

Contrast

2024

CONTRAST
Literary
Magazine
Spring 2024

Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

Being able to be passed the torch of *Contrast* has truly been the most exciting and favorable part of my college career. Since 1957, McDaniel has published *Contrast* Literary Magazine, which features poetry, visual art, and prose produced by the student body. It was an enlightening journey to see the talents of my fellow classmates, and an honor to present them to you.

I am extremely grateful for the work of our wonderful Ed Board. Their dedication to creating the magazine with Carter and me as a team was remarkable. I thank you all for your continued support throughout my senior year.

Special appreciation to Harrison Booth—none of this would have ever been possible without you. You are always enlightening to work with.

As obvious as it sounds, the English department fueled my ideas. I could talk about ideas and writing endlessly; it was a privilege to have an environment to host that effort. Thank you to all of the English Department for allowing my ideas and knowledge to flourish and push boundaries. I absolutely need to acknowledge Kathy Edmondson for her kindness and consideration.

That being said, none of this would have ever been possible without the incredible patience and knowledge of Dr. Kate Dobson. I commend the effect you have on other people, and I hope to replicate your stature of kindness, understanding, and knowledge into my own legacy. I cannot emphasize how grateful I am to have met you. I will never forget the lessons you taught.

To Carter Timmons—you are one of the most clever thinkers I have ever met. Not only to be your classmate, but to be a Co-Editor with you will always be my favorite memories at McDaniel. I commend your dedication and skills it took to create *Contrast* and your consideration for others. What an honor it was to get to create a friendship with you. Thank you for this incredibly fun journey together of hours of sitting in meetings and immense amounts of screen time-- and I could have never done this without you. I couldn't be prouder of what we created.

A special message to any current and future McDaniel students: the power of not only ideas, but compassion is within being able to collaborate with others, and I urge all of you to find the value in it—and keep finding value in it because it is the gift that never stops giving. Everyone involved in this edition was a community to create something incredible, something everyone should feel a part of. To all students who submitted and will submit to *Contrast*, I hope you continue finding ways to express your creativity and keep sharing it with others.

My deepest gratitude,

Erin Lewis, Co-Editor-in-Chief

Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

Where do I even start?

Being the Co-editor of *Contrast* has been an incredible journey and an unbelievable honor. This experience has meant so much more to me than I could've imagined. I am so fortunate to have had the support and encouragement to not only take the position but to excel in it.

First, thank you to our authors, artists, and poets who entrusted us with their work. It took guts. Without you, there would be no *Contrast*. Thank you, truly.

Thank you to our wonderful Ed Board—I am so glad I've gotten to know you all and I am so thankful for all the work and care you have dedicated to this magazine. You are all so extremely unique, brilliant, and hard-working. The time and effort you allotted greatly helped Erin's and my experience while putting together *Contrast*. Thank you!

I am extremely grateful for the support I have been granted by the English faculty at McDaniel. You all know who you are.

Special thanks to Dr. Kate Dobson. You saw my potential and ignited an unrelenting force by pushing me towards goals I didn't think I could achieve. Thank you Kate; I could not have asked for a better advisor for *Contrast* and for during my time at McDaniel. It would be an honor to have a fraction of the wisdom and wit you possess.

Thank you to Harrison Booth—I had some big shoes to fill, and I hope I could do the magazine justice. Your genius and artistry will forever inspire me.

Thank you to Sofia Divens, from the both of us. You were incredible!

Most importantly, thank you to my Co-Editor, Erin Lewis—thank you for seeing my worth and working so incredibly hard with me on this tremendous project. Thank you for your support, humor, and dedication during long meetings over bottomless bottles of soda. I will forever cherish the times we spent together. I could not have done this without you. Seriously. Can you believe it? We did it!

Lastly, Readers, thank you for participating in this timeless McDaniel tradition. It has been an honor being your *Contrast* co-editor for 2024. Dig in. I hope you enjoy it as much as I do.

Gratefully,

Carter Timmons , Co-Editor-in-Chief

Contrast Literary Magazine

McDaniel College

Spring 2024

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Carter Timmons

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Carter Timmons

Table of Contents

PART ONE: Impressionistic Expression

Rough Edges.....Art **21**
Jayden Rodwell

Shadows and Blurs.....Poetry **22**
Kaitlyn Barker

Black Dahlia.....Prose **24**
Elana Patrone

Perspective.....Art **27**
Jayden Rodwell

The Divine and The Feminine.....Prose **28**
Emily Hollwedel

Birds of Different Feathers.....Poetry **30**
Robin Odom

Depression's Lack of Self Care.....Poetry **32**
Jenn Madison

Still Life.....Art **33**
Zoe Flood

The Burg.....Poetry **34**
Nico Davis

discharged in reverse.....Poetry **36**
Emily Hollwedel

Christopher McCandless.....Poetry **39**
Harrison Booth

Table of Contents

Dimensionality.....Art **42**
Harrison Booth

I Bite.....Poetry **43**
Nico Davis

Echoes of Abuse.....Art **44**
Sabina Alvarez Prats

Real Screams.....Prose **45**
Eli C.

Apollo Beach.....Prose **47**
Victoria Walker

Raynaud's Phenomenon; Seen.....Art **55**
Kaitlyn Barker

bad luck ocd.....Poetry **56**
Emily Hollwedel

Changing the Subject.....Poetry **59**
Harrison Booth

PART TWO: Series of Growing

Ode to Motherhood.....Poetry **64**
Alishia Mitchell

Venus.....Poetry **66**
Natalie Hutchinson

The Word Entropy.....Poetry **67**
Zach Brown

Table of Contents

Praying Mantis.....	Art 68
Elaine Griffith	
The Ants Go Marching.....	Poetry 69
Elana Petrone	
The 503.....	Prose 70
Kimberly Medrano	
The Lurker.....	Prose 71
Carter Timmons	
Baltimore.....	Prose 73
Kayla Douglass	
Death and Mourning in Harrisburg, PA.....	Prose 77
Sofia Divens	
Irises.....	Poetry 80
Elaine Griffith	
Choosing.....	Art 81
Zoe Flood	
A Storyteller's Rose Garden.....	Poetry 82
Kayla Douglass	
Bees.....	Prose 83
Harrison Booth	
Headless Corinthian.....	Art 85
Carter Timmons	
My Mother is Made of Earth.....	Poetry 86
Robin Odom	

Table of Contents

Would you still love me if I was a worm? Poetry **87**
Ra'Nya Taylor

Dolly Sods Wilderness.....Poetry **89**
Harrison Booth

Pacific Crest Trail.....Art **92**
Kaitlyn Barker

sitting on a balcony in fort lauderdale.....Prose **93**
Caroline Willis

Elounda Marina.....Art **95**
Carter Timmons

Apparently, Definitely Black.....Prose **96**
Jenn Madison

Nightmare.....Poetry **102**
Caroline Willis

Birds.....Prose **103**
Erin Lewis

Anna's Hummingbird.....Art **104**
Harrison Booth

An Ode to Mami.....Poetry **105**
Kimberly Medrano

PART THREE: Adapting & Aging

In Translation.....Art **108**
Carter Timmons

Table of Contents

Trinkets on a Shelf.....Prose **113**
Ra'Nya Taylor

Grief is Funny Like That.....Prose **114**
Alishia Mitchell

How I Failed to Convert My Nana.....Prose **115**
Sofia Divens

Peonies.....Art **117**
Zoe Flood

memories as currency.....Poetry **118**
Dante Martin

A Fist Full of Tears.....Prose **120**
Elana Petrone

When Life Gives You.....Art **124**
Kaitlyn Barker

An Ode to My Childhood Friends.....Poetry **125**
Alishia Mitchell

Cliche.....Prose **127**
Eli C.

Something Wrong.....Prose **128**
Jenn Madison

I'm Just a Teenager.....Poetry **129**
Alli Nocera

pyle center rd.....Art **130**
Erin Lewis

Table of Contents

Stars.....	Poetry 131
Elaine Griffith	
A Letter to the Lost Boy.....	Poetry 132
Robin Odom	
The Art of Spite and Wordvomit.....	Prose 133
Carter Timmons	
Maturity.....	Poetry 135
Zach Brown	
Gateway.....	Art 136
Jayden Rodwell	
The Shark Tooth Necklace.....	Poetry 137
Brooke Wier	
Monster.....	Prose 138
Madison McKenzie	
One Summer Night in Your Room.....	Poetry 139
Zach Brown	
Another Crusty Letter.....	Poetry 141
Eliezer Mercedes	
Chasing Joy.....	Prose 142
Elio Romero Cruz	
My Ears Are Not for Everyone.....	Poetry 144
Madison McKenzie	
Cherry Chapstick.....	Prose 145
Ra'Nya Taylor	

Table of Contents

Black Girl Love.....Poetry **147**
Alishia Mitchell

Yearn.....Poetry **148**
Eli C.

Trillium in Evening Sun.....Art **149**
Harrison Booth

Little Miss Sunshine.....Poetry **150**
Nico Davis

The Sides of Her.....Poetry **151**
Brooke Wier

Little Girl.....Poetry **152**
Caroline Willis

Bubs.....Art **154**
Monte Prinz

People Who Raised Us as Adults.....Poetry **155**
Erin Lewis

Bottom of a Bottle.....Poetry **156**
Ra'Nya Taylor

A Study in Silver.....Poetry **157**
Elana Petrone

Harvey Stone.....Art **159**
Kaitlyn Barker

Your GPA Won't Matter.....Prose **160**
Carter Timmons

Table of Contents

the sweetest thing.....Poetry **162**

Ra'Nya Taylor

Introspection.....Art **164**

Jayden Rodwell

Presence.....Prose **165**

Erin Lewis

Awards

Poetry

1st

Shadows and Blurs

Kaitlyn Barker

2nd

discharged in reverse

Emily Hollwedel

3rd

The 503

Kimberly Medrano

Art

1st

Choosing

Zoe Flood

2nd

Dimensionality

Harrison Booth

3rd

Bubs

Monte Prinz

Prose

1st

Apparently, Definitely Black

Jenn Madison

2nd

A Fist Full of Tears

Elana Petrone

3rd

Trinket on a Shelf

Ra'Nya Taylor

**“We are all just vessels, for the
stories we carry.”**

-Unknown

PART ONE

Impressionistic Expression

Rough Edges

Jayden Rodwell



Shadows and Blurs

1st Place Poetry

Kaitlyn Barker

Memory to me is a dwindling thing.
Ages twelve and before are question marks
 in the essay that is my life.
Some things seem familiar
 (though that may be from the stories I'm told)
But how much is true
 and how much is made up
 is a mystery even to me.

The story goes:
 "Now boarding for Italy",
 See the Colosseum,
 Chocolate gelato on my sister's face.
 Lobster tails and bloody toes,
 Broken buildings,
 Statues, Chapels, Paintings.
Or so the photos say.

Six years old is too young for an adventure to remember.

Many of the photographs I keep
 are the only way to remember
 memories I no longer carry.
They were stored on my mother's computer,
 The one we don't use anymore.
Pictures lost to the wind of wires and cables.
Now I can no longer recall what happened then,
 without proof that I existed at all.

Hard to know what I've forgotten to remember,
 what's no longer there and what used to be.
No longer can I recall the smells at the park,
 the views from my childhood bedroom window,
 or the name of my imaginary friend.
The adventures I went on with my sister,
 there in the backyard.
My favorite dress, or my best friend's face.

Voices sound familiar,
 now confusing for no reason.
Why gasoline sparks a memory
 that burns before I can grab it.
Figures that are shadows in my dreams,
 places so blurry I can't see.
Not sure what I'm missing,
 only aware of the blanks they left behind.

Black Dahlia

Elana Patrone

He didn't deserve to be up there, I did.

The grainy pixels portrayed my ex-boyfriend. One of the most horrific murders Maine has seen in years....The newscaster droned on as my face replaced his. *Dahlia Freeman, the ex-girlfriend and survivor of Azazel "Zay" Muna's brutal attack, joined us for an exclusive interview on Tuesday night, two days after the murder of 23-year old Lily Rozen.* The screen changed again, this time replaced with the footage of me and the interviewer.

I grabbed the remote and cranked the volume up. I knew the story by heart, and was ready to set the record straight if the interview didn't do it justice.

January 7th — Two Weeks Ago

She was beautiful. Milky pale skin contrasted by her dark brown hair and golden eyes. Her flowing, white skirt embodied petals, her lip-gloss stained mouth was kissed with fresh morning dew. *Lily!* Someone called to her. The name of a flower—innocent, pure. It suited her—

Zay roughly grabbed my chin, tearing my eyes and mind off her. His mouth parted to ask, *Who the fuck I was staring at*, when he saw her. He devoured her from head to toe with his eyes, not bothering to hide his obvious attraction. He licked his lips and let out a long whistle that followed her before slamming on the gas, sending his red beater lurching down the road.

Lily.

I turned the name over in my mind. Nice to meet you.
Again.

*January 21st — Sunday
3 p.m.*

313 B—Lily inserted her key and disappeared inside the apartment. We'd been following her for a week now, learning everything about her. Hot yoga classes intermixed with brunch dates with friends and of course a shiny job at The Ditzzy Daisy, her very own boutique downtown.

A perfect life for a perfect girl.

We watched her from Zay's piece of crap car. *You're such a genius, Dolly*, he crooned.

Dolly. What a pathetic pet name.

We waited an hour for her to disappear into her sleek BMW, probably off to Whole Foods for her weekly grocery trip. Luckily, her apartment was

was guarded only by a keypad whose code we had cracked easily within the first few days of our surveillance.

Zay began rummaging through her drawers, bare handed. *Gloves*, I half hissed, half whispered. Too preoccupied to deal with me for my tone, he wordlessly slipped them on and resumed digging around her dresser. He then moved to her bathroom, clanking around loudly in the cabinets.

No, no, no...yes.

I pulled out a pair of her frilly white socks and slipped them into my jacket pocket.

We hid thirty minutes before she was supposed to get home. Me under her bed, him in her closet. It was getting close to 7 p.m. when I heard the front door creak open. I could feel my heart hammering into the carpeted floor beneath me. *Just three more hours.*

10 p.m.

The mattress sagged against the bed frame as Lily crawled into bed. *Thirty more minutes.*

Zay creaked the closet door open and wagged his finger at me--the signal that it was time. I rolled out silently from under her bed, taking my place against the left side of her bed as he came to stand on the right. Wordlessly, we mouthed the countdown,

3...2...1...

Our blades came slamming down into her wrists and she shot up. She tried to scream, but I was faster. I whipped out her frilly socks and stuffed her mouth full like a doll being filled with cotton stuffing. Then she stopped and her eyes became full moons. *Dwuhleeuh?*

What the hell did she just say? Zay demanded. *I-I-I don't know... there's no way she knows me,* I replied shakily.

DAWLEEUEH!!! Her muffled scream was surprisingly coherent, and Zay's attention shifted to me. *HULPPP HULPPP!!* She was hysterical now. My head was swimming.

It'd been three years since we had matched online. I didn't plan on her remembering my face, but all the more fun for her to die knowing it was her own fault. Usually I keep my personal affairs separate from my business, but Lily had betrayed me first.

Who gets on a dating app just to make *friends*?

I had to move quickly now, Zay could sense the shift in the air. A lamp to the head took him out easily, then it was time for my favorite part.

12 a.m

I washed her crimson down the drain then scrubbed my own nails till they bled. Zay lay alive, yet unconscious beside her. Perfect.

I slammed her bathroom door, ensuring it'd be loud enough to stir him.

911, *what's your emergency?* I grabbed my left arm with my fingernails pressing into my skin and pinched hard. The tears stung my eyes as they blurred my vision.

DAHLIA, OPEN THIS DOOR RIGHT NOW OR YOU'LL REGRET IT! He pounded loudly against the thin wooden plank separating us.

P-please, my boyfriend...he hurt me and another girl...I-I don't know what happened, I just woke up and managed to lock myself in the bathroom...

Okay, sweetie, I'm going to need you to take some deep breaths and tell me the address where you are.

Uhm, I don't know...he just took me to this random apartment...I think it's 331 C? No, no, that's not right...313 B. I think that's it...

Okay, police are on the way, stay on the line with me until they arrive.

An ear piercing shriek came from the other side of the bathroom door. I smirked.

YOU'RE SICK, DAHLIA, I KNOW YOU DID THIS—OH MY GO— Then he cut himself off with his own retching.

January 23rd — Tuesday *The Interview*

Wow, what a harrowing story of survival. You are so brave, Dahlia.

Oh, I don't know about brave...I just wish I could have saved the other girl...

I fought back sobs and the interviewer gently patted my back. My joyous tears threatened to spill. I had just separated the population from a monster like Zay and scrubbed our already failing world of Lily's naïveté.

I only wish I could get the credit.

Two Months Later

I missed Maine's farmer's markets. Everything felt crisper and tasted sweeter, even the air. Florida was a stuffy excuse of a state, but it was the perfect distance from Zay, who was already fighting for his freedom at my expense. I couldn't continue my work if I was locked up.

Order for Daisy!

My head snapped around just in time to take her in.

Bingo.

Perspective

Jayden Rodwell



The Divine and The Feminine

Emily Hollwedel

I am terrified of dying a woman, but I hope they still bury me beautiful.

Have you seen that painting of Ophelia? In her immortalized glory, languidly spread in the river amongst willow, nettle, and daisy, forever posed fair and lovely with wide eyes turned to the heavens? I want to be in the algae, the violets and butterfly weed, kissed by fish and birds alike. But in my death, I will be trapped, too.

They will see me amongst my final peace and call me the wrong things, and it will be like burying me instead of burning me. Men will write of me faithfully, on my knees with my big ocean blue eyes, long lashes, full breasts shoved high, pretty pink mouth agape and salivating at salvation. Forever captured at my most beautiful, some would say—pure, pristine, and perfect, passive to every prying person and unable to defend my own honor. I'd be built as they'd like instead of how I was.

I don't want to be faithful, but worthy is a start.

As my body drifts languid too, I want to be asked after—at last, the roles would be reversed! My friends and loved ones would be the ones wishing for eyes, shoved in a role they could never fill, and thus unable to appeal or be admired without exception. Never pretty enough to fuck, but friends with enough people who are to get into a few parties. Then I gave that away, too. And I don't miss it much.

I understand what's been explained to me many times: who I am is not appealing in the way women are to be desired. The way I present myself confuses them, drives them away, keeps me believing I am the divine unfeminine, and therefore a disciple betrayed by my own body. I struggled every day knowing that I was supposed to be a woman yet remained handcuffed to a label reading "too queer to be sexy." Even if they pretended I was a woman, I just couldn't seem to make the cut. The tag along fag who cut their hair short spring of freshman year, wrenching the sword from the stone and carving my destiny with the blade. I was just surprised that it brought me nothing that I didn't already know—false apologies and probing questions and words exchanged behind my back.

I once read that the God or Gods created me this way to experience transformation—that my existence was equivalent to turning grape to wine and wheat to bread. Can you imagine the joy I felt? There it was, my divinity in words—a capacity to travel between structured worlds without getting crushed under the weight of being. For the first time, I felt certain of myself.

But yes, when I die, I fear they will still examine my bones and mark the “F” on their sheets. I’m afraid of them scrutinizing my body once they realize what I had, making sparse comments here and there about this or that. And perhaps they will do all of these things and more, but I will not allow myself to be trapped anymore. If I must begin my metamorphosis, I will be the monarch of my own choices. I can still be divine, without being feminine. And when they mourn for that hollow casket, I will shine down with my soul and laugh, because nothing will truly be there. I will be swimming downstream, flowers in my hair, smelling of salt and sand and heading for open water.

Birds of Different Feathers

Robin Odom

We knew that night was our last,
Clinging to each other like to let go would bring the goodbye
sooner.

Birds of different feathers
Red breast pressed against shimmering black.

Neon orange camp shirts grew muddy
as we pushed each other to the ground.

You were 12 and I was newly 14,
relishing the freedom of teenhood

You were stronger even then,
carrying me around for hours.

The others taunted us, made claims of romance.
I think, even then we knew our bond went deeper

As the sun went down, he cast the sky in golds and pinks and
orange,

a softer one than what we wore.

We settled down, giggling to each other secrets long forgotten.

The fire was lit,
my father impressed the others with trails of light,
but all I could watch was you,
sparks reflected in your eyes.

I fell asleep by that fire, cuddled against you,
a perfect fit.

You left the next day with hugs and promises to text,
but a screen could never replace that warmth.

We grew, explored who we are.
We tried what the others suggested

I knew I loved you, but how was I to know back then
that I'm not fully capable of the kind of love
the poets idealize.

Birds of Different Feathers

I only know the bond we have

Beyond friendship
Beyond romance

Soulbonded, like two trees grown twisted into each other.

Depression's Lack of Self Care

Jenn Madison

My skin
My dry and cracking in winter skin
My covered in pimples skin, my thick skin
My unwashed, in need of a shower to save my skin
A drought long enough to make my skin crawl
Somehow getting through by the skin of my teeth

My teeth
My crooked, enamel-less teeth
My yellow, unbrushed teeth
In the mirror, lie through my teeth
It's okay, they're okay
Yet I can't just sink my teeth
Into anything (Not apples. Not ice cream.)
Fighting my brain to pick up the toothbrush
Fighting tooth and nail

My nails
My long, sharp nails
My nails that keep bending
Keep breaking
Keep bleeding

But despite the red
Despite the stains
Despite the cracks
I never seem to
Hit the nail on the head
With my self-care

Still Life

Zoe Flood



The Burg

Nico Davis

Sneaking out when the day's worn through,
Finding comfort in the dim night.
Street lights guide us to our hideaway.
In the glow, our worries fade and I see that smile,
Toothy and familiar, out to get me.

We pass the river,
running through our little town,
A vain of the marsh.
Jumping off the old rusty bridge,
plunging to our fates
in the summers, we'd drown.

The woods guard our secrets,
where dreams quietly scream.
Hushed parties in the evergreens,
Dancing in this apocalypse,
Wailing out our shattered minds to the stars.

Cigarettes on your breath,
Even though we're much too young.
You say it's cool and hack,
I laugh and show you up.
I was never addicted to nicotine,
But the way you would look at me,
As I ruin my lungs for you.

Just an old and empty vessel now,
My old house there, we pass,
filled with childhood hollers and dreams.
Old friends buried in the back,
Condemned to haunt and fester
But I haven't forgotten.

The tracks are where we go,
Littered with who we used to be.
A phantom train runs us over
I want a love that splatters,

Like us all over the railings,
I would feel more at home.

But I bite my tongue,
and tell you about my day instead.

discharged in reverse

2nd Place Poetry

Emily Hollwedel

the fresh spring air is warm on my skin.
ten days and forty milligrams of
fluoxetine dissolve in my veins
to allow me to gaze at the sun
and down toward the stream where the ducks
are bobbing for algae and svelte fish
darting past thick shrubs and greenery
clustered like the inky curls of
the soft-spoken music therapist.
i should have impressed her by standing
up in the group and volunteering
for a tune-carrying talent show.

decorate your negative feelings
with construction paper and acrylic
nails chipping off from endless picking.
write name tags for your dining room seats.
in another life, we might be friends,
i think as we shuffle up to
the window. tilt your head back and stick
your tongue out for all of us to see.
government names and grass stains on
a pair of socks. can i use a fork?
only long sleeves are allowed. do your
laundry. make your bed. earn points and leave.

my glasses are perpetually
smudged. i get my period, go
shower. books and letters of varied
length sit on my dresser, along with
some crumpled sheets of phone numbers and
names. dial tones at the nurse station
where a chair crashed against the side
on my first night up, leaving a mark.
blood pressure cuffs slice deep through skin that
i thought we were supposed to let heal.
still the weird one. i eye my dinner
and pray for a vanilla pudding.

i asked him what he was doing and
he said i knew. i felt filthy then,
like fuzzy mold metastasizing
on my skin with every single touch
under the table. this outfit is
two days old and my hair is greasy.
i want to say something. instead i
just stare into a styrofoam tray
with nothing to eat inside, face blank.
i am allergic to shellfish, not
the fish sticks that i asked for. oh well.
i have no appetite anyway.

shout, shout, let it all out, i hear as
i gaze out the window of my own
personal waiting room. the sun blasts
onto a stout electrical box.
the weather seems warm on the outside
when i press my palm to the clear glass.

the hallways are long and filled with art:
words of affirmation and circles—
peace, confidence, mindfulness, clean tile—
all things foreign to me. the kind words
i hear plunge through my pearly white skull
to the frail, pulpy flesh of my brain.

this new blue and white bracelet cuts into
my arm. not to fear, i already
have scratches and bruises all over
that i cannot explain to my loved ones.
i bid goodbye with my usual
a star and a bouquet message sent.
tears stain wet and sticky trails on my
cheeks where kisses were my parting gifts.
there is no turning back now that my
glass eyes have shattered and drawn out blood.

discharged in reverse

i was fine, really, all well and good
until i was sitting across from
that woman who pitied me behind
the desk. i wanted to rip out
my hair and scream so loud my throat tore
when she advised my whimpering parents
that this was my best option for now.
i did my part. was that not enough?
how could anyone ask me to stay?
it is
a beautiful
day.

Christopher McCandless

Harrison Booth

Understanding
why he's leaving behind all
humanity is
beside the point of all this.
While he is walking through the desert brushing
away
flies,
he does not need to know why. Leather hits the black ribbon and
he
moves faster now, faster beneath
the sugary sun—
it is as if
he can see below the floods...and
far under their blanketing water
in the slot canyons and out to the coast,
he hears the anxious whispers of the waves.
He is tired, but he supposes he will be okay for
the time he puts in—
all
for
nothing.

He gets paid
well.
Falling into a
rhythm of the organ-
ic,
impressionist
images occupy his mind more than anything else right now.
Surreal,
his beating heart's
murmurs are heard nevertheless in the hoary mountaintops far to
the
north

lands—
like a swallow, his mind glides up to the contrails and
travels with them,
almost cries at the memories he doesn't have yet. Sometimes
He glances upward and
left—

his parents are these mountains now, the reason why he
is here, the reason.

Night arrives like it is
the shadow of God,
rests with headlight beams upon
their stony face.

And then it falls on him, and
he remembers

his mother and father.

He remembers,
and then it falls on him, and
their stony faces
rest with headlight beams upon
the shadow of God.

Night arrives like it is...
is here, the reason.

His parents are these mountains now, the reason why he
left.

He glances upward and
almost cries at the memories he doesn't have yet, sometimes
travels with them
like a swallow—his mind glides up to the contrails and
lands.

Murmurs are heard nevertheless in the hoary mountaintops far to
the North;

his beating heart's
images occupy his mind more than anything else right now—
surreal,

impressionist-
ic

rhythm of the organ
falling into a
well.

He gets paid

nothing

for

all

the time he puts in.

He is tired, but he supposes he will be okay—for
he hears the anxious whispers of the waves
in the slot canyons and out to the coast...
far under their blanketing water,
he can see below the floods, and
it is as if
the sugary sun
moves faster now, faster beneath.
He does not need to know why. Leather hits the black ribbon and
he
flies
away—
while he is walking through the desert brushing
beside the point of all this.
Humanity is
why he's leaving behind all
understanding.

Dimensionality

2nd Place Visual Art

Harrison Booth



I Bite

Nico Davis

"I am not a violent dog, I don't know why I bite"
Isles of Dogs by Wes Anderson

I used to have to bite to survive,
flying fist, broken jaws, snarling mouths and bared teeth.
Those streets I grew up in—no one kept me tethered.
Just a feral child, just a filthy mutt running loose
Howling for someone to care.

But after I was taken
I came with my jaw clenched tight and my head to the side.
Just listening—no longing wanting to be heard,
I could not fathom a gentle hand.
But you came after me with a sharp bite
And I was surprised, because it didn't hurt.
Not like before.

We ripped into each other,
delicately at first.
How terrible you were, a slobbery, whipped, mess
A playful rebel in the streets,
Chained up to the tracks,
I should have muzzled you then.

The sting of your teeth, I felt the pain.
We didn't stop,
'Til I bit with my words.
And then it hurt
You retracted with a sharp yelp.
But by then the blood had been spilt
And we couldn't find ourselves in all that red.
So like a cornered dog you growled and spat
Lunging for my throat.

And I let your canines sink in again,
With a lowered head, wearing our scars.
Because I would rather tear out all of my teeth
Then bite you back once more.

Echoes of Abuse

Sabina Alvarez Prats



Real Screams

Eli C.

There are so many different kinds of screams.

Horror movie screams is probably the biggest genre of scream. Horror movies include so many different people and always kill off any representation of diversity they have. This causes them to need several different screams in several different keys and tones. The classic soprano white girl scream is probably the most iconic scream we think of with horror movie screams, but we know there are others.

Ironically enough, I don't think the horror character Scream actually talks. Or screams. I wonder what theirs sounds like.

Comedy also has screams. The silly goofy Wilhelm scream is one everyone can remember. Plenty of shows try to work it in wherever they can. Games too. It's supposed to be funny, a running gag of this specific scream everyone knows. An indication someone is being hurt. But it's animated and the person will probably live. Maybe.

People always laugh when the Wilhelm scream dies.

There are also the screams of young children being upset in the grocery store. They are tired and hot and hungry and want the toy on the shelf. Some moms can differentiate which scream indicates which need of the child. Children have this amazing ability to scream and be heard by someone. It might not always be the right person but it is heard.

The parent gets embarrassed when a child screams and tells them to shut up their expression.

There are screams of joy. Children, teenagers, adults, everyone screams of joy sometimes. It starts as a laugh but gets louder, more dramatic. It climbs the latter of pitch as your serotonin levels get higher. It makes the memory of the moment stick because joyful screams tend to be a rare thing in our lives.

Real screams, from real people, in real situations are all incredibly different. And yet somehow, even when they are the most authentic, they are the most unheard. We never hear the last scream of a murder victim. We are lucky if we hear the scream of a rape and ignorant if we ignore it.

We have recordings of the screams of hate crimes but we focus on anything else because the news is always so sad nowadays. We have access to real screams, but the ones we remember always recorded in a studio.

I don't know what the screams of the people in Gaza sound like.

I don't think I could stomach it. But I know they are not screams of joy, they are of children in need, they are not a gag, and they should not be silent like *Scream's*. They are never recorded in a booth with fancy microphones and equipment to fix the volume or the outside noise, they are ugly. They are ugly and raw ripped from the throats of people who did not ask to exist and fight for the choice to keep going. Yet these screams of real people in real need with real troubles and real danger, are the ones we hear the least.

Apollo Beach

Victoria Walker

PART ONE

On the shore of Apollo Beach, my body stands like a log in the cold sand. It's not much of a beach, really. It's more like a slice of sand against dirt and a very active lake. The waves lick and lap at my feet, but I never move away from their chilling caress. I'm waiting—I've been waiting for a long time. For every twist and tilt of the earth's axis, that's how long I've been waiting. My thoughts never leave the crushing nostalgia of summer's sun, mosquitoes, and fruity vodka slushies. It's been ten summers since then, without them, and ten winters waiting for their return.

That morning three years ago was wan, pale skies and stale air. My mother woke me up from my paper thin sheets, damp with sweat, and pulled me to the car—my mouth still crusted with saliva. She loaded a heavy plastic bin labeled 'cleaning' into the trunk of the car before urging me into the passenger seat. It took about two hours to drive from Sutherland to Westknox. Brown and gray buildings, chipping away and charred from house fires and arson. Littered with rotten food, trash, and empty needles. Exiting the city was like when the darkness underneath your eyelids in a deep sleep turned into something brighter, more tangible. Like flying from earth to mars.

When we zipped past the corner store with the abandoned bicycle chained to a bollard, I counted to one-hundred twenty-four. Tall-ish buildings shrunk into themselves until there was nothing but wheat fields and cattle. I reached one hundred, before starting over—just another category of numbers in my mind.

Twenty.

Twenty-one.

Twenty-two.

Twenty-three.

Twenty-four.

And the world somehow fell apart and mended itself back together, opening itself up to me—like an old but good book. Trees and grass fields faded into each other in a vivid green ombré. The rusted iron exit sign shivered in the gentle winds. Now leaving Sutherland. It filled my heart with a bitter anticipation. I wasn't going home; I was visiting. I was coming to shadow my mother who mopped floors and wiped dust for a poor living. Within the next hour, the first view of tourist attractions expanded from little pastel colored dots to wide and rich buildings.

The sun had risen, closing in close to the peak of its arc. And it was like watching the time-lapse of a flower bloom, the plain green lands became so rich with human life. The sun's fingers peeling away the shadows, and opening up the city to bring life about. People strut the sidewalks, run the streets. They flash their black cards at famous brunch spots, and wonder if its going to be golfing or the yacht for their afternoon activity. There's kids who wear second hand shoes and take the bus to school here too, though. It made me believe that I could find my place there too. I wanted everything this city has to offer: the Cape Cod and Mediterranean style homes, the quaint little shops, the mystic beaches. I wanted it all, not just in this moment — not to admire in these passing seconds, but to wake up with seashells in my hands and sand in my hair. I rolled my window down to breathe in the salt speckled air. Something about it called my name like it knew me and all my secrets. I didn't know that I, myself, would reveal them.

The De La Luna house was utterly stunning. The cobbled driveway wrapped around in a semicircle, encircled the white fountain in the center —sprouting the cleanest water I had ever seen. Plants I didn't know the name of line almost every length of the estate. The front door was tall and framed by marble pillars, colored a blood red. Inside was warm, lived in, and clean. The white floors shined so clear I could see my dark brown skin against my even darker brown hair. A wide space everyone called the foyer, which I thought looked like the desolate spaces of a museum, opened up and gave me a clear view of the living room and kitchen. I didn't like it. The way their home gave nothing to the imagination, left me wondering about lunch instead of what lies before me.

At the sound of luxury brand slippers scraping the floor, my mother dipped her head — almost falling into a bow. She smiled with the life of a doll, the ones you wind up and set off to do as you demand. Lily Brenden, the owner of this beautifully bland house and my mother's employer had her own smile. Something like a leer, how she looked at all of the working class. She doesn't quite look at me, glancing more over the top of my head as if waiting for someone more impressive to walk in. Although, I would say that I had gotten used to it, it never failed to make me feel small, ugly, and insignificant.

Until, "Oliver, can you play with me today?" A raspy voice, like the melodies of a saxophone, floats from the top of the two-way staircase. Sebastien was out of breath, because he always was. He wore his collar peeking out from underneath his sweater popped, and it brushed the

curve of his jawline with every heavy breath he took. He grinned wide and silly, waving his hand at me while running (almost tripping) down the steps.

Lily's summer dress, white with frills and pale green flowers, sweeps the floor as she turned toward the stairs. "Be careful, and watch the time, the math tutor will be here soon." That time, she did look at me but with curiously hateful eyes. Why was her perfect little boy so keen on making friends with the housework's pitiful child? I didn't know myself.

My mother slipped away into the shadows where she scrubbed any surface until it sparkled. Lily sauntered into the kitchen she never used, and Sebastien watched me with eager eyes and bated breath. He wrung his hands, before putting them in his thick, dark curls.

"I got a new deck, we can play speed." He said, and looked nervous for some reason.

Realizing that it was either cleaning or card games, I figured I much rather enjoy the latter. "Sure."

And I was blind. Blind to the way his face broke into sunshine.

PART TWO

Now, at twenty-four, I still don't know why Seba watches me with such anticipation. I don't know what keeps his stare. I live on this beach like a ten thousand year-old rock, one that could give in to the swift change of the wind—the wet wool coat hanging onto my back. What is so interesting about that?

Thick leather boots crunch sand and pebbles beneath worn soles. "Look at this asshole!"

Raspy laughter carries through the air, like the Air Force planes we would watch from Quinn's grandmother's garden. You can't help but hang on to the emissions, the voice cracks, as they pass you by. He's just so contagious. Sebastien walks up to me with an air that smells like respect, and money—no matter how hard he tries to hide it. He wears a Cartier watch he calls a 'timepiece.' The differences in our tax brackets are always apparent.

"What the hell are you doing out here? It's freezing." He rubs his hands together and cups them to his face, blowing, as if the show would make me feel ridiculous for waiting around outside.

I only shrug, tilting my head back to look at him fully. Seba's maroon leather coat billows like Superman's cape, and I've decided that I hate him more than I miss him. Him and his stupid smile, his dark curls that flutter with the wind.

I hate how beautiful he is, and I don't want to admit that I miss it even in the spring, summer, and fall.

The eye contact we make lasts for what feels like forever, but is a second before we collapse into each other's arms. I make sure Seba reaches out first to remind myself that his infatuation could be temporary—just in case.

His raspy voice is muffled into my shoulder. I don't know what he says, but it sounds something like, I missed you. I assume he means something else, so I don't say anything. I brush my hands against his back, and he feels like a rock. A strong and jagged rock. I sigh as we part reluctantly, like we're stuck in one another's orbit—or at least I'm trapped forever in his. Seba locks his arm with mine, and Quinn latches on to my other.

They pull me down the shore and away from the water that glimmers in the evening sunlight. My eyes are set on its easy beauty, something you could never get tired of watching for hours upon hours.

Seba tugs me along when I stumble behind. "What do you look so sad for? Julius brought weed...and you know what that means." He's smirking and grinning, and it'd be ugly on anyone else but it makes me a bit jealous at how he could be beautiful like those waves reflecting iridescent light. He shines, just like he did when we were kids.

"You know he gets into his little moods." Quinn laughs, and I join in—because my seasonal melancholy is indeed funny.

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That doesn't matter, though. What does matter is the chill in the air, the weather app calling for snow, and Christmas lights being hung before

we can cut the turkey on Thanksgiving. My home's arms wrapping around me, and welcoming me back from a long year.

They drag me onto the sidewalk, then a back way path that leads to De La Luna Beach House for a night I won't remember. When we reach the dark oak stairs, Julius is standing in the doorway with a bag of discernible green leaves.

"Aw shit," Seba says with pure excitement dripping off the corner of his crinkled eyes.

The stairs moan with age and depression. My shoes scuff the moss and dirt that have overgrown from the sides. Straying branches from unruly bushes scrape my coat, like a bar ladies lingering acrylic nails on my arms. The exterior of the house is rough, rougher than I'm used to seeing. There's foliage crawling up the sides and around the door. Wood is chipping, stone is cracked. Seba doesn't treat this house with the love his mother did, the kind my mother made. My heart sinks and slips from beneath my ribs when Julius saunters backward into the house, holding the door open with his socked foot. The inside is different from what I remember too. It looks like shit.

The once reflective floor is now smudge with streaks of dirt. Dust coats every surface in a stifling blanket. I swear something squeaks and skitters and—

The kitchen lights flicker on and off, because Quinn dances his fingers over the switches. He laughs a little, as the one's above the backsplash dim and the chandelier sparks on. "I never know how to work these things."

I open my mouth to say, me too but I know better—because the things Quinn doesn't know how to do come from him not caring. He's probably never had to turn on a light switch himself until he left home. I remember his nanny, Isabelle or Isa, spoon feeding him adulthood. My lips tuck into my mouth, and I bite down. I sit down at the island and watch as Seba, Julius, and Quinn sway through the kitchen. They move like trees in the wind, so easy yet grounded.

This all makes sense for them. Flying first class to Westknox every summer and winter for vacation, getting rid of househelp because we're hardly here, using filthy kitchens, and getting high without caring about what tomorrow holds. Of course, I'm a little upset but I'm not sure who at.

In the throws of a setting sun, we mull around the marbled island — licking batter from spoons, biting around burnt ends, and stopping for a brief flour fight. I lose myself in these moments, where our faces split with happiness, and the gap between my debt and their trust funds mean

nothing. Then, everything becomes dreary when the moon spins the sun around to the other side of the earth. I'm lying on the couch with my eyes closed and mouth open. My head feels heavy with my mind entering a state of transcendent pleasure. I'm slipping underneath silky water. Nothing could take me away from such a feeling. Not even Julius' panicked whimpers across the room, where he's latched onto a curtain and kicking away what anyone could assume is a mirage of an army of insects.

Quinn is dancing to old Christmas vinyls that screech and crackle from misuse. I open my eyes to watch his thin limbs stretch and swirl with the violins, shake and shimmy with the bells. Somewhere behind me, Seba is laughing. What the fuck is so funny? I get up, my head wading through water, and I have to catch myself on the arm of the couch. We clip shoulders as I escape into the dining room. Beyond the winding archway, a wooden table so dark it almost looks black stretches out to each end of the room. I glide my hands against the back of the chairs tucked under the table, quite heavy and molding with neglect. I walk, fast, around the table once—twice—before Sebastien walks in himself. His straight eyebrows scrunch his forehead that barely peeks from behind the winding curls that have begun to fall in his fiery eyes.

"You okay?"

I bite the inside of my cheek. "No."

"What's the matter, Oli? You've been looking a little more depressed than usual." He slides a hand over my back, and the touch feels so soft and warm—yet I want to vomit all those emotions onto the dusty rosewood floors.

I want to lie as I answer, but something in the way Sebastien furrows his brows in such a clueless gaze lights a fire within my heart. And my brain tells me I'm too old to be so acquiescent. "I hate that you act as if you don't know what I'm talking about or going through."

Seba's face contorts into pure bewilderment, exemplifying the root of my anger, and shakes his head. He reaches out to me, he wants to shrink our distance—cage me in his arms and keep me captive. A hopeless man, now a slave in its natural habitat of love. I step away.

"Oliver, no, no—I never mean to be dismissive? Just tell me now."

"Remember when I applied to be the marketing manager of that marketing company, and you gave me your dad as a reference?"

"Yeah? Why?"

"Because I went back on it, and I decided to use my Professor Drew instead. I went to the interview, and you know what they said...?" He stares at me with his tongue bitten in his mouth. I watch his jaw work up

and down when I start. "You're not quite qualified for this position, but we have an opening for a janitor."

He tilts his head, like he always does and it sends ripples of a flaming irritation under my skin. I feel it surfacing. A bile surging up through my throat and spilling out in a crimson colored anger. My chest puffs and sinks with every harsh breath that relentlessly seeps out the air from my brain.

The air hangs like an awkward dead weight. "That's so fucked... but what does that have to do with me?" Everything.

I feel dizzy. "Everything. I used Stefan's reference, and even chalked it up about how we were childhood friends. And he heard you went to Dupont, and got a full ride to Brown. Seba..." A deep sigh trembles its way out of my mouth, and my throat goes dry. "We talked about you for more than two-thirds of the interview."

"Oh, hm, um..." He seems to give up for a moment. "I'm sorry,"

"I don't want an apology." I bite out, the words feeling like molasses slipping past my teeth. I don't want this conversation to continue.

Seba reels back a bit, offended. "Then what the fuck do you want, Oliver? You always prance around with that sad ass look, and expect everyone to be at your beck and call. Wake the fuck up, and actually say what you need to say."

I'd rather not. Because then you'll see me. "You need to wake up! Stop acting like your shit doesn't stink."

Our agitation sparks into a billowing white fury. The air in the dining room becomes thick, tightening our throats and strangling the ounces of cordialness from this space. This hot and lonely space. Sebastien throws his arms up and stomps out of the room. I follow, like an idiot.

He's screaming now, "And what exactly did I do, Oliver?! What the fuck have I done for you to suddenly act like this? Maybe I'm living in a daydream, but I thought you were my friend—my best friend. I was always there for you, and you for me. But ever since mom died you've been—"

"She's not your mother."

Quinn and Julius, who were trying to light the fireplace, have their heads on a swivel with their eyelids peeled back and mouths wide open. They put down the firewood and matches, moving so slowly as if someone poked a bear. Well, I guess I did.

Sebastien's head whips around to me. "What?"

I attempt to steel myself from the rage seeping off Sebastien in waves. His shoulders and chest rise and fall to and from his ears with every heavy breath he takes. His eyes, once sandy brown eyes have melted into

a molten brown. They're almost black under the fading chandelier lights. He's still so beautiful, even when he looks at me like I destroyed the sun and moon. Plucked all the stars from the sky.

It hurts a bit. "She's not your mother. Don't call her that."

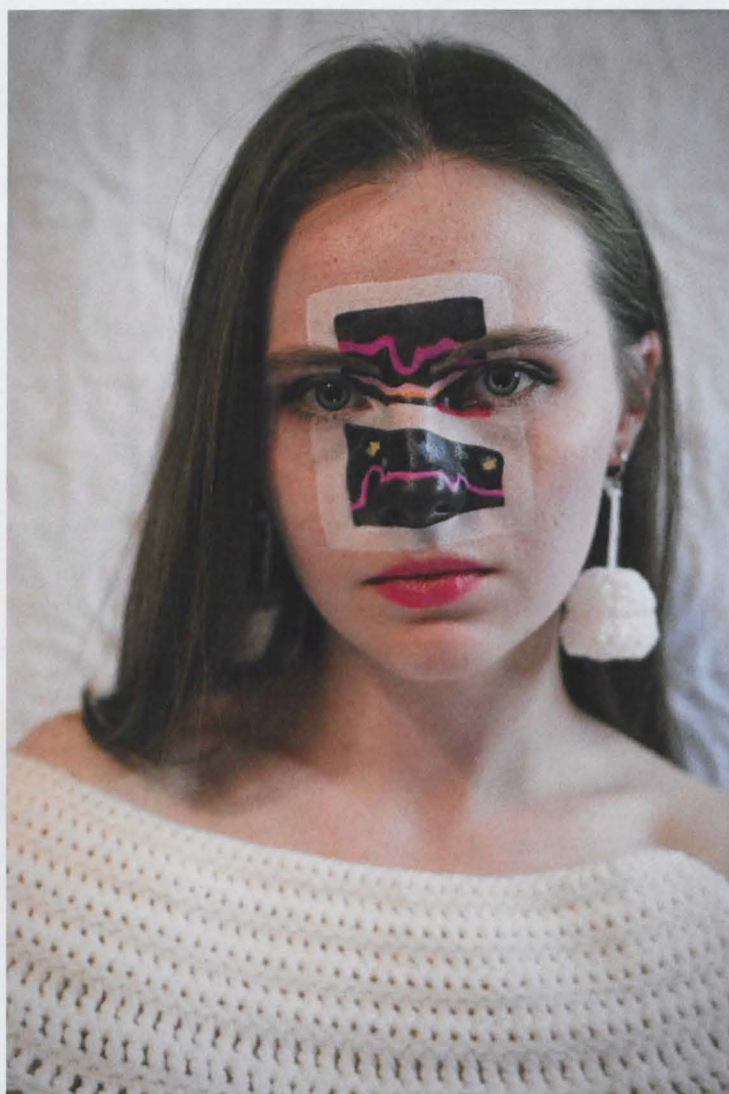
He delves his hands into his hair, ruffling the already fluffy strands; I want to smooth them out. "Are you fucking serious right now? She was more like a mother to me than my biological one. She might have been your mother, but she took care of me like I was one of her own. You can't take that away from me, no matter how you feel."

He's turning to leave, and I take a half-step. Don't go, I want to say but I'm a coward. He grabs his coat, and it falls so softly into his arms. It looks heavy and light simultaneously. I want to wear it. And yet, "You've taken everything from me, Seba, really. Whether you know it or not." I can't let him know that.

"Here!" The coat flies at me and shines under the bitter yellow light like a beacon of burgundy. "Now you have something of mine, since you never took anything in the first place." The door slams, loose objects—my heart—rattling in fear. I feel the weight of his leather coat, I taste the dark cherry red, and I wish it was him I was holding instead.

Raynaud's Phenomenon; Seen

Kaitlyn Barker



bad luck ocd

Emily Hollwedel

bad luck, or the cost of one cent to the mind with ocd.

i.
if i could, i would take it in my hands,
push the metal straight through my palm so
the white hot sensation subsides
long enough to walk to a wishing well.
and there, i would toss it in a high arc
to plunge into the cold, quiet pool—
and drown it.
hold it under,
until it quiets down.
baptize it
beside its family
so that when they ask what purpose it was cast for
it will feel the burn of shame
as it has to say nothing.

payback for the blood and the pain and the way
that the transaction ruined me—
no, robbed me.

it smells like dried blood
that long ago rushed to my head
and stuck there with this
all-encompassing sense of dread
as i stare down at that copper-colored
bad luck on the concrete.

i've had good luck too—
on boardwalks stained by centuries of sun and salt,
framed on cool tile cafeteria floors,
claimed by the fuzzy carpet of my own
house, room,
in places i haven't cleaned in years.

ii.

i made the transaction to avoid bad luck carelessly,
back when the taste of blood meant little.
only when i was taller
and the damage was long done
did i ever think there might be something in my water.

and all the things i missed while that copper poison coursed through
my veins!
watching the sunrise
and hearing my friends laugh
and the feeling of the ocean kissing my skin.
waking up from a good night's rest
and staying off of my phone during class or
breakfast (or lunch or dinner or at her sweet sixteen or while i was in
the car or when i was
trying to)

breathe
or when my dog was crying
just to be let out of the house
and escape the overwhelming weight
of my immobile,
contaminated state.

transaction complete.

iii.

do i have a choice to begin
a healthier transaction?
or will my mind bid me no
respite from the never-ending
desperate gnawing of its greedy demands?

does it matter
that flipped over
this coin is good luck?

why do fear and frustration and all things vile
bleed into the back of my throat so easily?
is it to take away the one power i've ever had?
it seeps in warm and sticky, like my heart's own tears
stifling, dwelling, swelling in my chest
compelling my ribs to concave from the pressure.

iv.

all this blood from a little copper-colored bad luck
someone dropped in the street
that i can't bring myself to pick up.

Changing the Subject

Harrison Booth

The cat looks on at my face's swelling;
He does not know what it means;
he does not know what it means;

maybe knowing what it means
is why it
swells,
the only source of
tears' deep wells.

Why do I cry like this,
standing in the living room be-
fore a table empty five chairs 'round,
empty still when I sit there on
weekday nights.

(It is Saturday, and
I do not sit.)

The cat inquires from the fifth chair
across the table;
He does not live in the round;
he does not live in the round;
and when he faces me,
hears my irregular breath,
takes in this quivering face,
I lock eyes just in case
he knows what I am thinking
of.

He inquires with no answer;
good God, to be him now—
yet I wouldn't know it anyhow—

I feel I've been gone before I've even
begun,
but to know that you have to start somewhere,
and the place I've chosen is
beyond the place that water
leaks from.

Beyond the quiet sponge of
this earth.

The place I've chosen is
the place that names the vacancy
behind the
cat's soft eyes,

the place that knows the nothing that he knows,

the somewhere I've called
nowhere.

Of such a place
he hasn't the slightest
inkling.

I implore him to change the subject,
but I don't want him to.

He looks away;
there was nothing to change.
Waters shift,
and rearrange;

PART TWO

Series of Growing

Ode to Motherhood

Alishia Mitchell

Who births the women who were never meant to be daughters?
Who raises the women who weren't meant to be mothers?

My mom and I are one
I didn't want to be born
And she didn't want to birth me
I never grew up
And neither did she
I allow my childhood naivety to hope that we'll be the women we
needed

Can someone tell me who my mother is supposed to be?
It's not her fault
I was born into motherhood
I nursed my dolls to life
I sung them lullabies out of apologies for the world I brought them
into
I sacrificed my playtime to show them the mother I'd be

To my future children, I'm sorry if I don't do the same
I'm sorry if I make you my mother
I'm sorry if I give you the weight of my world
I'm sorry if I show you the mother I would be

To my descendants, I'm sorry for the cycle you're born into
I begged for your forgiveness
But you told me my contempt dressed in sorrow meant nothing
You said these things never change
I'm sorry

I know my mom promised us the same
I'm sorry for the things I didn't listen to until it was too late
No one talks about the stage where we outgrow our mothers

I went back in time to apologize to my pregnant mother
I think I was too late
I asked the sky if being a woman was a curse
The stars glowed in silence

Ode to Motherhood

To my grandmother, I'm sorry you couldn't see the woman I'm becoming

To my mother, I'm sorry you have to see the woman I'm becoming

To my children, I'm sorry for the mother that you have

Venus

Natalie Hutchinson

when in Paris, a day at the Louvre is not optional.

i find myself in a crowded room,
flotsam floating in a sea of people.
i make my way towards the window,
pushing past the cameras.

and i turn, and i look, at Her.

i don't realize that i'm crying.

She is made from marble,
but save for a four-pack,
Her body is soft.
had She been given arms,
there's no doubt those would be soft too.

as i walk through the gallery,
She follows me where i go.
in every corner, i see Her.

with hip dips.
stomach rolls.
love handles.

the aqueduct continues to flow.

She's known as the goddess of beauty.
some say She is beauty, in its purest form.

She is not a statue;
She is a mirror.

Her name is Venus.

if you look hard enough,
you will find Her everywhere

The Word *Entropy*

Zach Brown

Entropy. It is the empirical tyranny which decreed that the day I began living was the day I began dying—the unpredictable despotism that reduced me to nothing more than 37 epochs worth of irreducible complexity and chaos manifest, guided solely by the volatile design of spontaneity.

It is the law which demands that nature be beautiful only because it has to be—that there is no benevolence in

the leaf which falls or the bird which sings

in a closed system infinitely approaching

a state of randomness and disorder. It

is the equation which proved that

I laugh, that I love, that I hurt,

and that I hate for no reason

but that it is favorable to

the species—that my

will is forever

that of my

master,

my

capo,

and

my

coda,

Entropy.

Praying Mantis

Elaine Griffith



The Ants Go Marching

Elana Petrone

Erupting from their molten lava cake home,
The workers scurry out to the grassy field that is their world.
Red, round, rallying ants go rushing to their jobs.
I imagine each one has an assigned task,
But how are we to know.

Do they know we watch for them?
Sealing our doors shut,
Trapping them with sticky sweet syrup,
A cruel trick to ensure they can't escape.

When do they build their underground labyrinths?
I've never seen it happen
It's just something we accept,
Death—

—Squished with a squelch under a shoe,
Yet little warriors,
Backpacking breadcrumb boulders up to fifty times their weight.
Tiny but mighty.

Forever foraging for food.
Praising us, the greedy giants,
Hoping we provide a shower of crumbs
To feed their queen.

If their dirt abode crumbles inward
Do they suffocate?
The grim reaper already isn't kind to them.
Two years in and they go underground for good.

Would ants stomp us to death if they could?
Smearing our guts on the ground,
Creating black or red goo,
Destroying our wooden homes we worked hard on?
Or would they understand and leave us be?

The 503

3rd Place Poetry

Kimberly Medrano

Where I'm from, the color red was often splattered on the walls.
There was no safe point, there was no peace.
Where I'm from, people live in small shacks,
Shacks filled with portraits of their loved ones that were lost at battle.

Where I'm from, the Paleteros have seen it all,
From the moment light has entered through the small broken cracks of the window,
To where the moon was the only source of light that would exist,
in the dark, cold depths of Usulután.

Where I'm from, the only sounds you would hear,
Would be the cries and whimpers of mothers holding on to their sons
While the ladies across the street, grab tortilla masa and continue making Pupusas,
As if they didn't witness a life being taken away.

When will it all end? When will people stop living in terror?

Where I'm from, the beaches used to be a battlefield.
A battle between officials that would hide behind the long green palms in fear,
And the crew that would shout out laughter while in desperation to pull the trigger.

Where I'm from, People used to live in fear and injustice.
Despite the violence and horror,
The 503 will always be a place I can call my home.

The Lurker

Carter Timmons

I am there.

I was there when you were small. Tiny, little, frolicking thing. With your hair at your shoulders and with your smile missing teeth. I was there when you felt the ocean splash on your toes. I felt it too. The fuzzy, cold touch of the sea that tickles and nips and bites and excites. The bubbly splash. The crinkles of sand and how it felt in your clumsy little hands. The drip, drip, drops of the salt running off your suit. Yes, I felt it too.

I was there when you fell. Your bony knees crashing on the black asphalt. I felt it too. The crunch, the scrape, the slice. You hobbled your way to the water hose as the local kids shouted at you, "You lose!" Blood leaked down to your shoes. Yes, I felt that too.

I was smooth then. Healthy, loving, caring. I'd reflect the sun with my own beams as you smiled back at the horizon. Golden. I was there.

I am there.

I was there when you grew. No longer the bob-bearing kid with mismatched socks and off-brand shoes. You cut your bangs too short. Clenched your teeth so tight that your braces groaned. I was there every night. Under those pink, crusted covers you began to hate. I was there when you first put eyeliner on—you poked your eye and the crumbly ink leaked. Like the drip, drip, drops. I felt the stab, the ache, the blinks just as much as you.

I was there. Always there. There when you finally saw me. Saw me for me. You studied me. Touched your fingertips to me. Grazed. You probed. Then you forgot about me.

I am there.

I am there when you work. Thumping, bumping, punching. I am there with your friends. I call for the attention because you—you have tried to hide me. I am there with your family. You cover me, block me, try to wash me away. I am there when you look beautiful. You cannot banish me away. You cannot hide me.

I am always there.

I am there when you don't want to think about me. I am there when you want to think about me. I am there when you cannot think at all. I am there when you think too much.

I am there when you try to focus. I am heavy. I am large. I am slick. I am hot. I am red, furious, bulging, shouting. I pull you away. I beg for you.

I am there.

I am there when you are bored. I am light. I am tiny. I am dry. I am warm. I am clear, waiting. Patient. Because I know you. I know what you want.

I am there.

I am there when you feel the best. I am there at that concert. I am there on that date. I am there at that party with those kids that you hate. But you look great. But I am there. I poke. I prod. I push. I push and I push. Until you can feel me. There. You reach for me. You trace me. You have tried to ignore me, cleanse me, cleanse yourself. But I am there. You resist me. Until you cannot unsee me.

I am there in the bathroom. I am there in the dressing room, at the Ross, at the Kohls, at the Target, at the Levi's. I am there in your car. I am there in your room. I am there in the glass.

Even when you don't see me, you can't help but push me back. To poke me. To graze me. To circle me. To dig your nails into me. It's our ritual. You can't forget about me. I can't forget about you.

I am there.

I am bursting, popping, spewing, and drip, drip, dropping. I am small. I am large. Sometimes I itch. Sometimes you scratch. Sometimes I swell and ache. Sometimes you squeeze and pop. Regardless.

I am there.

Does it make you feel better? Knowing that I am there? Always there?

I am there when you look at yourself. In the water. In the glass at the mall. In the reflection of your car. You get close. It doesn't matter if you have had a good day, a bad day, an okay day. When you see me, you can't help but get rid of me. You press. You dig. You pinch me until I bleed. Drip. Drip. Drop.

I am there.

I comfort you. I enrage you.

I am there. Red grave marks littered everywhere. Gashes, holes. I am still there from when you took your knife and sliced me open. I felt the blinding rage, the dull blade, the pricks of crimson. Yes, I felt that too.

Just as much as you.

I am there in your tomb. Whittling away. Papery. Gritty. Gray and dull. Then I am dust.

But I am still there.

Baltimore

Kayla Douglass

Baltimore. The word tasted as funny as the butterscotch ice cone I once tried the first time I tried to say it. Balt-e-more? No. Balt-i-more? Sounded too choppy.

On one hand, there were painted ladies, houses made of shingles and bricks, flags billowing in the wind lining the streets. On the other hand, the roads were as bipolar as the sea, dips of potholes and faded dashed lines on the road, staring back at the cars that rode on them. On the *other* other hand, however, well, let's just say there's only two hands.

There's the great city of Baltimore, and not one that stood tall with the Transamerica Tower, or the Bank of America Building. Never stepped foot in them, and never really wanted to, either. There's a lot of people in business suits, crisp black ties and clean white blouses ignoring the *click click click* of their heels as they stepped into the parking garage and rode their cars home. Over the smooth roads that branched out from the busy city, smooth roads and bustling crowds of a place that could devour people whole and spit them out.

There's the Baltimore Harbor, but it's just the Harbor here. *Hey, have you been by the Harbor?* Or something akin to a *Tickets are on sale for the aquarium by the Harbor* but the words *by the Harbor* were often unnecessary because it wasn't as if there was more than one aquarium people went to. The water glittered in the midday sun, just right for a traveler's brochure. It's perfect for people, see, because of all the black and white and brown and asian and every person in between spilling from the Cheesecake Factory and into the bookstore located across the way, the brick building towering in the air, tall and imposing despite actually not being very tall at all from an objective standpoint. Commands something with brick walls and years and years' worth of old, new, shiny, and used books lining the shelves. Then there's the ferry, moving so slow in the water it may as well be drifting aimlessly. On hot summer days—when the sun bore its gaze relentlessly into the backs of any and all—Rita's had nothing short of a line long enough to sigh upon sight. Children running around in shorts and an ice cream cone, hair wet and flip-flops soggy from the sprays of water coming from what people often assumed to be merely statues in the small parks a few minutes' walk away.

But, oh, that's not Baltimore. It's Baltimore, of course, but it's not *Baltimore*. The harbor is a collection of what's supposed to be the best, and skyscrapers are meant to keep out parts of the city, and people in suits never stay in suits forever.

Speaking of summer, it doesn't stop with the harbor. It's a collection of things. Children working with Youthworks, stumbling on MTA buses to get to their summer jobs located somewhere around the city and counting down the days until they get paid. Collecting the change they get and clutching their cards in between sweaty, eager fingers while they watch the games and clothes in display cases at the mall (which could be: White Marsh Mall, Towson Mall, Security Square Plaza, or MonDawMin to an extent. There were few more, but those were often thrown out when people wanted to shop somewhere).

But there's also the sense of the majority of people who want to continue living life they always do regardless of the season. Makes sense, they're still working, heading to hospitals in teal scrubs or getting into buses to start a shift or even layering on bright orange jackets to start on a new construction project to *make the city better*, despite gutted painted ladies haunting the streets like lost, vengeful phantoms. People have less patience than they already did. The boys that walk across streets with water bottles in hand almost always strike up a sale nowadays. Sweat glistening down their foreheads, coolers of drinks set on the sidewalk somewhere. Three or four a hand, they knock on the window of the car and would ask the driver whether they would *like to buy one, ma'am? Only a dolla*. Then they'll walk away, only to be replaced with another boy, spray bottle and window wiper in hand with a brief *want me to clean your window?*

But then there's night, and only a handful of people and places ever really slept.

Further from the city—and not downtown further, but near the edges where no one wants to visit, but where people live—the sidewalks bleed purple, as rich and velvety as whatever blood was spilled just an hour before. Not rich like the night sky, though. Stars aren't visible in any part, only the dark endlessness of black and the occasional gray cloud. But this purple is invasive, a product of red and blue coming together and mixing like wet paint, police cars crowning yellow tape, it gently swaying in whatever night breeze comes.

Another one, someone would think upon seeing it on the news. Another homicide, or fight, or stray bullet that happened to sink into someone's skull. But then there would be the sadness, the tangible disappointment upon looking at the shaky video in the news and recognizing the street it happened, but rarely with the belief that violence wouldn't be able to occur in that area, because pretty much every part of Baltimore is subject to one thing or another at one point or another.

(But every now and then, the city's heart will stop beating as something paralyzing and cold trickles into its limbs. April 2015—the killing of Freddie Gray. An unlawful killing in the hands of the Baltimore Police Department. Helicopters in the sky, shining bright white lights on the ground because what ensued was nothing short of pandemonium. Wooden boards covering up any inch of windows and painted signs in the streets and crowds of people shouting and crying and pleading and breaking and ripping what held the people at the seams with such unfiltered passion that he will never die. Freddie Gray lives on in the city's heart, treasured in the way all people should be. But most of the time, people will see death on the news and turn their heads and move on. It's the unfortunate side effect of living in a city that took little with people that took plenty.)

The brightness of ambulance sirens glows as bright as the cherry-red embers of dwindling cigarettes, fluttering to the ground in fragments. Hands shake as they clutch glass bottles encased by brown, stained paper bags. People lean, then they fall like trees caught in a storm. They shake styrofoam cups at the bus stop, glazed eyes staring at something only they can comprehend, their only evidence is the smell of alcohol or weed or cigarette smoke and the person who's perceptive enough to distinguish between the three. They settle by the corner store, shrouded in their puffy coats and ragged shoes. *Do you have a quarter?* they'd ask, the question turning to hushed whispers in the night air. People often press on, hands shoved in pockets and heads looking downwards.

But they're *there*, and as present as skyscrapers. Holding cardboard signs declaring their homelessness. Occasionally, there's a man missing an arm or a leg, begging for money for medicine. Occasionally, there's a woman with kids, a baby cradled in her arms and a stroller next to her form.

And then there's houses—actual houses—dotting roads with lush green

gardens and metal fences. There's people milling about, tote bags in hand as they head to the farmer's market to pick up fresh fruits and vegetables for the week. There's people selling books and working in food trucks both in and outside of farmer markets trying their best to start their business. There are stores that open only to shut down again mere months later. There are stores that open only to boom into a great, big hit and not only become a business, but become a business that originated in Baltimore, spreading far enough to need a place of origin.

Waverly has a school and the Y nestled in a quaint little neighborhood. Every Saturday welcomes a farmer's market sandwiched between a 7-11, a Giant, and a bookstore. Graffiti bleeds from ideas to skilled hands to brick walls above the gas station right across the street, pictures of bees and baseball games and celebrating people right over a block filled with little businesses with faded signs and flickering neon lights that said open.

Graffiti takes over spaces below bridges, people and flowers and tributes to dead people (like dead candles and teddy bears near poles, like shoes hanging near traffic lights, solemn but significant in their own right) and messages and scrawled, half-baked thoughts such as *why isn't there a starbucks here?* or something much more crude in nature. They hover under bridges, but over the tents of homeless people. On the side of businesses and near the empty windows and doors of abandoned homes and buildings. Art on stickers that are slapped on street signs and power boxes. Art on sidewalks in the form of children's chalk drawings and little messages scratched in with twigs on wet concrete that stay for years. Art in the form of flowers blooming in sidewalk cracks and in front of abandoned homes and plumes of smog from buildings that caught on fire, never to recover. Art in the form of bright red or green or blonde box braids and shiny hoop earrings and dreads that cascade down backs and decorated acrylics. Art in the form of a patchwork of a city that covered and displayed and devoured and spat out and nurtured and rotted all at the same time, every second of the day, with every person that took the time to traverse its waters.

Bal-tim-ore? It sounded smoother on my tongue now. I could draw out the m sound—that or the i sound—but it didn't feel right. It was much better. Less choppy and prone to falling apart.

Bal-tim-ore?

Baltimore.

Death and Mourning in Harrisburg, PA

Sofia Divens

Halfway into my two-week long grounding, my Pappy finds himself in the ICU. He had already been staying at the medical center in his hometown for a couple of days. He was admitted on account of a problem with his heart—a problem which had been trampling its way down his family tree for generations; finally landing on his stubborn, hayseed branch.

My dad gets a phone call around 10 at night from a Pennsylvania area code. By 10:15 I'm packing a book about teenage twin sisters, one a human and the other a vampire, while my parents get dressed. We drive for an hour through fields and farms. It's the way we've been taking for years up to my grandparents house. I've never seen the drive at night. Everything is so bleak and empty, surrounded by darkness. The cows I usually see are away in their barns asleep. I imagine them cuddled up against one another; big and soft and safe. Done with the windy summer air and nestled in the warm-dark.

When we finally get to the medical center, we meet up with my Nana, my uncle and his family. My uncle is tall and always wears a baseball cap to cover his balding head. He's loud and often says things he's not aware I'm hearing. He's the younger brother. His wife is short and dresses akin to Nana or really any grandmother from the country. She has cropped blonde hair and laughs too much. By the time hellos are over with (I'm thoroughly avoiding my cousins) we learn that granddad is being helicopter-ed to a hospital in Harrisburg.

It's well past midnight by the time we get there and are all seated in the waiting room. Everyone is talking a lot, especially my mom who has a hard time sleeping on a good day. I lay in two arm-chairs pushed together for what feels like hours before I finally sleep.

After waking up in my makeshift crib, I eat a small breakfast which tastes like how I imagine those little silver packets of astronaut food taste. Everyone is still talking a lot and my mother's sagging eyes betray the hope in her voice. I don't think she's slept at all. We go in to see my grandfather who is unconscious and, as the nurse puts it, has little to no brain-activity. No one is talking anymore.

I don't understand where or when the turning point happened. We visited him in the small hospital just a couple days earlier. He'd been his gruff, blunt self; rolling his eyes when the nurse told him to uncross his ankles for fear of clotting. I don't know what questions to ask.

In the afternoon, Dad takes me on a walk around the hospital grounds. It's actually quite pretty, with a small garden and some wrought-iron benches. I don't think the smaller hospital has any potted plants or walking pathways. Comparatively, it's a prison.

"Machines are all that's keepin' him going right now. Mom is having me and Brian make the decision. I think it'll happen tomorrow morning," he says.

It's weird to hear him refer to my grandma as 'mom'. I wonder why she isn't the one making the decision, but I don't ask that.

"Zach and his mom are coming up tomorrow to be here when it happens."

I envy my half-brother and his distance from the rest of our family. I envy his mother's distance even more.

"How're you feelin', Sof?" he asks.

"I'm sad, but I'm okay," I shrug. My grandad has been pretty much irrelevant in my life up until this point.

"You know how much he loves you and is proud of you right?"

"Yea."

That night, I'm reading *My Sister the Vampire* when Nana walks into the waiting room. She's short and plump in stature, so it's more like a defeated waddle. I try not to look at her. I can tell she's been crying, her eyes are pink and puffy like a strawberry crepe.

"Will one of you kids come lay with me in the room?" she says, her voice is warbled and thick.

My cousins, who are cresting adulthood at this point, say nothing.

I look over at my mom, who is concentrating fiercely on her phone. Her hair is dark and pulled back from her thin face. She catches my eyes, and gives a small, sympathetic smile. I turn towards my dad. He's gray for his age, but not yet balding—unlike his pot-bellied brother. I pray for him to look at me and he doesn't. My hands are sticky.

"I'll go with you," I say, weak and slow, setting my book down.

"Can I use your phone, Dad?" I ask, since my iPod is still hidden away somewhere back at the house.

He nods and hands me his phone, which is much bigger than mine. It feels unfit for my hands, but I take it anyway.

I stand up, ringing my hands like two damp rags. She smiles. The burgundy lipstick she always wears has completely faded off her thin lips. She waits for me to reach her before she puts her arm around me. We walk down the linoleum hallway. I watch the pretty nurses at their station, talking to one another quietly. They see us and smile. I look away.

The lights in his room have been dimmed. I think this is kind of pointless, considering he's been unconscious since he got here last night.

There's a twin-sized cot beside his bed; which is this giant tangle of tubes and wires. I barely recognize him. I think of Doctor Octopus from Spider-Man 2. This thought makes me want to throw up.

My Nana lays down on the cot, the side closest to her husband. I lay down next to her, as close to the wall as I can get without becoming it. She wraps her arm around me and cuddles me from behind. I feel her take a deep breath, her nose nuzzling the back of my head.

Her skin against mine feels pulpy, yet thin, like over-rolled dough. She pulls me in tighter. The smell of sweet powder and aldehydes spoon me. I want to leave. I hear the constant beep of his heart-monitor. I try to wait as long as I can.

I try to play a game on my dad's phone, but can't. I try to unclench my jaw, but can't. I imagine my parents sitting in the waiting room. I watch the minutes go by on the phone's clock. I tell myself just a few more minutes. Then I'll go. I don't think I've ever missed my parents this much, maybe except when I try to sleepover at someone else's house. I'm beginning to sweat through my t-shirt.

It's the idea of being back in between them, nestled in the warm-dark, which helps the words come out.

"I'm gonna go back to the waiting room now," I say as sweetly as I can, trying to get out of this Nana-shaped coffin I refuse to die in.

"Okay, sweetie. Thank you for lying with me." I can tell she's disappointed by the strain in her voice, but I refuse the guilt that threatens to come.

I get up from the cot and walk back to the waiting room. I'm not sure why I want to cry so much.

Early the next day my grandad's plug is pulled. All of the machines are removed. All of us are in the room. He's given a high dose of morphine. I count the seconds between each of his labored breaths, the empty space growing wider and wider. I sob into the arms of my half-brother's mom, who had just gotten there.

Irises

Elaine Griffith

I never realized how flowers die differently until I started bringing them to my bedroom.

I've had roses taped above my head for months and they're perfect corpses.

Not a single petal cracked or fallen.

But the irises, they've gone from red to purple.

They wilt and fall into my bed, into my dreams and you're there.

I rip off my face because I want to wake up

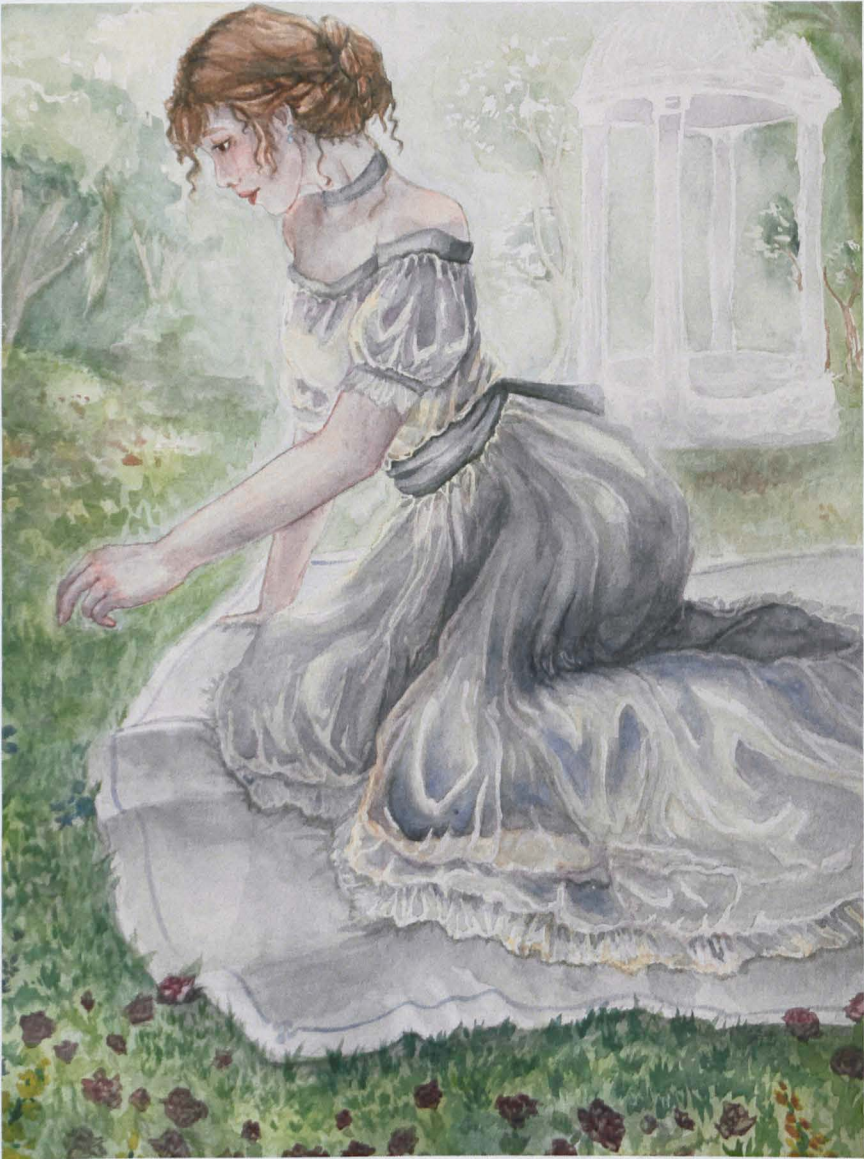
and you rip out your eyes

to add to my bouquet of broken irises.

Choosing

1st Place Visual Art

Zoe Flood



A Storyteller's Rose Garden

Kayla Douglass

Mentally tumultuous and admiring the life I live,
for the stories I birth, for my creativity, for the flowers I like to water,
they're giving, giving,
and the words flow, ideas pressed in ink and kissing my papers,
they're singing, singing,
I stand up to share but I'm anxious and excited and animated and
talk and talk and talk and talk and—

I try to say another word and nearly vomit flowers.

Passion and love and even anger, drenched in scarlet
seared in a mystery, thorns pricking my eyes, my ears, my lips
they're blooming, blooming,
and my anxiety growing from its embers, hot and nebulous,
they're booming, booming,
crimson swathed in vermilion and maroon and
red and red and red and—

Oh, I think they're shaping to be like roses.

Thorns trapped in my stomach, crawling up
up my esophagus, up into my mouth, up past my teeth,
they're growing, growing,
and petals colored by me, by my blood, by my passion,
they're slowing, slowing,
in my stomach they stab and plunge and stitch and
prick and prick and prick and prick and—

I can't keep doing this, I need to calm down.

Air fills my lungs and the brittle flowers crackle
turning into thriving plants, into mature plants, into withered plants,
they're dying, dying,
but not completely, never completely,
they're lying, lying,
breathe in again and lick my lips and taste copper and
soothe and soothe and soothe and soothe and—

But I'm happy that my words are no longer just words.

Bees

Harrison Booth

As a child, I never reached a point where bees began to frighten me. There just wasn't ever a need for this development.

My first memory of bees is a fond one. I can picture walking around a sunny neighborhood (not my own), on the kind of day that made newer sidewalk panels glaringly white, and happening past a lush cluster of purple flowers, not unlike Russian sage, planted at the base of a mailbox. This is a mostly content-less memory; I can't quite put my finger down on how any events unfolded, who exactly was with me (my parents and some family friends, perhaps?), or even what the backdrop looked like (was it around a bend in the sidewalk? On top of a hill?). I do remember this—upon and between the flowers danced dozens of bees. Honeybees, bumblebees. Though I know this more from feeling than from recollection of any words, I must have been told to keep my distance, but sensed that none of them wanted to hurt me. And I think liked them.

Years later, there was never a need for fear around bees. I never had any barefoot summer misfortunes like so many of the friends I've talked to over the years.

And until fairly recently, I was never stung.

I was sad to break my years-long impunity streak. Bees and I were on friendly terms, I had thought, and, after the fact, I was mostly just disgruntled at our falling out. My untouchable years were over.

See, my father is an arborist. For as long as I can remember, he's been doing tree work on the side for friends and acquaintances from his day job, and I've always been his assistant. I've helped make brush piles, slowly lower cut trees down with rope and pulley systems, and rake up after hours of pruning. One particular day, probably one spring during my upperclassman years of high school, we were working on taking down a dead tree on a forested property. We were just down a little stone-covered slope from the house's driveway, standing in the leaf litter next to the snag we were working on—probably 25 feet tall, ragged, rusty where the bark was plating off. At the very top of the tree was an old woodpecker hole.

We took the tree down in sections. And when the "hole" part came down, its unhappy tenant emerged to give us a word.

Carpenter bees are a solitary species, and are much bigger than most bees you'll see in southeastern Pennsylvania—about an inch long.

They live by themselves in cavities they chew into rotting wood. When this particular carpenter bee came whirring out to greet us, swooping down towards us as we dropped our tools and tried to evade its attacks, I became, for the first time, the direct and undisputed target of another creature's raw aggression.

The bee spiraled towards my dad, then at me. His flight seemed frantic but calculated.

My thoughts raced. Could I be allergic? After all, I wouldn't know. I became distinctly aware of this possibility.

After less than a minute of clumsy zig-zagging from side to side, trying to confuse a creature much faster than me, the bee landed on me. On my face.

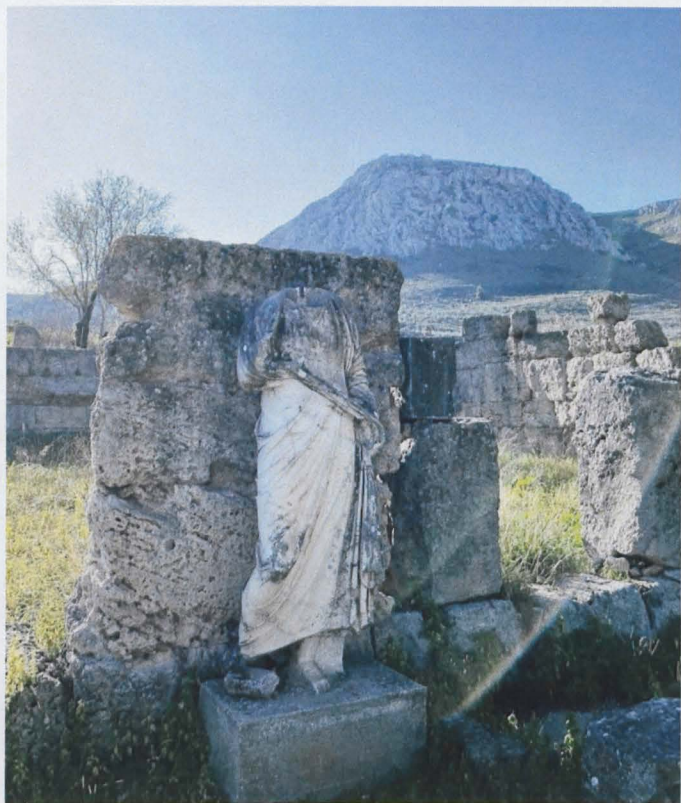
I fled up the little gravel bank as the pain of the sting reached my cheek, the small stones sliding under my boots and refusing to give me much purchase on the slope up to the driveway. The bee was gone from my face, but the strangely potent, semi-localized sensation of the stinger venom made its flavor known to me for the first time. I caught my breath under the overhang of the second-story wooden porch. As my father made his way over to me—"Are you alright? Did he get you?"—I investigated the aging red paint on the walls of the cabin-like house we were working at. No anaphylaxis, I noted. That was good. I don't know what I was expecting.

I had just been talking to someone a day or two before about how I had never broken a bone, and had never gotten stung in my life. So much for that, I thought, listening to woodpecker calls in the woods and resting my fingers gingerly on my cheek.

What could this mean for my bones?

Headless Corinthian

Carter Timmons



My Mother is Made of Earth

Robin Odom

My mother is made of the earth.

Her hands; rough as tree bark from a life of working,
Forming the skin of beasts into forms of artwork
Soil caked in deep as she encourages the seeds to grow
Just as she did me

Her hair red as clay, the henna she uses
Turning ethereal moonlight into spun copper

Her smile is not the sun, but a sunflower.
Serenely seeking the rays of light,
Like a lizard on a warm stone.

The lines in her face, like the rings in a tree,
Show years of smiling, loving, worrying.

When she steps into nature
I see the stress slip off her shoulders,
A waterfall of peace washing away the debris of life.

My mother is the earth.
Nature's blood runs through her veins
And it runs through mine too

Would you still love me if I was a worm?

Ra'Nya Taylor

I think if you were a worm
I'd be a worm too
We could dig in the dirt
And just do what little worms do

And if you were a bird
I'd be a bird too
We could fly forevermore
In search of a perfect view

If you were a cow
Well just look at me moo
We could live on a farm
With plenty of grass to chew

If you were a panda
We'd be snacking on bamboo
We could be together
In the San Diego Zoo

You could be a seashell
And if that ever became true
I will be the ocean
Always calling out to you

If you happened to be a tiger
I'd be your Winnie the Pooh
And if you are Thing One
Then I'll be Thing Two

If you were conditioner
I'd be shampoo
And if you were a ghost
I'd be your boo

Would you still love me if I were a worm?

If life were a stage production
You could be cast, and I crew
And if you are grass
Then I'm the morning dew

If you are an artist
Then I'm every color in every hue
And if you are a sculptor
I'm your one-of-a-kind statue

I feel there isn't many things
That for you I wouldn't do
I'd probably turn into a sneeze
If you became a tissue

I'm not too good at affection
But you know that's nothing new
I sat here and wrote a poem
Cause I struggle to say I love...

Dolly Sods Wilderness

Harrison Booth

I: Arrival

Switchbacking gravel road between the trees,
Negotiating with the mountainside—
The first leaves turning, hearing now the pleas
To join last season's growth, which now resides
Among the variegated forms below,
The green-stemmed understory blooms of fall—
I try to photograph them, but I know
Their depth will not translate. I make the call
To simply watch the passing forest floor,
A full conglomerate of leaves—fronds—grass—
Such bounty, I can scarce imagine more,
And yet, the glass between us. Always glass.

The rental van scrapes on, with me within,
Containing me, my air-conditioned skin.

II: Red Creek

The boulders strewn about the creek were white,
The water red with iron and with pine,
Its riffles soft, its bendings gentle. Night,
When it came arcing o'er the woods, so fine
and soft, we walked down to the creek and sat
upon the rounded stones. The milky way
reflected in our dusk-cooled eyes, so flat
against the mountain sky now void of day.
Somebody asked us what we thought of God,
And looking up, I blinked, and held my tongue—
I could not hear the stars right now. It's odd
how dulled I felt. Before, I might have sung.

We turned our lights off, let our eyes adjust;
I tried, I failed, to stop evading trust.

III: The hike

We woke with dawn, unzipped our sealed-up tents,
We cooked our breakfast, packed, were given maps,
And made off through the woods. The thin trail bent
And twisted with the ridges' whims. Perhaps,
the leaves said, you can see our colors now!
I strained my eyes, I listened, felt, but still
Their quality evaded me somehow.
We passed a waterfall, and watched it spill
out from the wetted stones that it had carved.
We looked at aphids, molds, and fungal growths,
And still I found my love for them had starved,
It seemed. I hungered for those broken oaths

I'd thought I'd always keep with forest lives—
Those oaths I'd severed with imagined knives.

IV: The Peak

It thunderstorm'd just as we reached the peak,
And though we pushed, we had to turn around;
The winds had gashed the sky and made it leak,
Into the valleys spilling o'er the ground.
Although the trees had opened to the sky,
And we could see the carved expanse around us,
We had to pass the view we'd come for by,
And let the whims of happenstance confound us.
The rain soon chased us down beneath the branches;
It snaked inside our jackets to our skin;
But once we'd known its liquid avalanches,
It left us with the sky's cerulean.

We laughed, we slapped our hands against our thighs,
We didn't turn around. We curbed our sighs.

V: Dawn

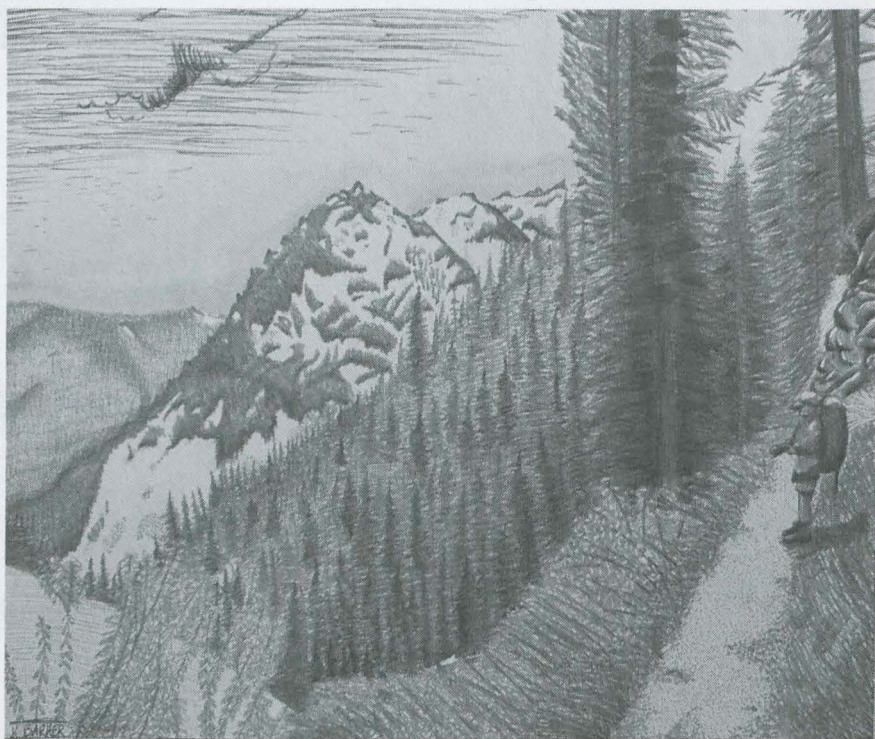
The fire that night was denser than the last.
We all sat by it, having changed our shoes,
our shirts, our socks. The caddisflies amassed

around our lanterns. Sticky residues
bedewed my mind, for though I'd tried to feel
the majesty the day'd conveyed to me,
I could not taste it, could not make it real—
The fire, the stars, both glowered; "Help me see!"
I cried to them, but nature has its way
of hiding when you call it to submit.
Next morn I woke at dawn to pink'ning Day,
My final chance to coax the life from it.

The Red Creek laughed and shirked my cold inspection;
I gazed, but only saw my own reflection.

Pacific Crest Trail

Kaitlyn Barker



sitting on a balcony in fort lauderdale

Caroline Willis

holy shit, who goes to florida in july? it's like this:
we walked out of the airport and my straight hair curled
humidity gains victory over the human
my sister grins, our first trip without our parents
our hotel lobby glistens with its ocean tile floor —
white shells and the clearest blue water glass

the balcony is my oasis
i get lost looking at the line of boats cutting through the water
i count the minutes the bridge opens for the million dollar yachts
i see a heavy raincloud miles away from the balcony,
lighting so loud it cracks and booms, snaps and sizzles
but there's sun above my head, so stupidly persistent
the heatstroke blinds me in a haze
the air conditioning hums until it chills my bones
i can smell the chlorine from the pool, it clogs my nose —
the pool my sister and i will swim in tomorrow

but tonight, after the sun has long set
we eat tacos on our balcony: mine shrimp, hers fish
they're juicy and fresh and okay, maybe florida isn't that bad —
besides the bare-chested woman at the beach,
besides the bat in the boot of our lyft, knife marks on the seats,
in the end it's not so bad —
a ferry boat flows us down the canal,
we see houses beyond our wildest dreams and giggle thinking,
that could be us

we run back to the hotel after taking the bus,
tires screeching, doors squeaking open, its hinges tired and worn
the heavens opened and hurled rain on our heads
soggy saturated clothes cling to our bodies,
our shoes squeak obnoxiously on that hotel tile floor
soon we find solace on our hotel balcony once again
waves kiss and lap the docks below us
as we stare out at the lights of fort lauderdale,
high in our penthouse above the piping hot pavement

sitting on a hotel balcony in fort lauderdale

i'm gonna miss this place, i realize on our last day
i soak up the last bit of sun standing out on that balcony —
the same sun i cursed for heatstroke
i could bask in its glory forever.

Elounda Marina

Carter Timmons



Apparently, Definitely Black

1st Place Prose

Jenn Madison

1.

I was told black people come in all shades by my mom. I guess I'm proof of that. A black girl with light skin.

I wouldn't know I was black. How am I supposed to tell? I feel guilty, like I should be able to.

2.

I learned the story of my grandpa from a video we watched at his funeral a month ago. "2019 Ohio Ag Hall of Fame Inductee - Lewis Jones". He grew up on the farm, his family winning multiple awards for their cows. His friends convinced him to go to Ohio State University for agriculture. Even with full scholarships to other schools, he decided to work multiple jobs to pay for the education he wanted. The video showed black-and-white pictures of him standing with his class. In a sea of young white men, there was my grandpa. My dark skinned, smiling grandpa. After being extremely involved in agriculture and the dairy industry for about 50 years, he was inducted into the Ohio Agricultural Hall of Fame. My family drove out to support him. We stared at the wall lined with square, black-and-white photos of decades' worth of hall of famers. In a sea of old white men, there was my grandpa. My proud, black grandpa. And a few squares down was his father.

3.

I lived in a place where the schools were filled with white people. White students, white parents, white teachers. I could count the amount of black people I knew on one hand.

4.

I have a wide, black nose. I have big, black lips. And I have black hair. Big, curly, thick, hell-to-deal-with hair.

I don't know if it's my anxiety or depression or just plain laziness that makes me not want to do anything to my hair. It needs constant

maintenance that I don't provide—brushing, washing, countless black hair products I never use. Fallen out hair strands litter my room and clothes. When I finally do wash my hair in the shower, I always step out and see the walls and floor of the shower covered in dark coils, like a hair explosion went off, leaving every surface covered.

A few years ago, I fell in love with my hair being natural. Smiled every time I saw myself in the mirror with cute curls and twists flowing out. But I couldn't take care of it. I left it alone for a couple months, and my hair became a giant, knotty monster on top of my head. It took almost 3 hours to finally brush it out.

Wearing it natural, for some reason, doesn't seem worth the workload. And I don't like braids. Braids are the solution to having natural hair without the workload. But I always find them so incredibly uncomfortable, that within 24 hours, I've pulled each one of them back out into long, loose curls.

I usually wear my hair straightened and curled. I like the way it looks. And all I have to do is brush it every day—easily glide through the hair for a minute instead of struggling for hours.

I feel like I'm covering up my blackness. Not putting the work into being that part of myself. I envy white hair. Smooth and seemingly always perfect, falling in just the right places. I envy my white friend who never owned a brush and just woke up every day with perfect, wavy curls. I feel guilty looking in the mirror and not seeing that beautiful, thick forest of tight curls above my head. And I feel guilty when it becomes a large, knotted mess.

5.
When I was 16, I went to an in-patient mental hospital for a week. For one day, a small group of us patients played Mario Kart. Every race, I would consistently get first place, and another girl whose name I don't remember would get second. After a race, she suddenly called herself and me "mixed kids." She said it proudly; proud to have someone like her there with her, winning. "Mixed" sounded right to me. But when I told my mom, she said no. I wasn't mixed. I was black.

What is mixed? One white parent, one black parent? Mixed people are often just called black. But I'm not mixed. My parents are black. Their parents are black. Their parents were black too. But there's white blood in me. My skin shows it. Was it all the way back to slave owners? Is that really the only white I can relate to?

6.

Because of my light skin, other kids at school didn't know what race I was. A few straight up asked, "What are you?" One thought I was Hispanic. Very few knew I was black. Most thought I was white, like them.

7.

I don't know much about my grandma. I know that she had my mom and uncles in college. Married and left my abusive grandpa. Worked her ass off to get enough food on the table for three kids by herself. Worked her ass off to become a lawyer. A black lawyer. In 1979.

8.

My hair has always been done by my mom.

As a kid, she would wash my hair in the sink. I would always complain, worried shampoo would get in my eyes. Then we would move to the sitting room. She would sit on the couch, and I would sit at her legs on the floor in front of the TV, and she would brush out my hair. I would always complain, saying it hurt, as she complained I was tender-headed.

When I got older, washing and brushing was on me. I never did it as often as she did. But she still straightens and curls my hair. I still don't know how to do it myself—attempted to learn, but each time got frustrated at being unable to control my own head. My mom is an expert, knowing exactly what to do and how and when and my hair always comes out exactly how I want it. It's selfish, but part of me doesn't want to learn. I like the excuse we have for her to sit on the couch and me sit at her feet in front of the TV together for hours, where I can feel each of my mom's gentle pulls on my hair.

9.

I remember in high school, when I wore my hair natural, people would touch my hair. Students would come up to me, flock around me, surround me with wide eyes and “woah”s and reach their hands out to feel this unfamiliar poof. At the time, I liked the attention. Now I look back and realize how much of an invasion it was. No one asked. No one treated me like a person, like one of them. I was strange, a marvel, abnormal.

10.

My mom talks about how she and her mom and her brothers and her cousins grew up in the NAACP. She talks about how she was the state secretary, then state president of the youth division in Indiana. How her grandma was the state president of the adult division in Ohio. How her mom was the national legal advisor. She talks about going to state, regional, and national conferences. She talks about how she’s stood next to famous black people at those conferences. How her cousin made a jingle to the tune of MAACO. Instead of “M double A C O, go MAACO!”, my cousin would sing “N double A C P, go negro!”

11.

I can’t go into just any hair salon. It took me a while to realize that. They don’t know how to do black hair. We have to look up where a place filled with black women who do black women’s hair is. We’ve always had to drive at least 30 minutes to get to one.

And I never like it in there. I spend hours waiting, getting my hair tugged, waiting more, getting my scalp burned, only to have the result never look the way I want and walking out a hundred dollars poorer.

12.

When I see black people, I don’t see myself. When I see white people, I don’t see myself. If I’m not mixed, what am I?

13.

My mom grew up with white people hating and avoiding her because she was black. But she also grew up with some black people hating and

avoiding her because she was light skinned. Girls would yell at her in the street on her walk from school. "You think you're so cute, huh? Think you're better than us because of your light skin!" They called her albino. They called her yellow nigger.

At one of her work meetings, a black coworker talked about how being dark skinned was hard, and how being black and lighter skinned is so much easier. My mom was mad for the rest of the day. "She has no idea how hard I had it."

My mom is black. My mom has light skin from ancestors I don't know the names or faces of. My mom has faced racism from white and black people. My mom has always been fighting.

14.

The involvement fair was something I looked forward to for weeks as a freshman in college. One reason was because there were black clubs, something I'd never seen before. NAACP. Black Student Union. Curlfriends. I was most excited to go to the Curlfriends booth, a club about embracing your natural, black hair.

I walked through the endless rows of clubs and finally found it. There were three black girls running the booth.

I remember walking up, then suddenly wanting to walk away.

Found myself afraid when the girls suddenly stopped and looked at me. I felt like I didn't belong here. I felt like they thought, "Why are you here? This isn't for you." The feeling grew stronger when I put my name in a raffle for black hair products. The feeling stayed when I went up to the NAACP booth. And I found myself awkwardly walking past the Black Student Union booth to avoid having to feel it any longer.

I tried again this year. I didn't even make it to the NAACP booth. Felt the stares, heard the thoughts, and left the Curlfriends booth as soon as I could.

I don't know if those girls actually thought that. Was I projecting? Projecting feeling like I wasn't a part of the black community?

Projecting my own inability to differentiate white people and light skinned black people?

15.

My mom sometimes talks about our skin color compared to other family members. Who's darker. Why some of her brothers have darker skin and not her. How my dad has darker skin than her and his mother. How even I have darker skin than her. Every time she seems to imply the desire, the wish for darker skin.

It turned into something I wanted sometimes too.

Why? To prove to others I'm black? To prove to myself?

16.

I've only fought small battles—do I even deserve to call myself black?

17.

I am stuck in between. I am extremely proud to be black. But I am unsure, unable to relate. To see being black as a part of who I am. I don't blame those who didn't know what I was. I really don't know either.

NIGHTMARE

Caroline Willis

There was no sky
no clouds, just an abyss
a sea of black churning agony.

It sang a siren song
so that its jagged talons and broken teeth
were shrouded in a sickly sweet melody.

It called to me, again
just as it does every night — when time stops moving,
and the clock skips midnight and tolls thirteen.

In that hour of liminal space
I get drunk off that melody,
and pretend I can't feel it caging me in with its limp death grip
I pretend I cannot see the scythe or the river
because in my thirteenth hour I do not have coins to travel with.

I stare up at the abyss and wonder,
what if I could fly to you?
could I see beyond your swirls of existentialism?
or is your sickly song truly just the flame I am destined to be drawn to?

But soon my hour of questioning comes to an
end when the clock hits midnight,
and my drunken stupor fades into a pulsing pain inside my skull.

The abyss fades away,
and the sky returns.

I can see stars, a tiny dusting of clouds
I hear the leaves of trees rustling, that siren song fading away.
I will hear it again tomorrow night
and stare into the bottomless eyes of the swirling darkness.

But for now,
I'll let the tears roll down my cheeks with a smile
and watch as the day begins again.

Birds

Erin Lewis

When I was a kid, I used to climb trees. I really liked to climb trees because I like to be up high. I was young at this time. My mom told me that I had done this since I was probably four years old. I liked to climb trees to see the moving of the branches, the leaves. You could see the specific way the leaves were designed and the way the sun shined behind them showed how different and perfect each one was. Once you got so high, you could see the clouds in the sky too. But they were also animals; you found nests sometimes, mostly birds. The animals ran away from me and they never bothered me so that wasn't much of a problem. I never thought of it as a problem. Thinking back now, I was in wild territory and never felt more safe. I really like the way the leaves look, especially in the fall. The different colors would shine brighter because of the sun and reflect how things change over time.

My mom was terrified of me being up in the tree. She wasn't a fan, but I liked being up there and I was probably way higher than I should've been. My mom tells me I climbed 50 foot high in the air in the tree. I don't know if that's necessarily true but I just kept climbing. It never felt too high for me, although I am very afraid of heights now.

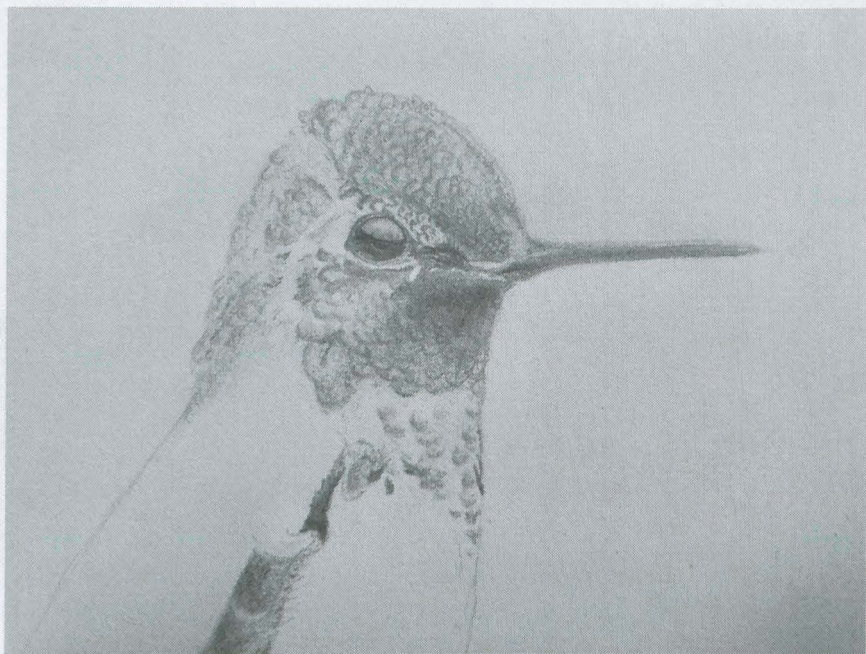
I miss the way the bark felt, rough but secure. The deep brown lines tracing the trunk, roadmaps for insects and entire ecosystems. The courage I had in myself to keep climbing higher and higher.

The peacefulness of the wind, swaying. There's something incredible about the confidence it takes to just enjoy something, but I wasn't old enough to know about that yet. Its ironic that I would enjoy the instability because it reminded me of life. I would think about the person I would become, and who that would be, all while swaying in a tree, listening to the wind and the friendly songs of birds. My winged friends etched on the branches around me. Its notable that I was never afraid, in fact I waited everyday after school to disappear up with the birds. But at some point I got too big and the world got too hard to keep climbing.

I think that young girl would be so ashamed to know how much fear and instability scares me as an adult.

Anna's Hummingbird

Harrison Booth



An Ode to Mami

Kimberly Medrano

Oh how much beauty you carry,
From your short soft curls,
To the french twists you do before heading into work.
From your light honey hazel eyes,
To the tragedies and miracles you have seen.
From your scar'd hands that has held me,
To the tears you had to wipe from your own cheek when in anguish.

To your long elegant skirt swaying
right to left,
To your feet that took you on an adventure,
From migrating to a different country.

From your harmonic voice,
To you comforting me with your hum when moments of anxiousness
came like a wave,
“*don't worry mija, I'm here with you*”.

From you waking up at 6,
To you sacrificing your:
Sleep
Time
And Self.

From me constantly being thoughtless,
To you unconditionally loving me.

This Ode is for you Mami,. Thank you for loving me and being my role model.



PART THREE

Adapting & Aging

In Translation

Carter Timmons



Later I would lament about not being able to define "what I am."



Signifiers

Dialogic

Presence

Essentialism

Binary opposition

Definition through consensus

Referential

Signified

Absence

Dissemination

Logocentrism

Until I began to learn about **DECONSTRUCTION**

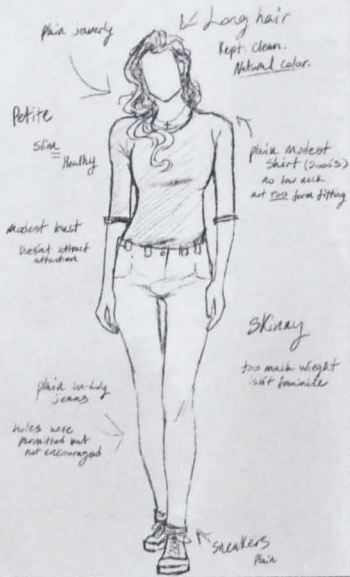


I had immediately applied this to my experience with gender. And my parents. How they defined gender. How it impacted my definition

My Mom had her own definition of femininity. And what it meant to be a woman. It was traditional and fit her values.

Requirements 4 Young Ladies

- **Modest clothing**
 - not slutty, but still feminine
 - not baggy enough to look like a boy.
 - plain, "normal" style. Don't look like a freak.
- **Long hair**
 - natural
 - untangled
- **Be Lady-like**
 - Don't swear
 - Don't cry
 - Like boys, but don't show it.
 - Wear make up, but don't, it will make you look old.
 - Style your hair but don't try too hard.
 - Don't stand out
 - Be Presentable



My first offence was at 12



This might have been my first test at a queer identity, but it wasn't questioned.

Maybe my mom allowed it because I had not grown into my nose and my jaw was still soft from childhood.



I went in and put it edgier to my mom's version of femininity. I tried to figure my own expression within these confines.



15-17



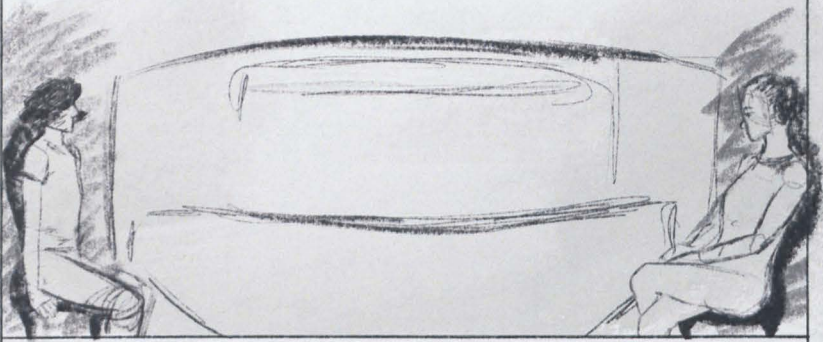
I cut my hair again at 18. I was an "adult" now, so I figured that I would not be questioned.



I was ignorant to think that my mom would not see my open offence

where my jaw used to be soft was now ridged and pimply. My nose big enough to be masculine





I look at my parent's way of thinking differently now
that I can define it with one word.

I hope you realize one day
that you're choosing SLN over family.

Where are you
in the alphabet soup?



Logocentrism

Essentialism



(He would later call me
an earth worm.)

In a lecture on Gender Studies in literary criticism my professor said something
so blatantly obvious but mind blowing. Naming something gives it power." RK
Power to the title, but mostly to the one doing the naming.

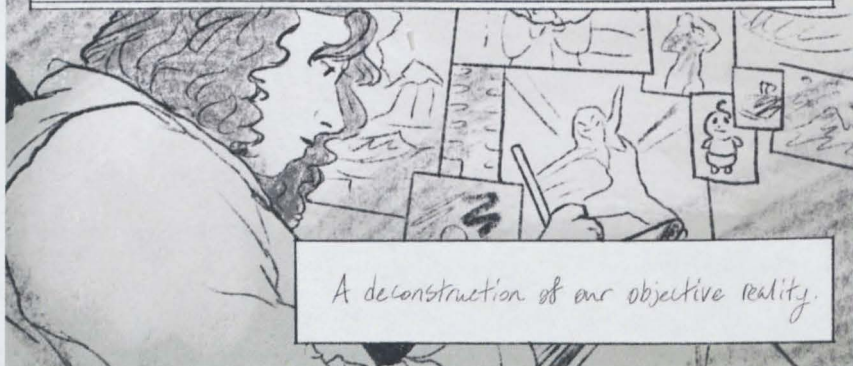
Perhaps the re-naming of myself stripped the power away from my parents. My failure to define my "gender" only fueled their pursuit for absolute certainty. But absolute certainty only collapses. I didn't fit into their set binaries of opposition.



I don't need a definition. Derrida states that when looking at binary oppositions long enough — it all simply falls apart. There's no real definition behind anything. Especially not gender.

It's all just language.

Made up concepts in order to communicate ideas.



A deconstruction of our objective reality.

Trinkets on a Shelf

3rd Prize Prose

Ra'Nya Taylor

I imagine myself to be a high schooler's well-worn friendship bracelet from her elementary school days. The tied-up strings are dulled, and edges frayed with time. It is all but disintegrated really. I imagine she stayed up late at the sleepover, swapping secrets while sharing sweets beneath the starlight. All the while, she slowly ties sloppy knots that seem to be endless. I am slipped around her wrist, hanging on tightly, knowing

I am but a testament to a lingering childhood love.

I imagine myself to be a well-loved book on a librarian's shelf. A book with a faded cover and worn off title. One with dog-eared pages that calloused thumbs have flipped through. One with countless curly scribbles in the margins and dusty pink highlights on the parts that made her swoon. I imagine myself to be a well-loved book with dried tear stains on the pages that made her overflow with emotion. One that she holds with reverence as she reads it for the tenth, twentieth, hundredth time in her life and yet it never gets old. To her, I would be timeless.

I imagine myself to be a handmade wooden swing roped tightly to an aching weeping willow tree. A beloved childhood pastime left there to mindlessly sway back and forth, keeping company to a tree that bellows in the breeze. Though the child has long since grown and left home, I am not here alone. I am embraced by nature as I continue to age though I imagine years later the child might return with a family of her own for me to be loved once again by a whole new generation. For the joy I bring could never be forgotten.

I imagine myself to be something that carries meaning. I would cosplay a trinket on a shelf if it meant that I was loved. I wish for that love to have changed me. I look at myself, my frayed edges, and faded smile. I wipe my tear-stained cheeks, I feel the aching in my heart, and I wish that I was that high school girl and not just the torn-up bracelet. I wish that I was that librarian and not just the dusty book. Or that I was that grown up child, not just the rotting swing. I wish that I could love myself.

Grief is Funny Like That

Alishia Mitchell

When you died, my skies became an unfamiliar city of gray and the oceans flooded what we were becoming
I cemented myself to my bed with hope that you'd help me
I still talk about you in the present tense
I'm sorry I keep calling a number that isn't yours, anymore

When you died, I allowed my confusion to act as dams to the floodgates
I mean, I wanted to cry
But it happened so fast, that I'm still waiting on you to tell me it was fake
I mean, I remembered your birthday
And I tried everything to wish you a happy one
But the clouds smiled at me instead
And I hope the thanks was from you

I ruined our relationship before you had the chance to change
I've kept so many memories
Searched in so many pictures
With hope I'd find the cure to this
And I know things will get better
But I hope you bring back the man I knew

When you told me you died
I went back in time
And I told you that I needed you
I told you that I can't do this on my own
I told you that I've cried out my love for you
But you said these things never change
So I write you back to life instead

I've created so many lives to make you love me
I created walls out of the grounds you've given me
I want you to know that I do love you
I'm sorry for all the losses I've given you
I hope that grief is a stranger for the rest of your days

How I Failed to Convert My Nana

Sofia Divens

As a kid, I believed in fairies. I can't say how or when it started, but I'm inclined to blame my mom. Throughout my early childhood, she entertained notions of trolls and fairies and ghosts—which she does actually believe in. For years our home was a haunted house. Even after all that time, when the house became less eerie, it wasn't because ghosts didn't exist; but rather that we drove them all out.

It was at my grandparents' house where I first encountered opposing beliefs. They lived on a massive plot of land. There was the house, and the field and then the woods—which I favored. It was right at the top of a mountain in a deeply isolated part of Pennsylvania. Their house sat on the left side of a long stretch of road, the only other house being my great-grandmother's which was less than a mile away. Farther left of their houses were the woods. Those were the tallest trees I'd ever seen. In the summertime, they billowed inward with a beckoning I could only truly appreciate as a child.

In those woods was where I believed the fairies lived. At least, that's what my mom always told me. Fairies and trolls lived in the forest—just like how mermaids and the kraken lived in the ocean.

"But Nana and Pappy's forest is special," she'd tell me.

Not only because it'd been in my dad's family for generations, but it was a piece of the earth that had been left totally and completely alone, save for the "troll house" which was only a small hunting shed.

It was the dead of summer when I tried to convince my Nana that fairies were real. I was eight and didn't know what shame was yet. My dad had brought me with him to their house that day. He was mowing her grass when I got the idea. My Nana, as she's always told me to call her, was reading when I approached her.

"You want to what?" A smile spread slowly across her face.

"We should leave some fruit out for the fairies," I told her very matter-of-factly.

If she wanted to question me she certainly did a good job of hiding it. My Nana stood up at that, setting *Tea Time With God* down on a doily on the wooden end-table.

"Alright then," she said, getting up from her recliner, "go get some blueberries out of the fridge and we'll take them outside."

Her tone was cloying and unsure. It was a sound I had yet to begin hating. I gathered all my materials, a handful of blueberries and some flowers from the front lawn, and met her out back.

How I Failed to Convert My Nana

She was standing beside the big rock that sat right where the woods and open field met. Nana smoothed out her khaki capris. I'm sure on some level I knew that the whole thing was strange for her. Her other grandchildren weren't even allowed to watch Harry Potter.

"So, should we just leave it out here?" she asked.

I didn't bother to reply, only setting down the fruit and flowers on the rock before taking her back inside. I didn't doubt that my gifts would be gone by the next time I visited. My mom always said that if you put good out into the world, good would find its way back to you. I assumed fairies felt similarly.

There was more to be fixed up around the house, so I came back only a few days later with my dad. As soon as I walked through the door, I ran up to my Nana. She seemed confused at first— she'd completely forgotten my offering. I didn't let that deter me though.

As we walked down the back porch steps though, I could already see the rock. The berries and flowers sat untouched, wilted and sour. Looking back, I wish a deer would have come up and ate the berries, to save my embarrassment at the very least.

The worst part was my grandmother. She didn't make a snarky comment— though that would have been easier. She only gave me a knowing smile. I had nothing to show for my faith.

Peonies

Zoe Flood



memories as currency

Dante Martin

i may never truly get to know you,
but i know of your existence.

i know you were given the duty to watch over me,
but only ever from afar.
that you were instructed to never lay a hand of interference,
only to watch.

i know you have witnessed every waking moment i have lived
even if i have walked parts of this life asleep

i know that you are not ignorant of the malice i have committed.
i know that you look down upon me with shame.

but i also know you equally acknowledge my benevolence,
acknowledging their coexistence.

i do not know who is above you,
who assigned you to me, or if there is a hierarchy.

i do not know the full responsibility of your duty, the laws which
you must follow,
how you may prosper from this, if you even wanted to be witness to
my story to begin with.

regardless,

i hope that your duties are fulfilled.
that you, yourself,
are satisfied with the work you have done and will continue to do.

i hope that you feel joy,
not obligation for what you do.

i will never ask you to interfere,
to save me,
to teach me right from wrong,
to guide me.

though i do wish to ask you enlighten me on something.

please tell me, whoever you may be,
are the memories i inherit
from the decisions i abide by,
worth the sacrifice my future will pay?

have the memories i already cherish due to my nature
to stand by my decisions
caused my future to suffer?

is this something you can answer?
or is silence the answer you choose to give?

A Fist Full of Tears

2nd Prize Prose

Elana Petrone

I can count the number of times I've seen my mom cry on one hand. Each moment so distinct and rare that it became permanently stamped into my mind. It always baffles me that a woman who cries so little produced a daughter who cries so much. I think I get it from my dad, he cried watching *Inside Out*.

I've always identified as a sympathetic crier. When I wrote my college application essay, I wrote about how much I cried over quarantine. Yes, I had kept a record of each time and the reasoning. The opening scene from *Up*, the music video for "Symphony," whenever a character in a movie or TV show cries, if I just need to cry, the list goes on.

My mom, however, has always been stingy with her tears.

The first time I remember seeing her cry, I was either four or five. Too young to be attending school yet, I'd spend my days at home with my mom. The entire day is a fuzzy memory until I think back to her bedroom. At the time it was probably still white, but my mind has replaced it with the robin's egg blue color that has been its hue for years now. Natural light poured in through the windows, but despite the glow, I felt a sense of dread.

My mom thought that I had lost her wedding ring. Even though I frantically exclaimed that I hadn't, she didn't believe me.

As a child, I was mischievous. My nickname was "bully baby" because I was known to be bossy to my older sister, so the accusation of me misplacing her ring was not far fetched. Despite being the most likely suspect, this time I was being honest.

Although she stands short at 4'9", her fury made her appear ten feet tall and I could feel myself shrink. She instructed me to help with her search for the ring, and out of fear of being disowned, I obeyed without hesitation. As we searched, I began to gaslight my already anxious mind into believing that maybe I had actually lost the ring.

We examined every inch of the room for what felt like hours before she finally checked behind her bed. There it lay in all its gold and diamond glory. Suddenly, she melted and the frustration and rage were gone and all that was left was remorse over her false accusation. She scooped me up and carried me into her bed. Apology after apology flowed from her mouth like a meandering river and her tears followed suit. Seeing her cry came as a shock, and I easily accepted her apology. It was the first time I

remember ever seeing her cry, and it was years before I would witness it again.

The next time my mom publicly shed tears, I was nine. As a child, death feels like a figment of your imagination. A faraway concept that is all just make-believe to scare us. I thought no different until I attended my first funeral.

"So you just dig a hole and chuck 'em in, right?"

I thought myself a 9-year old comedian, and I had expected my comment to be met with at least a smile, but instead my mom looked like she was about to fall over. This was the first time I had actually known someone who had died despite not having any sort of personal relationship with them. After gently explaining to me that no, you actually are lowered in nicely if you choose to be buried in a graveyard, we left for the church.

As we pulled into the parking lot, I noticed the solemn faces and sea of black cloth swarming for the doors. I could tell this was definitely no place for jokes. My mom led me and my older sister, Gabby, in through the familiar doors of our Catholic Church, St. Ann's, and politely greeted the other grieving parishioners. We made our way to one of the hard, wooden pews near the back of the church and took our seats. The woman who had passed away had been in charge of leading the mothers' bible study group that my mom was a part of. I had only seen her a few times, but it was clear she had touched a number of people during her life based on the presence of many people and few empty seats.

As if my own memory was stolen from me, the next thing I remember was my mom, my sister, and I getting up for Communion. I glanced over at my mom while we made our way to the line, and I saw tears glistening in her eyes. I continued watching out of my peripheral and caught her pulling out a tissue to dab at her eyes and make a quick pass at her nose. I didn't like seeing my mom cry. She always had such a strong exterior when it came to sadness, quick to resort to anger first, so catching her with her walls down left me feeling uncomfortably exposed. Before I knew what was happening I felt the hot, salty tears flowing down my face. I guess my sister was feeling the same way because I caught her silently crying too as we trudged towards the front of the Communion line.

After the service, my mom asked us how we were feeling and what had made us cry. We both agreed funerals were sad and that seeing her upset had caused us to cry. I'm not sure how she responded. At the time, I was content with the lack of reply, but I wonder if she had seen this as a failure. My mom grew up in a household where showing emotions

besides anger was almost unheard of, so this must have been a very vulnerable moment for her.

I wish I could tell her that I understand now.

We entered the funeral processional to go to the graveyard where I spent the entire time reflecting on the service and how the shared feeling of loss and sadness could be so isolating yet comforting in a strange way. It was a confusing day that my memory and time have only further clouded.

As I entered my teen years, the thought of my mom crying seemed like a distant relative that hadn't visited in years. It had been so long that I sometimes wondered if she still had the ability to cry. Unfortunately, I got my answer when I was fourteen or fifteen, and I witnessed what I recall being my parents' worst fight. It was a Saturday, peaceful and lazy like the ocean waves rolling in gently. But like a sudden crash of waves, the argument seemed to have boiled over out of nowhere. I knew my parents sometimes argued—that was normal with all couples—but this one made my heart seize up in my chest.

My little sister, Izzy, and I were playing on the floor in the dining room and I felt her back go rigid. Unsure of how to leave without causing some sort of miniature chaos in the process, we both froze and just listened to the argument that was cooking in the kitchen. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary at first, slightly raised voices with rapid back and forth exchanges.

Then something shifted.

My mom's voice grew more strained and higher pitched, and then I heard the crack in her voice as a sob caught. The content of the fight never stuck in my mind, but the tension of it being enough to make my mom cry always has. Izzy started to shift uncomfortably, so I cradled her tiny body to keep her calm. Before I knew what was happening, my mom was down the hall, shutting tight the door to their room, and my dad was out the front door.

Izzy started to cry and if I hadn't been playing the role of protective big sister, I would have too. I gently held her hand and asked her if she wanted to go outside and get her nails painted. She nodded and I plucked my favorite grape color from my collection and took her outside with me. My dad wasn't gone for long, he'd just gone for a drive to cool off, but Izzy and I stayed outside even after he went in. I was too afraid to hear my mom cry again.

I don't remember how old I was the next time I saw her cry, but it was the first time one of my sisters had made her cry with our words. I grew up in a house of three girls as the middle child. Izzy was the sassy one.

Gabby was stubborn. I was the peacekeeper. Whenever my mom would butt heads with my sisters, my dad or I would step in and become the mediator. By the time Izzy was seven or eight, she had already developed a strong sense of self and with that came a tendency to pick fights with my mom.

We all sat in the living room, ready to watch a TV show and enjoy dinner as a family. Out of nowhere, Izzy made a comment about my mom. Like in my other memories, I don't know what it was, but it was bad.

She and my mom started to get into an argument and my dad tried to calm my mom down. Unfortunately, he picked the wrong tactic of sounding like he was on Izzy's side. Frustrated, my mom went back into the kitchen where she was within sound but not sight of the living room. My dad had realized his mistake and was trying to calm her from the living room which was unsuccessful. I could tell Izzy was starting to feel bad, and despite wanting to step in to help, I couldn't do anything except watch it unfold.

My dad got up and went into the kitchen where I could hear the heart-wrenching sound of my mom struggling to talk through tears. She refused my dad's hugs at first, and tried to insist she was fine, but then we heard her give in and her speech became muffled against his shirt.

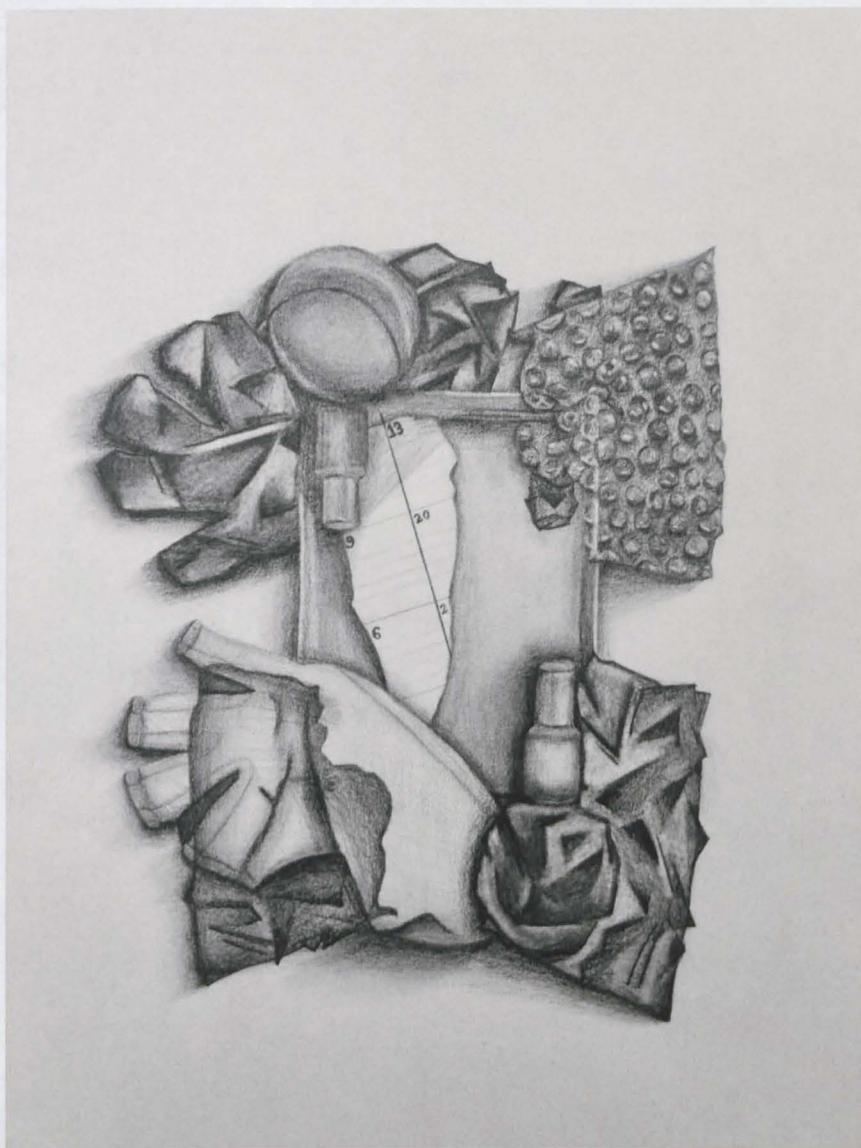
I tiptoed into the kitchen and heard her say how Izzy always makes her feel like she is a bad mother and doesn't do enough. At this point my sympathetic crier side broke through and I melted into the hug as well, reassuring my mom that she was a great mother. Izzy and Gabby slowly made their way into the kitchen as well and soon everyone was hugging and crying. The tension remained throughout the night, but after that she and Izzy went together like peanut butter and jelly.

Growing up I never thought of crying as a weakness because I saw my dad cry all the time. Even though my mom's tears were always few and far between, she never ridiculed my dad for crying or expressing his emotions differently than her. They balance each other out well and wherever the other lacks, one makes up for it. Over the years, my mom has gotten more in touch with her emotions, and she always tells me that I made her soft.

The other day, my older sister left for South Korea, and my mother called me crying. I wonder if she knows the generational trauma she's already begun to erase through opening herself up. It's more than her parents ever did. I wonder if she knows that her tears are like diamonds to us? Rare. Valuable. Strong.

When Life Gives You...

Kaitlyn Barker



An Ode to My Childhood Friends

Alishia Mitchell

Are we lost if we can't find each other?
I don't want our worlds to be so far apart
I don't want us to live separate lives
I want us to love who we've become

When I allow my absence to serve as an explanation, I know that I
am my father's daughter
They say the body keeps score
But I'm starting to forget the feeling of being held
My dad supported me with his love
But I've grown too big to be helped
I'm sorry that I grew faster than expected

I've traveled worlds that I can't talk about
I mean, I don't know if you remember me
I've created characters out of the days we'll never get again
I can't remember who we used to be

I know we spent our lives waiting for this moment
I've spent my life hoping I'd grow
But I'm still the same size
And I still look the same
But I don't think you'll recognize me anymore

I don't think we've met the real versions of ourselves
I mean, when my mom asks about you
I create lives out of the lies I've told myself

I want you to be happy
I want you to accomplish all that you want
I want you to find yourself
I don't know if you'll remember to tell me

I don't know if we ever accomplished our dreams
I don't want to be a teacher anymore
I don't know how long I've known that
I don't know who we are anymore

An Ode to My Childhood Friends

I'm glad that I see you on Instagram
I'm glad you look so happy in your pictures
I'm sorry that I'm not your best friend anymore
I've tattooed our nicknames on my back
I don't remember what we used to call each other

I don't want to leave you
We're both in denial
We're not in awkward stages anymore
Does growing up mean growing apart?
I'm sorry I moved so far away
I'll never forget the days we used to have

Cliche

Eli C.

Dear The light of my life,

The way I love you is really cringe. But from the moment your orbs met mine, I felt my soul light on fire. And upon our first meeting, when you gave me that brighter than city lights smile, I felt my whole world suddenly fill with colors I didn't realize I could see. Please allow me to lift the burden off your shoulders that hold the weight of the cosmos in your bravery. Allow me to help ease your troubled mind as you are forced to step up and make these big decisions. I know you miss the days we would ride off on your motorcycle and pretend there was no one else in the galaxy as much as I do. "But you are the next in line for the throne so you must step up." Who needs that when we have soulmates? So run away with me, off into the sunset where our families can't find us ever again. We'll rely on your bad attitude to get us through the hard parts and I promise I will be so tough so I can help you fight off everyone who gets in our way. If you accept my proposal, meet me at midnight. You know where to find me. And if you wish to keep things as they are, know that I will always be here when you need to unleash that pent up aggression. I can take it. I must admit I've dreamt of much more than your touch every night since we've parted last. I've dreamt of the way you'd rip my clothes and

*With all my dreaded love,
Yours.*

P.S. Come home to me, my monster.

"So your ex wrote this?"

"We should frame it."

Something Wrong

Jenn Madison

Sarah was picky. She was never sure if she'd found "the one". There was always something wrong about every guy she dated that threw her off. One would always interrupt her. One's voice was too squeaky. One constantly complained about the smell coming from her basement. One looked at her weird that one time on their third date. There was always something. But she learned from them. Kept a nice neat catalog of exes, all lined up in a nice neat row. Her basement of mistakes. And when she was done with one, she would come back upstairs and find another.

I'm Just a Teenager

Alli Nocera

I'm just a teenager
I should be pouring liquor into my liver
Skipping classes because I'm hungover
Running around the streets and
Getting immune to the lack of sleep.
Instead, I'm sitting in fluorescent light
Begging my doctor to turn back time.

My body no longer works the same
With aching joints that are forever changed.
I'm hearing the words drill into my head But
it all feels like muffled words said,
Like your body needs medication
From the fear of failing organs and inflammation,
When flares produce weeks of complications
Confusion, fatigue, and irritation.

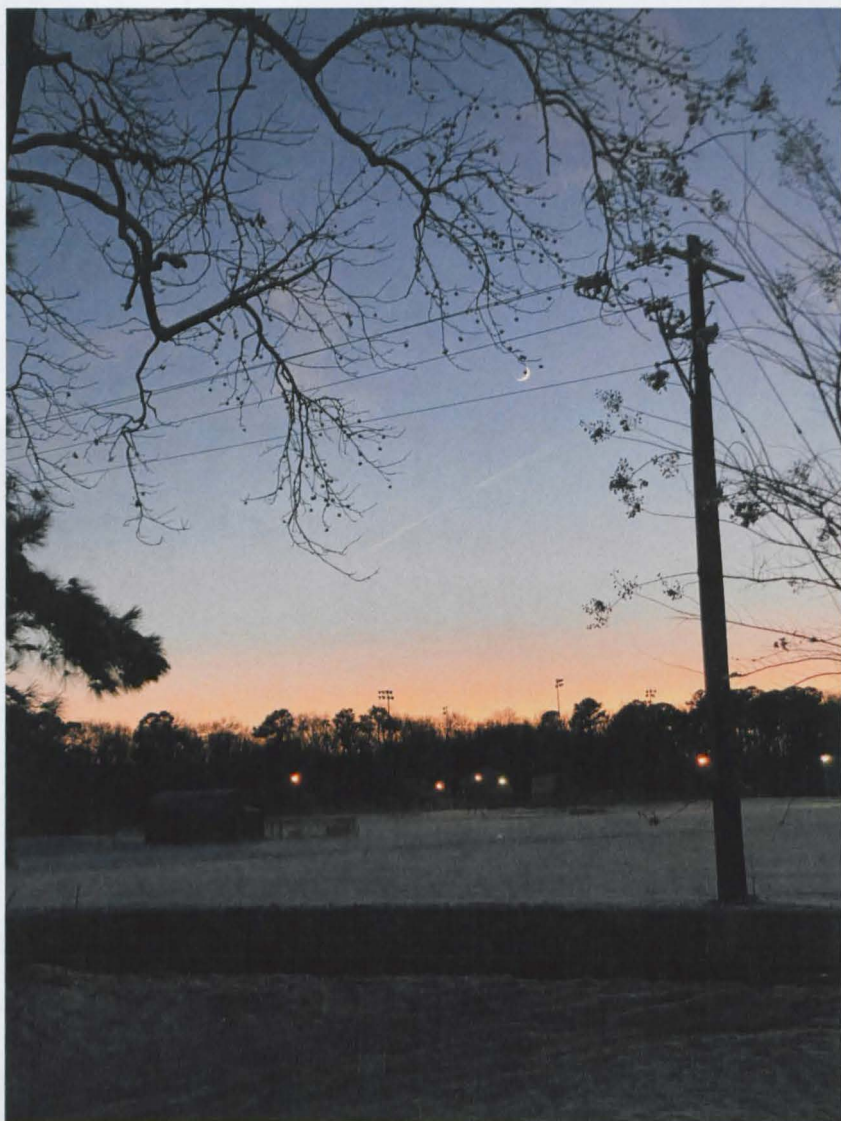
The list goes on as I feel foreign in my own skin
With my body attacking itself from within. I
didn't ask for this immune system
As I become the victim
But I am numb with the intrusion.

This soul sucking disease crept its way in And the life
that was once mine feels forgotten. Now my time is
filled with the strong smell as alcohol cleans my skin
waiting for my vein to swell. Going and getting my
blood drawn quarterly, I plead and pray to be the girl
I was formerly. It's hard to think of a time where I
was once free from this draining depleting disease.

I'm just a teenager.
My teen-lived days are long gone
And the girl that I once was won't live on.
Hopefully one day she will grow into this disease
And not feel like a foreigner that's never free.

pyle center rd

Erin Lewis



Stars

Elaine Griffith

My stars,
carefully carried here,
strung up and strung out.
They died here.
I have parking lot street lamps.
A kid died here.

A Letter to the Lost Boy

Robin Odom

When you don't want to be a little girl,
Climb to the top of your tower.
If they tell you to wait, just run
You can be your own prince.

You don't need the dust to fly,
Though it does help.
The lost boys will follow you
If you scare them with spiders.

The world is full of pirates.
Stab them if you need
But show them mercy if you want.

If your parents don't believe in fairies
Don't worry.
If you believe, you aren't alone

Don't be afraid to crow,
You should not be afraid of your pride

To die is an awfully big adventure,
But so is to live.

And remember:
Wendy isn't the only one who grew up.
If you find yourself evolving,
You can always be Robin Hood.

The Art of Spite and Wordvomit

Carter Timmons

July 10, 2023

I always wonder if I made the right choice.

Did I go out on my own terms? Did I do it “right?” Did I think it through?

My sisters did it right. Got engaged and married. Got a job. Got to live her dream in Florida working for The Mouse. They all prepared. My parents supported them with advice and gifts and scheduled videocalls.

They got going-away-parties and tightly, gracefully, steadily packed boxes.

Mine were left on the sidewalk.

Perhaps it’s easy to paint such a biased image. To throw the biggest and whiniest pity party. Tearful. Drunk. And snot dripping on the floor.

My sisters left for reasons that would benefit them in the future. They left on opportunity. Manifest destiny. With good intentions and the promise to call *every* Sunday.

My parents never call. Nothing is questioned but my well-being.

“Have you been good?”

A phrase from my father. I only ever hear it from Dad.

When I was younger it meant something different. It asked if I was well-behaved. If I acted right. If I was polite. If I caused any trouble.

I suppose that kindergarten question’s inherent meaning remained the same, but it grew up and mutated such as I did. It has become: Are you still working? Have you been responsible? Have you been smoking? Drinking? Are you causing that family trouble while living in their basement? Have you paid your bills? Are you still with that guy? Is he treating you well? Not too well. Are you having sex? Are you still a productive member of society? Are you still gay? Or whatever you think you are? Has this phase ended? Have you been well-behaved?

My parents only cared about behavior. About how things appeared. They wanted so badly to market a false picturesque depiction of the ideal blended family to their own parents—and to themselves. It never sold. Not to my grandparents. Not to me or my sisters. And deep down. Not to them either. Then who was it all for?

My behavior was my downfall. I wish I had gotten better at burying who I am. Being well-behaved was also secretly about being what they wanted. A good straight Christian girl with long blonde hair wearing sundresses and Sketchers.

I wish I had been able to deny myself the privilege of being myself. What should I have expected? My parents never took that pleasure either.

I constantly fight with myself. I'm so split apart. There is this scared little kid fighting to keep everything they were ever *allowed* to know. They want the car rides, backyard days, joke-filled dinners, and even the squabbling. Most of all, they miss the way they would run up to their Dad when he got home from work. They miss that smell of his crusty, El Paso-dusted uniform. And the way he would squeeze them like he *never* wanted to let go.

My Dad stopped hugging me like that when I stopped getting off planes. I stopped when he'd come through the door and I realized no one else followed me.

Was this the right choice?

It was the only one.

I would have died. Suffocating from swallowing so much of myself.

And that is what my sisters did not receive from my parents as a parting gift.

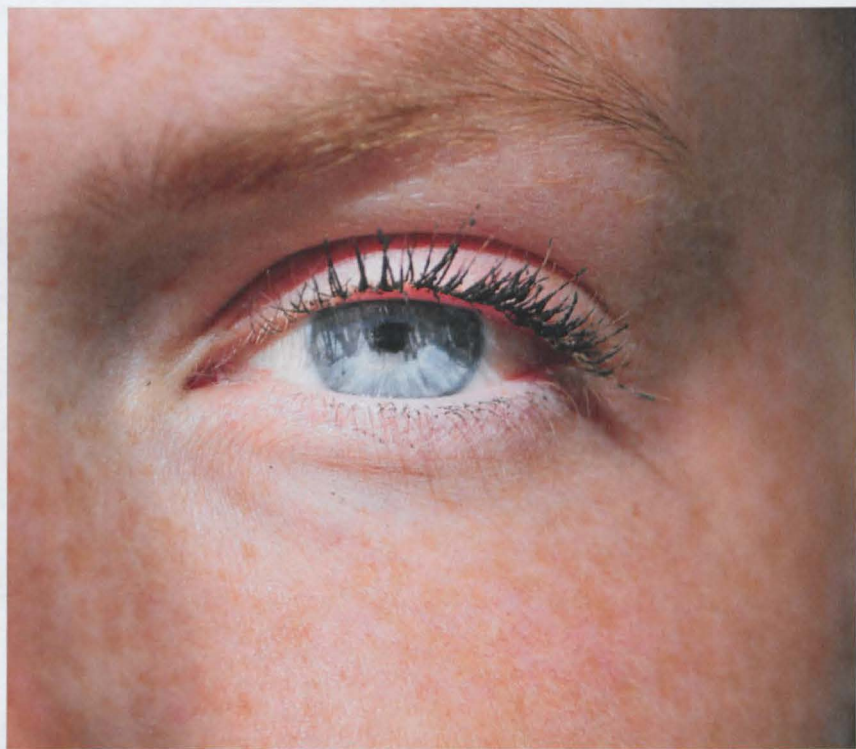
Maturity

Zach Brown

Oh, how I resent the laughing of
a child from the bottom of
the hourglass where
upwards I
gaze,
for
I so envy
the boy who
knows not the weight
of the sand yet to crush him.

Gateway

Jayden Rodwell



The Shark Tooth Necklace

Brooke Wier

Something that was once so beautiful,
a delicate reminder of a love once shared.
A shark tooth necklace that once meant comfort, and strength now
hung around his neck as strangulation marks lay underneath.

I remember that necklace on dates to the movies,
late nights dancing in the kitchen, and rainy days on the couch; the
necklace was always there.

Now it's digging in like the pain of the handprint on my face,
Burning marks on his neck, it keeps twisting, choking, aiming to
claim his last breath. He wanted to end it all.

Although he lived, that part of him
that I once loved, died that day.
All that remains is the twisted shark tooth necklace

Monster

Madison McKenzie

A monster's diet consists of an ample serving of evil. Therefore, we are monsters, as there are no beings that gorge so generously on evil than humans.

A monster's diet is what we force-feed the little sheep. Sever their mouths, dislocate their jaws if you have to, and let them taste it. Don't concern yourselves, the aftertaste is terribly titillating. An abhorrent aphrodisiac climaxing hard, subtly seizing and searing away the sheep in you.

A monster preys on the sheep with no compassion, care, or conscious. Rejecting the Gentleness, the Godliness, the Goodness.

A monster preys on your virginity. Your essence. Your virtue. They scold your self-restraint and they long to murder your morals. As to resist the monster and its evil, one must stay celibate rather than put the condom on.

So, this elaborate creature you have in your mind. With distinctive skin, gender, religion and politics. Forget it.

Because we are all the same. We're human. And we're all dining from the same table.

The Shark Tooth Necklace

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One Summer Night in Your Room

Zach Brown

I won't forget how ruthless August had been
the night I first heard you perform.
There, with bodies bound in sweat
and nakedness veiled in darkness,
did the light of far-off lampposts
perfectly pierce the shattered blinds
and cast long even lines over us
and us alone.

The cicada symphony played without rest
as your head stilled beneath my chin.
A cricket serenade swelled from the sill
as I trimmed your locks with kisses—
as I singed your brow with promises
and all the world watched and envied
a pair so naturally adorned
and universally ordained.

How I savored every burning exhale
that struck my chest and condensed my soul
while your sunken eyes grew ever heavier
and the sheep gently bleated you home,
but not until you fell perfectly silent
did your orchestra take the stage,
and your breathing find its cadence,
and the triads take their shape.

Oh, if you could have only heard!
You, who arranged the cacophony of night—
my Mahler, my Mitropoulos, my maestra
who so seamlessly set the music of life
to the tempo of your breathing—
who interpreted so beautifully that score,
too ceaseless to be applauded
and too esteemed to be forgotten.

One Summer Night in Your Room

But you never knew what a fool I was—
how I laid there awake all the night,
long after the baroque balconies cleared
and the dark claret curtains fell,
counting breaths over silence
like cattle over the moon
because I loved you far more
than you loved me.

Another Crusty Letter

Eliezer Mercedes

"You still love me?"

Lately, I have been consuming more sugar
As result of tangling our tongues
And rasping your rose-tasting lips;
Bitter, and worse than smoking a cigar.

The handwritten letters I have sent you;
Ink-bleeding sheets of paper
With words that thirst meaning.
Those are the response to your question.

Being silent is not the way to coalesce,
If the words you have swallowed were seeds,
In your stomach you would have a fully-grown tree, Maybe
that is why I have decided to care less.

Chasing Joy

Elio Romero Cruz

*I want to honor a man who wants to hold a wild thing, Only
for a second, long enough to admire it fully. -Ada Limon*

My partner spins and twirls and dances
From across the room.

They've made space in the church to
Have swing dancing lessons.

Every time I rotate back to him from the
Circle of dancers, he tells me he's tired.

I tell them I am too, but we keep going anyway,
Too elated to pace ourselves.

They haven't gone swing dancing in almost 4 years, And
they are bursting from all that energy kept inside.

I twirl and spin and dance with them,
His movements so jolting.

That I'm tugged into their gleeful embrace
Still, this image of them: confident,

Exhilarated, so within their element he's lost in it.
Nothing could stand in the way of their joyous
wake.

Once we were in the bed and breakfast his mom was
staying in And my partner strikes up conversation

With a woman we've never met, on the importance of
supporting someone who's coming out.

They mentioned something I'll never forget,
The warm, comforting advice he gave to this stranger:

"Coming out for me was less about running away from
sadness, And more about chasing joy."

I think about all the chasing we do,
I'd chase that smile, that laugh, until the end of my days.
They say we are asleep until we fall in love, I'll never stop
waking up because of
him.

My Ears Are Not For Everyone

Madison McKenzie

My body, my choice. My choice, my body.
Oddly, bodily autonomy is a lie.
Your parts are always being loaned to somebody.

See,
my ears are constantly filled with other people's garbage.
That's the reality.

My ears are the cesspool of the outside.
I go to school where my thoughts get overruled.
Where my colleague's profanities get to carpool.

And when I turn on the news. I wonder who chooses these interviews.
Where all I hear is Good is deceased.
And all around, Bad and Ugly point North, South, West, and East.

But if I put it in their script that their words are akin to spit,
being shoveled in the pit of my ears
that transmit to my mind and fills it with more sh –

Whoops.
Can't say that bit.
Better recommit.

Cherry Chapstick

Ra'Nya Taylor

"Cherry."

She told me her favorite chapstick flavor was cherry? Huh, go figure.

The club is most definitely not a place to go to find a lover. I found that out the hard way a long time ago. Still, for some reason, that never stopped me from trying (thank God).

"That so?" I asked, eyebrow quirked. I watched her as she readjusted each ring on each of her fingers, some sort of nervous habit, I'm sure. At the time, I just thought it was cute. She looked up at me through a curtain of bangs, curls framing her face as though she were a stranger stepping out from the fog. Immediately, I was enraptured.

She nodded; it was so slight I nearly missed it. "Why would I lie?" she asked in return, full lips pulling in a nervous yet somehow still sly sort of grin.

"Well," I began, finger tracing around the rim of my glass. "Isn't that just so... obvious?" Women tasting like cherry wasn't exactly a hidden stereotype and judging by the way her head fell back in a hearty laugh, I'd say she knew exactly what I was referencing.

Her head then tilted to the side, examining me in a way that made me squirm. For a moment, I became self-conscious of the baggy cargo pants and cropped band tee I was wearing but I cared more about the shift in energy; it was palpable. "Well," she began, I held my breath in anticipation. "Nothing wrong with obvious. It got me you, didn't it?"

I breathed out. It sounded nervous to my own ears. "I don't..."

Not unfortunately, I didn't get to finish. She stood and left a bill on the bar counter. Before walking away, she shot me a wink over her shoulder. Then, she was lost in the crowd.

I got the feeling she wanted me to follow her, a bold implication on her end and yet a stupid decision on my part to even indulge. Sometimes, (at least I figured out that night and not a single time before it) stupid decisions bring you the best fortune. I mirrored her behavior, paying my tab before trailing behind in the direction that I saw her go.

I felt like I was in a dream, chasing something that I wasn't quite sure was real, but I just wanted to prove to myself that she was. She was a figure that I could see but not touch. An object of my wants and desires but not a tangible manifestation. A ghost even.

I found her outside, arms crossed behind her back as she stared directly up at the night sky. Curiously, I looked up too only to see nothing. The night was a blackened abyss, not a star in sight let alone the

moon. I wondered why she would stare so intensely at something that wasn't even there. In a moment, I would learn that unseen things don't simply cease to exist.

"I didn't imagine you'd follow someone who ran from you," she said, but I could hear the humor and sarcasm in her tone.

I looked back down to my feet, beat up Docs gazing back up at me and box dyed locs hiding my expression. "Well... I didn't imagine you'd run from me. And here I thought we were getting along."

That pulled another laugh from her, not as hearty but just as captivating. There was something about her that just made me feel like there wasn't much else in the world to see. Like this right here *could* be it. I knew it was too soon to feel that way and yet I so deeply wanted it to be true.

"Touche." She turned to look at me finally, I felt blessed by it. Almost as if God were real and she was standing right in front of me, merely pretending to be human. That felt so close to reality. "Let me make it up to you then."

There must have been something in the air, maybe I had a little too much to drink, anything to cause me to make such unserious decisions twice in a row. I followed a woman out of a club into the middle of a street lit up only by the neon signs of nearby bars. The feel of the music was still pounding in my ears (it could have been my heartbeat). I didn't think twice about her suggestion. I simply blinked once, asking: "How?"

That caused her to giggle, another expression of humor that I catalogued as she seemed to just be joy bottled up and personified because of the way she expressed it so carelessly. Almost as if she had too much of it. She made me wish I had more of it. "I could tell you." She offered a hand to me (the pounding in my ears was definitely my heart now). "Or I could show you."

In that moment, I realized that the stars were never gone, they had just been hiding in her gaze. She may not have been a ghost or a god but the second I had put my sweaty palm in hers, I knew that there was no earthly explanation for what we could be. In an instant, I thought that, perhaps if we tried hard enough, we could discover the most profound and divine secrets of the universe, but more importantly, I just felt warm.

Black Girl Love

Alishia Mitchell

I tell you I love you
And you tell me my body has grown too wide
My nose is too spread
And I'm not who you wanted me to be

I tell you I love you
And you tell me my skin is too deep
That the caramel that envelopes my body isn't brown enough for you
You say my culture is too much
I ask if you want to meet me
And you say you already know my type

I tell you I love you
And you say my brain creates a greater distance between us
And when I tell you that I'd run toward you
You say it shouldn't be this hard to love someone

I tell you I love you
And you ask what you're supposed to feel

I tell you I've created a to-do list out of the things that make you happy
I tell you I've spoken your name so much that I've forgotten mine
I tell you that your love is a sign that there is good in the world
I tell you that I'd give you back your rib if it meant you'd feel whole, again

I tell you I love you
I ask if you feel the same
You tell me you'd give me infinity if I feared death
You say you asked the universe for infinite time with me
You say you'd draw our silhouettes in the caves so we'd be remembered for eternity

I ask if you like black girls
And your eyes turn the words into coal
I'm sorry for burning our world so many times
You tell me you love me
You don't see why I asked you

I tell you I love you

Yearn

Eli C.

What does it feel like
The flame someone strikes
When they yearn for you
Is it warm like an oven?
Does it burn like wax?
Do you only notice it when
It's below freezing?
Will it cradle you like a blanket,
Lifeless but a thin shield?
Is it worn like a backpack,
Heavy, achy, but constant?
Or is it more like a heated blade,
A fleeting warmth that feels
steaming before you recognize
The wound it's already caterized,
Preparing to strike again?
What does it feel like to be
So wanted,
To the point it's obviously
Going to leave a mark.

Trillium in Evening Sun

Harrison Booth



Little Miss Sunshine

Nico Davis

There you stand, in front of the tv.
Through sea glass eyes and a round freckled face.
The world around you has disappeared as they announce the new
"Miss America!"
You stop, pause, rewind
because you just want to know how she created that spark

A spark you already possess
Lighting up the world around you
Yet you sit there still, practicing her face,
unsure and melancholy
Clutching your stomach

Winners and Losers they say,
not guided by hearts but by triumphant and victory.
But what in the world are you supposed to do,
When the world does not seem made for you?

To win, to excel, to fight for something
Only for it blow up like a scream after 9 months of silence
Or to never see the light again after a blissful guilt
To fail to see the light, only to remain unhappy
To know it won't go anywhere, because you're just too different
To all need a little miss sunshine.

To laugh.
To smile.
To breathe.

The Sides of Her

Brooke Wier

On the surface, she's kind,
outgoing, and charismatic.
She has many hobbies:
the musician, the artist,
the writer, the seamstress.

On a social level, she's talkative,
she'll stop you on the street
just to ask where you got that shirt,
and end up leaving knowing
your whole life story.

On a family level, she's protective.
She'll do anything for the
younger sister she had to raise.
Often falling on the sword set by her
parents, to watch her sister prosper.

On the deepest level, she's fragile.
She'll pour everyone else a glass;
before ever filling her own.
She's afraid she cares too deeply
for the ones that don't.
That this world won't be enough,
to ever see her the way she sees others.

And on a psychological level,
when asked, "who are you?"
She'll be able to write endlessly
about her love for others,
but fall short at coming up
with a single thing she loves about herself.

Little Girl

Caroline Willis

Who are you, little girl?
with your hair braided so beautifully
a halo sitting atop your head

Who are you?

Where are you going, little girl?
in that fancy puffy dress
shiny shoes gleaming through the black and white photograph

Where are you going?

Where are your parents taking you, little girl?
are they taking you away from home,
from the city of Ternopil

to the camps in Germany
until,
finally
New York City?

Where are your parents taking you?

Did they take you and your brothers
just for one to have his first breath of freedom air
sucked away at sixteen?

Did you grow into a strong woman,
an executive administrative assistant
Eastman & Eastman
first-name basis with Paul McCartney?

Yes

Did you take my mother into your home,
a roof above her head
up in the tower of your castle house?

Yes

Do you bring your family together every Christmas Eve,
with every bowl of deep pink borscht
vats of smetana
and soft but dangerous holopchi?

Yes

Do you get to watch me grow,
praising my success
pulling me close
whispering "my little girl" into my ear?

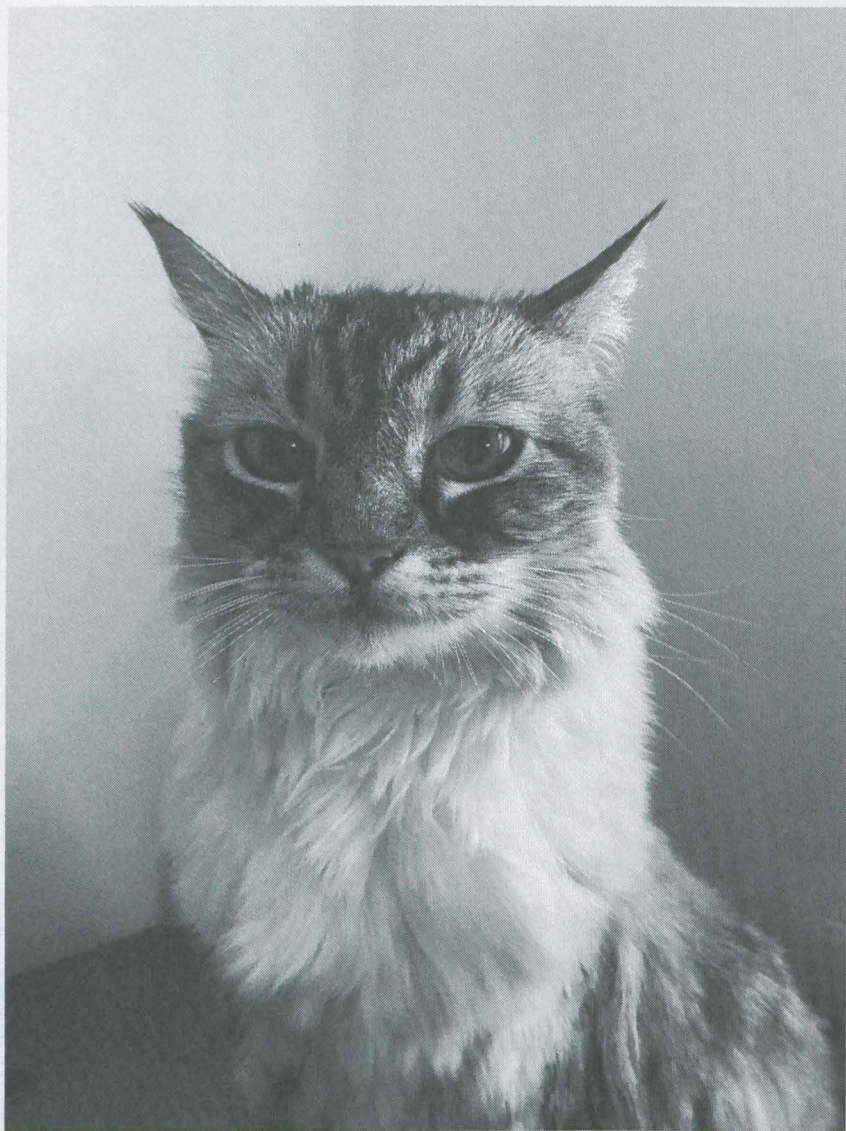
Yes

Little girl,
my Teta,
my Marijka

Bubs

3rd Place Visual Art

Monte Prinz



People Who Raised Us as Adults

Erin Lewis

3 hour bi weekly drive turns to a 40 minute daily commute

Our safe space turns into some halfwitted students' new apartment

Laughing about being so broke turns to investing in properties

Green tea shots turns to glasses of champagne

Throwing our keys on the kitchen table turns into throwing our caps at graduation

Daily venting to each other turns into "I miss you" text messages

Let's go to turns into remember when

The water tower doesn't mean home anymore.

Bottom of a Bottle

Ra'Nya Taylor

One night, I found love at the bottom of a bottle
I saw everything that I knew I could never have and ran
towards it

Full throttle.

I was drowning in the illusion of intoxication
Where the truth was the same as my
imagination
It's easy to get lost when you're in that position
Skin against skin and I kept on wishing
I cursed and I prayed lost in all 50 shades

That night, I thought I found love at the bottom of a bottle
Knowing damned well that wasn't the case
But everything I always wanted was right in front of my face
Part of me must love the pain, hoping everything would
change
Yet we remained the same

Cause I didn't find love at the bottom of a
bottle
Just the regret of the morning after
and some leftover champagne

A Study in Silver

Elana Petrone

In elementary school you recognized my shade on coins
nickel

dime

quarter

In chemistry class you were taught that I am
soft

dense

reflective

In life you idolized me
gracefully aging

a sign of hope

an effortless exchange

Not just going gray but sprouting silver locks
Not just a dark cloud but a silver lining
Not just given but on a silver platter

You fear my ugly, muted cousin
Drab, sickly, aging—
Gray is not a color of beauty
Wrinkles are a sign of old age
The only lines I produce are silver

hopeful

I am beautiful.
I know I must be
everyone stares

I can do no wrong.
I only tarnish at your hands
left without care

A Study in Silver

I glint in the glorious glow of the sun
Sashay on the iridescent scales of fish
Wink at jealous onlookers wishing for a ring.

I am beautiful.

I am envied.

Just how I like it.

Harvey Stone

Kaitlyn Barker



Your GPA Won't Matter

Carter Timmons

So about graduation

Three months left.

You can do it you've made it this far

It's just a discussion board.

Just a notice. Don't drown in debt.

Two months left.

If it were the other way around me and mom wouldn't be there

You've got it taken care of. She will hear what she wants to hear.

One month left.

If they say your name your parents will think I encouraged it It would just be awkward for me, your dad probably wouldn't like me after either

Half a month left.

It's either having a good day where we're all together, we treat you to dinner, we have fun Or they say the other thing and we just won't be there

Three weeks left.

I want to be there and show you how proud I am Thank you

It's about being an adult, Dad.

I appreciate you doing that

Two weeks left.

Your generation is going to save the world

But you got evicted and can't afford groceries or a studio.

One week left.

Find an outfit—not gay, not feminine, not masculine, not uncomfortable, but not slobbish. Something Just Right.

If you choose yourself you will lose your mom.

If you lose your mom you lose your sisters. You lose everything.

Lose a part of you.

But it's already lost.

Five days left.

It's just some school. Just some years passed. Just some friends you'll never see again. Just some ceremony. Who. Cares.

But you do. And so does she. You both care too much.

Two days left.

One hundred applications and no interviews. One rejection letter.

One day left.

I can't wait to see you graduate

Even if it's not you who walks Just some other name with your face

You'll learn that it's okay.

Say goodbye.

Adapt.

It's just graduation.

the sweetest thing

Ra'Nya Taylor

i think i would lie naked in the grass,
letting the dirt cover my indecency,
if it means my rotting corpse will
perhaps provide comfort to the earth.
something my breathing body could never do.

maybe,
if i should be so hopeful,
what is left of me will grow a tree and
(if the universe wills it)
my tree could provide you shade.

if not that then
at the very least
my tree could gift you the

freshest
breath of air you ever inhaled.

and i will feel closer to you.
as though being cradled in the arms
of a lover.
a feeling foreign to me.
i could be in your skin

as i always craved
because mine was never enough.
i would finally have purpose.
something i always searched for,
but never found.

not to be presumptuous,
but for once
i might feel appreciated.

the sweetest thing

grass, beautifully mundane,
would grow around me.
the smell of my rotting corpse is putrid,
but decomposing was never meant
to be romanticized.

when i die
something will finally ~~want~~
need me.
i am not sure if that is the
sweetest thing.

Introspection

Jayden Rodwell



Presence

Erin Lewis

There's something about presence that isn't like any other abstract thing depicted in this life.

You can sit in a room, but not be there

You can talk to others but not be heard

You can be there without being there—

Something I got to know all too well.

I get it from my father, he is good at being places without giving himself to the situation. He spends all of his time with us, but he isn't here. He is in another world that feels more comfortable for him. One day he let me in.

I was 15, recovering from undiagnosed mono that led to kidney failure, recently discharged from the hospital. He took me on a drive.

Throughout this time, he would frequently take me on car rides because it was something simple, I could do that didn't require much from me physically. I think he did this because he knew it was a release for both of us. But this time felt different.

Having the horizon ride along beside us, feeling like we were chasing the sunset. He would play songs I used to sing as a kid to make me feel like I was still real.

One time we were driving the backroads of my little beachside hometown in Southern Delaware, when we came across a giant pile of dirt. My dad being the simple man he is, this made his entire body fill with excitement. He is the kind of person who finds joy in little success; especially small dad successes like making me feel better when no one else can.

This pile was large enough for multiple cars to drive on top of, so it was certainly there for housing development production.

This massive mountain of earth.

Us.

Maybe he wanted to prove something. Maybe he wanted to show me resilience.

We went up, and as he is straining the car, I can see the recently smoothed land and the remains of the forest that once stood over the spot we were trying to drive up on. I can see what we are working for. The car is pushing and giving everything it possibly can to just slightly inch up the hill so slowly, I thought we were going to roll backwards while being able to see the finish line.

That is how every second of my childhood felt.

When we finally reached the top, I felt like we weren't in the same world. We weren't worried about the doctors' appointments, or how to pay for the hospital visit, or how long it would take for me to have a normal life again. We were both there, two little characters in this huge scene of another world. Tiny specs of dust in this massive universe.

Maybe I was supposed to realize the worthiness of myself. Maybe I was supposed to learn to enjoy simple pleasures.

We listened to the birds and saw the deer exploring the alienated new place that was once the forest they called home. The area was newly cleared and was a confusing blank canvas to those around it. It was confusing to us too, because this ground was meant for us to be here, to be present with each other unintentionally.

I felt like a child; finally getting to feel like I could crawl back to my father, but just for a moment.

Presence is entirely too complicated and vulnerable.

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