

Voices

2019-20

Voices



Vol. XII

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MIDWESTERN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESENTS

VOICES

VOL. XLI

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EDITORS' NOTE

The Editors proudly present the forty-first issue of *Voices*. We extend our thanks to Dr. John Schulze, our *Voices* advisor, for his expert assistance and guidance throughout the process of compiling this journal. We are also grateful to the Department of English, Humanities, and Philosophy; the Student Allocations Committee; and the Bryan L. Lawrence Endowment for making this year's *Voices* possible. Finally, we thank everyone who contributed their work to our publication.

The Editors hope that the time and effort invested in the creation of this *Voices* issue matches that of our contributors. Although the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the publication of this issue, we appreciate each and every submission, and hope that our contributors are proud to see their work published in this journal. We are confident everyone will enjoy reading this edition of *Voices* just as much as we have enjoyed making it.

If you are interested in submitting your work for a future edition of *Voices*, you can search for us on [Submitable.com](https://submitable.com) or visit our website: mwsu.info/voices.

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MSU TEXAS WRITING AWARDS

The Vinson Award is given yearly to a current, full-time undergraduate MSU student who is in good academic standing. Students may submit poetry, short fiction, or creative nonfiction. The award is presented at the Honors Banquet during the spring term. In addition to publication in *Voices*, the award includes a cash prize of \$1,000.

The Bryan L. Lawrence Creative Writing Award is given annually to the best submission to *Voices* from a student attending MSU Texas. Poetry, creative nonfiction, and short fiction pieces are all eligible. In addition to a certificate and publication in *Voices*, the award includes a cash prize of \$200.

The President's Awards for Creative Writing are awarded in two categories: poetry and prose. All submissions from all contributors are eligible for this award. In addition to publication in *Voices*, each winner will receive a cash prize: First Place— \$100, Second Place— \$50, and Third Place— \$25.



Jean Laffite's Retreat From Galveston
Carter Gracin

The Nation of Immigrants

Makayla Baughman

Welcome to America: “The nation of immigrants.” Once a nation who opened our loving arms to the battered masses, and now a nation who opens our cages of steel. These cages house some of the youngest “criminals” known to man. The screams of infants and toddlers ring alongside the liberty bell, and the torch of lady liberty scorches all hope of new life.

Of course, America claims it is not to blame. These immigrants boldly flee the only homes they’ve ever known, and risk their lives in order to infest our nation with drugs and violence. How helpless and victimized our nation truly is! Wheel of Fortune reruns glow upon the eyes of “real” Americans as these evil criminals rip jobs straight from their hands. Marijuana smoke clouds the vision of middle-aged white Americans as their prep school sons and daughters inhale the poison from beyond the border. If only we could force these monsters out of our land! If this were the case, the unemployed citizens who sit around inhaling fast food feasts may stand and head to a 9-5 job. The tainted youth of our nation may remain drug free and sheltered from the dangers of beyond. Because it is only natural to blame those simply seeking asylum for the faults of the American people.

Though these immigrants infest our nation, government officials do everything in their power to make their stay enjoyable. These detainees are given a single sheet of tin foil in addition to the cold concrete floor that serves as their bed. After such a tiresome journey, our nation is so considerate to book them a room in their own private prison. Just like any good hotel, a complimentary breakfast is served to the immigrants. A slice of moldy bread and the occasional cup of water is the well-balanced meal you may spot being served into the foaming mouths of these monsters. The United States is actually so considerate that they put immigrants on their own diet plans! If you haven’t already heard, the latest trends along the border are protruding ribs and distended stomachs. Toss your salad and cancel your gym membership, head on down to a border detention facility and you’re sure to drop 20-30 pounds. The growl of stomachs, pleading voices, and sharp barks of guards form the perfect racist symphony.

Human beings are packed into cells like swine on their journey to the slaughter house. Except in this case, death isn’t brought about by a sharp blade. Death is brought about by illness that spreads through the facilities like wildfire. Of course, no smell of death is as foul as the stench of xenophobia and hatred.

If you’re angry now, don’t be! The people holding important positions in our country would never do anything to dehumanize these “illegal aliens!” Our President slaves away in his white palace, making calls back to back from his own personal spray tan booth in attempts to better the lives of these “drug

slingers and criminals.” How considerate is that? What I personally believe is so very moving is that our President truly does not see “color.” In fact, he is so blind to color that he cannot even see the screaming children pleading to be returned to their parents. He does, however, care for the boys and girls whose parents he must convince to re-elect him! Our powerful leader makes promises of a brighter future and stronger economy, but first we must spend \$21.6 billion dollars in order to wall in such evil. Because exactly what we need at this time is yet another symbol of the hatred our nation has for anyone of another nationality. As if the right-wing terrorism isn’t already bad enough, now we must allow our President to fuel more racist bigots. Life as we know it is at the moment seemingly bleak, but in time “America will be great again,” so we must not fret. If we continue in this “great” direction, we will continue to see a nation immersed in racist theory and continuous hatred; and if our President says this will be great, it must be true.

So, now that you are nearly finished reading, raise your rose colored lenses back to your eyes and avert them from the gleaming television screen. Ignore the younger generations who are lining the streets, who are marching with vigor, and who are sitting at a computer warning you that something is wrong! Or, if you’re a human being with actual morals, do not ignore the injustices happening within our lands. Smash the lenses under your sole the same way the lives of the dehumanized and demonized are smashed under the boots of injustice! Solutions can be found without death and without denial, we must end the trauma and heartache we are allowing to occur. Love is stronger than hate and hope is stronger than fear; do not let them convince you otherwise.

Borderland

Dolly Jacqueline Maass

Yo nací en El Paso where the Rio Grande cuts through my English and my Spanish are dry like the river wet with light from the star on the mountain on one side *Franklin* is the father *Anapra* is the son and *I* the holy spirit of alligators sewn in boots my dad is supposed to wear *la bandera* wrapped around a pole, a policeman, a polluted city is sister to a mother of a father who wants blood in the streets on a flag on America is not a country but a continent I'm ashamed of the way my skin contrasts *el cuerpo de mamá* cut me in half at birth I was a borderland in this body *soy una frontera también.*

Racist

Nathan Conard

“Racist!”

The insult she flung at you, right there in the middle of the road, while you were waiting to cross. The accusation, hurled at you, right there on that London street, that surging stream of cars and buses. Blaring horns, whining sirens, the unceasing gurgle of muddled speech. A thousand clamorous sounds, all reduced to silence by one voice.

She called you a racist! That middle-aged black woman, standing next to you, waiting, with you, for the pedestrian signal to dam the chaotic flow of traffic.

She called you a racist! Astonishing, astounding! Stupefied, you stood there, unable to reply. Motionless, stuck on the island of pavement, alone. No, not alone: there were your classmates, right behind you. They were laughing about something. Fate segregated you in that moment, isolated you, they were distracted, they heard nothing, saw nothing. Yes, alone: alone, you squirmed and writhed beneath her tormenting glare. Finally, the red light halted the torrent of vehicles. She walked ahead, released you from the custody of her reproach. You saw her addressing another pedestrian, making the same request.

A request. A purchase. An oyster card, granting access to the sweltering subterranean labyrinth, the London Underground, The Tube. Public transit, access to the entire city. She wanted you to buy her an oyster card, like the one in your hand, the one you just swiped, as you entered Mile End Station. The oyster card, which cost you £120. That was for a month’s use, of course. She probably just wanted a one-day travelcard. Only £10. Cheap.

You wait at the platform for the Central Line beneath the stale electric light, below the city, amid the jostling pedestrians. The fresh memory of the stunning, dreadful moment propagates in your mind, chases your thoughts in painful circles.

“Racist!”

A pause.

“Racist!”

A pause.

“Racist!”

Not a raging shout, not a bitter whisper, but a confident, mechanical declaration to your face, assertive and controlled as the striking of a hammer, relentlessly driving the nail into your soul.

You privileged, white male! You, with your scholarships, you, studying abroad, studying Shakespeare, enjoying the best of London, traveling to Scotland during the mini-break. Yet you cannot spare five minutes, £10, for anyone!

All this—unbeknown to her—conveyed by one word. She and you are strangers; what does she know about you? Her ignorance nullifies her accusation—you are condemned to advocate for her, pick up her hammer, strike harder.

Yes, you are condemned, because you overthink. You have been sentenced to overthink—she called you a racist!

You sit in the hollow belly of the train, the metal serpent that devours London's untold millions and vomits them in the dark, stifling recesses of the city. No daylight passes through the windows. The train careens through the darkness, shuddering, slithering. The train screams demonically, the awful shriek of wheels sliding against the unseen track deafens you. Pandemonium. The air is thick, hot.

In this Dantesque Inferno, you are tormented by overthink.

How did you respond to her? Poorly—coldly. You realize that your dismissal of her need was devoid of sympathy. Surprise overwhelmed sympathy. In your experience, random pedestrians do not accost you. Accost you—dear God, what if you felt resentment because she singled you out, forced you to confront her need? Why did she single you out? She must have entertained some hope that you would be charitable. You betrayed her. You abhorred her—why couldn't she just have asked for directions?

What did you say? Dumbfounded, you struggled for words. You explained that you couldn't hold up the group, you were just a foreign student... who knows! Why did you really reject her? Fear, uncertainty. Guard yourself, you are in a foreign country. You must retreat.

When she started calling you a racist, you retreated. You immediately ignored her, you looked away, pretended she wasn't there. You are certain that only confirmed her assumption. You idiot!

She drove the nail deep, deeper, until finally you splintered. You turned, you apologized; no, you did not offer then to help. How feeble, how inept.

Now you must vindicate yourself. You are guilty until proven innocent. You are the racist, you exemplify racism, discrimination! You are oppression incarnate! Beg and plead, supplicate reason, logic, conscience, that they may alleviate your guilt!

Aha! An objection! A defense! She wrongly assumed that you rejected her on the basis of her skin color, when you might just as easily have dismissed her on the basis of her gender!

So now you're a sexist—

No, no! Is that your best retort?

Who is that elderly woman, sitting across from you? Her head is permanently twisted to the side, her neck contorted. You wonder how the injury occurred, whether anyone in her life genuinely cares for her. Who is that homeless man, walking through the cars, reciting his oft-repeated speech, the same appeal to hundreds of indifferent passengers, hundreds of times, his weary voice lost to the screeching of the train, barely audible?

“If you could assist me—” he begins.

“The next station is Liverpool Street” the intercom interrupts, dispassionately mocking his misfortune.

This is Hell, where silent nonentities mind the gap between the train and the platform, avert their eyes from human suffering and adversity.

You feel bad for him. Ha! What good is sympathy, if you do nothing?

Sympathy. You care about people. No, you are not a racist (or a sexist). You just feel powerless. You are 4735 miles from home, from Texas, in a bewilderingly enormous, crowded city. You cannot miss a single class activity. A performance tonight, at Shakespeare’s Globe: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

You exit the train, ascend the stairs of Mansion House Station, see London’s clouded skies again, pierced by countless stolid buildings.

You did not help that woman. She called you a racist, yes, but she cannot make you a racist. You wrench out the nail. Neither will you hold anything against her. You will help someone, when you awake from this midsummer dream.

How exciting, to find, upon reflection, that one is not a racist. They will drive nails through you, sometimes. Do not hide the holes. You will find your sympathy, your compassion will not be forever concealed.

Breaking Free

Rachel Shipley

(A light comes up on a young girl sitting cross legged in the center of a shallow pool of water. CLAIRE is dressed in a simple white dress that floats in the water around her legs. She is obviously disheveled and upset but she doesn't move. She stares blankly in the direction of the audience. Two figures begin to move towards her covered in the darkness that encapsulates the rest of the stage and they slowly become illuminated by the same light allows us to see the girl. The first figure is dressed in a long flowing dark dress and her hair is a mass of dark brown tendrils atop her head. The second is a man dressed in a deep navy suit with a crisp white undershirt underneath, his dark black hair is slicked back on his head. Both wear no shoes. As they move towards her the water splashes beneath their feet, revealing the entirety of the stage is covered.)

FIGURE 1

(softly) What seems to be the matter Claire?

FIGURE 2

Why so blue? Is it something we did?

(FIGURE 2 smirks at CLAIRE, almost daring her to say something. It is obvious that CLAIRE hears their voices and is aware of their presence but she offers no response, she only continues to stare blankly ahead.)

Are you ignoring us Claire? We want to help, that's why we're here. You should know that by now, let us help you.

(FIGURE 2 brushes past her as he speaks and CLAIRE shivers underneath his shadow, visibly growing more uncomfortable the closer that he becomes.)

FIGURE 1

Claire, you know we only wish to protect you. The world out there is just so big and scary and we don't want it to hurt you. We want you to stay here, where it is safe, with us.

FIGURE 2

It is not our fault that everyone out there hates you. We only want you to

understand that you cannot trust them. We want you to understand that you are just too much for them. They will never love you. They don't care about you at all. If you died today none of them would notice Claire. You mean absolutely nothing to them. Don't you remember what they've said to you? You're too much for them, they don't want you around. Stay in here where you can't bother them. Stay here with us.

FIGURE 1

It's true Claire, they hate you, but we don't. We don't want you to suffer anymore. Take matters into your own hands. Make everything stop. It will be better for everyone. You don't have to listen to them anymore, Claire, listen to me. Trust me. You have the power to make it all stop.

(FIGURE 1 bends down next to CLAIRE and takes her hand in her own. She looks into her eyes.)

(smiling) You can end all of it. Trust me, they won't miss you. It will be better this way. For you, for us, for them. It will all be better Claire if you just leave them behind. Leave it all behind.

(CLAIRE'S eyes slowly shift to her own hand, now held in the hand of FIGURE 1. Her hand remains almost lifeless, the hand of FIGURE 1 the only thing keeping it from succumbing to the weight of gravity.)

FIGURE 2

It's what they all want Claire, they're just too afraid to tell you. None of them are your friends, *(almost spitting the words at her)* they just pity you. Don't make them suffer any longer. Take us all out of our misery.

CLAIRE

(softly) stop. Please stop.

(she pushes the hand of FIGURE 1 away from her own as she uncrosses her legs. Bending her legs, she propels herself backwards, water flies up in every direction as she skids upstage, a sizable distance from the two FIGURES. She now sits with her legs outstretched in front of her body with her hands placed on the floor at her side. Her eyes have now come to life and they rapidly dance back and forth between the two figures before her.)

(louder) Get out. Please get out. *(louder still)* please just leave me alone. I don't want you here anymore. I hate you.

FIGURE 1

But Claire, we are only trying to protect you. We are trying to protect you from them. They don't understand you. They never will. We understand you Claire, we want to help you.

FIGURE 2

Face it Claire. Their lives would be better without you in them. They don't need you. They don't even want you. So just do everyone a favor and get out, you know it's what they would want. Give them what they want Claire, it's the least you can do.

(CLAIRE slowly struggles to stand, tears now streaming down her face. Though she is now standing her body remains hunched over, unable to fully extend her body in the presence of her oppressors. She slowly raises her gaze to meet the eyes of her oppressors, her fists clenched in determination.)

CLAIRE

Get out of my head, I don't want your lies anymore. Get out of my head and never come back. Get out. Please get out. Leave me alone. Please get out. I know you're liars. *(frantically)* Get out. Get out. Get out...

(with each "get out" she slowly backs further away from the figures, a vain attempt at a retreat. Her body slowly straightens as the sound of her voice grows stronger.)

FIGURE 1

But Claire, you need us. You will always need us, how else would you survive. You'll never make it out there on your own Claire, we know what's best for you.

FIGURE 2

We're all that you have. We are all that you will ever have. Without us you'll be all alone. You don't want to be all alone do you?

CLAIRE

That's not true. They told me it isn't true. They said I don't have to let you control me. They told me that you've been lying to me. *(yelling)* You're liars!

(From the darkness emerges a third figure, barely able to be seen in the faint light that encompasses the outside edges of the stage. FIGURE 3 is a young woman dressed in simple yellow sundress, she too is barefoot. Her hair is golden brown and it lays perfectly tousled across her back, everything about her is warm and inviting, though she remains unnoticed by the others at centerstage. She looks on, not making any indication she plans to intervene on CLAIRÉ'S behalf.)

FIGURE 1

(reaching her hand towards CLAIRÉ)

But...

CLAIRE

(with a sense of power) I said get out. I want you out.

(The strength of her words causes the figures to recoil back into the darkness and they disappear from view, the sounds of their feet hitting the water continue for a moment and then they cease shortly after both of the figures disappear from view. Everything is still and quiet aside from the drops of water that hit the surface after they fall from her dress. She slowly lowers herself to the floor and sits, holding her knees to her chest. She rests her chin on her knees.)

CLAIRE

(almost a whisper) Get out. Get out. Get out. Get....

(FIGURE 3 slowly moves towards CLAIRÉ, making a great effort to remain unnoticed. She slowly lowers herself to her knees next to CLAIRÉ, it is only then that her presence is finally noticed. A wash of relief comes over CLAIRÉ's face and she turns to embrace FIGURE 3. FIGURE 3 holds her, allowing CLAIRÉ to melt into the safety of her arms.)

FIGURE 3

(almost a whisper) You were so brave Claire, I'm so proud of you. You are so brave.

(CLAIRE pulls away from her, tears still streaming down her face.)

CLAIRE

What if they come back... I don't want them to come back...

FIGURE 3

They'll never leave you Claire, but that doesn't mean you have to listen to them. You don't have to give them power. They'll try to convince you that they deserve it but they don't. You know they don't.

(FIGURE 3 stands and offers her hand to CLAIRE and they both rise to their feet)

You are braver than you know Claire.

CLAIRE

I don't want to be brave, I just want all of this to stop. Please tell me you can make it stop.

FIGURE 3

It never stops Claire, it just gets easier.

(she reaches out to hold her hand)

I promise that it will get easier. Their voices will always be a part of who you are but they don't have to be this loud. You have the power to silence them Claire, I know you do, look at how far you've already come.

(FIGURE 3 squeezes CLAIRE'S hand and smiles, she turns to walk away, only pausing for a moment at the edge of the illuminated section of the stage.)

CLAIRE

Please don't leave me here alone...

FIGURE 3

(smiling) be brave Claire, I'll be here when you need me.

(she disappears into the darkness, only the sounds of her disappearing footsteps can be heard. CLAIRE turns to face the audience, her eyes now full of power and life. For a moment it seems as if she is going to say something but the lights simply fade to black. A few moments pass in silence, the stage remains in total darkness. The sounds of the water that covers the stage moving can be heard but aside from the occasional splashing there is nothing. The lights slowly begin to rise, bathing the stage in a soft yellow light that illuminates the playing space just enough for the actors to become visible. The light reveals that a twin size bed and a night stand have been placed in the center of the stage. Sitting on the bed is CLAIRE, just as she was before the stage became dark but now she is staring at the screen of a laptop. Her mother sits on the edge of her bed gently rubbing her back.)

MOTHER

Claire, sweetie, talk to me.

CLAIRE

(suddenly aware of her surroundings) oh... sorry mom... I didn't mean to... I just don't understand. I don't understand why... I thought they were my friends. I thought they cared about me.

MOTHER

I know you did honey. I know. But friends don't do that and you don't deserve to be treated like that Claire. Think of it this way Claire, you're free now. You don't have to let them treat you like this anymore... I always knew they were bad news anyway and you know what they say about us moms, we're never wrong.

(CLAIRE smiles. Her MOTHER reaches in front of CLAIRE and slowly closes the laptop screen. She pulls CLAIRE into herself and holds her there for a moment before gently kissing her on the forehead.)

I think we've looked at that enough for one evening.

(her mother rises from the bed and begins to walk away, she pauses for a moment and turns back to look at her daughter still seated on the bed)

CLAIRE

Thank you mom... I love you.

MOTHER

I love you too honey, now get some rest.

(she smiles and then exits the stage leaving CLAIRE alone on her bed. She slowly crawls under the covers of her bed, curling up into a ball, her face almost unable to be seen from the audience. CLAIRE reaches for the lamp on her bedside table and pulls the cord as the lights begin to fade. As the lights slowly dim the three figures can be seen far upstage, CLAIRE remains unaware of their presence.)

Who's the Real Victim

Nikki Anderson

Lights up on SL. JASMINE walks into a police station nervously looking around. OFFICER HARRIS notices her and approaches.

HARRIS

Is there something I can help you with?

JASMINE

Something happened to me last night.

HARRIS

It's going to be okay, sweetie. What happened?

JASMINE

(Pause)... I think... I was raped.

Lights down SL, lights up SR. LACEY knocks on CHASE's front door. CHASE answers. He sees LACEY and his shoulders drop.

CHASE

(Frustrated) What do you want, Lace?

LACEY

(Taken aback) I was coming to check on you, I was worried. You weren't in class today, and you never miss class, and I was texting you and you didn't answer...

CHASE

(Cutting her off) You know why I wasn't at school today...

CHASE turns and walks back into his house, LACEY follows and closes the door behind her. Pause.

LACEY

Because of the police report? Chase, you wouldn't do something like that.

CHASE

(Growing more aggravated) Wouldn't I though? Wouldn't I, the captain of the tennis team, Pacific U's crowning athlete and grade A asshole, have the nerve to take advantage of one of the hottest girls in school if I got the chance?

LACEY

You wouldn't. I know you wouldn't do that.

CHASE

Well everyone else seems to think I would.

LACEY

(Comforting) I know you Chase, you don't have the heart to do those things she said you did.

CHASE says nothing, and avoids eye contact with LACEY. Pause. LACEY grows concerned.

Right?

CHASE

Well...

LACEY

Chase... What did you do?

CHASE

I swear I didn't rape her but... I did do some of the things she said I did, but I didn't want to, and I didn't mean to hurt her, you have to believe me.

Lights down SL, lights up SR. JASMINE and HARRIS are now in an interrogation room.

JASMINE

I can remember that I was looking for my friends and I bumped into Chase Ward... He offered to help me look, we were looking all over the house. *(Pause)* I don't remember how, but we ended up in an empty room together. *(holding back tears)* He pushed me onto the bed and ripped my shirt open he was taking his pants off and I fought back clawing and scratching but he was too strong and... and...

HARRIS

It's okay, we can take a break if you need to. I can get you some water.

JASMINE

On the verge of tears, but none fall. Her voice is shaky.

I'm okay, I just... um...after he overpowered me, he grabbed my arms really tight and pinned me down, he kissed me really hard, then he... um... he took off his belt and tied my arms tightly around the bedpost, I tried kicking but he was on top of me and I couldn't move... and... then...

Taking a deep breath

um, can I get that water now?

Lights down SL, lights up SR. CHASE is now sitting on the couch, while LACEY is sitting on the arm of the arm chair.

CHASE

I mean... yes I did some of those things, but she wanted me to, I swear, she came onto me! And that's not the full story either.

LACEY

(Skeptical) She wanted you to do all those things to her?

CHASE

Yes! *(Pause)* God that sounds so bad! Look she was flirting with me the whole night, making eyes at me, brushing up against me as she walked by. Clear signs that she wanted me. I did bump into her, but she wasn't looking for her friends, she was looking for me. She grabbed my shirt

and pulled me into the closest empty room and there she was: Jasmine Hayes, the most popular girl in school, she could have anyone, and in that moment... in that moment I thought she wanted me. And yes, I had had a few drinks, so I wasn't totally opposed to a pretty girl wanting me, ya know?

LACEY

(Pause) I'm trying to believe you... I just don't know what to think, I mean she has physical evidence.

CHASE

I do too! She scratched me. Look!

CHASE pulls up his shirt to reveal his back covered in scratches. Lights down SL, lights up SR. HARRIS and JASMINE are sitting on the same side of the table. JASMINE is holding a glass of water.

HARRIS

(Comforting) You're doing great Jasmine. Any details you can remember will help us get him. Just take your time.

Pause. JASMINE closes her eyes in concentration.

JASMINE

I can remember he had a light blue shirt on... it may have been light green... um... he smelled like beer and Axe... he spoke softly but stern, he never yelled or raised his voice at me... and he tasted sweet like strawberries...

HARRIS

That's good, Jasmine, good. *(Pause)* Is there anything else you can remember?

JASMINE, still with her eyes closed, furrows her brow, beat, she relaxes her face, opens her eyes and shakes her head. Still on the verge of tears.

JASMINE

No, the rest is kinda fuzzy. I was really drunk; I don't remember everything.

Voices

Lights down SL, lights up SR. LACEY is now sitting on the couch while CHASE is pacing back and forth.

CHASE

She wasn't even that drunk, yes we had both had like one or two but she was conscious the whole time, she knew what she was doing, and she was the violent one, not me.

LACEY

You left bruises on her, Chase.

CHASE

(Frustrated) I KNOW! okay... I know. (desperate) But I didn't... I wouldn't... Why don't you believe me?

LACEY

I just want to know the full story. If you didn't do it, then what is your side?

CHASE

Well, we were having a good time and she was rubbing me the right way. But then she asked me to do some things and I felt uncomfortable doing but I...

LACEY

(cutting him off) What kind of things?

CHASE

Well she wanted me to pin her down so she couldn't move.

LACEY

I mean, I guess that's a little weird, but it's not unusual. To each their own I guess... if she did ask you to do that.

CHASE

She did, and that's mild compared to what else she made me do.

Lights down SR, lights up SL. HARRIS is now on the other side of the table from JASMINE again. JASMINE is standing by the mirror on the wall.

HARRIS

Did you fight back any, or possibly leave any physical evidence that will link him to this?

JASMINE walks over toward CS and faces the audience.

JASMINE

I remember... it was almost like a dream for a minute. I don't remember much, but it was like I was watching myself from the corner of the room, and I was just lying there... I was just letting it happen.

CHASE turns toward the audience and moves closer to CS.

CHASE

She was on top of me for the majority of the time; she was in control. We were having a good time. I thought we were anyway. And I wanted it... at first.

JASMINE

And I was yelling at myself from the corner to do something, anything, to get away from him and get out of the room... I guess I finally snapped out of it, and suddenly I was back under him and I was trying to kick him off, and get my arms free.

CHASE

She eventually rolled us over, and then I was on top. Still goin' at it... and this is when it got uncomfortable. She wanted me to choke her.

JASMINE

I tried to scream but he put his hand over my mouth, so I bit him and tried to scream again but he grabbed my throat and I couldn't scream and I could hardly breathe.

CHASE

I didn't feel comfortable doing that, but she insisted, she said she does it all the time, and told me her safe word... Eventually I gave in and did it.

JASMINE

His full body was on top of me and he was hurting me and I couldn't get away from him and I couldn't breathe and I must have passed out...

CHASE

I got scared that I was going to hurt her and she couldn't breathe, so I freaked out and let go. She wanted me to finish and to do what she wanted, but I didn't want to, and then she got more upset and called me a little bitch for not following through and practically kicked me out of the room.

CHASE moves back to SR.

She was conscious and pissed when I left her.

JASMINE

The next thing I remember is waking up this morning in an empty room. Alone.

JASMINE moves back SL.

HARRIS

Okay... you did great, Jasmine; you are really brave for coming in here... Let me get you some more water and a little something to eat.

HARRIS takes JASMINE's glass and starts to head for the door, before stopping and turning back to JASMINE.

It's going to be okay. We are going to do everything we can to get this guy.

HARRIS turns and exits. Lights down SL, lights up SR. CHASE and LACEY are both standing in the center of the room.

CHASE

All the evidence shows is rough sex. Because that's all it was... Rough sex.

LACEY

... Or rape and defensive wounds...

CHASE

... You really don't believe me, do you? You really think that I raped her? Why did you come over here to talk to me and make me think that you were on my side, when you're... you're not even going to... I thought we were friends Lacey. I thought I could trust you.

LACEY

We are friends I just... I just want to know what happened.

CHASE

I told you what happened. You said you came here to hear my side, but you're not listening to me. I thought out of all the people you would believe me.

Silence, the two stare at each other.

Just leave.

LACEY

Chase, come on-

CHASE walks over to the door, and opens it

CHASE

If you're not going to accept the idea that I didn't do this, then I don't want you in my house anymore. Please leave.

LACEY stands looking at CHASE for a moment before crossing to the door, she stops at the door a second. CHASE looks at her, hurt, he looks away and LACEY walks out the door as CHASE closes it behind her.

Lights Down

Rise Up

Omar Combie

It is 7am. I reluctantly open my eyes to the sound of my phone's alarm. Though it was intentional, I regret placing the phone on the opposite side of the room. Now, I either force myself out of bed to silence the ringing, or wait five minutes for the noisy device to automatically turn off. I choose the latter. Half-awake, partially covered with a bed sheet, I casually scan my room. My eyes land on the large calendar on the wall.

5 minutes

What's the point of getting up? It's already late November. My grades so far have been crappy at best, and that's with extra credit. Even if I managed to finish this month strong, my GPA is already beyond saving. I haven't missed many classes though, so I should have enough wiggle room to sleep in today, right? With no chance of a good final grade, there's no need to put myself through the "death lineup": 8am to 9:50am, Calculus II; 10am-11:20am, American Government; and to put the nail in the coffin, one hour of History. That's the last time I register late for classes. To make things crummier, I got dealt the worst professors for each course. The lousiest one out of the group is the Calculus professor, Dr. Simeon, a.k.a Professor Shrek.

The guy is larger than life, literally; he has the height to dominate at basketball but has a belly that looks nine months pregnant. No one can understand his crooked handwriting. Plus, when he tries to explain his scribbles to us, his deep voice and poor speaking skills make him impossible to understand. Yeah, definitely not what I need first thing on a Monday morning. I turn my gaze to the ceiling.

4 minutes

Why am I even at college? This was never part of my plan. I just wanted to continue playing bass with my hometown band. I blame my parents. They were gullible enough to believe the saying, "everyone should go to college." Yeah, right. I can't stand the idea of spending a fortune on a piece of paper that doesn't guarantee me a job. Plus, trapping myself in a life of debt isn't very appealing. Yet here I am, a sophomore pursuing a bachelor's degree at an average university with a four hundred thousand dollar loan hanging around my neck. My head starts pounding.

3 minutes

I place my hands on my forehead, hoping that the pain will subside. I'm still hungover from last night. I was never much of a drinker until after the incident. A one-time thing turned into once in a while, until the routine became every weekend. Drowning myself in a ton of beverages helped give me ease of mind, even if only temporary. Vodka, rum, scotch, whiskey and any other concoction

the bartender served up found its way to my taste buds. At this rate, my degree should be in alcohol. I'd probably write a great research paper on it.

I chuckle to myself until sharp pain in my head has me turning on my side. My eyes now fall on the framed picture of you on my bedside table.

2 minutes

I bet if you could see me now, you would be pretty pissed. I've become a perfect candidate for the popular position of college drop-out. You'd probably kick me off this bed and tell me, "Ramon, get off your butt!" You would lecture me on my casual attitude until I inevitably promise to work harder. You always won in these situations. Even if my motivation would be on zero, you'd be right by my side, pressuring me to finish no matter how long I would take. You'd do it with a beautiful smile, too. Wouldn't you? I grab the picture to look at it closely.

1 minute

But you're not here. You're gone. How long has it been? One, no, two years, right? You were the one with the ambition. You were the talented writer with a head full of dreams and the discipline to make them a reality. Acknowledged by peers and teachers alike, you were the one projected to change the world. I was among your supporters, your biggest fan, waiting to see what milestones you would set. Yet, your chance was stolen. You were robbed of your opportunity by an insecure highschooler who, instead of dealing with his issues, let his rage out on our classroom that Monday before graduation. I was home sick on that day, but the flu could not compare to the grief I felt when I saw the news. Your picture, among the thirty others that were slain during the shooting, was on all the major networks.

I still read the last text I got from you, "Hope u feel better. See you tmr" But that tomorrow never came, Angel. I place the picture back in its rightful spot.

30 seconds

You're not here. I am. Why am I? You were the one person I cared about the most, and I've lost you. Why wasn't I there that day? I could have done something, anything. Why am I still here! Damn it! I miss you so much. I look back up at the ceiling.

20 seconds

What did you always used to say, "A story isn't done until you stop writing?" There are many times I thought of putting my pen down, and closing my book. At least that way I'd be where you are. But, you wouldn't want that.

10 seconds

I'll keep writing. I'm not as elegant as you though. I'm clumsy and probably make a plethora of mistakes. Plefra? Petra? Plethora! I'm not as confident as you. I'll probably second guess myself on every decision. But I'll keep writing.

Voices

Although your book is closed, I'll keep you alive in my story, whatever it may be.
And hopefully at the end, when I see you again, I can tell you about all the great
chapters in my life.

My phone stops ringing. I rise up and get ready for class.

Death Womb

Andrea Ramos

After Sara Borjas

To those who have experienced this too: you made the best choice for you and that's enough.

truth: you were cradled in my placenta web, then you were scraped out.
truth: when you place your body in another's hands, you wonder how brave
and depressing it must be, coddle fetuses in jars; aliens in a museum.
except these aren't up for display. true: even i
never saw you. truth: if it were up to the christian man who jammed
a sign in girl's faces by clinics, shouting his verdicts of hellfire,
lambs, and other bullshit-he would surely ask the devil to take me home.
true: i was relieved not to see eyes and feet looking to me for
comfort and safety, invading my space. truth: the surgeon roped you in
like a whale calf from the sea, from your own space. true: i hope you both for-
give me.
truth: i don't worry too much anymore. truth: i own a death womb.
truth: how womanly it is, with its dust petals and dead caught flies.

The Devil You Know

Daniel Valdez

Forked-tongue with fire
flailing about in fluid motions,

you slither in on your belly,
arms and legs sold

long ago, and I
am the one who must pay.

You stick your fangs
through my soft skin.

The venom is so sweet
and so deadly,

you let it choke me
and watch me convulse.

My blood thickens with venom,
veins weighted down by sin.

Yet you make the same mistake
over and over

you strike at the heel,
forgetting your tender head.

Job in Texas

Paola Brinkley

I sit on my bed
my rainboots dangling
on the edge of a river,
that ripples softly
every time somebody moves.
It's *déjà vu*.

I've seen the same river
visit my house two years ago
"A thousand-year flood"
the news had called it.
I'm not good at math,
but I know enough to know
that two doesn't equal a thousand.

I wonder what the God in the heavens
thinks about my abandoned flip flops,
surfing through the waves of my house.
I wonder if God aimed to teach me
the same lesson twice,
or does He just sit and watch
good people suffer?

He's got a plan but,
it'd be nice if He shared it,
and maybe I could stomach
the smell of gasoline wafting
through the air of an old
spilled gas container,
floating in my garage.

Maybe I could understand
why my arms feel so sore and raw
from madly draining buckets
of water down the bathtub,
or why my head pounds like
a hundred jackhammers set off at once
because I haven't slept all night.

Voices

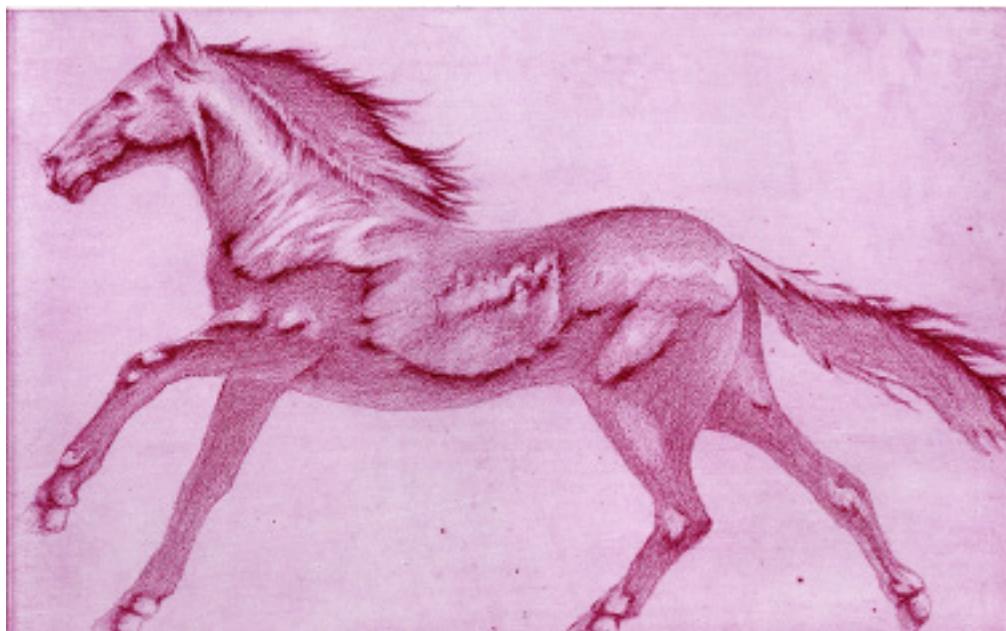
Does God bring the floods
To cleanse? To begin again?
Or have we been judged twice
for the same crime?

I watch the swamp gondolas
through my window
like beacons of light
thinking in my head
God destroys and God saves.

But how do I prevent the wrath?
or am I supposed to succumb
to the waves of a fickle God?

Stallion

Shem Alexander



Float

Avery Zhao



Fake Happy

Alexis Towery



Among the Bubbles

Ariel Ong



Pattern of Life

Elena Lake



Butterfly

Melissa Koss



One with Nature

Melissa Koss



Burned

Kristen Longo



President's Award - Third Place Poetry

Burned

I remember your flame
And catching fire when I got too close.
It was not a superficial burn
like those you get when sloppily lighting cigarettes
or holding a firecracker too long.
It etched my bones black,
Warm to the touch
lacerating my skin and hazing my thoughts.
Like a moth drawn in by light,
zapped when we touched.
I figured we would put out our fires together
as time went on and we grew closer
But things quickly got out of hand.
My ribs turned into firewood and my blood gasoline.
My entire body engulfed, igniting inside and out.
Eruptions of color but mostly reds.
This was violent, uncontrollable—
A forest fire devouring the town
And coughing up ashes.

I can't remember if I have a right to feel this way—
Or if I'm exaggerating residual emotions
But all I know
Is that this fire is real.
You left me scorched,
singed beyond recognition,
decimated.
But finally, the smoke has cleared
and I've contained your flame.
It never goes out completely—
It flickers and dims but remains lit.
Occasionally, it will burn bright again
Like when I read your name
Or something sparks a memory.
But eventually it dies back down.
Let me be clear—

I don't regret getting burnt.
Because now my heart is purged
And fields of bright yellow daffodils
Can grow through your embers.

Blue Lines

Connie Fogle

The first Saturday of every month, Daddy marks our heights on the kitchen door frame.

Blue for RJ, purple for Olive, green for me.

I tippytoe, craning my neck to stretch for the highest blue line, always a few inches behind RJ.

Today I stand in the doorway with my green marker, looking at the last blue mark. Mommy's crying. I'll catch up soon.

Sunset

Nadilia Gilbert

He sits there, just sits there
Staring into the distance and running his fingers through his hair
It's like he's mesmerized by this raw beauty

It's quiet here, so peaceful here
Sand between his toes, no memory of his woes
Above his head stands a sturdy coconut palm tree, slightly bent as though in
pain
In multiple clusters, her yellow-green children hold on tightly to their mother

Seagulls squawk in harmony, ghost crabs stand guard in crimson breastplates
He watches as the sun slowly makes her exit
Cotton ball clouds are glued to cotton candy skies
And blue-green water splashes as it collides with large opposing rocks

The cool breeze caresses his face and whispers to him, her most intimate secrets
He can't help but feel happy here, at home here
This is all that he could ask for
He thinks that maybe, just maybe, he should visit this place much more

The Yellow Crab

Johnathan W. Potter

The gulls were out when they arrived that day, squawking and cawing, their bodies white as hospital gauze, soaring beneath pillows of gray that bedded the sun and put to rest earlier forecasts of golden skies. They came, lured by the kiss of the ocean's breeze, its tides gushing and waving them forward, teasing them with hidden treasures and kingdoms as they ebbed and flowed over the shore.

They moved in tandem, Little Laurie and Pa, hand in hand, both with beach towels folded over their arms, their feet kicking through blankets of yellow sand, sketching in the grains a map from where they stood to the brown sedan parked back on the road. So much smaller were Little Laurie's feet compared to Pa's, as were her hands, swallowed in his grasp, his grip calloused and strong. Nonetheless, Little Laurie sought to do everything just as Pa, squeezing his fingers with all her might to match his unyielding hold, stretching her short legs to walk with him in stride.

There was nothing Little Laurie wanted more than to be just as Pa. It was why when Pa suggested going to the beach, though the sky had been dark and overcast since noon, that Little Laurie hurried with him to the car; it was why when they got into the car that Little Laurie waited for Pa to grab his seatbelt so to hear the click of their locks together as they fastened each other in; and it was why when they arrived that Little Laurie carefully laid her towel down without a crease and sat down with her feet in front of her, waving them from left to right just as Pa had done. Little Laurie wanted to walk like Pa, dress like Pa, speak like Pa. If not for Pa's resistance, Little Laurie would have shaved her languid locks and styled her hair bald just like Pa.

Anything Pa did, Little Laurie was ready to do the same.

That afternoon, as Little Laurie sat on her colorful beach towel, the second in an identical pair, Pa sprung forward and yelped, grabbing at his right foot. There, hung on the tip of his big toe was a small, yellow and brown crab, patterned like a living dune, its shell speckled as if powdered with grains of sand, its curled white pincer latched onto his skin like a crude piercing. Without hesitation, Little Laurie pried the crab off of Pa's big toe, placed it in the center of her palm, and stared into its long black eyes as if to say, "Now, pinch me."

Pa shook his head and took Little Laurie by the wrist, picking up the pint-sized crustacean and dropping it back into the sand. For a moment, Little Laurie sat in silence, her lips pouted and her arms folded across her chest, her face reddened and her big brown eyes beginning to well, just as they had when Pa refused to let her cut her hair, and as he had done before, Pa smiled and took

Little Laurie in his arms.

With her head buried into Pa's broad chest and with tears trickling down the sides of her face, Little Laurie asked, "But, doesn't it hurt?"

Pa, rubbing his massive hand over her delicate, little back, said, "Laurie, I'll be fine. Please, don't worry anymore."

"But Pa, I want to be just like you."

"I know . . . but some experiences are not meant to be shared."

With the clouds swelling and the tide battering the shoreline, Pa stood to his feet, clapped the sand off of his hands, and folded the colorful towel over his right arm. Turning and beginning to walk back to his old sedan, Pa expected Little Laurie to follow closely behind just as she had done so many times before. Yet, for the first time since she was born, Little Laurie didn't move.

Little Laurie stayed put, watching Pa walk off before turning the other way and running over to where she had last seen the scuttering crab.

There it was, blanketed and blent into the yellow sand, still as she bent over to lift it off the ground, the rigid contours of its shell pressing into her palms, as were the hard points of its eight segmented legs. As those first drops began to fall, Little Laurie looked into black eyes and knew the crab would not pinch her, for its carapace was empty, hollowed and lifeless.

Tempest

Connie Fogle

I'm standing barefoot on the cool tile. Soaked and shaking.

A thundering boom shakes the house, and everything goes dark.

A flash of lightning brings me back to the sound of a knock on the bathroom door. Electricity plays across my face and in the tips of my fingers. I tug my arm free from the weight of my body. My muscles are fried. Trembling, I reach up to the countertop, pull myself upright, and turn to sit with my back resting against the cabinet door.

Another knock. This one more frantic. And the echo of a voice.

“Claire! Are you okay in there?”

My mouth is an arid wasteland where my voice has gone to die. I can't scream or cry. Only choke on too much air.

I clutch the lavender cotton towel and wrap it haphazardly around my torso before turning the lock on the knob that has been violently trying to turn. The door bursts open, and I see three faces pale with realization, sending another shock right through the middle of me.

It's raining again. Right onto the white knuckles clenched around the towel under my chin. I reach up with my free hand to wipe the drops from my cheeks, and pull it away smeared with bright red.

My mother breaks through the wall my brothers form in the doorway and falls to her knees, enveloping me in her arms.

Torrential.

My ambulance is a 10-year-old cream colored Ford Taurus with the check engine light on, a heavy dusting of residue from scratcher tickets, and a sticky coating of yellow nicotine.

The doctors will tell my mother that my blood sugar dipped too low. This, combined with the heat of the shower, caused my blood pressure to drop suddenly. That's why I fainted.

That's the official reason.

My mother's relief will be short-lived, and my father will yell that they shouldn't have taken me to the hospital at all. The drive home will be suffocating. The dust, the nicotine—the smoke and raised voices.

Then we'll try to clean up the mess of broken limbs and leaves scattered by a storm that's still raging.

Beach Cinquains

Nathan Conard

Shoreline.
Shimmering waves,
Tumultuous, roaring,
Advance. my feet sink, embraced by
Cool sand.

Mole crab,
Darting bullet.
Flee from my hand, burrow
Beneath the sand. Squirming, smelly
Pebbles.

Breath held,
I sway, submerged.
The sea breathes, inhales,
Exhales. My body, relaxed, rides
The waves.

Cape May Diamonds

In the languishing evening hours
I explore the beach.
Not the shy whisper of yielding sand,
But the chatter of multitudinous jostled pebbles,
The regular protest of gravel
Crunched by bare feet, attends my roaming search.
I crouch, plunge my hands into the cool substrate.

Myriad pale stones,
Globules of frozen water,
Polished glass beads,
Glazed misshapen marbles,
Quartz gallstones,
The Cape May Diamonds,
Dense spitballs vomited by the
Delaware River.

They rattle in my Tupperware container,
Choice jewels hand-picked.

Stalagmites

Merlin Cuellar

Our weathered coil is rain slugging down into caves
A perfect measure drowns and corrodes that safe home
The crevice now a roar of frothing black water
Recall what would have stayed, without the hungry waves
The mud pools overhead, atop the catacomb
The rocks too will be worn but slopes survive the slaughter

Yet with uncertainty, the tear that drums gently
Uncontrolled- will hammer, upon the secret hall
Past the punctured shell there, through a steadfast strung drill
Now that rain is spirit, pressure in assembly
By chance amount this drip grows to be useful

This web is made slower but it is more sublime
than any of the spiders, yet humbled by Nimrod
A column made of yells crouched behind the eye veins
Screams made from a fistful of teeth plucked over time
The peak does not emerge, quickly to sting the flawed
for it steadily climbs, just as it is in chains

Till finally the point of each spared speck
will bare all that could not then escape

Free Range

Jenni Baros

The prairie bends to either side,

slate, indigo, *limón* curtsy –

winding Cambrian sea air

over rattled plains, the sky curls

nautilus around herself in electric tango

spinning seasick and dizzy

weighted with the scent of soil and manure; spreading spikes of agave-tinged funnels.

vortex of mastodon

shade disappears with *las noches* navy folding

turquoise light into her burrow

- sage pressed spine - anchoring humanity on a
spear tip,

dug down in sun-baked dirt

skewered by herds of pinwheel progress.

The Garden of Earthly Delights

Daniel Valdez

The birds of our pleasure
shall be our demise.
Expelled from Eden
we make our way
into a different garden.

This one
overgrown with towers
and drinks of sweet wine,
frothy beer,
and bubbly champagne.

This one
full of orgies
with women who scream
with pleasure
and men who groan
with glee.

This one
expanded with gluttony
from fresh fish,
cured hams,
and juicy fruits
of every sort.

We have our way with demons
as they have their way with us.

Soon, we shall see
judgment -
into eternity we go,
and we will burn
and gnash our teeth
and wail in agony
from the garden
to below -
Fallen angels beat
their drums
and pluck

Voices

their strings.
We suffer alone
together
where Love is absent.

To the Dandelion in the Pavement

Caitlin McNeely

I see you grow,
and I think of all the fathers –
with square lawns
and home owner associations –
who want to kill you
with harsh poisons
annoyed with your defiance
of their pretty (controlled) yards and sidewalks.

I think of all the children –
with dirty feet and messy hair
and a gaggle of fierce friends –
who see your cheery yellow
and want to pick you
as a reverent offering to their mothers.

(I must admit, dandelion, I have been both of these,
but today you and I must make peace,
as we have only one way to grow:
Up)

Vinson Award Winner

Smoke and Cinnamon

Emma Cranford

We had a huge snow storm the night before and they canceled school. Mom decided the best option was for me to go to Grandpa's, which I thought was a fine idea myself. Grandpa usually let me play in his study while he read a book or made spaghetti; he didn't know a lot of other recipes.

I spent the afternoon laying on the couch with my legs hanging over the armrest, staring up at the ceiling. The cushions had a rough woven texture that left an imprint on my arm and they never ceased to smell vaguely of smoke and cinnamon. My guess was that Grandpa sat there for his daily cigar whenever I wasn't around. Mom said he had been doing that since she was my age, maybe even before, but never did it when I came over. He usually took his cigar to the porch and sat in his rocking chair while he smoked it. When the weather was nice, or at least bearable, he would sometimes spend hours out there. If he wasn't smoking, he was drinking coffee. Black with one sugar cube.

Whenever we went into a restaurant or a cafe, he'd order his coffee with a glass of water. The waitresses all seemed to know him and there always seemed to be an "old friend" that would stop by our table to say hi. Grandpa would jokingly ask them if they had a spare sugar cube on them so he didn't have to use those "cancer flavored" packets of sugar. They usually responded with what I assumed was an inside joke and a genuine laugh that Grandpa always brought out of them. People liked talking to him, and he liked talking to people. I can't blame them since his toothy smile always made me grin too.

I sat up from the couch and propped myself on my elbows. Grandpa had a lot of books, but seldom were they ever on the shelves. Occasionally there would be some of his larger 600 page novels on an empty area of his desk, or maybe on his chair, but most of the time there were small stacks placed randomly throughout the room creating an almost obstacle course if you didn't know they were there. Some books had a coffee ring on the covers from where Grandpa used it as a temporary coaster, some books had gold paint creating the most intricate designs, and some books were just brown with a mildew smell to them. I never liked those books but he always spent time looking at each individual one, cherishing every word between the covers .

I walked over to the big window behind his desk and reached for the edge of the lace curtain to peer outside. It had stopped snowing, the sun was out, but there was still a thick blanket that coated every piece of green in sight. The world was still enough that I could hear the wood on the porch creak with the movement of Grandpa's rocking chair. He was smoking his cigar. I let the curtain fall from my fingers and watched the sunlight peak through the small

holes in the lace. The floral design created a shadow garden on the opposing wall that further decorated the intricate designs of the books. Mom said when she was young, the same curtains were hanging in her room and she would have to spend a good portion of her time blocking her eyes from the sunlight. Eventually, Grandpa moved the curtains to his study where I would learn to fall in love with them. He always commented about how lovely they were and how he always liked them more than Mom did, but I think he just didn't want to hear her complain anymore. In the early mornings, when Grandpa was in his study, the lace shadows would coat his body in a way that made him look like he was made of flowers. He sometimes let me trace the shadows with a marker and I would cover him in mistakes and poorly drawn plants, and I would inhale the smell of cinnamon that fell from his clothes.

He stayed outside for quite a while after his cigar had gone out, just rocking back and forth. I wonder if he was wanting to savor the moment. He was still on the porch when Mom came to pick me up so I kissed his cheek and walked to the car while a toothy grin spread across his face. Smiling back uncontrollably, I waved goodbye to him until we rounded the corner away from the house. I tried to imagine Grandpa on the beach or in a ski lodge, and wondered if he would bring me back a souvenir from his trip. A key chain with my name on it or a funny picture he took in the sand. I imagined these things until I was old enough to understand where he had actually gone. Now I imagine him sitting in a cafe, asking an old friend for a sugar cube, and they actually have one. I imagine him stacking books until they are taller than him and he never has to fear that they will fall over. I imagine him, every morning, with a cup of coffee and a rocking chair. He sits on his porch and smokes a cigar while the snow starts to melt, and the plants peek through. He smiles, and the flowers no longer need the sun because they grow toward him.

Your Poem

Simon Avey

Left stranded in the wake of failure,
With nothing to show for it
Only painful memories and hearts broken
Helpless as the life drains slowly from what they once had
Dreams of seeing her behind a veil,
Ruined
Now he sees her only through a haze
One so thick her figure is only roughly recognizable
Their future engagements now tainted
By their own misadventures
Everything serves as a reminder to them
A reminder of the void left by one another
When they returned hearts they had once exchanged
They are now stuck
Opposite sides of the same glass
Reaching out to one another
Only to be obstructed by that crystal
Now they both ponder
The millions of paths they could've taken in that wood
Only to be saddened because they took the one more traveled
The flower,
At first blossoming
Died with the frigidness of winter
Its petals sagged under the weight of the frost that sat atop
No longer able to bear the burden
Finally succumbing to the weight,
Plummeting towards the earth
The last grain of sand has fallen
Gone now is their time together
Wasted on the trivialness of meaningless disputes,
The inability to see,
Their faithless endeavors,
Left stranded in the wake of failure.
Nothing to show for it
But painful memories and hearts broken.

You Left in the Night

Lilith O'Connell

You left me alone in the pitch of night
And for a while I was furious.
Deep inside I felt that you had no right

I thought that maybe it was spurious.
Alone in a world, I was not kin with,
The pill was hard to take, I was bilious.

You had always been with me since my birth
You didn't even get to say goodbye.
Your time had come to leave this peaceful Earth,

But I never expected you to die.
And I was always told that time would heal,
Even though the thought of you made me cry.

The events of that night felt so unreal.
I would dream that it had never happened,
But when I woke life was a living Hell.

I carried the loss of this life, burdened
By all of my missed opportunities.
My beating heart fragile yet hardened.

I Can't Remember

Kaylee Kahn

I can't remember- and I need you to understand.
My mind isn't where it used to be
and it will never be there again.
You speak to me of your stories
that I once lived but —
I can't remember

I can't remember - the person I used to be,
a father
a husband
a grandad
Yet
I can no longer fulfill those roles.

I sit here- I hear your words
“I love You”
I understand
I just can't talk
because
I can't remember

I can't remember- that I don't know what I'm doing.
“I can do it by myself,” I say
yet everyone knows I can't.
I am useless
I have been overcome by something —
I can't remember

I can't remember- why I am in this place.
I was brought here a year ago
and left here without my family.
They come and see me
feed me, shave me, talk to me.
I feel like they rarely come
yet
I can't remember

I can't remember.
why do they still love me,
even though I don't know them?
I see the pain being covered
by big bright smiles.
Some days I recognize them
and I rejoice, yet on the other days —
I can't remember

I can remember
although,
the feeling, the love, the warmth
that is given to me every time I see them
I am stuck inside this body,
a dying brain
a lively heart that feels.
But once you touch my heart,
You —
I can remember.

A Stout Amount of Stupidity

Daniel Valdez

My ex walks into a bar,
the same bar I am sitting in.

She's so beautiful,
but her heart is so damn ugly.

Her red dress shows her curves,
but only I know her soul.

She bears the attitude of a wasp
and the brain of a junebug.

I get up to say hello,
and she tells me to piss off.

I walk back to my seat,
slowly, as I hear her tell

her friend she's watching her weight
as she orders a beer.

To help, I try and ask,
"Do you know what's in beer?"

She threatens me with mace,
says, "Get the fuck away from me."

So I sit down and watch her drink six stouts
(her favorite 'cause they "remind her of coffee").

Her beer baby extends
like a globe beneath her red dress.

She belches.
She stumbles to the restroom.

I walk out into the cold night air
and reevaluate my standards.

Three Stupid Words

Sarah Peralta

I had a dream about you last night. You were there with me. And we were together. Or together in a sense. It is vague now, that dream, but I know it was good. I knew that you loved me. But now, you, you love me too. It's an interesting thing, isn't it? How you can just say it and it can mean so many different things. Love is all encompassing. You can say you love someone to your teacher and they will laugh. You can tell your mother and father that you are in love and they will laugh. Laugh at you and your stupid naivete. Because you, you are young. You don't know what love is. And you certainly don't love me. But how my heart wants you to. I want what you said to be true. So badly. I want to be next to your heart and feel it beating. I want to feel my heart racing next to you, until our two hearts syncopate and become one. But this world doesn't exist. And I doubt it ever will. But all I know is that my stupid heart will still leap every time I see you. I know that those butterflies are not going anywhere. All because you said those three stupid words.

Isabella at Angelo's

Ellie Mahan

Aromas of homemade sauce filled the atmosphere: tangy tomato, ground meat, and parmesan cheese. While she waited for her table's orders of chicken fettuccine alfredo and salmon picatta, Isabella gazed at her favorite painting in Angelo's Italian Restaurant. In the painting, the moss behind the Italian village house crept toward the front to frame the door. Red and yellow blooms of potted loveliness adorned the cobbled, broken streets that led to the heavy wooden door. When she squinted, Isabella noticed her favorite part of the painting, a Jack Russell Terrier curled up on the large front step of the porch, sound asleep. Sometimes she wished she could be that little brown dog with one white spot, hidden away from the world, and swallowed whole by the serenity of the porch. Ding! Juan peered at her expectantly through the window. Isabella rushed over to pick up her food.

"Isabella, the cooks shouldn't need to ring the bell. You should already be there waiting," Kaltrina prompted with a fake, menacing grin. She mumbled something to her brother, Menderes, in Albanian, giggling, as Isabella dropped the plates off at her table in a swift motion. *Oh Kaltrina*, Isabella thought, *always a ray of sunshine*. She remembered the slammed Sunday morning Kaltrina threatened to take a percentage out of her paycheck because no one made time to refill the ranch dressing container. Her aggravation with Kaltrina made the weight of the third double shift in a row feel heavier. She knew her gelled curly hair had gone frizzy, and her makeup had smeared. *Only one hour until we close*, she thought.

"Yeah, Bella, keep up. How you say, Andale?" Gent teased in a whisper when she returned to the waitress stand. Isabella smirked and rolled her eyes. Gent was a member of the family that owned the restaurant, but to Isabella, he was just another member of the wait staff. The only time she remembered Gent was related to the owners was when he spoke Albanian. Unlike Kaltrina's criticism, Gent's rude jokes were annoying in a fun way. When he teased her, she couldn't help but laugh, and her cheeks turned pink for reasons she couldn't explain.

Sometimes, with Gent, she felt like the old Isabella, the person she was before José was torn from her life by the careless hands of a drunk driver. She always shamed herself for having blossoming feelings for Gent because she felt like she was dishonoring José's memory. Just months ago, when Isabella attended José's memorial, she knew she couldn't love anyone else as she watched blue balloons sail high into the clouds. The puffy clouds had taken her back to the

summer's day they spent laying on the grass, looking up to debate what each cloud looked like, eating popsicles, and contemplating what kind of dog they would have one day. They were so eager to start their lives with one another, no matter what it took. She could always see that movie-star grin of his in the back of her mind.

Despite Isabella's guilt, she was in fact already dating someone. This surprised even her sometimes. Her boyfriend, Junior, was José's cousin. Just a month after José's funeral, Junior texted her, asking if she wanted to go get ice cream with him. This struck Isabella as odd because she had only spoken to Junior a few times at José's family events. However, she knew she needed a friend at the time, so Isabella reluctantly agreed to meet him. She convinced herself at the time that it wasn't a date, so she did not need to feel guilty. As soon as she stepped into Junior's rusty, old chevy, Isabella felt like she had made a mistake. It was too soon. Junior awkwardly mumbled something in greeting. He then ran a large hand through his smooth, black hair in the same way that José did before he met her parents, when he was standing on the sidelines of a football game, and after the first time he told Isabella he loved her. It was José's trademark nervous tick. In an odd way, this comforted Isabella, made her feel better about agreeing to go out with Junior. Then, after they were halfway through Sundaes at Braum's, there was a lull in the conversation, and Junior made a confession.

"I've always noticed you, you know. I remember that first Thanksgiving you came. After we ate, I laid on the couch to watch TV, and I pretended to watch the football game, but I watched you from the window." He paused. Isabella remembered going outside after Thanksgiving dinner to sit on the porch swing and lay her head on José's shoulder, where she felt at home. Junior started again, correcting, "I'm not creepy, I swear. You've just always been so beautiful." Isabella looked away, pretending to stir her ice cream. He ran his hand through his hair again. "Sorry," he murmured, and his eyes darted away, attempting to hide his embarrassment.

"It's okay. Thank you," Isabella said. Junior smiled in relief. It was not José's bright, boyish grin, but the way Junior's eyes glistened left the slightest inkling of José's captivating beam. José's smile was the sun, and Junior's smile was a ray of light peeking through an otherwise black room. This was maddening to Isabella, so after that first date, she let him pick her up from work every day. This was the only way she could get her daily dose of shimmering light. She never stopped hoping the sun would rise again.

One evening at work, Isabella put a tray of eight waters together and brought them to the family at table 22. The pig-tailed ten-year-old thanked her politely and happily. The girl wore the same caramel skin color as Isabella and a shirt that read "Make your dreams happen in glitter." Isabella remembered being that age, free of any worries or pain or even numbness. Then, she checked on

table 30, party of two. A proud grandmother and her college graduate granddaughter needed a refill of Chianti because they were killing time before going to see a play at seven. When Isabella brought back the wine, the tall, model-like granddaughter had vanished to the bathroom. "I'm so lucky. I get to take out my favorite granddaughter tonight," she beamed. After Isabella asked if they were celebrating anything in particular, the grandmother replied "Just because." Isabella suspected this woman spent most nights playing online scrabble, and this was the most she had glowed in weeks.

Table 22's food was in the window, so Isabella gathered the scorching plates on a tray to distribute to the family. The little girl's face lit up when Isabella set down the slice of pepperoni heaven. The mother looked up through curly bangs after she ensured that her children weren't touching their hot plates.

"Thank you so much! It looks wonderful," she said. "And we are about to pray if you want to stand by and join us. If not, that's okay too." In her three months as a server, Isabella had never received such an invitation, but it seemed so kind and pure. She had to accept.

"Sure, I'd love to." Isabella said. During the prayer, she could not stop thinking about how honored she was to be a part of this moment, and before she knew it, she was saying "In the name of the father, the son, and the holy spirit." The little boy sitting on his father's lap while he ate resembled the son she once dreamt of having with José.

Later that night, Marley, another waitress said, "Hey, I don't know if you've noticed this, but Gent totally flirts with you." Isabella denied this immediately. Isabella, Marley, and Gent often spent long shifts talking about their personal lives. When Gent left for his smoke break, Marley started talking about her new boyfriend, and the subject of sex came up. Isabella told Marley that she was still a virgin because she feared it would hurt too bad.

"It hurts the first time, but it's totally worth it if you love the guy," Marley said a bit too loudly while stirring the sugar into the tea. *I'm sure it would've been worth it with José*, Isabella thought. The moment all the customers went quiet Marley said, "All I know is Gent clearly wants to do it with you." Marley immediately turned around to see if anyone heard her, and Isabella instinctively ducked behind the bar. They exchanged a look of alarm before bursting into laughter, thanking the Lord that none of the owners were at the bar. Gent emerged from his smoke break to find Isabella and Marley having uncontrollable laughing fits behind the counter.

"What is so funny?" Gent wondered, his Albanian accent always thicker when he was confused. This sent Marley into hysterics, but Isabella tried to pretend nothing happened. Gent playfully looked at her like she had lost her sanity. "What, Gent? It's not like you tell us everything you talk about in Albanian," Isabella mocked.

Gent paused a beat before saying. "Alright, then what do you want to know?"

Isabella wasn't expecting this. "Um.. Goodnight. How do you say good-night?"

"*Naten e mire*," Gent quickly stated, not breaking his gaze from hers.

"*Nottoon dimeeree?*" Isabella tried.

Gent tried not to chuckle and failed. "No, Bella. *Naten e mire*," he articulated.

"*Not in demere?*"

Gent didn't even try to stifle his laugh this time. It was a deep, hearty laugh that made his face scrunch. It was no movie star smile, but it stirred something in Isabella, and she laughed authentically for the first time in a long time.

The next morning, Isabella posted a selfie on her day off. She was beginning to feel like herself again. *Maybe I just needed some time*, she thought. She spent her day watching *Dora* and *Despicable Me 2* with her two little sisters. When her parents got home from work, she helped her mom make her absolute favorite, tamales. Junior originally planned to come to dinner, but his boss scheduled him to work at the last minute. After dinner, Isabella realized that Gent had replied to her Instagram story:

"You look nice. Where are you going?" This began the back-and-forth messaging. Conversation flowed effortlessly. At 12:30, Isabella finally told Gent she had to go to bed, to which he replied, "*Naten e mire*, Bella."

The next day at work, Isabella brought regulars, Karen and Kevin, "the usual." Kevin wore his worn-out John Deere hat, and Karen wore her stained gray t-shirt. They were high school sweethearts, who always called each other sunshine and darlin'. Isabella looked at the front door, as she often did when it was slow. She imagined José waltzing through it, hands in the pockets of his worn-out blue jeans, grin as wide and bright as a comet. It took her a moment to separate reality from her greatest desire.

Isabella's days at Angelo's Italian restaurant blended together after a while. Kaltrina reprimanded her every fault. One slow afternoon, Gent tried to scare her when she was on the phone with a customer. He came up behind Isabella and poked her in the side, the part that always tickles.

"You said raAAHHhch?" Isabella screeched. She glared at Gent and held back laughter while she finished taking the to-go order. She noticed that Gent always found any excuse to touch her. One day she was wiping down table 30 when Gent put his hand over hers.

"I was just about to clean that. It was my table," he said.

"I don't care. You help me all the time," she continued to wipe the crumbs for a few seconds with his hand on top of hers. He gave in quickly, removing his hand.

"Fine. As long as you don't use it against me later," he smirked as he walked away. His hair was cut too short for him to nervously run a hand through, but

when customers asked him a question he didn't know how to answer in English, Isabella noticed his default was a child-like grin that made his eyes crinkle. For the rest of the summer, they teased each other at work and texted each other in their free time.

Meanwhile, Junior dropped her off at home most nights after giving her a few kisses. Sometimes it led to a bit more, but Isabella never allowed it to get passed a certain point. The more she texted Gent, the more guilt she felt, but talking to Gent just felt natural. On the other hand, she sometimes felt Junior forcing their conversations along, but she ignored this. Junior was the one she was meant to be with. *José led me to him, right?* She thought.

She had been texting Gent for about three months when Junior brought Isabella to an empty parking lot on the lake, so they could have alone time. Isabella knew what he wanted to do, and she wasn't going to stop him this time. She was ready to get her first time over with. *Like Marley said, It might as well be with someone I love,* she thought. At least he looked like someone she loved. His lips brushed hers softly, a whisper of kisses, almost ghost-like. His fingers slid down to unbutton her sky-blue blouse. It wasn't until she heard the unzipping of her jeans that she realized this was really happening; she was finally going to have sex with the one she loved. She ran her hands through his hair as he shifted on top of her. The initial shock of him moving into her was painful, but it got better after the first couple of minutes. When it finally became bearable, it was over. It was his first time too. Fog clouded the windows. Dribbles of his sweat were on her chest.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you, too," and as she said it, she started to believe it might be true.

Isabella didn't show up to work the next morning, and she didn't call in. As she tried to rationalize why she quit so abruptly, her mind flashed through the gallery of mental pictures she had taken in the past couple of weeks: families raising glasses in celebration, lovers sharing their first meal together, Karen smiling across a licked-clean pizza pan at Kevin, content with nothing more than full bellies and each other, Marley gushing over the excitement of her best friend's upcoming wedding. Even Kaltrina had her subtle moments of displaying love with Menderes. Blaring through all of these images were the ones of Gent. She noticed the way his face squinched when he laughed. Her favorite expression of his was the single arch of a bushy eyebrow, challenging her intelligence when she attempted to say something in Albanian.

Isabella saw images of love every day at the restaurant. Strong reminders of José were constantly slapping her across the face, and she couldn't take it anymore. She just wanted to stay at home for a while, away from everyone at the restaurant. *Gent isn't the reason I'm quitting. I love Junior,* she convinced herself. She was content to look for another, less social job. She would find a

place where she didn't have to worry about the possibility of Gent changing everything. Quitting was what she wanted, even if it wasn't necessarily what she needed.

Gent messaged her the day she quit, asking why. I'm moving, she fabricated in her last message to him. She did not move, no new start. She spent many days with Junior, lying in the grass and looking up at the clouds, wishing it were a different day, a different time, a different person. But this would have to do for now.

Burn Out

Charla Whittenburg

It's raining today, are you okay?
My favorite artist-
not enough, not enough is what you always say.
Never a time where you weren't trying your hardest.

Asking, how to return such love?
I can see that the light in your eyes has died.
Icarus is what I am reminded of.
It must be hard, traveling worldwide.

But this is just a thought, never brought up,
only the shadow behind such an endearing smile.
Standing up only because of another coffee cup.
I understand that you chose this lifestyle.

Your music will shine forever,
so don't act like it's now or never.

My Last Fire

Caleb Dozier

How could you continue without fire?
Without the hunger for something better,
What does one do when they run low on desire?

Would you pick up the pen, write a letter?
Could you keep on swimming through the blues?
Walking farther, bound down by the fetter.

Why does my flame waver in different hues?
As each burning throne crumbles into ash,
I wander through a million opposed views.

I suppose that my heart was always brash.
It always would take what it wanted,
Without any sort of care for the crash.

And now I am left here, left daunted.
In the absence of those brilliant cool flames,
that very heart and soul are left haunted.

I could still call out each of their names,
My love is one upon her throne of pyre,
In the end, she was the last to proclaim.

“Forgive me dire soul for I tire.”
And with this decree, it began to fade,
what was left of my last burning fire.

Breakfast

Bethany Lopez

There's no need to keep track of time,
mark the calandra like she did. Because the days,
the days go by as they always have.
When she was here they danced along
a moody tune.
With a spirit like fire.
Like ice.
On a ten-miler in the Hawaiian terrain.
Muggy. Hot. Quenched until the next heat
wave swallowed us up
like a petting zoo.
No, they will go. The days.
Everything's the same, you know,
no matter where I am, the sky looks
the same, the air smells the same,
the trees droop the same too;
low enough to enhance the bird-less sky
which is filled with the same sound
those monster circadian make.
Bzzz, bzzz, bzzz,
it's all the damn same, you know.
Suppose that's why I have three eggs
for breakfast.
Two whites, and one yolk.

Gray Matter

Samuel Armstrong

Dwelling- isolated with my own thoughts,
my mind becoming my enemy; home
becomes a house and loses its comfort.
Room becomes cell, trapped with my gray matter,
connections are lost, and relationships
drift; glee and bliss are a thing of the past.

Why can't life be like it was in the past?
Imagination free- no pause for thought.
When you and your parents' relationships
could stand the test of time. Your childhood home
holds an abundance of whimsy; matter
of fact, Pop-Ice gave a sense of comfort.

Now, the only thing that gives me comfort,
are the two hounds lying on my bed; past
that door lies a world of antimatter;
instability and madness. Who thought
it was smart to bring guns into our homes?
What happened to human relationship?

It now seems that modern relationships
consist of bitching and nagging. Comfort-
ing to know this is life now, home sweet home.
As I stare at the ceiling, time ticks past,
slowing down each second when swarms of thought
shroud my mind. Door opens, "What's the matter?"

They seem to care now, but it doesn't matter;
it's complicated- the relationship
between my parents and I. I once thought
they understood, dimwitted to comfort
myself with such false hope; don't put it past
the fact I live close to a mental home.

This is life now- stuck in my room, my home;
my mind in a cage, mind over matter.
That's not how it works for me; in the past,

Voices

I wept. Now only the relationship
between boy and hounds begins to comfort
my drooping soul and darkened house of thought.

Home becomes house, it no longer matters.
Relationships wither; losing comfort,
future over past, or so I had thought.

The Knot

Caitlin Barrager

The sun still rose
That next morning.
My alarm still rang
At 7:00 that next day.
Yet, the air was a little colder;
And the sky seemed a little darker.
Your chair was empty that next day!
The teacher told us if we needed to
talk he was always there.
He still taught like you were present.
Everyone gathered together
To remember your smile, your laugh,
and your love for basketball.
We knew you were sad,
But we were hoping it was another phase.
Like the time you only listened to country music.
We didn't realize the true demons
You were fighting!
The hours you felt alone;
Thinking you had no one to talk too.
And how it hurts to think how a simple "hi"
Could've changed that thought of--
Tying that knot!
Or instead of walking by
I could've asked how your day was
And told you how much I valued our friendship.
But instead all I did was
Smile and wave.
I should've realized after you
Gave me a hug and said goodbye
That something was amiss.
I lost you that day!
But I also lost
Your laugh,
Your contagious smile,
And a great friend.

Voices

October 9th--
A day that will always
Be a burden on many hearts.
Fly high sweet angel.
Long Live Miguel Mora.

Not the End

Carter Gracin

What will happen when I die
Will the trumpets sing, will the blackbirds fly?
I sit here on this lonely night, a sad expression fills my face
I've lived all my life, all the years have gone
Why must I be confined to one resting place
I imagine my friends and family all gathered 'round
While I'm slowly lowered underground
Throughout the years I've been worldwide
I've made new friends, in me they confide
As I'm lowered down will their memories be forgotten
Will the dirt smother them too?
Will they all turn rotten?
This sounds to me like something that cannot be
If I must I'll crawl out and plea
Don't stand here and weep, this isn't the end
Through memory, my body will transcend
In my mind, I change the scene
A place so calming, a room so serene
My loved ones are gathered around a fire
A wave of storytelling, sure to transpire
I smile
Forget the hole in which I lay
Along with the tombstone for which so much we've paid
They mark an end that has not come
A life of grief, from which you all must run
Instead, run free, go out and play
And gather around on Thanksgiving Day
Through loved one's company, you all will thrive
And through memory, I will survive

Dead Flowers

Kristen Longo

My foot connects with a can every few seconds as I walk down the street towards a house at the end of the block. This house has a tint of light blue mixed into the aging wood, a freshly painted white fence surrounding its edges, and the most expertly-kept garden I've ever seen. The owner of the house is an elderly woman who sweeps the street out front with an old-fashioned broom made of straw that looks as if it came straight out of the 1800s. Every morning I walk past her house, pick the newspaper up off the street, and bring it to the doorstep since walking can exhaust her. Before I can even knock, she appears with her short white hair wearing a vintage satin dress and fuzzy socks with grips on the bottom.

"Dear," she says, "how many times do I have to tell you not to bother with the newspaper. My joints need the exercise!"

She smiles, and as she opens the door wider, I can feel the warmth of her kitchen reach beyond the foyer and embrace me as I stand slightly beyond the door frame.

"Mrs. Langley," I say, "as my favorite resident on the block, you know I can't pass up an opportunity to help out such a beautiful woman."

I knew that if I didn't retrieve her paper she would forget because I had noticed a while back her memory seemed to be failing her. I get another smile and a hug that makes me feel as if I'm back at home greeting my own grandmother.

"Would you like to come in for a snack?" She asks. "You look like you haven't been eating enough lately."

I contemplate her offer for a second, but then I remember why I started walking down her street in the first place.

"I would love to ma'am, but I have somewhere important to be." I give her one last hug and say, "Bye, Mrs. Langley, maybe tomorrow I'll stay and visit."

I turn my back and walk down the steps. I make it halfway off her property until one of her flowers catches my eye. I bend down, hovering above it to take in the almost unnatural beauty. Pollen litters the inside and vibrant yellow streaks stain the off-white petals as its scent dances around every olfactory receptor I have. Heaven must have hand-painted this flower and in return for its beauty, it grows closer to the sky each day. I turn around to see the front door closed and I assume Mrs. Langley had already gone back to baking. There always seems to be an abundance of flowers in her garden whenever I stop by which tempted me to selfishly scoop my hand under the flower, causing soil to creep beneath my nails. I gently place it in the can I had been kicking along. I wipe the dirt off and continue my walk down the block until I hear a voice call out from behind:

“Is that my flower?”

I whip around to see crossed arms and for someone as frail as her, she is surprisingly intimidating. I swing the flower behind my back, but the damage to her garden had already been done.

“Mrs. Langley, I--”

I start to explain my motives for stealing her flower, but it’s too late.

“Almost every day,” she says, “I watch you take a flower from my garden. I plant more each Sunday just for you, but I think I deserve to see who you steal my flowers for. You must really love them; come, we can take my car.”

I begin to protest but she grabs my arm, and for an old lady, her grip is iron. We walk around to the back of her single-story home to a retro gray Cadillac parked in the driveway. I help her inside and then I find myself in the driver’s seat checking the rear-view mirror and pulling out of the alley.

“The drive isn’t too long,” I say. “Just a little less than a mile. It was kind of you to offer but I don’t mind the walk, it helps me think.”

As we pull up, I see a look of confusion spread across her aged face. I park the car in the front and hold the passenger side door open and takes her time getting out. We reach the entrance and I push the towering steel gates open, dead grass crunching beneath our feet as I hold onto her arm. We exchange somber looks as I kneel beside my girlfriend’s grave. Quietly, I sit and stare at the stolen flower in my hands. Mrs. Langley sits down next to me and I hear her gasp, but I keep my focus on the flower. She places her hands around mine and then pulls the flower from me. She reaches down to the grave and with the care of an experienced gardener, lines it up with her other flowers I’ve taken. Some were planted in old cans like the one today, but others were in whatever discarded trash I found on my walks. After what felt like an eternity, I break my trance and look Mrs. Langley in the eyes only to find tears running down her face. I didn’t understand the compassion she had placing a flower on a stranger’s grave, the tears, or the pain that poisoned her sweet face when she read the name on the headstone until she said, after all the silence, in a small voice:

“I remember now. My granddaughter is buried here, too.”

The Wrong Afro

Caitlin McNeely

The thing Jody remembered most about her brother's funeral was the wig on the body. A child-sized afro to match the one Nick lost to the sickness. But it was wrong, synthetic, and crow-black. Where was the brown? The puff? The magic? Lost like her brother.

She was ten then.

And she was sixteen when she saw him again.

Two puffs on her head, pastel pink sweatshirt, and ripped jeans, she walked out on the porch, swinging an aluminum baseball bat. She'd heard something—the telltale creak of someone poking around where they shouldn't. She looked around, found nothing, and was about to go inside when she saw the swinging golden light out of the corner of her eye. She swiveled in an instant, bat raised. The bobbing light was down the road, and she couldn't tell what it was. Probably just some kid with a flashlight, sneaking out to find his friends.

Then the light passed in front of a face, and it was him. Still eight-years-old and grinning, front teeth barely growing in, and his afro firmly in place.

Jody's heart stopped. Then she was running. Legs pumping as she shot down the porch steps. Feet smacking on the pavement, she pursued the bobbing light as the face turned from her as he ran, too.

She couldn't help but remember a time when Nick broke their mom's best vase. It'd been holding the lilies Dad had gotten her for their anniversary. She'd been so proud of those lilies. Then, Nick and Jody were playing, and Iron Man was attacked by Voltron and went spinning into the table. The crash made their blood run cold, their eyes flicking to each other in horror of the impending ass-whooping.

"Oh, you are so dead when Mom finds out!" Jody'd said. And he bolted. Ran right outta the house and down the cracked sidewalk where Jody's feet worked now.

She'd given chase then, too, intent to bring the culprit to Mom before she got blamed for the mess. Then, he'd run to the park, tried to climb a tree to get away from her. She'd grabbed him by the ankle and hauled him down. Mom had found them wrestling in the grass, bruised and half-feral. They'd both gotten in trouble.

This time when he ran to the park he didn't go for the tree. He didn't go anywhere. Just seemed to flicker and vanish. She couldn't find the light. Her eyes searched the trees, and she called his name. She threw down the bat and called it louder. Any embarrassment was outweighed by the overwhelming need to find him. To see that huge smile again.

Minutes passed and frustrated tears burned her eyes. Why? Why did this

happen? Where did he go?

Again, when she turned to go, the light flickered in the corner of her eye. He was perched on top of the monkeybars. She'd taught him how to swing himself up to sit on those the summer before he died. She should have known that's where he'd be.

Her steps were slower now, less sure as she crossed the grass, climbed up, and swung up to sit across from him. The light was coming from some kind of round lantern on the end of a stick balanced on his shoulder. The contraption reminded her of the time Nick had tried to run away from home and all he'd brought with him was some stuffed animals tied to the end of a stick with the blue knit scarf Meemaw had made for him. He was only four. He'd left the house for fifteen minutes, then came back in tears when his stick had broken.

Was he on the run again? This time he'd been gone for a lot longer.

The light behind his head illuminated his afro and nearly made Jody forget all about that wig. His face was in shadow, but the moonlight sparked off his eyes and flashed over his teeth, and Jody knew he was glad to see her.

She never had been before, but she was suddenly scared to speak, afraid it would break whatever spell allowed her to see him so clearly.

Then he opened his mouth. "I like your hair." His voice, free of the burden of sickness, was like a balm. She felt her shoulders relax.

"Thanks. I like yours, too."

His grin widened and he tilted his chin up to the sky. "Cheshire moon tonight."

She looked up at the creamy, glowing smile. For the first time in a long time, she pictured the cat in the sky like they used to. "You think he caught a mouse?"

"Prob'ly just joshin'."

Her smile faded as she looked back at him. "You gonna disappear, too?"

"I can't stay here forever, Jo. Neither can you." Without warning he noiselessly dropped to the ground below. "Come on. I wanna show you something." He started walking towards the pavilion and Jody scrambled to follow.

"Remember when you had your birthday party here?" he said, gesturing at the picnic tables. "I was so bored that day. You were playing with your school friends, so I hid under this one." He crawled under the nearest table. "See?"

Underneath the table was a riot of faded colors, obviously courtesy of the twelve pack of sharpies mom had gotten him for his birthday, only three weeks before hers. One corner had a big "Nick Was Here." In the center: "Happy Birtday Jo!" Then about ten arrows went from Jo to "Meany!!!" The rest was squiggles, flames, explosions, smiley faces, and sad faces.

"Wow." Jody's fingers went up, tracing over her brother's name in his wobbly child handwriting. "This is amazing," she breathed. She looked over at her brother, but he was no longer next to her. She wriggled out from underneath the table and looked around the pavilion. But he was gone.

Voices

The panic she'd felt before when she'd lost the light did not well up in her again. Instead, she laid down and looked up at the table. She couldn't see as well without the lantern light, so she pulled out her phone for illumination. She reached up and traced over the words again and again, her own Cheshire smile curling her lips.

Nick Was Here.

President's Award - Second Place Prose

Spectacle

Connie Fogle

Cold prickles up my arms and across my shoulders, meeting the rising hairs on the back of my neck. The world is bright and new, reflected in the moonlit snow. A canvas stretched and primed for a new masterpiece.

I step lightly through the powder, passing a bench where a grizzled, older man lays huddled beneath a patchwork of paper and plastic, his breath freezing in a puff of crystal vapor. Instinct draws my hand to the wire frames on my face only to find that they are missing.

Strange. I must have dropped them.

I turn to retrace my steps and a lump forms in my throat.

The girl is a few feet from me, sprawled on the icy ground. Her top half twists unnaturally away, her left arm swung over her face as if ashamed to be caught in such a compromising position. The ends of her thin, blonde hair are stained and matted black against her emerald coat sleeve.

Familiarity creeps just out of sight of my subconscious, compelling me toward her.

I step gingerly around the tangle of limbs, my eyes trained on her. The knees of her jeans are soaked and covered in dead leaves. One brown boot hangs off the end of her right leg at a sickening angle. The snake of a belt lays coiled just out of reach.

I force my eyes to her face, pale and purpling in the frigid air. Thin lips parted in a silent, eternal gasp. Dark, brown eyes stare into nothing, tugging at some deep-rooted memory.

I know those eyes. But something is missing.

Light glints in the corner of my vision.

There they are.

Near the top of her head, half-buried in the snow.

A simple pair of wire frames.

What Really Hapened to Us

Kendra Woods

I would like to clear something up before I begin telling my story: Telemachus wouldn't hurt a fly. That's a nice phrase, isn't it? I have learned a lot of your phrases through glimpses of your world. I like to use these new phrases because it makes me feel young again, wipes away the thousands of years I have spent floating around the Fields of Asphodel.

But all of that is beside the point. Please excuse how easily I get sidetracked. My memory comes and goes these days because I have spent much more time in Hades than I ever spent above ground. That is why I decided I must document my account before I lose my mind entirely, wandering down here for all eternity.

Back to the point. Telemachus was harmless, if not a little cowardly. At least until his "father" came home. I put the word father in quotation marks because he was no father. A father nurtures and teaches his child, but Odysseus was nothing more than a sperm donor for the most critical years of Telemachus's life.

Anyway, Telemachus would not have killed us of his own will. I suppose with that point established I can now write my story from the beginning.

Ω

My name is Melantho. You may have read somewhere that I had pretty cheeks, but let me assure you they were not that pretty. Like any young person, I had cheeks covered in zits, and my constant physical labor caused sweating that definitely did not help my acne. But, you see, people tend to exaggerate when they write after all. The hanging of young maids is more fun to picture if they were young and beautiful maids.

I was born to some random, nameless slaves working in the palace of "resourceful Odysseus" and "circumspect Penelope." I say that my parents were random and nameless because slaves' names didn't matter. (Their names are not remembered anywhere anyway, so naming them here would be irrelevant.) As soon as I was born, the queen decided I was pretty enough for her to play dress-up with. Of course that by no means meant that I was excused from the hard labor of the other slaves; it simply meant that the queen herself taught me how to be a good slave. I've always believed that she only took us in because Eurykleia never allowed her to parent her own son, but that is not my story to tell.

Perhaps I shouldn't speak so harshly about the queen because she was nothing but kind to me during my life. Well, as nice as a slave owner can be to her slave.

I, along with eleven other beautiful slave girls, was allowed to play with the

young prince. We would run over the rocks, play along the beach, and feed the goats together. All those years playing together allowed us to think we were equals with the prince, which was stupid of us in retrospect. However, children never think about class differences.

All those joyful years were spent without “King” Odysseus of course, which was why they were joyful if you ask me. Although no one ever asks me. I’ve heard there are even people who think we were not even real people at all. They like to turn us into symbols to overlook the horror of our deaths. The moon maidens of Artemis. Ha! Don’t get me started on people’s interpretations of that 359-page lie named after that narcissistic king. There is no interpretation needed. Odysseus was evil. That’s the point.

But let’s not talk about that evil book any longer. I would prefer to discuss the truth only.

Ω

Life was all right before the Suitors came. I was exhausted like any slave, but I was lucky to be a favorite of the queen. At first, the men came a few at a time, which wasn’t so bad. But once they started coming in earnest, life got much harder. Poor Queen Penelope was constantly hounded by their insistent requests that she marry them. At the time, the maids and I, along with Telemachus, were about 15. He was too young, too powerless, too untrained to do anything about the Suitors. We all watched as the Suitors destroyed the livelihood of the king who had been gone for so long he was assumed dead.

Of course we, as all slaves do, had to serve the Suitors all the food they were stealing. We circled with pitchers of wine and plates of olives, figs, and cheese. None of which we did because we wanted to, mind you; who would want to give away her master’s food to thieves?

The worst part was the way the Suitors groped us and insisted they take us to bed, which we avoided for a short time in honor of *xenia*—that ancient law of Zeus that got so many people in trouble. Eventually (inevitably), the Suitors just picked a favorite girl and raped her every night. I don’t remember now who I went with. It’s been so long now, and honestly all the Suitors seemed to blur into one giant dog. Collectively, the twelve of us decided to pretend we loved the Suitors because it made them gentler in bed, but we never actually loved them despite what you may have read. We just did what we had to do in order to survive.

Ω

The nights weren’t all bad, however, because once the rapists fell asleep, we could sneak back to the palace. We still had work to do. Not the typical work of slaves—cleaning the floors, making the beds. Our nighttime work was helping the queen unravel *The Shroud*.

I’m sure I don’t need to tell you about this bit because “circumspect Penelope” is famous for her trick, while we get honorable mention at best in the story for aiding in the unraveling.

So after we went off with our rapists, we returned and helped Penelope fool

the Suitors. During that time, we shared information learned from serving the Suitors, both in Odysseus's dining hall and in their own beds.

It's been said that we badmouthed Penelope and Telemachus to the Suitors, and it's true. However, this was to gain the Suitors' trust so they would speak freely in our presence. Eurykleia hated us because she believed that we truly hated the queen and Telemachus, which is why she eventually turned only us twelve over to Odysseus's evil hands.

During those nights, we smiled, laughed, and joked together with the queen like old friends. She told us that she felt bad for us, but unfortunately she had no power in her own home to stop the Suitors. We told her we appreciated the concern and understood why she could not help. We still see her down here occasionally, but Odysseus does not like her or Telemachus to speak with us. We do not know what she knows of our deaths, and we cannot ask.

Three years we spent in this same pattern: wake up, serve the Suitors, bed the Suitors, help Queen Penelope, sleep for maybe an hour, repeat. It wasn't ideal by any means, but it was the best life a slave could have had during that time. We were happy.

But once the Suitors discovered her trick, she finished *The Shroud* in just a few days. Our nights were no longer spent laughing with the queen. Instead, we dressed after our nightly rape and came home to slave's quarters to sleep packed like sardines (a great modern simile).

Ω

The arrival of "the beggar" (Odysseus in disguise of course) did not seem that strange. Beggars came to the palace occasionally to search out the sympathy of the royals. No one (please excuse the unintentional reference) paid any mind to the beggar. The Suitors teased him and threw stuff at him, and we continued to circulate the room as normal—pretending to love our assigned rapists and badmouthing the royals.

It became apparent that something was off with the beggar when he demanded to be given a turn in Penelope's bow test. This ruffled the feathers (another great modern phrase!) of the Suitors. However, Telemachus acted with more defiance and courage than he ever had and allowed the beggar to compete. Now, I should not be telling this part of the story as though I were there because the room was locked. I am just sharing the story as I have heard it.

Our story from the day of the slaughter was much more interesting than the killing of *xenia*-defying men anyway. According to Zeus, the Suitors had it coming, but we were innocents.

Ω

Where was I? Let's see; I covered parentage, Telemachus, *The Shroud*, the rapes, the beggar—that's right! I was going to talk about our deaths.

The day of our death began like any other day. We woke up and began preparing the wine and food for the Suitors. We circulated as always, being groped

and eyed, but nothing seemed different. Queen Penelope had set the bow test for the Suitors, stating that whoever strung the great bow of Odysseus and shot straight through the twelve axe heads would be her new husband. However, we imagined this was just another trick from the queen who was by far the cleverest person we knew.

It was obvious something was off when Eurykleia told us to leave the food in the kitchen and go with her to the storerooms. We could hear blood-curdling screams from the hall, and we were afraid. Would the murderer inside the hall soon come for us? We didn't know who he was or why he was killing the Suitors, but we were glad for our rapists' deaths regardless. We wept tears of joy.

Abruptly, the screaming stopped. The deafening silence was somehow more terrifying than the sound of the slaughter. Telemachus came out a few minutes later, covered in blood, and summoned Eurykleia. We heard Telemachus tell her that his father wanted to see her inside the hall, but there was no way the real Odysseus had come at last. Odysseus after Odysseus had come to "reclaim his throne and his wife," and Penelope had outsmarted them all. We assumed that this Odysseus would fare the same against our brilliant queen.

Once Eurykleia had disappeared inside, we snuck back to the slaves' quarters to hide.

Eventually, we were summoned to clean the mess in the hall. We knew the Suitors were dead, but we could never have anticipated the horror Odysseus had left behind in the hall. (We later learned that Odysseus had left horror and death everywhere he went, but that's not my story to tell either.) Bloodied corpses and smashed furniture were all around the room. I felt like throwing up at the gore and the stench. But good slaves do as they are told, so we worked together with Telemachus and the herdsmen to drag the bodies outside. We scrubbed the floor, tables, and chairs until the room was as spotless as it had once been; though it had a fewer tables and chairs than before.

Then, Telemachus led us outside to the courtyard. We stood speechless against a wall, tears drying on our cheeks because of the gruesome scene we had to clean up. Telemachus wouldn't look us in the eyes, and I knew something was wrong.

The prince, our poor friend, began to halfheartedly reproach us, saying that we deserved the most painful death for insulting the queen and himself and for sleeping with the Suitors.

Now I know what you're thinking. If he said that, he must've believed it. I don't claim to know how he felt about us in that moment, but I always knew him to be a sweet boy. I will always believe he said those words for the benefit of the oxherd and the swineherd who were with him, not because he himself believed we had betrayed his household. We had grown up together after all; he knew how much we cared about the queen and him.

I blame no one but "blameless Odysseus" for what transpired that day. Telemachus, our dear childhood friend, wrapped a noose around each of our

Voices

necks and tied us to the prow of a ship.

There were screams from some of my companions as we were hanged alongside the sickening crack of breaking necks. I stayed silent, my eyes boring into those of the prince.

Breath leaving me and feet kicking of their own accord, I felt the life seeping out of me. The last thing I saw was his pity-filled eyes.

Then, nothing.

Ω

Next thing I knew, I was being led along with the other maids and the Suitors by Hermes to Hades. Along the way, Hermes spilled the beans (my personal favorite phrase) about Odysseus's supposed relation to him. The god of trickery explained that the grandfather of Odysseus, Autolycus, used his cleverness to spread the rumor of his divine parentage to explain away his lies and thievery.

Odysseus was no more divine than the others and I, yet he lives on as a hero as we are dishonored and forgotten, reduced to symbols or whores.

She Was Like

Nikki Anderson

She was like...

The first dusting of snow in November
Subtle, fresh, and cold to the touch
She was good for the soul
But hardly memorable

She was like...

A shower first thing in the morning
Clean, refreshing, and fun for the moment
She was nice to wake up to
But by bedtime she had worn off

She was like...

A childhood best friend
Close, understanding, and full of laughter
She was all your favorite memories
But she's in the past

She was like...

A first love
Safe, warm, and never failing
She was the best thing in the world
But now she's gone forever

She was like...

Me...

The Game

Haley Goodman

Life is simply you against everyone.
Like a wolf in sheep's clothing, just a game.
But it's Russian roulette, you have the gun,
Firing is easy but it brings pain,
Because it's on you where you choose to aim.
And after that you'll have no one to call,
For who stays to be shot with lies again.
So you don't tell them they're playing at all,
But when the gun goes off, it'll be you who falls.

This game of deceit is like spider's webs,
Carefully woven with beautiful lies.
To trigger this trap one must be misled,
And there's no better way to catch the eye
Then a venomous spider playing shy.
So she smiles and lies her way right though,
Right through suspicion to the naive fly.
The deceit like shadows veiling both views,
For even the spider doesn't know, she's stuck too.

Our Blue Smoke Sky

Carson Owens

A cup of coffee and a shared cigarette
We're seventeen, slick and sly
Our parents think we know nothing yet

One quiet blonde, one big mouth brunette
Our friendship gets us by,
Along with coffee and a shared cigarette

The world could hand us any threat
Into unknown worlds we pry
But our parents think we know nothing yet

We don't owe this world a debt
Down midnight roads, we fly
With our coffee and a shared cigarette

Our dark lipstick is our best asset
Black smeared across our eyes
Our parents think it's too much, and yet,

We cling tight to CDs and cassettes
Under our blue smoke sky
Created by our coffee and shared cigarettes
And our parents think we know nothing yet

President's Award - First Place Poetry

To the Stranger at Andy's Frozen Custard

Paola Brinkley

We're eating ice cream
and it's 30 degrees outside.
Our skin feels
numb like old rubber
in the harsh winter wind,
but it tastes too damn good.

You don't know me
nor do I know you,
but I know enough to know
by the James Brownie Funky
Jackhammer in your hands
that it's been a hard day
or maybe a hard life
and you're looking
for a frozen fix.

We side-eye each other
because we're the only fools
on this cold Austin night
to eat frozen custard
like it's hot chocolate,
hoping that this fudge
addiction would melt
the heavy load in our hearts.

We don't care that it's January,
and we don't pay attention
to the looks the tired
employees give us.
We just bask in frozen
strawberries and brownie chunks
and the coolness of creamy vanilla
while we watch our troubles
melt in frozen fire

on the sidewalk
like the caramel
drizzle on
our tongues.

Nineteen Suitcases

Grace Tschlis

“Which says ‘I’m here to have fun, but not too much fun,’ the dress or the striped pants?” Eloise asked Jude as she spun around his living room, showing off the dress option.

“I’m practically blinded by all the sparkles on the dress. Is that the point?” Jude responded.

“Of course, don’t be silly, Jude.”

“I would go with the pants, they’ll be more comfortable anyways.”

“You might be right. I’ll go try them on again.” Eloise disappeared into the bathroom to re-try on the other outfit.

Jude sighed. It was a Friday night and Eloise was getting ready to go out, most likely to some grimy club downtown. She invited him out every weekend, but they both knew he would prefer to stay at home. Usually, Jude loved helping his best friend pick out outfits for her wild evenings, but tonight was different. His Amazon package arrived earlier that day and he was dying to open it. Every time he ordered something online, he paid extra for expedited shipping. He was simply incapable of waiting 6-8 business days.

Eloise reemerged from the bathroom, grinning in her bright colored striped pants and black shirt. “Well, right again, Jude. I look stunning, if I may so.”

“I agree. I’m sure you’ll have lots of fun tonight,” he said.

“Some say that’s my only talent.”

Jude laughed and rolled his eyes. Eloise was a certified genius and worked as a computer engineer. Their friendship had lasted for sixteen years for two reasons; a shared love of computer science and marshmallows. When they were nine years old, they sat next to each other in homeroom and failed to build a tower out of toothpicks and marshmallows because they decided it would be much more fun to eat the marshmallows. Eloise liked to joke that was the first and last time Jude broke a rule.

“You sure you don’t want to come out with me?”

“Definitely sure.”

“You know I worry about you, Jude. I think it might be good for you.”

“While I appreciate that, you are too busy of a person to be worrying about me.”

“I’ll text you when I get back home.”

“I’ll probably hear you stomping around up there, you’ve never been a quiet upstairs neighbor.”

Eloise pretended to be offended and gave Jude a kiss on the cheek. She skipped out the door, off into a world that he would never understand.

A year after they graduated high school, Eloise moved into the apartment

upstairs so she could be at Jude's door in a moment's notice. She never complained that her commute to work became longer or that her family lived on the opposite side of town.

Jude walked into the kitchen and searched for a pair of scissors to tear into the box. He cut away at the tape and pulled out a dark green winter coat with two pockets on the outside and two on the inside. It was perfect for his winter trips to Chicago to visit his brother, Leo. His brother worked as an accountant and lived with his fiancée and their cat in an apartment Jude considered too modern. While Jude went to a local college, Leo went to the University of Chicago and never came back. Above Jude's desk in his home office was a laminated google map of the route from Roseburg, Oregon to his brother's home in Chicago. 2,196 miles exactly.

When they were growing up, Leo always gave Jude a hard time for being too sensitive. It usually led to a fist fight until Leo apologized with a pint of Ben & Jerry's Chocolate Fudge Brownie ice-cream. If there wasn't any in the freezer, they continued to pummel each other until they became too exhausted or bored. As most siblings, they grew closer as they matured. Leo gave Jude rides to the comic book store, and in return, Jude listened to Leo rant about his girlfriends or his football teammates.

With Leo gone, Jude listened to Eloise talk instead because she talked enough for the both of them. It calmed him down. She told him everything about the places she visited for work and brought him back key chains from each city she stayed in. The key chains reminded Jude of all the places he needed to see and explore. He couldn't stay trapped in his apartment, or Roseburg, for the rest of his life.

Jude went to his closet to put away his new winter coat. Stacked along the walls were a variety of suitcases, ranging in color and size. He pulled down a blue one with two wheels and unzipped it. Inside were sweaters, gloves, and jeans. He neatly folded the coat and placed it on top of the other clothes. He adjusted the luggage tag he had labeled "Chicago: Winter." Jude had a suitcase for every place he wanted to visit. For some places, he even had two. His suitcase for a trip to Chicago in December was packed with warm clothes, while his suitcase for a trip to the Windy City in July had an assortment of t-shirts and shorts. Besides his two Chicago suitcases, his favorite was a blue and white striped one he designated for Greece. It was empty except for a map of Athens and a printed PDF entitled "A Tourist's Guide to the Acropolis." On top of the Greece suitcase, he had a small red one for California. There wasn't much in that one either because Jude planned to fill it with as many souvenirs from Disneyland as possible.

Everything Jude bought for his travels was purchased online. It was easier for him. No clingy employee asking if he needed help every other minute. There was no one to rush him or judge him for his purchases. Nobody except Eloise knew about this hobby. The first time he showed her the closet, she was

unable to hide her surprise.

“How on earth did you manage to fit all these suitcases in here?”

“A lot of trial and error, really,” he said.

“You have too much free time, you know that?” She asked.

“I like it. It makes me think I’ll really be able to go to all these places one day.”

“You will, Jude. I’m sure you will.”

Jude loved traveling, but he had never been outside of Oregon. He had never visited Leo in Chicago, and he didn’t know when he would. His suitcases gave him something to be excited for, even if he had no plane tickets purchased for the near future. On one of his better days, he and Eloise went to the post office to get his passport photos taken. It was the first actual step Jude had taken to legitimizing his travel plans. Eloise even baked him a cake and traced an outline of an airplane in chocolate icing. Those pictures remained on his desk, collecting dust as months went by.

Jude didn’t want to be like this, but he didn’t know how to help himself. His anxiety had only gotten worse as he grew up. At first, it manifested in insignificant moments he could get through, like presentations at school. As he moved from each grade level to the next, he felt like the voices in the hallways were all complaining about him. Leo ate lunch with Jude in the cafeteria every day. Leo never once complained about not eating with his friends.

Now that he was older, Jude tried to get help. It wasn’t easy. He didn’t want to leave his home to talk to a therapist, and he never felt comfortable with the ones that came to his apartment. They were kind enough, but their constant writing and intense stares unnerved Jude. The sessions almost made him forget about traveling.

Several hours later, Jude heard his best friend’s loud footsteps returning from her wild night out. She seemed to be using his ceiling as her own personal dance floor. He had been drifting in and out of sleep, thinking of a winter trip to Chicago. Should he buy matching gloves to go with the new coat? Or should he just borrow some from Leo? Which led to the terrifying thought, did Leo even own gloves? Most nights, planning trips in his head helped Jude to fall asleep. Tonight, it seemed to do the opposite. He rolled out of bed and turned on his closet light. His Mexico suitcase was balancing precariously on top of the New York City suitcase. He instinctively rushed to adjust the luggage.

Jude looked at the large, silver, four-wheeled suitcase beneath the Mexico and New York one. It was the only suitcase Eloise had helped to pack. It was for Japan, a trip they planned to take together. Eloise said they could stay with some of her dad’s relatives. Suddenly, he heard his phone buzzing from his bedside table. On the other end of the line he heard the dulcet, but slightly drunken, tone of Eloise.

“Why hello Jude! I’m surprised you picked up.”

“Yeah, I was just fixing some stuff. How’d your night go?”

“Just stellar. I think we went to every club in all of Oregon,” she said.

“I’m sure you did. Glad you’re home safe.”

“I am always safe, Jude. Not as safe as you, but still pretty safe.”

“Anything worth telling me at 3:30 in the morning? Or can I go back to bed?”

Eloise paused. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, it’s the perfect time for a round of 20 questions,” Jude rolled his eyes.

“When are we leaving?” She said.

“Leaving for where?”

“Anywhere. I want to get out of town. I want to do something besides bar hopping every weekend and going to the same old job every goddamn day.”

“I don’t know... You know I want to.”

“I know you’re trying. But you’re gonna have to keep trying if you want to your brother’s wedding.”

“What? What are you talking about?” Jude said, now slightly confused.

“Didn’t you check your mail today? Your brother sent out an invitation. I got one.”

Jude’s heart started to race. What was Eloise talking about? He hadn’t received any invitations within the past few days.

“Leo set the date for the wedding.”

“I haven’t got anything from him. Why wouldn’t he have just texted or called me about it? Am I not invited?”

“Don’t be stupid, of course you’re invited. It probably just got lost somewhere,” Eloise said, yawning on the other end of the call.

“I might go check my mail right now, just to be sure.”

“Juuuude. Please wait until the morning, I don’t even know what I’m talking about right now.”

“Technically, it’s already morning.”

“Listen to me. We’re both going to hang up and get some much needed rest. I will see you later, okay?” Eloise said.

“Fine. How about 10?”

“In the morning? Are you insane? One o’clock at the earliest.”

Eloise ended the call, leaving Jude alone to his thoughts. In the morning, he decided to text his brother asking about the wedding. Leo was notorious for taking several hours to respond to messages, so Jude did what he usually did when he was anxiously waiting for something. He cleaned. Halfway through mopping the kitchen, he heard a knock on the door. Eloise waltzed in wearing jeans with holes the size of small moons and a navy shirt.

“You know, I think there may be a thing as too much Febreze.”

“Shut up, I need something to do while I wait for Leo to respond to my texts,” Jude said.

“I’m sure he’s just busy with something work related, he’ll reply soon,” she said.

“It’s a Saturday, what could he possibly be doing?”

“Probably working overtime to pay for the wedding.”

“I don’t like that he didn’t tell me they set a date before they sent out the invitations to everyone. And I haven’t even gotten mine yet!”

“Maybe he wanted it to be a surprise?” Eloise offered.

“Or maybe he didn’t want to hear me say I wouldn’t be able to come.”

“Don’t say that. Your brother loves you. I bet things just got busy and he decided to wait to talk to you about it.”

“Wow, what a great brother I have,” Jude muttered.

The two sat at the small wooden table in the corner of the kitchen. Jude volunteered to make her some lunch, but Eloise was content with a couple of bowls of Cheerios. Jude rocked back and forth in his chair while Eloise shoveled cereal into her mouth. At one point Eloise almost missed her mouth, causing some milk to spill on her shirt. Jude couldn’t help but laugh and he felt the tension in his shoulders relax. She recounted the events of the previous evening. She had always been a wonderful storyteller. It was as if Jude had been there the entire time, instead of home alone rearranging his suitcases. Suddenly, Jude’s phone buzzed.

“What’d he say?” She asked.

He scanned the message. At least Leo had the courtesy to reply with more than a sentence.

“He apologized and hopes I’ll be able to make it.”

“That’s it? Those are the words of wisdom he has to offer you?” Eloise scoffed.

“I really don’t know how I’m going to do this. Lots of strangers crowded in a church somewhere in Chicago? My palms are sweating just thinking about it. I know Leo wants me there, but...”

“You’re considering it though, that’s something you would never do for anyone else.”

“Of course. I want to see my only brother get married, but at the same time I don’t want everything that goes along with it.”

“Jude, you need to talk to someone about this.”

“I am. I’m talking to you.”

“I mean someone who knows how to actually help you. I can only do so much for you,” she frowned.

“I’ll just wait ‘til the invitation comes and I’ll go from there,” Jude said. His words did little to reassure Eloise, or himself.

Two months had passed since Leo’s invitation arrived and Jude worried more and more with each passing day. It was a constant cycle of packing and unpacking his Chicago suitcase. As if the rhythm of organizing could inspire some sort of solution. He lied and told Leo he and Eloise had already booked their flight. Jude watched YouTube videos every night called “How to Get Over

your Fear of Flying.” Jude’s problem was that that was not his only problem. He could not define all his thoughts and worries into a single fear. Meanwhile, Eloise wanted to buy their tickets sooner rather than later. She said she would not be afraid to blame Jude if he made her miss the “wedding of the century.”

“Wedding of the century? He’s my brother, not yours. Calm down,” Jude told her one Sunday afternoon.

“Did you honestly just tell me to calm down? Because I could say something very insensitive right now, but I will hold off because I’m trying to be a nice person.”

Jude grumbled and went back to scrolling on his phone.

“But really, we won’t be able to go anywhere until you become more comfortable talking to people besides me and Leo.”

“I know.”

“Don’t you get tired of living like this?” Eloise asked.

“I guess. I don’t know.”

“I want to help you, I really do. I just don’t know how. We never really talk about what’s going on with you, what’s going on inside your head. I feel like sometimes we pretend it’s not a problem that we should be tackling.” Jude could see tears swimming in her dark colored eyes. A tiny droplet was stuck on the tip of her right eyelash.

“What are you going to do if I move away for work or if I meet someone?”

Jude hated seeing Eloise cry, it was such a rare occurrence.

“You don’t want to see a therapist, and I guess that’s your business, but can’t you at least try again? You’re much too intelligent to do nothing for the rest of your life. I hope you know that,” Eloise sniffled.

“Thank you,” was all Jude could manage.

“My other friends ask why I’ve stuck by you for all these years. You taught me that it can be fun to stay home on a Friday night and traveling is a privilege I am lucky to have.”

“I’m glad our years of friendship haven’t been a complete waste,” Jude said, trying to make her smile.

“I totally get if you don’t want to talk to me about this kind of stuff, but I will help you find somebody you can talk to. I will screen every therapist and doctor in the whole state if I have to.”

Jude wondered what would have happened to him if they never bonded over their love for marshmallows in the 4th grade. He would be much lonelier, he knew that. Eloise cared for those she loved with an intensity that rivaled Mother Teresa.

“I can start looking into flights,” Jude said.

“Really?”

“It’s a step in the right direction, isn’t it?”

Eloise grinned, “Of course. One step at a time.”

The two huddled around Jude’s laptop screen while searching for the cheap-

Voices

est seats. Jude didn't know what would happen about his brother's wedding. In a perfect world, he would hop on the plane and never look back. At the present moment, that seemed unlikely. However, arguing with Eloise about which city was the better choice for a layover and listening to her rant about luggage fees gave him the smallest bit of hope. Those suitcases would one day be so battered from all the use, he would have to start replacing them.

One-Night Stand-Up

Jessica Harrison

“Did you bring a condom?” I ask as I unbutton my low-cut blouse.

“Yeah, but it’s been in my wallet since freshman year of high school,” he replies. Someone was optimistic.

“Have you ever done this before?”

His face blends in with my cherry lip. I couldn’t tell what he was insinuating. A one-night stand? Or sex in general? He awkwardly placed his hand on my boob as if it determining the ripeness of a melon. Now I was being optimistic.

“There’s nothing to it,” I respond as I walk towards my freshly made bed. He walks towards me with a great sense of hesitation as if he’s a baby gazelle and I a lioness.

Being a cougar seemed like a good idea. I thought it would spice things up in my life. Who knew it would be more like babysitting a man child. All of the women I knew in college were happily married or banging the pool boy since our kids left for college. I used to be such a man eater. Back in the day, Jill and I would sneak out to the club and dance the whole night through, a new man each night. Jill would laugh her fucking head off if she could see me now. Fifty-two, sitting in my one-bedroom apartment, trying to convince this twenty something to sleep with me. She would have a riot.

I rub my disgraced finger and fiddle with the stupid metal band. That piece of tin was just a reminder.

“How many kids do you want to have?”

His words pulling me back to reality. So, we are going down this road.

“I have three kids already.”

“Wow, so I’m going to be a dad?”

“What?”

“Well, if things go well tonight, and we get married they’re going to be my kids too, but I don’t think I’m ready to be a dad.” At the old age of twenty he was having a midlife crisis.

He cried, no he wept for a solid hour afterwards. I pulled out a cigarette and took a long puff, holding the smoke in for a while allowing it to completely destroy my lungs then releasing with a big sigh. The smoke dissipated in the air leaving a pungent smell that still had its grip on my lungs. Unsurprisingly, we did not sleep together. No, he lay on my bed and began to tell me his whole life story.

“My mom and I are really close. I tell her everything. Maybe I will tell her about you.”

“No really, that’s okay. You shouldn’t tell anyone about this.” For the sake of my dignity which was probably nonexistent by now.

Voices

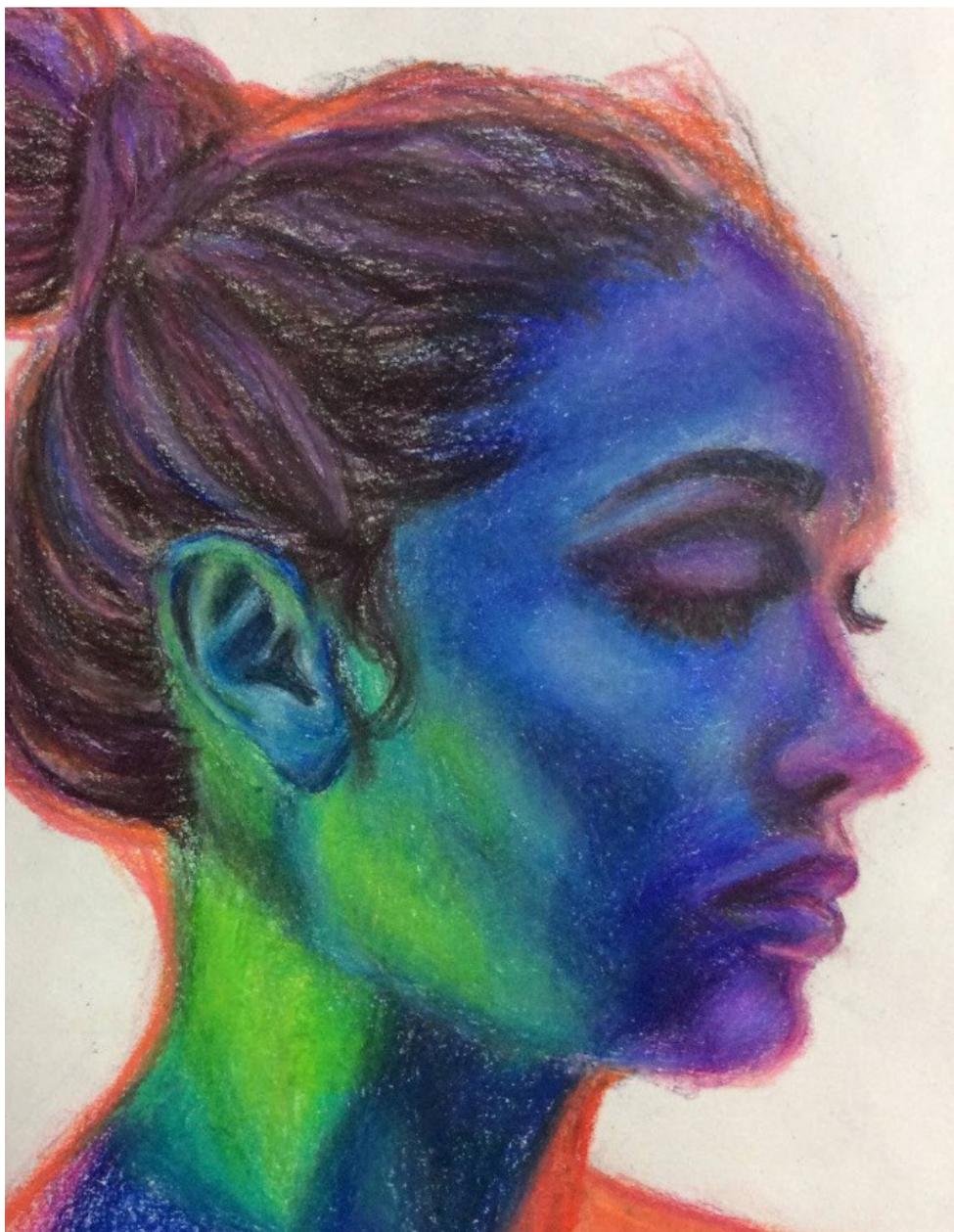
“You remind me of her.”

With that one final blow to the remainder of my dignity, he fell asleep. I ended up doing the walk of shame that morning, out of my own house.

Now all I can think is: I wore Spanx for that?

Polychromatic

Sarah Ann Teaw



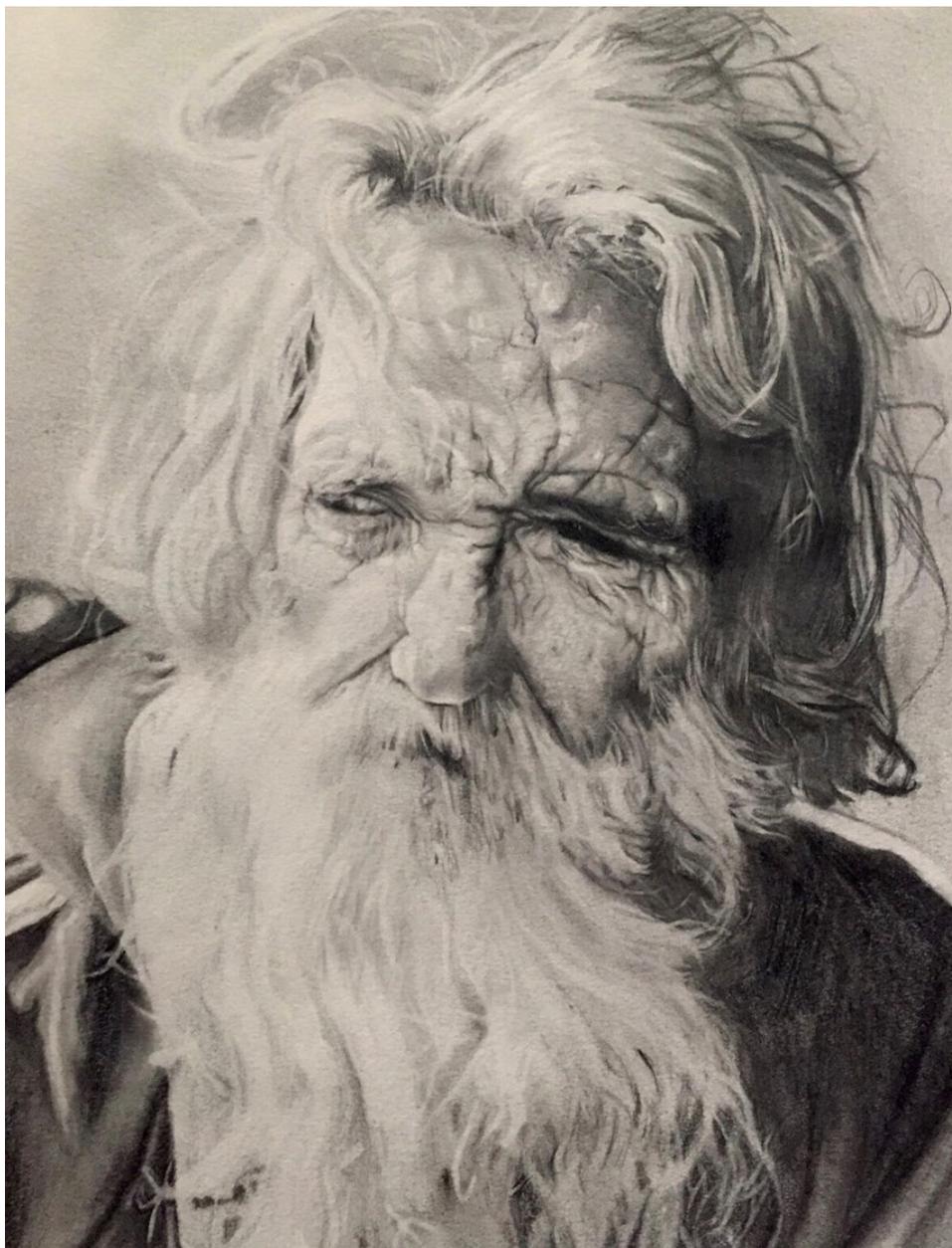
Pride

Sarah Ann Teaw



James

Natalia Hernandez



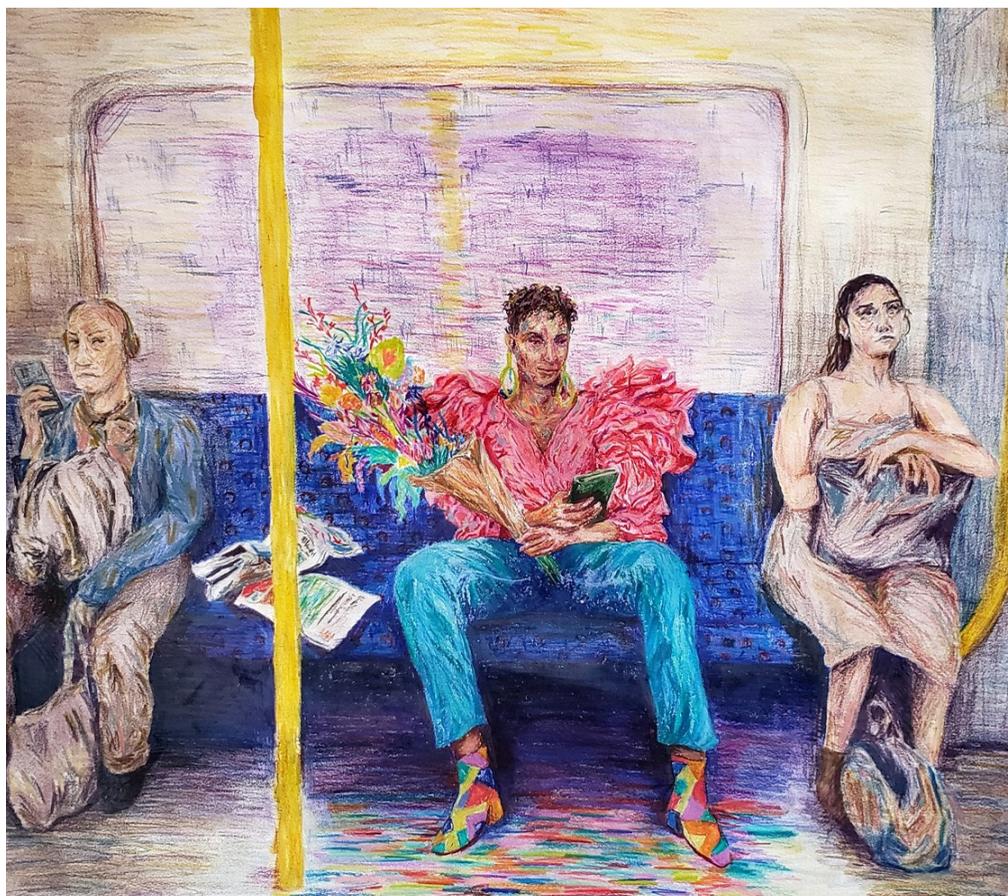
Shielded

Andi Newberry



Self-Assured

Andi Newberry



Bound by Flesh

Ferdine Leblanc



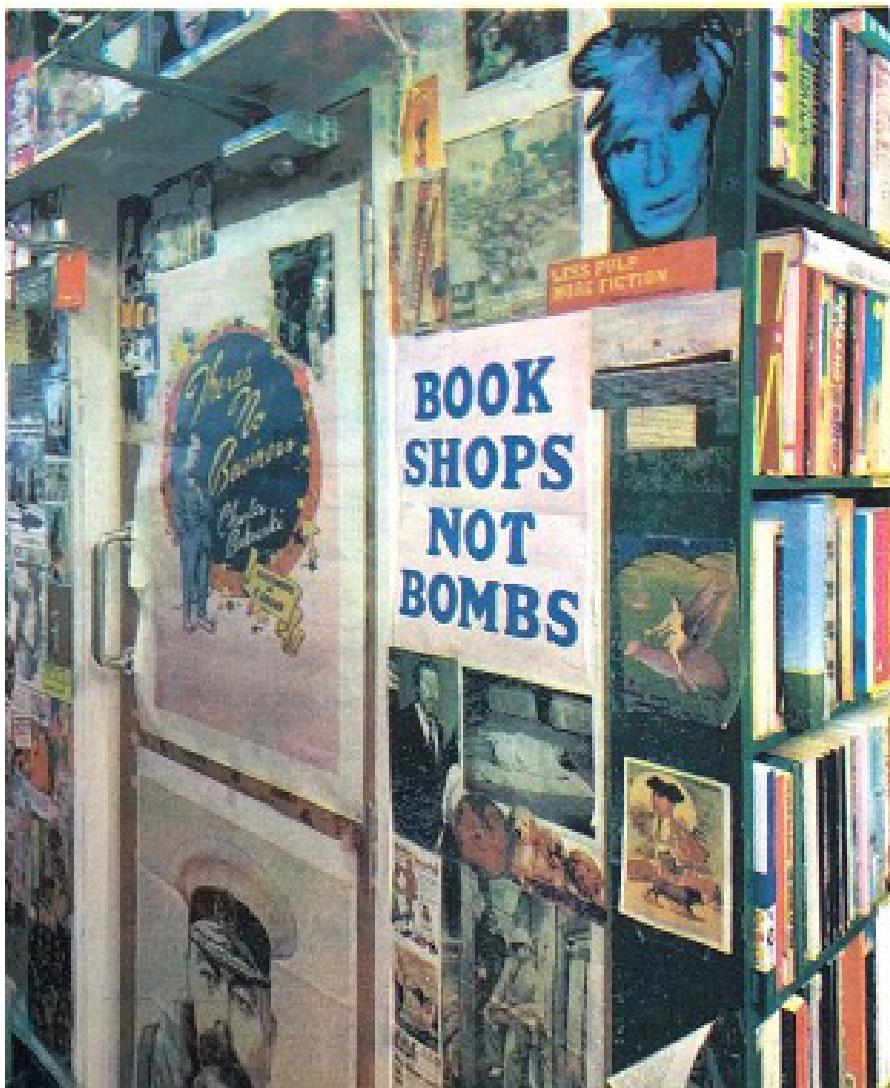
Faces of Nature

Ferdine Leblanc



Books Shops Not Bombs

Amanda Hansen



A Dream to Have

Cameron Mayberry

They always ask, people
“What do you want to be?” It’s a staple.
When I answer, it’s always genetic
“I want to be a doctor, a vet, just not pathetic.”

All kids my age sound so sure of what they want.
But it seems like I wasn’t able to have that grant;
To have something to work towards
I feel like it’s a skill of mind that everyone hoards.

If I had a thought like that, I wouldn’t leave it at bay
Because I know if I do, there will be only one place I can stay.
A house. Owned by a mother and father
Who put up with their child and thinks she doesn’t bother.

The truth is I do bother and care;
I do think about the future and how well I will fair.
Only I don’t have a clue on how to get there
The more people ask, the more I look, but where?

Had I known, I would hold it up high
Because as they say, the only limit is the sky.
I have this hunger in my stomach
I want what other people have or my life may plummet.

It seems like an amazing thing to have, to feed and to grow.
I will to find one and work with it because I’m tired of feeling low.
People I’ve asked will say they want love or a chance by anyway of mean
Mine isn’t as complex as theirs, I just want a dream.

It sounds so stupid and I hate when people ask me
Because I just want to say “so what I don’t have one. Go, there’s nothing to see”
Those are the times when I just want to hide.
Without something so trivial, I have nothing to abide.

Voices

When thoughts like those come, I tell myself things will be fine
I remember to look, not rush, because things happen with time.
I wish nothing more than to make people proud and show the world what I've
done
And I can't wait to know and thrive into whatever I become.

Cut Little

Dolly Jacqueline Maass

Monday mornings
taste like desert here in Texas.
A blow-dryer whistling a tune
into my oily skin.

twenty-five cent gender-gum,
obnoxious bell,
cut out magazines;
I want to be cut into pieces,
too, you know,
I want that haircut.

“That’s a boy you’re trying to be”
“Momma, *I like boys don’t like boys like girls—*

cut me small, Akira,
and when you do, *fold me little.*”

Seven Centuries in Hell and Other Fun Party Games

Jessica Harrison

3/5/11

Dear Diary,

Don't let the name fool you, seven minutes in Heaven was literal Hell. Tye Smith and I, a foot apart, in a dark dusty coat closet. Measly minutes pass like countless centuries. I didn't know Tye that well. Only that he sat two seats next to me in English and would doodle in the margins of essays rather than write them. At least three girls in class had a crush on him, I didn't see why. I guess he had kind eyes or something. Taylor Fields said that she would totally 'do him' whatever that meant.

Love,
Georgie

5/9/12

Dear Diary,

I played Suck or Blow for the first time. I realized rather quickly the name was misleading. My older sister Genie tried to convince me it was code for a blowjob. As soon as a deck of playing cards was whipped out, I knew something wasn't right. The game is oddly strategic to most teens. They stand, their crush by their side, and with the utmost precision retrieve the card from another person's breath. Once they face their crush they "accidentally" drop the card removing the barrier from each other's lips. Party games aren't for competitive people. A game like Suck or Blow for instance. Essentially, one person blows on a playing card while other person inhales, passing the card between mouths until it lands on the person you want to kiss. Suddenly, you forget the simplistic rules and end up kissing someone. I was determined to not drop a single card. I'd be crowned victor of the party! Damien melodramatically turned to me as if the card was going to fall. I pressed my lips onto the card, attempting to stabilize it. The next moments seemed like slow motion as I watched the card slip from between us and hit the floor. Our lips had no barrier between them, just his lips touching mine. In that moment all I could think was, 'YOU MADE ME LOSE THE FUCKING GAME.' Damien's face resembled a red solo cup, and he

quickly vanished into the sea of people. I didn't see him again. He must've been so embarrassed by the loss.

Xoxo,
GG

4/1/13

Dear Diary,

When I thought of the grand climax leading up to my first kiss I imagined greatness. I had seen all of the Rom-Com's under the sun to know exactly what it would feel like. As he leaned in, the beginning of 'Closer' by Tegan and Sara would play, 'All I wanna know is will you come a little closer'. That obligatory pause, with his lip's inches away from mine until the chorus hit. The volume crescendos then blast, 'It's not just all physical. I'm the type who won't get oh so critical". By the time it got to, 'I want you close, I want you" we would've been making out for sure. I'm going on my first date with Josh tonight so I'll fill you in.

Elated,
GeGe

Update: Well, it wasn't at all like the movies. I felt nothing. No sparks, fireworks, or pyrotechnics of any kind. He didn't lean in slowly. It was a rapid lunge like a cheetah coming onto an unsuspecting gazelle. His lips felt like I was wrestling with sand paper. It couldn't possibly get worse. I stood corrected. He began jolting his tongue down my throat like a frog and my uvula a poor fly. If this is what kissing is, I didn't see the appeal. I would've rather stayed in this closet of seven centuries in hell for the rest of my life than kiss another boy.

Unfortunately,
Georgia Mae

1/3/14

Dear Diary,

I never understood those stupid party games. Why'd it only count when it was a guy and a girl. If I had spun the empty coke bottle and landed on a girl, the circle would go silent then erupt in chaos, ruling it void. Boys feared jeopardizing their masculinity, and girls despised the boys drooling gaze. Overall, it was taboo. Where did they learn the rules? Everyone knew the rules except me. Could I Google the rulebook to find a loophole? There was no rhyme nor reason to the proceedings. The older kids constantly alter the game in their

Voices

favor. Brandi landed on Steve but nudged the bottle and insisted it was Michael. I wanted to callout her obvious cheating, but the prize didn't seem worth it. Maybe I'll understand when I was older.

Hopefully,
Georgia

Update: I didn't.

We Played With Dolls

Dolly Jacqueline Maass

In the tree house, for years, we played with plastic bodies: brown and yellow. We brushed and braided their hair together into knots of pasty horse mane.

We rubbed their gummy stomachs against each other's faces; carving black Barbie's nose into Kelly's pink intestines.

My little brother massaged his fingertips on Kelly's underdeveloped breasts, back and forth in the same motion that his abandoned Hot Wheels rolled over the dirt.

We chewed on their tiny fingers and feet until we left a pattern of teeth marks on their skin. He snapped Kelly's little arms like chicken bones and fixed her over and over like a tower of Legos.

The first time I felt tingles like ants walking up and down my body, I had cut Barbie's purple dress in half. I licked her back until *it* felt wet.

The smell of her rubber skin made me think I was in love for the first time. The day my brother lost interest in Kelly, he fell in love with Barbie's blue eyes, too.

I decided I had to pop her head off like a firework and cut her into pieces before he came home from school.

I took her into my tongue and savored the silicone that held her together and swallowed the fragments of her muscles and black hair through the walls of my throat.

Is This What You Meant When You Told Me Beauty Is Pain

Caitlin McNeely

My mother always said
That we live in the ugly part of Texas
The flat brown part
But I could never quite agree
As long as sunlight filtered through trees
Sparking gold off their uppermost branches
Splaying strange patterns of light on the ground below
How could this be ugly?

Now my mother tells me
That light through trees
What I have long considered the purest beauty
Hurts her
Induces her migraines
That keep her in bed in the dark
Made her lose her job and
Racked up the medical bills
And I finally understand how such pretty light
Can be ugly after all

President's Award - Second Place Poetry

As in Illustrious, or Enlightened

Alahna Alvarado

my niece is not yet born, but i have plenty to tell her
she is still nestled in that warm place
of my later-in-life sister, who was not born from
the same womb, but who cried the same nights in
our early twenties - red-faced and mad as hell
at god, broken as old town potholes and as
hopeful as seaside towns, stubborn with
sandbags and resigned to rebuild -
though she is not yet born, she has already danced
to the Nutcracker in my dreams, crossed her arms
and scowled like her mother at my low credit score,
giggled at my clumsy attempt to speak quietly -
those moments like dna hold her mother and i
together - nights when we laughed loudly and painfully
to cover up the sound of us scratching
our scars under the kitchen table - plates full of
carbs cheaper than sweet tea in the south - and
our stomachs warm with bad moscato - tragically still, cheaper,
she is not here yet, but i want to tell her:
i'm sorry you'll get no cousins from me, i feel the need
to explain to her: i'm not like your mom - sure and calm,
older and steadier, like the way hills roll but mountains rise -
to reassure her: though auntie is more likely to nurse a night out,
she will still be there as your mother winces as you first learn
to latch, though auntie can't stand any shade of red, she will still
cradle you in pale pink and whisper while your mother,
my sister, sighs - exhausted and elated - that
you're finally here
and i want to tell her, even before her first birthday:
i can help hold some weight, like your mother held mine
and to warn her: if your secrets hurt, they become
your mother's too, i will tell her: even if mom and dad
don't give you a sister on your fourth christmas, or
whenever you inevitably ask - i'll help you find her -
for once, sure and calm: in the way your mother
has appeared before me, surely a sister will do so for you,
to advise her: find your sisterhood, and after you do,
celebrate them, as your mother has done for me,

Voices

find the women who would have been burned
let down your wispy light-brown hair - curled at the ends
like cirrus clouds, and ride with your sisters to the moon,
dance like you've never needed, and give with gratitude
in the way your mother does, and how she has taught me,
and finally, C, when you do find your sisters:
don't wait to laugh with pain or shriek with laughter -
dare each other to scratch your scabs above the table
and never be scared to do even better
than your mother and me

Bleachers

Jenni Baros

They are both fifteen now,
your daughter
and mine.
Older than I was when
 – wings stuttering –
you dragged me
from before
to after. I still gag
at the scent of Pina Coladas. Coconut
 – bird of prey –
sweat honeyed in your mouth,
 – talons –
invading,
 – and a beak –
ruptures on my tongue. Heart
flailing beneath ribs
 – hummingbird against the window –
while your jackal fingers punctured breast and belly and bone.
Both our girls
perch on Friday night bleachers
in ruffled uniform, laughing brassy
and wide-mouthed like trombones. As we
did. Are you ever afraid
someone will dent metal bench rails into
your daughter's
tender back, while he claws rust-tasting lines onto
her unripe belly? When your lids
fold together, do these fears startle
from the underbrush
a flock of beating wings and hurried attempts at escape

Four

wheels thresh pavement. Used gum stuck to a running shoe.

Mi patas, rest

-less, are spiked with

juniper hair because I left

my razor on the lip

of our tub –

mira, a white throat shock

beneath sienna-horned muzzle –

next to your mint-bourbon

soap and my songs, arguments,

and clinging

strings of long hair, like cracks

that let too much water in.

Four

on the floor

with overdrive for the long stretches of juddering asphalt where there's only *tu*,

and a horizon

running

in the wrong direction.

Stained-glass yuccas incised with

amarillo spires in trenches of forgotten water.

I am sweat-sticking to dried heifer skin,

older, even, than me

chasing you.

Four

decades of turning

on this packed ochre dirt, layer upon layer, that rattle copperhead

pennies in my cup holder while

philandering sunflowers

churn

past fence posts thorned with barbs

and wires,

and the memory of how

tus manos cup me inside them.

Four hundred miles

still

I only know the way back home.

Ending Cycles

Charla Whittenburg

Look at what you have done to my son!
She is nothing, but fallacies cosmic imaginings, yet she has ruined your reality.
I suggest you step back.
Trust in your intuition for those that have gifted me are there for you.
Clear sight is needed, forgetting what is already completed.
In order to ruin these routines rush to reality.

Don't plead for mercy it disgusts me.
Go forward, fight towards things that makes your instincts sting.
Joy is to be found however, it is only from within.
Authoritative figures mean nothing if they can't provide the answers.
You are already knowing of these new opportunities.
Wasting your energy.
Graceful findings teach the mind only if there is storage.
Empty faces, empty chases. GET ALIGNED!
For God's sakes I'm sick of hearing about the same mistakes.

Junior Won't Be Stayin' Here No Mo

Johnathan W. Potter

Mama kicked him out on thirtieth, two days after Thanksgiving, ham still in the fridge, pans in the oven, pots on the stove, and sweet potato pie on the dining room table. Mama changed the locks on the first, three weeks before Christmas, Hallmark on the television, SUNNY on the radio, snow falling up north, and hummingbirds flocking down south. Grandma sat in the kitchen, silent and hurting, trying to lose herself in the voice messages on her phone; Sissy was on the couch, the volume in her headphones fighting to drown out whatever worlds were existing outside the glow of her computer screen; and Jordie was in her room with the door closed, not speaking to anyone, finding her peace in detachment. Junior realized his key didn't work about twenty minutes ago and hasn't stopped knocking since.

This is my fault.

I should've said something the first time I caught him stealing money from me. All I had saved from my semesters as a student tutor, there in his hands, the whites of his eyes swallowing his face as he turned to see me standing in the doorway, freezing for a moment before dropping his eyes and drooping his head.

I should've grabbed him then. I should've demanded he tell me where that money was going. I should've let him know then that if he was in trouble, he could come to me, and I would help. But, I didn't.

Instead, I yelled at the top of my lungs, "That's my money! I'm your brother! You don't do this to family!" He gave me back a blank stare, no guilt-ridden words, no shows of remorse, just a blank stare. It infuriated me even more. I stood that afternoon berating him until it pained me to let out a whisper, but, no matter how mad I was, I didn't tell. I didn't go to my mother, I didn't run to my dad, and I told my sisters to ignore anything they might've heard. That night, I closed my bedroom door, crumpled onto my bed, and cried until I fell asleep.

I should've known something was wrong two Christmases prior when Sissy came to my room in a panic, Junior chasing after her, screaming, "You can't just go digging through my stuff. Give it back!" There, in her hands, was a long metal and glass tube, bisected by a small orange vile, the juice inside of it swishing and sloshing as she passed it to me, pleading for something to be done.

Right then, I should've praised Sissy and chastised Junior for the wrong he was doing. I should've chucked the tube in the garbage. I should've let him know that I would always be there for him if he needed me. But, I didn't.

Instead, I told Sissy to calm down and handed the tube back to Junior, saying only, "You should have known not to bring this here." Junior left and Sissy didn't say a word, staring up at me, letting her expression tell how much I had

let her down. That night, standing in the mirror, I saw that same look.

Junior celebrated a year of sobriety on the eighteenth, two weeks before Halloween, autumn colors painting the leaves and horror movie villains filling theater seats. He invited us to join him at a party being held in Richmond. There were fifteen to twenty people there, most of them in their middle ages, all sat in a circle, eating vanilla cake and joking around, portraits of Jesus Christ leaving no open space on the walls. “Hello, I’m Junior and I am addict.”

Junior relapsed on the twenty-seventh, one month after the celebration, back to his old self, hands in Grandma’s purse, missing Thanksgiving dinner to feed his addictions.

The Closet

Tavion Ivory

You were supposed to know.
Why didn't you?
How couldn't you?
Did you not want to?

Everyone else did.
They knew before me!
Did you just push it aside
Hoping I would be something YOU wanted me to be?

I don't know why you waited
I thought you just hated me
Yet you continued to put up this front

Sometimes I wondered
If I just should have finished
If I wasn't here maybe you wouldn't have to deal with it.

You wouldn't be disappointed
You wouldn't have to worry
You wouldn't even have to deal with me
That's what I thought you wanted

The night I finally told you
Tears glistened on my face
The moon danced in my eyes
In my mouth sat a salty taste.

All that time
I thought you knew
Anger
Heartache
Pain
All because of you

So when I opened up the closet
And decided to step out
All I hope is that you love me

Even when you couldn't figure out
Now while you might not like it
Even when you don't agree
When I opened up the closet
I'm glad you were waiting for me.

Killer of Goldfish

Lauren Foster

The day it came out, my father was sad and my mother was indifferent. My grandparents were against it and my sister knew it all along. But I was okay. It didn't matter. He was my brother and I would love him all the same, gay or not.

My father and grandmother talked about Bobby's "situation" on the phone for what seemed like days. The whole family knew, immediate, distant, and in between. But I was okay. Who knew a Facebook post could carry such weight? One picture suggesting all the wrong things and looking, as my uncle put it, "too gay", was the new story line for annual cookouts and get-togethers. But I was okay.

Strange looks and whispers at church made me feel special in all the wrong ways. My cousins who committed the "outing" harbored no remorse and showed no sympathy. But I was okay. My mother chimes in, "I should have known. He was always so different from the other boys."

My father retorts, "But how does he know he is gay if he has never even dated a girl?" I sit in the corner, watching the ignorance of it all. But I was okay.

He was my big brother, friend, and protector. He was the pain in the ass who always ate my leftover Chinese food. He was the brother that let his annoying little sister sit in his room and play video games every day. He was the brother that killed my pet goldfish and claimed it ran away, figuring a six year old wouldn't know any better. He was also the brother that walked me home from school on rainy days and snuck me ice cream when mom wasn't looking. But I was okay.

"What about that girl he went to prom with, wasn't her name Vivian? She was pretty," my father continued as he spoke to my grandmother. "She was just his friend," my mother yelled from the dining room as she spooned through old baby pictures trying to detect when things "went wrong." "Look at him here. It was his first Easter, and for the life of me, I couldn't get him to play with the other boys," my mother said, waving the Polaroid in the air as if she had found the missing clue as to why her only son was gay. "Maybe it's just a phase. He is too young to know what he wants anyway," my father continued into the phone. But I was okay.

As discussions went on, my mother and father at the time figured a ten year old learning her brother was gay must be traumatizing; thus they decided I needed to have a good talking to by a voice of reason, a pastor, my grandmother.

"We love Bobby. We just don't approve of 'that' lifestyle. God loves all his children, but sometimes his children can stray from the path," my grandmother preached over the phone. "Don't worry, God will 'fix' him," she continued. As I listened, I couldn't quite understand what she meant by "fix". What was wrong

with him? My ten year old brain was churning. But I was okay.

Years have passed since that time in my family's life. We have all accepted things for what they are and come to understand Bobby's choice as just that, his choice. There is nothing anyone needs to "fix" about Bobby, but there were and still are some things we need to fix about ourselves.

Homosexuality in black families is the unspoken boogie man in the closet. If you are gay; you hide it. There is no such thing as "being out." It's taboo. Bobby was no different from the other men in our family who are gay, except that he refused to hide who he really was. Bobby was shamed for his choice by some who believed it was "wrong" or "against" God to love another man. But they were wrong.

Bobby's choice didn't just change his life, but everyone's. His choice ignited old standing prejudices that were held by certain individuals (I would soon realize that witnessing these prejudices in full affect would go on to forever change the way I thought of those family members). His choice also unearthed the religious hypocrisies that plagued many religious black families. But undeniably, his choice highlighted an absence of tolerance among those in a religion where love is supposedly a central tenet.

Something I couldn't grapple with as a ten year old was the idea of something being "wrong" with Bobby. As my grandmother would 'preach,' I could just never truly believe in what she told me. If God created every living creature, then how could one say another needed to be "fixed?" If we are all created by God's grace (and God is believed to make no mistakes) are those rallying against homosexuality really rallying against God? Or does framing homosexuality as a "personal lifestyle choice," let God off the hook?

These repeated statements of Bobby needing God to "fix" or "lead" him were the banners of my childhood. But Bobby didn't need fixing. He needed support. He needed acceptance. He needed his family.

Bobby is gay. That's it, that's the story. That's the elephant in the room. That's why my father cried that night, thinking no one would hear. That's why our once close knit family just isn't quite that close anymore. That's why Bobby refuses to go to church and see "those bitches" as he calls them. That's also why we haven't seen Bobby in more than five years; maybe he hates us. But I'm okay.

Bobby coming out as gay is not a loss. It is not an 'unfortunate' situation. It is not embarrassing or anything to be ashamed about. If you read these words don't look for a story containing a defining moment of undeniable gay detection, you won't find one. Bobby is gay and has been his whole life. The only real shame in this story is the ignorance and homophobia exhibited by his family who did everything but show him the grace and good-nature they spent so

Voices

many Sundays learning about in church. But I'm okay.

Bobby is and will always be my big brother, friend, and protector. He will always be the brother that let his annoying little sister hang out in his room. He will always be the killer of goldfish and the master of sneaking ice cream past mom before dinner. But most importantly, he will always be a pain in the ass who ate my leftover Chinese food. But again, I'm okay. I think.

Granny's House

Nadilia Gilbert

She inhales clean, crisp air
And exhales her frustrations, her worries, her pain
The drive was tiring but she's finally here, at granny's house

The view is the same as she left it ten years ago
In the air are the lingering scents of mango and fresh cocoa
Everything here is therapeutic
From the sound of children playing, to birds singing their favorite song

She reminisces on her childhood days
She and Stacey would always come here
Barefoot, they would climb the lush cherry trees
And compete against each other in games of marbles
Granny would always make a pot of her famous *braf* or red beans soup with *gel*
cochon
Times were different back then, much simpler back then
She'd give anything just to experience her childhood again, just to be age ten

(940)...5882

Taylor Vaughn

Cookie bakin'
Story-time readin'
Warm huggin' granny:
That's what I'll always remember you to be.

From the moment I was born you were right there watching
Helping me grow;
A servant's heart,
a beautiful soul,
the brightest smile that I have ever seen
The woman I wish to be.

Coloring Bambi pages,
Watching Disney movies,
Playing outside on the swings.
My guardian angel;
Spending the beginning of my life with me on Earth.

But then you got sick;
Mom said you needed medicine
with strange people taking care of you.
Sitting in your new bedroom,
Your pin-curl hair was replaced with a scarf.

Little did I know that was the last time I would see you,
And later that day
You met Grandpa Frank in heaven;
I asked Mom and Dad if I could go with you.

They said that where you moved to we couldn't visit
That your new home was too far away;
But we get a chance to say goodbye
To see you later that day.

I grew to learn that you never left,
You have been with me this whole time
you are still with me every single day;
The only difference is you are a little far away.

Graduation,
Sweet 16,
Moving out,
I'll always fill you in what I'm up to,
At (940)...5882

The servant heart,
beautiful soul,
bright smile;
now lives with me,
hopefully, one day;
I'll be half the wonderful woman that you were to me.

An Ode of Calm

Jocelyn Taggart

Every vacuum is irritating. They sound similar to an overpowered kazoo
except they only have one note that goes **eeeeeEEEEEEE**
echoing through the door. I try to blare a xylophones' soliloquy but-
EGAD! Its cleaning powers still ring through my eardrums!
Every part of my brain bursts with steam
even when I try not to scream in frustration at the wall that
encloses me from that noisemaker.
Escape from the off-note instrument seems futile until...
Silence.
Slow breaths return, as does my calm mood.
Scraps of paper are picked up,
Shuffled until neat before I pick up my pen to-
eeeeeeeEEEEEEEEEE
Every part of my face hits the desk with a groan.
Will this earache ever end?!

Ink in my Veins

Preston Kines

My hand is a stranger to my pen,
My words no longer create songs,
My title of Poet I defend.

A stranger to my pen,
I no longer bleed ink.
Poetry, I defend.
In a world of rhyme, form, and meter, I sink.

I no longer bleed ink.
I open my veins to bleed,
Hoping to move beyond the brink,
So that the Poet within be freed.

I open my veins to bleed,
Upon the page, my poetic stain.
Poet within be freed,
Write freely, convey the pain you contain.

My poetic stain,
Left incomplete poems, still I,
Convey my pain.
Tomorrow again, I'll try.

Still I,
No longer create songs.
Again, I'll try.
Where has my creativity gone?

A Poet

Preston Kines

Do I have the right to call myself a Poet?
Simply because words flow freely from my hand.
Dripping scribbled lines from a ballpoint pen.
What does it mean to be a writer?
Why do I long for my existence to last in ink?
And why, upon these pages, do I bleed?

My stain upon the parchment, my words; bleeding.
A pain conveyed by him who calls himself Poet,
I, who fight my battles with hurried, smudged ink.
I, who rely on the creation from my hand,
He, who knows truly not what it means to be a writer.
I, who scribble these lines with a ballpoint pen.

I knew not in my younger years the power in a pen.
Then, upon pages, I did not bleed.
Then, I had not the interest in becoming a Writer.
Then, I could never think myself a Poet.
Then, there was no creation stemming from my hand.
Then, I made no impression, no stain of ink.

Now, I live in what last; ink.
Its existence scribbled into life by this ballpoint pen.
Now, an extension of my own hand.
Poems flowing from my veins, bleeding.
But still the question, am I a Poet?
Or just a fool that spends too much time writing.

But tonight, and again tomorrow, I will write.
Tonight, and again tomorrow, I will leave my mark in ink.
Tonight, and tomorrow, I will be a Poet.
Tomorrow, again I shall bleed.
Tonight, and tomorrow, creation will stem from my hand.

I am he who creates from his hand.
I am he who forms life in his writing.
Page upon page I bleed.
Page upon page, my everlasting ink.

Preston Kines

Worlds are built from this ballpoint pen.
I am without question, a Poet.

From my hand, I spill ink.
As a writer, equipped with this ballpoint pen.
I will bleed upon this page, and be what I am meant to be, a Poet.

Shaking

Raygan Hogue

He is not my oxygen
He is not the reason I wake in the morning
His touch does not cause me to stop functioning
He is not that powerful

Have you ever made eye contact with the sun?
Have you ever gave sound to a silent paper?
I have.
I have reached for the stars and knew
in the deepest and most vulnerable part of my being
that the stars were inching closer to kiss my finger tips.

I have read
in books
that a simple look could shake someone's universe.
People believe that to be true but those people must be blind and oblivious.

They must not have heard the cries of Pluto in the midst of a winter storm.
They overlooked the stretch marks of the lands
the way the ground still roars and shakes.
They do not realize that rivers must be caused by a mountain's continuous
stream of tears.
They do not know what shattered means.

His arms constricted around my waist will not affect the world.
His hands wringing my neck does not mean he is stronger.
Our fingers entwined do not mean that the world is complete.
His hand is not the most important thing I have held.

Have you ever plucked a chord so sweet it was a slice of Heaven?
Have you ever flipped through the pages of a conundrum?
Have you heard a paintings voice?
I have.

I have learned to track letters across piece of paper
to trail the footprints of words.
I have the ability to write thoughts in pencil or in ink.
I can change the world with either a spatula in my hand or a notebook as my

weapon.

I understand the language of silence.

He does not complete me.

He is not the half that makes me whole.

He does not understand when I say that I will be married to myself first.

He does not set my world spinning.

I have tangoed with fallen leaves and felt the wind lead my steps.

My favorite conversations are with my radio.

The best hug I have ever received was the ocean crashing into me.

Have you ever held a pen and knew that you were writing the future?

Have you ever ran so fast that the wind caught your hair and you could fly.

Will you ever learn that technology will die long before my voice will be silenced?

This is a revolution cry,

and when I speak, I'll send the world shaking.

What Do you Call it?

Bryce McFadden

I heard you say
Magic left this world
Long ago

Now if that's the case
I'd like a few things
explained

What do you call it when,
Your mind's a mess
You don't know what to think
Or where to go
But just one song
Comes on, right when you need it most
And that faceless voice
On the other side of your speaker
Knows exactly
how you feel
And exactly
What you need to hear

What do you call it when,
Just a few words
Hidden away in a dusty book
Written by a stranger
From another century
Crawl inside your mind
Slide down your spine
Hotwire your heart
And take it for a joyride

What do you call it when,
You're here
With me

You don't have to call it
Magic
I just want to know
What else it could be

Feathered Indians

Preston Kines

We sing of feathered Indians,
As we drink from foamy springs.
Sat around cold, blue mountains,
Their face upon the cans we bring.
Picking out memories,
As one amongst us picks at brass strings.
We cling to our spirits,
like the scent of tobacco clings to us.
Most drink to forget,
And smoke to die,
But we drink to remember,
and smoke to feel alive.

Prom Date

Nadilia Gilbert

Beads of perspiration trickle down his freckled face
He breathes in, then reminds himself to breathe out
His heart races quickly, fueled by anxiety
Should he laugh, should he cry, will he faint?
His knees shake violently
His skinny legs are fighting to stay awake
With a voice molded by puberty, he rehearses his speech one last time

Today he'll ask Anna to the school prom
Will she say yes, will she say no?
He stands outside a cherry wood double door
Sweaty hands are tightly curved around three fuchsia tulips, her favorite
He presses a large, brass doorbell
A sweet, familiar voice yells "who is it?!"
He thinks "it's now or never"

A Ticket to Burton-Upon-Trent

Alyse Morrell

The day felt sickeningly long to David. He sorted through his fifth box of donations for his shift, and he still had about ten more to go. “How are there so many drop offs today?” David asked.

“It’s almost spring,” his manager told him, “most people feel like getting rid of the old this time of year. Of course they don’t realize that by Christmas, they’ve bought back almost the same amount that they’ve just dumped off. And so the cycle repeats itself.” David had only worked with the charity shop for the last 2 months, but Irene had worked there for the past seven years. It seemed like the job had made her a little jaded.

He liked spending his time at the shop, because usually only a handful of customers came in most days. That gave him plenty of time to read, finish homework, or just daydream. Since summer break started last week, his shifts doubled, and today a tornado of people came through the store, taking all of David’s energy with them.

Irene plopped a cardboard box about the size of a mini fridge on the counter in front of him. “Last one for you, then you can go home.” He sighed with relief, and took to the task of organizing what could be sold and what was rubbish. It was always considerate of people to give to those in need, but no person ever needs broken lamps, expired toothpaste, or used underpants. And yet, people still donated them.

This box, however, held massively cool items; vinyl records, leather Oxford shoes with solid soles, and cloth bound books. Near the top of the box sat a navy blue, wool pea coat. David lifted the textile and examined its condition. It felt light in his hands, although it looked well insulated. He noticed a rip, about the size of his thumb’s width, under the armpit. Despite that, the piece looked fine. “Hey, is it okay if I have this?” David asked, “It’s out of season and needs to be mended.”

Irene glanced over to see him holding the coat over his head like a banner. “Sure,” she shrugged. “We have tons that look like that already in storage.”

“And what about these?” He pointed to the records.

“No,” she answered, not even looking at him.

Not wanting to push his luck, he set his new coat atop his backpack and finished sorting.

Since it wasn’t cold enough to wear the coat home, David carried it in his hands after leaving the store. He looked over the item again, recognizing that when in London, one can never have too many coats. He checked the pockets, and found two small, firm pieces of paper within. One, a loyalty card to a café that he didn’t recognize, that already received nine of the ten punches need for a

free coffee, and the other was an Overground ticket from Paddington Station to Burton-Upon-Trent, set for the next day at 8:46 am. Dang, how unfortunate for them, thought David. He scoped into the other pocket and found a black, velvet box that could just rest within his palm. Cracking the lid, he witnessed the glisten from a diamond engagement ring. Double Dang!

David sat at the desk in his room, scrolling between the multiple tabs displayed on his laptop screen. The ticket found inside the coat had the name of the traveler printed on the back: Arthur James. He looked on every single social site he could consider, and even asked his mother to borrow the phone book, but every Arthur James David contacted didn't know about a missing coat or train ticket. No way David would mention the ring to anyone before confirming the coat actually belonged to them. In fact, David felt crazy for even putting this much effort into trying to find the guy. Anyone dumb enough to lose a diamond ring doesn't deserve it! David didn't actually think that way, and he knew he should have taken the ring straight to the police, but he felt oddly compelled to solve this mystery. Most of the times, instances like this only get mentioned in cheap tabloid magazines. And although David didn't care about this encounter ending up in *The Sun*, he did want to know how this story would end.

Who could this man be, and the women he wanted to marry? Maybe he already proposed to her, and she said no? Devastated from the rejection, he threw away all of his earthly positions and decided to join the clergy. Either way, David knew that he, as the one who discovered the coat, carried the responsibility of returning the coat and all of its items back to the rightful owner. That, and he had nothing else to-do tomorrow.

The coffee he bought from the closest Costa didn't feel like enough to keep David awake. He knew it wasn't that early in the morning, but eight am still feels early to a teenager. Plus, he didn't really sleep through the night. Bad thoughts of his alarm malfunctioning kept him awake. He double-checked on the board and on the ticket if he waited at the right place. Just before leaving his home, he thought of writing Arthur's name out on a piece of paper like how chauffeurs at airports do. He felt a little silly for doing this, because who needs a chauffeur onto the train from the platform? But how else was David supposed to know whom to look for?

The coat sat within his bag on his back with the ring nestled deep within the bag. He felt panicked that today, of all days, he would get pick pocketed, but who would honestly believe that a sixteen year old would carry around a diamond ring? He checked last night if it really was a diamond, and not just costume jewelery. Only going off of what he Google searched, the piece seemed real. It even had an engraving on the inside of the band, "T.D." Taking the time to engrave a fake seemed highly unlikely.

The clock inched closer to 8:46, and still no one even seemed to look down

at the sign he was holding. They all had their faces turned upward at the information boards or down into their phones. Paddington Station always seemed packed any time David visited. Twenty men named Arthur could have walked past him already, but he would have no way of knowing.

Amongst the faces of strangers, time and space seemed to part for David, as the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen walked toward him. They met eyes, and she gave a courteous smile. Then her eyes scanned downward toward his sign. She tilted her head and her smile puckered a little, as if she just remembered something funny.

There she stopped to gaze at the train times, close enough that David could smell the fruity scent of her shampoo. Don't be creepy about it, just look forward. Wet circles formed under David's pits, and he hoped that she couldn't smell him back.

She continued her pace once she found the platform she needed. Turns out, she was heading to Burton-Upon-Trent too.

The warning whistle blew from the train, and the stress sweat formed on his brow, now. It's decision time, David. What are you going to do? I already tried this far, right? What's a two-hour train ride to solve a mystery, anyway?

Whoever Arthur James was, he traveled in style; first class seating. He may have been on the train at that moment, so David tried to inspect if any of the man looked as if they either received a huge rejection, and stressful over losing an engagement ring. Everyone looked impartial, so far as he could tell. Most were settling in for a long journey. Since David already threw away his make-shift sign and wasn't about to go around asking each person what their name was, like some weirdo, he decided to do the same.

There was no point in trying to devise a plan to find Arthur, based on the little information he had. It's pretty impressive that he can hold onto this loyalty card for so long, he thought, even if he stopped at the same café each day. The card was severally bent and twisted in places, and splashes of coffee stains marked one of the corners. I always end up losing these things.

Somewhere along his thought process, David started thinking about the girl from the platform. She really could be a model, but she also seemed so approachable, like you could talk about anything with her and she would listen attentively. I think I am just projecting, I only saw her for a second. But she's here, on this train right now, maybe I can try to find her...and then what, what are you going to say to her? 'Come here often?' Lame.

David twisted the card back and forth between his fingers, and listened to the soft pulsing of the train rolling on the track. The rhythm was soothing against his anguished thoughts, and it gently drifted him to sleep.

Falling asleep while traveling alone is like playing a game of chicken with luck. David would have missed his stop if a crying baby hadn't jolted him

awake. He was one of the last people off the train, which meant he missed a second opportunity to find Arthur. Thankfully, his phone GPS showed the café's location only a short walk from the station. If this guy drank as much caffeine as David did, then that would be the first spot he'd go. David had never been to Burton-Upon-Trent, but it looked like any other quaint little British village, not exactly where he would have picked to spend his day off.

Inside the café, the smell of freshly brewed coffee reminded David that he needed to get seconds. He decided not to use the punch card, because for some reason it felt wrong to take another man's free coffee. Instead, he collected his own, despite the odds that the card would be lost long before he could ever visit this town again.

When the plucky barista served him his latte, he decided to ask her if she knew anyone named Arthur James who came in.

"I can't say I recognize that name?" she answered with a subtle Irish accent, "But I recognize faces more than names. Why do you ask?"

He explained his story awkwardly, and she seemed genuinely interested.

"It's awful kind of you to do that. Does the coat have any distinguishable features? May I see it?"

The two examined the label, a brand neither of them recognized. The barista ventured down inside the pockets, and on the tip of her fingers rested multiple brown crumbs. She gave them a sniff.

"Dog treats." She said, and checked the hem of the coat. "Aha!" She pulled up fine strands of short, white hair.

"Pomeranian, I'm guessing? Maybe Maltese?"

David gapped in astonishment, "Who are you? Sherlock?"

"No, I work a second job as a dog walker. We have lots of people come by with their dogs, so if you see someone with a pet that matches that description,"

"It could be my guy!" David finished.

"Nice on you, Watson." She went back behind the counter as more customers filtered in. As exciting as this development was, David wondered how long he would have to wait to see if his plan could work?

"David, I'm sorry, but we need to close now." Jessica, the barista, kindly let him sit in the café all day, but since it was already 5 pm, she couldn't indulge him any further.

"I understand," he sighed and creaked himself out of the wooden restaurant chair. The air outside took an unseasonably turn toward chill. The takeaway coffee Jessica gave him did not seem like enough to warm him up. He decided to put the coat on, then turned the collar up against the wind.

The village looked dusky this time of day, and it actually looked pretty pleasant. Well, at least I caught up on all the politics by reading every single newspaper and magazine in that place. I suppose all that I can do now is take the ring to the police station? Maybe it will be easier for them to find the

guy since he lives here. But does he live here? I just assumed because it was a one-way ticket. Crap, I wasted so much of the day chasing a fantasy.

A soft tap on the shoulder and a “Hey” took David out of his thinking. He turned to face that same girl from the Paddington platform. Her breath came out slightly labored, and her cheeks looked flushed, either from running or the cool air.

“Hey, did you hear me calling you just now?” She asked.

“Um, no, I guess not?” David didn’t know what else to say. The seconds of not talking felt too long, and the opportunity for sweat to reform felt close.

She finally spoke up first, “Yeah, sorry, this might sound weird, but I think you have my coat? Or at least, my granddad’s coat.”

David’s jaw hit the floor. “Wait, what? No, not possible,”

“Hey wait, I recognize you? You were at Paddington this morning.”

He felt flattered that she remembered his face, but also perplexed by her claim. “Why do you think this coat belongs to you?”

“Well, unless there are two navy blue wool coats with a hole under the left arm, and embroidered initials on the back collar, I’d say very likely.”

She knew about the hole? Wait, “Embroidered initials on the collar?” Instinctively, David tried to turn his head and look behind himself. He laughed at his own foolishness, and took off the coat. Just under the turned up trim, stitched the initials “T.D.” in gold, fine cursive print. The same initials on the ring! “How did I not notice this before?!”

“My grandmother added that, since my grandfather had a habit of always turning the collar up, she wanted the other women to know that he was taken.”

“How does that logic follow?” David asked

She shrugged, “I don’t know, but it is cute either way. What I want to know is, how did you manage to get that? I accidentally left it at my Gammy’s house in London...” her voice trailed off as she began connecting the narrative together, “Oh, I was helping her sort donations yesterday, she must have accidentally packed it away. And you bought it, so I suppose, it is your coat now? What a funny little coincidence.”

“Yes! I mean, no! What I mean, it isn’t my coat now. But also, it isn’t a coincidence. I was trying to find you.”

Her pleasant expression turned to fear, and her weight shifted backward, as if she was ready to sprint the opposite direction.

“Oh no,” David exclaimed, “I don’t mean to be creepy, but of course, every creepy guy says just that,” he breathed in deep to help think through his explanation. “I work at the charity shop your Gammy, uh grandmother, donated to, and I found inside the pocket, this.”

He held up the ticket stub for Arthur James, “I was trying to find him, are you... Arthur James, by chance?”

She laughed, and any trace of unease left her, “No, I am not Arthur, but my father’s law firm is Arthur & Jameson. He bought my ticket for me, and must

have used his business credit card by mistake.”

“And T.D. stands for?”

“Theodosia Dupree. Coincidentally, that is my name as well, but Theo works fine.” She pushed her hand toward him to shake, and he prayed that the sweat had not reached to his palms yet.

“David. And, this is a lot crazier than I expected, honestly, the chances I could find you?”

“Yeah, why did you feel like you needed to return the jacket to me?” Theo asked, “I ended up just buying another ticket.”

“Well, I don’t think you can just buy another one of these,” David pulled the ring out from his coat pocket, and instantly realized how this might of looked to a bystander. She took the box, her face inching back towards the concerned look she had before. Then, complete surprise took over her gorgeous features when she opened it.

“Where did this come from?!” she yell-whispered.

“I don’t think Gammy realized she put it in with the other items,” David guessed.

She held the box close to her chest, and tears formed at the corners of her eyes, “Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome,” He did what he set out to do. What do I do now?

“How can I repay you for this?” she asked.

“Oh, I really wasn’t expecting anything, honestly.” Do it, you got to do it now, or else you will never have the chance, or the nerve again. “Can I take you out to get a coffee some time? Maybe the next time you are in London, or when I am here? I know of a great place around the corner.”

She paused for a moment to think it over, then asked, “How often are you in Burton-Upon-Trent?”

“Not very,”

She laughed lightly, “Okay, I think I’d like that.”

They exchanged phone numbers and gave an awkward goodbye hug. David gave back the coat to Theo. He could get another coat at work tomorrow. The two started walking in their opposite directions, when suddenly David remembered one last question.

“Wait!” she turned back around, “Do you happen to have a small, white dog?”

“Um, no, but Gammy does. A maltipoo named Peppermint.”

Wow, that clever barista chick was right.

“How did you know about that?” she asked.

“Oh, that is kind of a long story.”

She shrugged, “I guess you can tell me about it on our date?” Theo turned on her heels and kept her pace toward the sunset, which gave an angelic glow around her blonde hair.

Wow, thought David, not a bad way to spend a day off.

Rhythm

Madison Jarvis

A dancer glides across a darkened room
Mirrors the only witness to the scene.
Alone she forms her movements, all consumed
The floor is her kingdom; she reigns supreme.

No music heard to the outsider's ear,
She seems to find rhythm in the silence.
The pinnacle of grace, she feels no fear
As she sways for her unseen audience.

The movements quicken, slow dance awakens
Exciting, delighting, reviving shift.
And dancer herself seems overtaken
Then, all at once, she begins to downshift.

The piece is over, the room empty once again,
The next dancer enters, her work begins.

Contributors

Shem Alexander is currently a senior working towards a BFA at Midwestern State University. He hails from the twin island nation of Antigua & Barbuda where he is inspired by the culture and tropical landscape. His favorite art medium is paint, but he's always open to experimenting with other mediums.

Alahna Alvarado was previously mentioned in the San Diego *CityBeats* as a "local author on the verge." With an affinity for the desperate, sinister and poignant, Alahna enjoys writing about losing, longing and defiance. When she is not stubbornly avoiding the Oxford comma, she studies innovation and the future at the University of Houston.

Nikki Anderson grew up in a small town in the Texas panhandle where everyone knew everyone in some fashion. She is currently a theater major at Midwestern State University.

Samuel Armstrong is a 17-year-old student at Burkburnett High School. For the majority of his life, he has suffered from multiple mental illnesses, and he seeks to express the thoughts and sensations he experiences from his illnesses through his poetry.

Simon Avey is a senior from Burkburnett High School. He was previously a football player and now plays golf.

Jenni Baros grew up on the New Mexico/Texas border and is finishing her graduate thesis at Eastern New Mexico University. Prior to becoming its editor, Jenni's fiction had been published by *El Portal*, and she received the ENMU Writers' Retreat Top Honors for Poetry. She shares her writing space with her husband, children, and two spunky Labradors.

Caitlin Barrager is an 18-year-old senior at Burkburnett High School.

Makayla Baughman is an 18-year-old at Burkburnett High School. She enjoys writing poetry and prose and plans to major in English next year at the University of Texas at Austin.

Paola Brinkley is a junior at Lamar University in Beaumont, TX. Other than writing, she loves music. She plays clarinet in the Lamar University Wind Ensemble, and also performed a couple of solos during the academic year. She is a part of Tau Beta Sigma, an honorary band sorority, that seeks to promote music through service. She serves as the secretary, and she enjoys involving herself in activities such as fundraising for band programs in need, performing music for children and the elderly, and aiding the Lamar University band programs.

Omar Combie is a freshman mass communication major at Midwestern State University. He is from the Caribbean island of St. Lucia. His passion is in digital media: mainly photography, videography, and graphic design. In his free time, he enjoys playing basketball, watching crime shows, and reading mystery novels.

Voices

Nathan Conard is a senior English major and philosophy minor at Midwestern State University who expects to graduate in the spring of 2020. His interests include academia, literature, theology, ambient music, and the outdoors. He hopes to become an author of sci-fi and fantasy, taking inspiration from J. R. R. Tolkien, Frank Herbert, and others.

Emma Cranford is a junior at Midwestern State University. She was born and raised in Dallas, Texas before coming to Wichita Falls for school. In 2019 she was published in the issue of *Voices* with her poem “Elemental” and her short story “A minutes worth” with her poem winning the 2019 Vinson Award in creative writing. In her free time she enjoys reading, writing, involving herself in the on-campus PRIDE organization, and taking long naps in the middle of the day!

Merlin Cuellar is a 17-year-old at Burkburnett High School. He enjoys painting and studying psychology in his free time.

Caleb Dozier is an 18-year-old high school student who is set to graduate this May. He was born on July 2, 2001 to a loving mother and father, along with two annoyingly antagonistic older brothers (who he would die for). They are a military family and have moved around quite a bit. His poetry takes from a kind of fading passion and emotional state. Sadly, he suffers from depression, but he’s also too stubborn to let it beat him.

Connie Fogle is an unapologetic oddity and work in progress. She writes short fiction and is drafting a YA novel. When she’s not putting words together, she’s spending time with her husband and pets, designing t-shirts, and putting an immoral amount of bright eyeshadow on her face.

Lauren Foster studies journalism at Widener University.

Nadilia Gilbert is a proud international student from the Commonwealth of Dominica. Her academic journey officially commenced at the Dominica State College there. In 2013, she obtained her Associates Degree in Business Administration. In 2014, her first internship was at a non-profit organization called Junior Achievement which was an enlightening and satisfying experience. Her next internship was at the National Cooperative Credit Union in 2015. She learned to strengthen her skills in paying attention to details, organization, and customer service. Currently, she is a senior at Midwestern State University and will graduate with a Bachelor of Business Administration, management this semester.

Haley Goodman is a student at Burkburnett High School. She writes poetry as a de-stresser where she can openly express her feelings.

Carter Gracin is a senior at Burkburnett High School. He loves using poetry and art to “paint” pictures (excuse the pun) for his viewers and readers.

Amanda Hansen is a Graphic Designer and Printmaker at Midwestern State University. She specializes in relief and screen printing.

Jessica Harrison is a junior at Midwestern State University. She is majoring in creative writing and is pursuing freelance writing as a means to gain more experience and expand her writing horizons. She strives in her writing to tell diverse, inclusive, and sometimes difficult yet important stories with a dash of her unique sense of humor. She hopes to

Contributors

pursue writing in many forms such as novels, scripts, musicals, and more. When she is not writing, she usually finds her self reading, singing, or just watching musicals with her dogs.

Natalia Hernandez is an art major at Midwestern State University.

Raygan Hogue is a high school student at Byng High School in Oklahoma. She recently won second place at her school's Poetry Out Loud Contest.

Tavion Ivory is a senior at Burkburnett High School.

Dolly Jacqueline Maass is a twenty-three year old creative writer at the University of North Texas in Denton, graduating this December. She grew up in the borderland of El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua. She enjoys writing poetry that portrays the Mexican-American culture, as well as other themes.

Madison Jarvis is an undergraduate student at Texas Wesleyan University.

Kaylee Kahn is a senior at Burkburnett High School.

Preston Kines is an undergraduate student at Stephen F. Austin University where he is pursuing a Bachelors of Fine Arts in creative writing. He plans to pursue graduate degrees in literature with a focus in nineteenth century romantics.

Melissa Koss is a junior at MSU. Photography is her passion. She loves capturing motion, emotion, and spontaneous moments in nature with her photography.

Elena Lake is a graphic design student who enjoys all mediums. She infuses patterns, human form, and emotions into her pieces, and pulls much of her inspiration from nature.

Ferdine LeBlanc is an international student from the island of Dominica. She is pursuing a BFA, emphasizing on sculpture and ceramics. Her artwork often speaks to the idea of identity and how society has placed us into categories that dictate who we are as individuals based on specific traits.

Kristen Longo is a sophomore at Midwestern State University pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts and teaching certification. She is majoring in ceramics with an interest in printmaking. She is currently working on combining art with poetry.

Bethany Lopez is a United States Marine Corps Veteran, and current undergraduate at the University of Texas at Austin majoring in English and creative writing.

Ellie Mahan is a sophomore at Midwestern State University studying English with a writing concentration and a minor in journalism. She is from a small town called Grandview, Texas, population 1,706. In her free time, she likes to do yoga and visit the humane society to walk dogs because she misses the two labs she has at home.

Cameron Mayberry is a senior at Burkburnett High School. After high school, he wants to do a little bit of everything and help others.

Bryce McFadden was born and raised in rural North Carolina, where he learned the value of a hard days work and that everything tastes better fried. He is currently 20-years-old and studying history in Southern California at Mira Costa College while

Voices

willingly delivering plates of dead fish to people for money.

Caitlin McNeely is a graduate student in English at Midwestern State University. Her academic interests include archival research, feminist rhetoric, and composition. Outside of school, she enjoys singing about everything she does, playing video games, bingeing TV shows, and reading excessively. She intends to finish her thesis, degree, and novel in 2020.

Alyse Morrell is originally from Houston, Texas. She has contributed to High Street Times magazine and LU Press. She currently works part-time as an office administrator while studying for her Communications degree.

Andi Newberry is a native Texan and in her second year of studying art at Midwestern State University. She focuses on painting, drawing and printmaking, and enjoys using color to relate to emotions and creating pieces with their own atmosphere.

Lilith O'Connell is an 18-year-old high school student at Burkburnett High School.

Ariel Ong is a high school student in her second year of taking a formal art classes. She is currently enrolled in a Pre-AP 2D Art Class at Jasper High School in Plano, Texas, and is a self-taught digital artist.

Carson Owens is a junior at Stephen F. Austin University where he studies creative writing.

Sarah Peralta is currently enrolled in an arts school in New Mexico. She is majoring in creative writing. She mainly writes fiction, but enjoys writing prose poetry.

Johnathan W. Potter is a junior majoring in creative writing at Stephen F. Austin State University. He was raised in the city of Rosenberg, Texas, and spent the first two years of his collegiate career attending Clarendon College where he graduated magna cum laude. A love of language and storytelling pushed him to begin writing poetry and short stories. His influences span across music and literature, from hip-hop artists such as Common and Andre 3000 to novelists and poets like Stephen King and Langston Hughes.

Andrea Ramos is a Cal State University Northridge graduate who received her Bachelor's in literature and creative writing.

Rachel Shipley is currently working on her undergraduate degree in both English and theatre performance with a minor in musical theatre.

Jocelyn Taggart is a senior at Midwestern State University. She is currently an art major (and planning to earn a BFA in graphic design), but she enjoys creative writing and making scripts for comics in her spare time.

Sarah Ann Teaw started art class when she was five. She enjoys drawing mostly people and portraits but also loves experimenting with new mediums and techniques. She is looking forward to pursuing a career in art.

Alexis Towerly was born and raised in Nocona, Texas where she graduated high school. She's currently a sophomore at Midwestern State University with a major emphasis of graphic design.

Contributors

Grace Tschlis is a senior English major graduating in December 2020. After graduation, she hopes to be an editor or a publisher. However, if she could have any job in the world, she would like to be a writer for *Saturday Night Live*. Besides reading and writing, Grace loves to bake and travel. At MSU, Grace is a member of Model UN and the Redwine Honors Program.

Daniel Valdez is from a small city in Southeast Texas. He has been writing since he was a sophomore in high school, and he is currently a graduate student studying English at Lamar University. He creates poetry to portray his understanding of the human experience, and uses it as a form of therapy to learn more about himself and the world.

Taylor Vaughn is a student at Burkburnett High School.

Charla Whittenburg is an undergraduate student in English with a concentration in writing at Midwestern State University.

Kendra Woods is a senior at Midwestern State University. She is a President's Distinguished Scholar and an English major who plans on being a teacher after graduation.

Avery Zhao is currently a freshman at Jasper High School who loves 2D art, especially watercolor.