHER gently pushes the lute back at BARDOLOMEW.

FATHER

Try again.

BARDOLOMEW takes a deep breath, then plucks the strings. The sound is better, even pleasant.

BARDOLOMEW

I did it!

FATHER

See? You're getting it. Keep practicing.

BARDOLOMEW  
Thank you, Father...

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. SMALL DAMAGED COTTAGE - DUSK

BARDOLOMEW opens his eyes to see BELLE reaching down toward him with a damp washcloth. He sits up in surprise, startling BELLE. The washcloth slips from her grip.

BARDOLOMEW  
GAH!

BELLE  
Oh, good, you're awake! I was worried I had-

BARDOLOMEW  
Where am I?

BARDOLOMEW looks around. They are in a small cottage with splintered wooden walls and a partially collapsed straw roof. He sits in a nest made of straw and scrambles out of it.

BELLE  
Well, you see... this... this is Nickelton, my home. Or... what's left of it.

BARDOLOMEW stops and looks at her, a look of confusion upon his face. Then he panics and pats his chest.

BARDOLOMEW  
My lute! Where's my lute?

BELLE points her right wing to the wall behind her, where his lute rests, and winces from pain.

BARDOLOMEW  
Are you all right?

BELLE

Yeah, I just pulled a wing muscle-

BARDOLOMEW rushes toward his lute and scoops it up, cradling it in his arms.

BELLE

Oh.

BARDOLOMEW

Thank goodness! Are you hurt? What'd they do to you?

BARDOLOMEW inspects the lute, looking for any possible damage. BELLE gives him the side-eye.

BELLE

Shall I leave you two alone?

BARDOLOMEW glares at her, then slings the lute over his shoulder.

BARDOLOMEW

I suppose I should thank you, so... thank you. Now, what happened out there? Who were those dogs and why are they after you?

BELLE becomes crestfallen and sighs, looking away.

BELLE

Those were the Hell Hounds. Their leader is Balboa. They're a traveling metal band. Not very popular, mind you, but they have some fans. I am... was one.

BELLE lets out a nervous laugh.

BELLE

But a few days ago, they came to our town. They put on a show, then afterward, they started asking these questions, like if we had any musicians in town. I- well...

BELLE trails off. BARDOLOMEW's whiskers twitched.

BARDOLOMEW

Well, what?

BELLE turned toward him, holding a long staff made of butternut wood, topped with a clear quartz crystal, kind of in the shape of a microphone. She holds the staff out, but winces and drops it. She grabs her right wing with her left.

BARDOLOMEW

Are you all right?

BELLE

It's just a staff.

BARDOLOMEW

I was talking about you.

BELLE

Oh. I'll be fine. I just pulled a wing muscle carrying you.

BELLE picks up the staff and holds it out.

BELLE

Anyway, I may have told them I was a singer.

BARDOLOMEW

Are you?

BELLE

Yes! Well, not really, but I want to be.

BELLE gives her staff a longing look, as if she is remembering the events of that day. After several seconds of waiting, BARDOLOMEW speaks.

BARDOLOMEW

Well? What happened?

BELLE

Oh, right. I told them I'm a singer, but I'm also a summoner. But... I'm not very good at either. I may have accidentally rained slimes all over them!

BARDOLOMEW stifles a laugh.

BELLE

It's not funny! I tried to impress them, but my voice is...

BARDOLOMEW

Obnoxious?

BELLE

Hey!

BARDOLOMEW

Look, I don't know what you got yourself into, but I want nothing to do with it. I'm gonna go back to my tavern and carry on with my life, okay?

BELLE

If they did to your tavern what they did to my town, then it no longer exists.

BARDOLOMEW heads for the door.

BARDOLOMEW

I don't want to hear it.

BARDOLOMEW pushes open the splintered door.

BARDOLOMEW

I'm going back to my tavern and that's-

EXT. NICKELTON - DUSK

BARDOLOMEW stops, seeing the devastation before him. Broken homes, damaged trees, and animate slime creatures dot the tattered landscape. Other bird people work to mend their homes, nailing

boards and sewing patches of straw together. A few residents rush around, struggling to shoo the slime creatures away. BELLE appears behind him, her face crestfallen.

BARDOLOMEW

They did this to your town?

BELLE

It was awful. The Hell Hounds were ruthless. Balboa... his music makes them tremendously strong, almost like they become monsters. It's frightening.

BARDOLOMEW

Then my tavern...

BELLE nodded.

A toucan, BILL, walks by, carrying a bundle of sticks. He spots BARDOLOMEW and BELLE and frowns, disappointed by the sight of her.

BILL

Oh, you're back. Come to bring more disaster to our homes?

BELLE

That wasn't my fault! ...entirely.

BILL

Hmph. If you must stay here, the least you can do is get rid of these dang slimes!

A slime clings to BILL'S leg. He shakes it off and scoffs.

BELLE

I-I don't quite know how yet.

BILL

Of course you don't. Just try not to cause any more damage. BELLE just frowns and nods as BILL walks off. She sighs, then spots BARDOLOMEW walking toward the sunset. She rushes to his

side.

BELLE

Where are you headed?

BARDOLOMEW

Back to my tavern.

BELLE

Ah, actually, it's this way!

BELLE points north, toward the distant volcano. BARDOLOMEW stops and redirects his stride.

BARDOLOMEW

Right.

EXT. OUTSIDE OF NICKELTON - NIGHT

BELLE walks at his side. BARDOLOMEW'S whiskers twitch.

BARDOLOMEW

What are you doing?

BELLE

I'm coming with you.

BARDOLOMEW

Why?

BELLE

He destroyed my home!

BARDOLOMEW

So rebuild it.

BELLE

You don't know the way!

BARDOLOMEW

I'll figure it out.

BARDOLOMEW walks faster.

BELLE

Your power didn't work on him last time!

BARDOLOMEW stops, clearly reflecting on those past events and her words.

BARDOLOMEW

[Murmurs] That's right. That's never happened before. Why didn't my music have any effect on him?

BARDOLOMEW frowns.

BARDOLOMEW

Very well.

BELLE

Thank you! Oh! I never told you my name.

BARDOLOMEW

Because I didn't ask.

BELLE

It's Belle. And you are?

BARDOLOMEW

Annoyed.

BELLE stops, looking confused.

BELLE

Annoyed? Odd, I could have sworn you said your name is Bardolomew.

BELLE rushes to catch up with him.

BELLE

Anyway, let's show this dog what we can do!

BARDOLOMEW stops and looks at her.

BARDOLOMEW

And what *can* you do, aside from breaking my eardrums?

BELLE

I told you, I'm a summoner! When I sing, I can summon otherworldly creatures to serve me! Watch.

BELLE clears her throat, waves her staff, and then holds it like a microphone. She belts out a song into the stone atop her staff. BARDOLOMEW grits his teeth and covers his ears with his paws, his hairs standing on end. BELLE finishes and the stone on her staff glows for a few seconds, then flickers out. A beam shoots toward the ground.

When the beam fades, a creature that looks a lot like a blobfish sits on the ground. BARDOLOMEW sticks his tongue out in disgust and looks at BELLE. BELLE flashes him a sheepish smile.

BELLE

I'm still working out the kinks.

The blobfish opens its mouth and spews out a sickly green fluid. BARDOLOMEW grabs his nose.

BELLE

I'm getting better at it! At least it is intact this time!

BARDOLOMEW

Oh yes. If all else fails, we can stink him to death.

The path ahead of them splits into three branches. One path winds west toward the SILVER MOUNTAINS in the distance. A second path heads east toward the COBALT RIVER. A third path heads north toward the TUNGSTEN FOREST. A rickety wooden signpost stands in the brush, pointing to each direction with the names of the locations. The one heading north toward the forest reads "To

Copper Town." BARDOLOMEW stops and reads the signs, then heads toward the forest.

BELLE reaches out and stops him.

BELLE

W-wait! Y-you don't want to go in there!

BARDOLOMEW

And why not?

BELLE

That's the Tungsten Forest! It's fine by day, but you want to stay out at night. We should go that way instead.

BELLE points toward the Cobalt River. BARDOLOMEW shakes his head.

BARDOLOMEW

That's the Cobalt River.

BELLE nodded, her eyes wide with hope.

BARDOLOMEW

That weaves through the Chrome Fields before reaching Copper Town.

BELLE nods again.

BARDOLOMEW

It'll take days if we follow it. It would be quicker to cut through the forest. What could be so dangerous?

BELLE

Oh, I don't know. Maybe all the creatures that would eat us!

BARDOLOMEW

It'll be fine. We'll be in and out in no time.

BARDOLOMEW walks down the path. BELLE shudders, but fol-

lows. As they approach the forest, tall white pines surround them. Barely any light from the waxing crescent moon shines through the canopy. A light mist clings to the ground. BELLE hugs her staff, her eyes darting wildly around her.

BARDOLOMEW glances back at her.

BARDOLOMEW  
[Whispers] Hey, are you all right?

BELLE jumps.

BELLE  
N-never better! I'm just- EEP!

BELLE jumps again and points toward the path ahead. An eerie tune rings through the air. The mist grows heavier and the trees seem to shift, cutting off their route. BARDOLOMEW'S eyes widen and he frowns.

BARDOLOMEW  
Did you see that?

BELLE just nods. Her body trembles. BARDOLOMEW readies his lute and unsheathes his claws.

BELLE tugs on his tail.

BARDOLOMEW  
Ow, do you mind??

BARDOLOMEW looks back at her. BELLE points toward some brush. From the shadows, a figure steps forward, nothing more than a tall, lean silhouette within the mist. Its head is round with a spike topping it and a long snout. Gleaming red eyes stare at them and it bares its glistening white fangs.

SILHOUETTE  
Hello, snack!

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. IRON TAP TAVERN - NIGHT

The HELL HOUNDS are playing around in the tavern. There are no more customers. The HELL HOUNDS help themselves to food and beverages. Some play games, others sing, and all have a good time. BALBOA sits in a chair, his feet on the table. He seems to stare at nothing, clearly lost in thought.

BLOODHOUND approaches BALBOA.

BLOODHOUND

Sir, how long are we gonna hang around here? The band is getting anxious.

BALBOA

I've said this already. We're not leaving until I take the cords of power from the cat.

BLOODHOUND

What's so special about these cords of power anyway? We're already a great metal band.

BALBOA sneers and takes his feet off the table. He leans toward BLOODHOUND.

BALBOA

Fool! Do you not remember what happened at our last gig? Some pathetic wannabe singer rained all that slime on us. It was humiliating!

BALBOA stands up.

BALBOA

I will be the greatest bard to have ever lived, and all our detractors will see how wrong they were!

BALBOA starts playing his lute.

BALBOA (SONG)

Ever since I was a young pup, I always wanted to be strong.  
To wield music and be a rock star, to make people kneel to  
my song.

FADE TO FLASHBACK.

EXT. SCHOOL YARD - DAY

YOUNG BALBOA plays a lute, looking happy and carefree.

BALBOA (SONG)(CONT'D)

The other school pups, they laughed at me, said I'd never  
wear a crown.

They stole my lute, they smashed up my dreams, and kicked  
me while I was down.

A group of large school pups gather around YOUNG BALBOA. They  
grab his lute while making mocking sounds and laughing. The pups  
destroy the lute and then attack YOUNG BALBOA.

BALBOA (SONG)

But still I persisted to search for this song, to get my revenge  
I avow.

Then I finally found my power, well, who's the rock star now?

A battered YOUNG BALBOA picks himself up. Transition to the in-  
terior of a library. YOUNG BALBOA searches through music books.  
He opens a page, his eyes go wide.

FADE OUT OF FLASHBACK.

INT. IRON TAP TAVERN - NIGHT

BALBOA plays his lute, and the other HELL HOUNDS join in, play-  
ing their music and dancing. A performative show commences.

BALBOA AND HELL HOUNDS (SONG)

Go!

Hell Hounds will shred the world!

Hear our music swirl!  
And every knee will boooooow!

We!  
Will bare our claws and fangs,  
And every head will bang!  
This is what we vooooow!  
Who's the rock star now?

Short musical interlude.

#### BLOODHOUND

But what does that have to do with the cat's lute?

#### BALBOA

Patience, friend. I'm getting to it.

BALBOA drapes an arm around BLOODHOUND'S shoulders, waving his free paw in the air as if painting an imaginary portrait of his dream.

#### BALBOA (SONG)

Now that I had found my power, a metal band I formed.  
But it could only take me so far, my friends my music transformed.

How I longed to empower myself, over my foes to tower!  
At long last, I found my desire, I'll claim the cords of power!

With my newfound strength in my grasp, our reign over all shall unfurl.

As the greatest bard to have lived, we will rock the world!

#### BALBOA AND HELL HOUNDS (SONG)

Go!  
Hell Hounds will shred the world!  
Hear our music swirl!  
And every knee will boooooow!

We!

Will bare our claws and fangs,  
And every head will bang!  
This is what we voooooow!

Who's the rock star now?!

BALBOA enters an epic solo on his lute, shredding up the music and scenery. HELL HOUNDS join in after his solo to finish off the song strong.

### BALBOA AND HELL HOUNDS (SONG)

Go!  
Hell Hounds will shred the world!  
Hear our music swirl!  
And every knee will boooooow!

We!  
Will bare our claws and fangs,  
And every head will bang!  
This is what we voooooow!  
Who's the rock star noooOOOOOW?!

Go!  
We will raise the fire!  
Hear the thunderous choir!  
We'll tear the heavens dooooooown!  
No!  
Nothing can stop this sound!  
For we are the Hell Hounds!  
Kneel before our croooooown!

Who's the rock star now?!

BALBOA ends in an epic band pose. As the music fades, BLOOD-HOUND approaches BALBOA.

### BLOODHOUND

But what if the cat doesn't return?

### BALBOA

Then go hunt him down and make sure he does. Bernard!

BERNARD, a massive St. Bernard with his drum hanging around his neck, steps forward.

BERNARD

Yeah?

BALBOA

Go with Bloodhound and find this Bardolomew. Bring him here, dead or alive. Just make sure that lute returns in one piece.

BERNARD

Okay.

BLOODHOUND and BERNARD step outside. The door closes behind them. BALBOA returns to his seat, props his feet up on the table, and sneers.

FADE TO BLACK.

INT. TUNGSTEN FOREST - NIGHT

Surrounded by trees with a heavy mist clinging to the ground and an eerie melody sounding. BELLE lets out a yelp of fright and ducks behind BARDOLOMEW. BARDOLOMEW'S eyes dart around, looking for the source of the voice. He readies his lute. BELLE clings to her staff, trembling behind him.

In front of them, the silhouette in the mist emerges, revealing AMADEUS, a silver wolf. He wears a pickelhaube and a black vest, with an accordion between his paws. The melody comes from the accordion. The mist moves around him, as if he controls it.

AMADEUS

How nice of you to venture this deep into the forest. It's not often we get guests. My gang will be pleased.

Around them, the sounds of brush rustling, footsteps padding against the grass, and muffled snarls and snickers. BELLE presses her back against BARDOLOMEW'S back, much to his annoyance.

She holds out her staff, looking terrified.

BARDOLOMEW

We are just passing through. Let us leave in peace.

AMADEUS

But you only just got here. At least let me introduce myself. I am Amadeus, and this is my Wolf Gang.

More muffled laughter from the mist as it shifts around them, briefly revealing three other wolves, all wearing stahlhelms. The mist shifts again, wrapping around the wolves and they disappear. BARDLOMEW'S whiskers twitch. He strums out a power chord. The blast of music rushes toward AMADEUS. The mist gathers around him, fading into the mist, leaving behind only his glowing eyes and glistening fangs. The blast hits the mist, dissipating it. AMADEUS is no longer there.

BARDOLOMEW

Show yourself, coward!

AMADEUS

Come now, is that any way to treat your host? And I was going to invite you to dinner... as the main course!

Creepy metal accordion music plays. The camera pans around our heroes.

AMADEUS (SONG)

In the darkness of the forest,  
Through the chilling mist,  
The shadows creep along the ground, ready to devour.

Feel the shiver down your spine,  
The icy touch of Death.  
Come the reaper for your life  
In this final hour.

A wolf leaps from the mist. BARDLOMEW ducks, narrowly avoiding getting eaten. The wolf lands, slides across the grass, and

fades into the mist. Another wolf swipes from the mist as BELLE. BELLE swings her staff, missing, but avoiding getting swiped in the process. BARDOLOMEW leaps forward and skillfully plucks his strings, claws out.

BARDOLOMEW (SONG)

Come and fight with all your might,  
We will not be slain.  
With my music in my hand,  
I don't fear the night.

Through the mist I see your fear,  
Cower if you must,  
For after the darkest hour  
Always comes the light!

BARDOLOMEW'S whiskers twitch. He turns around and blasts his music through a thick cloud of mist just as a wolf leaps out toward BELLE. BELLE ducks and the wolf whimpers as it is hit. The wolf tumbles across the ground back into the mist. BELLE scrambles across the ground, staff in her grip. As she stands up, a wolf peeks through the mist, sneering.

WOLF

Boo!

BELLE screams and swings her staff, clanging it against the wolf's stahlhelm. The wolf stumbles back into the mist, snickering. BELLE'S wings tremble from the impact.

AMADEUS

Ah, you're quite the bard, aren't you? Good, I like it when my meal fights back!

BARDOLOMEW

I can go all night!

AMADEUS reveals himself for a moment, grinning ear to ear as he plays his accordion. BARDOLOMEW launches a blast of music at him, but AMADEUS fades into the mist again. BARDOLOMEW'S

attack hitting nothing.

AMADEUS (SONG)

Wolves of the mist, howl and tear,  
Stalk our prey all night.  
Rule the darkness for we are ghosts  
With our bloodstained grace.

We bend our knee to not a soul,  
Freedom is our own.  
Pray to your gods, for you'll never  
Leave this cursed place!

A wolf leaps out at BARDOLOMEW, catching him off guard. BARDOLOMEW gets pinned to the ground and his lute slides across the grass. He pushes against the wolf's snout, then swipes with his claw. The wolf reels back, then sneers. BELLE swoops in, grabs BARDOLOMEW'S lute, then swings her staff, striking the wolf. The wolf rolls off BARDOLOMEW into the mist, disappearing. BELLE helps BARDOLOMEW up and hands him his lute.

BARDOLOMEW

This ends now.

He glares around, watching the mist move around. His whiskers twitch. He spins around and strums his lute, blasting the mist apart, revealing AMADEUS. BARDOLOMEW smirks.

BARDOLOMEW

There you are.

BARDOLOMEW and AMADEUS stare each other down. AMADEUS grins wide. BELLE looks around, her back to BARDOLOMEW'S back, watching the mist close in on her. Wolf silhouettes prowl toward her. Just as BARDOLOMEW is about to strum his lute, BELLE raises her staff.

BELLE (SONG)

[In a squawking, terrible singing voice]  
sPiRiTs Of ThE hEaVeNlY lIghT,

cOmE aNd PiErCe ThIs DrEaDfUl NiGhT!

BARDOLOMEW and AMADEUS wince in the awful screech BELLE lets out. A beam of light shoots from BELLE'S staff into the sky. For a moment, silence befalls the forest. Then a beam of light shoots down from the sky. The mist around them dissipates, revealing the three wolves. Brilliant light blinds everyone. BARDLOMEW and AMADEUS shield their eyes.

A shadow drifts down from the sky, traveling through the beam. Everyone stops and stares. When the shadow reaches halfway down, the beam disappears and a thing drops to the ground with a splat. Everyone looks at what fell and sees a hideous ugly greenish-pink blob.

AMADEUS

What in the moonlight is that??

BARDOLOMEW

Wait, I've seen this thing before.

BARDOLOMEW immediately grabs his nose. The blob thing spews a putrid green-brown sludge. The wolves, including AMADEUS, all cough and gag.

AMADEUS

By the pale moon, that's rancid!

BARDOLOMEW

Yeah, I'm still trying to figure out if that's a mouth or a butt. The wolves start laughing. BELLE looks anxious and starts shaking her staff.

BELLE

[Mutters] Come on...

AMADEUS laughs as BELLE'S shaking causes the blob thing to jiggle.

AMADEUS

Either way, those cheeks sure can jiggle!

BARDOLOMEW

Oh, it looks like it's gonna be sick!

BARDOLOMEW and AMADEUS laugh as the blob thing spews again. BELLE shakes her staff even harder. The blob jiggles so fast, it pops into a gooey mess. BARDOLOMEW and AMADEUS laugh even harder. BELLE stands there, looking embarrassed and feeling very small.

AMADEUS slaps BARDOLOMEW on the back, his laughter waning.

AMADEUS

Ah, you're all right! I think I'll let you go. Just be sure to visit again sometime.

BARDOLOMEW

Why, so you can eat us later?

AMADEUS

Hey, can't blame a wolf for going after prey that wanders so willing into our midst. But I like you. You play a mean lute there!

BARDOLOMEW

Thanks. You're not half-bad yourself.

AMADEUS

What brings you through here anyway?

BARDOLOMEW

A pack of dogs took over my tavern. I mean to take it back.

AMADEUS

A tavern, you say? We may need to pay you a visit sometime. Go get those mangy mutts out of there. If you need some help, just whistle. These keen ears will pick it up just about anywhere.

While BARDOLOMEW and AMADEUS talk, BELLE is surrounded by the three wolves. They stand and listen to the conversation, while

BELLE clings to her staff, looking very nervous.

BELLE

C-can we leave now?

BARDOLOMEW

This was fun, death threats aside, but we should get going.

AMADEUS

Of course, friend! Don't be a stranger now!

BARDOLOMEW walks past BELLE toward the exit. BELLE looks up at the wolves, who just smile at her, flashing their sharp teeth. She squeaks and rushes after BARDOLOMEW.

EXT. TUNGSTEN FOREST - NIGHT

BARDOLOMEW and BELLE walk down the path. In the distance, the Gold Fields graze the horizon, with the Cobalt River winding toward them, flowing near the path they walk upon. The moon drifts toward the mountains. A few scattered clouds streak across the sky.

As they walk, BELLE looks like she wants to say something, but hesitates, clearly unsure of how to say it. Her walking speed slows down as she looks at the ground, muttering to herself. BARDOLOMEW glances back and stops, crossing his arms.

BARDOLOMEW

You're walking slower than usual. Something the matter?

BELLE

Ah, well, you see...

BARDOLOMEW taps his foot.

BARDOLOMEW

Well, what? Out with it.

BELLE

I... didn't really appreciate being mocked back there.

BARDOLOMEW stops tapping his foot. His face changes to a more serious expression and he uncrosses his arms.

BARDOLOMEW

Back in the forest? It was just some lighthearted jest. We didn't mean anything by it.

BELLE

Well, I didn't like it. I... I know I'm not good at singing or summoning-

BARDOLOMEW

Clearly.

BELLE frowns, looking angry.

BELLE

See? That's what I'm talking about! I know I'm bad! You don't need to point it out all the time!

BARDOLOMEW opened his mouth to say something, but stops. He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, then opens his eyes again. He approaches her.

BARDOLOMEW

Look, at least you acknowledge that you're terrible. Many go their whole lives in denial.

BELLE

Is this supposed to help?

BARDOLOMEW

But what they also fail to realize is that acknowledgement is the first step to improvement. Now that you know you suck, you can work on it.

BELLE looks like she wants to be offended, but at the same time, realizes the truth in his words.

BELLE

But how? I've been trying to improve for a long time. It's... it's been no good.

BARDOLOMEW readies his lute.

BARDOLOMEW

My father taught me everything I know about music. He said that music does not come from the instrument, but from the heart. Watch.

BARDOLOMEW plucks his strings with grace. A sweet, relaxing melody comes out. BELLE listens, her body visibly relaxing. She holds her staff, and she looks like she wants to add her voice to the melody, as if the music wants to come out of her. Finally, BARDOLOMEW stops playing.

BELLE

That was beautiful.

BARDOLOMEW

Thank you. The music comes from within. You have to really feel it, and once you get that feeling, hold onto it and practice. Lots of practice. Now you try.

BELLE

Okay, here it goes.

BARDOLOMEW braces himself, ready to cover his ears. BELLE closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, but instead of squawking out a loud annoying sound, she exhales slowly. Then she opens her beak and sings.

BELLE (SONG)

[Better, but still terrible] From the stars in the sky, to the waters of the sea, come to this realm and protect me.

BELLE'S staff glows and a beam shine upon the ground. When the beam fades, a fish flops in place. BELLE sighs.

BELLE

It's no use.

BARDOLOMEW

Hey, at least it's something normal this time.

The fish farts, propelling it towards the river. It keeps farting until it lands in the water with a splash. Several fish float to the surface.

BARDOLOMEW

I spoke too soon.

BELLE

I should just give up. Mother was right, I'll never be a good singer.

BARDOLOMEW

Not with that attitude. What you just did was better than anything I have heard you sing since we met. That is improvement. Now you practice and sing better than that next time. You just need to find your voice. It will come.

BELLE looks up at BARDLOMEW with misty eyes. She runs up and hugs BARDLOMEW, who freezes in place.

BELLE

Thank you!

BARDOLOMEW

Ah, you're welcome! Now off, you're making me feel all funny.

BELLE lets go, turns around, and skips down the path. BARDLOMEW shivers, shaking his fur, then slings his lute and follows, a slight smile on his face.

**END ACT ONE**



**Misery**  
Susanne Bush  
*30' x 15' Set Design*



# Guitar Showcase

*Elizabeth Terhorst*

I prayed for the first time  
in a long time.  
    Not a plea or a wish,  
    but a prayer

Seventeen Hail Marys  
for I truly believed  
I was at the hour  
of my death.

The lights carved  
    an outline  
of your stony face.

White shirt,  
and shoes,  
and sheets.  
    My sheets used to be white.

I sat in the back  
of the auditorium  
for the guitar showcase  
    where you adorned  
    Carrara marble,  
and  
    I was rolled up  
in my black shroud.

I prayed for the first time  
in a long time.  
    Not in an attempt for salvation,  
    but a question for the Lord  
        May He be with me as well?

I was rolled up in black,  
staring at the white.

But, the dark threading of your laces.  
But, the dingy socks on your feet.  
But, the inky pendant around your neck.  
Those weren't white.

I was rolled up in black  
staring at the white.  
But, my hemming was clean.  
But, my ring hugged pearl.  
But, my glasses were ivory.  
Those weren't black.

Where is grey born amidst  
the first encounter of  
white and black?  
Where does good no longer  
hold up against evil?

Where does man  
separate from God?

Where do I  
leave shroud for swaddle?

Where do I  
become clean of you?

## Without Breaking Stride

*Skyler Kissel*

During dinner rush, the restaurant felt alive. Steam lifted from plates of pasta and caught the golden light that hung low over every table. The thick aroma of garlic and lemon oil filled the small dining room, pressing against exposed brick walls and drifting between closely set tables dressed in crisp white cloths. Chairs scraped and shifted, voices crossed the room, and laughter broke out in sudden bursts that carried from table to table. The space stayed in motion, alive with people leaning in, calling out, and filling every corner with sound. Tony slipped through it all without breaking stride, his hands moving in silent, practiced motions. When the lights were warm and low, the whole room seemed to breathe, and he breathed with it.

The air felt thick enough to touch. Heat rolled off the kitchen line in steady waves, curling through the space like a second heartbeat. Every few seconds the door swung open, spilling out bursts of white steam and sharp light that broke against the dim bar. The clatter of plates, the hiss of pans, and the scattered laughter of servers folded together into one long note that never stopped. Tony took pride in that sound, in the way the room held so many people at once without ever feeling careless. A woman's perfume passed through the air and mixed with garlic, citrus, and the faint smoke of seared meat. The scent clung to Tony's sleeves and hair until he could not tell where the restaurant ended and he began. The walls seemed to hum with their own pulse, and in that noise, he found a kind of peace. It was just loud enough to keep the world outside from getting in.

Tony had been at the restaurant for nearly thirty years, enough time for its rhythms to settle into his bones. Iozzo's carried the reputation of a top Italian dining room, one of the city's favorites, even if Tony knew the kitchen no longer lived up to its name. What mattered to him was the experience, and he took pride in being part of what still made it feel special. The place had become more than a job. It was the center of his days, the shape of his weeks, the one constant that never shifted beneath him. His social

life existed almost entirely within these walls, and he never apologized for it. Milestones were acknowledged with nods and raised glasses from across the bar, never with plans made afterward. The room gave him company, but not companionship. He didn't meet friends for drinks, didn't go out after shifts, didn't keep up with old faces from Chicago, where he grew up. Outside of work, his phone stayed silent more often than not, and he told himself that was fine.

Tony took endless pride in the place. The food was still decent and reliable in the way familiar things are, even if it was not what the restaurant had once been known for. What kept the room alive was the service, the way Tony and the other servers moved through it, attentive without hovering and making people feel noticed. The warm light, the low ceilings, and the walls crowded with old paintings and fading photographs all helped, but it was the care behind the bar and at the tables that held it together. People came to feel taken care of, and Tony liked knowing he was one of the reasons they left feeling that way.

Here, he had purpose. The regulars knew him by name and lit up when he approached their tables. Tony could pull a laugh from a tired stranger, calm a tense room with a single well-timed joke, or captivate a whole bar with a story from "back in Chicago." Tony always looked sharp, even late into the night, in his crisp black jacket and open collar. He worked in perfect rhythm with the clatter and hum around him, each practiced motion carrying the quiet thrum of someone who took great pride in every second of it.

Greg moved through the dining room with a similar ease, the kind that came from years of letting the restaurant shape his stride. He had been at Iozzo's almost as long as Tony, long enough that the staff joked the two of them came with the building. Cancer hadn't slowed him much in practice. He still outpaced servers half his age. Tony admired that about Greg, how he kept working after the cancer, still moving through the room with purpose. But he also knew when to stop, when to let the night finish without him. Some shifts, Greg wasn't there at all, and the room carried on. Tony found himself looking forward to the nights Greg worked. In a life built inside these four walls, Greg had become the closest thing Tony had to a real friend.

“Hey, you see that guy at table twelve tonight?” Tony said, smirking as he polished a wine glass until it squeaked. “Orders veal parm, says he’s gluten-free. I’m like, pal, you’re halfway through the bread basket.”

Greg chuckled, shaking his head as he wiped down a nearby table. “You’re going to get yourself fired one of these days, Tony.”

“Fired? Please.” Tony waved him off with a flick of his towel.

“They’d have to drag me outta here. This place’ll go under before I do.”

Greg let out a tired, warm laugh, the kind that came from too many years and too many shifts. “You really love it here, huh?”

Tony leaned on the bar, glass still in hand. The wood was smooth and warm beneath his fingers, sticky in spots where the lemon oil hadn’t fully dried. “What’s not to love? The food, the noise, the people. Beats sittin’ around watchin’ TV.” He smiled, but his eyes drifted toward the darkened back dining room they had already closed for the night.

Greg followed Tony’s gaze toward the empty dining room, its chairs stacked and its shadows stretching long across the floor. “Y’know,” he said softly, “you ever think about slowing down? Even a little?”

Tony blinked, the question hanging between them longer than it should have. He thought back about before coming to this restaurant.

Back in Chicago, it all started as a way to pay the bills. The year after he graduated high school, Tony moved out, eager to prove himself. He worked in a small neighborhood restaurant wedged between a check-cashing place and a pawn shop, its windows filmed with grease and fingerprints that never fully came clean. The food was fine, filling and dependable, but it wasn’t the reason people came back. What lingered was the way Tony remembered faces, kept cups filled, made a night feel easier than it had any right to.

He took every shift they offered him, doubles and weekends and holidays, because rent didn't wait. The tips depended on him more than the menu. He learned how to read a room, how to smooth over long waits and burned edges with a joke, how to make a place feel warmer than it was. After closing, he stood alone in his apartment, traffic rattling the windows, fryer oil clinging to his clothes. He stayed in his shoes longer than he needed to because taking them off meant the day was truly over.

He missed how life had felt in high school, how friends showed up without planning, how time felt wide open. He meant to keep in touch. Instead, weeks slipped by unnoticed. By the time he realized how long it had been, the quiet had already settled in. Working through it hadn't been a decision. It was the only option left, the only way to keep the lights on and the days moving forward. One night, a man who'd been eating at the counter for weeks lingered after the others left. He watched Tony work the room, the way he held things together even when the place was half-empty. "You ever think about working somewhere else?" the man asked. He talked about a restaurant farther from home, in the heart of Indianapolis, a place that needed someone steady. Someone who knew how to take care of people.

Tony said yes before he had time to second-guess it. It felt like being seen. When Tony first took the job, the pride surprised him. He felt it in the way he showed up early, stayed late, and treated the place like it mattered, a feeling he still carried with him years later. The man who invited him there retired years ago. Tony stayed.

The shuffle of coats and the low murmur of departing customers filled the pause between them. "Slowing down?"

Tony scoffed, straightening the glass in his hand. "If I slow down, I'll stop. And if I stop, this whole damn place'll crumble."

Greg smiled, not mocking, just knowing. "Maybe," he said, nudging a stray fork into alignment, "or maybe you'd find something waiting for you outside of these walls."

Tony didn't answer. He just reached for another glass, polishing it until it gleamed, as if the shine alone could quiet the thought.

Just as he finished the glass, Tony noticed a woman at the far end of the counter watching him with that polite, hesitant look he'd seen a thousand times—the kind customers used when they didn't want to interrupt but needed something anyway. He set the glass down gently, the faint ring of it against the wood slipping into the hum of the room.

“How's everything tonight?” Tony asked as he approached. Her face lit up immediately.

“Really good actually. Could I get another glass of red? My friends and I are celebrating. We finally all have the same night off.” She laughed. “It feels like a miracle these days. Everyone's schedules are insane.”

Tony reached for the bottle, its dark glass thicker than most with a clean and understated label. He knew it was a good one, the kind people ordered when the night mattered. “Night off with friends... can't beat that,” he said.

“Exactly,” she said, accepting the glass he poured. “We don't get to do this often, so when we can, we make it count.” She took a sip, then nodded toward the glowing room around them. “You've got a great place here. Feels special,” she said.

Special wasn't the food; he knew that. It was the way the room was held together. Tony smiled, the familiar pride rising in his chest. “I'm really glad you think so,” he replied. But when he turned back toward the bar, her words lingered longer than he expected. *Nights off*, he thought to himself. *Making them count*.

Tony wiped down the bar and counted the stools without meaning to, his movements unhurried. Fewer regulars stayed late anymore, the kind who used to stretch a night just by talking. The ones who did linger now kept one eye on their phones, conversations thinning until there was nothing left to say. He couldn't re-

member the last time someone waited for him after a shift, or the last time he'd rushed out the door to meet friends instead of locking up alone. The bills were paid. The lights stayed on. Still, he stayed. In the mirror behind the bottles, Tony saw his reflection, the silver creeping into his dark hair and the faint lines near his mouth. The bar lights softened everyone, including him. He liked that trick.

A little time passed in a blur as Tony moved through his usual closing motions, wiping rings from tables, resetting silverware, stacking dessert plates without thinking. Eventually, the last couple lingering over their tiramisu finally stood, offering him a grateful wave before slipping into their coats and heading toward the door. Their laughter trailed behind them as it swung shut, leaving the restaurant suddenly still in their absence. The room, so full an hour earlier, felt wider now, the empty tables stretching out like quiet reminders of the night winding down. Tony gathered their glasses, the clinking of them in his hand sounding too loud in the new hush settling over the space.

Greg finished wiping down his last table and untied his apron, rolling his shoulders like the day had finally caught up to him. On his way toward the hallway, he paused beside Tony.

“You know,” he said softly, “nights like this make me think you deserve more than just closing up alone every time.” He offered a small, tired smile. “Give yourself a chance, Tony.” Then he pulled on his jacket and headed for the back door. Tony opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out. A moment later, Greg was gone, his footsteps fading into the quiet.

When the door clicked shut behind Greg, the restaurant changed shape. The silence filled the space like water, slow and creeping, rising around Tony's ankles and climbing higher the longer he stood still. Without the chatter and clatter to keep him anchored, the room felt strangely hollow, its warmth stretched thin. The hum of the refrigeration units pulsed in the background, steady and cold, a poor substitute for human voices. Tony ran a palm over the bar's smooth surface, his fingers catching on a tacky spot of lemon oil and felt a flicker of something he couldn't quite name. Restlessness, maybe, or the echo of Greg's words settling into the quiet.

For the first time in a long time, the place did not feel like a refuge.

Tony finished the closing tasks on instinct, his body moving through motions he had done thousands of times. He stacked the glasses, wiped down the counters, and swept the corners no one ever looked at. But each action felt strangely separate from him, as if the work belonged to a version of himself he was slowly stepping away from. The lemon oil glowed on the bar, the chairs waited in their neat rows, and for the first time, the familiar quiet felt less like safety and more like a hollow space he was standing alone inside. He paused, towel in hand, unsure what to do with the sudden stillness pressing against him. That was when his phone buzzed in his pocket, cutting through the quiet like a lifeline.

Greg: *Dinner tomorrow? I know you'll say no, but I'm asking anyway.*

The words made Tony pause. He'd have to call off work. Greg had been nudging him for months, always with the same half-joking invitation, always brushed off with a laugh or an excuse. But tonight, something about the sound of silence made the thought settle differently.

He typed back, pausing before each word: *Yeah. Tomorrow. I'll be there.* When he hit send, the room suddenly didn't feel so empty anymore. It felt like a door cracking open. He slipped the phone into his pocket and listened to the quiet settle again.

He finished closing up more slowly than usual. There was no rush now, no reason to stack one task on top of the next. He locked the cabinet, wiped the sink handles, folded one last napkin into a neat triangle and slid it into his coat pocket. For once, the night didn't feel like something he had to outrun.

As he turned off the lights row by row, he thought about Greg, about the way he worked fewer nights now and let the rest go. He had always assumed stopping meant losing something, but maybe it didn't have to. Maybe slowing down was its own kind of staying.

Tony stood there a moment longer, the smell of lemon oil sharp in the dark. He realized he didn't know what his days would look like if he took less of them here, and that uncertainty didn't scare him the way it once had.

Outside, the winter air met him clean and honest. He walked past his car just to feel the cold move around him, his hands still smelling faintly of citrus. The night felt open, not empty, as if there was time he hadn't accounted for yet. For the first time, Tony allowed himself to wonder what it might be like to slow down too.

# Barns Isn't Over

*Maggie Hoppel*

sometimes, i burn  
down—wet skin toppling  
to sloppy linoleum,  
one footprint awaiting its answer  
on godforsaken clothes.  
i would die to myself  
if you plunged your enamel  
into my patient carotid—  
perhaps tuck a business card  
into the lemontwist  
of your osseous mouth,  
but when i met jesus  
& siddhartha, neither deigned  
to stay in touch. i recall fractions  
of a drink i dropped  
into your silhouette—  
ballerina shards & shuddering lungs  
hissing at the old scratch  
of new palmistry, cufflinks  
lip locked, dishpan claws  
wringing my cerebellum dry,  
& then we met, & by god—  
by every black hole swallowing itself  
pure—we keep meeting.



**Anticipation (Nicole)**

*Robert Smith*

*.20" Diameter Graphite & Pastel on Sized Paper*

## Chitose in February

*Nisha Cavendish*

had fell silent, interpolated  
with my shivers, breaths into my hands—  
the cold reminded me to buy gloves,  
and how I hadn't eaten since starting my cross-country trek.  
A-soon-to be blizzard ushered toward lodging,  
still, the smell of ramen lulled me from my path  
right to an old lady's home—  
a bottle of Sapporo Kirin, fried rice,  
chashu ramen, her smile despite me being a foreigner  
told me I wasn't alone in the snow country.  
The Queens Hotel was my respite,  
thermostat set to 75F, a view letting me gaze  
out at white that went on for miles;  
I thought I had craved that silence;

I'd roam the dead world at night,  
3am combini trips to scarf down 100 yen donuts—  
but one encounter rings through my mind  
of a child crying, cowering behind his mother  
just from the sight of me;  
My hotel room became a weekend prison afterwards,  
the city of white I had yet to fully explore off limits;  
I wondered if I was the one bringing the cold—  
Who wouldn't cling to warmth during a bitter Winter.

# Being Collectable

*Isabella Park*

It was the early morning, and Adam and I were still going in circles, arguing about something I did wrong again, or some thought Adam didn't want me to be having.

“You should know you are beautiful. If there is one thing you know about me, it's that I am a collector of beautiful things.”

Adam proclaimed this as if he had wrapped up the world in a big pink bow and given it to me. This profound realization was his cue that the argument had been concluded indefinitely.

Pressing Adam any further would have ended with raised voices and slamming doors, but I wondered what kind of collection I would be put in. What kind of “beautiful things” did he collect?

I couldn't be a collection of knickknacks. Snow globes, little bird statuettes, and crystals were off the table. Adam didn't like knickknacks, and when we moved in together, my collection of adorable useless items shrank into closeted boxes or was tossed in garbage bins.

I could see myself being placed among a collection of useful objects. Maybe I belonged with the mugs and saltshakers, or the tangled charging cables bunched in the office drawer. Adam always liked objects that were useful to him and easy to use. He got bored easily—maybe I would have been a variety of mugs that never lost their novelty or purpose.

Maybe Adam meant a collection of normal, everyday items. Perhaps I belonged with the spoons and forks. A collection of dog leashes or fleece throw blankets? Maybe a matching set of pots and pans?

What about a collection of taxidermy—a gigantic dead buffalo head or a stuffed pheasant?

I don't remember what Adam and I were arguing about; it wasn't important to him. The argument collapsed, and now I will never know what Adam meant. Back then, it felt like I was an object worth holding onto, and I didn't want to ruin it—afraid he might take the beauty he saw in me away.

Conversations always ended in the middle, like a cliffhanger.

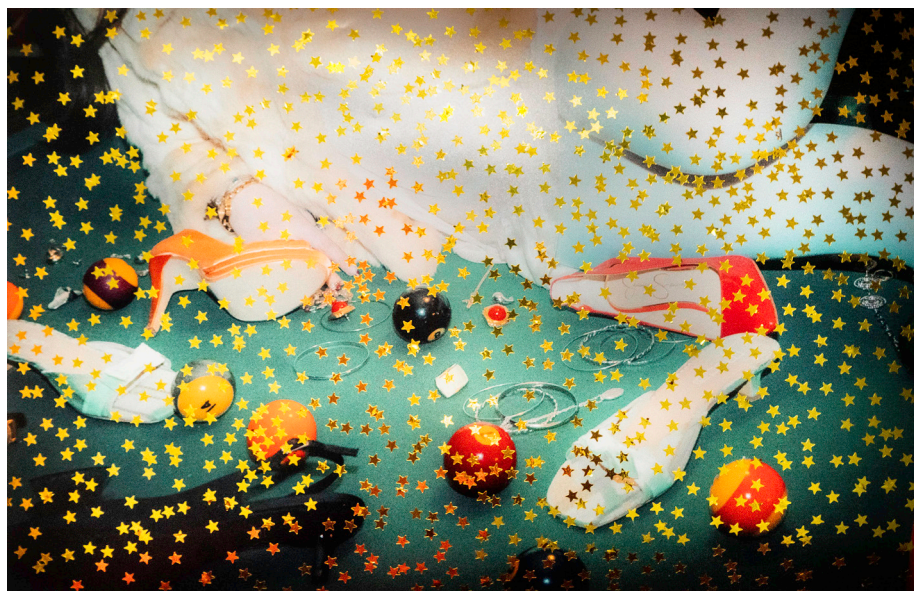
Maybe I am a four-year collection of every unresolved conflict and every cut-off sentence. All the lost little pieces of who I was make up a collection of my abandoned self—a betrayal of myself in hopes of being loved.

Time has stretched between Adam and me since we last talked. Looking back, I question when Adam stopped seeing me as a person—the last time, the exact moment, I became an item to be collected.

## mostly i want a husband

*Maggie Hoppel*

so that i can sit like always in the cvs drive thru line  
on washington road that takes forty five minutes  
and the 2006 camry will still soak up my scream  
except he'll be scheming in the shotgun seat with  
an extra, ideally work-provided insurance card  
and the cd he burned for me in college  
and he'll tumble out and bolt inside the store  
and shoulder the disapproving glances  
of the couple behind us in the (eugh) honda cr-v  
and take brushstroke manstrides past the candy  
and the lip gloss to the pharmacy counter  
and it will be a possibly serious race to my accutane  
in-store vs pickup window and camry vs vans  
and win or lose he will rustle back into my liar  
of a heating system with a box of tampons  
and a can of root beer to split the time and the  
difference and the triangle into a trapezoid  
spinning like wheels mathematically and errand  
checked we'll make tracks out of the parking lot  
jungle book sashaying into highway smog  
with fresh period products and a dumb receipt  
and a promise forty-five minutes closer to its breaking



## **Your Porcelain Dolls**

Malana Kramer

*24' x 16' Photography*



## Worshipping Him

*Jazz Walker*

Sundays smelled like grease and heat,  
fried chicken cooling on paper towels,  
dust rising like incense in the yard.  
Her uncle stood at the door, calling it  
the Movement for the Melanated People of God,  
his voice rolling across the grass like a storm  
they weren't allowed to outrun.  
Women orbited him like moons trapped  
in his gravity, each carrying a child  
with his smile,  
folding themselves  
into silence small enough to swallow. (a silent thing that is small  
enough to swallow)  
Nine cousins clung to hips and shoulders,  
their faces half-sunlight, half-shadow,  
eyes too old for the games they tried to play.  
He preached about freedom,  
arms raised to the hot Indiana sky,  
sweat slipping down his temples  
like truth trying to escape.  
She remembered the shouting,  
the swaying,  
thinking it was holy.  
She remembered the women in corners—  
hands over their mouths,  
prayers sounding like breathing  
that was trying not to break.  
Only now, older,  
after Plath taught her the language of unraveling,  
after Brooks taught her how a neighborhood remembers,  
after Lorde taught her the cost of silence—  
does she see the chains braided into his words,  
the empire stitched from fear.  
She did not know then,  
while laughing barefoot in the dirt,  
that he worshipped himself

and named it God.  
But she knows now.  
And knowing is its own kind of freedom.

## another letter she'll never read

*Kate Coffin*

When I was 13, I think I fell in love with a girl from my softball team. She was the first girl who made me feel fuzzy and safe, like there was no one out to get me as long as she was by my side. Eventually, as all eighth grade relationships do, it came and passed. You know when the sun is beaming into your room and the dust is floating in the air? It's beautiful, for something so drab. It's the first sign of a warm day or the pollen to come in early spring. It's small and meaningless, but it sure is pretty, even if it doesn't last long.

After the breakup, I lost the ability to suspend myself in the sunlight. I was so afraid of the vacuum that I didn't let myself love or be loved. I lost that ability for so long, so I filled it with pot and sex and other stupid things a stupid kid who can't express their feelings would choose. I lost it, but recently, I've found it again.

I've found it in the soft smiles and outbursts of laughter. I've found it in the passing touches and lingering eye contact. I've found it while watching your side rise and fall as you sleep beside me, the few inches between us stretching miles:

I've found it in you.

There are feelings I haven't had since I was 13 that live and breathe only in my head because saying them out loud could cause a breeze, dispersing the dust until it finds its way to another, lesser, window sill.

I don't know if it's love. I'm not sure I've really loved someone, and I don't think love can exist if it's one-sided. To love someone is to be loved, you know? I wouldn't call it obsession or infatuation, either. It's the feeling you get on the first day in spring that you can wear shorts and a hoodie; it's not quite the right time of year for it, but it feels right. It feels like you have to wear them because you want to. Even if you get cold, you made your decision before you left your house. You chose how you interacted with a feeling you enjoy. There's potential for it to be a warm 64 degrees or a chilly one. You

took the risk when you wore shorts, and maybe it didn't pay off. Maybe you'll vow to never wear shorts again in early April, even if the weather calls for it.

Dust is always around us, even when we can't see it. It's making us sneeze and cough, getting caught in our throat mid-laugh. You never notice it until you open your window in the early afternoon, and right then, at least to me, it's a moment you can't ignore. All it has to do is suspend itself, vulnerable to just a flick of a disregarding wrist.

I hope that you never wipe down your nightstand again. I hope that you never decide on leggings instead of shorts. But more than that, I hope you find a sunbeam you can't look away from and a pair of shorts that fit your body just right.

I hope that you can love and be loved.

I hope that it's with me.



## **The Seen, Refracted**

*Shivam Patel*

*Digital Photography*

# Spanish Fall

*Katelyn M. Stewart*

Alejandro sat motionless in his chair, staring at the empty screen. All day, he had delivered magnetic gestures to his co-workers in their virtual work setting, but as soon as the last face logged out, loneliness crashed over him.

Across the room, on the kitchen bar top, sat a phone. Alejandro tried not to look at the device, knowing that if there was a message, he would not want to read it.

Stella lay purring rhythmically. She had tried to comfort Alejandro, but his emotions made her uncomfortable, so she retreated for an extended repose on the back of the sofa. Alejandro looked over at his small feline companion and felt a pang of jealousy, realizing that the troubles of man would never bother a cat. Stella's apathy gave Alejandro the motivation to stand and view the room from a different vantage point.

Alejandro's apartment was pristine. Red brick served as a base for the room's main features, accentuated by bursts of color from Gustave Klimt paintings and the black-and-white's of old movie posters. His most beloved poster hung above the leather sofa. It featured Clark Gable biting into a carrot with fresh veneers as a young Claudette Colbert stared at him with wide silver-screen eyes.

Alejandro was thirteen when he and Miguel started going to the theater after Mass to watch the old films. Every Sunday, the owner, a widower in his mid-30s, would put on the pro-code films in memory of his late wife's obsession. On those days, the only four people who would step foot in the theater were Alejandro, Miguel, the owner, and the ghost of his wife.

During these screenings, the two couples—one separated by life and death, the other by the risk of discovery—would pine for one another under the silver screen.

Of all the movies that played during the black-and-white

Sunday showings, *It Happened One Night* was the boys' favorite. There was something spectacular about the way the old Americans spoke; biting into every word like a source of unyielding pleasure.

Alejandro shook the memory away as he moved out from behind his desk and made his way to the kitchen. Eating had become difficult over the last week. Still, he took comfort in gripping the refrigerator handle, pulling it firmly until the seal released, then, as it gasped widely, pushing it shut. His eyes drifted across the countertop, past the knives, breadbox, and coffee maker, until he landed on the miniature bottle of port wine. For six months, it had sat on the counter untouched.

Theirs had been a spring wedding: Miguel and Adelina's. Alejandro had stood, straightening his suit in a back room of the church before the ceremony began. Adelina had begged for the groomsmen's suits to be cream-colored. Alejandro had agreed. The woman had exceptional taste. The heavy wooden door opened, and Miguel quietly entered.

Years ago, Miguel had grown his mustache to match Clarke Gable's, and even now, against his bride's wishes, he wore it proudly. Alejandro was never bothered by it.

"Are you ready?" Alejandro asked.

Miguel flashed a grin, "Her father already said yes."

The wedding happened.

Before the eyes of the Lord, a man and woman were married. Their families were thrilled. Wine poured down the throats of all who attended, and while the bride danced the night away, her husband escaped to a coat closet with his lover. Only God knew.

That night, Alejandro went home with a miniature bottle of port wine, and Miguel went home with Adelina. Neither slept well. Alejandro felt a chill of despair run through his ribs. He looked away from the bottle of port wine and out the kitchen window. Outside his apartment, city life continued unbothered.

The Madrid fall was something like magic—warm mornings followed by cool evenings. Laughter could be heard on every corner in transit to the festivals happening around the city. For those who wandered the solitary path, the light rains would brush their cheeks, ensuring they weren't left un-kissed that day.

Due to the state of the body, Adelina had declined an open casket. During the funeral, there was no rain, just exhausting sunshine. Alejandro had stood outside the church but was unable to make himself go inside. Instead, he walked to the back to sniff out a rogue cigarette. Behind the church, dressed in black silk, was Adelina. Her gaunt face stared out across the courtyard, taking long, numbed drags off an unfiltered cigarette. *Perfect class.*

Alejandro stopped dead and attempted to retreat without being noticed, but Adelina turned, dark eyes smeared in residual mascara and stared directly at him. Purgatory would not have lasted as long. Adelina broke the stillness by pulling the half smoked cigarette from her lips and placing it carefully on the church step. She then rose and stepped back inside. Alejandro walked over to finish what she had left.

There was no smoking in Alejandro's building. Even if the activity was allowed, he had only smoked a handful of times in his life. But now, sitting by the window, he craved a drag. Suddenly, he heard a rap at the door.

Alejandro remembered the last time someone knocked on his door. After crawling from his slumber, he had answered the door and found Miguel standing there, rain beading across his rain jacket, eyes distant. At that moment, Alejandro knew this would be the last time he ever saw Miguel.

A passionate entanglement began and ended. Alejandro awoke alone in the morning, and later that day, he received a call from his mother, who between sobs, told him what had happened. Now, the rap came again. Alejandro rose to his feet and approached the door as if a ghost were behind it, ready to announce the intention to begin a haunt. He turned the handle, opened the door, and before him stood Adelina.

A wool peacoat and smart dress almost distracted from the dark circles under her eyes. Almost.

Alejandro, surprised, began to stutter. “Adelina...what are you doing here?”

She raised her chin, staring intensely at Alejandro. “Come. We’re going out.”

“To where?”

She pursed her lips. “Anywhere. Come on. Grab your coat. It’s brisk.”

Hair stood on the back of Alejandro’s neck, but Adelina’s presence, although terrifying, was also comforting. He reached behind the door for his coat and followed her out into the city. Stella did not stir.

Adelina and Alejandro walked side-by-side. Two people of impeccable dress, grieving over the same personal loss. As they were about to pass a cafe, Adelina sat down at an outdoor table. Alejandro looked around to see who amongst the strangers might care about their conversation and took his seat across from the widow.

The waiter appeared. “Welcome. Shall we start with drinks?”

Adelina gave him a wide plastic smile. “Yes. Two Vermut, *por favor*.”

The waiter stepped away, leaving his patrons to steep in their atmosphere once again.

Alejandro shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “So, how are you?”

Adelina waved the question away and replied in a passionate indifference. “No pleasantries. We’re both miserable. There’s no reason to hide it.”

The urge to defend himself and continue the facade crossed Alejandro's mind, but Adelina's forceful composure left him disarmed. *How much did she know?*

Adelina continued, "What I don't understand is *why*? What was so horrible in his life that he had to end it like that?"

The waiter appeared again and dropped the two glasses of vermouth on the table. Whether he spoke, neither knew.

Adelina's eyes moved to the street and watched as a group of young people made their way towards some wondrous destination.

"Was I that bad of a choice?"

Alejandro leaned forward. "Adelina, He loved you."

Adelina's statuesque form remained still. "No, Ale, he loved you."

Alejandro could feel the buried misery rising to the surface. The dryness of his mouth left him unable to say anything. Soon the tears would come. Not in public. He looked to Adelina, whose eyes now held him. She sat there, the gatekeeper secrets, and he knew she wanted him to tell her everything.

"You think I didn't know? You think that I thought it was normal for my husband to not want to touch me?" She gestured wildly at her feminine frame. Exasperated, she leaned back in her chair and tilted her head up toward the heavens, breathing in the open air. After a moment, she sat back up to meet Alejandro's eyes and shifted in discomfort, seeing that his face had fallen.

"He loved me in the way he could, but his deep reservoir of love...that was saved for you, Ale."

Alejandro knew this. That deep and sacred love that they shared had gone unspoken for almost 15 years, and he couldn't help thinking that if they had told the truth, Miguel might be alive today. Before Alejandro sat Miguel's beautiful and sharp-witted widow.

Her dark hair was pulled back with a French hair pen, and her eyes were wide, dark, and all-knowing. Even now, Alejandro could see the entirety of the Universe flash through Adelina's irises, and he wondered what Miguel had last seen in those eyes before he decided he could no longer go on.

Then, they began to weep.

At that point, no other words were necessary. All they could do was let the tears pour as people passed by, living their lives.

After the tears had flowed for a while, Alejandro looked back at Adelina, whose features were hidden under the swelling that only grieving brings, and at that moment, he understood. They were just two people surviving the loss of a man they had both loved very much. He then grabbed his glass of Vermouth and raised it high.

Adelina wiped her eyes and slid her hand to her glass.

“To those who survive the greatest losses.”

They toasted to each other.

## **Our Love**

*Marcus Z. Ramey*

Our love's a curtain  
fig bonsai, covered in snow,  
glowing in the sun

## Dadaism with a Blood Orange

*Ella G. Bundy*

*Blood orange: a shade of orange linked to vitality, creativity, and the potential and desire for new beginnings. See also: raw material effortlessly transformed into art.*

It's rotten. Petrified, really. The single remaining orange balances delicately over the moss-green bars of the food service shelves. It is a husk of its former self, skin wrinkled and collapsing, flesh turned hard and porous to the touch. Once an ample sphere laden with juice, now a solid hunk of clay left abandoned by a wandering artist.

Wren's mother had always loved oranges. Her youthful hands, smooth and unburdened, had prepared the fruits with painstaking care, separating peel from bounty with impeccable precision. Now, though, Wren grabs the orange with a gloved hand and tosses it into the trash bag at her feet. It hits the bottom with a thud. She tips her head, a fall of onyx hair sliding across tanned skin as her eyes lock on where it landed.

Throughout her childhood, each weekend spent at Mama's had been painted with the scent of oranges. She and her brother would sit out on the front steps, squishing clover mites into red smears on the concrete, while the wafting scent of Sicilian whole orange cake escaped from the screen door behind them. Falling leaves cascading over crinkling grass, chapped lips, stained fingers. Childish jostling, fierce competition, a race to reach the kitchen table first. How many times had she shoved her brother, Henry, launching with her sticky hands open in supplication for the first taste of dessert?

Mama always said that oranges were "little hearts," guarded but sweet. Wren feels like hers is the one at the bottom of the bag, heavy and cold.

The trembling in her bones is enough to break her reverie, her attention returning to the present. The kitchen's cooler hums

around her, frost clinging to the edges of the shelves as she rubs them clean. Her cloth—pink, thick—comes back draped in a cloak of dust, collected like a fur lining. Her reflection shows in the iron bars of the shelf's edges. Keychains dangling from the yellow belt at her hips, miniature stuffed elephant hanging from a carabiner, hair held back by a tropical bandana.

“Wren, you in here?”

She turns right as the heavy cooler door swings open, Jayce standing with his hip against the entryway. “Hey,” she says, lowering her cloth. “Good Monday morning. How’d unloading the truck go?”

Jayce sucks his teeth. “What truck?”

Wren’s brows furrow ever-so-slightly. “What truck...?” she repeats.

“Hasn’t shown up yet,” Jayce says. He steps into the cooler, red-gold hair trapped beneath a dark hair net as his head dips, and he peers into her trash bag. “You making a half-frozen fruit salad, hm?”

“I was trying to get rid of the bad produce to make room for the truck,” Wren says. She heaves her cloth down at her soap bucket with more force than necessary, a collage of bubbles spurting into the air. For a brief moment, they look sparkling and magical. In the next moment, they are gone. “I’ll give it another few minutes and then call and see what’s going on,” Wren says. She puts her hands on her hips, squeezing her eyes shut. “Ugh.”

“If it’s any consolation, it’s supposed to be one of our busiest days all season,” Jayce chirps. She opens her eyes to find him scratching a bit of mold off of one of the shelves, inspecting the build-up beneath his nail. “And we have nothing to serve!”

Her smile is strained as she brushes past him, knocking shoulders. “Shut up.”

The cooler door is frigid beneath her fingertips as she pushes it open, holding it with her elbow as Jayce brushes past. The kitchen is large and warm, with a row of ovens in the back and sinks on either side. A prep station lies on either end of the space, one for cold foods and one for hot. The sound of fans whirring, the humidity seeping from the oven set to *steam*, and the ever-present reek of fryer oil is enough to loosen some of the tension from Wren's shoulders.

"I can call if you want me to," Jayce says from behind her. "Since you've been dealing with... you know. *Do you want me to call?*"

"No," Wren says. "Yes. No. Yes."

"Yes?"

"No." She rubs at her forehead for a minute, grimacing. "No, I'm the manager so I'm the one who should do it."

Jayce nods and drifts off, opening ovens to check their contents. Wren excuses herself and walks back to the office, kicking the door shut behind her. It's a stuffy thing, the office. Three desks crammed together against one wall, a towering array of shelf space behind them. Staplers and pens and dry-erase markers, paper-cutters and thermometers and mounds of missing-punch forms. Wren slings herself into her chair, bones releasing relieved sighs as her body relaxes into the leather.

Her desk is cluttered. A souvenir shot glass from Florida shaped like a pair of barely-clothed tits, a stuffed polar bear wearing Hufflepuff robes, a crocheted frog with buttons for eyes named Dostoevsky. She pushes the amphibian author aside and reaches for the phone, typing in the extension.

Right as a voice picks up, Jayce opens the door to the office.

"Truck's here."

Wren drops the phone and gets to her feet, tucking the riot-

ous curls at her nape into the collar of her polo. “Okay. Unload it as quickly as you can so we can get some food prepped before opening.”

She heads back to the cooler and finishes dusting and de-molding the shelves, carrying her now-faded pink cloth and soap bucket out to one of the kitchen countertops. She sets it down alongside the cardboard boxes of produce brought from the truck. Fresh arcadia lettuce, grape tomatoes, cucumbers, red onions. And various fruits.

“Mornin,’ Wren.” The voice is sharp, too loud for the waning morning air. Wren winces as she turns to find Sharon in the doorway to the kitchen, all thirty-two of the old woman’s teeth bared as she fights to get her hair pulled back into her claw clip. Her apron is tied so tight that it seems she is split into two, body billowing over the top of the fabric. Sharon’s piercing silver eyes land on the boxes, and she groans, cheeks already flushed and eyebrows drawn together. “I can’t prep all this shit alone. Rick went and screwed up the schedule again so we’re short-staffed. I’m sure you noticed.”

“Rick has a lot on his plate as co-manager,” Wren says, wringing her hands as she steps forward. She bites her lip as Sharon grabs a clipboard and pen, ready to begin narrating her complaints. “Sometimes scheduling gets me a bit miffed, but it happens. Today will be a good day.”

Sharon ignores her. “Where’s Jayce? He should be here. Another no call, no show, maybe. Anyone under thirty should just be immediately overlooked during the interview process.”

“Hey Sharon,” Jayce sing-songs as he enters the kitchen, the veins in his forearms near-bursting as he heaves a box onto the countertop. From the heavy clang that fills the air, Wren can assume that whatever is inside is frozen.

Sharon ignores him, too. “Wren, can you put your manager stuff on hold and help me prep some of the salads? We’re supposed to have a blood orange and burrata one today. Coriander seeds? I

think coriander seeds, too. I don't know where we keep those. Feels like we're just trying to find random shit and make it useful."

Wren glances down at the stuffed elephant attached to her belt. "Random shit can be fun."

"No," Sharon says. She scratches furiously on the clipboard.

"Waste of time, if you ask me."

"She didn't," Jayce says.

Wren coughs into her elbow to hide her grin and then reaches for one of the boxes, pulling an X-acto knife from her pocket and slicing through the tape. She pulls it open, revealing the various oranges cradled inside.

*Dadaism: an art form that focuses more on spontaneity, chance, and everyday objects than on order and logic. For example: blood and orange juice in the sink.*

Mama ended up obsessed with the mandarin cups in the nursing home, dull nails struggling to peel up the plastic at the edges. Wren had wiped tears as her brother Henry lifted forkful after forkful of slimy fruit to a greedy mouth. In her last days, Mama had insisted on covering her lips with layers of color, sometimes magenta or pink or red or once, a hideous purple color that reminded Wren of a bruise. She was beautiful, skin still untouched by wrinkles and hair still unkempt and dark. Frizzy curls framing a cherubic face.

Even when she didn't remember their names, Mama remembered oranges. She'd request a cup of them with every meal, and oftentimes the attendants would tell Wren that it's all she'd eat. Day in, day out. Oranges. Mama would talk about the orange cakes on clover mite days, about orange parfaits battling the heat of Paris streets, about orange chicken from the Chinese restaurant they'd gone to for Wren's graduation and the orange and avocado salsa she used to make every year as a New Year's Eve dish.

Now, Wren lifts one of the fruits from the box, her fingers careful as she twists it in her grip, eyeing the bright flesh. When she'd been six and recovering from a tonsil removal, every food tasted like sparklers were being lit against the inside of her throat. But then Mama brought an orange sherbet she promised would make all pain go away, and it did.

“We should sell orange sherbet,” she says out loud.

Sharon ignores her. Jayce isn't around.

She sighs and picks through the oranges, swallowing past the sudden thickness in her throat as she brings an armful of fruits to one of the sinks. She twists the dial on the antimicrobial fluid and watches it splash over the oranges, seafoam green cascading over gamboge peels. The colors seem radiant, brought to life under the fluorescents.

“Are you going to stare at them all day or actually help with the salad prep?” Sharon's voice is grating, grinding down Wren's spine like two serrated blades drawn against one another.

Wren shuts off the antimicrobial fluid. “I'm still your manager, you know,” she says as she snatches a paper towel and begins to briskly dry the fruit. “Even if I'm helping you.”

“Are you?”

*Are you?* Wren had asked the same question to the nurses and doctors only months ago. *Are you helping her?* A woman of only forty-seven years shouldn't be forgetting her place in a movie, let alone her name or the faces of her children. The early onset dementia had been the crack in the foundation of Mama's marriage—a husband who didn't want to risk the possible danger of a forgetful woman, a mother determined to stay present for her kids. *Are you helping?*

Childish jostling, fierce competition, a race to reach the kitchen table. How many times had Wren shoved Henry to the ground only to find the table empty? Mama sitting at her desk, fid-

dling with the mouse in front of her computer, eyes glassy? Smoke rising from the oven. Burnt orange filling the air. Henry crying fat tears when he realized there was no dessert.

Wren brings the oranges over to a cutting board and lifts one of the heavy knives from its place, magnetically attached to the pristine white wall. She pierces the orange with ease, the citrusy scent immediately overtaking any lingering hint of charred ruminations.

“I’m gonna go take my break,” Jayce says. He’d appeared beside her when she’d been reminiscing.

She jolts slightly, the keys at her belt jangling. “Okay. Thank you for your help so far.”

“No prob. I’m going to avoid the wicked witch and go the long way to the break room,” Jayce says, eyes gliding over to where Sharon is bent in front of one of the cabinets, grumbling as she inspects the contents. “Need anything while I’m gone?”

“Carissa should be here soon and then we’ll have double management,” Wren says. “I’ve got it until then. Go on break!”

“Consider me broken!”

She forces a chuckle as he disappears, continuing to slice the oranges. They separate easily, falling into chunks that she swipes to the edge of the cutting board, refusing to lose her rhythm.

*Chop, chop, chop.*

The first time Mama forgot who Wren was, it was when she came to visit the nursing home with a painting tucked beneath her arm. Art school was taking nearly all her time, but Mama was more important than any assignment. So she brought in her paints and set up to work on her still life—oranges. Mandarin orange cups on the edge of a rectangular bed tray, plastic peeled back and juice clinging thickly to the sides. Segments of the cup like segments of the fruit.

*Chop, chop, chop.*

Chop.

Chop.

Chop.

“Fuck,” Wren hisses. Then: “Shit, I didn’t mean to curse.”

She drops the knife and pulls her glove off, inspecting the sliced flesh of her pointer finger. A narrow strip has been cut clean off, weeping flesh already welling up with crimson tears. She groans and turns on the faucet, extending her hand towards it.

The blood drips down onto a dirty cutting board left by last night’s closers and Wren pauses. Scarlet liquid pouring over a sandpaper surface. The color is bright, vibrant. She swallows and bends down, dragging a fingertip through the blood diluted by the water stream.

Then she moves the cutting board out of the water, her blood dripping down it. Her nail seems to glide through it as she uses the blood like paint, curving it into the arch of a jawbone.

Mama forgot most things. Names, places, people. She never forgot the oranges. She also never forgot that Wren loves art.

On the day before she forgot forever, she watched from propped in her bed as Wren mindlessly traced patterns on her denim-clad thigh. The cooking channel buzzed monotonously above her head—she’d thought Mama was asleep. But she wasn’t. Instead, she cleared her throat and pulled a coloring book from behind her pillow.

*For you, Mama had said. I don’t quite remember who you are right now, but I’ve been keeping this for you.*

Now Wren sketches the silhouette of her mother’s sleeping face in the cutting board blood. She holds her hand low, squeezes her skin and milks the blood from her finger until it rains down over her canvas. Her work is crude, elementary. Eyes, nose, lips. Cheek-

bones. The curve of a neck. The slope of two shoulders. A cascade of water-thinned, blood-drawn hair.

Wren's eyes prick. She leans back to admire her artwork. Mama stares back at her, tranquil, the dirt from the cutting board all washed back so the clean space surrounds her head like the iconographic halo of a saint.

The oranges lie forgotten. In the sink, her mother is alive.

“Wren!” Carissa materializes from nowhere, peering down at the flesh wound on Wren's finger. Her messy brown hair is pulled back into a haphazard bun, her work clothes absent and her leopard-print parka still zipped up. It's clear she was just checking on everyone, not yet having settled in. “You're hurt,” Carissa says. She turns the sink pressure up without looking, washing all of the blood away.

“No,” Wren says, watching the evidence of her grief swirl the drain before disappearing into its depths. The scent of citrus stings her nose. “No, I think I'm healing.”

“I don't think that's how quick that works,” Carissa replies, her back already turned. Sharon is striding towards them with a clipboard and purpose, and Clarissa's small shoulders square up like a soldier preparing for battle.

Wren looks back to the oranges sitting beside the sink. She might get back to painting today. She might bake a cake to bring to a mom who doesn't know her name. She might even send a piece over to Henry's—if she remembers to.



## **Every Poem Is Your Name**

*Emile Tipton*

*Multi-Layered Collaged Lithograph*

# Changeling

*Jay Loperena-Martin*

Mom is in the kitchen when I get home.

Somehow she must hear me open the door over the sounds of my dad's football game blaring from the TV and my brothers shouting over video games down the hall, because she calls out to me before I can slink off to my room. "Ruby," she says, "how was school, baby?"

I sigh, kicking my shoes off at the door and trudging into the kitchen. "It was fine."

She's packing the boys' lunches for tomorrow, bread and fruit and deli meat and baby carrots all laid out on the counter in front of her. Her hair is pulled up into a ponytail, curly and blonde like mine. She barely even looks up at me when she says, "That's nice, honey."

I hover in the doorway, unsure if I've been dismissed to leave yet.

"You're home late," she continues, diligently chopping strawberries and sorting them into Ziploc bags. "Did rugby practice run long again?"

I know it's a trap. She makes me and my brothers keep this stupid app on our phones that tracks our locations; she'd have noticed I left school hours ago. She just wants to see if I'll lie.

"A little," I say, "I went over to my friend's house afterwards."

Mom hesitates. "Is this a friend I know?"

I shrug and hope she stops pressing, even if I know she won't. "I dunno, maybe."

"Maybe?"

“Um,” I brace myself, “Lisa?”

My mother pauses, her shoulders deflating in disappointment. “Ruby—”

“I know,” I interrupt her. “I know, I get it.”

Mom hasn’t liked Lisa since middle school. We’ve been friends since we were kids, before all of her dark makeup and black box dye and the septum piercing that nearly made my mother burst a blood vessel.

“I just don’t think she’s a very good influence on you, baby.”

Maybe she’s right. Maybe I shouldn’t be thinking about her black lipstick on my skin.

\*\*\*\*\*

After school the next day my hands are settled at the curve of Lisa’s waist, her fingers carding through my hair, her breath hot against my jaw. Dark makeup smears down my neck and across my collarbone, staining my fragile porcelain skin with her touch. Rabbit-quick heartbeats slow to a steady crawl.

I should go home. Each second I stay, I know I’m only making things worse, making Mom suspicious. Lisa’s bedroom is dark, the curtains drawn, the walls littered with sketches and band posters. They press in closer and closer the longer we lie here, limbs tangled, breathing gently.

But then she looks up at me, her gaze soft and pupils blown wide, and draws me into another kiss.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mom doesn’t stop me in the kitchen this time, so I march right up the stairs and into my bedroom. I’m still untying my shoes when she appears in my doorway. She doesn’t bother to knock.

“Lisa’s again?”

Fuck. I should never have told her that. I could’ve lied. I should’ve lied.

“Yeah,” I say, not looking up at her. “We have math class together. She offered to help me since exams are coming up.”

It’s not a lie, technically. Lisa’s always been good with numbers; much better than me, at least. Somewhere buried in my closet there’s an old picture of us from the 5th grade mathletes finals, back when her hair was still curly and red and I still had braces stuck to my teeth. Mom scoffs anyway.

“I thought last year you told me you didn’t need to keep seeing your math tutor, baby.”

“I *don’t*,” I insist. “It’s just nice to have someone else to study with, you know?”

She’s not convinced. I finally pull my sneakers off, dropping them to the floor beside my bed. Mom grimaces, already bothered by the mess. “I just don’t want you getting distracted.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Her touch turns me into something other, something real, the raw plasma of a burning star. Lisa’s chipped black nails peel back my skin and reveal every caged, visceral part of me. I piece myself back together and leave before her mom gets home from work, the smoldering, volatile thing inside me straining against its shell. I take the bus home, catching my reflection in the window. The girl who stares back at me is a stranger, an ill-fitting disguise, a cheap Halloween costume. Her curls pulled neatly out of her eyes, her features plastic and fake.

She looks so much more like my mother than me.

\*\*\*\*\*

The dinner table that night is quiet, only broken by occasional idle chatter of my brothers squabbling with each other. For once our mother doesn't step in to reprimand them; her scrutinizing gaze fixed on me, her unruly, wayward daughter. Dad is tense, silent, picking at his food.

"So," my mother says, and I know this isn't going to end well,

"Ruby, how about you? How was school?"

"Fine," I say.

"Just fine?"

"Yeah," I answer with half a shrug, "Nothing really happened, so."

"Mhm," she says. "And after school? At a friend's house again?"

"Jeanette," my father warns. Mom shoots him a glare.

"No, no, I'm just asking," she insists, "I have the right to know where my daughter's running off to all the time, don't I?"

"Mom—"

"Baby, I know you're young, but that girl is—"

Something sharp and defensive rears its ugly head within me. "She's *what*, Mom?"

"*Don't* interrupt me, Ruby; I don't want to argue with you."

"Jeanette, *please*," Dad says again. He gives a brief nod to the boys, shooing them out of the dining room and up the stairs.

"Oh, would you *stop that*?" she snaps. "You're not worried about what kind of people your daughter is spending time with?"

“What kind of person is she, Mom?” I know what she means.

I want to hear her say it.

Admit it.

“She’s not like *you*, baby,” she says. “You’re a good kid—”

“You don’t know what I’m like,” I answer. “You don’t know anything about me.”

Mom looks hurt. I can’t bring myself to care, not when I know that every vile thing she wants to say about Lisa she would just as soon say about me if she knew what I am.

There’s something restless kicking at the inside of my ribs, tearing at this fragile skin of mine from the inside out. My instinct is to hold it back like I always do, to rewrap the bandage around this bleeding wound; but it thrashes, caged, throwing its weight against the brittle walls I’ve built to contain it. It’s then that I realize there’s no escaping what I am, no wrapping it in lace and satin and report cards and family dinners and dead-eyed smiles.

No more hiding. I take hold of it, pulling, tearing it raw and bloody from my chest. I want to show her exactly what I am.

I want to show her that maybe I’m not her daughter at all.

# How Haunting Goes

*Kaleigh Washburn*

I've been walking the halls of our wanting,  
like a ghost only you can see.

And I've been aching between the bends of my limbs,  
where you kissed my bruises,  
promising a better breed of grief.

And we don't know each other well these days,  
but I'm trying to learn  
how to accept change.

So when I'm guiding my hands down the warmth of your lungs,  
I want you to teach me  
how to let things go.

I'm so tired of haunting  
all the lives I wish I was living.



**Mold**

*Lyric Stille*

*48" x 42" Oil Painting*

## Why Wouldn't You Just Leave?

*Amber Williams*

First, fall in love. Fall for his gleaming smile, his quick-witted yet corny pick-up lines, and his promises to treat you like royalty. He loves you! He said it on the first date! In fact, you are everything that he has been looking for in life. Ignore the whispers about you two. He may have been a player when he was younger, but he is different now. Nevermind the snarky remarks he sometimes utters about his former lovers. All of his exes were crazy. You are different just like he told you. Don't ask him how they were crazy; that makes him angry. He could never joke about how unattractive and stupid you are. And when he does, laugh it off. It doesn't mean anything; it's just good fun. And when he spits venom at you, understand that sometimes he will call you a bitch when he's angry. Don't be a bitch. Don't make him angry. And when you do, duck when he hurls the Precious Moments angels that you inherited from your grandmother. He didn't intend to throw it so close to your head! He was aiming for the wall! It was probably your fault anyway. He will accuse you of cheating, so give in to every demand he has to show you that you weren't. Stop talking to your friends just like he asked. They could never understand how sweet he is when he is happy. When was the last time you made him happy? Let him control your bank account so he knows you're not spending money on another man. Don't question the sweet, nutty perfume radiating off him when he stumbles through the door while he should've been sleeping. You are still the only girl. Buy some opaque foundation; you'll need it later to cover up the bruises from what is left over after his drunken nights out. Tell the doctors at the ER that you just fell. Why was this flyer in your discharge papers? Sheltering Wings? What kind of sorry soul would need that? If he ever gets that bad, just leave. Or don't. It was your fault anyway.

# My Love is All Consuming

*Jasper Wisecarver*

the warmth radiates from your body  
like dinner, fresh from the oven. all i want  
is to sink my teeth in.  
exhale your pain in a puff of smoke and let me feel  
soft flesh against my tongue  
i revel in the grip i hold  
And mark you  
deep red and pink rippled crescents  
of my desire ...  
I admire the stamp upon you  
remember this,  
My Love.  
And let me take another taste.

i worship Her.  
like the Greek statue that She is,  
Perfect marble skin, scraped with the rosy red of desire.

your touch is a roller coaster, and i'd kill to ride again.  
my heart leaps from my chest  
with the thought alone.

your sweet taste lingers, a warm comfort against my lips  
like the end of a smoke  
on a winter night.

oh, to have you swell my senses with your presence...  
i have never known a greater pleasure.

# An Inquisition of Loyalty

Heather Mandel

*Bang Bang Bang.*

The vigorous thuds on the door pulled Martyn out of his peaceful slumber, leaving him gasping in the earliest hours of the morning with only one thought on his mind. Fuck. They found me.

“Hmm? Wassthat?” The other occupant of the room stirred, voice slurring with sleepy curiosity.

“It’s nothing to worry about, love.” Martyn lied, hoping that the trembling of his hands wasn’t noticeable. It felt like his heart was pounding in tune with the thudding knocks as he pushed himself out of bed, the cold air making him shiver as he slipped out from the safety of the blankets. “Go back to sleep.” He pulled the sheets up, ensuring that his partner was fully covered and warm before slipping out of bed, silently mourning the lost comfort of his warm blankets.

*Bang Bang Bang.*

“Open this door!” A gruff voice roared, volume more at place for shouting through a festival crowd and not an oaken door in the middle of a silent night. “By order of the king! Open this door!”

Martyn swallowed back the lump in his throat as his sleep-addled mind processed what, or more specifically *who*, he’d heard. “Coming, coming!” Martyn yelled back. His return call went unacknowledged if heard, and the knocking didn’t cease. He tugged on his robe, lighting a candle to guide his way through the dark house as he traipsed down from his bedroom towards the awaiting door. *Breathe, Martyn. You can do this.* Instead of opening the door immediately, he paused with his hand on the knob, waiting for the right moment.

*Bang Bang-*

Abruptly, Martyn flung the door open with a flourish, stepping back as the knight missed his swing and came stumbling a step into the household, startled.

“Samuel, good sir!” Casual smirk slipping onto his face like an old tunic, Martyn forced himself to keep a cheerful cadence, somewhat marred by the sleep-rough quality of it. He stepped forward with a grand sweeping gesture, subtly angling himself between Samuel and the rest of the house as a barrier. “What a delight for you to have come all the way here to my humble abode! Would you like some tea? Crumpets?”

Samuel recovered quickly from his brief stumble, straightening up and adjusting an askew piece of his armor before turning to Martyn fully, ice blue eyes taking in the sleep-ruffled state he was in. For a long few moments, all he did was stare at Martyn like he was some sort of ghost. Granted, Martyn was sure he looked like quite a sight, blonde hair sticking up at odd angles and wrapped in an old pink bathrobe that he wouldn’t be caught dead in around anyone else.

Samuel, by contrast, looked like he’d stepped straight out of Martyn’s memories, if those memories were significantly more *tired*. Every aspect of his appearance, from the cropped brown hair to the polished silver armor, seemed to scream professional, but the slow blinks of his eyes and the tense way he held himself betrayed his exhaustion. Even in the direst of times, of sleepless nights guarding the king’s door in times of danger, Samuel had never looked quite like this.

Were the circumstances not what they were, Martyn would have half a mind to consider offering his home as a place to rest. But the sobering realization of what Samuel was here for stilled his tongue.

After a long moment of stunned staring, Samuel seemed to remember his words. “Don’t bother with trivialities. You know *exactly* why I’m here, Martyn.”

“Not to have tea, then?” Martyn sighed, extending the sigh

an extra beat to make sure Samuel got the message. “This isn’t about the king, is it? You realize I haven’t been his servant in about twenty-one moons? I have no information to offer you.”

“... Just say three weeks, man. You don’t have to sound like a pompous jerk every time you talk.” Samuel’s stoicism wavered just a bit, and Martyn couldn’t help but feel proud at still being able to break down the man’s tough façade as easily as ever.

“Oh, but my fine sir!” Martyn exaggerated his accent further, drawing a chuckle out of the other man. “If I myself do not speak like the noblest knights of the court, how ever could you have not mistaken me for some other peasant in this here village?”

“No one else talks like that, and you know it.”

Determined to get at least a proper laugh, Martyn thickened the accent even more. “I doth thinketh that *all* of thine Court spea-keth with such greateth distinction. Like pompous jerks.”

There was the laughter, right on cue, and Martyn couldn’t help but break character to laugh as well, two old friends sharing an age-old joke together. The moment didn’t last nearly as long as Martyn had hoped for however, before Samuel caught his theatrics for what they were. He composed himself quickly, smile dropping back into a hardened gaze, and Martyn mourned the last few shreds of lighthearted banter with his old friend before returning to the topic at hand. “I’m afraid I can’t linger for idle chatter and old jokes. I’m here on business, Martyn.”

“And what business is that?” Martyn feigned innocence.

“You know exactly what I’m here for,” Samuel cut straight through Martyn’s act. He looked almost remorseful as he spoke, which almost dulled Martyn’s offense at his claim. Almost. “Information on the king.”

“I’m afraid I’m as clueless as you are.” Martyn didn’t rise to the accusation, choosing his words carefully. “Twenty moons past and he hasn’t yet reappeared?”

Samuel shook his head, the lines of exhaustion in his face increasing with each passing second. “No, not yet, and no leads either. You’re still the last one who’s seen King Ronan.”

“Is that so?” Martyn raised an eyebrow. “I don’t suppose *that’s* the reason you’re pounding down my door, is it? I hope you realize that having the king’s guard at your door first thing in the morning in a town such as this doesn’t lend well to subtlety.” As Martyn’s gaze wandered to the outside, a light that had been on in the neighbor’s house snuffed out abruptly. *Oops.*

Samuel at least had the decency to look embarrassed, drawing the door closed behind him. “Apologies, Martyn. I may have acted rashly by coming here on such short notice, but you must understand my concern.” Samuel pleaded. “The both of you disappeared on the same night, and I thought... I thought you both were...” He trailed off, unable to bring herself to finish. “But then I hear word of you here, and I knew I had to speak to you. Any lead is a lead, old friend. You have to understand that. What happened?” He seemed genuinely distraught, and part of Martyn yearned to break down, confess to the truth right then and there. But that wasn’t the part of him that won out.

“I was fired, simple as that. My liege dismissed me from his service, told me to pack my bags and leave behind the life I built, and I followed his orders as he requested,” Martyn replied. “Since my duties were no longer needed at the castle, I had no reason to remain nearby. If you had been disgraced by the king, would you have stayed in a place where everyone knows exactly what you once were? I’m sorry that I left without a goodbye, but I felt with the circumstances it was best to leave with haste to not anger the king.”

“The whole palace knows that you left. Gossip travels fast in the kingdom... But I couldn’t stop thinking about it,” Samuel admitted. “It’s incredibly strange timing. Less than a day after King Ronan demotes you without any warning or reason, he goes missing, and you show up here three days later, in the most nowhere part of the kingdom? You have to know that sounds suspicious.” Samuel stepped forwards, ice-blue eyes boring into Martyn’s soul. Not for the first time, Martyn cursed how Samuel was one of the only peo-

ple who could read him. “Why did you both disappear at the same time?”

“Disappearing is a strong way to word it. I was traveling.” Martyn defended, meeting his gaze with equal fervor. “Since my duties were no longer needed at the castle, I had no reason to remain nearby. I wasn’t aware the king had vanished at all until I arrived here.”

“Well, it’s awfully convenient that in your ‘travels,’ you never once came across news of the king’s disappearance. Word travels fast, I’d say.”

“You doubt my loyalty to the crown?” Martyn’s scowl deepened, appalled at Samuel’s audacity. “I have no qualms about my liege. I’ve been in service to the throne for over 20 years and have found nothing but kindness there.” Samuel *knew* this. They had served those decades together, only for Samuel to turn on him at the drop of a hat. Martyn crossed his arms, hoping his face didn’t portray how much the knight’s words stung.

“It’s not your loyalty to the crown that’s in question. It’s your loyalty to the man who wears it.”

Martyn seethed, voice dropping to a growl. “If you came all this way just to wake up all my neighbors, harass me, and accuse me of disloyalty, nay, *treason*, then you must be even more of a fool than you act. My liege has always been a fair and just ruler, far kinder to the foul lots of the kingdom than they ever deserved, and there has never been and will never be a time I wouldn’t lay down my life at his feet. Did you forget who saved me when he had no other reason to? Who took a poor soul off the streets and offered him a place in the palace, gave him food and shelter and work? If you think something as simple as being *fired* would turn me against the king I have so loyally served all this time, then you are not the friend I thought you were.”

Silence hung heavy in the echoes of Martyn’s outburst, words dangling on the thick ropes of tension in the air. Martyn closed his eyes, breathing deeply. When he’d calmed down enough to reopen

them, Samuel was watching him with such a familiar concern that it made his heart ache for times long past. When he spoke again, it was entirely absent of the suspicion that had been laced in his voice throughout this encounter. “I’m sorry, Martyn. I didn’t mean to come into this so accusatory. I know you would do nothing to hurt him.”

The sight of Samuel in distress was almost enough to quench the flame of offense that had burned within Martyn. “I do love the king, you know. Even if you think I don’t.”

“I know you do. I’m just worried... Three weeks have passed with no ransom note, nobody, and no trace of him anywhere. Nothing I’ve done has been enough to find him. It’s like he just disappeared...” Samuel seemed lost in thought for a moment, exhaustion apparent. With a deep breath, he regained his composure, back to looking every bit the regal knight of the king’s court. “Apologies for disturbing you. Have a good night, Martyn.”

As the door clicked shut behind Samuel, Martyn pulled his robe tighter around himself as he traipsed back towards his bedroom. The flickers of candlelight illuminated the room, casting shadows on the figure waiting for him on the bed.

“I had hoped you had gone back to sleep.” Martyn’s voice dropped to a whisper.

“You both were far too loud for anyone in the kingdom to sleep through.” The figure wrapped the blanket tighter around himself, voice slurred with tiredness. “I am truly sorry that my presence is causing you such a headache.”

“That should be none of your worries, my liege.” Martyn hung his robe back onto the hook. “I knew what I was getting into when I brought you out here.”

“Do call me Ronan, won’t you? It’s bad enough being called ‘the king’ by everyone. Or at least go back to calling me *love*.” The sleepy smile on Ronan’s face was almost worth the teasing, and it brought a smile to Martyn’s face in return.

“So you have been listening,” Martyn sighed. “I should’ve known you would eavesdrop.”

“How could I have not? It sounded like a wild beast had gotten in. I figured I’d might have to fend it off once it had eaten you.” Ronan’s joke got a weak laugh out of Martyn.

“The difference between Samuel and a wild beast can be very slim at times. Loud and impatient, but devoutly loyal. Still, he will tire of this hunt in due time,” Martyn quipped back. Stepping over the crown that had been carelessly discarded on the floor last night, he slipped into the bed next to Ronan, who proceeded to wrap the blankets around them both, chasing away the chill. Martyn slotted against him perfectly, one arm wrapping around Ronan to pull him closer. Ronan’s skin felt unearthly soft against his own, as pale hands that had never seen work or turmoil lifted up to cup Martyn’s stubbled cheek as Martyn wondered how he had ever gotten this lucky.

Ronan leaned over him to blow out the candle, the room now lit solely by the moonlight streaming through the windows. In the dim light he looked like some ethereal god, brown hair tumbling past his shoulders in waves, absent of the elaborate braids and threads of gold that once adorned him. The top of his head looked bare without the presence of his crown, and yet he held himself high like a great weight had been removed from him. He looked nothing like the king he was, and Martyn found him all the more beautiful because of it, a view only he was allowed to have. “I feel like I should be offended that you think my best soldier will get bored looking for me.”

“I feel like I should be offended that you think your best soldier is Samuel,” Martyn retorted, unable to fight the jealousy creeping into his stomach. “I’ve fought just as much for you, if not more so.”

“You have,” Ronan agreed immediately, humor melting into fondness. “You have done far more for me than I could ever repay, and even in the absence of my power or wealth, you chose to follow

me. Even despite the accusations thrown against you and questions of loyalty, you have persevered. For that, I am eternally grateful.”

“As if you haven’t done equally much for me.” Martyn countered. “You found me in your chambers with a knife at your throat, and yet you still chose to not only spare me, but bring me in as a servant and companion, knowing that I could turn my back and kill you at any turn.”

“I knew you wouldn’t.” Ronan reached out to tuck strands of Martyn’s hair behind his ear, voice soaked with fondness. “I could tell by how you were trembling that you could not bring yourself to kill me. It was a risk, yes, but you can hardly deny how well it paid off. If either one of us is lucky, then the honor is all mine.”

“I suppose we’ll have to agree to disagree.” Martyn punctuated his statement by leaning in for a kiss, which Ronan happily reciprocated.

“I do wish that this journey would have been easier on you. I should’ve known they would suspect you for my disappearance.”

“Truth be told, it was *my* mistake for thinking we could make it across the border without being discovered. I hadn’t thought people would recognize my face this far out... Or that Samuel could travel so quickly.” Ronan’s only response was a hum of acknowledgement, and with a grin, Martyn added. “And besides... With due respect, power and wealth are not what I fell in love with.” Martyn grinned. “Wealth is a fickle mistress, and power’s not my type.”

The joke wasn’t funny in the slightest, and yet Ronan’s smile turned into proper laughter, and Martyn swore to himself that he’d take on every single member of the Court weaponless just to hear Ronan laugh like that for the rest of their lives. If only his subjects could see their king now, nestled in the arms of a peasant-born servant, expression free of the dark cloud of stress that had become a constant for him in the last few years. Martyn would have loved to see the looks on their faces.

Ronan’s laughter ran its course soon enough, but before the

bedroom could fall into total silence, he asked, quietly, “Do you really think we’ll make it? Across the border?”

“I do, love.” The former servant looped an arm around the shoulder of his former king, tugging him further into a tight embrace. “I’m sure of it.”

Martyn had never expected things to turn out this way. If someone had told his younger self that one day he’d be betraying the country he’d been devoutly loyal to over the years to not only fall in love with the king he’d served, but run away with him, he would have probably laughed in their face. Fate, as he’d found, can lead people down unexpected pathways. But if following this path meant a lifetime of waking up beside his love, of walking side-by-side with him instead of two steps behind, of Ronan pressing soft lips against his cheek without fear of watching eyes, then Martyn would gladly run down that path and never look back.

# Josephine the Dragon and the Isle of You

Tilly Wininger

The moments go quicker the closer they are to being over, Josephine noticed during a night of reminiscing over old photographs. There's a book full of pictures in her lap, each page decorated with photos of her family. She had to find the best few, the ones that spoke the kindest praise, told the funniest stories. Whispered of the good nights and shoved the bad nights beneath an old rug in her mind. Josephine could never picture a life without Hailey, so she lived in those photos instead. They had to be perfect for Hailey.

Josephine greedily looked over each photo as if it were precious. She thumbed over one of Hailey during golden hour, when the sun began to kiss the horizon and everything was drenched in honey. In the photo, Hailey picked weeds faster than they could ever hope to grow, a pile of them getting ever larger in the wicker basket at her side. It could go on forever, the feud between the hand that picked them and the dandelions that grew in the front yard. Hailey had a way of making things feel eternal.

*“Momma told me I’d get a cent for every weed I picked,” she trilled, southern twang dancing in the air. She was so young. “How many are you going to pick, then?” Josephine had asked.*

*“All of them,” the young girl said giddily.*

*“All of them? That’s at least a thousand. Can you even count to that?”*

*“I’ll learn how to when I’m countin’ my money.”*

*Josephine hummed in amusement, watching her sister stomp through the grass.*

*Grass is an invasive species, their mother had once said. Smothering the clover and honeysuckle, a damned green monster that we’re stuck with. It made sense now, her contempt for the evergrowing, persistent plant. But back then, it was simply one of*

*those odd things that older people say, falling unto young ears not yet deaf but just as unlistening.*

*“How long are you going to stay out here?” Josephine asked.*

*“Until it’s dinner time,” Hailey said. “We can fry up some of these dandelions, can’t we? Or make jelly?”*

*“We can make whatever you want,” Josephine said. It was a mistake to plant the idea of ‘anything’ into a kid’s mind, but Josephine couldn’t refuse Hailey’s gummy smile, or the way her short blonde hair fell into her eyes. Her blinking eyes were so full of life, then, even when annoyance flitted across her features. The frustrated slap of her hand against her forehead as she tried to push the strands from her brows, or the silly way she paused to pull up her hand-me-down socks every few steps.*

Josephine tumbled out of the memory, trying to once again focus on the photobook in hand. The album was worn and frayed, holding onto the memory of touch as tightly as Josephine held onto it. The fabric-bound spine was stained with glue residue from repairs, pages wrinkled from the dampness of spring and tears. The photo album was supposed to be an artifact for Hailey to look back on when she was older and embarrassed, not the reminder of her absence that it had become. She leafed through the frail sheets, examining the photos rubber-cemented onto them. One of the family, grinning as they stood in front of a live evergreen wrapped in LEDs and garnished with tinsel. Another of just Josephine herself, milking a cow for the first time. Another of a grumpy Hailey shoveling hay into a wooden trough, a hungry horse impatiently snorting behind her. Another with Hailey, Josephine hidden behind the lens of the camera. Another, and another, and another.

She sighed, discontented with the progress she’d been making through the book. Every second she paused, searching through the depths of the photos, searching for any sign or reason as to why what happened had happened. But there were no signs. It was as sudden as it was quick. It was as unfair as it was inexplicable. She closed the book gently, leaving it on the corner of the glass coffee

table that was still smeared with Hailey's fingerprints and the wax of her crayons.

She trudged to the kitchen, hand running through once-shaved hair growing into a greasy buzzcut. In solidarity she had shaved her hair. It felt foolish to miss it when such greater things were missing. It curled at the nape of her neck, tickling the shell of her ear as she began to rub at her temples. The fluorescent light of the kitchen was nothing like the warmth of the photos. This spring wasn't like last spring.

Josephine pulled a small jar of dandelion jelly from the cabinet and stuck her finger into it. Her mother would've scolded her. Her sister would've asked for some. But nobody was around to do either of those things, so she sucked on her finger and reveled in the taste of honey and lemon all alone. The uniquely earthy hint from the dandelion came in waves, sometimes rich, other times more delicate. All the time it reminded her of Hailey, though.

She sat on the marble counter, clean save for a few take-out containers and one moldy container of 'My condolences!' muffins from a kind but nosy neighbor. Josephine sighed, her sticky lips parting in defeat. Perhaps one day it would hurt less, or she would get stronger.

She thought back to another photo, one taken right before they'd found out. Hailey was smiling, one of her last real smiles, tucked in her bed with princess covers and silk pillowcases for her hair. The symptoms had started rearing their heads by then, tired and fearsome and written off as the flu.

*"Isle of you," Hailey said, playing with Josephine's long hair. It was a place they made up, one they went to when they played. It just so happened to sound like 'I love you.'*

*"Isle of you too," Josephine said, leaning back as Hailey pretended she was a hairstylist at a high-end salon. Hairbrushes littered the star-studded blankets, hair ties hiding away in the fabric's folds. They laughed, speaking their secret tongue.*

*“Does it look good?” Josephine asked.*

*“Well, it sure looks,” Hailey said, leaning back defeated. “It’s all tangled.”*

*“Here,” Josephine said, reaching for the brush. Her manicured nails were painted a deep purple. She began dragging the brush through her hair, snagging on the bits that braided together.*

*“Can we play something else?” Hailey said.*

*“Of course,” Josephine said. “What do you wanna play?”*

*“Dragons,” Hailey said. “You’re the dragon, I’m the princess. You have to kidnap me because everyone loves me and if they catch me, they get rich. But then you have to fly away because everyone is going to come after you next. ”*

*“How am I going to fly?”*

*Hailey smiled, lifting her arms in the air and wiggling her fingers. It was the universal sign for ‘pick me up!’ and Josephine obliged. She would always oblige. She carefully grabbed her sister beneath her arms, lifting her into the sky. The bedroom’s ceiling light shone behind her head, illuminating her golden hair with a beautiful glow. It was a halo adorning an angel’s head, Hailey’s smile bright as a thousand suns. Josephine the dragon flew around the house, leaping from step to step down the stairs with a giggling Hailey in her arms.*

Josephine climbed those stairs now, fingertips collecting dust as they ran up the bannister. The house had been empty for a few days. It would stay empty for a while, save Josephine and her grief. She had nothing but a funeral to leave the house for, now that there was nobody to take to the park. She reached the top step, listening for the familiar creak that always sounded when someone tread on the time-warped wood.

It was a comforting sound, a reminder of Hailey and how she would try her best to sneak around during the night, only to be

tattled on by the top step. Josephine entered the first door on the right, Hailey's old bedroom. It stayed the same even after she began changing. When her hair grew thin and fell out, the silk pillowcase stayed on the thick pillows. As more and more blankets joined the bed to cover her chilled bones, the princess comforter remained on top, bright, pink, and covered in castles and unicorns. The walls were still pink. The window panes still warped with age. The ceiling fan's blades still painted the colors of the rainbow. Nothing and everything had changed, all at once and never at all. Time went so fast it stood still, warped by that disgustingly poetic lens of grief.

Josephine sat on the edge of the bed, feeling the comforter drag on her fingertips. She sat where she sat hundreds of times and imagined the moment she had imagined hundreds of times.

*"Am I sick?" Hailey asked, voice uncharacteristically small. They sat outside on the top step of the porch, letting spring's gentle showers wash away their fears of the future. What they said now didn't scare either of them. They could be whatever they wanted, here on the Isle of You. They could be healthy, or sick, and it wouldn't matter one bit.*

*"Yes," Josephine said, because she could never lie to Hailey.*

*"Are you sick, too?"*

*Josephine thought for a moment. "Yes." And she was. She was homesick, already missing what wasn't yet gone. "But not in the same way."*

*"Not like me?"*

*"No," Josephine said. "Not like you."*

*They sat together in silence, playing no games, picking no dandelions. Instead they looked out into the front lawn, watching a small family of rabbits hop through the invasive grass. Invasive, like the mutation in Hailey's lungs. The mass that kept growing in secret while Hailey coughed and wheezed. Her chest pains and death rattle, the grass of hurt growing inside her heart's garden,*

*smothering her own clover and honeysuckle. It was like their mother knew, knew this grass was like a cancer, killing anything that dared lay roots in the Isle of You.*

Josephine turned to look out the window, despite its warped nature, and feasted upon the view. Golden hour once again, it always seemed to be golden hour. A kindness or a taunt, she couldn't remember, but regardless she saw it clearly from up here.

A thousand dandelions, growing untamed and unpicked, waving in the gentle breeze, carrying florets across the lawn in an act of defiance. Rabbits eating the seeds, distributing them all over, growing more and more and more. Invasive all the same, but golden and beautiful and just like her hair. Josephine thought of all the money Hailey could make, picking these dandelions that grew wild and free. A thousand tiny pinpricks of yellow in a sky of green, waiting for somebody to find them.

Josephine cried. She cried until the corners of her eyes were raw from rubbing, sobbed like a child who had never experienced grief before. She spent the last remaining days of her youth planning a funeral. She chose the casket, the cemetery, the shade of concealer and the nail polish they used to decorate what remained of Hailey. Bright yellow nails, and a princess dress. Josephine felt like a dragon, watching over the young girl in her tower.

There was a slideshow at the funeral, full of photographs picked from Josephine's photobook. They were grainy from enlargement and flickering out of an old projector, a relic of a happier past. They were a poor excuse for the warmth of Hailey's laughter, but they held her smile all the same. Josephine's bouquet for the simple gravestone was made of dandelions and grass, plain and unbecoming but so full of love you could smell the sweetness of the jelly, the softness of her hair, and the feeling of a photograph, heavy in your hand.



**Is There a Prince Charming? I Don't Think So!**

*Olivia Daniels*

*32" x 48" Oil Paint on Canvas*

# Resurrection Ferns

*Elizabeth Terhorst*

I've always hated having splinters. When I was a child, my dad would hold my hand down to the back of the kitchen table and dig them out with his Leatherman. It didn't matter how much I screamed or cried or begged him to stop. He wouldn't stop until the little sliver had exited. I always hated having splinters, but I was stuck with this big lump of wood in the middle of my abdomen.

I'm supposed to like having some tree bark in there. Most people born with pink bows and dresses do. I'm supposed to want little saplings to grow and have a nursery of my own— something to call home.

But, this piece of wood is rotten. It's putrid and twisting backwards. Stumps jagged and pressing into my spine through the kidneys and intestines and tendons. It stabs through my back, and the blood mixes with my blue shirt to create a harrowing purple.

This is one splinter my dad refused to rip out— despite how I begged and pleaded.

The purple dripped down my body and collected around my knees during the time I spent praying on the pew before the clergy of clinicians. Sent home with pantry strength pain relief and penance, the rot only spread and festered. It felt like it was crawling outside of the exit wound on my back and corroding my still tender flesh from the "Atta boys" I'd get.

Night after night, I'd wake up covered in sweat with leaves between my legs.

They crunched and disintegrated under the weight of my shaking body in bed. They ranged in brilliant shades of brown and red. No matter how much I scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed, I'd still walk around covered in pieces of decaying leaf.

I longed to snap off this piece of branch and throw myself

into the river. To become driftwood and sail down the bends and curves until I found a delta where the ocean would welcome me into her loving arms. But, not all pieces of wood float.

I stole my father's Leatherman and tried to cut it out myself. Hours and hours of trying to chop down this tree, I finally collapsed in exhaustion at the riverbank. My body sank beneath the blue waves. Between the bubbles and the blurry outline of my hands, shades of pink and red leaves floated up to the surface.

I always hated having splinters.

After being fished out and left to dry under the broiling sun, I stumbled to the new doctor with leaves stuck to my face by gluey tears. She used her tweezers and peeled them off, one by one.

It hurt, but never as much as the knife.

It took days, weeks, months. But, after she had washed me of my sins, she found the septic site in my back. She tried to shave off some of the wood, but it had grown callous in my neglect.

She pulled and pulled, but it stayed rooted in place. Each tug tore at something deep in my stomach, but it wasn't the searing rip of losing something that belonged to you. It was the painful relief of removing an abscess.

But, it broke my heart when she couldn't get it out alone.

The crumbling wood rubbed against my seat all the way to the hospital. I felt propped up on display, back breaking under the weight of the medical interns gawking at the twisted limbs I had grown. But, when I woke up, I was flat on my back for the first time I could remember.

It was scary to cry, for I feared any water would inspire the seeds to take root in the still fertile soil packed around my surgical scars.

The new doctor assured me nothing would grow again, but

the dogwood-shaped remnants clinging underneath my sheets coaxed my doubts to blossom into beautiful, velvety flowers.

This is the one piece of wood my dad would never take out. It couldn't be gone. I hadn't started a nursery of my own yet.

But, the nursery never would have been mine; I didn't want to raise seeds my parents wanted me to care for in hopes of ripening fruits to sit at their dinner table. I'm glad it's finally gone, but the removal didn't remove all of the pain.

I thought that once it turned into an abandoned excavation site, it wouldn't hurt anymore. No leaves trail and drag behind me. There isn't a symphony of twigs and branches snapping in my wake. Even the faint smell of autumn hasn't graced my presence, but there is still a dull throb at the base of my abdomen.

At night, I can feel it reverberate all the way up to my diaphragm where it pushes against the underside of my lungs until it feels like all of the air has escaped me. I lie for hours and hours gasping for breath, for the memory to leave me. Only when the cool, winter light starts creeping through my curtains do I find something to take in and turn into glucose and oxygen. Facing the sun, there is still the dull throb, but I can feel my green fingers start to stretch and grow.

Without the desperation and the decomposers, I think I've finally started to find my own shape.

However, my growth did not come without pains. The push and pull of spring came with nights where I thought I was going to freeze to death and days where the heat made the water evaporate before it could reach my roots.. Like a seed splitting out of a shell to unfurl a green sprout, I tried to break though the surface. Again. And, again. And, again.

I ached for sunlight.

When I finally felt the first ray of sun, the first brush of breeze against my cheek, it frightened me. I didn't know how to

step into the sun. Without the carefully curated walls of my parents' nursery— the only walls I had ever known, it all felt like too much. Maybe this plant was to stay on the shelf, never to make it outside to take root in the ground. But, I couldn't always hear the animals sing from inside my walls.

The faint hum of nearby amphibians became my newest obsession. It was hard to think of anything else, or feel anything but the butterflies in my stomach when the croaking would start. It was maddening at first. Disharmonious squeals and achy whines. But, as time passed, I was able to hear the ensemble hidden underneath the shrieks. I couldn't bear to leave my nursery, but I wanted to know what the sounds were coming from. Maybe they'd give me new splinters, but maybe they wouldn't. The thought of having to rip out a splinter all over again was enough to keep me from unfurling all of my leaves. For weeks, they stayed curled up in tight fists by my sides. But, each day I heard the animals sing, my leaves loosened a little. From sundown to sunrise, I'd listen to the music and from sunrise to sundown, I'd debate on being strong enough to leave. Long nights turned into brighter days, and on the solstice, I finally stepped outside.

Summer comes, and I can feel myself start to breathe life into mine. While it is not a band of saplings, I've grown to be quite fond of the class of frogs I've been able to shelter. Each night, they had asked for me, and when I finally stepped into their room, I was met with the warmest embrace I've ever known. They're bug-eyed and headstrong, but I can hear their croaks create a new sound that welcomes me to join them in the night. It's loud enough and bright enough to not leave room for memories lurking behind my surgical scars; I've found I cannot be haunted if I am not alone. These tiny creatures and fellow friends I've made help me keep my face in the sun, and while I see other trees start to pop up, I do not hold fear of them taking root in me again. The rain comes and washes away any tendrils that creep close. The rain always comes, even if the clouds bring the night with them. And, after the night, there is always the return of the Sun..

I know that I've done my part to make the air clean and sweet for more frogs to come and go as they please. It isn't a nurs-

ery, but it's a place which feels more like home than any garden I've walked through before. I don't think I have to worry about getting splinters anymore.

# retrouvailles

*Maggie Hoppel*

maybe i'm nine years old. maybe i'm waiting,  
lunchbox zipped, at the corner cafeteria table,  
four foot three chicago mobster in hello kitty  
twinkle toes. maybe i can say door in spanish.  
maybe i tackled a kid twice my height on the mulch,  
and maybe he barely stumbled. maybe i cheat  
at kickball but not on tests. maybe on wednesdays  
i watch aliens on TV. maybe i wrote a poem  
that syllabically required the word "pterosaur"  
be pronounced "puh-terosaur." maybe i'm scared  
of santa. maybe i'm scared of being stabbed  
by some cartoon bandit and the safety scissors  
i left out on the coloring table. maybe i meow  
at the fifth grade girls because i don't have sisters  
and people like animals more than people.  
maybe i hold up the wrong fingers when i pretend  
to smoke a cigarette. maybe the weekend dawn  
is my first secret. maybe i'm the ringleader of  
a code language or a society built on exclusion.  
maybe i never studied for spell bowl one bit,  
not sincerely. maybe i loved the wrong boy.  
maybe the dog bit me and i never told anyone.  
maybe i lay awake with my giraffe sleepytme lite  
and think about what dying feels like, and maybe  
it's grape hyacinths, scentless and swaying  
in the grass. maybe my dad will carry me upstairs  
like the echo of a bride. maybe i'll beg him for one last  
bedtime story before we both drift off into the hayfield.

## To the Soot, Anew

*Naomi J. M. Estes III*

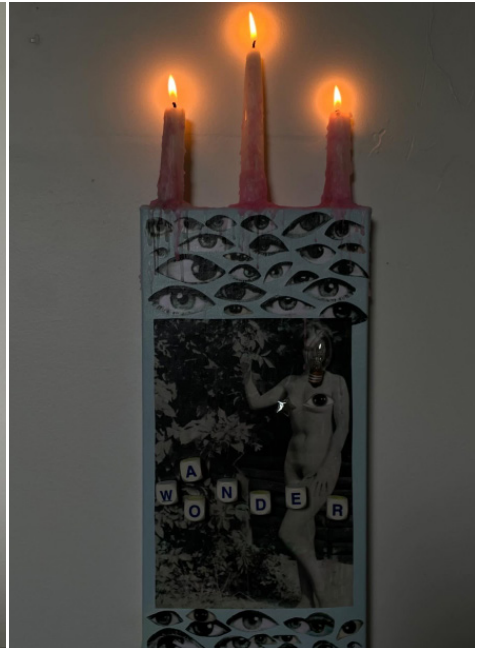
My candle's wick has reached its end;  
Ah! My wax is pooling.  
In this shadowed summer's night,  
My twinkling ash gasps, dull in gaze,  
choked by soot's simper.  
The gentle hand of a somber breeze whispers to me,  
Tickling, whistling, worrying a wispy lip;  
Lapping at my languished flame.  
In the pool of my wax,  
I dare to dream  
Of a world in which the tether never snaps.  
What is left for me to burn?  
And away I drift,  
my wax cooled and still  
My body amongst the stars, once again.  
In the blanket of darkness,  
my ash still shines  
Among heaven's cradle,  
my body still cries.  
The lust for light has ceased,  
And yet –  
I have never seen such brightness.  
From the pool of my ruin,  
To the cinder stars above  
I dream a constellation of newborn suns.  
Shining and gilded,  
weeping with life;  
Ah! I am once more.



## **I Wonder/Wander**

Juls Serowik

*6" x 11" Oil paint, Collage Cut Outs, Wax Candles, & Boggle  
Letter Pieces on Canvas*



# What The Womb Couldn't Shape

*Ella G. Bundy*

I was not born to be restricted to the form  
of your shame, the shape of your resentment.  
I was not born to be a voice in your confessional,  
bemoaning the passion you call sin.

I am not dust or clay to be molded  
by your discomfort and embarrassment.  
I am not Adam's spare rib remade in your image  
or a breath borrowed to keep you alive.

I can grieve the distance that grows in your eyes,  
the road of judgment between us.  
I can be devastated by this narrow gate –  
but I am not responsible.

I am not Veronica's sacred veil,  
lifted to wipe the blood and sweat from your skin.  
I am not the Eucharist for you to swallow,  
teeth red as you plead for my salvation.

Still, in spite of all these boundaries,  
the water of the womb drowns me.  
Lulls and laps and pulls me under  
like a baptism taken too far.

It soaks my skin soft until it flays open  
like that of the great St. Bartholomew,  
my sternum torn free to become the instrument  
on which you play your sorrow.

Yet even bound in your lament,  
I forge my freedom.  
I am not clay, nor dust shaped  
into the shell of man.

I am simply the fire they threw the saints in,  
love burning through holy water  
in the womb of my  
Christening.

# Sex As Dessert

*Signe Nettum*

You've just finished a wonderful dinner at a gorgeous restaurant. You could be with your partner, a few friends, or a whole table. In the end, the question is the same.

*How do you feel about dessert?*

Your dining partner says that they think about dessert all the time — sometimes it's the comfort of sweetness, or the idea of something special at the end of a day. No matter the reason, it still boils down to them thinking about dessert and how it is normal for them to think about it almost daily. Turns out, most people think about dessert daily. It is ingrained in your society; you should have and enjoy dessert, it is expected of you.

For the entire meal, dessert was not on your mind. You had your entree, drink, maybe an appetizer, and you are full. *How do you feel about dessert?*

Scenario 1:

Your partner wants dessert; you are full from the rest of the meal. They suggest splitting the dessert between the two of you. You could go either way, it does not matter to you. But it matters to your partner, and you enjoy spending time with them. So of course, you'll have dessert with them. The two of you enjoy the dessert — for you, while it does taste good, it's not about the taste. What you enjoy the most is the smile on your partner's face, and it makes you smile.

Scenario 2:

Your partner wants dessert; you are full from the rest of the meal. They suggest splitting dessert between the two of you. You love them, but for some reason, dessert just sounds wrong today. The taste, the texture, nothing on the menu entices you. You listen to your partner talk about how wonderful dessert is, and you can understand in the abstract sense, but in the end, they cannot make the idea of eating dessert sound good to you. Your partner accepts your preference of no dessert.

### Scenario 3:

Your partner wants dessert; you are full from the rest of the meal. They suggest splitting the dessert between the two of you. You get a sick feeling in your stomach about the idea of dessert. It's not full out revolting, but you cannot imagine yourself eating dessert. You tell your dining partner this, and they get upset. *They ask you, why did you have dinner with me if you didn't like dessert?* Or they say *what kind of person doesn't like dessert? Everyone likes dessert, it's in our nature.* The two of you part ways, dessert unordered and uneaten.

### Scenario 4:

You are out to dinner with a group of friends. They share stories about their favorite desserts, or what they have tried with different people. You're asked about your history with dessert. While you have had dessert, you confess that you don't like it. They begin to question you. *Have you just not found the right dessert?* While they mean no ill will, their comments come off almost infantilizing you. *You'll learn to like it when you're mature enough to eat the richer dessert. You need to experience this dessert, it'll win you over in one bite.*

You stay quiet for the rest of the meal.

### Scenario 5:

You're with a good friend and you mention that you don't need or have a want for dessert. They ask you why, because to them, it is something they've always had in their life, the want for dessert. Sure, the want did not manifest until post-puberty, but they found a taste for it and now it is a part of their life.

They ask questions like *how do you know you don't like dessert? Maybe you just haven't found the right dessert or dinner partner to enjoy it with.* And maybe they are right to an extent. But why are they questioning your stance? Why do you need to validate an absence of something instead of people saying *okay, you don't like dessert, that's fine.*

### Scenario 6:

You are ridiculed for not liking dessert. People make demands from you. You have to like dessert. Your tongue must be broken since you don't like dessert. You just need to find the right dessert and you'll realize that you've been wrong your whole life. *Have you tried this dessert? Just eat it, go along with everyone else.*

You try to get others to understand you. You find a community of people who had to fight for their dessert preferences and be recognized as dessert eaters. While you are not a dessert eater, you are also arguing to be accepted by others. However, instead of finding a group that accepts you for fighting a similar fight, they treat you with the same level of rejection. Sometimes even worse than others. *You're just faking for attention, they tell you. You haven't faced ridicule like we have, so you're not really like us. You can still eat the dessert others eat, all you have to do is swallow it. They're not harassing you like they harass us when we talk about dessert.*

### Scenario 7:

Your partner wants dessert; you are full from the rest of the meal. They suggest splitting the dessert between the two of you. After discussing what kind of dessert to order, it dawns on you that your opinion on dessert has changed over the time. You really enjoy spending time with your dining partner, and through the connection you two have, you have begun to think about dessert more often. Usually in the context of sharing it with them, instead of the idea of dessert as a stand alone. But it is a want for dessert nonetheless. You do not feel shame for your past stance on not enjoying dessert. You are allowed to change.

# A Imaginação

*Elizabeth Terhorst*

My eyelids flutter shut,  
and your warmth lights up  
the inside of my eyelids.

Late at night  
when my thoughts fall  
into the violet haze  
my hippocampus  
floods through my veins,  
    you come to me  
    dressed in black  
    with a crooked smile  
    purer than gold.

For, those eyes  
are a sweetness  
ceasing starvation.

Shades and tones  
wrap themselves  
around my waist,  
and pink presses  
against my  
    mouth  
        and throat.

A small part of me  
dies on your tongue,

but, in death, you  
still coax me,  
    and my soul  
    *trembles*  
    at your light touch.

Pink and tan slide  
down my legs  
and hold me like  
I might slip away  
into the light blue  
of my alarm clock.

But, it's the white daylight  
which severs me from  
your attention and  
back into my lonely bed.

Yet, your phantom touch  
lingers like cigarette smoke  
on my favorite leather jacket.

# Virgin

Ella G. Bundy

You first hear the word when you're young, maybe eight or nine. Knees scraped, mouth sticky from a fudge pop that made your teeth ring, jean shorts clinging to sweaty legs. Your best friend Betty is a year older than you. Her fingers are sticky and her cheeks are just as fat as yours, but she is wiser. She knows a new word: *Virgin*.

She defines it with crude hand motions and you clamp your hands over your ears, squealing in disgust. You both fake gag. You both fake vomit. You both burst into screeching laughter after your cries of *GROSS!* make the neighbor holler through his thin walls. It's funny enough that you fall back against your lumpy mattress and forget about hand-me-downs and the invisible "stamps" your parents use to buy food.

Later, when you're a bit older, you'll find yourself at the grocery store with Betty. She giggles in front of one of the shelves and you rush across the linoleum, the soles of your shoes slapping with each step. *Virgin*, she mouths, pointing to the olive oil. She encourages you to touch it, her tan skin scattered with scratches and peeling sunburns. *Virgin*, you repeat. Your finger touches the cool glass of the bottle. *Being virgin means pure*, she half-whispers. Your hand feels dirty when you pull it back. Oily.

You read about virgins in a mythology book at the library. Artemis stands strong with a bow and arrow, her posture as proud as you are, handing your brother Jamie the paintbrush he asks for. He teaches you how to fill in the holes in the walls left by raging door-knobs. You tell him about virgin goddesses and he tells you about his God and chastity—but his God doesn't seem to make him as happy as he says. He leaves for college that autumn, his eyes filled with sadness.

You're thirteen and sitting on the curb of your driveway, mindlessly picking at old scabs, when Betty appears from nowhere. Her dollar store mascara trails down her cheeks, her lips are bitten. You shoot upright, attention locked on the way her caked makeup parts like

the Red Sea as tears fall. *What happened? What's wrong? Betty!* you half shout, partially in fear, partially in annoyance as she starts to blubber.

*I made a mistake*, she sobs, collapsing on the concrete. Her skirt shifts, revealing bruised, scraped knees. Serum wells in droplets of clear-yellow. You lower yourself beside her, pulling her quaking hands from her face. *What happened?* you repeat. Your eyes lock on the trail of blood leading down her thigh. You understand, then.

Instantly.

*Virgin means pure*, you recite. You don't mean to, but the words slip out. The balmy summer air seems to grow heavier as Betty takes a deep, deep breath. *I'm not*, she whispers. Her blue eyes flicker open, veins bursting red, and for a moment you're entranced by the contrast of color, by the beauty of her. *It's okay*, you murmur back, reaching an arm around her. You expect her skin to be dirty, you're remembering the olive oil bottle, but she is the same Betty she's always been. *It's okay. It's okay.* You press your lips to her cheek as you've done a thousand times and feel her flinch away. It's too late now to tell her that you love her.

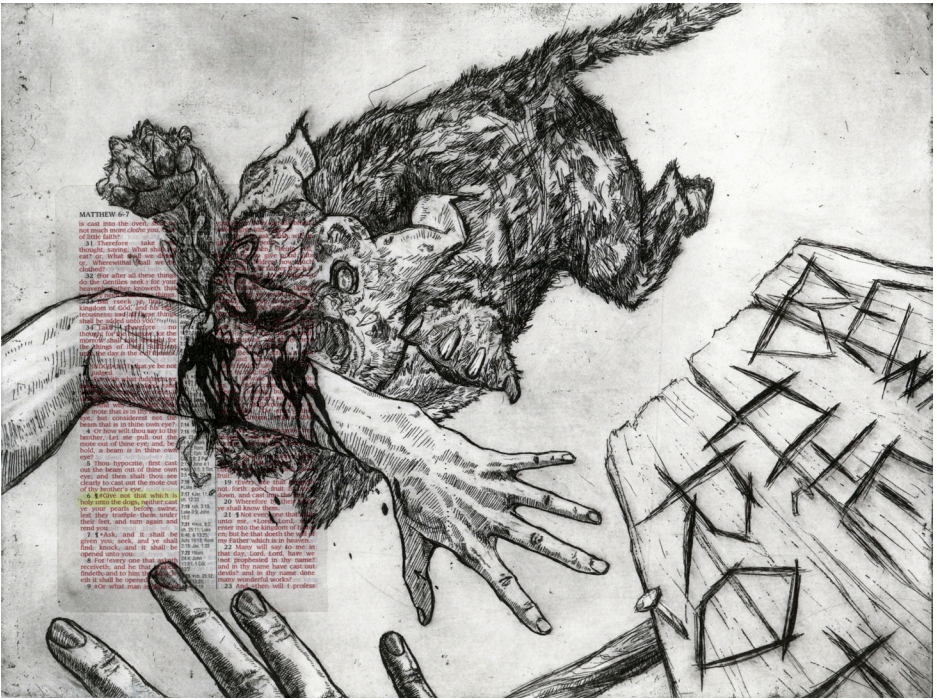
You write about this experience to Jamie the night your parents echo down the halls. Your tears hit the letter and make the paper moist and pasty. You write about the last book you read, about virgin sacrifices and Iphigenia. You write about how virgins were killed to end wars and save crops, and how gods rarely answered. You write about how you realized that Artemis doesn't save girls like in the myths – she didn't save Betty. You ask if Jamie's God protects those who pray to him, but when Jamie's reply comes, he ignores the question. Instead, his letters slow down and then taper completely, until one letter appears with "return to sender" on the front.

A virgin beer is what your mom hands you after the funeral three long months later, the apple juice sparkling in a plastic cup. You raise it with the rest of the people toasting, your eyes on the closed casket. Jamie is gone. The priest says that despair is a sin, but Jamie's soul may find mercy in God anyway because he kept his body pure. He was a man of God, after all—unstained, even with

weakness in his mind. The drink tastes sour despite the saccharine carbonation coating your tongue and throat.

Betty stands beside you, but she no longer remembers how to cry. You cling to each other and lower your cups to the edge of the casket, leaving them there, abandoned.

Oily. Untouched.



## Dogbite

Remington Brown

9" x 12" Copperplate Etching Print with Chine-Collé

# Blood in the Bushes

*Caedence Jones*

confuse words for knives,  
critique each syllable said,  
blood bounds the mouth tight.

you tear at my flesh,  
cut and pry my ribs open,  
with wandering hands.

the gallows await,  
cowardly, careful, callous—  
with a righteous rope.

his legs drag me  
limp, lifeless, down dirt-strewn paths.  
branches catch and cut.

a shot echoes out,  
dark forest swallows the sound,  
leaves shiver in fear.

innocence is lost—  
shattered under unseen eyes.  
night swallows the world.



lith's grasp, I try to calm the horror frantically knocking around my skull. There is no sign of sanctuary to be granted to me, not just yet. I do not deserve such grace. A barrier flashes lustrous crosses with black wisps idly twirling around, a display of how many souls this cathedral claimed. I do not wish to join the army of souls trapped here. A freeze rushes through my veins, numbing my blood momentarily. The evil knows I am here for my final test—traveled here for my soul's salvation. Is this the end goal? The chance for deliverance? Perhaps for my spirit, and I shall be reincarnated in a life of purity. A glimmer through the crack of the massive doors drags my intrigue to the dark chasm inside. An altar showered in a soft spotlight highlights a velvet-covered figure lying upon it, bathing in the limited sheen. Every ounce of my calm and control scatters like light in a prism. I shall assume my fate in Carmilla's hold.

# Domesticated

*Tilly Winger*

In his mouth I was a writhing excuse of a wild animal,  
Domesticated some years ago by another bloodline  
I do not remember myself following him home  
I do believe I was forced

But in his mouth I am revered as a delicacy,  
Fingers licked clean of sorrows and disgust  
By a tongue that comes looking for insecurities,  
And domesticates them, not by nature but by nurture

In his mouth I was always frightened  
The jagged edge of volatility and endearment  
That lead me to believe possession was security  
And obsession was a tender something

But in his mouth I am tasted for what I am  
Sour, with a sweet coating hiding the bitter flavors  
He licks me down, layer by layer,  
Until all that remains is spit and trust

In his mouth, I was cursed  
But In his mouth, I believe that I'm cured  
And that I was never ill;  
Just poisoned



## **Smile**

Anthony Stewart

*8.5" x 11" Digital*

# Of the Long Ago

*Naomi J. M. Estes III*

It is a faraway daydream, pure in its love, a semblance of yesterday.  
And it sounds like two sisters, chasing ladybugs and dragonflies  
under the midday sun.  
It tastes like the melting sugar cone of vanilla ice cream, dripping  
on burning black asphalt.  
It smells like tanned skin and the freshly lain tears of cut onion  
grass.  
It looks like the wriggling bodies of worms, dancing on sizzling  
pavement.  
It feels like whistling winds and the sweat of clammy, clasped  
hands.  
It is a faraway daydream, a veneer of memory beneath the squish of  
my brain,  
an echoed reminder that casts a dimming light on the looking glass  
of time—  
and it sounds like two sisters, chasing fireflies and June bugs under  
a setting sun.



## **E Morte, Vitam**

*Eris Hembree*

I emerge from my grave,  
Dirt underneath broken nails  
Splinters decorate my skin  
Old bloodstained clothes  
I am not who was buried  
Nevertheless, I am,  
Bound to the same body  
Now free from the coffin  
I feel sunlight on my face  
And grass between my fingers  
There is a smile on my face  
Newborn and joyous  
Caught up in the ecstasy of life  
A spark spread through kindling  
My senses are immersed,  
In birdsongs, and clover patches,  
In the tangle of loving arms,  
In the taste of fresh air.  
Sitting beside a tombstone  
Which describes who the body was.  
There are flowers left for him.  
I am not supposed to be.  
His family wishes I wasn't.  
They insist I am misled,  
A tragedy, or defilement  
Of his life and legacy.  
Personally,  
I think we would have been friends.  
I could comb his messy hair,  
and he could bandage my cuts.  
They don't see us that way.  
They cannot look at my eyes.  
"You came back all wrong."  
Yet I didn't come back.  
So, with arms outstretched  
I tell them I love them

Yet, the world's is the first embrace  
I feel, gentle and kind.  
My life has just begun.  
A thousand firsts await,  
as I am born from,  
that graveyard womb.  
From blood and dirt  
into iridescent light

# Red Leather Couch Reformation

*Emily Shipman*

I was only 13 when the world started  
conditioning me for submission,  
because I fell asleep on the couch as I was;  
a girl,  
blessed with the naivety so many other girls  
had ripped from them when they, too, were still just girls.  
But I rose anew;  
A woman swaddled in a child's body.

Because I awoke with stained pants and  
a pain in my gut that would not ease;  
Not with time.  
Not with painkillers.  
Not within the arms of my protectors.  
No relief would be found in the biting pain of wood grain  
on my knees, knelt in a beggar's prayer.  
It would stay unsettled.

Because I was worried about how to seamlessly  
slide a tampon up my sleeve in class.  
And they were worried about pinning me down  
and injecting me with vaccines to preserve my bounty;  
my usability.  
My Flintstones were now to be taken with  
a pill to keep me protected, until the time was right.  
I started to understand my place.

My body was no longer mine; it was no longer a body at all.  
No longer the chassis of my soul that carried me up trees,  
or shielded me from scraped knees  
when I ran faster than boys down dirt roads.  
No longer the storyboard of my life spelled across my skin,  
in freckles and scars.  
No longer a girl with dreams and gap-toothed smiles.

Instead, I became a moldable vessel—  
an unsullied womb.

# Relapse

*Elizabeth Terhorst*

I can't tell  
if it's wine  
or blood  
on my shirt,  
but I've missed you  
just the same.

Your silver edges  
drag up and down  
my arms and legs—  
    your sharp tongue  
    piercing  
    my reclaimed,  
    virgin flesh.

There are  
pink parts  
where past  
lovers left  
their mark  
on me.

My eyes flutter,  
and my chest heaves,  
but your pressure remains  
a sobering constant.  
    Kisses run down  
    my torso and neck,  
    but the warm crimson  
    left behind  
    stains like a  
    high school hickey.

I can't tell  
if it's wine  
or blood

on my shirt,  
but I've missed you  
just the same.

My only hope  
once I wake  
in the morning  
I'm left by  
my lonesome  
in my bed.

But, the morning light  
has a nasty way  
of illuminating  
my past regrets.

## Blood Money

*Emily Shipman*

EXT. ABANDONED CHURCH - NIGHT(CLIFFS)

An old church sits silhouetted against the dark night sky. It stands close to the edge of a sheer cliff edge, overlooking the sharp, choppy lake below. The windows are filled with the flickering light of BURNING CANDLES. Faint, rhythmic CHANTING can be heard.

[MUSIC CUE: A high energy, feminine POP SONG suddenly starts playing. It is jarring against the silence and the creepy visual of the church]

INT. ABANDONED CHURCH - NIGHT(CLIFFS) - MONTAGE

A THICK OLD BOOK, yellowed pages covered in LATIN SCRIPT sits on table.

A HAND enters frame. Sets PINK IPHONE on the book as a text message pops up across the screen.

INSERT: TEXT MESSAGE:

Hey, babe, I'm here. Let me in.

A MACBOOK sits on a table, SPOTIFY is open on screen.

PLAYLIST titled "Ritual Vibes ❤️" is now queued to play.

A BIRKIN BAG is harshly opened. A set of hands begins removing items from the bag.

Slowly, a RITUALISTIC DAGGER, is removed from the chaotic bag.

Three HOODED FIGURES stand in the dim room. Both figures on the left and right are the source of the rhythmic chanting.

The MIDDLE HOODED FIGURE is reapplying lipstick as the chanting gets louder.

The middle hooded figure begins to blow a GUM BUBBLE that grows with chanting. When the chanting reaches its peak the GUM BUBBLE pops.

EXT. PREP SCHOOL FRONT LAWN - DAY

On the lawn the chaos of move-in day is unfolding. Staff are unpacking bags and trunks from luxury cars.

Through the crowd, a beat-up car pulls through and parks off to the side. Its pattering engine causes people to turn and stare.

TAYLOR, exits the car and begins observing her surroundings. Taylor, is a 16 year old average teenage girl.

TAYLOR

Okay, first day of your new life, Taylor. Your future starts today.

DAD (O.C.)

Are you talking to yourself again? You know that tends to freak people out.

Taylor's DAD, a nerdy, 50 year old man, joins her next to the car.

TAYLOR

What the hell are you wearing?!

DAD

You like it? I made it myself.

TAYLOR

No, I don't like it. And I think the people here would rather this school burn to the ground before selling Ormond Prep merch. Please, take it off. Or cover up.

Taylor's MOM, a kind, 50 year old woman, is standing off to the side taking plenty of pictures and selfies. She finishes and then joins both Taylor and Dad.

MOM

Let him have his moment, Taylor. I don't think I've ever seen him do anything remotely crafty before this.

TAYLOR

I need you guys to start acting normal.

MOM

Honey, this is just exciting for us. We're very proud of you and all the work you put into getting this scholarship and being here.

TAYLOR

I know. I know. And I'm grateful. I just... don't want to stand out more than I already do.

Taylor gestures back to the car. Dad grabs Taylor by the shoulders, pulling her in close to speak quietly.

DAD

Listen, if this is too much or overwhelming, we can go home. Me and your mom aren't going to be upset if you decide to leave now.

TAYLOR

It's not too much. This is the best way to guarantee college and networking and my future.

Taylor begins unpacking her bags from the car trunk.

TAYLOR

I'm stressing myself out. I want to be here. It's fine. I just need to, like, settle in.

DAD

Well... if you're sure. We better get this stuff up to your room then. It won't move itself.

Dad grabs a bag from the pile and turns to start taking it up to the school.

A BUSINESS MAN FATHER who is talking on the phone and carrying a DESIGNER BACKPACK nearly collides with Taylor's Dad.

BUSINESS MAN FATHER (TO DAD)

Watch where you're going. Why are you just standing there? Take this bag up to my daughters room.

The Business Man Father shoves the bag he was holding into Dad's arms, promptly returning to his phone call.

BUSINESS MAN FATHER (ON PHONE)

Yeah, I'm still here Daniel. Sorry, the moving staff this year is incompetent. I need those reports by the end of the day.

Dad holds the backpack while looking to Taylor.

TAYLOR

Oh god, we look like movers. Come on, we need to get to my room.

DAD

Do you think I should set the bag down here or?

TAYLOR

I don't know. Just carry it for now. I guess. More importantly, let's go.

Taylor starts grabbing her bags and pushing her parents forward towards the dorm.

MOM

You shouldn't be embarrassed about who you are, honey.

TAYLOR

Mom! I'm not embarrassed... Well, I'm just embarrassed in this exact moment and I would really like to get up to my room.

Taylor and her parents grab the rest of the bags from the car and begin carrying them all towards the doors of the dorm.

INT. DORM HALLWAY - DAY

Taylor and her parents move through a crowded dorm hallway.

MOM

What's the room number again?

TAYLOR

I'm in room 109. I think it's a few more doors down.

Taylor and Mom continue walking down the hallway. Dad is struggling to keep up because of all the bags he is now carrying.

DAD

Yeah, I'm fine. No. I got it.

Dad stops walking and readjusts the bags. He notices a Resident Assistant who is struggling with their clip board and various bags.

DAD

Oh, do you think you could take this? I'm not sure whose it is. Thanks!

Dad puts the bag given to him earlier on top of everything the Resident Assistant is carrying.

Dad picks everything back up and catches up with Taylor and Mom. The Resident Assistant drops their whole stack of things.

Taylor and her parents stop in front of room 109.

TAYLOR

Okay, this is my room.

Taylor digs a key out of an envelope and unlocks the door.

INT. TAYLOR'S DORM ROOM - DAY

Taylor and her parents step into her new dorm room.

MOM

Oh, wow. This is so spacious.

DAD

It's nicer than any dorm I ever lived in, that's for sure.

They all begin to set the bags they are carrying down in the room. Taylor is looking around the room, Mom begins taking more pictures on her phone, and Dad is opening every drawer in the room.

There is a knock on the door that makes them all pause what they are doing. HEADMISTRESS BARDIN, a sharp, put together middle aged woman, walks into Taylor's dorm.

HEADMISTRESS BARDIN

Ah. You must be our newest scholarship student. Taylor, yes? I am Headmistress Bardin. I see that you are getting settled in now. Well-

Dad steps forward and begins shaking Headmistress Bardin's hand vigorously.

DAD

Thank you for stopping by Headmistress Bardin. We're all very excited about this opportunity for Taylor.

Mom starts taking pictures of Headmistress Bardin and Dad.

DAD

I think Taylor will settle in nicely, but it's good know the staff looks out for new students.

HEADMISTRESS BARDIN

That's not-

Dad is still shaking Headmistress Bardin's hand.

DAD

Truly the campus is better than we remember. Taylor is very excited. Oh, I don't think I remember her registering for classes-

Headmistress Bardin forcibly removes her hand from Dad's.

HEADMISTRESS BARDIN

Oh, what an exuberant bunch. Taylor, darling, I have tasked another junior standing student to help you finish setting up academically and to help you adjust. She should be stopping by soon.

TAYLOR

Thank you, Headmistress Bardin. I'm excited to get started here at Ormond.

HEADMISTRESS BARDIN

Yes, well we want all our students to succeed. I am going to check in on some other students, but best -

Another knock on the door cuts off Headmistress Bardin. PHOEBE HUNT, a strong willed 17 year old girl, partially enters Taylor's dorm room.

HEADMISTRESS BARDIN

Never mind. Phoebe, darling, come in. I was just telling Taylor how you would be her Edwina Ormond Preparatory liaison.

Taylor and Phoebe awkwardly stare at each other. Dad leans over to whisper in Taylor's ear.

DAD

You should probably say something.

TAYLOR

Oh. Uh. Hi.

DAD

Smooth.

Taylor elbows her dad in the side.

TAYLOR

I'm Taylor. Thanks for showing me around and stuff.

PHOEBE

Phoebe. Yeah, it's no problem. I know Ormond can... Phoebe glances over at Headmistress Bardin.

PHOEBE

...have a steep learning curve.

HEADMISTRESS BARDIN

Excellent. Everyone is now acquainted, so I am going to see myself out. Taylor, best of luck this school year.

Mom takes a final picture of Headmistress Bardin as she is leaving.

DAD

Phoebe, just give us a second to wrap up our goodbyes and then we'll get out of your guys hair.

PHOEBE

Yeah, sure.

Phoebe steps out of the way to the side of the room. Mom begins sniffing and crying.

TAYLOR

Mom, why are you crying?

MOM

I'm just gonna miss you. I feel like you're growing up so fast.

TAYLOR

Our house is literally like 20 minutes up the road. I'm pretty sure you'll still see me all the time.

DAD

Let your mom cry, this is a big deal. We know how important getting this scholarship was for you, and now you're here.

Dad brings Mom and Taylor in for a big hug as they finish saying their goodbyes.

DAD

But don't forget to have fun and just let yourself be a teenager, okay kiddo? Go to parties, fall in love, make bad decisions. That kind of stuff is important too.

Mom steps away to take a picture of everyone in the room. Her flash goes off startling Phoebe.

TAYLOR

Oh my god. Okay, its time for you guys to go now.

Mom starts reluctantly moving towards the exit while crying and Dad goes to follow.

DAD

Remember! Have fun too!

Taylor's parents exit the dorm room leaving Taylor and Phoebe alone.

TAYLOR

I'm sorry you had to see that. Something about today made them more neurotic than usual.

PHOEBE

Typical parent behavior. Something about an empty nest really messes with their heads. My mom's gotten really into reiki recently in hopes of curing our dog's depression.

TAYLOR

I didn't realize dogs could have depression.

PHOEBE

I'm not sure they can. But he has seemed lighter emotionally since she started.

INT. TAYLOR'S DORM ROOM - LATER

Taylor walks from her closet and hops up on the bed.

TAYLOR

So, tell me more about this “steep learning curve”.

Phoebe looks over her shoulder at Taylor from where she is on the floor organizing the bookshelf, but remains quiet.

TAYLOR

Oh my god. What does that mean? It’s like every person I talk with today is trying to make me regret my decision to come here. It can’t be that bad, right? Or, like, people wouldn’t send their daughters here or-

PHOEBE

Hey. Woah. Chill, I didn’t realize you were that stressed about it.

TAYLOR

Of course I’m stressed! I was hoping I could maybe slip in mostly unnoticed. But people thought I was literally like a child laborer of the school earlier, so clearly I will not slip in unnoticed. And now I’m going to spend the night thinking about what exactly you meant by that look on your face instead of getting any sleep before the first day. So now I’m going to show up looking crazy.

Phoebe watches from the floor as Taylor gets up to pace around the room.

TAYLOR

Like is this place hell on Earth? What if there’s some haz-ing initiation that I don’t know about and your face was your guilt showing because you feel bad for knowing and not telling me? Like-

Phoebe stands from the floor and intercepts Taylor’s pacing, grabbing her by the upper-arms to stop her.

PHOEBE

Hey. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by my face.

Phoebe moves her grip to Taylor’s forearms. Taylor quickly looks

down at where Phoebe is holding her arms before looking back up at Phoebe.

PHOEBE

I promise there's nothing crazy going on. Besides girls caring too much about which yacht they are going to pick out as a graduation gift.

TAYLOR

I've never even seen a yacht, Phoebe!

PHOEBE

You're over thinking it. I just meant that it's high school. Who actually has anything good to say about high school?

TAYLOR

Yeah, I guess. But I'm still pretty sure I held a purse today that cost more than my parents' house.

PHOEBE

Yeah, you're just going to have to get past the cost of the material items floating around this place. If you think about that kind of stuff your head will literally explode. Listen, it's late, but I can stop by tomorrow and I can walk you to class, make sure you don't get lost or anything?

TAYLOR

Okay, yeah. I would like that. Thank you. You're a ... um great liaison. Yup.

Taylor awkwardly removes herself from Phoebe's grasp and pats Phoebe on the shoulders. Taylor walks towards her dorm door.

TAYLOR

Well I don't want to keep you so-

INT. TAYLOR'S DORM ROOM - ENTRY WAY - SAME

Taylor goes to open her dorm room door for Phoebe when it swings in violently from the hallway. The door catches Taylor in the foot.

TAYLOR

Fuck!

Taylor begins cursing and hopping around on one foot. Despite the chaos, CECILY, 17, the cunning leader of the pack, BEATRICE, 17, Cecily's dutiful right hand, and PIPPA, 16, Cecily's cousin, all burst into Taylor's dorm room. These are the IT-GIRLS.

CECILY

Eva! Where are you? Come on bitch, we have things to do and you're not even answering the group chat. Like, we do not have time for this.

TAYLOR

Who the hell is Eva?

Cecily, Beatrice, and Pippa all look up from their phones and finally notice Taylor and Phoebe standing to the side of the door.

BEATRICE

Ew, who the hell are you?

PIPPA

OMG! Are you, like, a burglar?

PHOEBE

You are idiots. Clearly, Eva doesn't live here anymore.

PIPPA

Ew, it's the freak, too.

CECILY

And why the hell are you here, freak?

PHOEBE

Jesus, get a better insult.

BEATRICE

Why? Especially since its true, you-

CECILY

Shut the hell up, Beatrice. Eva's not here. Let's go before whatever is wrong with the freak and company rubs off on us.

The It-Girls all turn and leave Taylor's dorm room.

TAYLOR

What the hell was that?

PHOEBE

Just a bunch of crazy bitches.

TAYLOR

Is that, like, normal for them?

PHOEBE

Yeah. Honestly, just ignore them.

TAYLOR

That's kind of hard when they are breaking into my room.

PHOEBE

Trust me, they don't care about you. Cecily is just missing a minion.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - MORNING

Taylor and Phoebe are walking down the hallways of the school. Phoebe is showing Taylor the way to her first class.

TAYLOR

Thanks for like getting up early to make sure I don't get lost.

PHOEBE

Well, you were basically on the way.

TAYLOR

Hah. Right, of course.

PHOEBE

Are you feeling better about everything after last night?

TAYLOR

Yeah. I think I was stressing myself out mostly.

PHOEBE

I'm glad you realized that before I had to point it out.

TAYLOR

Wow. Thanks.

Taylor and Phoebe are walking closer together, bumping shoulders as they walk.

PHOEBE

Well. I mean ... you were there. You were in total freak out.

TAYLOR

I can see that. But in my defense, a bunch of crazy, random girls broke into my room and started yelling at me.

PHOEBE

Okay, that happened waaay after you already started freaking out.

TAYLOR

Well, I'm just saying it didn't help.

They begin laughing while they continue walking down the hallway. Taylor and Phoebe walk past the bathroom.

TAYLOR

Hey, I'm gonna run to the bathroom before class. I'll catch up with you at lunch though?

PHOEBE

Are you sure?

TAYLOR

Yeah, I can literally see my class from right here so I think I

can manage not getting lost.

Phoebe laughs and keeps walking as Taylor enters the bathroom.

INT. GIRL'S BATHROOM - MORNING

Taylor walks into the bathroom but stops because the It-Girls are inside.

CECILY

I mean I just don't understand where the hell Eva is.

Cecily bends down and takes a bump of coke off of a textbook that Beatrice is holding. She rubs her nose and passes the 100 dollar bill to Pippa.

CECILY

Like I've never seen that bitch without her phone and now she's just not responding?

PIPPA

Omg. What if she's, like, dead?

BEATRICE

God, Pippa! Don't say shit like that.

CECILY

No she better be dead with the way she is ghosting us.

Cecily turns to adjust her hair in the mirror when she sees Taylor still standing in the corner from when she walked in.

CECILY

Jesus, were you just spying on us like a freak?

TAYLOR

What? No.

CECILY

Leave!

Taylor quickly leaves the bathroom.

INT. GIRL'S BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

The It-Girls continue discussing Eva after Taylor runs out of the bathroom.

BEATRICE

Of course she would be a little creep, she was hanging out with Phoebe. Who even is she?

CECILY

It doesn't fucking matter who she is, Beatrice! What matters is that Eva is being a fake bitch and disappeared on us and now we have no way of reading the book to perform the ritual. Like Latin's literally a dead language and Eva just knew it? And now she's gone. We're so fucking screwed.

PIPPA

Oh, god. Cecily, I can't go back to how things were before the rituals! I had perpetual dark circles under my eyes and stretch marks on my ass! I can't go back to that. You had to wear contacts!

CECILY

Shut up, Pippa!

BEATRICE

I mean... we have this.

Beatrice holds up the textbook that they were just doing coke off of, revealing that it's their Latin class textbook.

CECILY

Are you fucking joking? Like I'm going to take the time to try to figure out how to read the ritual by paying attention in class.

PIPPA

We have Latin class?

CECILY

Ugh!

Cecily storms out of the bathroom. Pippa and Beatrice quickly pick up all of their things, including Cecily's bag, and chase after her.

INT. LATIN CLASSROOM - AFTERNOON

Taylor makes it to Latin class after the run in with the It-Girls in the bathroom. She finds an empty seat towards the front and starts getting her things out of her backpack.

The It-Girls walk in and pass by Taylor on their way to a set of seats behind where she is sitting. Taylor looks up at them as they pass by.

BEATRICE

God, stop being a creep.

The LATIN TEACHER enters the classroom.

LATIN TEACHER

Okay, everyone get seated and take out your textbooks. We are starting on page 17.

Everyone flips to the page in their books. Beatrice spends extra time swiping at the cover of her textbook.

The Latin Teacher finishes teaching and class ends for the day. All the students begin standing up and putting their things back in the bags. Taylor is at a desk toward the front of the room and the It-Girls are towards the back of the classroom, texting on their phones.

LATIN TEACHER

Taylor, I must say you did astounding for the first day back from summer. Do they teach Latin at your old school?

The It-Girls overhear this and start moving closer to where Taylor and the Latin Teacher are now standing.

TAYLOR

Oh, no, they don't. But my dad works a lot with, like, archival documents for the museum. I guess a lot of the old religious stuff is in Latin. So my dad is pretty good at it and I guess I've just picked

up on it over the years listening to him.

LATIN TEACHER

Very good. Well, I'm excited to have you in this class.

Taylor finishes packing up and leaves. The It-Girls smile at each other knowingly.

LATIN TEACHER

Okay, girls. Move along. Some of us have limited time on lunch breaks.

The It-Girls roll their eyes and leave the classroom.

EXT. COURTYARD - AFTERNOON

Taylor and Phoebe are sitting in the courtyard eating lunch, talking quietly to each other. The It-Girls suddenly appear and sit themselves around Taylor and Phoebe, cutting off their conversation.

CECILY

Well, look who it is, the freak and the creep.

PHOEBE

What the hell are you talking about? You literally found us and sat here.

PIPPA

Potato. Tomato.

TAYLOR

That's not how that goes.

CECILY

Listen, we're ready to put your creep behavior behind us. We got off on the wrong foot. You're new here, you don't understand how things really work around here yet.

BEATRICE

Yeah, we can't be mad at you for not knowing.

PIPPA

Yeah. Plus you're like soo good at Latin.

TAYLOR

What?

PHOEBE

Just go away, Cecily.

CECILY

Listen new girl. You don't want to make a bad first impression on everyone else by hanging out with the wrong people right away.

Cecily stares directly at Phoebe.

BEATRICE

Plus we can get you an invite to parties, or dates with boys. Or invites to trips we take. Basically, anything you want.

PHOEBE

Seriously? What is your guys' problem?

BEATRICE (OVERLAPPING)

You better shut up, freak.

PIPPA (OVERLAPPING)

Phoebe, you're so fucking annoying.

PHOEBE (OVERLAPPING)

Me shut up? No-

Taylor grabs Phoebe's hand that is sitting on top of the table to get her to calm down.

TAYLOR

I think I'm fine the way I am. But thanks.

Cecily notices Taylor holding Phoebe's hand.

CECILY

Clearly. Let's go girls.

The It-Girls get up and leave Taylor and Phoebe at the table.

TAYLOR

Phoebe, that is not normal high school!

PHOEBE

You didn't know mean girls at your normal high school?

TAYLOR

Of course I did. But they weren't actually clinically insane.

PHOEBE

Hmm.

INT. TAYLOR'S DORM ROOM - NIGHT

Taylor is laying on her bed after a long day of classes. She is on the phone with her mom talking about how her first day went.

TAYLOR

Yeah, I mean it was definitely different from-

A weird noise from the window cuts Taylor off.

TAYLOR

Sorry, mom. I think someone is at my door. I gotta go. Love you too.

Taylor walks over to her window to look for the source of the noise. Just as she gets the window it flings open and a boy's head pops inside. They both begin screaming. After a moment, Taylor puts a hand over the boy's mouth to get him to be quiet.

TAYLOR

Holden? Holden Jones? From freshman year biology? What are you doing?

HOLDEN JONES is a 16 year old boy who Taylor attended public school with. They are not friends but familiar with each other. Holden removes Taylor's hand from his mouth.

HOLDEN  
Taylor? What-

Holden loses his footing outside the window and begins to slip.

HOLDEN  
Taylor! I don't know why you're here but help! Help, I'm slipping!

Taylor grabs his arms and begins pulling Holden into the window.

TAYLOR  
Why I'm here? This. Is. My. Room.

Taylor hoists Holden all the way inside and they both fall to the floor. They are both out of breath from trying to get Holden in the window. Holden quickly sits up, but is still out of breath.

HOLDEN  
Wait. What do you mean this is your room?

TAYLOR  
I mean this is my room. Why are you breaking into it? I'm getting real sick of that happening.

HOLDEN  
You go here now? This used to be Eva's room.

Taylor quickly sits up to look at Holden.

TAYLOR  
Who the hell is Eva?!

HOLDEN  
Whoa. Um. She was my girlfriend. Is my girlfriend? I'm not

really sure where we stand actually because she hasn't texted me back. But like we had just said I love you a few weeks back. But Eva is pretty hot and cold about this kind of stuff.

TAYLOR

So you thought breaking into her room was the best way to win her back?

HOLDEN

What? No. I used to visit her like this all the time. I don't usually fall, but there's not usually someone screaming in my face.

TAYLOR

Um. You screamed first.

HOLDEN

No I didn't! Wait. Pause. Why are you here?

TAYLOR

I go here now. I got a scholarship. Have you not questioned why I haven't been at school?

HOLDEN

Honestly? No. I think I actually heard someone say you, like, ran away from home or something.

Taylor takes a big breath to argue with Holden when there is a knock on the door.

CECILY (O.S.)

New girl! Open the door.

TAYLOR (WHISPERS)

Okay come on. You've got to go.

HOLDEN (WHISPERS)

Why are we whispering?

TAYLOR (WHISPERS)

Because you're not supposed to be here!

Taylor begins pushing Holden towards the window.

BEATRICE

We can hear you moving around in there.

TAYLOR (WHISPERS)

Go!

HOLDEN (WHISPERS)

Wait we were still-

TAYLOR (WHISPERS)

Just text me or something!

Taylor slams the window shut after Holden is all the way outside. She waits a second to make sure Holden can no longer be seen then goes to answer her door.

INT. TAYLOR'S DORM ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Taylor opens her dorm room door and the It-Girls are on the other side. They walk past Taylor, inviting themselves into the dorm.

CECILY

Wow. I didn't realize ... how quaint it was in here last night.

TAYLOR

Don't we all have the same size dorm room?

BEATRICE

Hah. No.

CECILY

Yeah, definitely not. But I was more referring to the decor. If you can even call it that.

PIPPA

Yeah. I hate what you've done with the place.

Taylor shuts her dorm room door.

TAYLOR

Did you guys come here just to insult me some more or?

CECILY

No, actually. We came here because we need each other.

Cecily sits down on Taylor's bed and removes a large, old book from her bag.

TAYLOR

Yeah, I don't think so.

CECILY

See this book? It's some ancient spellbook or whatever. I don't really know. Eva was the one who read it. It was her families' or something.

TAYLOR

What does that have to do with me? I don't need to read it. I don't even care about what it is.

PIPPA

We can't read it.

CECILY

Pippa! Shut up!

Cecily takes a deep breath.

CECILY

It's in Latin. We need you to read it.

TAYLOR

Why would I help you anyways? You've been raging bitches to me.

CECILY

Because you need what's inside of it more than we do.

TAYLOR

What the hell are you talking about?

CECILY

Listen, obviously our families have lots of money. Like a lot of money. But that requires so much effort to maintain. And eventually that will all fall on our shoulders. But what about the things that we want?

Taylor looks at them, waiting for an explanation.

CECILY

We want to still be rich without all of the business work.

BEATRICE

And we want to be famous.

PIPPA

And hot. Like we want to be hot forever.

CECILY

And there is a ritual in that book that lets us have all of those things. As long as we keep performing it.

TAYLOR

Yeah, right.

Cecily sets the book down on the bed and then stands up to look down at Taylor.

CECILY

Fine. Don't believe us. But you need the ritual, especially if you want anything to happen with Phoebe.

TAYLOR

What are you talking about?

CECILY

Please. Don't play dumb. I can tell that you have a little crush. It's cute really. But that's all it will ever be.

TAYLOR

You don't know that.

CECILY

But I do. Because even though Phoebe isn't like us, she's still one of us. High society. And you're not. That kind of stuff matters to old money families, you know.

Taylor stutters to respond. The It-Girls begin leaving the room. The book is still on the bed.

CECILY

Say what you want. But you know where to find us when you make up your mind.

The It-Girls leave Taylor's dorm room.

# amputation

*Maggie Hoppel*

we don't look—we chop  
one hand with the other,  
one hand with the knife,  
one hand on the stump  
and we stick it in the snow  
to numb the wound.  
we toss the severed pieces  
to the decomposers—we don't watch  
what the fingers latch onto,  
fumbling blindly for the missing  
like a hungry newborn.  
we go inside—we peel off  
our coats. we are free bleeding  
but we don't even know it.  
when the hearth sings  
us asleep (placing pennies  
like a throne upon our eyes)  
we dream of hemlock flowers—  
sprouting like mistaken purity  
out of a discarded palm.



## **Final Resting**

Sarah Hollcraft

*8" x 12" Digital Photography*

## Texts I Didn't Send

*Kim Kile*

I want to hate you.

I miss our morning talks.

I want to try again.

You have a hold on me I can't release.

My head spins at night trying to change our last day together.

Wishful thinking is my best friend right now instead of you.

It hurts that we can't share friends or even dinner anymore.

I think this will wound our kids more than you.

You left me with two dogs and three cats, and I'm allergic to all of them.

Fucker!

You've drained all of my energy from me.

I've never had anxiety until now.

I live for your read receipts. It means you thought of me.

I call your counselor Rasputin.

I waste a lot of time waiting for you to reach out to me.

I hate that Facebook told me about your dating life while we were still married.

I hate Facebook even more for posting breakup memes on my feed all day every day.

I don't want to make separate memories with our family.

I haven't found a daily mantra that makes me feel better.

It really hurt to see Halloween pictures of you smiling with our grandson.

I want you to drunk call me and tell me you're sorry.

Henry just asked where you were, and my stomach felt sick.

I cry when I think about you going out on a date or even getting married again.

To be honest, I cry about everything.

Six months ago, you were desperate to save us, too.

I'm afraid of my future.

You picked a really shitty time of year to leave us.

I'm sorry you were unhappy.

I just want to talk to you.

I hope you miss me.

We should fight for us.

I want to be part of a couple again.  
Thinking about losing you takes my breath away.  
I want you to regret your decision.  
I'm mad you didn't tell me in time to work on us together.  
I can talk to you without making it awkward.  
I've already changed.  
You broke me.  
I still love you.

# Travel Makes You Ravenous

*Emily Shipman*

Travel makes you ravenous. It doesn't matter that you've been cooped up in that shitty Honda Civic, doing nothing but driving straight for 8 hours and gorging yourself on Cheetos. Travel will still make you ravenous.

Maybe it's because a long stretch of road makes you long for home, or wherever you're going, and one thing that is clear in your memory of that wherever place is the food. Or maybe in preparation to leave, you didn't buy any groceries, didn't cook any meals. Instead, living off of greasy fast food and takeout tacos for the last three days. Whatever it is, travel makes you ravenous for something hot and cooked with care.

And when you're ravenous, you ignore your best judgment. Normally, you wouldn't even think about stopping at some roadside diner in the middle of nowhere. The kind of place where you look up and down that flat expanse of road and don't see anything else. Well, you can only see as far as the flickering neon light of the diner sign will let you see. So maybe something is closer, but it's a secret only the sun knows.

The kind of place where you can't see through the windows. Not because they're tinted, but because the crud has built up so thick that not even the strongest window cleaner could wipe it away now. The kind of place that you know the Health Inspector doesn't know exists.

The kind of place you should just drive past. But travel makes you ravenous, so you pull in for a meal.

Once you're inside, it's not too late. If you really thought about it, you would realize your stomach isn't clinching in on itself. It's not grumbling with hunger pains. That the travel hasn't made you literally ravenous, it's something else you hunger for. And if you realize that, then there is time to leave.

But you won't leave. Because hunger is terribly hard to ignore.

You could order anything on the menu, except one thing sticks out to you. The Sloppy Joe. Sloppy Joes remind you of your grandma. And you miss your grandma. So you order the Sloppy Joe.

You shouldn't have ordered the Sloppy Joe.

One of those order-up bells will ding across the counter. You'll get a glimpse of the nostalgic sandwich only for a second before the freckled, wrinkled arm of the decrepit diner waitress blocks your line of sight.

She does not remind you of your grandma.

She'll set the plate down in front of you, and you'll forget your manners. Because travel makes you ravenous. The slop is smeared across your cheeks, and you don't bother to unravel your silverware roll. You can feel her eyes on you, the diner waitress. You don't care.

You should care.

Eventually, you'll bite into something hard, and you'll pause, and you'll fish it out of your mouth.

You should've left before looking at the hard thing. But you didn't.

Pressed between your pointer finger and thumb, you'll find a tooth. You'll know it's human. But you won't know if it's covered solely in slop.

Is that blood?

You'll tongue around your mouth, counting your teeth. You have them all.

That is not your tooth. You really wanted it to be your tooth.

You'll make your last mistake when you look to the diner waitress in horror.

Your first mistake was that travel made you ravenous.

# Iona Road

*Caedence Jones*

Gravel and grit poke and pester the arches of my feet,  
Tattoo them with countless calluses and embedded granulate,  
Drawing blood I could not yet see,  
A permanent reminder of my days on Iona Road.  
While elm helicopters flutter my hair,  
Spindling strands with each swirl.  
The red and white stripes ripple,  
Like the stream behind the forest,  
Just downhill from the house,  
Filled with water spiders and scotch pebbles,  
Cold as a warning.  
And when the sun peaks just over the hill,  
It kisses its surface, and scatters sapphire sparkles  
On the dewy forest floor.

Violets bruised purple and pink peonies adorn the porch,  
Their smell no longer as sweet,  
But they softly sing to themselves if you listen,  
Flirt familiarly with the hummingbirds.  
The abandoned tire swing rots in the yard,  
Collects the tears that roll from the branch's eyes each storm,  
Sways and sloshes with the trees.  
While the rusty trampoline watches from afar,  
Carpeted in leaves and tattered netting,  
Envious of the companionship.

My grandma calls out to me,  
And I can smell the fear of God on her wrinkled, leather arm—  
Or maybe it was the sour sweetness of her Chanel N°5,  
Suffocating the stale air around her.  
Walking through the door felt like entering a chapel,  
Especially when crosses loom over doorframes in each room,  
Hitching and tossing in torture when I enter,  
Like a noose begging to fulfill its fate.  
The only picture of her murdered mother rests on the oak side table  
Just at the end of the couch, almost out of reach—

Blurry and smudged just like her memory had become.

The stairs still creak and moan just as loud as they did when I was  
nine,  
Sneaking to and fro on Easter Sundays to escape the inescapable.  
The guest bedroom, despite all the times my grandma claimed she'd  
tidy it,  
looked like a hoarder's wet dream, as pounds of dust collected on  
the books,  
Packed loosely on top like snowfall just after Christmas.  
And the bed that stole my youth sits untouched in a corner,  
With the same navy-blue sheets,  
That I bet his stubborn stench and Axe Apollo still linger on.  
I flinch at the ting of the metal bedframe,  
Too familiar with the taste of its coating.

I still wince when I hear his name,  
Spoken in conversations during the holidays  
Or tagged in Facebook posts  
Congratulating him on his baby—  
*Thank God it's a boy—*  
I can't run away from family.  
My legs will never take me far enough,  
And my arms can only drag my limp, lifeless body so far.  
I notice fingerprints indented from the soot on the Bible,  
And I can't help but wonder if he ever really read it.

A shot rings deep in the woods, eerily echoing out—  
I let the sound finish the thought I cannot,  
And continue the path ahead, with gravel still stuck to my feet.



**A Piece of My Love #2**

Sarah Hollcraft

*6" x 8" CMYK Cyanotype*

## My Lover Is Dead

*Tilly Wininger*

You and I lay on the last of the summer's sweet grass, ignoring how it tickles our sweat-drenched backs. It feels timeless, the moment, full of a dying sun so warm you can feel your skin buzzing with its heat. Clouds make shapes I've never seen, changing ever so slightly each second they spend dancing across the sky. It's just a memory, a nice one, but I wish I could remember more. I want to remember more of you.

You look beautiful. Coppery hair with freckled cheeks, hazel eyes with pupils so big they swallow the iris like a greedy dusk. Your arms are textured and elbows red from resting on the earth, small red bugs crawling up our limbs and nestling into our skin. This is how it should be, me and you laying with the earth. Together.

But instead, I watch the procession from outside the funeral home, a line of cars with little orange tags that read 'funeral' heading to the after-party. They'll tell stories about you, I'm sure. Funny ones from when you were a kid and ran into walls or sweet ones about your first recital. There won't be a single story about us, though. Nobody knew how close I was to you. I wasn't even invited to your viewing. I saw more of you than anyone else ever had, and still I couldn't be the last to behold you.

I remember one thing more clearly than anything else, that one sentence with teary eyes and shaking hands. Nervous smiles and your teeth chewing skin off your lips. As if I could say anything but yes.

"Will you marry me?" You requested.

You ask of me my hand in marriage, and I had answered yes, of course. I love you. I love you. I love you. That is how I know we must be married. Even in death, when hidden from the ones you loved and the ones I loathed, so far away that not even I can reach you, I will still say yes. The only question was how.

Days pass before I find the idea. It comes to me while holding my head beneath the water in my just-barely big enough tub. We'd showered here, together. I'd washed your hair, you'd scrubbed my back. I found one of your long, ginger hairs on the wall. It broke me, but in all the right ways. Just enough to consider...

What if I could be with you again? All that was left was to exchange our rings. The wedding rings we chose together, just as we would do most everything else for the rest of our lives. Together, together, together. The word sings in my head like a church bell, or a death knell. I can't be sure which. You're practically calling me, whispers of warmth surrounding me as my ears fill with water. When I emerge, I am certain of what I must do.

You picked up gardening a year ago, planted the flowers that pop up each year like clockwork. You explained time and time again that it was the bulb that allowed them to spring up in the same place. I simply credited it to your magic. Your green thumb. I wonder, are you green now? Are you melting into the earth yet? What will your scent become, now that you can't shower with your lilac shampoo and coconut conditioner? What will become of the rest of your bodywash, pomegranate and mango mixing together in a sweet concoction that I used to lather on your skin?

I decide to worry later about belongings, instead focusing on the trowel left in a small pot in my front yard. You had plans to come back here and pack the dirt some more, surrounding a small wildflower planted in a ceramic jug. Your watering can has a cobweb on it. Will you, too? I grab the trowel and begin the descent down the hill. I live next to the graveyard. Or is it a block away? Time doesn't pass the same since you've been gone. You were buried here, maybe in my front yard. One small mercy, you were close.

I wait for the cover of night to kiss my footprints away, covering them with mist that reflects the moonlight. Nobody else knew of us before, they certainly can't now. I pick my way across the graves of other lovers, coming to a stop only when I see your name. My lover. Etched into the stone, a perfect script reading your name and a last name that should have been ours. I begin to dig, nothing but my labored breathing and the sound of crickets chirping in my ears

to disturb the peace. Dirt begins to form in small piles around the perimeter of the grave, and before I can register the pain, my hands are blistered and bleeding from the trowel's rough handle. I continue, the stinging reminding me of your loss, reminding me of why I'm doing this.

For you, who requested marriage. For you *will* be wed.

# Slumber

*Kim Kile*

When's there's someone else in my bed,  
will I sleep through the night,  
wrapped in his arms like a precious gift  
instead of curled up in a fetal position  
on my side of the bed praying for the night to end?

When I'm no longer alone in the mornings,  
and I share them with someone new,  
will I appreciate the comfort and peace  
of mundane bathroom conversations  
and the sharing of daily calendars in the kitchen?

When I open my heart to love again,  
will the trust I lost with you return to me  
as gentle waves of confidence,  
or will I continue to hear the subtle message  
you left within me whispering "You don't deserve it?"



**Too Tired**  
Chasity Goliday

# Think of the JOY!

*Samantha Stapleton*

Think of the Joy!

Think of the potential joy  
that sits stagnant for eternity,  
for there is only so much living we can do.  
The personality traits that sit in silence  
because we did not explore the experiences  
that would've shaped our clay minds.

I think of all my favorite songs  
to which I will never dance in my room  
or fall asleep while bathing in their melodic lullaby.  
A fraction of dullness will forever linger,  
left uncured  
because the antidote was never heard.

I think of all my favorite books  
not living on my shelf  
or being scanned at the library checkout  
under my name,  
stories I won't get to picture in my mind  
as I turn the prose blankets of wood pulp.

I think of all the dawns I will miss from heavy eyes.  
I think of all the wrens whose songs won't wake me up.  
I think of all the mountain peaks whose air won't cleanse my lungs.  
I think of all the maple trees I'll never rest beneath.  
I think of all the wishes blinded by light pollution.  
I think of all the joy my idleness hinders.



## **Where The Cattails Sing**

Emile Tipton

*2D & 3D Materials*

# Scowling Sergeant

*Amy Schleppenbach*

It's July 2018, and I had completed two jetlagged weeks of mandatory in-processing for my first Army duty station, Panzer Kaserne in Böblingen, Germany. I was assigned to the 554th Military Police Company as a medic; my rank was lower enlisted Private. I had a clean break from my civilian life and all its vices and a new, cheerful can-do mindset. I was excited to start my military career and be a part of my new Army family. The sun was shining almost as bright as my smile as I walked towards the main entrance of our company building to meet my leadership.

“Holy fucking shit, Private!” said a female Sergeant.

My blood turned to ice, and I stopped, reflexively going to the position of parade rest. I wasn't expecting to get yelled at and had no idea what I did wrong. The Sergeant, scowling deep enough to curdle milk, blocked the door. Her uniform nametape read “Richards,” and I recognized her as my Medic Section's Non-Commissioned Officer.

“You are not about to present yourself to our Platoon Sergeant looking like ass! Start pushing!” she ordered. I started doing pushups, the default corrective action of the military. Her grating voice was thin and reedy from years of smoking. She sounded like a cartoon character. She continued her tirade for another few minutes, her angry voice grating across my ears like a metal rake through gravel.

“Hold on,” she said. I looked up from the ground.

“Did anyone ever teach you to do your hair?”

“No-o-o,” I replied, scared.

“No, Sergeant. The hell do they teach you soldiers nowadays? Do a couple more pushups and follow me.”

“Yes, Sergeant.”

She took me into the bathroom and taught me to put up my hair in a bun. It was the first time I ever had a Sergeant stop yelling at me and teach me how to fix an underlying issue. She left to find a hair sock and some bobby pins. In the mirror, with my hair down, I looked just like my mom. I fought back tears I thought the six previous months of training had buried and plastered on a smile when she came back.

“That’s good enough for now,” said Sergeant Richards. “I’ll help you get hair supplies at the PX later. Now, you are meeting our SFC, don’t you dare fuck this up. You are a Medic and need to always be at your best in front of this unit, our soldiers count on us. So help me God, I will send you back to Basic Training myself if you fuck this up.”

My meeting with our Platoons’ SFC didn’t go well and I planned to pack my bags during lunch. I had done everything she had told me to, but she didn’t know I had failed my Physical Training test I had taken during my in-processing.

As punishment, our Platoon Sergeant ordered me to do sit ups and pushups every time a higher ranking soldier passed by me, then took me outside to do some corrective action, a colloquialism in the military known as “getting smoked.”

Sergeant Richards was assigned to personally lead me in physical training for the next week. I felt her gaze bore through me as she smoked a Marlboro Light from the nearby designated smoking area, as I did situps in the dirt. I had to take the physical training test again tomorrow but I was convinced she would kill me before then. I used a smile to hide my discomfort as the corrective action continued. Gravel dug into my palms and gnats bit at my sweaty skin.

“Put those teeth on safe, Private!” said a Sergeant. I stop smiling. “Do you think this is funny?”

“Why the fuck you have to smile like it’s all sunshine and

rainbows outside?” asked another.

I’m dismissed and I run inside, fighting back tears as I shower and change into a fresh uniform. I thought I had outrun my storm clouds of grief and failure when I became a soldier.

“You’ve done it now,” said another soldier. They were helping me hide from the more sadistic higher ranking soldiers in my unit who went out of their way to have me exercise in locations like the stairwell, in doorways, by the dumpsters, or on the main sidewalk where everyone could see me.

“Sergeant Richards is going to eat you alive. She is angry enough to boil a tea kettle and now we have to hear her shriek like one until you get your fucking act together. If you don’t drink or smoke or dip now, you will be soon.”

I passed my physical training test the next day. I had a lot of motivation from several screaming peers who ran and did the push-ups and situps with me, but the individualized training still stood.

I took a moment to breathe as I followed Sergeant Richards to the school’s track. The dark mountain forest wreathed in mist was beautiful and I felt the grief unclench from my heart for the first time in months.

We set our phones on the bleachers and began warming up. SGT Richards had hardly spoken one word to me since yesterday and I was too scared to ask when she was sending me home.

I was surprised when she did the exercises too. I had expected her to stand on the sidelines and scream at me like a Drill Sergeant. Over the next hour, I was happy to learn I could outsprint her smoker’s lungs, but she could beat me at sheer endurance in push-ups, situps, and planks. Near the end I was panting but she sounded like a dying freight train. We finished, cooled down, and she lit up a Marlboro light.

“How many pushups did you do for your test?”

“Twenty-eight, Sergeant,” I replied.

“Jesus, no wonder you didn’t pass. How old are you?”

“Twenty-seven, Sergeant.”

“You look like a fucking highschooler. How are you only three years younger than me? There is no reason for you to be doing the bare minimum to pass pushups and situps when you maxed out the run. Do you go to the gym?”

“No, Sergeant.”

“Well you are now. Meet me at the gym at o’dark thirty every morning from here on out. Don’t be late.”

“Roger, Sergeant.” I was convinced I was going home in a box.

Over the next few months I adjusted to waking up in the dark, exercising, then watching the sun rise as I walked back to the barracks to get ready for work. My smile became less and less forced as I became friends with other soldiers in my unit and stopped having a heart attack every time someone called my name.

Sergeant Richards had me sign up for every free weekend event I could attend.

“I will be damned if you sit in your barracks room and become an alcoholic. You are in a foreign country for the first time and this is an opportunity of a lifetime. You will travel if I have to drag you out kicking and screaming to run to Schloss Solitude. It’s only a forty minute walk from Panzer Kaserne!”

I soon became the Better Opportunity for Single Soldiers liaison in my unit. The program ensured single soldiers or geographical bachelors or bachelorettes had a peer group they could hang out with and a safe travel group to see the sights of Europe with. With them, I saw more of Europe than I ever had of the US.

During morning predawn runs, the winding mountain roads would be full of sheep and cows as farmers rotated their fields with herding dogs. Endangered frogs sung loudly, then went silent as they pulled their legs inward and closed their eyes, pretending to be leaves as we rucked past.

In my freetime, I explored the wooded German countryside, hiking Ancient Roman cobblestone trails, their colored mosaic broken where modern repairs had been done. Wildlife rich forests sheltered castles on every mountain peak as foxes screamed at you until you left their territories. Wild boar and deer, all fairytale tiny compared to their American cousins, would flee the heavy tread of hiking boots, disappearing silently into the Black Forest. I traveled to neighboring countries with my new Army friends and my grief took a backseat to the joy of exploring new wonders.

I also learned more about Sergeant Richards as we continued going to the gym. She was from Phoenix, Arizona and had joined the Army for a fresh start. She had a small family, a grandma, mother, stepdad and brother. None of which explained the scowl or anger.

“Well, no wonder you ran away,” she said, when I told her about my life in Indiana, my fourteen biological siblings and nine stepsiblings. “Your father was planting children instead of corn.”

“I have a question, Sergeant,” I said, during a rest between sets.

“It’d better not be stupid.” I wasn’t sure if it was so I blurted it out.

“Why haven’t you sent me home yet?”

Her expression changed out of a scowl for the first time I had known her.

“It was a fucking joke! Holy shit, you thought I was serious? Oh my god, wait until I tell everyone at the company!” She started laughing and I smiled. Her laugh didn’t sound like a cartoon char-

acter, it was genuine and rich as if she didn't use it much. By the end of the day everyone in the unit had heard the story.

“Good job, Schlep. I haven't seen Sergeant Richards this happy in a while,” said a soldier.

“Aren't you a little ray of sunshine for Eeyore's rain cloud,” said another.

There was a notable change in her attitude as we neared Thanksgiving break. She seemed a little less angry and the scowl faded when we sat together in the office. It would reappear as soon as we were disturbed but less and less it was directed at me. She took an interest in my family and listened politely as I rambled on about them for a solid hour.

“It's going to be hard this Thanksgiving,” I said, winding down.

“Why?” Sergeant Richards finished off her third Monster energy drink of the day. It wasn't even noon yet.

“My mom died in 2016 around Thanksgiving from cancer and I can't take leave to be with my family this year,” I said.

“Why don't you come over to my place?”

“Ok.”

I was glad I wouldn't be alone with my grief again.

Thanksgiving rolled around and she picked me and my bottle of Malibu up and drove to her apartment ten minutes away. The countryside was beautiful. Yellow mustard flowers were in bloom and the cold would soon send them to seed to be harvested. The apartment was beautiful too. It had a marble staircase with replica Greek vases in nooks and metope carvings on the walls.

“It's like a castle,” I said.

“Cleaning it sucks. All residents are on a roster and take turns mowing the grass and cleaning the common areas like the laundry room,” she replied. She unlocked her door. “Wait, have you not been in one of these before? Of course not, you live in the barracks. Let me give you the tour.”

She started with the door which had a weird system of turning the key a set amount of times to unlock the deadbolt. All the windows had built-in garage door style shutters, a kitchen, a bathroom with a tub big enough for two people, a master bedroom, and a living room bigger than my barracks room. It was easy to ignore the black mold behind the fridge and the handful of prescription bottles on the counter.

“The landlord paints over the mold every so often and those are my antidepression meds that make me piss out my asshole. Here, let me mix you a drink, I used to be a bartender,” she said. I was glad for the subject change. I didn’t think it was polite to tell her to put her meds away in her own house even if they brought back bad memories and made me uncomfortable.

We sat down on her sofa and watched a movie. The alcohol soon kicked in and I started crying. The grief around my mother was still a raw hole in my heart. Sergeant Richards politely ignored my crying until I hiccuped to a stop.

“I know how you feel,” she said quietly. I was wiping my nose on the inside of my t-shirt collar. “My father committed suicide on my birthday.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I replied. I tried not to choke on my snot. “Do you need a hug?” She turned to look at me.

“Ew, no, gross! I have more tissues, you could have just asked. Why did you use your shirt? Ugh, it’s running down your chin. Go wash up!”

I cleaned up and then passed out on her living room floor as she started another movie. The next afternoon, after we had Doner Kabob from a Turkish food truck, and were sober, she drove me

back to the barracks.

“Schlep, you remind me of myself when I joined five years ago. You’re the reason I get out of bed in the morning and I don’t want to disappoint you as your noncommissioned officer. Don’t ever lose that smile,” she said.

“I won’t, Sergeant,” I promised.

“Good,” she said. “You’d better start carrying tissues around, that was disgusting. Oh, and go get some vitamin D pills from the clinic, the sun will disappear for the next six months. I don’t want you to get seasonal depression.”

I now had a military family to help carry my grief and the means to help others. I carried my smile, a contagious ray of sunshine, through the entire winter.



## **Maria**

Robert Smith

*18" x 24" Graphite and Pastel on Paper*

# Names Cannot Die

*Naomi J. M. Estes III*

I have never known you  
But I have forever been a part of you.  
I was named for you  
But I will never hear you.  
My old name twists and turns in time  
Whenever I think of you.  
My name gives me dreams,  
Because it was your name, too.  
Among them I see the howling forms of countless Zeroes  
And feel the roaring flames that lick the flanks of sinking ships  
Clomping my sodden feet, laden with sand  
Wading through a wake of crimson tide  
The sticky warmth of blood on helmets  
And the creased darkness of wrinkled bags under sleepless eyes.  
I see a symphony of destruction,  
Bullets endlessly whizzing  
And scalpels ever slicing  
Fleshy things screaming  
And propellers singing.  
Through my dreams  
I can grasp a trauma,  
Masked as a triumph.  
And when I wake,  
My father will tell me, again and again,  
That I was named for a hero.  
I do not look like this hero  
For which I shared a name.  
I do not feel like this hero  
For which I shared a name.  
I never met this hero  
For which I shared a name.  
But here I stand before you,  
And I can see you.  
I can imagine the bend of your jaw, cracked and brittle  
The dimpled smile that so resembles  
The man who raised me.

I see the Pacific blue of your eyes,  
The ocean that cradled you,  
When you fell from the sky.  
I can hold out my hands  
And almost feel you hold them.  
Standing here, the woman I am now,  
I can see you smile  
The same way my father had  
When I told him I was changing everything.  
We still share a name,  
No matter what I call myself.  
We still share a life,  
For you gave me mine.  
And now I stand before you,  
Alive and breathing,  
A legacy of you,  
With your love in my heart.

*In memoriam of Dr. Jack Martell Estes I  
The man for which I was named.  
August 15th, 1923 - June 18th, 1981  
U.S. Veteran of World War II, Naval Frogman  
of the Pacific Theatre  
Former Chief of Staff at Christian Hospital Northeast-Northwest,  
St. Louis, Missouri*

# Paci-Fist

Jacob Venable

*“Good men don’t need rules. Today is not the day to find out why I have so many.”*

- The Doctor

When you get punched by a pacifist, you know you fucked up. On the surface, Darius looks like he could throw a man down a flight of stairs. He owns a battle-ready katana, dreams of fighting evil, and even enjoys a good sparring match with a trusted friend (hey, that is me!). But that fighting spirit is an illusion; it is no less a fantasy than the anime he consumes. Sure, we used to pretend to be awesome fighters in our younger days; we had even managed some great feats of strength. One of our favorite games back in the day was something we called “Clash of the Titans,” which involved going up into the California mountains, carrying the biggest logs we could lift to a location that was stupidly dangerous, and then beating each other with said logs. Just imagine two stupid teenagers swinging logs twice their size while standing on a bridge made of two telephone poles tied at the ends, forming a makeshift bridge over a raging river. Yes, we were that dumb.

Yet, despite the bulk and the swords, there lies a man who could not bring himself to harm a firefly. Much like a certain doctor who flies around space and time in a blue police box, Darius is a man who invites loved ones with open arms and a warm smile. He rarely parts his lips, for his two front teeth resemble a football goal post, something he is quite insecure about for some reason. Perhaps it is because I try to kick a field goal whenever he does. It does not stop the ladies from swooning, though. With those rugged cheeks and chestnut hair styled into the perfect storm, he rarely lacked company for date night.

I met Darius in the Porterville High School library during lunch. Where is Porterville? Well, there is a space between the genitals and the anus. Porterville is *that* of California. While sitting at one of the tables, a chess set spread between me and my friend Chris, Darius approached me with this calm, almost shy demeanor.

Understandable, since high schoolers can be little pricks, especially when it comes to what he wanted to ask me. So imagine my hesitation when he asked me the question that sparked our lifelong friendship: “Do you happen to play Pokémon?”

With a raised eyebrow and an expectation to yet again get harassed and mocked, I answered “Yes.”

I do not know what I expected, but I most certainly did not expect what followed. Darius straightened his posture and, in exaggerated motions, pointed his finger at me and said “I challenge you to a Pokémon battle!”

Needless to say, a Pokémon battle ensued. I whipped out my GameBoy and link cable, and our friendship was forged in the fires of glorious combat with digital cartoon animals. Pixelated ice beams and explosive eggs flashed across our little cabbage-green screens in what must have seemed like the lamest of scenes to outsiders: two nerds hunched over little beige bricks. But to us, we were in the middle of a grand coliseum with our creatures waging war on our behalf. I won the battle, and for my efforts, I reaped my prize: his friendship. (He denies it happened this way and will take that to his grave.)

While on the outside, Darius is a pleasant, cheerful, and adventurous man with whom I went on numerous daring quests in the mountains, those narrow hazel eyes hide a sadness that is reluctant to reach out. Behind the extroversion is a melancholic, tortured soul that peeks out through clamshell lids, a soul who prefers keeping the peace over throwing hands. He prefers to resolve conflict with tender words over a sharp tongue. Reserved and calm, he enjoys a good laugh in public and a soft cry in private.

I got into a fight in high school. Some small child posing as a high schooler thought it was a good idea to put his hands on me. I grew up with the code of never starting fights, only finishing them. The moment this action figure touched me, I knocked him out and made him cry to the teacher. It was the first time Darius knew me to act violently outside our sparring sessions. While he did not witness the fight, he knew me well enough by then that it must have been

justified. Still, he never glorified it; rather, he avoided mentioning it at all. Even when I went from being known as the Pokémon kid to having people call me “Pika Tyson,” he never said anything about it. It was not until that same punk demanded I meet him off school grounds for a rematch that he finally mentioned it.

“Are you really going through with this?” Darius asked.

“Nothing’s gonna happen,” I said, “and if something does, I’ll handle it.”

“Good,” he said, “because I’ll have your back if it comes to it, but I’d rather it didn’t.”

“I know, man. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it.”

When we reached the meeting spot, I saw the loser brought a friend as backup. I had no doubt he thought the same about me, so to make a point that Darius was not there to fight, I had him wait by the road and approached the two alone. After some shit-talking and things started to get heated, Darius called out to me.

“Come on, bud. If you have any pride, you’ll walk away. Do you have any pride?”

I looked at my opponent, took a deep breath, and said “No.”

The guy stared at me for a long moment and left, apparently deciding I was not worth a second black eye. I walked back to Darius, who just gave me a long, silent look. Saying nothing, he turned and we headed for the movie theater.

That was the day I learned of Darius’ pacifism. He did not outright tell me, but he showed me in various ways. One day, while we were playing Pokémon cards in the library, some asshole walked up, slapped my cards out of my hand, and said “What’re you gonna do about it?” I stood up, but Darius intervened.

“Dude, don’t,” he said, grabbing my arm from across the table. Then he shot the guy a glare and said “Get out of here.”

“Or what?” the punk said.

“Or I’ll let him show you why everyone calls him ‘Pika Tyson’.”

The asshat’s eyes darted between me and Darius, and finally, his two brain cells met and generated the only good idea his Cro Magnon ass ever had: he walked away.

“He needs to be taught a lesson,” I said. “I could’ve taken him.”

“Just because you can doesn’t mean you should,” Darius said, sitting down and picking up his cards. “I don’t want you getting expelled. Now finish your turn.”

Strange words for someone who loved making fictional animals duke it out so much, but I could not deny his wisdom. Little did I know he would fail to heed them himself.

The town of Springville, a place where Darius lived but never called home, held the Apple Festival every October. It became a sort of tradition for us to attend the festivities and see what kind of goodies we could find. From handcrafted necklaces to gourmet tamales, the bounty from that year’s harvest numbered more than just apples. Children ran amok through hay bale jungle gyms, while farmers and craftsmen erected their stands. With the Sierra Nevada looming overhead, the stage was set for a grand, eventful day. Little did Darius or I know it would start off with a bang.

“We should check out those necklaces,” I said.

They were cheap products with premium prices, but I always ended up buying one. Darius preferred bracelets himself. We had our own specific tastes in accessories.

Darius smiled. “Last year, they had some nice beads-”

“hEy HeY-!”

*CRACK!*

A clown jumped out from behind the splintered Apple Festival plywood sign. A middle-aged man caked in runny make-up, I have no doubt he was just trying to make a couple of teenagers laugh. Instead, his painted smile met meaty knuckles. His red rubber nose flew past my face. The clown flopped cartoonishly onto the road, arms and legs splayed about. The crimson grin had a new sheen spreading across it. For a split second, time froze, and I thought the street would soon be decorated with a brand new chalk outline.

Then time snapped back into place. The idiotic clown flailed about like a crab on its back, trying to find his footing. He dug his heels in, grabbed his nose, and looked up at us like we had committed some cardinal sin.

“Why?” he asked, as if he did not already know.

Darius said nothing; he just walked away. Since no answer was provided, I looked down at the clown, pointed my finger, and scolded “You know why.”

Did I know why? Of course not. I assumed it was due to the idiot’s sudden appearance from out of *fucking nowhere*, but jump scares never yielded such a violent reaction from him before. It was not until that evening, when we sat upon the playground swings, that Darius told me he had coulrophobia (fear of clowns). He regretted that punch, even though I thought it was a perfectly reasonable response to such a colorful ambush. At the very least, it did not ruin our day. We never saw that clown again (this includes future festivals), and had a pretty good time. To cheer him up, we tortured the poor souls at The Hamburger Stand by ordering peanut butter and chocolate shakes. They hated making those things.

I never saw him act violently again after that. Even our silly little sparring sessions slowly faded out, much to my disappointment, though I am certain our bodies thanked us for it. He still loved swords and Dragon Ball Z, but his love for nature and animals emerged a lot more. Hikes, mountain climbing, and bareback river

riding became more frequent. Outwardly, he seemed so jovial. Yet, despite all our adventures, that sadness in his eyes lingered. Always reserved, he rarely talked about his personal issues, but over the years, he let some of them out, little by little.

“She gambled it all,” he told me one day.

We sat on a Springville park bench, watching fireflies blink in and out of existence. The sun sank toward the horizon; I imagined it loomed over Porterville much like the moon did for Clock Town in Majora’s Mask.

I was confused. “I didn’t know your mom even liked gambling,” I said.

“My grandmother’s inheritance... she gambled it all away. I have nothing.”

It was a somber thing to hear. His grandmother had left him a quarter-million dollars when she passed, but his mother’s gambling addiction sapped it away into oblivion. In one hand, he saw it as no change; he continued to struggle making ends meet all the same. In the other, he condemned his mother for her complete disregard for anything outside her tiny bubble. He fought it back, but I could see his world crumble just a little more. His mother, just like his father so long ago, had abandoned him.

A long-standing tradition for us that broke when I joined the Army involved venturing out to buy the newest Pokémon game the day of its release. GameBoys in hand, we marched into Target, slapped our cash on the counter, and demanded the newest games the moment the store opened. Then we found a cozy outdoor place—a park, a playground, the peak of Mount Mordor—and just played our new games. These are the memories I cherish most. They were carefree times, when we had few responsibilities, where we were old enough to enjoy freedom away from parental supervision, yet not old enough to shoulder the soul-crushing weight of adulthood. A time when we could insert ourselves into a fantasy world of quadruped harbingers of doom and psychic murder cats, and ignore reality.

I think he resented my joining the military. Maybe he will never admit it, but perhaps his pacifist nature did not like the idea of his best friend going to war. He did confess that he expected me to return in a box rather than a plane, and gave me a Yu-Gi-Oh! card when I found out I was deploying to Afghanistan. “The Warrior Returning Alive” the card was called, featuring a battered armor-clad fighter returning from battle. It sounds like a cheesy gift, I know, but the symbolism was not lost on me. I kept that card in my breast pocket each day I was out there and still have it today. I keep it safe in my treasure box.

One day, shortly after I left the Army, Darius sent me a video clip. In it, I watched a lanky, yet handsome man in a bowtie confront a spaceship with a giant eyeball and claim to be the Earth’s doctor. It did not mean anything to me at the time, I must confess, but Darius said “Isn’t that the most epic scene ever??”

“Sure, that’s pretty cool,” I said, not knowing what I just watched.

“You should check out Doctor Who,” he said. “It’s an awesome show!”

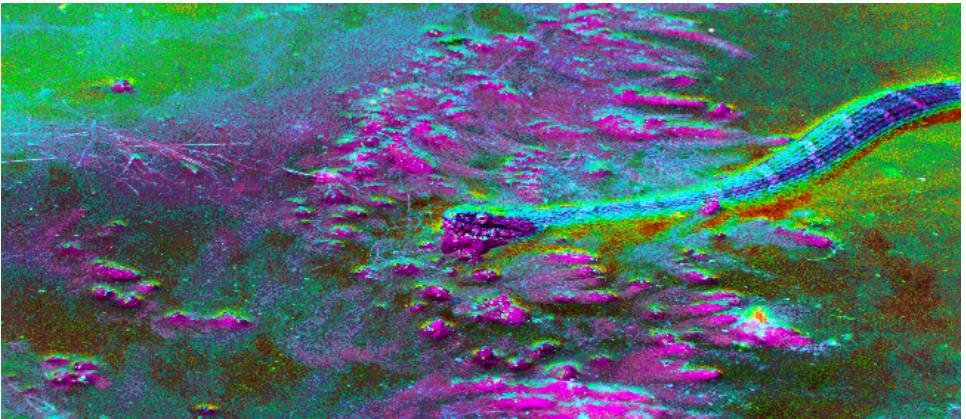
So I pulled up Netflix and watched the first episode, thoroughly confused because the lanky bowtied man was nowhere to be seen. Yet, the leather-clad man presented to me had an edgy humorous personality that I vibed with. As I consumed episodes, it dawned on me why Darius liked the show so much: he was the Doctor. So much of what I saw in the Doctor, I saw in Darius. Fighting enemies with words and wit rather than fists and guns, while looking oh so cool seems on point for him. But the Doctor, like Darius, hid an anger that burned within the pits of his soul, an anger that crept out once in a while. Though it was on a much lesser scale, I liken Darius’ clown punch to the Doctor’s war incarnation. It was something he did that was so out of his nature, he regretted it with his entire being. But I have no doubt it was the culmination of every struggle he kept buried deep inside lashing out in a very human way.

Darius is a father now. Parenthood has only made him a

better man. He still carries his demons, and though he has shared some with me, I know there are many more he keeps locked up. His tender parenting with his daughter shows he refuses to pass those demons on to her. His kind, compassionate, pacifist self shines a light upon his little girl's life. Though she may not see it now, her father fights the shadows that loom over him. He may seem kind and gentle, but I have personally witnessed the anger he buries deep inside. Is he a pacifist? I say he is, but even pacifists have a breaking point. I pray to God we never see his.

*"We're all stories in the end. Just make it a good one."*

- The Doctor



## **Mimicry**

Sarah Hollcraft

*18" x 8.5" Inkjet Print*

## **Fox Prints**

*Marcus Z. Ramey*

Snow stalks a fox, with  
prints across its frozen pond;  
cracking ice calls out.

# Wicked Winter

*Caedence Jones*

Snow falls suddenly on the dead lawn,  
The nightly news says to stay inside:  
    “Ice is coming.”

Stock up on endless essentials,  
Stay together and don't open up—  
The cool air is deadly this time of year.

Winter breaths burn lungs—  
Each inhale a barbaric bullet  
Firing through thoracic cavities.  
Gripping a ~~gun~~ cellphone  
To capture the snow in the sky.

Ice is sticking & slicking the roads,  
Avoid driving in dangerous conditions.  
Switch right to left — sleight of hand,  
Easier access to an armed accessory.  
Shiny safety off — three thuds,  
A loss of guaranteed Good.

Fractured ribs from supposedly slipping,  
Asphyxiation in the bitter breeze.  
Choke down & cough up ignorant icicles;  
Three months in Texas to be killed by the chill.  
Assert it was anxiety or blame his bipolar—  
Anything to absolve the bergy bits & growlers.

A little boy in a blue bunny hat slipped  
In the stale snow & slid, from Minneapolis to Texas,  
On his Spider-man backpack.  
The sun hides behind gray clouds,  
Afraid to lay eyes upon the American soil,  
Imprisoned in several feet of solid sleet.

A spoiled snowman stands, half-built & beaten.  
The nightly news says to stay inside:

“Deadly weather will continue.”

Winter destroys & denies,  
ICE is everywhere,  
& it is only January.

## 59.4572°N 135.3145°W

*Emily Shipman*

The woman of the mountains meets the waters of the icy  
passage, long fallen  
foliage gives way to rock terrain; a set of stairs carved and  
placed by Mother Nature  
herself, sticky sap-covered firs and mushrooms unknown, one  
campfire's glow  
bewitching strangers into lifelong friendships — right there on the  
edge of the world...

A footbridge that sways in the ever-blowing north winds; the  
mighty Taiya that rises  
with snow caps melting in summer heat, black bears covered in a  
cinnamon facade drunk on  
roadside dandelions, fuchsia flowers bloom from where  
fire's devastation  
once reigned — and evening air imbued with music and vaga-  
bond laughter.

Traipse through the glacier-fed waters as running salmon tickle  
by, and the night sky

dances in gemstone hues backlit by a storybook of constellations —  
a darkness that fades into

everlasting days of sunshine beams; the ancient soil always  
nourished by tears shed

from friends *see you later.*

A secret sanctuary kept by many no ones, because you're no  
one until you've been —

tucked away in a corner of nowhere once sought for its treasure  
untold, but the rivers

have since run dry.

and yet —

I left wealthy, no gold in my pockets.



**My Story**  
Gabriella Hanquier  
*5.5" x 2" x 10" Mixed Medium*

# La Mexa

*Isabella Christenson*

My Tia calls Mexican women  
Mexa's

I don't know why I like that word so much, but I do  
What is a Mexa to you to me to her

I wonder

Soy una Mexa?  
Do I count?  
Do I fit in here?  
Do I?

I never really feel like I do

What does Mexa mean to me to her  
Is it a stereotype

All hips and hopes  
All attitude and altruism  
All rhythm and ruido  
Or maybe that's just me

De vez en cuando algun gringo me dice  
But you don't look Mexican  
Are you Vietnamese  
Are you Hawaiian  
Are you this this or that  
Because Mexican only looks like one person to them  
But really what does a Mexican look like

Pero no me importa  
Porque yo si soy la mexa  
Porque La Mexa esta en mi sangre  
Passado de todas las mujeres de mi familia

# Tlazotlaliztli

*Isabella Christenson*

O Madre mia  
You crafted  
composed  
me with your  
broken splinters of  
Love  
pain and Hope

Amor Dolor Esperanza

all the emotion in the world  
couldn't describe

de vez y cuando  
creo que yo soy el amor de tu vida  
your masterpiece

when everything else let  
You down  
sometimes I can feel  
the patchwork pieces  
de tu  
Alma  
intertwined with  
my soul and  
mi corazon

tus rizzos your curls  
arrollado en holas rolled into waves  
en mi pelo in my hair  
piel calida y dorada golden skin  
se enfria en un tono almendrado en mi cooled to almond  
nuestros rostros son espejos del otro mirrored  
imagenes tan claras en nuestros ojos gemelas images in twin  
eyes

the most  
perfect  
parts of  
me  
are the best parts of  
You

## **If You'd Been a Deadbeat**

*Tegan Blackburn*

I wish you'd been a deadbeat;  
one of those fathers who  
only calls once a year  
or can't remember my birthday  
or uses the words "I love you"  
as sparingly as pocket change  
left forgotten in your old jeans.

I wish that you had beaten me  
either with hands or with belts  
or kicked me down the stairs  
or shook me in my cradle  
until my tiny brain rattled  
and smashed against my skull.

I wish you'd been the kind of dad  
that was simple to shove down  
in the neglected corners of my  
subconscious as easily as the  
faded scars on my knees where  
the flesh has died and regrown  
so many times that I don't  
remember what bloodied them;  
the echoes of old pain on some  
nameless concrete road that  
dug into my scrapes and tried  
to make a home in the layers  
of my raw and open skin until  
gentle hands brushed them with  
water and picked out the bits of  
gravel and cleaned out all the  
infection.

Instead you were the kind of dad  
who always gave me the bigger  
half of every chocolate bar

and wrote tooth fairy letters  
and spun me around in the pool  
and told me that you loved me  
and sang me to sleep with a lullaby  
“skinamarink-a-dink-a-dink  
skinamarink-a-doo

I  
love  
you.”

If you had been a deadbeat  
who left me on some curb  
I wouldn't know your absence  
any better than your presence  
and I could let my life pass by  
with the scars you gave me  
going slowly, steadily unnoticed  
as the skin grows thicker and thicker  
until I could look at them all  
and barely remember  
they existed to begin with.

Instead the wounds are ripped bare  
whenever I see a gumball machine  
or drive by our old Blockbuster  
or play pinball at a bowling alley  
or hug any kind of man  
who is tall like you  
muscular like you  
hairy like you  
and I watch the blood drip down  
to the floor as I remember  
that you were unequivocally  
the best dad I ever could have had  
and every dripping cut, every open sore  
is still all because of you.

# Coin Toss

*Kim Kile*

You left.  
You lied to be free.  
You say you're not happy.  
You promised we were okay.  
You used eHarmony.  
You chose the condo.  
You didn't take any pets with you.  
You're untangling from 36 years.

You ignore my texts and emails.

Your lawyer likes to "protect assets."

You took the autographed basketballs.  
You sleep peacefully in a bed we shared.

You share too much truth with the kids.  
You're on a quest for happiness.  
You were unfaithful.  
You stole my future.  
You blew up our marriage.  
Heads you win.

I stayed.  
I spoke the truth to keep us.  
I worry that I was never enough.  
I knew we weren't in a good place.  
I'm taking Bumble.  
I want the house.  
I'm allergic to cats and dogs.  
I'm entwined in what-ifs and broken dreams.  
I feel sick waiting for a response from you.  
I wish our marriage was still valuable to you.  
I kept our wedding album.  
I toss and turn in the custom-made bed you left.  
I protect myself by not saying enough.  
I hope to feel peace again.  
I'm too loyal.  
I'd take you back.  
I was collateral damage.  
Tails I lose.

# Tamango Boro's: The Taste of Nostalgia

*Kira Jansen*

Small flags tied on rope fluttered violently not letting me look away; reds, greens, blues, whites, and more swirled around. Entire civilizations strung up in the sky. I looked for my mother's country flag but there were so many nation's flags strung up that it was hard to spot a simple white flag with a red circle in the middle. Japan. The flags stood guard outside, Saraga International grocery store, waving at incoming and departing customers. Today was a special day, not only was the grocery store available for customers to shop in (per usual) but today there were vendors from all over the Indianapolis community in the parking lot of Saraga. This international foods festival that was hosted a couple times a year, that I would overtime become a frequent visitor to, was the main attraction for my visit. The smells of various barbeques wafted through the air as I slammed my friend's car door shut, eager to see all that was being offered. The tops of the food trucks peaked over the busy parking lot. I waited at the back of the car as my new college friend Sheila, who is always kind enough to drive me around, got out and locked their car. Beep beep.

As a fellow lover of trying new foods, Sheila was always sending flyers of local events that were selling foods from different communities of people. Sheila's visits to Saraga were as frequent as mine were to the local Kroger in my small hometown north of Indianapolis. Saraga was not foreign to her as it was to me, it carries a wide variety of ingredients used in Mexican households, making Saraga a key destination in her household. Hearing about this, I thought of my mother and how she would have loved having Saraga close to home, how it may have brought her some comfort. I believe that we can feel home in many different ways and food is one of those sources.

Sheila and I ventured into the aroma of sizzling meat that masked any other smells that might have been present. In the center there were tables lined up advertising some products that are sold in the grocery store. Laid out were small cups of samples.

I suppressed a yippe as my friend and I sped walked to the tables, determined to get any free treats we could manage to get our hands on. After satisfying our craving for free samples, and making sure it would amount to the amount we would spend later, we bought some birria tacos. We sat down in the shade, on a patch of grass outside of the commotion of the market, taking a deep breath and inhaling the tacos. They were gone in minutes and I wiped my mouth of grease, hiding my face from my friends. I looked over my shoulder looking at the entrance of Saraga. Sheila looks at my line of sight. “Want to go inside?”

“Yes!” I hurriedly got up to throw away my trash before we went into the store.

Saraga was famous, at least famous to me. My friends had mentioned it to me many times before, but me not being from the area, it seemed like a made up wonderland. We skipped over the shopping carts, not knowing we would soon need it. This would be a lesson that we would not learn right away as we always would think that as college students we would save money and not buy enough to need a cart. When it came to Saraga, we were always wrong. The foods and drinks we would find in there would be irresistible. Many not only because of their catchy branding but also because of the memories they held of meals cooked during my childhood.

The store opened up into a bakery, a very fancy looking place that contrasted the exterior of the building. Other food shops flanked the sides but the majority of people migrated to the bakery. My mouth gaped as I saw all the cute breads in the glass display cases. I wanted to take them all. A stack of trays and tongs sat neatly on a side table. It brought back memories of bakeries I had visited in Japan as a child. At the register was another brightly lit display case with a line of cakes. Oh my mom would love this, I thought. These were the cakes she described from her childhood. Just the right amount of sweetness she would say, not like the American cakes that made her sick from being too sweet. They glistened behind the glass, each cake looking as good as its neighbor. Laced with fluffy cream and bright fruits placed delicately on top, the cakes had me standing in the bakery section for an eternity.

We moved on into the main part of the grocery store, where vegetables and fruits, all colors of the rainbow lay stocked on shelves. Bright light illuminated each row of fruits and vegetables, many laying out bare, not covered in plastic or netting. No extra layers to reach the fresh produce. This section would later become a favorite of mine, but for my first visit it was overlooked.

The grocery store was no escape from the onslaught of people outdoors. Trapped inside, the chatters of families around the store were amplified. Faces of people from all around the world passed around me. I felt free, knowing there was not a single person here who I knew. I think most of these people were here to get a taste of home, whether that be food from their home country or in my case being a second generation immigrant, a taste of what food my mother introduced me to. And others perhaps, here to try something new. Or a combination of both.

The aisles then appeared, stretching out to the far end of the store. Looking down the aisles I could see swinging signs that were labeled. We were in America, literally, but also the aisle of American foods or at least the ones we see in the United States. I glided through this aisle with ease, nothing catching my attention. I was looking for something outside of my regular day to day diet. We traveled through the Mediterranean, Europe, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. If my friends and I ever got separated, we could always text what country we happened to be in. I walked ahead of Sheila, my eyes pulled my feet forward. Japan's aisle was nestled between the other countries of Asia. I stepped into the territory a little hesitant that I would not find what I was looking for. What was I looking for? I didn't have an answer at the time. My head whipped all around as I scanned the aisle, pacing back and forth to make sure I didn't miss anything. I was mesmerized by how much one aisle could hold. I thought of my mom, I thought of my siblings, and I thought of my trips to Japan. Memories that were starting to muddle with time. The dried squid, maze kake rice flavoring, and other niche snacks specific to my childhood were at every corner. Many of them I had forgotten about until this moment. I really didn't want to use too much money but it's hard not to go out on a shopping spree in Saraga. I am the type of person that once I decide to buy one thing it makes it easier for me to buy the

second thing and then the third thing. I knew I had to limit myself and have this day be a window shopping day. I decided to buy a little treat, something I could take back for my mom. Sheila followed me around listening to my little gasps as memories returned to me in the aisle of Japan.

“What are you looking for?”

I had asked myself the same question. “I’m not sure” I replied to Sheila. Sheila then points at a section of packaged snacks, “these are cute.” I see it then, the clear packaging with brightly colored cartoon animal graphics, a little different from my memories but still unmistakable. They were snacks for babies, but everyone ate them. The cute animal graphics on the front grinned back up at me and the packaging crinkled loudly under my fingers as I spun around to show my prize. Tamago boro, a cracker sort of snack, that was sweet and melted in your mouth. The main ingredient, egg, and the shape of it, round, made up the name “tamago boro.” It was nothing fancy but a sudden rush of memories came flooding in. I felt warm despite the heavy air conditioning in the building. Memories of stopping at the checkout line, and my mom despite not allowing many snacks in the cart, pulling a string of tamago boro packets off the checkout counter display. Me plopping them into my mouth, being made to pass the bag around to share with my siblings, and feeling content and satisfied until we would arrive at my grandmother’s home to eat a real dinner. It wasn’t the tamago boro necessarily that made the trip to Saraga so memorable. It was nostalgia packaged ready to dissolve in my mouth as quickly as my time as a child felt. The reminder that I can find a sense of home no matter where I am. No it is not the same but it will make me smile, it will spark joy, and it will be another reminder to call my mom.

Later at the end of my sophomore year of college I would bring my mother to explore Saraga. She made the same gasps I made when seeing foods she had not gotten to eat in many many years. Times had changed and many grocery stores now carried international foods but for my small hometown it was just now being introduced. I am glad I could bring some home away from home to her.

As for what I was looking for in Saraga?

Apparently tamago boro, and the gentle reminder that I can find home anywhere if I look hard enough.



## **Ancestral Faces**

Gabriella Hanquier

*42" x 60" Acrylic Paint & Sharpie*

# São Paulo

*Elizabeth Terhorst*

I can never go back to São Paulo.

Steam floated off  
of our shoes melt-  
ing into tarmac,  
and the warmth of  
your mixed drink crept  
up your face in  
a novice hue.

Across the way,  
our eyes always  
met more than our  
hands. But, I follow-  
ed you down to  
the streets, the  
shops, your house.

The music cleansed  
the windows similar  
to how your laughter  
washed over my senses  
and pulled me in  
hook,  
line,  
and sinker.

Under sonic waves and humid air,  
I was ensnared in your gaze  
and  
in your arms.

But, the walls of your home were painted  
with words still foreign to me despite  
the language we molded out of late nights  
and

reserved smiles in-front of the  
prying public. I wanted to tell you  
I love you in every language—  
native or not.

After hearing the chimes  
of promises you made  
to all those placed  
before me through  
our patched up walls,

all I wanted  
was your cold fingers  
to peel off  
my bloodstained shirt  
and wash over the claw marks  
you carved into the left side  
of my chest,

but the only apology you gave me  
was knuckles brushing  
against the bruises blooming over  
the back of mine.

You couldn't speak in a way  
I can understand because  
there is more than my tone  
deafness standing between us  
at the end of the night.

I walked out of the house  
and into the street.  
The gravel underfoot was  
beaten to dust and dirt  
by the weight of everyone  
else who walked away.

And, I knew  
this would be the last time  
I'd hear the music; the steel drum  
of your heart beating alongside mine,





## **Basket Weave 1**

Gabriella Hanquier

*5" x 4" x 8" Coiling Cord & Yarn*

## The FasMart Sodality

*Emily Shipman*

I'm a creature of habit with an addiction for cheap caffeine, so I start my day mostly the same way every morning, and the end goal is always the FasMart gas station and its mostly endless stock of various energy drinks. The FasMart sits as a kind of sentinel for my rundown neighborhood on the West Side of Indianapolis. You make that turn onto Morris Street, and it's kind of like you gotta ask the FasMart permission to go any further. Not that many people just passing through have any interest in crossing that proverbial gate. Settled almost perfectly between Haughville and Mars Hill, two infamous and named neighborhoods of West Indy, sits my neighborhood; so forgotten and dilapidated in nature that it doesn't even have a name, which is kind of shitty when you realize it means the people living here are forgotten and nameless too.

It's the kind of neighborhood that will have most people making some kind of ugly face when they talk about it, lips curling down around words like "low-income" and "inner-city". They pass on through, taking one glance at old buildings with boarded-up windows and groups of homeless people gathered under awnings on rainy days, and they press their gas pedal just a little bit harder. To put it simply, if you don't live here, then it's the kind of place you hope to god you have enough gas to drive past. Yet, despite all of this, I've made a place for myself under the obnoxious, buzzing fluorescent lights of the FasMart gas station.

Just like the neighborhood, the FasMart ain't nothing special to look at. I'll be quite honest with you, it's actually kind of a shithole. It's not really impressive on its best days and kind of gross on its worst. Don't get me started on the time the bathroom was caution-taped to all hell for the better part of a year, and there was a slight lingering scent of human shit that reached every corner of the FasMart. When the bathroom issues are cleared up, though, it's indiscernible from any other downtown-ish gas station, with its once white tiles that are perpetually sticky despite the constant presence of a wet floor sign and its smell of burnt drip coffee that is permanently ingrained in the drop tile ceiling. But if you take a

second to glance around, you'll start to notice the things that make the FasMart this cornerstone watering hole; much better smelling things than the above-mentioned bathroom catastrophe of '23 that is. Like the kerosene tank fill station that is right next to the front door. Which wouldn't normally be a defining feature for a gas station, except at the FasMart, it sits at just enough of a bent angle that I worry about spontaneous combustion when I walk past it. Or the fact that every year, the staff decorates for Halloween, a homemade "scary-good sales" sign above the register and all, in the middle of August. And every year, I get scared shitless by the crappy werewolf animatronic they put in the corner.

I could describe how the FasMart is uniquely its own every which way 'til Sunday, but it's the FasMart locals, the people I've met between the rows of candy and beef jerky, that truly define the FasMart for what it is. I didn't realize how many people you could meet at the gas station, it truly caught me off guard; as a certified talk your head off if given the chance kind of person, I had never even said hi to anyone at a gas station before I moved over to West Indy and started going to the FasMart.

You see, a morning stop at the gas station has been a part of my routine for as long as I can remember. Growing up, when I still lived in the outer-suburbs of Indianapolis, my gas station of choice was the BP that was just up the road from the housing addition where I lived. I was able to start the habit young because the BP was accessible by way of a bike trail that my quaint little town was littered with. I don't have to think very hard to remember that the BP is basically the Ritz-Carlton compared to the FasMart. It boasted many amenities the FasMart could never, like white walls free of mysterious brown stains, a brand-name slushee machine, and always being stocked to the nines. But I never met nobody in the 19 years I went to the BP.

I don't want to say I was resistant to the idea of FasMart locals and knowing people in the gas station; it was more just like I didn't know I needed to know them or that I even could. But, after so many visits, it almost becomes impossible *not* to meet the people of the FasMart. I've come to know many people for just moments over the years.

There was The Mom who had a crying toddler at her feet and an uninterested baby in her arms, and she was desperately trying to get her wallet, pay, and get the hell out of there. I was feeling all kinds of stressed for her, but also trying to politely divert my attention because, well, I don't think anyone should feel shamed for having a screaming baby. So, I was intensely analyzing the scratcher ticket display on the counter instead. I think I was considering whether *Wild Cherry Crossword* or *Electric 7s* would be a more lucrative bet when, before I could fully comprehend it, The Mom turned and said "Hold him?" without even looking me in the eye. My first immediate concern was that I hadn't held enough babies in my lifetime to be trusted with this task; my second immediate concern was a baby vomit situation, which would immediately lead to a me vomit situation, so maybe that should have been my first concern.

Either way, the stress and adrenaline of being given a baby with no prior mental preparation or proper arm stretching had the words "Oh, fuck," tumbling out of my mouth, shortly followed by "Shit, I mean. Wait. Um...Sorry?" because something will always feel wrong about dropping the f-bomb in a 6-month-old's face. It didn't seem to bother The Mom, though; she gave one of those "what can you do" shrugs over her shoulder in the way only a mom can. I stood there dumbfounded as she now, with great ease, got her wallet from her purse, tapped to pay, scooped one baby from the ground and the other from my arms, and went on her merry way.

Or there was this one morning when I walked outside of my house and found a flat tire on my car. This is a usual occurrence; the roads over here are shitty and littered with nails, and I have tires on my car more worn and bald than my grandfather. But that day, I was almost ripping my hair out because I had negative dollars in my bank account, and FasMart's biggest downfall is that it makes you pay for air. I dug out all the change I could find, hoping it would be enough as I wonkily rolled up to the air pump on the edge of the parking lot of the FasMart. There was this total JDM Guy already at the pump, ya know, the kind of guy who thinks him *and* his car are gonna be cast in the next Fast and Furious movie. I anxiously waited my turn, neurotically counting my quarters as if that would make more appear and staring this dude down in a way that was honestly

probably terrifying to witness. I was pretty damn certain I could hear the air leaking out of my tire by the second, and I was grateful in the fact that this guy seemed to be practicing for an audition for a NASCAR pit team, considering the speed he was filling his tires.

He stood up, and I waited for him to wait for the pump to turn off and then drive away. He didn't wait the pump out when he was done, though. Despite my stalkerish stare, he waved me over. There was just enough space for me to pull up next to him. Before I could even open my car door, this guy was bent down filling my flat tire; on his dime. I remember I put my hand out the window, brandishing my measly handful of quarters as some kind of thanks. JDM Guy just shook his head, waved me off, and left.

Despite my seemingly constant state of shock and awe, somewhere along the way, I became a FasMart local myself. Looking back on it now, it's clear to me that I was always a FasMart local from the second I moved on the block. But it wasn't always so obvious what being a FasMart frequent flier meant. My first summer living in West Indy, the first hellishly hot day in July to be exact, almost feels like my initiation into the FasMart locale. I remember temperatures peaked above 100 degrees that day, and I felt like a hunk of meat in a pot of sweat stew. With no AC and no pool pass to my name, I was desperate to cool off by any means necessary. I don't remember deciding to go to the FasMart, but suddenly there I was. Standing below that cracked, half-lit open sign felt like finding an oasis in the desert. I nearly ripped the door off its hinges, racing to get inside. I was stopped in my tracks by that beautiful, blissful, cool air that was lying in wait for every new customer. I turned my face to the source, inhaling deeply, trying to get as much as I could in the small amount of time I had in here. The Cash Register Lady laughed as I marched further into the store towards the soda fridges, clearly on a mission for further respite. I nearly flung myself in with the Arizona Teas, face pressed as close as politely possible to the can I had no intention of buying. I felt the sweat beginning to cool and recede from my brow, and my clothes began to feel less sticky and askew. I was in 99-cent paradise.

“AC out for you, too?”

The sentence broke me from my icy bliss and was a jarring reminder that I was, in fact, in public. Prying my nose out from between Mr. Arnold Palmer and Diet Green Tea, I saw a man who was also all but pressed up against the Dr. Peppers. I didn't recognize him, sure in the fact I didn't know him, now I can't even recall much of what he looked like. But he was only a stranger in technicality because, in that moment, we were brethren on the same quest for cool. I had never felt more seen.

"Don't actually have one," I responded to this kindred spirit.

"Damn, yeah, a lot of people over here don't. You got a box fan and a bathtub?"

"Uhhh....yeah?" I was cautious in what those two things could mean, but curious and desperate nonetheless.

Fridge Man proceeded to walk me through a trick that required a box fan, a bathtub, and a bag of ice. According to him, it would cool off the adjacent area, and I told him if it did, then he must be my fairy godmother or something. Just a few moments later, I returned to the Cash Register Lady, surely looking less erratic and now with salvation gripped between my two hands. She rang me up and checked me out, all while nonchalantly chomping on gum the same way she does any other day.

"You're all set. Stay cool, honey."

*Stay cool, honey.* It was a twist on her usual *stay safe, honey*. Just like the AC moments before her words stopped me in my tracks. Metaphorically, of course, I didn't actually stop walking. But I did think about her words a lot that day and afterwards. I mean, it's basically the same thing, only made different by one word. But it was just different enough for me to realize that even though I didn't know her name, the Cash Register Lady saw my struggle. Hell, Fridge Man saw my struggle, too. He could have sat in his fridge door next to me, quietly inhaled his air, and then left. But he didn't. He helped me. Just like JDM guy helped me. And Cash Register Lady saw me. Just like The Mom saw me.

It used to get into my head, all these people I met, and I didn't know their names, but somehow, for a moment, I knew them. I remember I sat on that thought for the rest of the week. A little while later, still locked within the same heat wave that set me straight into the path of Fridge Man, I made a visit out to my old suburbia. Believe it or not, that's where the closest full-size Walmart is. I made a stop at my old BP on my way out of town. I had paused for a second in front of the Redbulls, breathing in the cool fridge air. I quickly learned to appreciate any moment I could get in front of a cold blast of air before returning to my heat-trap of a house. I looked up from my momentary oxygen-filled place of zen and connected eyes with a BP patron. I passed him a knowing smile, the kind that says "Gotta get it while you can, amiright?" and he passed me a look of discontent, the kind that says "You look fucking crazy". I immediately felt myself stick out like a sore thumb, because at the FasMart, Fridge Man would have never. The people of the FasMart would have never. We would have reveled in our momentary camaraderie. I left the BP in a hurry, realizing that the privileges I once held there, to exist with strangers in passing faces and anonymity, were gone.

After that, I didn't feel bad about not knowing any of the FasMart locals' names, instead assigning them momentarily descriptive nicknames. And I didn't feel weird about all the people I would meet over a selection of Skittles. The stark difference between the FasMart Fridge Man and the BP fridge man, made me realize that FasMart locals don't have the same privileges as those who frequent the BP. Back when I was a BP person, I never had to wonder if the people I was passing on the way to my morning caffeine were surviving; you kind of just knew that they were. But at the FasMart, the honest to god reality is that most of the people are barely scraping by. No one's survival is easily assumed, and the only people remembering us in our little nameless neighborhood are us. I've been down on my ass, and someone from the FasMart has metaphorically scooped me up by the armpits and told me to keep fucking going. I didn't realize how many people I had in my corner just because we all frequent the FasMart together.

It was an easy transition after that, finally falling into the role of actively participating FasMart local. I began holding doors open

for what would end up being the entire Brady Bunch filtering back out to their car. It sucked in the winter, but I didn't mind. From time to time, when I'm not counting the pennies to get by, and I end up behind someone whose card declines on a Big Gulp, I throw my card down without question. I'm as local as they come now.

One time, just a bit ago, I was leaving the FasMart to go about my day. There had been a deal on Red Bulls inside. I don't remember exactly how good a deal I got, but I was holding more than I could carry. There was a young couple parked next to my car, talking in hushed and panicked voices. I don't know if they were from around here or not; they were still pretty green around the edges if they were. It was pretty easy to see their tire was flatter than flat, and the air pump wasn't gonna do nothing. "Gotta spare?" I asked them. They had a spare but no jack. I told them they were in luck because I had a jack, a tire iron, and no time constraint. I put down my armful of Red Bulls and we changed their tire, before I directed them to a used tire place up the road that would patch their tire for cheap. As they drove away, I decided to refer to them as The Newly-weds and wondered what they might call me. Probably Short Red-Bull Fiend or something along those lines. It didn't matter, though, what they decided on. At the FasMart, the guardian of a nameless neighborhood, it's not about names anyways.

# Soup Night

*Charlize Rawlins*

I sit and ponder—  
We always used the same recipe.  
the one written on the cardstock floral sheet  
handwritten by You and Me.

but You had to go,  
and You took the recipe.  
the pot sits empty.  
I must begin again.  
You always chopped the carrots.  
now I stand unsure.  
blade in hand  
Shaking.

*Chop—*

Every Friday, the house  
fills with the aroma  
of boiling seasoned broth  
that You and I conceived.  
I break the broccoli—  
quick, like You showed Me,  
My appointed task

*Snap—*

Every Friday night.  
a game of cards still rests  
on the counter, untouched.  
the table is quiet.  
there's no playful bickering,  
no shared laughter.  
silence remains.

Next, I grate the cheddar—

each shred uneven,  
never like Yours.  
You always took the biggest piece.

*Shink—*

Every Friday night.  
no silence between Us then.  
We never ran out of things to say.  
even the pause had warmth.

Now I place it all in the pot,  
turn up the heat.  
the cream swirls into broth,  
cheese dissolving slowly.  
it's not quite the same.

*Simmer—*

Still its something.  
and tonight,  
I think its time  
I close the pot.



## Summer

Anthony Stewart  
*18 "x 24" Colored Pencil*

## reject humanity. become crab.

Lily Coffey

so maybe all living creatures  
will be crabs someday  
with panopticon eyes  
with claws open wide  
to seize the day

so maybe every little plant  
will be trees someday  
and the greeks will be right  
and the sun will be *right there*  
just within arms reach

so maybe each mode of transport  
will be trains someday  
carrying the weight of hundreds  
carrying the weight of thousands  
on a tuesday afternoon

so maybe one day  
my little legs will  
*click click click*  
along metal grates  
and tiles stamped  
like passports  
by those who flee sideways

a ticket for  
**ANYWHERE ELSE**  
sails overhead;  
a white flag  
gripped so tightly  
in my claws  
that i can't be sure  
which one  
will tear first

like any good movie,  
the doors almost catch me  
as i shoulder

*shoulder?*  
*do i even have shoulders anymore?*

my way through

the train tries  
to shake me off  
but i'm six legs stronger now!

when the station pulls away  
i pull my eyes in,  
allowing the brilliant outside  
to dress herself  
before i look  
and when i look  
the picture in the window  
is one of gravestones  
for miles

and miles

and miles

for the trees  
that lost their lives  
so that i could have  
a ride  
home

## **If My Cat Were a Human**

*Samantha Stapleton*

If Ivy were a human, she would have brown hair and wear glasses. She would be slightly plump, but “well-fed” would be the preferred description. She would love to read and have her headphones on at all times. She would be antisocial – not in a rude, hateful way, but rather in a shy, reserved way. She would be just like her mother.

Her mouth wouldn't be able to process the messages it received from her brain, so all words would come out in a mumble, a stutter, a lisp. She would have so many thoughts flowing in that vivid, calamitous brain of hers, but she would keep them to herself due to her lack of social ability. She would listen to people talk about their most absurd opinions, and she would silently form her own contrary arguments that would never reach another set of ears. She might write them down, though. Her hands would cooperate with her brain much better than her lips would.

She would take long showers, enjoying the time to herself, rinsing away the day's work or the night's dreams. She would stare in the mirror for longer than she should, trying to decide whether her reflection is deceiving her, or if she really looks that odd. To her disbelief, she would be told later that day that her golden-green eyes look like the leaves of a Komorebi-washed Oak tree on a warm summer morning.

She would constantly feel like she was being watched. Shoppers' eyes would be burning into her skin as she walked through the aisles of the grocery store, drivers' eyes would be glaring at her like the sun as she sung in the car, neighbors' eyes would be shooting like lasers through her window as she made her bed.

She would spend a lot of time in her room, listening to her CDs, reading her books, sorting her jewelry, trying on her outfits, putting on her makeup, writing in her journal, planning out her days, and talking to her cat. She would be just like her mother.

Ivy would be discovered a little later in life, not having been known by much of anyone when she was a baby. Her early days would be unknown of, all her memories in the form of blurry colors and swirls. She would know that she is loved, but she is also frequently ignored. Not that it can be helped, she would know that it is inevitable because her mother has important things to do, but that doesn't mean it wouldn't sometimes take a toll on her. That being said, her mother would still be her best friend.



**Judith Slaying Holofernes**

Lea Brocken

*12" x 14" Acrylic*

## **Et Tu, Brute?**

*Tilly Winger*

Et tu, my beautiful Brutus?  
Your memory has changed on me  
As is your justified right  
But I mourn it nonetheless

It is not as if you are chained to 'then'  
Simply that I foolishly hoped for 'now'  
I hoped your eyes to be the ones of this storm  
The calm before calamity that crashed into Rome

But your heart has violently entered mine,  
And in a way poisoned our endeavours,  
And a dagger has been driven into my heart,  
And I regret nothing except the blood

I know it is not the end, as it was for old Caesar  
But it feels dreadfully solid and dreadfully real  
I longed for an intimate fantasy of calm  
But the storm arrives, it's the Ides of March

Once a thought echoes in my head,  
It incessantly rattles and remains for years,  
It is no longer a question, but a statement  
For now I know et tu, Brute.

# Stargazing

*Teya Anderson*

I shiver.  
Do the stars make my sins glow,  
clouded by shame?  
Is God looking down on me  
cringing, debating if He should leave me  
to lie here alone?  
The lights above me flicker  
as if unsure if I deserve to admire them.

*Who gets to decide that? Me or the stars?  
He says, a gentle thunder from Above.  
Don't you know that you,  
too, are a light? I called you,  
saw you beyond the clouds.  
I admire you, I give you a new glow.  
Let me be your cover, shiver no more.*

# I Killed You Last Night

*Eris Hembree*

The blood still stains the sink,  
as I wash my hands before breakfast.  
Smiling, you greet me at the table.  
Yet still you steal bites from my plate  
picking at the scrambled eggs left  
in a similar state to my nerves.

Your body lies underneath daffodils  
Once planted as a gift to you  
Now torn from their gentle home.  
Yet still you make the bed  
and water the ferns. Too much!  
They overflow from their pots regardless.

The knife that embraced you last night  
sits clean upon the kitchen counter  
beside the dishes you wash every night  
Yet still they do not pile up  
The cups and plates are fragile,  
and I am careless. They often break.

Your place in our bed remains cold  
stuffed animals and pillows untouched  
Their silent vigil turns away Hypno's gift  
Yet still your arms hold me close  
Wiping away guilt-ridden tears  
You kiss me, and your lips taste of copper.

## **Catholicism/Cynicism**

*Juls Serowik*

i've prepared for my death  
since i was brought into this world  
10 years old waiting in the confession line  
picked up early from the birthday party  
existential dread runs through my veins  
so overly aware of each breath  
each bruise  
falling harder each time

# Glystroach

*Remington Brown*

Pray ask,  
The scrawlingblack glystroach;  
As she scuttles to and from that which you've forgotten and dis-  
dained,

"Was it worth the toilspent and the throttle?  
The push and pull to gain what must again be lost for sake of  
crawling onward?"

And no those lost years minutes pas't in the blink of an eye but none  
too short to visit;  
For inside eyes of deepest woe shut blinds block out with shadowed  
stripes  
Those sneering pitchforked mobs of paranoias  
Although beyond the leering soulless windows there was thought to  
be a mirror;  
With one and only loneliness to peer:

Dripping tears and what a waste,  
To face to face your now distaste,  
So yank the drawers of scattered thoughts,  
And scour out a blindly lustrous new one  
Eyelids slammed shut the heft of learned sameness;  
Choose unsure and so live again in tessellation

(For which is new that you've already known to have discovered?)

Now crawl below beneath the glittering isles of what you hoped it  
might become  
And dance embasked in showers of shimmering woes of wish you  
could or didn't;  
Prevail despite the aching longing for a true respite yet lack thereof  
For though it gazed into your eyes it wasn't meant to be, my love

And never since should have the gates been creaked apart to grind  
Their patchwork rusted iron faces an open welcome to embrace

Instead be spines and bristled hairs and tooth and claw and what-  
not;  
A simpler task than letting concealed truths alive to breathe



**And the Monster Was Right Behind Them...**

Chasity Goliday

# Shadow Self

*Marcus Z. Ramey*

Night falls, shadows fade.  
On entering darkness, may  
the True-Self be made.

# United Airlines Flight 2317: IND->SMF

*Nisha Cavendish*

United Airlines Flight 2317: IND->SMF

tells me Christmas will be without my blood,  
spent instead in a condo barely with room for two;  
I'll imagine tasting Mom's lamb and candied yams  
while I'm scarfing down duck and rice, folding bao  
knowing here the gifts will bear my name,  
thousands of miles from doubling up on sports bras,  
tensing from hugs, praying no one can feel the straps.

They'll call, squee about how cold it feels—  
not having their three sons there. I'll nod,  
the chill rushing to my face as I speak,

the ball of my voice shoved down as I grit with every word.  
Add some shoyu, ginger, cooking wine, a drop or two of oyster  
sauce—  
my partner, her mother, and I our own Saint Nicks.  
I've no need to peer in from the cold,  
there's plenty of room for us three leftovers here.



## **We Still Cope**

Brianna Sim

*Acrylic Illustrating*

# Ouroboros in 220 Cycles

Heather Mandel

*Bus 220 Schedule for March 6th, 2025, Retrieved at 8:13 AM*

*Departed: 8:34 AM*

*Delayed 26 minutes – Departed-8:15 AM 8:41 AM*

*Cancelled: 8:55 AM*

*Cancelled: 9:15 AM*

*On Time: 9:30 AM*

Here we are again, old foe  
Facing off once more in a timeless battle of wills  
Otherwise called an exercise in futility  
Who will be the first to break?

*Delayed 2 minutes: 9:30 AM 9:32 AM*

Time thuds on in its constant crawl towards the future  
The thick black strip of our warzone vibrates with the thrum of  
passing cars  
It catches the burning light, sending shrapnel of light spiraling in all  
directions  
Part of me longs to surrender  
Turning heel to march a path of failure back to my home  
Yet I fight the weariness in my bones to hold firm  
And wait

*Delayed 8 minutes: 9:30 AM 9:38 AM*

Wretched ghost that you are!  
Wasting my hours  
Better spent learning, living, loving  
Anything but this!  
My patience weakens with every passing breath  
Every tick of the clock counts your absence further  
Until it too tires of waiting  
And sinks our asphalt battleground into a hushed silence  
That can only be broken by the screech of your arrival

*Delayed 14 minutes: 9:30 AM 9:44 AM*

Staring again at my glittering nightmare  
My resolve crumbles to sand and slips through my fingers  
I turn my back to dreams of victory  
And down the path towards home

*Delayed 21 minutes: 9:30-AM 9:51 AM*

As my fingers grace the doorknob, you bite through the silence with  
a piercing shriek  
I look back to see your figure flying down the road  
A monster of hulking metal, red-streaked and gleaming  
I turn, braced to charge  
Yet you soar past before I can twitch  
Gone from my life as soon as you'd entered it  
And I'm left alone once more

*Delayed 26 minutes – Departed 9:30-AM 9:56 AM*

In that single moment  
Watching your figure shrink out of view from outside my door  
We both know you've won once again

# Subway Station

*Azro-Solar A.*

In the underground subway...  
There was a rustle...  
a friendly banded bandit...  
looking around the pillar...  
padding between stations...

A bustling station...  
with sound, music, people...  
Sometimes they're great,  
People... food, sweets and drinks...  
Friendly pets with affections...  
Other times it's kicks from boots...  
loud noises... screams... and stressful moments...  
It's dangerous out here... navigating the danger,  
living on the edge... trying to read the future...

Escape down the tunnel... and there's a dead station...  
where the fluorescents flicker... water drips from pipes.  
a quiet station... where no one's there to bother...  
It's a station where the train doesn't stop...  
with only the infrequent trains passing by.

Vines has overgrown now crumbling the brick with its roots  
fragile as it may look... still supporting the foundation... it clings  
to...  
just the comfort of "isolation"...  
being curled up alone... hugging the wall quiet enough to rest...

Sitting on the ledge... looking at the rail tracks...  
feeling the gush of wind after the subway has passed... the screech-  
ing of the brakes.  
wondering... wondering... whether it's worth the travel.  
Going between the two stations...  
Wouldn't it be easier to choose a place and stay...  
Why be on the move... constantly... adapting... to just survive... an-  
other day?

p... perhaps one day... while crossing to the other side...  
to the other station that is...  
I'll see a light at the end... the end of a long dark tunnel...

Wind rushes down the tunnel...  
metal groans and screeches vibrate through the walls...  
the glow ahead flickers... blinding... unsteady...

Maybe... that's just life...  
a life of a raccoon...  
living in the subway tunnels...



## **Boaster**

Anthony Stewart

*18" x 24" Ink Pen and Alcohol Markers*

## PERMANENT RECORD

*Maggie Hoppel*

I got an A in reading. I got an A in counting syllables. I got an A in Sunday School. I got an A in being laughed at by adults. I got an A in Jenga. I got an A in sleeping in my coat during indoor recess. I got an A in threatening to kill a kid over a ham sandwich. I got an A in watching American Ninja Warrior on Mondays and America's Got Talent on Tuesdays. I got an A in talking to the glasses ladies at the eye doctor. I got an A in inventing faces in the ceiling to talk to me at night. I got an A in playing outside with my shirt off in a warm, slick, flatland body. I got an A in forgetting to thank God at my baptism. I got an A in Velveeta jambalaya. I got an A in being a yellow-card kid who was friends with green-card kids and red-card kids. I got an A in watching Frozen on a milky CD my grandma's boyfriend gave me. I got an A in moving schools. I got an A in reading The Fellowship of the Ring in public and Captain Underpants in private. I got an A in accidentally reading books with sex in them and throwing them in the trash. I got an A in not telling my mom when I needed new Maidenform bras. I got an A in redoing my room in turquoise. I got an A in scraping blackheads off my face like mold. I got an A in memorizing my locker combination. I got an A in making overly elaborate, disjointed PowerPoints. I got an A in playing "Hot Cross Buns" on a half-size cello. I got an A in fantasizing about a Slytherin tattoo. I got an A in eating tacos with ketchup. I got an A in getting tongue-tied when my parents were mad. I got an A in rewatching Barbie: The Princess And The Pauper. I got an A in avoiding my friends in the cafeteria. I got an A in reading library books while walking. I got an A in secretly enjoying Zootopia when it came out. I got an A in apologizing for my popsicle-stick catapult in science class. I got an A in never bringing a pencil for tests. I got an A in cutting bangs to cover my forehead. I got an A in earning a reputation as a poet. I got an A in barfing in the hallway in front of eighth graders. I got an A in accidentally putting both contacts in the same eye. I got an A in a group chat called "Cello Wackadoodles." I got an A in writing stories about vigilante secret agents with elemental powers. I got an A in wearing cowboy boots to school every day one year. I got an A in listening to Hamilton on the bus with corded earbuds. I got an A in ignoring the boy who told our

entire English class that we had sex in the girls' bathroom. I got an A in English class. I got an A in symphonic orchestra. I got an A in wearing hair ribbons to Homecoming and ripping them out when I saw the older girls in their skintight dresses. I got an A in being so quiet that boys talked about me like furniture. I got an A in feigning disappointment when public schools went online. I got an A in sewing cotton face masks that didn't work. I got an A in eating my mom's banana bread with dark chocolate. I got an A in not bothering to treat my acne anymore. I got an A in melting down over AP Statistics. I got an A in AP Statistics. I got an A in wishing my eyes had masks so the jock in biology wouldn't catch me looking. I got an A in reporting everyone I knew who was suicidal. I got an A in still believing adults could fix everything. I got an A in eating too much spaghetti. I got an A in going back to real school. I got an A in believing my car didn't have a radio because my mom said so. I got an A in reporting to my boyfriend's house on Fridays. I got an A on the SAT. I got an A in writing about fake kids I wanted to be friends with. I got an A in sloshing black coffee down my gullet until I liked it. I got an A in existentialism but not intimacy. I got an A in peach ice cream at midnight. I got an A in bad red lipstick at Christmas. I got an A in taking selfies with the teacher chaperones at prom. I got an A in giving up birthday parties. I got an A in being the last of my class to turn 18. I got an A in deciding which college to go to at 11:59 on the commitment deadline. I got an A in shopping for themed bathroom decor. I got an A in breaking up with my boyfriend over the summer. I got an A in remembering to pack my retainer. I got an A in thinking I knew all about the future. I got an A in sketching the world into a report card, and growing up, and forgetting how to do a good job unless it was marked up in red pen.

# Shiva

*Elena Saorrano*

“Walk”

A magnetic attraction pulls me  
Somewhere beyond this physical realm  
A place surrounded by a miasma of chants  
Someone is beckoning for my soul to be absolved

“Wake”

A crunch of leaves below my feet,  
a scrap of branches tears my flesh  
How I ended up here, I haven't a clue,  
but my heart knows  
A fire in my chest and a ghastly hand  
in my visions  
How divine and enchanting this  
ghoul moves

“Walk”

I do as she breathes and let the haze  
guide me  
There is a fiendish, beguiling glimmer  
as I move closer  
I move nearer to her alluring twists, her hips  
clad in jewels  
There is no competition between her and the guiding  
northern star

“Come closer”

Why would I not? I could spend my eternity  
and existence here

Her mystic eyes want me now, claw-like nails gesturing for my skin  
Why has the world stopped beyond the anodyne haze? No, it has not  
Her hex has manipulated and imprisoned my soul; what a fool I am

“Come closer”

These are not my feet that betray me at her horrid corruption  
She grins wickedly, feeling my heavy heart sink abruptly  
These are not my wishes of lust, yet I am still a sinner  
She sharpens her teeth, revealing her eyes of the void and vain

“Open your eyes, my darling”

My eyes are open, yet I do not wish to see her malignant form any-  
more

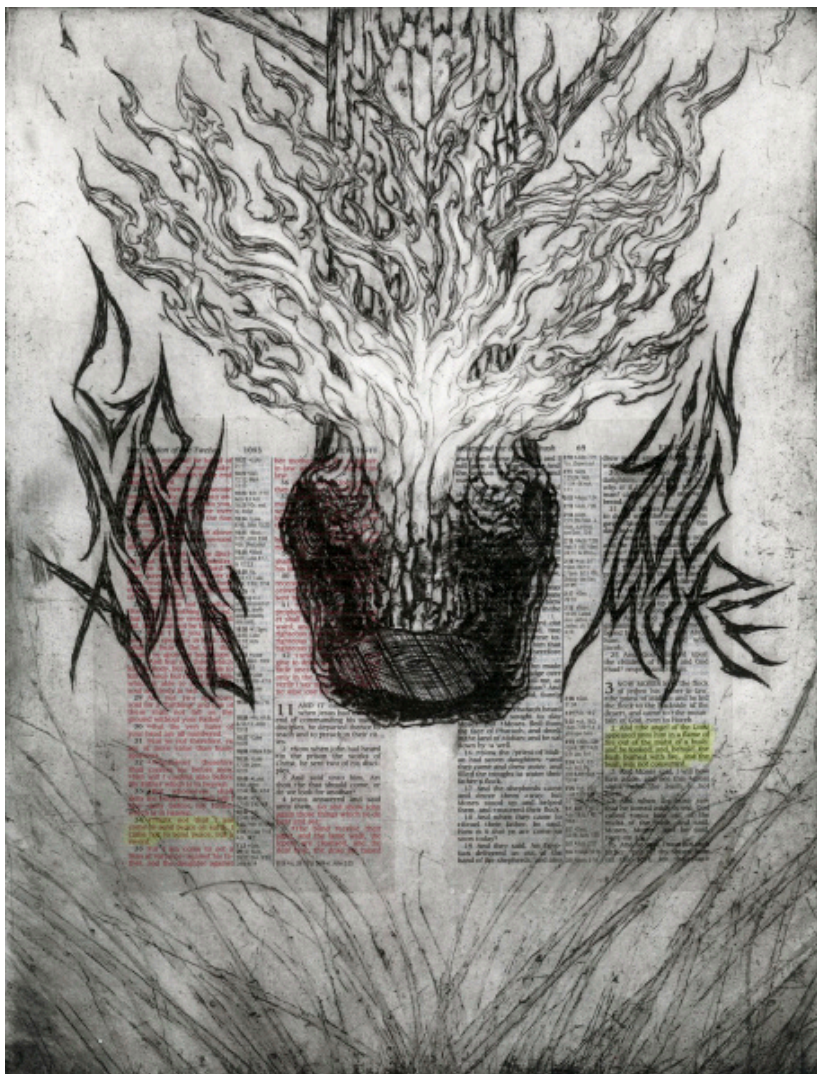
No, I am weak, and she overthrows the willpower

I have already given her

My prayers are useless against her chants,  
my persistence is nothing more

No, I have given her all ownership  
of my vitality, bound my body to her

“Your sweet, giving smell. The gift of mindless giving. How crude.  
No such freedom should be allowed to a life lower than amanitas. If  
this is the Heaven you prayed for, I welcome you.”



## Harbinger Tree

Remington Brown

9.5" x 12.5" Copperplate Etching Print with Chine-Collé

## An Exhibit by Grief, the Sculptor

*Evan Allee*

***Erechtheion. Caryatid. Kore***  
***A, B, D, E, and F***  
**Alcamenes and his circle**  
**420-515 BC.**

***caryatid***  
**Purchased from:**  
**Thomas Bruce,**  
**7th Earl of Elgin, 1816.**

Alas—Grief, the Sculptor, cannot find you if your eyes  
have not been carved yet. You cannot see it  
and it cannot see you—insentient and soulless  
without windows to peep into. There is no river  
without ducts to leak through,

But you cannot fault the Mediterranean's throat: open  
to drink in the north-flowing Nile. Grief has tools  
to find your impossible loss obstructed in stone,  
to point and chisel your vision towards Athens  
where, across the sea, Daughter

C is still missing.

Do you dream? The Sculptor will not force you to sleep; you struggle  
to find it, but the Sculptor can't make you when you prefer the grating  
of your own bones as you writhe, your neck a swivel—essentially,  
you will shave yourself down—but the Sculptor can wait. It is patient,  
and there are others who are less obsessed with restoring

Erechtheion temples to their fractured youth; the Golden Age  
of unpromised lives ahead of you—poised still lives posed  
for acid rain to pelt until mercy moves them into a windowless room  
with an empty space for a faceless maiden who is tucked away,  
a wall at her back rather than the pillars of her sisters.

Fuck that. Go ahead—look away. Bite off more than you can chew,  
tooth chisels buried into stone bruises that feast and feast and *feast*  
through the bones of your deteriorating reality. *Go*. Waste away  
in your memories—after all, denial is a river  
and you are well on your way to sinking.

**Menelaus and Patroclus (or *Ajax and Achilles*)**  
**Roman origin, restoration**  
**by Pietro Tacca and Lodovico Salvetti**  
**1st century CE, restoration late 16th century CE.**

When you wake,  
the Sculptor will be ready to hold you.

Without a mouth, you cannot sing  
your dearest harmony. Think,  
*Carve, O Grief, the wrath of Achilles*—though,  
even the Sculptor is wary of you. No, not even grief  
can pierce you. You are godless and crude; your fingers  
curled around a phantom spear only you are treacherous  
enough to wield. Could they love you with these deficits?  
They, whose devotion rivalled an oath from the River Styx?  
Avernal eye for an eye, command the Sculptor to fill  
your empty hands with dragon teeth to sow. Swear  
you won't drive it through your own throat. The Sculptor  
will have to hold you in order to free you, and you  
are far too eager for someone who is being chipped away at. Yes,  
the Sculptor molds you, but a tooth chisel is no match  
for your incisors. The Sculptor is no match for you—for the Rage  
of Achilles is a museless song. It is feral, but you are groomed  
and classically trained for war. It is a song only a lyre  
has the tune for. It is Thanatos's shadow looming  
over your most dear, it is you slashing your spear  
through an army of statues, it is a dry throat screaming bloody,  
murderous. A cry that pierces through even the densest  
of trenches, the deepest of oceans. Devotion  
will rip Thanatos's wings from his spineless,  
psychopompous shoulders and kill the Sun  
before it can liquify the cartilage and marrow  
to match your hollow soul. This is no hubris; this  
is vengeance. But it is a gloriless blaze, touching Helios's chariot  
back to Earth. It is voider than Chaos's room: this sunless field,  
this ashen pyre, this half-filled urn with space for you,  
because a hero's journey is worthless without someone  
to return home to. Not even your rage  
can keep the Sculptor from molding

your dreams, where your most dear and you are aged. Gray,  
not ash and ashen-faced. In this nightmare, the mourning doves  
are singing, and your dearest's rousing inspires the Sun,  
and you bake in it. Together, you bake in it, and separating  
one from the other is a feat more futile than sifting  
through cremains, that golden urn  
whispering as you wake,

*For what it's worth, I would have loved  
to live a long and unremarkable life  
with you.*

***Priam Supplicating Achilles for the Body of Hector***  
**Giuseppe Girometti**  
**ca. 1815-25.**

Your bone-bruised knees can be reshaped  
for as long as you have the dignity  
to crumble, but the Sculptor

cannot graduate past the clay  
until you are finished crawling.  
*Here lies the sunken stone*

*of supposition*; the balances of Fate  
so absolute in the face  
of your *what ifs*.

Around the walls, you would retrace  
the sprinting heels of your deceased.  
It is true that Death comes in threes.

*Complete his fourth circle*—perhaps  
you will find your child in one piece. Perhaps  
you could usurp that Fate. Tune

that spindle like a lyre, caressing  
lively thread with tender musicality;  
your portrayal of Clotho's callous-tipped fingers

as you string your own reprieve. Knit  
one hundred rows of life into a blanket  
while Lachesis is not looking—all this

for the long life of your regurgitated baby  
lying bloody and unperforated, birthed  
from the throats of rabid dogs.

But Atropos is not called “The Inflexible”  
senselessly; of course she would recognize  
your inability to find your feet, the stiffness

of a weary frame, that razed expression,  
like hooves had gouged your jaw slack,  
like chariot wheels had plowed wrinkles

into the ploughs that served your child’s body  
like swill. Like an animal, how far would you crawl  
to return their body back home? Perhaps

you would follow the dirt trail mowed  
by their body. Perhaps dragging yourself  
across enemy lines, no Trojan horse—

just you  
on all fours—bartering to Death,  
will grant you pieces of your deceased.

Commination is not a question; you are here  
for a concession. Eye-level with that heel,  
you would choose to kiss the hands

that carved your son from Earth  
if only to hold the remnants of him. Forehead  
to Death’s foot, *Relinquish him.*

You would provide him skin-to-skin  
that leaves you shivering. You would cover him  
in the same blanket  
you brought him home in.

*Danaïd*

**Auguste Rodin, carved by Jean Escoula  
ca. 1885-90.**

Lift your head and let the acid rain fill  
your waterline. Who are you? Can you fill

the basin and face yourself? It is a ceaseless task,  
living, but you have made it this far. You can fill

the holes in the sieve you have become, but you need to rise.  
You have convicted yourself of mortal sin, these delusions fill

the holes in your soul where new dreams could be molded.  
This bed cannot become your grave; you need to eat your fill

even if you would prefer to choke on the plaster. Drown  
on dry land and keep drinking. Think of this as a prophecy to fulfill

until you appear more human than statue—or appear at all,  
even if you are puddle jumping in shoes that you can never fill,

because at least you are here. A plaster mold of who  
you used to be, yes, with a smile that doesn't quite fill

out, but you have made it this far in the face  
of despair, and isn't that a tall order to fill?

Unfold your forehead from your ribs. You will always  
be a sieve, but it is more than possible to fill

your basin enough to find reasons  
to keep finding reasons to fill

in your fractured pieces. The Sculptor cannot make you whole again,  
but it will remind you who to live for; why you need to fill

and fill  
and fill.

***Prometheus Bound***  
**Nicolas-Sébastien Adam**  
**1762.**

There will come a point in eternity where you build rapport  
with the winged torture that greets you in the mornings  
with your blood still stained  
over its curved beak. A point where you wonder  
if the only apotheosis applicable to you  
is the quiet in the night where your insides  
regenerate anew.

There will come a point in the night  
where the absence of sound drives your head  
back into the rock. That quiet in the night  
where you recite the names of whose living  
you outlived. The quiet in the night  
where the stars shoot  
themselves in the foot, yet wish  
to be wished upon, cry out, burn up,  
preach to the choir, screech  
to the birds, bark  
at the dogs, curse  
the Gods.

There will come a point in cursing  
where you wonder if Grief  
is yet another ruler with a capital G.

my God, i am  
carving myself  
down to the bone. let me be  
a work of art.

This point isn't at the bottom of the Nile,  
or inside that golden urn, or at the heel  
of Death, or fused into bed,  
or chained to a rock  
as the Sculptor carves a fresh liver for you  
in anticipation for the eagle that comes  
every waking day  
to raze through your ribcage.

There will come a point where the morning  
 is, rather than a heavy chain, a familiar weight. In a way,  
 you are in two places at once: somewhere you've been  
 and somewhere you will go. Your eternity is laid out  
 on a stone, served up, eaten alive. It is the pinnacle of your existence,  
 this toil this pain this proof that someone existed, repairing a  
 cage pried apart rib by rib to the gyrating inside of where it  
 hurts, where it really hurts—not the superficial thing that  
 protects the thing that really hurts, because grief is stored in  
 the liver, you see, the organ that repairs itself behind a brittle  
 shell with slats perfect for talons to render through or perch on  
 to get a better view of this ill-furnished room:

<i>There</i> is someone	damned	in the trench where my sternum is	
	missing	in the third rib from the left,	
	stolen	in broad daylight,	
	broken	in crevices like graves,	
<i>there</i> is someone	dead	and I hold them	<i>here.</i>

You can't help but flex your hands,  
 wave the bird down. *Nothing's changed.*  
*All you can eat.* It is the only one who knows  
 what your abscess tastes like, who knows  
 the gnawing hunger of missing who lives  
 only inside of you. It is a regular.  
 It is your only visitor. Is grief eating you  
 alive? Do you like living  
 with your arms outstretched,  
 like one of those countless limping stars  
 will grant you the wings you wished for  
 when you were feeling your miniscule best?

Maybe you,  
 reader, mourner, voyeur,  
 listen for the whispers in the wings.

don't look for me in them.  
 there are five stages  
 and i am center  
 at every one

There will come a time where  
 apotheosis could be this breath.  
 An adrenaline crash.  
 A decision.  
 A bath.

An iron ring  
fashioned from the bounds  
of your torment, made for you  
to look back at, not down upon,  
to ground you, not chain you to the ground.  
Living isn't done by playing dead. Grief  
is not a death sentence; this exhibit  
does not lead to an execution.

Apotheosis is not  
marveling at marble  
in an echoey room, waiting  
for the clatter of chains  
to become the warble  
of a loved one's voice returning back to you.

Apotheosis is not  
something anyone will ascend you to.

There are five stages  
for you to feast  
your eyes on. Pick  
these statues apart. Eat  
them up.

Pace  
or peruse  
or pass by,  
but move.  
Keep moving.



**A Piece of My Love**

Sarah Hollcraft

*13" x 5" CMYK Cyanotype*

# The Scream

*Lucy Fukada*

“We do not yell, Sadhbh.”

“We do not sing.”

“We do not cry with open mouths.”

Mama’s words were always spoken in a whisper-yell, never at full volume. As a little girl, it was hard being silent, but, according to Mama, it was necessary.

We lived in the middle of a heavily canopied, imposing wood. ‘A forest full of danger and darkness,’ Mama said. My father had disappeared in the wood shortly after I was born. Something to do with the dangerous animals that roamed nearby. Mama told me gruesome stories about the forest; of the wild beasts and the wandering spirits called Banshees.

And before bed each night, she said the same thing, “Never go into that cursed wood if you want to walk out of it the same.”

One such night, deep into the winter of my sixth year, I lay in my straw bed in the little thatched attic of our cottage. The moon shone so bright on the new snow that the light came right through my bedroom window. Just as my eyelids were drooping, there came a distant sound. I turned in my bed, thinking it was a dream; there was never any noise in our house. I pulled the blanket over my head. But the sound came again, louder this time. It was a wheezing scream, first low then high. A voice broke through the scream and said, “I have come to meet with you, child.” I did not entirely trust my ears. Slowly, guardedly, I lowered the blanket to my chin.

There, before me in my little thatched room, stood a great and terrible Lady. She was tall, with orange hair that fell past her knees. She wore a wisp of a dress, and her entire figure seemed to shift and flicker with a silvery iridescence. The image gave the impression that one could pass through her like a candle’s flame.

“Sadhbh, wake up! We have much to accomplish tonight,” the Lady’s arms were flung out at her sides. I did not wonder at how she knew my name. My focus was instead fixed on her feet, which hovered a few centimeters above the ground. Fixed on the steps she took toward my bed, each one flowing into the next like water. This was the first moment I recall being afraid. Scrambling away from this incorporeal Lady, I cried, “What are you?”

“That will be answered in time.” The woman approached the foot of my bed. She was as lovely as she was terrible. Hers was the most beautiful and knowing face I had ever seen, with sunken cheeks, pale skin like the moon, and keen eyes that glowed from within. Then, without warning, she unhinged her jaw and let out a piercing shriek.

“Lady. Lady!” I sought to draw her attention to no avail for the better part of the next minute, fearing the trouble I would find myself in when Mama woke to find these noises coming from my room. Her screams filled the space completely. Nothing else existed but the sound of it.

I finally bellowed in response, “Lady, you will wake Mama!”

Only then did she pause her screaming and turn her fearful attention back on me. “Only you can hear me, little one. If your mother could, would she not already have come in here to silence me?”

“You are a wandering spirit,” I said with sudden understanding, “you are a Banshee!” It was not a question. Of this I was certain. I had heard enough of Mama’s tales to know.

I forget the rest of our first conversation. In my memory, I blinked, and suddenly we were standing outside of the cottage in the snow. I was barefoot, smelling like sleep, and the beautiful Lady was holding my hand. I gazed out at the canopy of trees covering the walkway up to my front door.

“Where are we going, Lady?”

“Do not call me Lady. That is only what I used to be.”

“Then what shall I call you?”

“You may call me Sound.”

The path leading from our front door into the wood stretched out before us. Sound turned her willowy shape away from me. All at once, she seemed to shrink and waver. Her edges turned hazy and undefined. For a heartbeat, I worried she would wink out of existence altogether.

I did not know what to do at that moment, so I wrapped my arms around myself. I began to cry. I had been gifted noise for the first time in my short life. Terrible, horrifying, uncontrolled noise. For a moment, it had been mine, and now I thought it would be taken away again. But when I looked again, I saw that the Sound was not getting smaller, but further away. She turned back, standing a short distance down the foggy trail. She called to me, “Well? Are you coming with me, Sadhbh?” She knew what my answer would be. And I never considered saying no.

With an exuberant shriek, I chased after Sound. My exclamation and the slapping of my cold feet echoed through the wood. And for once, I did not pause to worry if the noise troubled Mama. I did not stop to wonder if I was waking the wood. I was fearless with Sound on my side.

I ran after Sound for what felt like hours. She glided, winking before me in the moonlight. All the time we were traveling like this, she moaned noisily with her arms flung out at her sides. She did not look back at me once. I considered asking why she made such sounds, and if she did not fear waking the sleeping forest. But I kept quiet, as Mama had trained me.

Sound was faster than me, and many times I thought I would lose sight of her, but she never traveled too far ahead. Before long, I found myself in the middle of a moonlight-filled glade. The empty space shone brightly, and there was Sound in the center of the clearing, arms outstretched and head thrown back as if in a laugh.

Instead, what emanated from her lips was a horrifying shriek many times more fearsome than anything I had heard from her before.

Suddenly, animals of every kind from all over the edges of the clearing began to show themselves. They came, peeking their little noses and heads into the bright moonlight to see the source of the otherworldly screeching. They did not run away when they saw her. Instead, they crept out slowly to sit around her in a wide circle. After some minutes, there was a small crowd of squirrels, wolves, deer, and foxes about her feet. All were sitting, quiet and still, listening to Sound. They seemed perfectly comfortable with the noise. I wondered if perhaps they knew her.

It was then that my feet began to tickle. They tingled and began to jostle in place. A quiver ran from my toes all the way up to my forehead. It took a few moments for me to realize that this sensation was not coming from me; the earth beneath me was shaking. The reverberation was accompanied by a low hum. It came from the trees and the moon and the grass and all the little animals around Sound who were still sitting still. It came from everywhere. I was afraid again. As the feeling grew in intensity, I watched Sound close her terrible mouth and motion for me to come closer. She watched me as I crept slowly across the clearing. I came to kneel before her, as it seemed the only thing to do.

“Are you ready for a journey, Sadhbh?”

I nodded, and then we were gone.

Traveling with Sound felt like falling asleep in an unfamiliar house.

On the brink of unconsciousness, I was still vaguely aware of strange shadows stretching and contracting around me. Before long, we were back in the starlight-filled clearing in my wood. It was much how we left it, however, this time there were no animals in sight. And the dark night sky from before had lightened in color considerably. Morning was near. On our trek back home time seemed to move strangely. It seemed that as soon as we found the trail, we were heading up the winding path home.

For my entire childhood, on either side of the cobbled path to the front door stood dozens of great fir trees. They created a natural canopied hallway, leading all the way up to the cottage. But as we turned the corner, where the dirt path becomes uneven stones - where I expected to step into my wooded hall - I was instead greeted by the sight of open sky. On either side of the trail stood newly planted saplings. I paused on the path. Sound's flickering hand slipped from mine.

"Is this - is this my house?" I asked tentatively.

"This is your house as it used to be, Sadhbh."

Then we came into view of the cottage. It was the same house that I knew, but considerably lighter in color, as though it had recently received a coat of paint. And the roof was constructed of thicker, newer thatch.

"Sound! Where are we?" Panic was rising in my throat.

"You know where we are, child." We made our way up the path to my front door.

"But this house is different!" I was almost in tears.

"This is the house as I remember it," Sound said finally, as we came to a pause before the heavy front door.

My little eyes widened in realization, "Sound! Did you also live here?"

"Yes, Sadhbh. A very long time ago."

I did not have time to respond, for right then a young woman threw the door open and ran out. She had long, orange hair. It was Sound! Or Sound as she used to be. She ran right past us, as though we were invisible. Her normally pale complexion was flushed, as if she had been running about for some time. She called out wildly.

"Cian? Cian!" She was searching for someone.

“My husband,” Sound, the Banshee, said next to me. She must have seen the confusion on my face, “He went missing in the woods. Just like your father.”

Without warning, the young version of Sound dropped to the ground in front of us and screamed. It was a sad and horrible noise. I closed my eyes tight and slapped my hands over my ears. I shook my head from side to side, but my ears still rang.

Then the timbre of the scream changed. It abruptly turned high, wavering, and distant, as if it were coming from inside the cottage. I cautiously opened my eyes. The young Sound was gone. I looked around me. The cottage had become old once again. The paint was chipped and the thatch roof bare. It was my home once again!

Yet the scream persisted. I walked through the front door and realized with a start - it was Mama.

I raced up the stairs to the attic, where I found Mama staring at my empty bed. Tears streamed down her face. She screamed and screamed. It was the most noise I had ever heard her make.

I ran to her to console her. To show her I was home and well. But as I reached for her, my arm passed right through her waist. I stumbled backward in shock and, looking at my hand, saw that it was flickering and hazy.

Like a candle's flame.

“Mama!” I cried out. She did not turn.

“Mama, I am here!” I stood in front of her, waving my translucent arms to no avail. She could not see or hear me. Running back down the stairs and out the front door, I called out.

“Sound? Sound, where are you?”

The Banshee was gone.

I fell to my knees in front of the house, right where the young Sound had just moments before.

A sob escaped me. Then a wail. Then a scream.

I stopped short at the sound. It had grated at my throat in such a wonderful way. I let loose another scream. Then another. Then another.

Louder, louder, louder.

My screams grew into something animal, and I loved the noise. I smiled and flung my flickering arms out at my sides, imitating Sound's posture. I got up and started for the forest. My feet glided along the ground like water.

I realized I could now travel where I wished. I could make as much sound as I wished.

I would go greet the animals, I thought to myself. As the trees closed in around me, I flung my head back and screamed.

# Hunger

*Eris Hembree*

The snowstorm outside my cabin has been growing in intensity for the last several hours. Now it was shaking the windows with each gust of wind, and you couldn't see more than 2 feet ahead through the static-y snow. The gravel driveway was completely hidden under several feet of fluffy snow. It was perfect.

Yet still, I was hungry. I had been hungry for longer than I could remember. *When had it started?* I don't know. Maybe it was that first taste back in freshman year when I bit my bully's hand and felt skin tear underneath my teeth. The way she screamed and that hot spray of blood upon my lips is as fresh in my memory as the day it happened. It was one of my favorite memories, even if it had led to those several horrible months in that godforsaken wilderness therapy camp. That was where I met my first victim.

He was such a shy creature. He couldn't even tell me his name the first time we were paired up on a hike together. The sight of him made my hunger sing so sweetly. I think I could have resisted, though, if it were not for that slightly empty look within his ivy green eyes. You could tell he had lost just enough to make him scared to trust or hope for anything. I got him to trust me in the end. It took me two weeks, and all I had to do was talk to him about bugs(his biggest interest and offer him some of the marshmallows I had stolen the first week of camp. "I'm A-Alex. Umm, why are you being nice to me?" was the first he properly said to me. I told him the truth, or at least a version of it: "You fascinate me, and I need someone to talk to in this hellhole." He liked that answer, declared us friends. He even gave me a nickname. I was a "guardian devil," claiming my teeth made me look like a devil when I smiled. It took him another week to confess that I made him feel safe since "you are scary, but I know you wouldn't hurt me." I just laughed and ruffled his hair. Those moments of vulnerability from him made the hunger worse.

It took me 6 years to prove him wrong.

This time, it had only taken 4 months. I found her at a thrift store. She had sea green eyes with the same emptiness I was always looking for. She jumped so much when I tapped on her shoulder to steal her attention away from the cassette tapes she was scavenging through. Yet that shocked, blushing smile when I asked for her social status sealed her fate. She asked my name.

“Carmilla,” I said, making sure to smile widely as I said it. She took the bait like so many others before her.

“Like the vampire!” she exclaimed before gasping at the sight of my teeth, “and you have the teeth to match!”

It was a trick I had learned from my third victim, who had such a fascination with what I like to call my fangs. I mean, I had always had sharp teeth; every dentist I’ve ever had has said so. They would always suggest rounding them down. I found the suggestion offensive. I mean, I’ve always been hungry, I am sharp inside, so why should my teeth be anything else? My fangs were mine, just like my victims. She just didn’t find out till today.

She was so trusting, writers always are. I think it was the stress. All the same, after a few months of flirting, of tender words and offered treats, she agreed to this trip. To my cabin out in the Rocky Mountains.

Now, if you are reading this, please remember, she chose to come out here with me. I told her of my hunger, and she still trusted me. She was kind. Now the cabin is empty, and I am still hungry. Now that I’ve told you of my hunger, maybe you will trust me?



# Artists' Statements

**Azro-Solar A.** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Evan Allee** is a senior at IUI majoring in English with a double concentration in Literature and Creative Writing and minoring in ASL. When they're not reading, writing, or thinking about writing, they spend their free time watching anime and hanging with their cat, Stuffing. If you're interested in reading more of his poetry, fiction, or nonfiction, you can find him in IUI's *genesis*, vol. 54 and in Butler's *Manuscripts*, vol. 90.

On "Baby": An excerpt from Mary Simmerling's 2002 poem "What I Was Wearing," which is the poem that inspired the "What Were You Wearing?" installation by Jen Brockman and Dr. Mary Wyandt-Hiebert at the University of Arkansas, 2013.

"and i wonder what answer / what details / would give comfort / could give comfort / to you / my questioners // seeking comfort where / there is / alas / no comfort / to be found"

On "An Exhibit by Grief, the Sculptor": This piece consists of five separate poems that explore the five stages of grief. Each one uses a sculpted depiction of classical mythology. Grief, as a character, becomes a mythological entity of its own: a narrator who voices the connections between the myth and the stage of grief; a sculptor who shows the reader its creative process in how grief changes us; a guide who walks the reader through a museum and urges us to not get lost inside of it.

**Teya Anderson** is a Junior at IUI majoring in Social Work. From a young age, Teya has enjoyed reading stories and being transported into an imaginary world where she can feel, touch, smell, hear, and see what the characters experience. Reading has become her inspiration to write creatively and vividly. As Teya is growing in faith and experiencing new things in life, she finds inspiration to translate her experiences, thoughts, wonders, and feelings into poetry and prose.

**Tegan Blackburn** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Juileta Blanco** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Lea Brocken** is an aspiring painter from Indianapolis, IN with an interest in history, dreams, nightmares, religion, and spirituality

On “Judith Slaying Holofernes”: Inspired by the deuterocanonical Book of Judith- possessed by the will of a feral God, Judith slays the general Holofernes to protect her city of Bethulia from Assyrian assault.

**Remington Brown** is a multidisciplinary artist studying Illustration and Sculpture at the Herron School of Art and Design. They are currently creating their Capstone project, "Another Plague'd Night," an illustrated anthology book exploring dreaming, the unconscious mind, individuation, and personal mythology. Their work may be found on Instagram: @remo\_b\_art

**Ella G. Bundy** is a writer who can't resist pairing sharp voices with lyrical prose. When she isn't writing, she's often found reading a book or curating one of her hundreds of Spotify playlists. She's working on a novel and a short story collection.

On “What The Womb Couldn't Shape”: To my dearest friends, your love is not a sin.

“Virgin” is about the emotional weight placed upon the concept of virginity, and the realization that society has toxically reduced virginity to fit the label of "something to be consumed or sacrificed."

**Susanne Walker Bush** is a senior at IU Indianapolis, pursuing a degree in General Studies, an English minor, and a Theatre Certificate. For almost ten years, she has been designing and constructing theatrical sets all around the Indianapolis area and beyond. She's married, with three children.

On "Misery": This set design and construction was created for Buck Creek Players' production of Misery, based on the Stephen King novel. By centralizing the front porch and creating a visible hallway, the design fully captures the story's tension. The set por-

trays a 1970s feel with appropriate colors and furniture.

**Nisha Cavendish** is a poet from Indianapolis who writes in her free time between teaching. As an undergraduate, she studied English and Japanese Language and Culture at Indiana University. Some of her writing passions include covering the black experience, showcasing the joys of trans lives, and writing fantasy novels.

"United Airlines" focuses on the pain and distance that comes with having to hide one's self from their biological family before the speaker is able to find her resolve to spend the holidays with people who love her as unconditionally and endlessly as she does them.

"Chitose in February" is a fragment of my time spent abroad, from my undergraduate years. I went on a "Spring Break" trip with friends, and we ended our trek in Hokkaido. It was stunning, beautiful beyond words, but, looking back, there was an inescapable loneliness that I felt.

**Isabella Christenson** fell in love with poetry years ago and now it is an essential part of how she goes through life and processes experiences. AND? Isabella is a junior majoring in English literature. She has always loved poetry and has processed life through words for as long as she can remember. Her poetry is a reflection of her life and emotions.

**Lily Coffey** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Kate Coffin** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Olivia Daniels** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Naomi J. M. Estes III** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Lucy Fukada** is an English major with a concentration in creative writing and a minor in German. As a lover of children's fiction, Lucy spends most of her free time writing about strange, fantastical worlds that her younger self would have enjoyed. She is a Junior.

On "The Scream": Lucy Fukada is obsessed with the senses. After struggling for most of her life with a sound sensitivity disorder, she finds it cathartic to write about sounds - specifically, the act of making noise. Characters interfacing with the senses in nuanced ways ends up in most of Lucy's writing.

**Gabriella Hanquier** is currently a junior at IUI and is studying ceramics and sculpture. She works in a variety of mediums ranging from printmaking, fabrics, painting, and basket weaving. She currently is working on a series exploring her Mayan Indian heritage into modern day art.

On "Basket Weave I": This piece is to show my Hispanic heritage of the lost art form of basket weaving into a new spotlight and look.

On "Ancestral Faces": This piece includes Mayan Indian traditional masks that I have redone to show how they could look like in modern day colors. This is a part of my Hispanic heritage that is shown in a larger scale.

On "My Story": This piece shows my adoption story from Guatemala to the U.S and expressing both sides.

**Sarah Hollcraft** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Gerardo Garcia-Merida** is an aspiring writer. The eldest of six. Born and raised in Indianapolis, Indiana. He majors in Forensic Science, pursuing a career as an investigator while minoring in Creative Writing to contribute to his passion and the art of storytelling. He is a veteran of the U.S. Army.

"Mirror Man" reflects the grim reality that veterans suffer under. The unspoken horrors and internalized traumas are laid bare. However, friendship and understanding offer a boon of respite to those who served.

**Chasity Goliday** is a talented and passionate student currently pursuing an Associate of Fine Arts degree at Ivy Tech Community College. Born and raised in Indianapolis, Indiana, her artistic jour-

ney began at a young age when she discovered her love for drawing comics and writing stories.

Throughout her college years, Chasity has honed her skills in various mediums, including oil paintings, digital painting, and mixed media. Her artwork often conveys a sense of storytelling. Chasity's unique style is often experimental with vibrant colors, and intricate details that are gestural and bold.

Chasity's artistic process involves deep introspection and a desire to evoke emotions in her viewers. She draws inspiration from personal experiences, dreams, and outside commentary. Throughout her art, Chasity aims to create a connection between the viewer and the academic pursuits, Chasity's work has been exhibited both within the college and the local community. Her work has been recognized and appreciated for its creativity and ability to explore themes.

Chasity is constantly pushing the boundaries of her creativity and exploring new artistic techniques. She is eager to continue her artistic journey in further developing her skills, and creating thought provoking works of art.

**Eris Hembree** is a Junior majoring in creative writing. Fae's writing mostly covers topics of love, grief, and bittersweet memories of growing up in the American South, all through the queer lens of her life experiences.

**Maggie Hoppel** is a third year student majoring in English and Communication Studies. She loves quilting, photography, Garfield, and her jobs. She still has every friendship bracelet anyone has ever made her.

**Jay Loperena-Martin** is a creative writing major currently attending IU Indy. They write primarily short stories, with a lifelong love of science-fiction and genre-bending. Their work concerns identity, queerness, and what it means to be human.

**Heather Mandel** is a student, writer, and chronic overthinker, pursuing degrees in English and Psychology. When not writing (which isn't often), she can often be found thinking about writing,

coming up with new ideas to write, and wishing that she was currently writing.

On “Ouroboros in 220 Cycles”: This poem is dedicated to Heather's father, who was always there to provide support and a listening ear to her frustration during her time in Ireland. If not for him, this poem would have been just as late as all the buses she’s missed.

**Meg Markarian** is in their final year of the English MA program at IU Indy. Their primary focus is on queer happenings in literature, film, and popular media. Their artist's bio changes every time someone asks them to write one.

**Isabella Park** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Kira Jansen** is a senior at IUI studying video production and creative writing. She hopes to create art that inspires people to become more open minded to other's stories and all walks of life. Sharing stories that connect us with each other is what it is all about.

"The Elevator" is a story that started in eighth grade and has been revised to its current adaptation. This story is inspired by the silent observers and the ability to enact change.

On "Tamago Boro's: The Taste of Nostalgia": Kira finds a lot of meaning for her writing through how love was passed down to her. This piece revolves around finding home away from home for multiple generations. Kira hopes that through these stories people may find a piece of themselves while reading.

**Caedence Jones** is a junior Creative Writing major with a concentration in poetry. Her work is rooted in romantic entanglements and personal trauma, transforming memory into language. In her free time, she enjoys drawing in the quiet company of her two cats.

Caedence wrote “Wicked Winter” in response to the ICE attacks that occurred in January 2026. She makes specific references to four of the many individuals impacted by these ICE attacks, those being Renée Good, Alex Pretti, Víctor Manuel Díaz, and Liam Cone-

jo Ramos.

Caedence wrote the haiku "Blood in the Bushes" as a companion piece to "Iona Road" to deeper unpack her feelings about her assaulter.

Caedence wrote "Iona Road" in response to a prompt from a past poetry class, in which she was asked to write about a significant place that shaped her growing up. She couldn't think of a place more significant than the house where she was molested.

**Kim Kile** is a writer who found her way to poetry after the still-birth of her grandson, Theo. Her poems share what it means to be a Midwestern daughter, mother, and soon-to-be ex-wife. Kim is finishing her PhD program at IU Indianapolis and will have a degree in American Studies with a focus on helping school counselors integrate bibliotherapeutic techniques into their practices.

What do you say to the person who leaves a 36-year marriage on a quest for happiness? "Texts I Didn't Send" takes the reader through the speaker's thoughts as she processes her immense loss and what she wishes she had said.

On "Slumber": In the aftermath of a divorce, the speaker of this poem looks at how her life could change and if she's worthy enough to accept love and security again.

Every choice has a consequence, every action a reaction. "Coin Toss" expresses how the speaker responds to the choices her ex-husband made as he was leaving their marriage.

**Skyler Kissel** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Malana Kramer**, a student at Indiana University of Indianapolis, is a photographer challenging the constraints of conventional editorial work. Her photography shows the beauty, talent, and authenticity of every individual. Kramer captures portraits, fashion, and live performances through her lens.

On "Your Porcelain Dolls": We dress up as society's porcelain

doll of perfection. I am the cracking version of who they want me to be.

**Marcus Z. Ramey** is a Creative Writing and Philosophy major. When he's not writing or reading, he spends his time riding his bicycle.

On "Shadow-Self": [This piece] is about reflecting on trauma and bringing shadow (subconscious aspects of personality) to light for validation and growth.

**Charlize Rawlins** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Elena Saorrano** is a sophomore double-majoring in Forensic and Investigative Sciences and Chemistry. They draw inspiration from Gothic literature and music, blending elements of both into their writing. Their dream is to work in a forensic toxicology laboratory, publish personal pieces alongside their job, and have a family of at least three schnauzers.

"Cathedral of the Countess" was inspired by a dream Elena had of endless forests and fog, in search of something that was never concluded or continued.

**Amy Schleppenbach** is a senior at IUI pursuing an English major. She enjoys reading science fiction and gardening. Her two dogs patiently listen to her read her drafts aloud. She hopes to publish a novel someday.

**Juls Serowik** is an independent artist, undergrad at Herron School of Art + Design, always searching for my next idea to uncover. Thinker, creator, motivator.

**Emily Shipman** is a senior Creative Writing student at IU Indianapolis. A lifelong lover of stories, they can often be found lost in thought over semicolons and potential plots. When not obsessing over words, they spend their time gaming, hanging out with friends, and falling down Wikipedia rabbit holes.

**Brianna Sim** is a Visual Communication and Design student at

Herron School of Art and Design who grew up on the shore of the National Dunes. Seeing the lakeshore has been a part of her daily routine since she was a kid, just like drawing and painting. It's because of this that this painting was created and now hangs in the halls of her childhood home, showcasing the devastating yet rewarding feeling of coping.

**Robert Smith** is a painter and draftsman based in Indianapolis, Indiana. Formerly a metal fabricator, Rob attends the Herron School of Art and Design, pursuing his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting. He graduates this Spring. I focus on how individuals interact with external forces. By incorporating abstract symbols and motifs to convey psychological and spiritual themes, I illustrate the complex interplay between humans and the forces that shape their existential conditions and their identities.

**Samantha Stapleton** is a sophomore at IUI studying professional and public writing. She is a lover of books, poetry, music, flowers, the sun, monkeys, and cats. In her free time, she might be found reading, writing songs, playing her guitar, listening to her CDs, or petting her cats (Ivy, Huckleberry, and Finn). Samantha aspires to work in publishing as an editor some day!

**Anthony Stewart** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Katelyn M. Stewart** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Lyric Stille** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Sophia Sturgeon** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Elizabeth Terhorst** is a pre-K teacher and senior at IU Indianapolis majoring in Secondary English Education and English Literature. Outside of school, they're the external president of Domestic Abuse Prevention Student Organization (DAPSO) and host events at local DV shelters and provide educational and community-building nights on campus.

Elizabeth wrote "São Paulo" as a way to humanize someone who they had put on a pedestal. It's hard to end things or to leave-

even if it's the correct choice. And, it's even harder to watch someone leave but remain stuck at the same time.

Elizabeth wrote "Guitar Showcase" after a poor reencounter with someone who assaulted them. As a former Catholic school kid, it was strange for Elizabeth to find comfort in something which felt asinine for many, many (and still present day) years.

"Relapse" details Elizabeth's relationship with self-harm and suicidal ideation. It's something they've struggled with since they were ten years old, and it's hard for Elizabeth to articulate how they view it to others who don't have first hand experience with SH and SI; this was their attempt.

"A Imaginação" is a direct translation for "imagination" or "fantasy" in English. This was about not having the sexually fulfilling parts of a relationship but wanting it nonetheless.

On "Resurrection Ferns": This was something Elizabeth started when preparing for their hysterectomy. After enduring sexual trauma and medical complications, surgery was needed as well as gender affirming, but it was a harrowing process. However, it was a life-saving experience in ways that extended far past just physical health.

**Emile Tipton** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Jacob Venable** is a US Army veteran. Born in Sacramento, California, he has long loved the art of storytelling. He is a published author and seeks to bring more stories into the work for readers to enjoy.

On "Brushing Shoulders with a Long Lost Hero": This is a work of non-fiction. The opening event occurred during Veteran's Day of 2025, shortly after receiving the assignment in Reuben's creative non-fiction writing class. It was the perfect opportunity to honor my grandfather and finally say goodbye to him.

"T. D. Knight" sought to infuse metal music with a fun film for the whole family. He used his love of fantasy, cats, and bad puns

to fuel this piece to create something weird and fun.

On “Paci-Fist”: Darius has been my best friend since we were young teenagers. When I received this portrait assignment from Professor Rebein, the first image that came to mind was of him punching the clown. At the time, I simply wanted to make readers laugh. But as I wrote it and fleshed it out, I realized I could use it to honor him and our friendship in a way that will likely never arise again. So here he is, as I have seen him for as long as I have known him.

**Jazz Walker** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Kaleigh Washburn** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Amber Williams** is a student at IU Indianapolis.

**Jasper Wisecarver** is a senior at IUI, with a major in Integrated Film and Television Production, and a minor in creative writing. They've always been incredibly passionate about writing, and fell in love with poetry ever since their first poetry class, at IUI. They're very excited to be able to share their work in this publication.

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