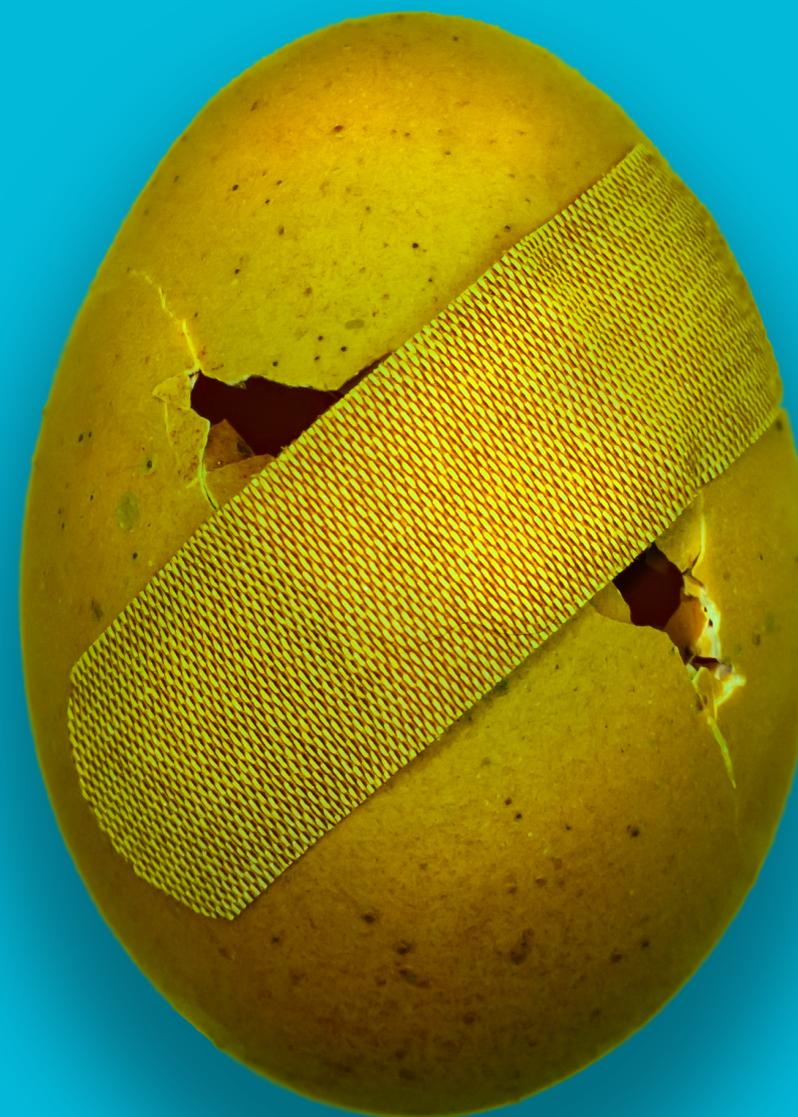


Voices

2020-21



Anna Akpabio

Sadie Bartels | Meredith Berend

Jonathan Booker | Jack Bordnick

Erika Cooper | Natellie Coufal | Harlow Covington

Chloe Dewberry-Hanssen | Halie Diehl

Logan Dugan | John Fulton | Sarah Griego

Kaitlin Hancock | Amanda Hansen | Jessica Harrison

Raygan Hogue | Heavin Holguin | Danika Hollis

Jodie Howard-Filan | Austin Michael Jones | Siany Kloss

Jenna Kober | Arthur Kwon Lee | Kristen Longo

Margaret Marcum | Alyse Morrell | Hannah Morris-Voth

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Issabella Shands | Sarah Ann Teaw | Sapphire Vasquez

Lindsey Wentzel | Dakota Young

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PRESENTS

VOICES

VOL. XLII

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Dr. John Schulze



EDITORS' NOTE

The Editors proudly present the forty-second issue of *Voices*. We extend our thanks to Dr. John Schulze, our *Voices* advisor, for his expertise and guidance throughout the creation and publication of this journal. We are 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. We would also like to thank Kristen Longo for making our postcards and posters. Finally, we thank all of this year's contributors, whose work made for a thoroughly enjoyable issue.

The Editors hope that the time and effort invested in the creation of this year's *Voices* matches that of our contributors. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted our publication timeline, leaving most of our work for the summer months with a particularly small editing team. Through all of the hard work and time spent in the *Voices* office, the editors have found great enjoyment in bringing you the 2020-21 issue. We hope that you enjoy reading our contributors' work as much as we have and that the pieces contained within provide you with connection during a time that has made many feel increasingly isolated.

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

Cover Art:

Fixed

Hallie Diehl

Cover Design:

Dr. John Schulze

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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.

Vinson Award Winner

Junk Drawer Women

Meredith Berend

Matches from kitchen junk drawers burn bright
inside women whose recipes hold everything
but the kitchen sink, their insides made of
wooden ladle, spatula rubber, rusted strainer,
steak knife, whisk with a missing coil.
An amalgamation of pointed edges,
junk drawer women are sturdy in spite of
their assorted oddities, Mama says.

She stares with olive eyes and pimento-stuffed pupils
her skin pulled tight across silverware bones that jingle
like the stainless-steel spoons in the cupboard drawer.
A bout of indigestion turns her tongue sour and she
tells me pain is a match that burns and burns and
burns but the spoons and forks and knives that
clink around inside us never melt.

That's what matters, she says, that we never melt,
but I watch her place a hand over her chest where
the heart's meat boils from the inside-out upward
toward thin flesh, flinch as she feels the antique match
left behind by her mother and her mother's mother
and a million mothers before her all made up
of everything but the kitchen sink, their matches
lit over gas stoves and fireplaces with lighter fluid
perfume, each one a slow burn that catches
the next match long after the flame has died.

PPC at Your Service

Alyse Morell

Walking up the church steps, I can hear the groom reading his vows through the glass foyer doors. Like a tornado in Kansas, I burst through. Hope this crowd is prepared for a show.

“I objeeeeeeeeect!”

Gasps and stares turn towards me. The groom looks befuddled, the bride in shock. Only the pastor seems to be able to speak up.

“Young man, we haven’t gotten to that part yet!”

“I couldn’t hold it back. I’d regret it for the rest of my life if I didn’t say this. David.” I reach for the groom’s hands, “I never should have let you go, you were the best thing to ever happen to me. Let’s run away to Fiji, like how we always dreamed.”

Another gasp ripples through the crowd. Oh, they love it.

“I can’t. It’s too late,” the groom dramatically throws his head back and covers his eyes with his forearm. He’s getting into it too.

The bride chimes in, “David, who is this?”

“David, you haven’t told her about your... first husband?” Phones are already recording the scene.

“Daisy, I’m sorry, it was such a long time ago. I was young and dumb,”

“Oh, is that all I am to you? A dumb mistake?” My hand meets his cheek in a perfectly timed stage slap, “And what about Richard? Was he a dumb mistake too?”

“Who’s Richard?” asked a guest in the audience.

“Yeah, who is Richard?” continued the bride.

“You didn’t even tell her about our little Richard?” I shot back. A murmur spills over the onlookers in the pews. “I don’t blame you for not mentioning it before, it still brings a tear just to mention his name,” I pull my lapel handkerchief to dab my dry eyes.

“What happened with Richard?” asked the priest.

David looks stumped.

“He died, in a horrible fire!” I interject, “David tried to save him; he ran back into the home, against my pleas, fighting flame and death itself. He came barrelling through the smoke with our little Richard cradled in his arms,”

An aunty whispers “poor thing” over my shoulder.

“The pain of it all was too much of a strain on our relationship, so I left, and I am so sorry I did. I couldn’t bear looking at your face, it only reminded me of sweet little Richard.

The bride asks, “So, Richard was your...”

David stammers back, “Um, Richard wasss ...”

I cut in, "Our cat! Our precious baby Bengal cat we raised from infancy." A soft awe echoes through the chamber. "But the heat of those final flames was too strong.."

A bridesmaid gives a soft sob.

"Please, David, can you ever forgive me?" I ask him.

"Oh, I know you didn't start that fire," he answers blankly.

"No," I redirect him, "I mean about leaving you, will you come back to me?"

"Oh. Well, the thing is, um?"

"Daniel," I inform him.

"Right! Daniel, I've really moved on from that ordeal, and I found myself more of a ... dog person now, and I love Daisy, so... no."

Here is the big part, "Oh, woe is me!" I cry out, "The most harrowing act I've ever seen of this man was not during that fire, but right now, with him being true to his heart." I really ham it up now. "Oh, I cannot break up true love! It is too beautiful. I guess the memories of what once was will be the only daydreams I will have. Good-bye, FOREVER!" I turn to take my leave and a rapture of applause breaks over the crowd. The mother of the bride even walks over to kiss me on the cheek,

"Thank you for the show, I'm so glad Daisy went with you for the part!"

I wave adieu to all of my adoring fans, "See you at the reception everybody!" That gets a chuckle out of the group.

I love my job. I really do. I was recruited by an agency when my faked allergic reaction at a restaurant got me out of paying for a meal. The agent said it was the best performance she'd seen and could use me on staff for reoccurring events that requested dramatic role-playing.

Ever since the ban of reality television and much other media sources from our 62nd president, people have been craving drama and suspense. Ever since the first Party Crasher Agency opened, P.P.C.s have been one of the most requested freelancing roles on the market. That's what I do; I'm a Professional Party Crasher.

Dull Christmas party? Spice it up with a staged heist. Want to make your friend's jealous at your cousin's Bar Mitzvah? A long-lost child of your second uncle is always a good go-to. Or even if you want to make a day more memorable, like the wedding I just worked this morning, those sorts of packages pay for my month's rent.

Since I finished this shift early, Stacey-Ann and I decide to grab dinner together before calling it a night. We started at about the same time with the agency and have been friends ever since. I slide into the booth across from her,

"You look ravishing today."

She passes a side eye to me through the heavy stage make-up and bouffant wig. "Children's party, the theme was 'Maria Antoinette'. It seems that I am nothing but a glorified clown to clients these days."

"If you want, I can give you some of my upcoming contracts. They all seem

to be more... mature themed.”

“Most of your contracts are meant to stimulate romantic inclinations amongst women aged 20 to 40. I don’t think I could pull that off.”

It was true that I did build up a bit of a reputation of being the ‘stud’ of the agency; a Don Juan of sorts.

“But I can’t help it,” I reply. “My job is to bring excitement to the humdrum life. I just happen to look handsome while doing so.”

She laughed, but in more of a mocking tone than I would have liked. “Let’s see how long that goes for you.” She nodded for the server-droid to take our orders.

When she finished typing it into the bot’s screen, I told her, “You know, you are actually beautiful.” She seemed surprised to hear me say this, so I continued, “You can easily play a jealous ex-girlfriend or a sophisticated fiancé for some dweebs high school reunion.”

“Yes,” she sighed dumping sugar packets into her iced tea, “but I don’t want to keep playing other people’s desires, I want to live out my own.”

“You know you ordered sweet tea, right?” I ask her.

“I like it a little stronger than how they make it,” she answered.

“You won’t even have teeth left once you hit your thirties,” I joked.

“Well, it won’t matter if my teeth fall out,” she growled as she yanked aggressively at another sugar packet. “It’s not like I’m kissing anybody.”

“Whoa, I feel like I hit a nerve?”

She sighed and looked around the room to form her thoughts. “I need to know if you want anything more out of ... this?”

“I’m providing an experience to clients that greatly appreciate it. The job pays well, but I’d like to run my own agency someday.”

“No. Between us?” she paused as the serving-droid rolled up on squeaky wheels to bring our food. They may not be sentient robots, but this one sure seemed to know when to come in at the most awkward timing.

“Wait, are you saying you like me?” I asked once the bot rolled away.

“I really thought I made it obvious before,” she tucks her hair behind her ear, not looking up from her food.

“No, I thought we were just, really good work colleagues, who enjoy sharing our free time together?”

“We do, like, everything together. We go shopping together, and you help me study for my exams. When was the last time we went a day without talking to each other?” I thought over what she said, but she was too impatient to let me answer back,

“Okay then,” she asked, “What do you think a relationship is then?”

I didn’t know if this was a trick question.

“Someone you eat meals with?” I answered.

“And? ...”

“And, ... sleep with?” Judging by her face that was the wrong answer.

“Oh, okay,” she scoffed, “so I’ve got 50% of the relationship down, maybe-

if I just fuck you that would complete the equation.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea, I’m just surprised is all. I had no idea you were interested in me like that. I would have thought that maybe... I don’t know, you’d make it known in a lot grander of a fashion. Make the moment really memorable?”

“Grandiose performances are my job, not who I am.”

“I’m just trying to explain why I didn’t know.”

“Well,” she sighed, “now you know.”

We ate the rest of our meal in silence. As I inserted bills into the server-droid, she asks, “Can we talk about this again tomorrow, after work?”

“Yeah,” I answer, “I’ll take the night to think things over.”

I don’t understand; I am so much better under pressure than that. I can improvise on a dime for my clients, so why couldn’t I be more suave when a girl confesses her feelings to me? I’ve had women propose their affections for me on the job, and it’s never been a big deal before? What is so different this time?

During the next day at work, all I can think about is Stacey-Ann and the night of uncomfortable gestures. Normally we’d hug each other bye, but now I didn’t know what was allowed, so I went for a handshake. I couldn’t take it back once it was out there. Stacey-Ann politely shook back but I could tell that she was just as confused about it as I was.

The decadence of this engagement party isn’t even enough of a distraction for me. Country club, open bar and buffet, all the women perfumed in Dior: all these signs of a great tip are usually enough to pull my head into the game. The bride-to-be stands out of the crowd in her pageant sash and tiara. It’s time to make a scene.

“I hope you’re happy now, Margaret,” I yell over the crowd. Everyone watches the play unfold. “You finally get what you want?”

She spots me and pleads, “Henry, please, don’t make a fool of yourself!” She is not as good of an actress as my other clients. However, she continues,

“I’ve found someone who will love me the way I deserve to be loved.”

“But I gave you the moon and the stars, tell me what more must I do to earn your love?”

“Oh Henry, you only loved the idea of me, but you never understood me, not like Hank.” Her swinging arm motion takes my attention to Hank, face deep in a rack of ribs.

“Margaret, I do love the idea of you. That is the only ribbon of bliss I can hold onto when you are not near. When I finally do hold you in my presence, the glow of heaven is upon us.”

I’ve used that line dozens of times, but it always carries favour with the audience. The client gives a nod as if to say “Go on”.

So, I do, “Nothing in the world matters more than your happiness, that is why I try so hard to make you laugh, even when you stubbornly refuse; but I can tell by the crinkle at the corners of your eyes that you are just as happy as I

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am. Being with you is like... is like... a really old sweater.”

“A what?”

A what? Old sweater? I’ve never used that line before.

“You know, that sweater that you’ve had for years, and you just feel safe and accepted wrapped up inside of it? That is what being with you is like.”

“Wow, Henry, ... that is really... sweet?” She looks over at her fiancé,
“Hank, are you even paying attention?”

He shoots his head our direction, barbeque sauce smeared on his chin.

“You know what,” she grabs my elbow and entwines her arm with mine, “I will go back to you.”

Hank stands up, “You’ll what now?”

Crap, I’ve got an off-scripter!

Hank lumbers across the room. It’s like this man was carved from a sequoia tree. His fists are balled kettle bells.

Margaret calls back, “Maybe I should be with someone who pays attention to me, huh Hank?”

I’ve got to try to save face, before Sasquatch pummels mine.

“If attention is all you seek in a partner, then carry a mirror around with you and provide it yourself. What I want is so much more. I want trust, and counselling, and even frustration, because those things all make up a unique pair. A beautiful display of what can be created together. And if you can’t see that, then I don’t know what we can be.”

She cuts me off, “Uhh, I paid you to make me look good, what do you think you’re doing rejecting me right when the tension is getting good?”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper to Margaret, “that wasn’t meant for you. I... I don’t know why I said that?”

I’ve got to quickly wrap things up. “If you are not satisfied with the service, you can contact my manager.”

I take off running to the doors, with the only applause coming from my Oxfords beating against the marble floor.

I keep going over the words I want to say to Stacey-Ann in my head, but they keep getting muddled up. I think I remember where she said her shift would be, and I can make it there before the event is over if I run instead of waiting for a taxi.

When I finally burst through the door, I can see that the event is wrapping up. Only a few partygoers are left sloppily dancing to slow music. Stacey-Ann is there, talking to some fancy looking guy.

Is she thinking of me as she smiles at his remarks, or is that genuine attraction she is displaying for him? Do platonic friends always talk this close to one another? I’ve never noticed before. Oh crap! I’m panting.

She notices me, and the smile dissipates. Placing their drinks on a passing waiting-bot, she leads her dance partner to a table.

Is she avoiding me? Did I mess things up so badly? I have to think of something quick to recover from this. Maybe I can grab the mic from the DJ

and sing her favourite song.

No, no, that isn't what she wants. That is what I do as a P.P.C., and Stacey-Ann isn't just some client. I head for the exit, but a voice catches me before I cross the door.

"Did you go for a swim and forget your swimsuit?"

I look over my shoulder and it's her. The tone in her voice was light but her face reads differently. I dab at my brow and find a stream of sweat.

"Or maybe," she adds, "Your party was hosted in a sauna?" She smiles, but it doesn't meet her eyes.

"Yeah, it feels like that right now."

Awkward silence. Who would have guessed we made our living off of improvisation? Then we both try to speak at the same time. My phone chirps in to provide a blissful few seconds to recoup from this disaster. It's my boss.

"Can you explain what the hell just happened with the engagement party gig? You almost broke up the couple!"

"I know, I'm sorry, I just,"

"Are you kidding me? They loved it! Want you to come back for their baby shower in two months, willing to pay double. I don't know what you said, but great job!" He hangs up before I can thank him back.

I can see the deep blue of Stacey-Ann's eyes through fog affected street lamp lighting. They seem sad. Have they always been this sad, or am I just noticing now?

"I heard what you said," I tell her while putting my phone away, "I mean, I know what you meant, what you said at dinner last night."

She interrupts, "Yeah, actually, about that. Maybe we can just, pretend like it never happened? I don't want to make things weird between us."

"No, things aren't weird!" I've given better performance in my sleep.

"Really, because it feels pretty awkward right now, honestly?"

"I know, but maybe it's just that," I don't know what to tell her? Does she want me to fight for her, or is that me being too over dramatic? Should I listen to what she is saying now?

"It's just that, what?" she asks, "You aren't very good at this sort of thing?" That isn't true, you do this stuff all the time for work, I've seen you woo women from 80-year-old grandmas to little toddlers."

"I know, but... It's just... Maybe it feels weird and awkward now because, ... I do care about how this turns out... Because I can't just write off this experience as another shift done; I don't get redoes or the choice to walk away without losing anything. This... here. I like this."

It's like, I'm finally realizing what she said, about all the hints she displayed for me to see, but I was too busy focusing on myself that I couldn't see.

"I have no idea," I resume, "if what I just said was the right thing to say, but it is how I feel."

"That is," she paused, smiling, "an acceptable answer?"

I breath a heavy sigh. "That is really reassuring."

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“Since we’re both done with our shifts, would you like to get something to eat?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I answered, “I’d like that. The Usual?”

“Hmm, let’s try a new place tonight?” She takes my hand and leads the way.

If You're Noah, and It's raining, Where Is The Ark?

Alyse Morell

I can't recall what made me want to talk to him in the first place? Guilt, probably. That Christian guilt that always festers within good girls who believe they are wicked. This was the third time I'd seen him there, in that same spot. The second time I saw him, I told myself, it is a sign if he is there again.

I found him hunched over, like a baby bird with a broken wing, by the curb of Food Town's entrance. Trying to make myself discreet felt pointless, considering he spoke to me first.

"Excuse me ma'am, I'm sure you're busy, but I wanted to ask you, if you're going inside, could you buy me some tape? It's only a dollar, I already checked, and I'd buy it myself, but they won't let me into the store."

Taken by surprise, "What do you need tape for?"

"The spine of my bible is falling off." He holds his brown leather bible, and the pages are fishes, flopping from his angler grip. "I just want to fix my bible."

I kneel down so I can talk to him at eye level, but keeping my legs ready to run if need be. From this position I can see his foot is bleeding pretty badly within his flip-flop.

"Oh no, do you need a band aid?" I ask, pointing to his feet. "How did that happen?"

"I think I stepped on some glass? I honestly didn't notice until you pointed it out. It doesn't hurt. I get cuts on my feet all the time."

"Do you want me to get you Band Aides too, and maybe rubbing alcohol to clean it?"

"Oh no, you don't have to do that for me. I just really want to make sure my bible doesn't break more," strokes the cover of the book like it's a family pet.

"What's your name?"

"Noah." He looks barely old enough to be called an adult, and although his clothes and body show wear and tear, he holds a sweet smile on his face.

Coming back from within the store, I squat more comfortably next to Noah and show him all that I bought: a deli sandwich, two waters, one for now and one for later, because it's only going to get hotter throughout the day in a Texas summer, and of course, the tape and box of bandages. He shares his appreciation, but only pays attention to the tape and proceeds to mend his bible.

Feeling like maybe there should be more that I can do for him, I walk away. If I had another person with me, I would feel more comfortable offering him a ride, but I doubt Noah would accept anyway.

A hurricane blew in later that week, and I worried about Noah during that time. I worried if he stayed in a safe place. Did he, like his namesake, survive the flood, holding his precious bible in tow? I looked for him later, but never

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saw him there again. It's possible the Food Town manager finally scooped him from their property. A part of me wonders if he avoided that spot because of me. Did I seem too overbearing with all of my questions? Was I rubbing my privilege in his face? Was I supposed to do more than what I gave, or was what I provided to him so minimal compared to all his other problems?

The Travel Junkie

Lindsey Wentzel

Tied to societal norms
Enslaved to substances to feel alive
Shatter the glass
Climb out through the open window
To view endless opportunities
A variety of destinies and destinations
Inherent demand for the unconventional
Refreshing authenticity
Stripping the soul raw
To be recreated through
Prolific, euphoric freedom
The hedonistic odyssey
Timeless transient
The exhilarating rush of a quest with no end
Rebellious wanderer

Hope rekindled
Risk rewarded
Daily visions of fate
The discovery of self in the midst of new places
Rebirth and redemption
Unplanned vagabond fortunes
Passionate obsession
Addiction to the nomadic lifestyle
A frenzied fetish

The Legacy of Rain

Issabella Shands

Storm clouds swell with ancestral tears
Fat dew drops fall, ripe with their fears.
The dew cascades down green blades,
Their memory, legacy fades.
As the wind spreads their silent prayers.

Words unspoken, yet so clear.
Societal norms they must adhere.
As the whitewashed culture pervades.
Storm clouds swell with ancestral tears.

Chromosomal heirs inherit sneers,
While wishing they could just appear,
themselves. A wicked game: charades.
Amass in a maze, barricades.
If only their skin not interfere.
Storm clouds swell with ancestral tears.

The State of Our Lives

Anna Akpabio

Tears flow from my eyes as my thoughts create a great agony,
With a clenched fist I hear the pain of my people,
I see their stories,
I hear their pleas for justice.
But not I alone, we.
We stand outraged by the pain of our people,
We hear the cries of the oppressed.

Empathy gushes forth from our hearts as we stand as one.
Tall and proud like eagles.
We beckon on our strength,
We scream and charge forth in pain and anger.
For the defenseless,
For those who can fight no more,
Whose souls are worn out.

We scream for George,
For Ahmaud,
For Breonna,
For everyone's pain and everyone in
pain.
This ends now.

Dear the oppressed

Heavin Holguin

Dear the oppressed,

You are the reason to stay alive, to strive, to fight for our lives, to sharpen our knives, and protect those who cried.

Cried is the thing of the past, at last, you aided me and gave me a cast, but you have to tell your kids to fast.

Fast, it's sad you have to try and outlast, but I just want to thank you, for not becoming blue, not caring if it's un-new, for all that you do, and for being the angle of view.

View. Isn't it nice to realize the promise, advise the calmest, and see the ways across the mighty waves, they say hey to Thomas, nay to that's upon us and damn those who con us!

Us, why can't it be us? Not just Guss or the privileged who still throw a fuss, but us. You and me who have to plead and bleed, yo take a knee and agree to try and fight for us to flee.

Flee, we're seen like fleas! Geez! Why is life a breeze for some, and others have to sit here and eat the crumbs, live in the slums, and die with frozen lungs.

Lungs! They're meant for breathing, but we're over here screaming!

Screaming because we're mad, sad, wanna do somethin' bad, but at last, we're not like the klan man who listens to the orangey tan-man and named their daughter ann, who's brains' a tin can, and damn for sure ain't no college man

Man, you know we have to kill the eel, save those who can't appeal, and create a deal with the unreal.

Unreal is something that's hard to imagine, like those who experience famine, and cannons, and tragic abandons, but get zero aid from the rich in mansions.

Mansions, where the people take no action, value fashion, follow their passions, steals for satisfaction.

Satisfaction, the opposite of dissatisfaction!

Dissatisfaction; what the poor feel when they see the fraction, their check is unable to pay for basic hospital reactions, They take legal action, but get a nuclear reaction. Police action ain't not nothing but detraction. Caption, the rich call this an overreaction, but this damn nation will kill those who can't afford a two-day vacation.

Psalm 105:31

Amanda Hansen



Boni and a Box of Posies

Sapphire Vasquez



Happy Pill

Halie Diehl



Perfect Addiction

Halie Diehl



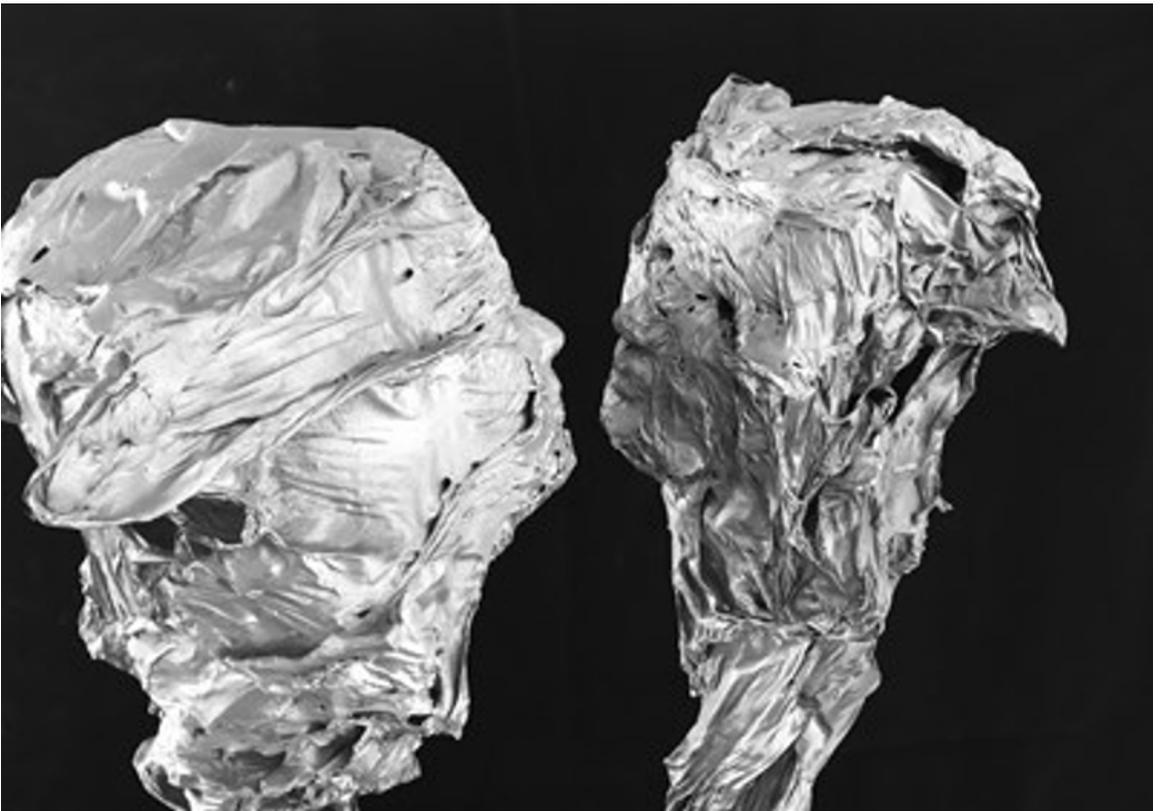
I Am Completely Smitten

Selena Reyes



Face 2 Face

Jack Bordnick



Letter to Donovan

Siany Kloss



Panic Attack

Chloe Denberry-Hansen



President's Award Winner - First Place Poetry

to be buried under glitter

Carson Owens

the center of a crowd,
shimmering, sultry

oh, to taste its coarseness
each edge, a slice in the gossiping tongues

to rest a finger on its sternum,
bringing forth a pearl-sized drop of life

oh, to fall into its caress,
flesh reduced to red ribbons

to bear my soul to its hungry eyes,
rubies spilling from each aorta

oh, to feel its gentle kiss
and cough up a gleaming silver razor

to look down into the pulsating center
and see that I'm finally beautiful

the night you said i love you

pools of blue gleam
peeking
from a mop of dishevelled hair

the car
speeding along a flooded road,
barely

hanging on, tires
spinning,
i try to hang onto

your smell, sickly
sweet, stale cologne and weed
i can't

roll the window down
the rain, wind, i
scream

as we flip
the trees give way to stumbling
broken silver

A Night Spent In a Wooden Rocking Chair

On the water, sits the moon.
The whispering dogwoods sway.
Across the sky, the stars are strewn,
and on the water, sits the moon.
I shiver here in my cocoon,
wondering if I'll be okay.
On the water, sits the moon,
and the whispering dogwoods sway.

Blinding Brilliant

Natellie Coufal

I used to make jokes about the nuthouse. As a teacher I would tell my students to settle down or they'd have to haul me to Shoal Creek in Austin, where I'd be crafting necklaces out of Playdoh and wandering around in a bathrobe with no belt. I'll be laying on a couch, recalling my troubled childhood to a shrink. Sitting at a crafting table where I can color pictures that reveal my broken psyche. Getting nicknamed "Sparky" for all my trips to the electric-shock therapy wing. They grin up at me from their desks. Damn, I'm funny.

2020. Our heat index has exceeded one hundred all week long. We have to handle the steering wheel with hot pads. Sometimes the local teenagers crack eggs on the pavement to watch them fry. The old men at Carolyn's feedstore joke that it's too hot to even screw. I chug my hot coffee anyway. I sweat. I'm nervous. I finish my coffee in no time, but I keep touching the rim of the cup to my lower lip, a nervous tick. Over the phone, I had asked if I could interview my twin sister about her suicide attempt and her stay at the psychiatric hospital. Steph comes right over with her two boys. She's all calm as she sips her Diet Coke, talking as if recalling a stay at the Holiday Inn. We sit in the shade of the porch while our kids splash and shout in the pool. The reflection of the sun on the kiddie pool is blinding; it hurts my eyes. I've recently finished Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, where she delineates "a blinding bad time." She gives it a time-frame, makes it something that can be measured, studied, understood. I need to understand this, our blinding bad time. I want to contain it.

Her primary care doctor told her that a mental hospital would be the safest place for her. Dr. Leal diagnosed her—Major Depressive Disorder with Suicide Attempt—and referred her to Rock Prairie Behavioral Health Hospital in College Station. Patients have recovered beautifully from there, he assured her. I was scared and unsure, she said, but Tim urged me to go—he was scared himself, and convinced me that these were the experts, they knew what to do. Paperwork and admission took up most of the first day. Once she was admitted, they patted her down. They took away her clothes and gave her scrubs to wear. They took her purse, jewelry, the contents of her pockets, and her shoelaces. When I say 'they' I mean a tech, she clarified. Mental Health Care technicians are random, unskilled people with no real training who are paid an hourly wage to do the grunt work of nurses and psychiatrists. The techs do anything from manning the front desk to patting down visitors to cleaning up vomit to wrangling a violent patient off of another patient. During her stay, Steph learned that Rock Prairie is notoriously understaffed.

1995. The movie *Mad Love* comes out, starring Drew Barrymore with her cute pixie haircut and Chris O'Donnell, with his bulging muscles and strong

jawline. At fourteen, we drool over romanticized psychosis. We love to see Barrymore in torn up clothes, jamming out to Nirvana and 7 Year Bitch. Her chemistry with O'Donnell on the screen is almost more than we can stand. For us, it is a too-simple equation: we swoon over O'Donnell, the prince charming, and how he rescues this poor misunderstood girl from the psychiatric ward, and her rich, stuck-up parents are the villains, with their rules and their stainless-steel appliances. We revel in their rebellion and pretend that it's ours. Barrymore's insanity is endearing and glamourized. She cuts school, has sex, runs away, lives spontaneously. When she returns to the psych ward in the end, it doesn't resonate. We only remember that crazy is the new sexy.

After searching her, they lead my sister down a hallway to small room that had a bed and a toilet in it. Like prison, she said. She was required to keep the door open at all times, even when using the toilet. She was on her period, so she asked for sanitary pads. She asked every hour on the hour for pads. The lady at the front desk explained that a fight had broken out, and that they would be very short-handed for a while. After four hours, my sister just gave up and continued to bleed on herself. She sweated, tossed, turned and bled on a mattress with no sheets—she didn't sleep at all because she was hungry and more nervous than ever. At daybreak she was still awake when a nurse came in with some new medication that Steph was unfamiliar with. She asked the nurse what it was and she said anti-psychotic. She asked her how it worked on the body, but the nurse didn't know. She took the medicine anyway. Just after the nurse left, a tech entered with her daily schedule. She asked for pads again, and the tech actually brought her some as well as some new scrubs to change into. From 9:00-9:30 Group Therapy was scheduled. Steph was escorted by a tech to a room where a dozen or so patients were seated in a circle. The psychologist was busy, the tech said, so she would lead the session; she asked everyone to state a goal they hoped to achieve for the day. A gothic-looking teenager named Sarah stated that her goal was to not get pissed off at anybody during group therapy. Another patient, Margie, sobbed when she reported that her goal was to forgive herself for the affair that she had—this made a guy named Mitch grumble under his breath: "Not this shit again." A slight, brittle gal said she didn't know—that she ate a whole roll and now was so full that she could die and couldn't think of anything else. One man named Mike slept with his head on his desk for the entire session. It took about five minutes to go around the circle. Then everyone was dismissed to their rooms, and that concluded Group Therapy.

2001. One hot summer day in Houston, Texas we watch the story of Andrea Yates unravel before our eyes. A diagnosis of severe postpartum psychosis and schizophrenia. A good freak show, she drowned all five of her young children in the bathtub. One of the sickest patients we've ever treated, an expert witness states. But we're hard of heart; we Texans shake our heads and say what a shame to it all. I remember waiting tables that summer. I can sympathize with her depression, but it's no excuse, says some old lady who sips her sweet tea and makes me reheat her potato soup. On TV we see a monster in orange

prison scrubs, unattractively scrawny, greasy dark hair strewn against her sickly pale skin. Something sub-human. She is not the valedictorian of her high school graduating class, captain of the swim team, or a registered nurse for MD Anderson. The personhood of Yates is lost somewhere between the clang of prison bars and the bang of the gavel in the courtroom. Her insanity plea denied, she is sentenced to life in prison. We all watch on TV, between bites of burger and fries, the incarceration of Yates. We are righteously horrified; who could do such a thing? I wipe blobs of ketchup off the table that is done and move on to the next.

My sister returned to her room but found herself thrashing on the bare mattress. She thought she would try the Community Room until it was time for her appointment with the Psychiatrist/Director of the hospital. The community room was small and dingy and smelled of disinfectant. A group of patients played Uno at a wobbly table. There was also a table with crayons and coloring books on it where nobody sat. Aside from tables and chairs, the room was bare except for a fuzzy TV which was on *The Price is Right*. A couple of patients dozed in chairs. Time is warped at the nuthouse, Steph told me. The clocks on the wall seemed stuck, unreal, like the ones in the Salvador Dali painting: melted, distorted, and still. When she gave up on the clocks, she used her own breathes to measure moment after moment. She sat in a hard, plastic orange chair like a child in a waiting room, jiggling her leg in agitation. A man near her own age, probably in his thirties, made eye contact with her from another orange chair where he had been browsing through a fashion magazine. He smiled and asked what she was in for. She told him her diagnosis, which she already had to repeat to the techs, the nurses, and the psychiatrist since she got there. It didn't get easier. The syllables still stumbled off her tongue. He came across as likeable; he did most of the talking, mentioning that this was his second visit to the nuthouse. They talked some about their families. He said he bet that she would do fine, that she had a lot going for her with her husband, her baby, and her sister. He told her that if she wants to get out, she should do two things without argument: take her meds and go to therapy.

2014. Robin Williams hangs himself with a belt in his bedroom. The Oscar-winning actor was sixty-three. Police report that he had superficial cuts on his wrists and a history of depression and substance abuse; it sounds like your typical celebrity suicide. Perhaps he just couldn't handle the fame. In *Dead Poets Society*, he is a wise and compassionate teacher, urging his students to seize the day. When Robert Sean Leonard's character puts a bullet to his brain, Williams is gentle and steadfast—he exits the classroom as steadily as he came. He's stellar in his performance of *Mrs. Doubtfire*, ridiculous in his old lady get-up, his fake boobs catching fire, his manly bulk evident underneath an old lady dress. We roar.

The patients got taken out at least once a day for fresh air. They were escorted to a grassy patch outside that was surrounded by four brick walls. There was one picnic table dead in the center. It reminded Steph of a hamster

cage where humans could look down and observe them. The smokers sat and smoked at the picnic table. My sister walked back and forth from wall to wall, eavesdropping on the smokers. She learned that one smoker had the hots for the teenaged goth even if her tits could be bigger. After about ten minutes, they were brought back inside. Steph passed the time writing letters to me. When it was her time use the phone in the hallway, she waited in line for her five-minute phone call. The call came at 3:05 in the afternoon, startling me—my cell had been in my hand all day, even when going to the bathroom and then finally I got the call. I answered the phone on the first ring. I told her how I had tried to call her multiple times, that I lost count after four or five times. She cried into the phone and told me that she missed me so much, that the day had been hell—long hours of sitting around and shitty therapy. I told her that I had spent the day alternating between baking and trying to call her, and it was hell worrying about her. She told me about how shitty the facilities were, how she tossed and turned in hell all night, and how she wanted out. I told her I'd do anything for her, and that I'd be there for visiting hours.

You'd have thought I'd have seen it coming. Twins share a magic quality; they speak a language all their own. Twins are supposed to have telepathic abilities, I've been told; they can detect when something is wrong with the other without even using words. Doctors say that the bond begins in the womb, around fourteen weeks. The twin fetuses will touch one another more than they touch themselves. They even know to be gentle around the eye area. I thought I was good. At an early age I could read her face, to know if she was bored, or mischievous, or content or constipated. I thought I had it down. One time we both showed up to a family barbeque wearing the exact same shirt that came from Ross: brown with pink polka dots. We had made the purchases independently, without informing each other. Another time we each got Dad the same Father's Day card from HEB: a hotdog with googly eyes that sang when you opened it. Everyone marveled at how twins think alike, how they really are in tune with each other. My mental compass must have been defective. I thought she was okay. Every day she would call at 7:30 in the morning. She knew that's when I finished getting the kids off to school each day. She needed me to pep-talk her for the day. She would ask me to tell how other mothers struggled, so I'd remind her of Kris Wunderlich, who refused to get out of bed one morning. Her mother-in-law had had to come over and watch her toddler and newborn. I told her about Kelly Dinges, with her five wild boys, how they got kicked out of a Walmart because one of them threw a temper tantrum and knocked all the toys off the shelves. How once one of them swallowed her birth control pill. Another time, one of them pulled down his pants and pooped on the floor at someone else's house. No, I thought she was in a good place: her miscarriage was over. She had conceived again four months later. She had given birth to a small, five-pound boy, premature, but healthy. She had a support system—she had joined MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) at Champion

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Fellowship Church. Every Thursday, she and I would attend to eat breakfast food, drink coffee, and swap war-stories with the other young mothers. She had cried one day and had told her small group that her baby was nearly a year old and she was still anxious, still overwhelmed and nervous as hell.

2016: March 18th, about 7:30 in the morning. She called. I was in the kitchen, right by the window. It was misty. Through a choked-up voice, she told me that sometimes she had suicidal thoughts. She told me. We can do whatever you want, I told her; Kelly Pittman was coming over for a playdate but I would cancel. We could do anything, go anywhere, whatever she wanted. I could take the baby. She told me no, that she would go to Leonita's house instead. I believed her. I hung up the phone. I never told anyone about that call. Kelly came over and we spent the day helping our kids catch frogs. I called Steph to check on her, and she didn't answer, but I didn't put the pieces together. I thought she was probably napping with Kyle down, so I crouched down and returned to catching frogs. My sister was downing three bottles of prescription drugs with a bottle of booze and I had hung up the fucking phone.

2018. In a fancy French hotel, Anthony Bourdain, celebrity chef, millionaire, and author of *Kitchen Confidential*, hangs himself with the belt of a bathrobe in the bathroom. His mother, Gladys, says "He had everything. Success beyond his wildest dreams. Money beyond his wildest dreams. He is absolutely the last person in the world I would have ever dreamed would do something like this." He was sixty-one. Authorities say that the act appeared to be impulsive, though the field of psychology reports that eight out of ten people who attempt suicide give warning signs. I wonder what wild thoughts raced through his brain before he did it. Or maybe he was super chill, calm in his knowledge that he had a way out. I wonder what secrets he hoarded, what he was trying to escape. Most of all I wonder if his loved ones feel how I feel—that they should have seen it coming, that they should have loved him better, that it is something they will live with the rest of their lives. I buy his book and search for clues. He is light-hearted and witty. Bourdain urges his readers to live daringly, eat oysters, take risks, travel and be forever changed. He insists that our bodies are not temples, but amusement parks—we should enjoy the ride. His oven-roasted eggplant recipe intrigues me, but I can't bring myself to try the dish. On the cover, he stands tall and handsome, his eyes looking directly into the camera. He's too alive for me, too good-looking, too memorable.

2020. My sister is calmer than me. She undresses her two-year-old son as she answers my questions about the nuthouse. She laughs at the way he shouts 'naked!' over and over as he runs to the kiddie pool to join Kyle who is playing with my three kids. They all laugh and scream as my eldest squeezes Dawn dish soap out of a bottle, creating a cloud of suds rising from the water. I've scribbled away at my spiral notebook; a mess of chicken-scratch words and phrases gawks back at me, a visual of the frenzy it took to jot them down. I've scrawled so hard, the words are like braille, or scrimshaw—they have dimension and meaning, and I'm depending on it. It's as bright as hell out here; when my eyes

Natellie Coufal

look up to the pool, my pupils shrink in pain. My hands brush up and down my homemade braille. I don't know anything, but everything is blinding brilliant.

The Life After

Logan Dugan

Experiencing the life after death,
May bring the notion it's not worth living.
Without the comfort of a lively breath,
The life after death is not forgiving.

After our bout and my untimely end,
I've made it back, however frail and weak.
This torturous hell that I now transcend,
May grant me the vengeance which I so seek.

I've clawed my way out, through all this damn dirt,
To confront the man who caused my demise.
I knew it was worth all of the effort
When I looked out and saw your fear-filled eyes.

Why don't you test your luck? Go roll the dice.
One thing you should know: you can't kill me twice.

Mother

Adrienne Pine

My mother died in the early minutes of March 21, 2012, just as spring was coming to its fullest expression in Birmingham, Alabama, the city where she was born, married, and had her children, and where she had lived her entire life. The foliage was a promising shade of bright green. The suburban lawns were visions lined with banks of azaleas in full bloom. The year was still young; as yet, the sun's heat had no weight to it.

On March 9, she was diagnosed with bone cancer. How long she had had the bone cancer, her doctor would not suppose. What was known was that the bone cancer was a metastasis from breast cancer she had survived fourteen years ago. For the past twelve years, she had been cancer-free, but, as it was explained, breast cancer is sneaky and insidious and doesn't give up easily.

The doctor giving her the diagnosis stressed the positive aspects: the cancer had not spread beyond the bones, and with chemotherapy, she might live a few more years, although she would likely be confined to a wheelchair. If this was meant to be the silver lining, my mother didn't see it that way. She confided her true state of mind to her rabbi. "Rabbi, I know I'm dying," she said to him when he visited her in the hospital.

"We're all dying," he replied.

"No, I know I am dying soon," she said, "and it's all right."

He told us this after the funeral, at the shiva minyan.

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As I drove along the roads of my childhood, it occurred to me that my mother's youth had been the best season of her life. Everything afterwards was a disappointment. And she had never really gotten over it.

Inside the woman she became, there was always the popular girl, the belle of the ball, whose life had never fulfilled its promise. Once her wit and repartee had charmed girls and boys alike, and young and old; she was accustomed to being the center of attention, adored and adorned.

Long after she married and had children, flirtation lived on in her encounters with tradesmen and repairmen—Stanley at the grocery store, Gus at the gas station—men she saw casually in the course of her errands. She seemed happiest when she was flirting, but I never saw her flirt with my father. Nothing so lighthearted existed between them. Instead there was a furious passion that erupted in explosions and battles.

It is one morning at breakfast, and I am three or four years old. I don't know what started their argument, but Daddy wants to leave for work, and Mama is angry and threatening to pour coffee on him. He is angry, too, and taunts her that she won't dare do it. "Don't you believe it," she cries, grabbing the coffeepot from the stove. She flings a fountain of hot coffee

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that reaches him as he tries to escape out the front door, splashing all over his good suit. He screams, and she flees back inside. Furious, he stomps up the stairs and inside the house to change, cursing her but avoiding her. His suit is stained the color of dirt, the color of excrement.

That stain endures—dirty, shameful, coloring our family life for years to come. So much unhappiness and disappointment. And so little tolerance and affection.

Long before my parents met, something had happened to each of them that left them damaged. Neither was emotionally whole enough to love in an unstinting and generous way. Their connections to each other and their children were based on transactions. “I’ll do this for you, if you do that for me.” Nothing was free, and everything had its price.

This was how they related to each other, and it was how they treated their children as well.

Mom tyrannized over us because she could dominate us. The home was the only sphere in which she was powerful. Every morning Dad escaped into the practice of law. It was a place where he had reason and justice on his side, and she didn’t exist. Only within her family was she all-powerful.

My parents fought constantly about money. There was never enough. Because my mother had no way of earning money and no intention of trying, she intensified the pressure on my father. He’d left a law firm where he was unhappy to go out on his own and struggled for years as a single practitioner before he was successful. But even after success came, the obsession with money continued.

It was more than a need for money that they expressed. They thought about money constantly, how to get it, how to hoard it, how to save it from anyone else spending it. My parents let their lust for money control their lives. The conclusion was that money was worth more than we were. We were constantly being reminded that they couldn’t afford us, but they were stuck with us. They calculated each expenditure, and it was up to us to prove we were worth every cent they grudgingly spent on us.

In her battles with our father, my mother pressured us to take sides, and woe befell us if we didn’t select hers. We grew up afraid of her temper and her outbursts. “What if Mom gets mad?” we would worry, and by “mad,” we meant her screaming until the veins stood out on her neck, and her vocal cords sounded as if they were stripped raw. In her rages, she hit us, and she tore up our rooms. Once, when I was a teenager, she picked up a heavy pair of ceramic mushrooms that sat on the coffee table and hurled them at my head. I ducked instinctively, and when the mushrooms exploded against the wall, shattering into fragments, she screamed that I had broken them. And in the shadows of her screams was Mimi, trying to find a way to glue the mushrooms back together.

Mom did not care how much she inflicted hurt. The harm within her that in turn caused the wish to harm seemed inexhaustible. That she never apologized was like a badge of honor for her, as if an apology were an admission of

shameful weakness.

She claimed that she hadn't wanted any of her children, that we were all the results of accidents and mistakes. She told us that she had jumped off the kitchen table, and thrown herself down the stairs, hoping for a miscarriage, but it hadn't worked. Even though she said this many times, it was hard for us to believe. After all, she took care of us; she hadn't abandoned us. She shopped and cooked, sewed our clothes, made sure we went to school, and took us to the doctor.

She was kindest to us when we were sick, and then she would bring us trays with soft boiled egg scooped out of the shell into an egg cup, to be spooned up with bits of toast, ginger ale with some of the bubbles stirred out, and hot tea and saltines. She loved us best when we were babies, before we had learned to talk or to walk, or express our will, when we were still helplessly dependent. Once we were toddlers, she did not like us so well. She was sure to find something in our behavior to object to.

* * *

At our first therapy session after my mother's death, my husband said, "It may sound blunt, but I think that your life will be a lot better now that she is gone."

It was hard for me to hear this. It set me apart from other daughters. It was as if I could hear my mother's voice in my ear accusing me of being hard-hearted and unnatural. She enjoyed reducing me to tears, until I had dissolved into a pool of water, like the Wicked Witch in the Wizard of Oz.

"Everyone thinks you're a good girl, a smart girl. You're a sneak, you've pulled the wool over everyone's eyes but mine," she would yell at me. "I know the real you. You're a nasty, two-faced little bitch, you're a selfish fuck who doesn't give a good goddamn about anyone but herself. You don't love me, you don't know how to love. Look at you! I can't stand the sight of you!"

How I sobbed and begged for forgiveness, hoping she would stop. But she remained cold and hard, as unyielding as steel. And I thought what she was saying must be true, because when I searched my heart at those moments, I could find no love for her.

Ten years passed, and then twenty. This scene was replayed hundreds of times, in countless variations. My mother's gift for twisting meaning was worse than the cursing and the hitting, because it caused me to doubt myself.

When I was younger, the only way I knew how to resist was passively. While she attacked me, I stood stiff and still, my face expressionless, while my mind escaped. I imagined that I was a prisoner in a cell, peering out the bars of a window, turning myself into a bird flying free. When she gripped me violently by the shoulders and shook me so that my teeth rattled in my head, I imagined that I had left my body behind, and I was somewhere else, where I wasn't being hurt.

She knew what I was doing, and it infuriated her. And even though I tried as hard as I could to be a stone that absorbed nothing, I didn't completely suc-

ceed. There was a part of me that took in every word she said and believed it.

And in between her rages, my father lectured me that it was my duty to endure whatever she did to me, just as he endured it when she got mad at him. He believed that his forbearance made him morally superior, and he wanted me to be like him. He insisted and then pleaded that I should give in to her. Do it for me, he begged.

And so I would agree to give in. And then all the crying that I had repressed, the sadness and the suffering that I had been holding back with rigid control, would burst out of me, and I would sob, wanting to believe that what he was offering me was comfort.

And I would go to my mother, dread in my heart. Time and again, my dread was fulfilled. Despite my father's promises, my mother interpreted my apology as an opportunity for a further attack. She went for the chink in my armor, and she struck deep. She struck again and again, until I was like the mutilated dragon, writhing at St. Michael's feet.

My father's claim of the moral high ground went hand in hand with his belief that he commanded an impartial view from this exalted place. He meted out blame. "What do you do that sets her off? She never gets mad at your sisters the way she gets mad at you. Why can't you learn not to provoke her?"

I didn't *want* to provoke her. I wanted her to love me, but she didn't. She constantly found fault. Something I did or said, or something I didn't do or should have done was always setting her off. Maybe she was right. Maybe deep down I was a bad person, pulling the wool over everyone's eyes. The truth was that I hated my mother, and at the same time I loved her with a painful love.

It took me a long time to learn to protect myself. It took distance. It took silence. It took decades.

* * *

At the end of my mother's life, she stopped battling. In our last conversations, she showed no wish to fight with me. While there were no deathbed confessions or revelations, neither were there accusations or threats. I didn't know how close to death she was, but she knew, and she kept her own counsel. She never used the word "cancer" in conversation with me. She insisted that it was her chronic fatigue syndrome and her chronic mononucleosis that was causing her problems. I had stopped challenging her years ago. I listened, and I sympathized.

In a strange way, illness always brought out the best in my mother. She was long-suffering and heroic. As a patient in the hospital, she made an effort to cooperate. On that floor, she was the nurses' favorite. She always wanted sympathy, and now it came to her in abundance.

But she wasn't getting better. And the depths to which she was falling took her by surprise. I could hear the shock in the tone of her voice.

The pleasures of her life slipped away from her; she could no longer concentrate on reading, or watching television. Eating, walking, going to the bathroom, getting dressed were no longer activities of her daily life. Given this

state of things, did she make a conscious decision to die sooner rather than later, in order to avoid the misery that lay ahead of her? Did she will her heart to fail, her lungs to fill with fluid? I wonder what it was like for her in those final moments, alone in the hospital room. I admire her courage, and I love her for not fighting the inevitable. If I were in her place, I would prefer it her way.

* * *

After my mother's death, I was left with a sense of emptiness. I found consolation in the family treasure trove of pictures. I loved looking at the images of my parents at the beginning of their marriage, when they were younger than I had ever known them, and their life together was a future promise. They seemed to beckon mysteriously from the unknowable past. What secrets could I unlock if I were to speak to them?

My sisters and I have fallen in love with these pictures; we copy and exchange them by email and flash drive. In these idealized images, our parents are smiling and beautiful. They appear happier and more confident than any of us ever remember them being.

Appearances deceive. Self-assertive and opinionated though my mother was, she was not confident. Despite her obvious gifts and accomplishments, she allowed herself to be paralyzed by fear. She was miserable every day of her life, and yet, long after her children were grown, she didn't have the nerve to leave an unhappy marriage where she felt dissatisfied, overlooked, misunderstood, and unloved. She was afraid to take a risk for happiness, although she found my father emotionally stunted and self-absorbed, and she blamed him for not providing for her in the way that she wanted. Ultimately, it was not love, loyalty, or friendship that kept her from leaving my father. She had never worked outside the home, and she didn't intend to start. She was worried enough about losing financial security that she clung to the evils she knew rather than fly to others that she knew not of.

In his own way, which was not her way, my father loved my mother very much. Once she was gone, it was touching to see how much he missed her, and how lost he was without her. Oddly enough, what he seemed to miss most was her sarcasm. Funny how I never realized how much he actually enjoyed being the butt of her jokes. When I asked him about his happy memories, he fondly recalled her witticisms at his expense, variations on the theme of how she wished she'd never married him.

"The thing with Mom is that you never knew if she really meant it or not," I commented.

"Nah, she didn't mean it," he replied softly, twisting his body with shyness like a schoolboy. Or was the gesture just a manifestation of his Parkinson's disease?

* * *

A friend who recently lost her own mother wrote me, "The best metaphor I have heard for this rite of passage is that it's like having the roof of the house yanked off, and suddenly you're looking up at the sky, exposed to the elements."

Voices

I find this metaphor rich and suggestive, as it hearkens back to the maternal ideal as intermediary, shelter, protector. I picture the black sky, pricked by stars. I feel the cold wind. But I don't feel the same way that my friend does.

I feel an emptiness, but it isn't the vastness of space. It is more like a physical sensation in my body, located at the pit of my stomach. It can't be relieved, or explained away. It's just there.

Instead of a roof, it was as if walls came down for me when Mom died. From the time I was young, my mother had erected walls to try to separate us from each other. Her idea was to divide and conquer. With walls, she controlled us, confined us, defined us. The walls were metaphorical, and they were also real. Sometimes they were the misunderstandings she liked to stir up between us, the way she talked about us to each other behind our backs and goaded us with what others said about us, or how she interrupted when two of us began to have a conversation that wasn't about her.

Now she is gone, the walls that she put up are gone, too. Each one of us sisters had spent years without speaking to the others, but now we find common connections in our shared griefs, our worries about our father.

We are trying to reach across the void my mother left when she died and hold hands.

Losing Yourself

Dakota Young

Denial:

Just ignore the silence
Ignore the demons
and their violence
Just shove it far from your mind
Be blind and deny
just so you don't have to die

Anger:

Blame the world
Yes that's it
with fists curled
Blame him and blame her
But don't look within
or you'll find where the problems always been

Bargaining:

They won't stop no matter
how you beg and plead
As your world shatters
maybe you can make a trade,
your life and soul
for a one-way ticket out of this hell hole

Depression:

You can call it what you want
but it's always been the same
A way for your demons to flaunt
that they have control now
As you look for and escape
The ideas begin to take shape

Acceptance:

Your demons have now won.
Don't worry it's almost over.
Soon you'll be done.
The cold steel presses to your chest.
You are filled with peace.
As your last breaths cease.

Reggie

Danika Hollis

Reginald Rojas—Reggie—was known for having a loud mouth. He didn't do sports; he was not really the team player kind of person. He was a skater, sort of (Tony Hawk was an alumni of his high school after all). Everyone just knew him because he talked. A lot. If he knew anyone was bothered by his personality, however, his loud mouth was a flippant disregard of any judgement. Even though he did alright in school, he was bored. And so, he was fine with the titles of jokester, punk, slacker, smart-ass, meat-head, etc., that were often thrown to him. He lived up to it and laughed. If he was going to have to put up with being in school, then he was going to make it fun, fun for himself.

One of his unfortunate and constant targets was Richard Smith—Rich—in his fourth period history class with Mr. Sanchez. He was not someone that had gone to elementary or middle school with the lot of them. He had just showed up one day, new to 11th grade. It wasn't that he was a nerd, he was fine, whatever. It was his very heavy, very English accent—and maybe his long hair. He was a novelty, something new to fixate on when Reggie got bored. Reggie's favorite thing was to greet Rich with, "ELLO, GOVNAH." Rich would cringe, Reggie would laugh. That would be that. Hilarious. And to Rich, Reggie was made of just two simple things: loudness and a cheap hat (for Reggie always wore his "lucky" San Diego Chargers ball cap).

On one normal Tuesday, Reggie sat in his normal assigned seat, with a normal book stored on the rack below. Pictures of men's mullets adorned the book cover—Rich thought this very weird from the moment he had "met" Reggie. To most others, however, it was just another funny thing about Reggie. One year, all of his book cover were random pictures of Daniel Radcliffe. Reggie's normal greeting made Rich involuntarily cringe, as per usual.

"ELLO, GOVNAH. 'OW DO YEW DO?" Reggie's bottom lip contorted. His top teeth popped out of his mouth. His nose crinkled and his eyes closed in amusement. Out of bored habit, he fixed his cap. John and Christian, Reggie's two best friends, also punks, laughed.

"Top of the mornin' to ya," Christian said. It was in an accent that was both terrible and culturally oblivious but of which made all three boys laugh.

Rich closed his eyes, took a deep breath. When his eyes opened again, he continued to remove a binder out of his rucksack. He straightened up, fixed a piece of mousy brown hair, and faced forward. If I ignore it, they'll stop. This mantra was repeated as he took in another deep breath. Unhappy with the strand of hair he had just fixed, he pulled it back down to his face and let it shield his eyes. At home in Birmingham, he would be studying for the GCSE with his best mate, Lee. There was a little park down the way from his home—

old home—where they would take their textbooks and cuppa tea. If it rained, they could step into the coffee shop across the street. He frowned at the happy memory, now muddied in sadness. He still had wavering thoughts on if their move had been for the best. The move had been good for his dad and mum; but then, was bad for it brought him to something so unfamiliar and mean. The class started and his tactic worked. The unfamiliar and mean—and the posse—left him alone.

Five minutes before the end bell, the phone in the classroom rang. The students erupted into hushed excitement. Mr. Sanchez shook his hair free, his baggy slacks and white shirt jiggled as he walked to pick it up. He answered and, while listening to the caller, turned to look in the boys' general direction. Rich's stomach dropped—it reminded him of the last time his class was interrupted by a phone call. The class silenced. When Mr. Sanchez hung up the phone, he turned and looked in their direction again, "Reggie, Mrs. Hall would like to speak with you."

At the sound of their principal's name, John, gave a loud, "OH! HO! Whatdja do this time, Reg?"

As Reggie got up he gave an even louder, "Nothing." He paused. "Nothing besides your mom." And then there was an explosion of laughter. Always. Always laughter. And it was the laughter that made him forget his mullet-clad textbook.

Mr. Sanchez sighed, now his lecture would never finish. Ugh, teenagers, he thought. Outwardly, he remarked, "Reggie. I hope you're not going to be this rude when you talk to her."

When Reggie left, Mr. Sanchez let the still unfocused students out a little early. It was one of the reasons he was everyone's favorite.

Rich, by habit, lingered to let all the others go ahead. Mr. Sanchez, oblivious of any one still left in the room, finished cleaning the board. When he turned around to find that Rich was still there, he motioned toward the desk next to him. "Hey, Richard, looks like Reggie left his book. Do you mind taking it to the office?"

"Me?" Richard squeaked. He had no interest in touching the filthy thing.

His 'me' could have been a high pitched 'yee', which was close enough to a yes for him. "Thank you," he said, oblivious to any hesitation.

Still a little apprehensive, he nodded, picked up the book and the rest of his things, and left. Out of curiosity of what lay under the mullets, he peaked at the title page: *The History of the Modern Middle East*.

The front office hummed. Phones rang, people walked to and fro, papers shuffled, keyboards were clicked. Rich asked the attendant at the front desk where Mrs. Hall's office was located and was then directed down a hallway. "First door on the left," the woman said over a covered phone handset.

Rich took his time to walk in said direction. He was in no rush to come face to face with his bully or even Mrs. Hall. He regretted lingering. And

Voices

he regretted it further when he had to linger by an almost closed door labeled 'Principal'. Taking off his rucksack, he put his back against the wall and slunk down to the floor.

"Your mom is on her way. I'm sorry, Reggie. I'm so sorry, Jessica. I knew your father well; he was a good man. I'm so very sorry I have to be the one to tell you." Suddenly Rich knew the type of hushed voices and sniffing he was hearing. He saw the phone ring again in Birmingham. He saw his old teacher answer.

Rich heard Jessica, Reggie's sister, give a stifled gasp. Reggie responded through embarrassed sniffles, "Thanks, Mrs. Hall. He always spoke of you kindly."

The boy in the hall blushed. It was the nicest thing he could recall Reggie saying. But it was also the saddest.

"My last memory of him was as he boarded the plane for Iraq—"

Iraq.

Rich's heart accelerated. Knowing of the personal violation he had just made, he hastily stood right back up.

Iraq.

He was transfixed on the word. He paused, debating if he should stay longer. He wanted to stay. He wanted to reach out. He wanted to reach out to Reggie, to Jessica. He wanted.

But he knew this was a private conversation he had no right to hear.

Rich turned around and left the book with the secretary.

Over the next few days, Reggie was absent and class was weirdly quiet—by then the word had gotten out that his father, an officer in the United States Marine Corp, had died in an ambush. No one quite knew what to say about it. John and Christian ignored Rich, and he started to feel better about his history class. But his "feeling better" mood was tinged with sadness when he thought about Reggie and his sister and how suddenly close he felt to the both of them.

It was on the following weekend that Rich flipped through the day-old newspaper at his desk in his room, looking for a current event to write about. Because, well, homework. An advert stood out: *Local Hero, Officer Rojas, Memorial Saturday*.

He shook his head and decided he needed to get a bit of fresh air. He set the paper down and wandered through the house towards the back door into the garden. But as he passed by the kitchen, he saw his mother.

"You alright bab?" Mrs. Smith watched as Rich took a banana from the work top and huffed into a chair opposite her.

After a moment, Rich admitted, "Nah. Not really."

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Smith took a sip of her tea.

"You know that boy I was tellin' you 'bout? Reggie..." Rich took a paper towel from the holder and set the banana on top.

"The one that's always givin' you hassle?" The woman set her cup gen-

tly on the table.

“Yeah. His father passed away.” Rich blinked back the tears that were trying to start. “Marine. Died in Iraq.” The boy looked up to see that his mum’s eyes started to well too.

“Oh darling.” Mrs. Smith stood and walked to the electric kettle on the side board while trying to hide her tears. “I’ll make a brew.” When she started the kettle, she turned to face her son.

“I miss dad,” Rich said, turning his attention to the garden out the window.

Mrs. Smith watched, not knowing what else to say. “I know. I miss him too,” was all she could manage.

For two minutes, the only hum of life came from the kettle as they waited for the water to boil. “The funeral’s today. ‘Thought I’d go,” Rich finally said as his mother handed him a cuppa tea.

“Do you want me to come as well?”

“Nah. It’s alright.” Rich stood, juggling his mug and banana in one hand as he went to the garden door.

Reggie stood at the pulpit, looking over the blurred faces, and talked. He wasn’t terribly religious; it was his mother’s idea to have the service. People will want to pay their respects, his mother had said repeatedly to him. He didn’t remember anything he had just said as he looked into the faces his mother said would be there. But when he looked for John, he was unable to find him. Odd. He looked for Christian. Not there either. Less odd, but still odd. And another odd feeling tingled at the back of his brain. Tension settled over his shoulders. Jessica’s friends are here, he noted. His mouth suddenly dried, he took a gulp of water before he continued.

That’s when Reggie saw Rich out of the corner of his eye. That odd feeling worked its way from his brain to the top of his spine and he shivered. Rich sat as close as possible to the side door into the narthex. How long has he been here? Reggie stumbled through more memories as he talked. He found himself talking about the first Chargers’ game he could remember... and the last. Does he know my dad? He stuttered over the lessons, left untaught, that would be lost to him forever. He managed to vow to be there for his mother. For fuck’s sake, is he crying? How dare he.

Reggie thought about Rich for the rest of the service. Rich was something new to think about, when thinking about his father started to become too much. Reggie was angry, and sad, and confused, and grateful, and incensed, and—and mad. He went through the motions of singing and standing and singing and standing. If his father was here, he would have hated this service. But if his father was here, there wouldn’t be a need for this service. That tingling at the back of his head nestled back in.

After the last hymn was hummed, he swam through condolence-wishing attendees searching for Rich. Why the fuck is he here? Having no luck inside, he found the closest exit and went outside.

The sky was bright blue, the sun too bright to look at. A blanket of warmth fell across his skin and he didn't know it at the time, but he felt lifted—like a bird finding the breeze. The anger he held with him being there diminished into determined curiosity. And so, when he found Rich in the parking lot, he couldn't find it in himself to be mad.

He thought he had missed him, but then he heard a whimper, from between two cars.

Rich sat on the curb with his car keys in hand and he was at the beginning of a sob. He looked up, but he was unable to move. He was unable to stop the sadness that flowed out of his eyes.

Reggie sat down, settled in beside him, shoulder to shoulder, and waited. He looked ahead, studying the paint of the red car on his right and the black car on his left. When Rich didn't stop crying, he took a tissue out of his pocket and put it in his hand. Slowly, Rich folded his fingers around it and lifted it to his eyes. Reggie then knew that his being there was nothing to do with him.

Minutes passed and soon he settled down. "My dad died in Iraq," Rich said into the tissue.

"So did mine," Reggie tried his first joke since finding out.

"We never had a memorial." There. Rich finally said the one thing that hurt him the most. The thing he kept flashing back to. It wasn't the move overseas, it wasn't the school, it wasn't the people. He wasn't unhappy with the unfamiliar. He was unhappy with what he knew was missing and his inability to do anything about it.

"—Reggie!?" Jessica called out, looking for him. "Where ar—" she called, looking down the space between cars. "Oh." She stopped when she took in Reggie's friend sitting next to him. "I'm glad one of your friends came—"

"What do you want Jessica?" Reggie rolled his eyes.

"Mom's looking for you." She turned back around and left them alone.

Reggie and Rich sat in silence for a few more minutes. Rich took in measured breaths and used the tissue to wipe his eyes.

"Are you coming to the reception?" Reggie asked.

Rich shook his head. "Thanks, but I can't."

The following week, Reggie was back at school. He knew John and Christian were already in 4th period, and then he also thought about how Rich would be waiting. Rich was Reggie's new thought—Rich would be looking straight ahead, hidden behind his hair, ignoring him. And that's all Reggie wanted, a day without being looked at, a day where everyone treated him like Rich did. Right then, he wished for more people like him.

Before class, he waited in the bathroom until the last possible minute. And when he opened the door to Mr. Sanchez's class and accidentally ran directly into Rich's back he stammered across, "Sorry." A wisp of his hair grazed his face as he turned around to look at him and Reggie felt hot, confused.

They stopped in their tracks.

The bell rang just as the door closed behind him.

It was Christian from across the room that hollered, “Look, King Riiiiiiichard has arrived. We can start now.” He rolled his ‘R’ in Richard for an annoying effect. A smattering of laughter followed.

“Shut the fuck up,” Reggie said, collecting his cool and walking to his normal seat. All noise ceased. A few other students turned to stare and even Mr. Sanchez flicked his eyes in their direction. Rich paused, letting him pass by, unsure of what was unfolding.

“When did King Richard knight you?” Christian sneered. Reggie’s Monday morning grumpiness was usual, he knew Reggie would get over whatever was up his ass sooner or later, always did.

“You’re a fucking idiot,” was Reggie’s simple but effective reply, “Clueless, too.” Christian, confused at his response, turned away from Reggie, pretending to be interested in the start of class.

Both Reggie and Rich sat down as quietly as possible. Reggie attempted a friendly nod at Rich when he stole a sideways glance at him. Pink blossomed across his cheeks, and he snapped forward. Reggie wanted to hide. But it was too late. He wanted all of the other stares to snap forward. But then he also wanted everyone to start talking so he could have the chance to say to Rich that he didn’t mind that he came to the memorial. He wanted to say to him that Christian was an idiot. He wanted to give an excuse for. He wanted to be. He wanted to say. He wanted.

Translating Ghosts

Hannah Morris-Voth

This girl is baby's breath.

On this hard table the candle drips,
we watch the whispering ghosts.

They speak into our ears
and we translate to
each other.

Their languages are
confusing; our voices are hollow,
sad, and steady. No one listens
as we tell the truth.

Joshua

Andi Newberry



Letter to Hunter

Siany Kloss



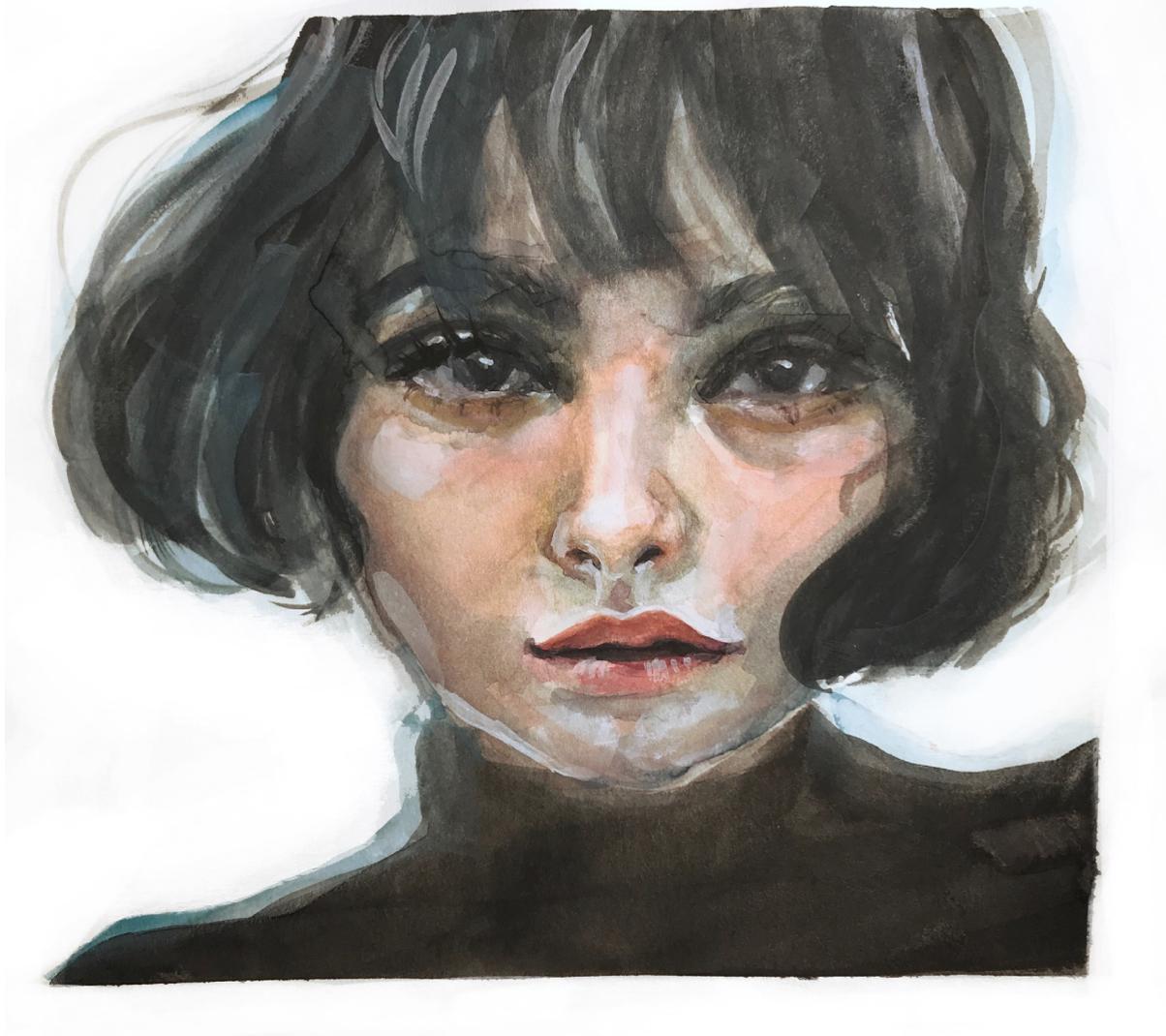
Eau de Parfum

Sarah Ann Team



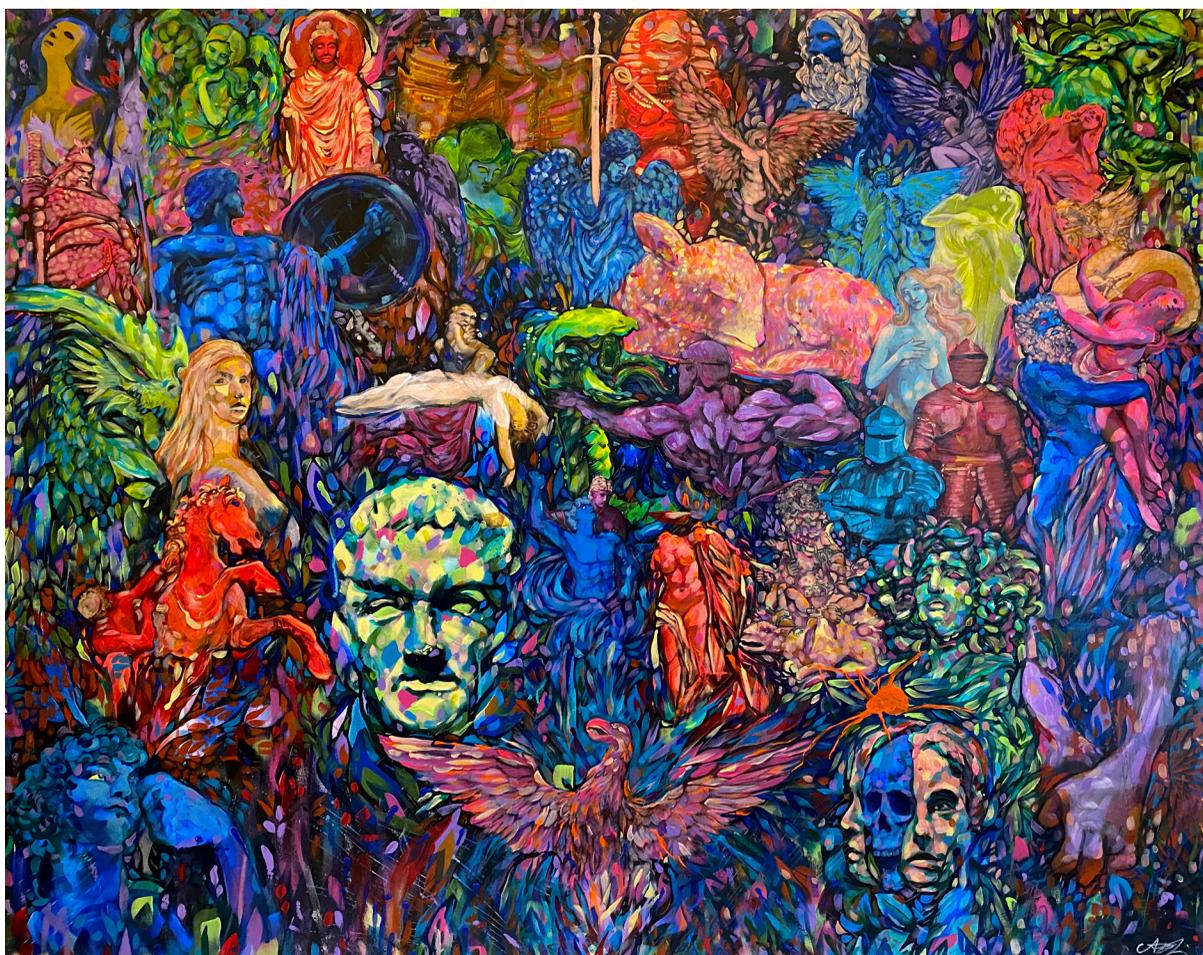
Bittersweet

Sarah Ann Teaw



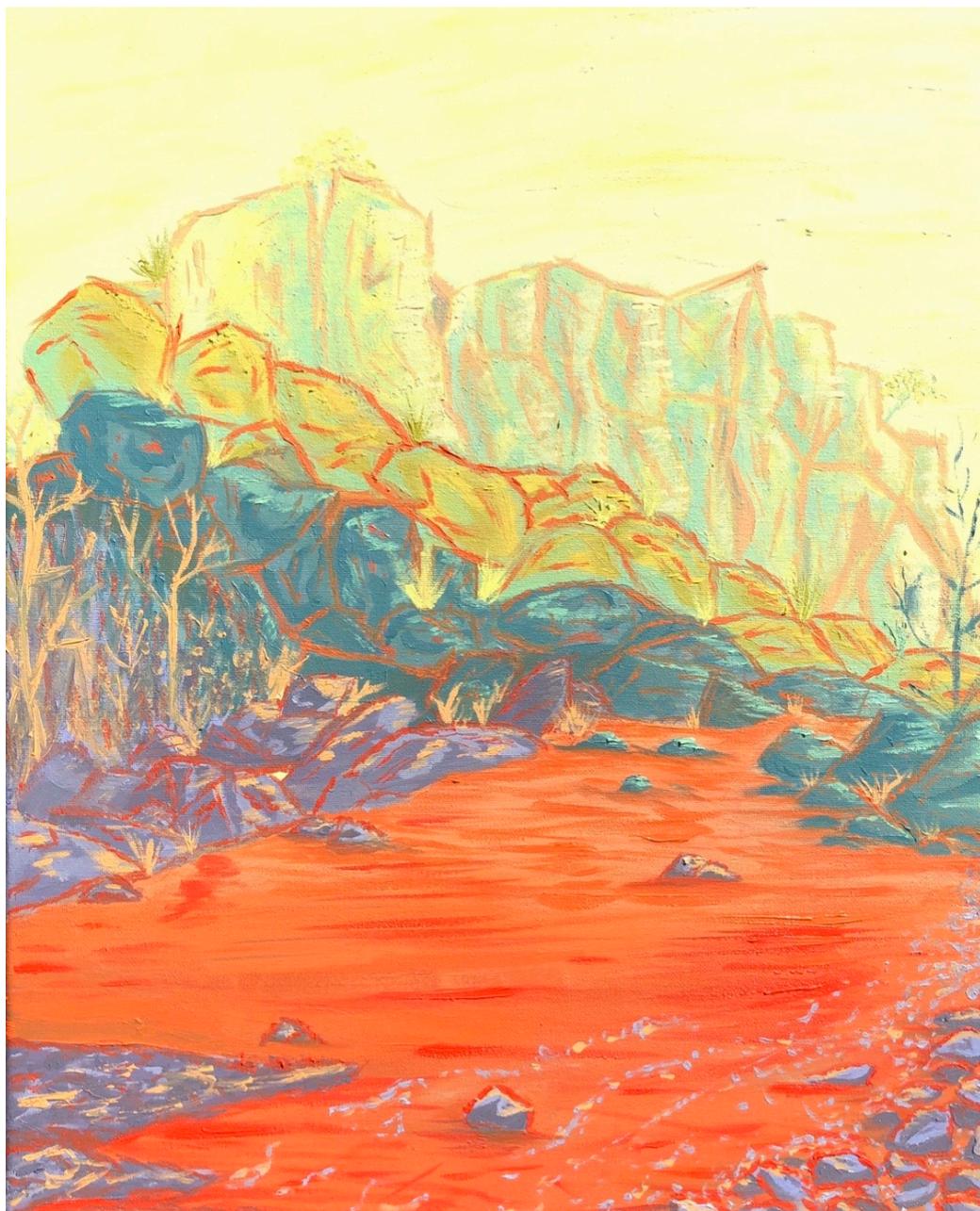
All & Everything

Arthur Kwon Lee



Spring Break

Sarah Griego



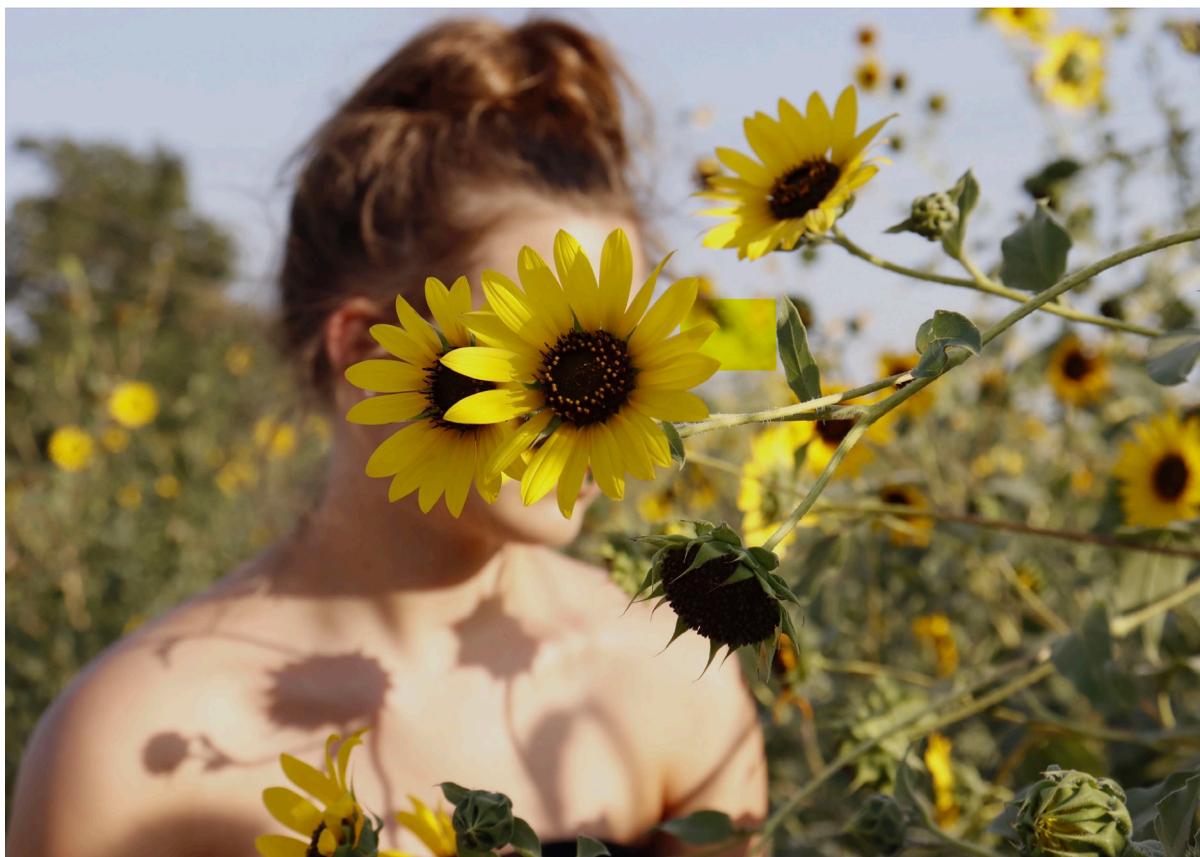
eye of the storm

Jodie Howard-Filan



Faces of the Sun

Kaitlin Hancock



My Sun

John Fulton

Sun o' mine
You possess a power unlike any other,
the power to bestow life unto me
Your light gleams through every orifice of mine
You allow my soul to know nothing but your eternal warmth
throughout each and every moment of my life

Each morning I arise from my slumber so that I may feel your warmth once
again
While no day is perfect, I awake all the same each morning
knowing that your warmth is what I will know first
While no day is perfect, I slumber peacefully each night
knowing that your gentle, bright illumination will be the first thing I know each
morning, encasing all that is to be known by me

Some days, fearsome tempests brew,
their clouds covering your shine from me
Upon such dim days, I begin to ponder what an eternity living as such would be,
Knowing nothing but darkness
Knowing nothing but an insatiable thirst for your warmth,
that a dark day would surely never bestow upon me
I then assure myself, if such a day was ever to come, I shall surely cease func-
tionality,
As I have never had the unfortunate fate of waking up to a day
not blessed by your unrelenting light

But, of course, even I must come to the realization that even light as everlasting
as yours
may someday cease to shine
Upon this fateful day, I dread, I will know nothing but frigid, unforgiving, unre-
lenting cold,
Only equal to that of your once luminous rays
Upon this fateful day, I know not of how I will shut my eyes for my daily slum-
ber,
as I will have nothing but my thoughts
My oh so horrific thoughts of the icy world I would awake to
A world in which I shall never again know your blazing rays,
A world in which will never know but the winter you have left it in

Voices

I ask you, o' sun, how shall I sleep each night knowing that I will only awake to such a world?

I ask you, o' sun, what will be my purpose in a world without your light?

Perhaps, in such a world, I would force myself to adjust
to this new feeling of ice

Perhaps, in such a world, I would force myself to believe
I have never known you, o' sun, and your fiery warmth

Perhaps, I may find new warmth

Perhaps, I may again stumble upon a ray robust enough
to give reason to my daily awakening

But, of course, no light, no matter how brilliant,
could ever replace the warmth of your once-overwhelming rays,
sun o' mine.

Untitled

Margaret Marcum

lamb on the cross,
direct me to my grave

needles that come
from wood, barren

warmth now of body,
crimson in light

touching soils rich
in night, tills morning's

air—sayer of future,
what now do you see?

horns sprung from ground,
our shovels look like guns,

bolts like bindis
among the eyes,

yours and mine, though
we have all gone blind

Beatitudes

Sadie Bartels

They are the repentant, poor in spirit
They look down on the proud from golden thrones
Their judgement is harsh, and all men fear it

They are mourners over morality's bones
Of a world rotted by unclean hands
Repaired only by their righteous groans

They are the meek, as gentle as lambs
They bless the worthless other with a smile
Resenting that other, their sins and their scams

Their hunger for righteousness rises like bile
They stomp and they scream for spilt blood
When their victim's the other, it's all worthwhile

Their mercy flows out in a earth-shaking flood
That cleanses an Earth unworthy of its holiness
Who really cares about the death and the mud?

They are the clean, pure, without brokenness
All that they touch is purified in fire
They carry no guilt, they ask no forgiveness

They are the diplomats, to peace they aspire
Yet they are foiled by that other, stubborn, sordid
The blame can't be theirs, for they are the higher

They are the persecuted, chased by the horrid
Though goodness they sought, they reap only hate
For all their good deeds, this is how they're rewarded

Alas, they were blind, now it is their fate
To pay for their pride, their evil, their loathing
For they insult God's love, and call themselves great

Thus when their end comes, deprived of their boasting
They'll look at the other, and see there a face
A face that was wanting, and loving, and hoping

Sadie Bartels

The face of another bearing no disgrace
So this is the other, the blessed and saved
And they were the monster, cruel, without grace

Sonata Pathétique (Standard Candles)

Jenna Kober

I. Grave -- Shakespearean Sonata

Stare up at the starry, starry sky,
outside, on any (or every) given
night; raise your hand to eye level
and you black-out

A section of the darkness.
And, too, block-out of your
view the twinkling lights;
no fewer than

ten stars that now explode
with the same brightness as
ten thousand stars which are unexploded.
Supernovas – phenomenal pyrotechnics

The best universe has to offer; a display
freely hidden, masked by tips-human.

II. Adagio Cantabile -- Rondeau Prima

Materia non est in principio creavit The stuff of matter, is baked naked in
kilns. Every atom of your nails, of your fingers --
really, in your entire body -- is shaped thusly

The elements of universal matter i.e. N, O, Li,
& Fe, all, products of such spectacular shows. Materia non est in principio
creavit The stuff of matter, is baked naked in kilns.

Materia non est in principio creavit --
the stuff of matter, is baked, naked in kilns.
The ceramic nature of your right hand,
came, hardened from a separate Supernova
than the dust comprising your left hand did --
the stuff of matter is exploded in starry endings.

III. Allegro -- Italian Sonata

Never forget that you are here because
of the kindness, the sacrifice, of stars. Maybe there's something poetic about
stardust lacing the bones of all humanity

Perhaps, there's a deeper lesson within the uniquely supermassive power of black-holes. In the end, we are all of much more than all of which you may think that you are.

After all, in Principio, we all have been borne, ashen-clay, by blood-streaked wombs; the archaic remnants of galaxies' dying suns', but too, Love, never forget, because you are here, then that is far from all of which you know you are.

Ode to Squalor'd Lovers

*A Seymourian Sestina;
Recitative, for J.D. Salinger*

i.

Jerome David, they taught me, was a poet;
semantically, he ain't, but ink'd lines lie
read between snickering sophomoric words
within pages: "Fuck" Hold-meta-phon-ory!)
Glassy-eyes gloss past; blank'd verse, to me,
Beautifully pen'd, in Crayola colour: skin-soul.

ii.

Beautiful thing about that kinda soul,
Jerome David's, I mean, to wit, a poet's;
Glass tongued irony, tastes true too, me.
Semantics, a syntactic game of lies
within an endless, infinite, metaphor
Read, us, lovers, his-story behind the words.

iii.

Read all the pockmark'd iambs of words,
beautiful rhythm, breathing, soulfully,
Within lines a cacophonous: metaphor.
Jerome David and me, co-breathing poetically,
Semantically snort the same lying lines of lies.
Glass' sunlit-shards mirror his air from me.

iv.

Within a time, co-ed-ucation finds metaphors .
Reading the world, studious, formalist, words;
Glass's now aesthetic; used to see ironic me
Beauty, I scoff. I, writer, (lonely) Buddy's soul.
Jerome David, xaa wrote of my mis'form'd eye; poet's
semantics, plaiting around an exquisite lies.

v.

Semantics dictated, I wept, tears metaphorically
within the space-time where they hear me.
"Beautiful voice of a gen-a-liche-phucking-poet's;-
Glass. Fragments, revealing mere human; words"
Reading him esoteric; he, writer, was too, a lonely soul.
Jerome David, in restful peace, may you eternally lie.

vi.

Jerome David, in this rhetorical analysis, you lie
semantically, like a crab; I see-more geometry-metaphor.
Reading, now, a brilliant critique of a world's soul.
Within prose pulsating (always) he ink'd me,
Glass'd slit skin, like syllabic similes to words,
beautifully incandescent. Surely, he was a poet.

**Beautiful metaphors, read poets'
Glass lined-words; within there lies
semantic souls of Jerome David, and Me.**

Talking to the Moon

Kristen Longo

I tried talking to the moon
but she doesn't want to listen anymore.
She's heard too many painful nights
and cries of heartbreak.
She's bloated with the songs of drunk devotees after dark.
It's not her fault she can't take anymore.
The moon has her own dilemmas unbeknownst to those below her.
Half full, longing for the sun she only gets glimpses of.
They will never meet,
Never touch,
Never be.
Who listens to the moon when she cries?
The heavens pour down, wetting the ground with tears.
But still
she's only a reflection of the one she loves.
It's a cruel trick played by the universe.
She suffers each cycle,
Destined to end in darkness
Only to be forced to rise again.

I tried talking to the moon
But she doesn't want to listen anymore.
I used up all my time complaining,
And now she refuses to show from behind the culminated clouds.
I've realized I don't know a thing about her.
She doesn't have name,
A face,
Or a voice.
She only has ears
cratered towards those longing for someone to listen.

The Leviathan

Sadie Bartels

The sea is a home.
To her clings the town,
sun-bleached paint, palm fronds, the beach,
the smell of salt upon the breeze,
the sun's great warmth and light cascading down,
oppressive heat and kind embrace all in one.
The shadows are stark, the colors bright, the wood worn,
the people all tan and wide-brimmed hats and uncalloused hands.
And when the sun sets, it stains the waves in its many shades,
orange and pink and red and blue and navy and bright stars,
while neon lights spill blinking into the streets,
and the moon lays still upon blackened waves.
The town spites the deep empty night,
all bright windows and streetlamps,
but beyond her the sea,
she is nothing,
a void.

The sea is alive.
She is schools and flocks,
pods and clusters and forests,
soft shimmering scales and scarred flesh,
gaping mouths and fins and muscled flippers.
Patterns of white and blue play across her floor,
dappling the seals' fur and crabs' shells and sharks' skin alike,
lacing the depths with warm light to which beasts hungrily cling.
Yet the sea yawns open toward those deeper and colder climes,
Where the day has no meaning and night offers no rest,
and hazy gray forms move shapeless and sluggish,
the water shifting with currents or breath.
Where there is life, there death waits eager,
perhaps why fish cannot sleep,
and sharks cannot rest,
never ceasing,
for fear.

The sea is a maw.
Her tongue is seaweed,
her teeth are serrated shells,

Voices

her hungry throat is lined with sand,
her stomach the formless shape of Tehom.
The people of the town carry names and places,
all the things that the sea has chewed up and swallowed down.
When she is satisfied she lays still and tame and bloated,
But she is Scylla, and soon hungers again for her dues,
just as she is Tiamat, mother of man and beast.
Her song is the siren's, beauty and terror,
to forget one is to lose the other.
But her people cannot forget,
her dark heart of wind and rain,
the hurricane,
the Leviathan.

Deep Roots

Meredith Berend

I gaze up at the night sky
her lonely clouded eyes
dull even in the sticks
though they twinkle like a wink
on occasion, pull words from my lips
make me beg to go home to my roots
of curled tendril tree flesh
and wayward stone
tender-woven arms beckoning
from soil beneath my bare feet.

I could be one of the wilted flowers
on my front porch that bends
to a sliver of sunlight.
Plant me right here.
Trade in my skin
for the cracked red dirt that longs
for a drought-ending storm to seep through its pores
or the newly-dead leaves that cling
to oak branches long after spring
has faded into fall
holding on tight as they whisper
let me be your last.

Though I fear them now,
if back to my roots
I would move like the ants and beetles and spiders
devour and be devoured
leave no drop of my life unused, untouched,
unwrapped, unmoved, pulled to pieces
like bones left behind by hawks.

Instead, I lay in repose beneath solitary stars
who shake their heads
silence my pleas which sink
into the earth where I find
my feet stained grass green
a greeting from my roots.

The End

LeNora Schindler

The sun shone through the thick canopy, various species of birds singing along to nature's song. The stream lazily ran across smooth stones, bringing with it tales of far-away lands never to be heard. Overall, a peaceful morning.

At least, it should've been for her.

If anyone bothered to look behind the waterfall at the edge of the forest, they'd find a cave. A cave that protected a small, cozy log cabin. Currently, a woman stood in front of it, staring at something past the waterfall. She had white hair- hair that once held a vibrant honey color and fell in waves to her hips. She wore a cloak made of the night sky and the leaves that fell early. When she moved, her cloak revealed a long dress of black cloth, the texture Remini. She walked along the edge of the cave, taking in the world around her. She held up a wrinkled, dry hand and dragged it across the wall. She could feel the wrinkles on her face and trailing over her body, flowing like streams and brooks until they simply vanished.

She was old now. How old? She lost track a long time ago. Time had no meaning when you had too much of it. And though many longed for the longevity she cursed, they knew not the price. The toll she paid every day she continued her existence.

In her youth, humans were new. They were kind, careful, frightened creatures. They respected the earth and herself, willing to protect her for as long as they lived. Now, they were confident. They were self-absorbed, ignorant, selfish creatures. They were also brilliant- more so than the stars they could no longer see.

They clouded the night sky with black, foul-smelling clouds and bright lights long ago, covering the stars from sight.

She sighed. Her old friend was coming to see her once more- probably for the last time. She walked out of the cave, intending to find her spot—the one her favorite humans made for her long ago- when she needed them most.

Her hair still had its honey color. Humans were still kind.

She sensed something in her forest, something that she hadn't felt in so long now..

She followed the feeling. She wasn't disappointed with what she found.

In a clearing, she saw a young human girl humming and picking berries. The human wore a brown leather dress and kept her dark brown hair in a braid. She seemed to sense something amiss and turned to see the strange lady staring at her. "Hello there. I'm Rosemary. And you are...?"

The lady stared for a moment. "I've never had a name. Your kind usually gives me one."

Rosemary straightened up and looked at the lady.

"That won't do," Rosemary stated, not questioning the implications of the 'your kind'. "Everybody needs a name, something all their own no one can take away. How about I call you... Anabel? What do you think?"

The newly-named Anabel's black eyes remained neutral as she responded. "Do as you wish. I will not stop you."

Rosemary's smile reached her brown ears and chocolate eyes, brightening her face as though the sun shone down on it. "Alright then. Where are you from?"

"Here in the forest. This is my home."

The berry-picker squinted her eyes as if judging the forest. "This is no home- not like this, at least. Let me bring my siblings. We will build you a home for you to live in."

Anabel shrugged, a human motion she picked up from watching those who wandered into her forest. "As I have said, do as you wish. However, you probably want to return soon. The sun is setting, and night is dangerous here."

The other looked up. "Oh, you're right. I'll see you tomorrow, Anabel!" She waved and ran off.

'Anabel' simply walked back to her favorite tree, intent on letting the strange day fade from memory like so many others.

She blinked her now gray eyes, only now seeing where she was. In front of her was an old, mossy, small village made of wood and stone. She called it a village, but in actuality, it was only a few houses- most of which not meant for humans in the first place. She walked into the center home, the biggest one in the circle. The house was covered in dust; she wasn't surprised at that since she hadn't gone in since her lover died.

"It's perfect, Anabel! We can live here, too. You'll never be lonely again!"

Anabel didn't have the heart to correct her partner because the sweet Rosemary would find out soon enough that she'd long outlive the other. Before she could respond, two people joined them. One looked exactly like Rosemary, only in trousers and with short hair. The other had shoulder-length platinum blonde hair and blue eyes. Neither liked to be called the same thing two days in a row, so Anabel simply called them 'they' or 'you'. The blond was named Skyler, the other Thyme. It seemed as though Rosemary's parents had a theme with herbs, but that was none of Anabel's business.

Thyme was bigger and sturdier than Rosemary and stronger, but also had more patience and tranquility. Skyler was small, even by human standards, and had such a temper, the volcanoes on the ring of fire would be shaking. They did more designing than Skyler. The two of them were an amazing team, born close to each other and raised as childhood friends. Their bond was so strong, their marriage was more of a formality than a binding—an official label to put on their relationship.

Her mind flashed back to her old friends -her family- while she walked the floor of the two-story house. A glimpse of a birthday party here, a celebration there. What they called a 'sleepover' in the guest bedroom, the time Bonny the Squirrel (a duck, in actuality- Rosemary decided on the name and title due to his personality) stole Thyme's breakfast, ending up in a three-hour chase. She didn't think they ever caught Bonny, now that she thought about it. Eventually, she came to the master bedroom, where her wife passed long ago.

Voices

“Don’t cry for me, Anabel. I don’t want to see that in the afterlife.” The old, sick Rosemary said, voice strained by her persistent cough and overwhelming emotions. “I know I’m the last from our group to go, but I want you to try to find someone else, someone to show our home to. Someone who will love you like I do.” She smiled, hand reaching up to grasp her lover’s. Her eyes haunted her face, and her gray hair fell like a halo over her pale skull. She had wrinkles and age spots everywhere, but Anabel still thought her beauty unrivaled. She took her ailing lover’s hand and smiled sadly at her.

“There will be no other, Rose,” Anabel started, tears welling up in her eyes and her face set in a grim expression. “In all my years, you’re the only one who ever made me feel love, made me feel joy and sadness at a human’s life. You are special and beautiful, more so than your favorite constellations and stars. More so than each sunrise and sunset that have or ever will pass this earth. More so than all the wonders in this world and those in the next. I will miss you dearly and hope you will wait for me.”

Her lover smiled up at her for the last time. “As long as it takes, Anabel. I will wait, and I hope you keep me waiting for all eternity.”

Rosemary died with her smile crinkling her eyes in the way Anabel loved, with her cold hand in her warm lover’s and her last breath being a promise.

She didn’t notice the tears streaming onto the floor but made no move to stop them. She laid upon their bed and waited, letting her mind reflect on the past without her beloved Rosemary by her side. A life of sorrow, of trying to do good by her love every day. Of depression and sadness, but ensuring that her wife wouldn’t be cross with her when she finally joined her and their friends.

She waited only another hour before she sensed her old friend, as depressing and gloomy as ever. “You are here, old one. Will you finally take me today?”

The silence replied in a way only she knew or understood any more. Her friends had been the last humans she taught to speak with the silence, for she hadn’t come across anyone else willing to learn. Some humans simply knew from the start, their souls being blessed by her friend from the beginning.

“I see... Rose... I’m sorry to make you wait so long. I’m coming to see you at long last.”

She smiled- just as her lover did oh so long ago- and before another moment passed, the world she knew slipped away.

On that day, in that moment, all greenery in the world faded to brown. All insects and birds stopped singing, and all living beings fell into ruin, for Life had finally left the Earth, never to return.

When the World Was

Jonathan Booker

When the World Was ours: we were the supreme
he was the greatest gift of My queer life
I used to think he was light of great beam
we battled via My toil and strife

When the World Was at war: we did not dance
he held himself and I down to sadness
void of Other's love, I was in a trance
I fell deep into a state of madness

When the World Was healing: he returned back
orange-ish appearance, meant temperance
the leash on his neck, pacified attack
his gifts I indulge without hindrance

When the World will soon be ours: hope to share
My world with Him, obsessions He won't bear.

Twitter DMs From a Satanist

Colin Scanlon

Perhaps one of the most historically misunderstood religions, modern Satanism is a far cry from the images that come to mind. Goats with pentagrams drawn on their foreheads standing over a boiling pot, a crowd of men in cloaks sacrificing a fawn to the Christian embodiment of pain and evil. Rather, modern Satanism has an expansive and circuitous path from an archaic, albeit fashionably clothed in floor length robes, practice of worship of the Christian Devil to a modern atheistic philosophy that shares etymology alone with the worship of Satan as a deity.

On April 30, 1966, in a small townhome painted entirely black leaning on its neighbors on a hillside in San Francisco, Anton Szandor LaVey founded modern Satanism.

To best describe LaVey's certainly individual appearance would be to imagine either an adult magician who takes his bizarre hobby far too seriously for somebody middle aged, or a bad guy in a low budget action movie circa 1986. LaVey and his fantastic goatee had a particularly acute interest in the occult. Together they turned a quasi-supernatural cabaret into communal philosophy uniting under what many would consider basic ethical principles. This understanding of Satanism as it exists today is challenging for many of us to due to the western Christianity lens that's most prominent in the media we widely consume.

When I first began researching this topic, it was merely out of curiosity that there might be people who still worship the devil in the way most of us imagine. I read article after article that opened to more misconceptions and I became curious about how this developed. I wanted to hear from people who really were believers of the practice of Satanism today and what they're experience is.

I live in suburban western Pennsylvania. Not exactly teeming with people who casually mention in conversation "I'm a Satanist" in a way many would say "I was at church last week" which is the extent to which I talk about religion with others. That left me with Twitter. I had no idea what to search to find somebody I could talk to that was a Satanist, so I just searched for tweets containing the words "I am a Satanist." Really a very intellectual way of tracking down a target demographic, I know.

After riffing through the nuclear wasteland that a Twitter thread can devolve into, I was able to find a couple people who had made posts publicly giving themselves the self determination of a "modern Satanist." I'd never actually approached somebody about their religion, especially one that's still widely believed to skin animals and use tarot cards to make any important

choices. I peered into the screen in the dark of my bedroom and decided to message them as honestly as I could.

“Hi! I’m writing something about the misconceptions of Satanism. Would you mind telling me about your personal experience with it?”

Shockingly, that worked for a few people, and I was only blocked once, which was multitudes less than I anticipated. Digging into these conversations was incredibly exciting to me. I, like many of us, was raised to see God as the good and Satan as the bad in its most primitive form. The idea that a peaceful, fundamentally sound philosophy had spawned from a concept that is historically looked upon as “bad” was odd. The more I learned the more intoxicating it was, drawn like an atlas moth to a macabre flame.

The first person I was able to speak with was a biographically self-described wiccan, pansexual, absurdist, and punk anarchist. Where the biography attached to his Twitter profile serves as a sort of philosophical manifesto, mine reads “doo doo head cootie queen” which is a joke from a Trident gum commercial from the mid-2000s I for some reason loved. Unsurprisingly, just as I’d imagined we’d been on very different sides of Twitter. Scout, as I’d come to know he’d been named, was the first person I’d spoken to directly with active membership within the Church of Satan. I felt myself brimming with questions, my mind like a pot of water beginning to boil over. How does one first get involved in Satanism? What led you there? What does it really mean to you?

Scout graciously agreed to talk with me over the phone the day after I first messaged him. I picked up my phone the next day and so began my crash course in modern Satanism. I asked Scout what his catalyst was in becoming a Satanist. He went on to tell me that he struggled to reconcile with how religions like Christianity were often weaponized to assert a monotheistic dogma. In particular, the official stance many prominent organized religions as it pertains to LGBTQ+ individuals. As somebody raised largely within a Catholic philosophic quagmire, I sympathized with airing frustration when it comes to the treatment of the queer community by most established religions.

This was something I too struggled with and something I wrote about for a local newspaper. Even as I introduced criticism circulating around the Catholic treatment of victims of child sexual abuse at their hands, and the systematic protection of these predators, my reception was not warm. I was stunned by how many people came forward to defend the church despite the insurmountable evidence that pointed to the harboring of known sexual predators. While I moved more into an agnosticism of solitude, Scout went on to tell me he did not believe in a higher power, but was attracted to the idea of a unifying set of moral code and community that many religions offer. In one of Scout’s direct messages to me, he told me that most Satanists he knew were simply atheists with a craving for a contrarian, “anti-religious” organization to unite under with likeminded individuals.

Blue light streamed onto my face in the dark of my room while I

watched three dots jump through a speech bubble knowing he was replying with more. He went on to talk about how sort of in a quasi-Buddhist way, Satanists practicing under the Temple of Satan believe in a Buddha-like deity called Baphomet who serves as an entirely symbolic figure for peace and knowledge. Scout went quiet for a few days but when he messaged me back he told me that it's been his experience that many members of the Church of Satan do find the "because it angers you" effect the mention of Satanism has for many people. A part of me does have to chuckle at the idea of a young man in rural Iowa joining Satanism just to piss off his parents. It's endearing.

No worship of Satan in the 21st century could be complete without a slick website though. The Church of Satan's website is surprisingly very easy to navigate and obtain information, and it has a very pleasing black and white schematic. In just a few clicks through "support" and "contact pages" (I suppose Satanists communicate in email like the rest of us and not through scrolls sealed with troll blood as I'd hoped) I was able to find the application to become an active member of the Church of Satan. Certainly something I can slap right on resume right under "proficiency in Microsoft Office." Card carrying member of the Church of Satan is a very marketable skill just like getting a certification for your career. A PDF I'd just downloaded sat in my files labeled "Church of Satan application" right above a vegetable casserole recipe I'd downloaded to print off.

I'm not sure what I was expecting. Directions on sending a blood sacrifice to a PO Box in Encino? A pentagram printout to summon your very own onboarding rep from the HR department in Hell? In fact, and to my slight disappointment, it was a long form that contained an application like you'd fill out at a new doctor's office with a sheet of questions attached to the next page. The questions ranged from philosophical inquiries to questions I'd expect to answer before being set up on a blind date. The first question beckons, "what are your impressions of the *Satanic Bible*?" But my personal favorite comes later down the line asking the applicant to tell their favorite joke. The questions are, frankly, bizarre upon initial review. Dietary preferences, your personal definition of magic, how many years would you like to live. All of these are asked for you to answer in complete candor for acceptance. My one hope is that in asking about diet that the Church of Satan is as discriminatory and holds the same abhorrence towards vegans we've all agreed upon as being socially acceptable now.

Perhaps the most delightfully grim facet of the macabre rabbit hole I'd found myself tumbling down was the discovery of the Church's shockingly blithe Twitter presence. With over 300,000 followers to boast, the social media presence of the Church of Satan is one of the more arguably contemporary religious presences on the app. Their twitter is splattered with gifs from shows like RuPaul's Drag Race and The Office, mostly used as ammunition responding to users who have misconceptions about the Church. The mere absurdity of the Church of Satan using Twitter to respond to critics with tongue-in-cheek,

flippant remarks was incredibly entertaining.

By the end of writing this, I sent my thanks to Scout for being my Satanic spirit guide throughout peering through the cracks in what a modern Satanist was. He'd told me it was his pleasure and asked to stay in touch which I told him I'd love to do (we discovered we also both have a similar affinity for the Game of Thrones, the foundation of any great friendship). We chatted a bit more about our favorite characters and he told me he'd be sending me something. A few days later a small manilla envelope laid in the snow at my doorstep addressed to me with a return address in the Poconos. I ripped through the bubble wrap and a small book wrapped in black tissue paper slid from inside. Underneath laid *The Satanic Bible* by Anton Szandor LaVey.

The Candlemaker

Harlow Covington

The roof was giving way. Already, it had begun to collapse in on itself. The lintel above the doors was rotting; the shutters hanging by a wizened nail, swinging with the wind. The timbered support beams too drunk to stand; the stone foundations overrun with lichen, cracked. Clearly, the cabin had sunk into desuetude in the days since the candlemaker left.

Inside, wax drippings covered everything like bird shit. Counters, benches, stovetop, walls—ubiquitous. Insects snared within, fossilizing, preserved. Obsequious armies of ants never to reach their queen. Grumpy spiders dead unfed. A bottle solitarily stood: the centerpiece of a wax-laden table. It was empty but the reek of cheap alcohol lingered. Whatever else had been left behind was gone, the space stripped bare.

The woman slid her finger through the wax, sniffed. *Paraffin*, she thought sadly. *Refined petroleum. Or coal, or shale oil. Clean energy, yes; but what about clean candles? Beeswax, or better yet, soybeans for the apiphobic.*

A wildcat stalked stealthily across a windowless sill, soundless. Black suit, white tie. *Wrong*, she thought. *Tabby fur, wildcats have tabby coats.* It turned its head, as if listening. Its gleaming yellow-green eyes met hers. Suddenly, it disappeared down through some hole in the floorboards. Curious, the woman followed. She inspected the spot of the incident, but found nothing. Disconcerted, fear edged into her being; she was not yet afraid, but shivers of terror, panic, danced around her, waiting to take over.

Hinges *creaked*. She jumped.

To her left, the wildcat was watching, encouraging, urging her without words: follow me, come, join me. And just as suddenly as before, it was out of sight.

This time she didn't hesitate. The hole was no wider than an oak tree, and she struggled to fit her body through. Down below, darkness abounded. A subterranean blackness, endless, suffocating. She should turn back, but she couldn't. She squeezed herself through and entered freefall. Blindly, she fell. She might have screamed but for the taste in her mouth: a sordid mix of dirt and radish greens. She reached out her hands for support but found some material foreign and spongy. A soft, pliable dough into which her hands sunk readily, alacritously. Hastily, she retrieved her hands and tucked them tight to her chest. Her knees curled, and in a ball she sped toward through that bottomless blackness. Time stopped. She grew and shrunk and shrunk and grew. Her stomach swallowed itself. She was weightless. She was two-dimensional. Spinning, changing, falling. Blackness engulfed her, an ocean, capsizing, overturning, spilling chests and spreading contents whimsically across the seafloor. She fell, dizzily yet calmly,

patient yet anxious, fearful but ready, poised.

Finally, she slowed and contacted the ground. It was soft, sand-like. But ungraspable. Almost like some sort of carpet. Cautiously, she opened her eyes. The light was as blinding as the dark. *How long was I spinning?* But quickly she banished the thought. Posted on the ground in front of her were footprints. Like trail markers deliberately placed to guide the way. She got up and brushed herself off, but she was totally clean. Not even a speck of dust.

The passageway was uneven, even hazardous with its pitfalls and jagged edges, and the footprints careened left and right to accommodate. She followed as best she could, eyes flashing up and down from trail to surroundings. Thrice did she almost fall, but always she kept her footing. Miles she must have traveled before the path narrowed. It was nearly impassable. Blood filled her body, her heart beat madly, muscles tensed. *There's no turning back.* She turned, flattened herself against the passage wall and shimmied through to the other side. Breathing came difficultly, her body sandwiched between sheets of unknown rock. But in the end, she succeeded; one step at a time, one foot delicately before the other.

The trail opened onto a hexagonal field. Flowers, vibrant and variegated, rung the perimeters. A spring flowed around its edges, and there was a ramshackle bridge of rusted iron.

"Turn back," a voice warned. "This is not your place."

But she knew. She couldn't turn back now. Not even if she wanted to.

A figure approached, withered and wrinkled, hunched and hooded. Golden rays cloaked them. The air grew cold.

"Go," they warned; though the voice was soft, sweet, like honeyed donuts and homemade apple pies. "This place is not for you."

But she couldn't move. She couldn't go. Not even if she wanted to.

Face-to-face, the figure unveiled themselves. Beneath the glowing robes rested a face aged by death. Pallid skin taut to the bone. Teeth missing, decayed. Eyes sunken. "Go," she said again.

The woman smiled. Tears welled in her eyes.

"But I never got to say good-bye."

Payment

Sadie Bartels

“You’re short.”

Marina looked up. “Sorry?”

“You’re short of the price,” the cashier repeated. “A cent short, to be exact.”

In his hand sat a messy collection of wadded-up dollar bills and a variety of coins. On the counter sat a bag of chips. Marina eyed the chips, and then the change in the cashier’s palm. She fumbled for her wallet.

“Only a cent?” she asked.

“Yup.”

The wallet was in her back pocket. She fished it out and unzipped it, her hands feeling awkward and clammy. The fluorescent lights above hummed in an unceasing whine. Outside, someone was pumping gas, leaning against the side of their pickup truck with their hands folded across their chest.

There was no money inside the wallet. Marina had known that, and yet she’d thought that maybe, somehow, there’d be a penny inside she might have missed. But there wasn’t. Her fingers searched desperately for the cold, metallic surface of a coin or the soft, worn paper of a dollar bill, and found only the leathery folds of the wallet, clean of anything except an old receipt for fast food and a business card. She tucked it back into her pocket.

“Come on,” she said. “It’s just a cent. Who cares?”

The cashier looked at her impassively. He wore a button-up shirt tucked into pleated khaki pants. His name tag, clearly cheap plastic, read *Ian*. Judging by the youthful curves of his face, the smoothness of his pale skin, and the fullness of his rich brown hair, he wasn’t any older than twenty-two.

“It’s necessary for you to pay the full price, ma’am,” he replied, in the same manner one might try to explain something to a whiny toddler. “Company policy.”

Marina hoped he didn’t see the warmth rising in her cheeks. She desperately searched the white-tiled floor for a glint of copper, and saw only reflections of stark-white light. Outside, an ambulance flew down the freeway, sirens blaring and lights flashing red, momentarily breaking the shroud of night before once again pitching everything beyond the gas station into darkness.

Marina looked up at the chips. They were Sour Cream and Onion Lays, the package depicting two golden slivers of potato, dusted with flavorful flecks of green. Her mouth watered. God, she was hungry. Yet she reached out to take them off the counter, searching for the shelf she’d taken them from.

“Wait,” the cashier said.

Marina turned.

“There’s another way you could pay.”

Marina tilted her head ever-so-slightly to one side. Her hand clutched the bag of chips a little bit tighter. Though she wasn’t afraid, not yet, her blood turned cold.

“What would that be?”

“My manager briefed me on it just yesterday,” the cashier continued, his tone clinical. “It’s a new method Shell’s been developing. It’s very simple and easy, and it only takes a moment.”

Marina was a very large woman, aged a little over thirty, with muscles that rippled beneath her skin whenever she moved. She participated in minor boxing tournaments alongside her job at an insurance company, and she often won. Additionally, she was insatiably curious, and there was something in the cashier’s words, some strange lilt of his voice, that made her need to know more. If the cashier tried anything untoward, she reasoned, she would leave him a bloody mess behind the counter and hope the owner of the pickup kept quiet.

“Alright,” she said, straightening her back. “I’ll pay with your little secret method.”

Though the rest of his face remained perfectly still, the cashier’s eyes glinted. “Alright,” he replied. “Back-up a few steps.”

Marina backed up.

“Perfect,” he said.

His eyes opened.

This is to say not that the lids over his eyes opened. Rather his eyes themselves opened, as if they were a second eyelid beneath the first. His pupils split into two halves, peeling away, revealing beneath them a cesspool of reflective black, roiling with movement and intelligence.

For a moment Marina couldn’t even begin to process what she was seeing. Then she did, and she was somewhere else.

She was young again. Her legs were short and stubby, her arms chubby with baby fat. Before her sprawled the beach, and beyond the beach the ocean, so large compared to her small, fragile body. She breathed in the salty sea spray and gurgled with laughter. It all seemed so wonderful. So unfamiliar. The colors were so bright, the peculiar blue-green shade of the ocean magical in its unfamiliarity.

“Mari,” said a voice behind her. She turned ungracefully on her stunted legs and saw her mother, her black hair tucked in a bun beneath a wide-brimmed straw hat, her skin a rich, dark tan, her eyes mirthful, jubilant. She was beautiful in that special, unique way that mothers are in the eyes of their daughters, beheld with awe and pure love. “Are you having fun, sweetie?”

In response, Marina only toddled her way towards her. At the last moment she tripped and began to fall, her face pitching dangerously close to the sand, a wail trapped in her throat. Then her mother’s arms were around her. The next thing she knew she was being held up in the air, feeling so close to the sky that she could almost brush it with one chubby finger. Seagulls squawked. Waves

Voices

crashed and hissed. Reeds rustled out an eerie, lonely tune.

Later, her mother would die in a car crash, and this would be Marina's last memory of her. But not yet. Not then.

The image receded. It grew foggier and duller, all its colors turning to gray. Marina reached out for it. Her errant hand only blurred it further.

Then it was gone.

Marina stood there, dumbfounded.

The cashier smiled. He ushered her forward and deposited all of her cash back into her hand. She absentmindedly shoved it into her pocket, feeling around her mind the same way that one's tongue feels around the gap where a tooth had once been.

"Would you like a receipt for that?" the cashier asked.

"No," Marina said. "No, that's okay." She wasn't sure why, but the thought of coming anywhere near to touching this man's hand revolted her. In her imagination it was rubbery, and wet, and cold to the touch.

The cashier nodded. "Have a nice evening," he said.

"You too," Marina replied without thinking. She'd forgotten she was even holding the chips at all. Something was missing, and only now, in this mundane encounter with a cashier whose name she'd already forgotten, had she realized it. But what was it? It only slipped further and further away the harder she strained to reach it, like the details of a dream recalled after waking.

She had no memories of her mother. That, she knew, was how it had always been.

Warmer

Raygan Hogue

Sing me a song, Sailor Boy.
Sing me one,
Teach me joy.
I'll cry you a river to sail down.
Stay with me,
And you'll end up drowned.

This love is a fleeting thing, my dear.
You'll drift away,
And I'll coax you near.
Turn away as I tear your world apart,
Then draw me back into your open arms.

Watch this magic trick of mine.
Fall in love,
While I make you blind.
Tragedy is how I catch my thrills.
So hold my hand,
And ease this aching chill.

This love is an awful thing, my dear.
You'll want to leave,
And I'll drag you near.
You built all the bridges I destroyed,
But it's funny how we both crawl back for more

So why did you ever come my way?
The rate we fall is not the same.
I've caged my heart in anger and deceit.
I hope you stay,
Too foolish to retreat.

This love is a nasty thing, *my dear*.
I'll not be tamed,
You'll show no fear.
Cascading in this ocean of desire,
Too numb to fear the burn of the pyre.

Cascading in this ocean of desire,

Voices

When will you learn?

It was me who started the fire.

Have A Great Summer

Jessica Harrison

Being the first to sign someone's yearbook was quite possibly the biggest moment of middle school. We haven't made it to the promposals or flings of high school and we are far from the kindergarten declarations of love that lasted in a day of marriage before an amicable divorce. The yearbook was used as a tool to get someone to admit their true feelings for you in the confines of a nine by eleven sheet of paper.

How does one properly articulate their feelings for you and the culmination of moments you've spent together over the course of the year? The options were seemingly endless:

Some opt to deface their yearbook photo. The cheesy pose where they make you nearly break your neck from turning so hard and your arm nearly popping out of place from stretching well beyond its bounds. The overcompensated face was now adorned with black eyes, mustaches, and vulgar images.

Others preferred to sign their name simply like an autograph that would be worth millions in a few years. They act as if they had blessed me, I could be forever grateful to say I knew them when.

There are also those who leave their phone number and insist we keep in touch. Though, if they really felt that way, wouldn't I already have their number? In reality, this was a means to fill up their contact list as they strut into high school. Nothing says popularity in high school like a copious number of fake friends.

I am not here to get any of these superficial yearbook mementos. The only graffiti I will allow on my crisp clean pages is the ink of Marcus Lake.

Marcus Lake, the most amazing guy in school. He was the captain of the football and track teams, as well as my chemistry partner two years in a row. And yes, he is also the most handsome guy in school.

I grasp my pile of multi-colored gel pens and make a beeline towards him. Being the first person to sign someone's yearbook is quite the honor. It gives you access to all the prime real estate. As I head over to Marcus' lunch table, someone shoots by me in a flash. I am able to catch myself on the trash can but look down to see my yearbook has vanished.

As I scan the area, I see the culprit. Jackson Carter. He sits alone at the lunch table, hovering over the book like it is his precious.

"Give it back." I groan. He sticks his tongue out in pure concentration. You could practically see the smoke coming out of his ears. That was dangerous considering the amount of hairspray he had in his hair. He could burn the school down with his sad excuse of a brain and then I would never get to talk to Marcus.

Voices

"I'm trying to sign your yearbook." He continues writing, clearly unphased by the possible fire hazard.

"Well, you kind of missed the part where I didn't ask you to." I hiss.

He shrugs me off and finishes, clicking the pen victorious and slamming the book shut. His tongue slides back between his lips and the smoke dissipates. I snatch my book back and furiously flip the pages until I see ink. I couldn't find anything until I got to the last page, I saw a long paragraph written in his chicken scratch handwriting. He would surely be a doctor one day, I guess I could brag about that.

Jackson sees my struggle and immediately turns the pages back. He stretches the inseam of the book and points. I turn the book to read the inscription, and along the seam reads, 'Woof Woof Quack Quack I'm the first to sign your crack'.

I was furious. How dare he deface my yearbook in such a childish way, especially as the first person. I take a deep breath to calm down. It's fine. I just need Marcus to sign.

I thought of so many ways I could proposition him. Like Sandy from Grease starting with a 'hey stud'. But in the moment, all I could do was thrust the book in his direction. He is startled away from his bustling bubble of friends and looks at me with a sympathetic smile.

"You want me to sign it?" He looks up at me and I melt.

"Yes, very much. I mean only if you want to." I felt my sweat droplets have sweat droplets.

He smiled, grabbing his favorite color, green, from my bundle of pens and perused for the perfect spot.

"How do you spell your name?" He asks. I wasn't fazed by the question. Sure, we had chemistry together and have known each other since kindergarten, but my name can be hard to spell. Wait, how do you spell my name? OH, right! "Sulfur Americium." I smile.

He looks at me utterly puzzled. Had I inadvertently spoken Dutch?

"We were chemistry lab partners. Sulfur Americium? S-A-M." I try to explain the joke. He lets out a chuckle. Sure, he's a little slow, but it's kind of cute I had to explain it to him. I guess I'm the brains and he's the beauty.

"So." I begin to make small talk to pass the time as he writes an assumingly heartfelt and passionate message that we will be able to look back on years from now.

"Done." he interrupts, handing me my book and walking off. I wasn't even upset that he had walked off with one of my most expensive and, because he touched it, favorite pen.

It was the moment of truth. This was it. I flip through the now slightly crinkled pages from Jackson's tackle and there it was in a forest green gel pen: H.A.G.S.

North

Erika Cooper

I slip through the barbed gate just before dawn
Life is unmoving and the air is still
With my symphony of silence I march on

Through the tall gray grass I come to the hill
A spot overlooking vast trees and brush
Whose beauty will never cease to fulfill

The birds and mice begin to leave their hush
As the sun rebirths so delicately
The warm paint of the sky starts to inrush

Coming to this place is a guarantee
To feel like a home like no other place
Although I'm sure the deer would disagree

While I'm out here I try not to deface
The surroundings in which these creatures live
But no amount of care could prevent some trace

Where the mark's left changes by perspective
I know truly the track is left on me
For efforts to leave are ineffective

Addicted to the feeling of carefree
Like a bird soaring through an endless sky
It is to the North they shall always flee

Winter's Knight

Austin Jones

The wind howled past him and chilled his bones. Maybe the knight would freeze before getting eaten. Down below his feet, a snow dragon lay sleeping. The cave was deep, easy for someone to fall in. He had almost done that himself. There was already ice forming around the incline slope by the cave. He knew if he fell in, he would never get back up. Snow had covered up dragons' caves before, and those who fell were never heard from again. He was lucky, some dragons' caves weren't on steep hills, they were fully immersed in the ground, like snake holes. Even now, Victress could see bones and remnants of animal carcasses lying near the dragon. He hoped there weren't any knights or maidens in there.

I better be careful, thought Victress.

The dragon was curled up, its tail almost touching its own face. Its breathing, heavy. The dragon's white scales easily blend into the snow, they were shiny. Not overwhelming, like a crystal potion, but just shiny enough to notice if you're paying attention. The majestic beauty of a dragon was enough to sweep anyone off their feet. But underneath the beauty lies power. A dragon's breath could easily annihilate half a village if it was provoked. Dragons have always inspired powerful tales and songs. Everyone in the kingdom, even the farmers and peasants, knew that waking a dragon meant certain death. Evil kings and even executioners had earned the name of "Dragon" to inspire fear in the hearts of peasants. There were no mages around for thousands of kilometers.

Victress had been given his mission from the king: find the dragon, report back, a mage would be summoned by raven, the people would wait a few weeks, and then the mage would arrive and destroy the dragon. Or, more likely, take control of the dragon. That was their specialty. A dragon mage could, well, control a dragon. There was a part of him that always thought it was wrong. Dragons were creatures too. They had dragon cubs, or hatchlings or whatever people decided to call them. Victress liked the term "cubs." They also had homes, like the cave. Victress was torn. He knew that they had the power to destroy homes and people, and sometimes they did. But then again, so did the knights and the mages. War wasn't a new thing.

How could they enslave a dragon like that? They make my blood boil. I want to rid the world of them, all of them.

He could always report back that he couldn't find the dragon, that the intel he received was wrong. But then the king would just send more knights to confirm the story. What could he do? He had always thought, even before he was a knight, that he could help dragons. He dreamed of having a dragon

sanctuary, where all dragons could come without fear of swords or mobs. Although, only two dragons had ever been killed by humans. They still provoked dragons, which, in the end was their own undoing.

Humans are odd, thought Victress as he unsheathed his sword. Then thought better of it and returned it to its scabbard.

Victress looked around. The snow covered the trees like blankets. Snowflakes were falling from the sky. He loved the mountain kingdom for this very reason. Snow fell a majority of the year, but he didn't mind, it was always so wonderful. One of the Sky Gods' great gifts to humanity.

I'll just head back. Make up some excuse.

As he turned and began walking back through the forest, he heard something. Just a faint breath, but it was enough for him to recognize the sound and tense up. As Victress turned, he saw the dragon, awake and crawling out from its cave. Its claws looked as though they could cut through steel in a single stroke. The dragon's legs were short in length, large in width. Victress stumbled back and fell. Soon, the dragon was glaring right at him, the dragon's crystal blue eyes pierced through his soul. Its snout wide and menacing, sharp teeth pointing out from both sides. Now that it was closer, he saw a small gash near its eyes, probably from a run in with a flaming arrow.

How am I going to get away?! Fear overtook his body.

The dragon opened its mouth, ice crystals already forming in its throat.

Why me, why couldn't it be one of those horrible mages?

Victress raised his hand to shield himself from the oncoming blast. He knew it wouldn't do any good, but he had to do something.

A strange light appeared on the dragon. It's white belly now displayed a green mark burnt into it. Victress didn't recognize it right away. It looked like a V. He looked at his hand, and a light green V appeared on his palm. The same color as his eyes. He stood up, but the dragon didn't care, it just stood there, like it was waiting for something. Two minutes ago, he was facing death, now, whatever this was. It was odd. Why had the dragon just stopped? Victress thought of the tales he heard of mage blood, of the sacred eyes and dragon kinship. The power that mages held over dragons.

Was he a mage? He moved his hand to the left. Nothing happened. He shook his hand up and down, nothing happened. The dragon's reaction was blank. Unmoving. Victress ran around in a circle, the dragon remained still. Victress shook his hands in the air. Raised his right hand up. Left hand. Nothing. Soon, the dragon laid down in the snow and got comfortable.

"Move!" Nothing happened. "Stand up! Do something!"

Victress leaned on a tree. It was no use. But why was his hand glowing, and why was there a glowing light in the middle of the dragon, and why wasn't the dragon eating him?

No no! What is this? He thought. Will it do what I say? How do mages control them? I'm no mage. It's hopeless. Move your claw, do something. I don't know.

The dragon stood upright and moved its claw.

Voices

What? Wait. Move the left claw.

The dragon moved its left claw.

Is this how the mages control the dragons? Am I a mage?

Victress looked up at the dragon.

Kneel. He thought.

The dragon sat perched on its wide legs. Victress couldn't believe it! His heartbeat quickened and a smile grew on his face. His own dragon. For the longest time he wanted to help and protect dragons, and now was the time! A majestic beast all his own, one he would cherish and protect. One he would use to find other dragons and lead them to freedom. He was on top of the world!

"C'mon, let's go find your friends and get you somewhere safe. Don't worry, I'm not like the other dragon mages. What name shall I give you?" Victress thought of all those in his life. His father, who feared dragons. His mother, who saw the good in all animals and nature, but was wise to also fear dragons. The grateful king, who he knew he was going to betray by taking this dragon. Ironic, the same king who asked him to hunt dragons. Maybe a spiteful king. King Reiglin.

I am sorry, my king. I will never forget your gratitude and kindness toward me and my family. But no one may harm this dragon. Not the knights, not the mages, and certainly not you. You have asked too much of me. For that, I cannot forgive you.

"I'll call you, Reiglin! We will be powerful. Let's go!"

Victress mounted his new dragon. "Fly." He said.

The dragon spread its huge, gargantuan wings and flew into the sky. Snow shook off the trees as they flew up. The air in the sky felt clean, nice, not just nice but fantastic. As he breathed in, the air filled his lungs and gave him a new sense of purpose. He looked behind him and saw his kingdom. His old kingdom.

Never again. He thought. *This is perfect! I can build my sanctuary for dragons! I can make my dream come true. They'll never get hurt again. And if anyone tries to stop me, I'll just show them this dragon. No one will stop me.*

As he rode his new dragon to sanctuary, a thought crossed his mind.

I should learn how powerful this dragon actually is.

Contributors

Anne Akpabio is currently a Junior at Midwestern State university pursuing a degree in Accounting and Economics who tries to balance her passion for literature with her interest in business. She lives in Chicago with my family when she is not in school. She hopes to one day work in the Corporate law Industry. Every major step of her life has been uplifted by her journey with literature. She writes because it gives her life meaning and she hopes that her writing can uplift and inspire people.

Sadie Bartels is a high school student with an interest in all varieties of art, from fiction writing, to poetry, to sketching and painting. She's been a military child all her life, and is only living in Texas for a short while before she finally settle down permanently, someplace warm and sunny with the ocean nearby.

Meredith Berend is a May 2021 graduate of Midwestern State University and current graduate student. She earned her BA in English with a concentration in writing. While at MSU, Meredith was active in the Redwine Honors Program, Sigma Tau Delta, and NSCS. She enjoys prose poetry, spooky fiction, embroidery, collecting ceramics, and being a general bore.

Jonathan Booker is a senior at Burkburnett High School.

Jack Bordnick is an Industrial Design graduate of Pratt Institute in New York.

Erika Cooper is a high school student at Burkburnett High School who believes that with the use of rhyme and emotion, beautiful pictures or tragic life stories come alive in an amazing way.

Natalie Coufal is a nonfiction and fiction writer from rural Central Texas. She is pursuing her M.F.A. in Creative Writing, Editing, and Publishing at Sam Houston State University where she has received a fellowship. Her work has appeared in *Glassworks*, *100 Word Story*, *Passengers Journal* and *Touchstone Literary Magazine*.

Harlow Covington, Esq., HCE (they/them), is a lawyer-turned-writer. A proud member of the LGBT community, they seek to connect diverse communities through the power of storytelling. Whenever possible, they try to convince their partner to buy a dog. They are an emerging writer with other pieces appearing in the *HASH Journal* and *parentheses*.

Chloe Dewberry-Hanssen is a Midwestern State University art student! Chloe attends MSU as a way to grow as an artist.

Voices

Halie Diehl is an aspiring contemporary artist who is currently a Senior at Midwestern State University with soon expectations of holding a B.F.A. Her major areas of focus are Graphic Design and Photography. Her fine art practice focuses on the labyrinth of interpersonal struggles and experiences one faces while battling with mental health issues. The work is intended to simultaneously put viewers in a sense of ease and awareness regardless the weight of the meaning behind it.

Logan Dugan is a high school student at Burkburnett High School.

John Fulton is a high schooler from Burkburnett.

Sarah Griego is an undergraduate student at Midwestern State University studying to become a Painting major with Teacher's Certification.

Kaitlin Hancock is a senior at Midwestern State University majoring in Graphic design with a minor in photography.

Amanda Hansen is a senior at MSU Texas, majoring in graphic design and printmaking. She specialized in screen printing and relief, and hopes to go to grad school for printmaking, and eventually go into publishing to design book covers.

Jessica Harrison is a senior at Midwestern State University. She gets her main inspiration and support from her mom and grandma.

Raygan Hogue is a 17-year-old high school student at Byng High School in Oklahoma. She is involved in various activities including Concert Band, Jazz Band, Color Guard, Speech, Drama, Business Professionals of America, National Honors Society, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and Beta Alpha Phi. She is also enrolled as a concurrent student at East Central University.

Heavin Holguin is currently attending Midwestern State University and aiming for a Bachelors of Arts in Political Science to sustain a career in law. Her previous work has only seen publication in a poetry book she wrote when she was sixteen. While on break, Heavin lives in Little Elm, Texas with her family.

Danika Hollis is a graduate student in Literature at the University of Texas at Dallas. She loves writing. She loves Antarctica. "Bíonn gach tús lag. Every beginning is weak." @danikaehollis

Jodie Howard-Filan is a Texas high school student.

Austin Jones recently graduated from the University of Texas at Arlington, was an English major with a minor in creative writing and strives to be a novelist.

Siany Kloss is a student at Midwestern state University whose major emphasis is in painting and minor is drawing.

Jenna Kober is a High School English teacher, amateur photographer, self-pro-

Contributors

fessed poet, grammar snob, Gamer girl, Apple addict, Disney lover, Shakespeare Fangirl, and practically a professional student. She lives in Connecticut, -- in the words of J. D. Salinger, -- “alone (but catless, I’d like everyone to know).”

Arthur Kwon Lee is a Korean American painter whose gestural mark making harmonizes expressive color palettes with world mythologies. His work has won awards from George Washington University, the Korean Artists Association, the Corcoran Gallery of Art and most recently the inaugural title of ‘Artist of the Year’ by the Eileen Kaminsky Family Foundation. Lee draws inspiration from a broad range of sources including Jungian psychoanalysis, local religious traditions, and his lifelong commitment to martial arts. Arthur Kwon has been published in *The Korea Times*, *Hyperallergic*, *White Hot Magazine*, *Art Market Magazine*, *Art Verge*, *Create! Magazine* and a number of reputable critics in the New York metropolitan area. Prior to developing a love for painting, Lee was a Division One athlete who placed in the US Tae Kwon Do Nationals for three consecutive years. Lee has carried this martial intensity into his artwork where it translated into large-scale works and a diversity of dynamic brushstrokes.

Kristen Longo is a ceramics major at Midwestern State University pursuing a BFA with Teaching Certification. She is a member of the Redwine Honors Program, P.R.I.D.E., Kappa Pi, and other various organizations on campus. Her poetry and art has been published previously by *Voices Magazine*. She has participated in poetry readings and continuously strives to create new works of literature.

Margaret Marcum is currently a graduate student in the MFA Program in Creative Writing at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. She graduated with a B.A. (emphasis on poetry) from the University of Redlands, where she was a member of the Proudian Interdisciplinary Honors Program. Her literary interests include animal rights, healing the collective through personal narrative, vegan studies, and ecofeminism. Her poems previously appeared in *Literary Veganism*, *Children, Churches, and Daddies*, *Amethyst Review*, *Writing in a Woman’s Voice*, *Flora Fiction* and *All-Creatures.org*.

Alyse Morell, though she has worked, studied, and traveled across the globe, is happy to call Houston Texas her home once again, with her husband and ram-bunctious Australian shepherd. When she isn’t studying for her MFA or working on her debut Young Readers novel, she is chasing her Aussie dog around the park or working on a collage moral. You can read Alyse’s other works in *Ripples in Space Magazine*, *Reedsy.com*, and *Voices’* 2019-2020 issue.

Hannah Morris-Voth has cultivated an interest in prose and poetry, alongside her studies in Chemical Engineering. Her defining literary characteristic is a longing for innocence and simplicity, a theme presented in her work and approach to life. She is currently working on her first pamphlet.

Voices

Andi Newberry is a printmaker and painter in her third year of pursuing a BFA from Midwestern State University. She is a Wichita Falls native and the oldest child of four. Lately, she enjoys exploring identity, modernity, and remnants of childhood in her work. Newberry is an active Kappa Pi member at MSU. She exhibited work at the annual juried student show, the Kappa Pi member show, and the Wichita Falls Municipal Airport two years in a row. Newberry practices art as a mode of experimentation, expression, and self-satisfaction. She also enjoys listening to music nearly all hours of the day, crafting, and composing ambitious outfits.

Carson Owens is 23 years old and a senior at SFA. He has pursued writing since he was a young child, always concocting stories and writing plays based on his favorite childhood characters.

Adrienne Pine's creative nonfiction has been published in *The Write Place at the Write Time*, *Tale of Four Cities*, *The Yale Journal of Humanities in Medicine*, *Carte Blanche*, *Feminine Collective*, *Gravel*, and other venues.

Selena Reyes is an art student at MSU who hopes to become a medical illustrator and draw bones for the rest of my life. Selena's dream would be to have my medical drawings in a famous textbook brand or doctor's office somewhere in the world.

Colin Scanlon is an undergraduate at Duquense University.

LeNora Schindler is an undergraduate student at Midwestern State University.

Issabella Shands is a high school senior from Burkburnett High School, who, after graduation, will attend Dartmouth College to study Neuroscience.

Sarah Ann Teaw is an aspiring artist who enjoys all fields of art, but is particularly focused on traditional art and communication design.

Sapphire Vasquez is an Art Major with an emphasis on Painting who is also pursuing a Teaching Certification.

Dakota Young is a high school student at Burkburnett High School.

Lindsey Wentzel is a single mother living in suburbia juggling an alter ego at times, Muse Mesperryian. She never finished college but has always had a passion for writing and reading. She attended the University of North Texas in Denton for two years until dropping out to travel the country via hitchhiking, riding freight trains, panhandling for money and utilizing social services available for travelers. After many years of drug addiction, she sought help and eventually became sober and a productive member of society...most of the time. Battling bipolar II, anxiety and ADD life can be a struggle at times, especially when you mix in being a sex and love addict. A professional business owner by day, her adventures and writing come in the evenings and on the weekends.