



Contrast Literary Magazine

2025

Editor's note

From Sofia Divens

I'd like to start out by saying that putting together this magazine has been the most exciting creative endeavor of my life.

When I first heard about *Contrast* my sophomore year, I had no idea it would become such an important part of my time here at McDaniel.

When Erin Lewis and Carter Timmons, last year's editors, asked me to be the editor for *Contrast*'s 2025 edition: I was stunned. I'd barely ever participated in clubs before, let alone run one. None of that mattered in the moment: I was overjoyed. I'm still so grateful to Erin and Carter for choosing me to be a part of *Contrast*'s legacy.

Dr. Dobson (*Contrast*'s advisor and my personal favorite writing professor), you prepared me so well for this process. You've encouraged me to see the bigger picture of what this magazine could mean to anyone who reads it; to think about style, organization, theme, and the connection they all have. Thank you for believing in my vision.

None of this would've been possible without my amazing co-editor Eli Ciabaton. Your never-faltering optimism and kindness has been a joy to work with. A great editor, a wonderful writer, and a caring friend; I couldn't have done it without you.

I'd also like to thank my creative, loving parents who've helped me grow into the woman I am today. Along with my best friend, roommate, brother, and personal confidante Lily Miller. Thank you for always being there.

And, finally, thank you to everyone who reads this. I hope you're able to feel just how much love was poured into this magazine from everyone who contributed to it. Take that feeling everywhere.

Editor's Note

From Eli Ciabatoni

I've wanted to be one of the head editors of Contrast since my freshman year. I walked into my first meeting and knew it was a space I wanted to get involved with. Then I had the honor of being on the editorial board with Head Editors Grace and Emily. I was so nervous and they made me feel so welcomed. Erin was on this board too and getting the opportunity to be on the editing board with her and Carter as Head Editors only made me want to be involved more. So firstly, thank you to all the previous editors for keeping this amazing writing space alive and I am so honored to be a part of its legacy.

I was so excited when Sofia asked me to work with her last semester. With her, this magazine has become something I know we are both incredibly proud of and I wouldn't have it any other way. Thank you, Sofia, your creative energy, calming nature, and love of the weird is perfect and you are so much fun to work with.

Dr. Dobson, thank you for being a terrific advisor not only through this process but also my time as a Writing Major. Your memoir class really helped to reawaken my passion for writing I thought I'd lost and pushed me to apply for the major I love.

I never called myself a poet until after Prof. Stanton's poetry class. Prof. Stanton, you were the one who helped me realize how much I truly love poetry. Thanks to you, "poet" is another title I claim with pride. Thank you.

Aaliyah Williams, through sleepless delirium, midnight escapades, and so many milkshakes, not only have you been with me. You went through all my hijinks next to me. Please know how grateful I am for you and how excited I am to continue to support you, just as you have me.

To anyone who reads this, Make Art.

Let muses meld magnificent melodies in your mind
And "arbitrary" adventurous ideas become addictive.
The evocative embellishments will entirely enchant you,
And savor the space they sustain in your soul.

Contrast Literary Magazine 2025

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Section One

A Secret Dwelling

Is there meaning in reaching the stars

Jonathan Pannell

Dream For the Stars

Youth is spectacular

Our minds are rarely plagued by rainy thoughts

The happiness of such innocence is temporary, we remain ignorant
of lightnings strikes

Time allows us to bloom even when covered in snow

Our willingness and excitement to rush into the future allows us to
progress through storms

Yet, the growth granted by time is a double-edged sword

My father told me the best years of my life are just ahead

My mother pushed me to continue to dream no matter what

My sisters continued to live in that world full of innocent
happiness

Yet, doubts clouded the mind

The questions that made hope hard to reach constantly plagued me

Is the dream I wish for worth it?

Is it possible for a lone star to shine brighter than the blinding
dawn?

Or is one destined to fade at the sighting of a real sun

In which case, is there a point in trying to become an immortal light?

Or should we be satisfied with the fame of work whose lifespan is naught but a burning candle under the night sky filled with countless stars that will shine brighter

I am not my father

I've always hoped my life's work would benefit more than my family...

That it could reach farther than the confines of my home

I am not my mother

I don't wish to allow fear and responsibility to stop me from doing what I wish

I am not my sisters

I have grown and I am far more understanding of this world

I can no longer have such innocent unawareness

Yet, I wish to still dream

Even if it seems impossible for my life's works to last forever

I want to let the thoughtful birds of hope fly through

I don't yearn exclusively for the immortality of my work

If it can last even half my lifespan, I believe I could be happy

I'll continue to dream, and I'll continue to better myself

Even if only to reach the stars for a mere moment.

A Journey Begins

Panka Rebeka Szancisk



An Ode to a Dear Friend

Caroline Willis

Pinks, purples, and lilac blues,
Here are all the ways that I love you

To the moon and back, to space and beyond,
Down to the little things like a lily pad in a pond,
Each day passes and it is you who I grow fonder of

With hugs that linger—soft and warm,
To such much more we have yet to explore,
Know that I will always cherish you for being you, in any state,
shape, or form

I'll hold your hand through the wind and the rain,
Whether it's a good or bad day, I'll comfort you always with zero
refrain,
Because in the end it will be us who remains

This poem is dedicated to you as the title suggests,
And with you as my friend I shall be forever blessed.

Summertime Flare

Faith Thumma



Robin and Owl

1st Place Poetry

Robin Odom

Robin and Owl meet for tea
In the time between worlds.

There's no one to hear them,
Sometimes not even the moon.

They sip from delicate blooms
As they discuss their wonderful nights.

Robin asks of the hunt,
Owl tells him of sweet mice in tall grasses.

Owl asks of the dreams,
Robin tells her of great adventures and juicy worms.

They sit and listen to the stillness of the world
Until life slowly starts to stir.

The ambitious squirrels rustle the leaves,
As the rosy sky shows the first fingers of the sun's rays.

Then Owl bids goodnight,
Tucking into the warm heart of her nest.

Sometimes she imagines staying awake,
Gazing at the world under the warmth of the sun.

Sometimes Robin imagines not going to bed,
Spending hours in the not-so-stillness of night.

But they were not made for that.
This crepuscular moment is all they get.

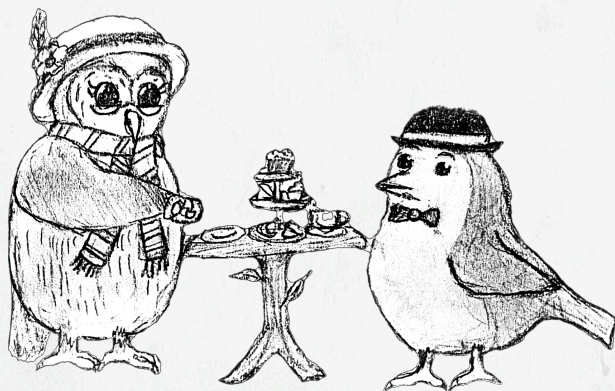
Robin and Owl meet for tea
In the time between worlds.

There's no one to hear them...
Except me, eyes blurring at my desk.

My own mug of tea long forgot,
Gone cold under the moon's gaze.

I hear their hope, and their joy.
And my daunting troubles seem a little smaller.

I hear their first song of morning and last song of night,
Suddenly feeling a little less alone.



My fear of buttons against my love of stuffed animals

Jen Madison

Koumpounophobia – The irrational fear of buttons

*

In every house I've lived in, there's been a Teddy Bear Room. A room filled to the brink with thousands of teddy bears. Bears of all sizes and colors sitting against the baseboards. Every inch of wall covered in shelves stuffed with them. The bears were all arranged by brand, of course. Gund, Steiff, Boyds all lined up next to each other, sitting neatly in rows. I loved this room. Found myself wandering in, admiring every bear. Sometimes taking one to borrow. I always wanted a room like that of my own.

*

I don't know when my fear of buttons started. There are pictures of me as an infant wearing dresses with buttons, no problem. The earliest memory I have of it is in kindergarten. The teacher announced we would be making crafts, and brought out a giant jar full of colorful buttons. I remember staring at it in fear. I don't remember anything after that. Don't remember if I had to stick my hand in that uncomfortable nightmare. Or if I awkwardly explained to my teacher why I couldn't make my artwork have eyes.

*

Last time I counted, I had 350 stuffed animals. That was years ago. I must be up to 500 now.

*

I have no clothes with buttons. Not a single button in my entire closet.

*

I'm not scared of buttons. I just can't touch them. I feel like I have to wipe my hands off on something after touching them. Need to wash my hands. Do anything to get this button feeling off of my skin.

*

I currently have seven stuffed animals on my bed. I always need at least one. Can't sleep without them. I snuggle up against them at night. Hug them. Pet them. Their soft fur soothing me to sleep. My main stuffed animal is a teddy bear, stolen from the Teddy Bear Room. Lovable. A brown, fuzzy bear in a green and red knitted scarf, hat, and sweater, a large heart sewn onto the front. His fur I find the most soothing. I sleep with my cheek against his face, feeling the softness on my skin, breathing in his Lovable smell. He's slightly worn from years of love. His hat is falling off, one side no longer sewn to his ear. His hands are full of holes from how much I would rub them. Before Lovable was Alphapuppy. Alphapuppy was infamous to my friends as a kid. I would take him to every sleepover. And Alphapuppy's feet are full of holes.

*

There's a specific type of button I don't like. Colored, plastic buttons with holes. The kinds that were on the red and black plaid pajamas I unwrapped on Christmas from my great aunt. The kind I had to look at, then look up to my aunt and fake smile, fake being grateful.

*

I name every stuffed animal I ever get. I remember where I got every single one. Where I bought it. Where I won it. Who gave it to me. Almost every stuffed animal of mine was a gift from a loved one or a gift from myself. Chompy, the pink hippo I won from Cedar Point after a man was unable to guess my birth month. Bo, a rainbow dog crocheted by someone my dad met at his last

job. Chocolate Chip, a floppy, tan and brown dog I circled wildly in a Toys-R-Us catalogue as a kid and unwrapped that Christmas morning. Goldie, a giant golden lab I begged my mom for at Greetings and Readings, a quiet bookstore that's now been closed for years. Brahman, a giant green dinosaur I locked eyes with at Target. Each one is special. They are a part of me.

*

I avoid buttons at all costs. I don't want them near me, and definitely not on me. Uniforms for jobs are a hassle. I have to awkwardly explain my fear to new jobs with buttoned uniforms, and watch the confusion on my new employer's face. I'm lucky I never want to be a chef.

*

Currently, most of my stuffed animals are packed tightly in bins, stacked to the ceiling in my grandmother's basement. We didn't have room for them in the new, smaller house. In the old house, they lined my walls and filled my closet and took up two entire shelves. Now they are trapped, squished uncomfortably together. But I will free them. I'll cover every inch of my small room in stuffed animals if I have to. I'll do anything to make sure they stay close to me.

*

It doesn't matter how much I love them, someone wearing buttons always receives an awkward sideways hug.

*

My stuffed animals are a vital part of my support system. Lovable has been with me through it all. Getting my tonsils removed, my time in an in-patient psychiatric hospital, the worst of my panic attacks, multiple fights with strep, the flu. His hugs keep me sane. Keep me resilient.

*

If there was a stuffed animal with button eyes, I wouldn't be able to touch it. I would avoid it. But avoiding the fear doesn't make me weak – it gives me a different kind of strength. I don't let my koumpounophobia consume me. I compartmentalize. I know I can't handle buttons, so I push it aside, control it, while making space for the things I love, like my stuffed animals, that help overcome those fears I can't avoid. Their love keeps me strong in the face of fear.

Jet!

Kelly Kujawa



Bedtime Travels

Faith Thumma

Mom bursts with nurturing care, controls the weather
Around the narrow, tiled ship she boarded me on
Plotting a course for cleanliness—
Stirring the rushing, splashing currents
Out the shiny faucet—volcanic eruption,
Lumps and clumps of bubbles forming
In waves, shimmering fractals of rainbows
Under the soft, golden bulb above.

As I'm lost in my own orchestral delight,
Narrating an adventure through conduction;
Polly Pockets, Barbies, My Little Ponies,
Drenched in the bathwater, rockin'
Soggy hair and squeaky rubber,
Mom lifts her freckled, hard-working hands,
Casting waterfalls over my crowded head -
Washing away the challenges of the day
With her sweet, loving gestures.

The tiny, sporadic tornado rips through
The fabric of the bubbly, soapy reality
With one quick plop of the tub's preservation
On Mom's part—one big swoop
Into her arms I go, engulfing in

The best bear hugs in the world.
I stain her t-shirt as I rumble and shake,
Droplets flying on my new, cotton cocoon.
Dark, mushy, copper coils dance
In the golden soaked room – soon
To be the cascade of bouncing curls
Mom simply adores.

And so, our departure from the ship is a swift one,
Traveling our way to our destination.
I'm all dressed up now for my big debut;
Pink gown—sheer and frills, stretched socks
Rippling around toddler ankles,
And a golden glow of childish wonder.
It twinkles like cupcake sprinkles
Over rosy dew fondant.
Mom hoists me up to the castle;
Pillow mountains, looming over
Rivers of blankets—from ruffles to wool,
All swallowing us whole, toasted
In the valley of the bed's warmth.

As I lay on my small back,
Mom is there—lying by my side.
Her strong nature, shielding my tiny self
From the scary, grim unknown
In the deepest darkness of the night;
Her graceful embrace, soft skin contact,

The smell of honeysuckle, caramel mocha,
Golden brass from '85 highlighting
Around her calming, hazel eyes
As she reads me away to slumber.

A radiant sunflower, my petals bloom
In butterscotch bliss as Mom's voice,
An alto, deep chestnut roasted,
Sings me that same old song:
“The sun goes down and says goodnight~
Pull your covers up real tight~”
It's off-tune. It's perfect.
I just want to be here with you, I wish.
I sing along, a mouse shrills beside

The purrs of a feline.
I can't get the words right—it's okay.
It's enough to bring that blinding smile,
That reverberating laughter,
On Mom's wonderful face.

Now where was Dad in all of this?
Who knows...
Already submerged in sickly, fiery liquor
Slithering down his gruff throat,
Wasted after another night, endless
Questioning what his priorities are—
Choosing the bottle, of course.
But that'll be dealt with when sunrise nears.

She said, "I'm right here."
"Don't worry your sleepy head about it, my dear."
With one warm, pleasant plant
Of her kiss upon my crown,
She sends me off—a ticket to the clouds.
And after searching wide, flying far away
"Winging passed the light of day~
The man in the moon and the Milky Way~"
I finally made it...
To Dreamland.

Cycle of Life: Harmony between Good and Evil

Axlo Freefall



The Idol

T. DeShazo Harper

It all began, I think, after I went to the library; it was only four weeks into the semester and already I could feel the weight of schoolwork burden my shoulders. Downstairs, the library was being renovated and I could hear drills being run and hammers swung. So I came to the topmost floor, where it was usually quieter. It was there that I noticed something I had seen before but never paid any mind. It was kept in a glass case in a dark corner away from most of the bookshelves. I walked up and looked at it in curiosity.

It was about six inches tall and erect, its legs locked together. Its right hand was raised as if in salute. A pair of horns sprang from its head. It looked up at me with two blank holes where its eyes should have been, and lips carved into an animal grin. A small card explained what it was:

Statuette believed to be an ancient deity. Dated approx. 2,000 BC. Discovered in the Iraqi Desert. Origin unknown. That was all it said. As intrigued as I was, I walked away anyway; I had too much work to worry about. I sat down at one of the desks by the window; the display case was on the other side of the library, opposite from where I was sitting. I pulled out a binder and my textbook for history class and began reading, pen in hand for notes.

I looked out the window and saw the clock tower on the campus chapel. It was half past four. I figured on knocking out a chapter from my book, jotting down ideas for the essay due the coming week, and then drop down at the dining hall before calling it a night.

I opened the book. One hand ran a finger across the page while the other clicked the pen.

I could feel the presence of the idol. As I tried to focus on work, I could see it standing in the display case, watching me like a leopard stalking its prey. I got up and moved to the next desk.

This time, one of the bookshelves blocked the view. Except I still had that suspicious feeling of being watched. *It's just an old statue*, I told myself, *forget about it and get to work*.

Later, I heard the chimes from the chapel outside, announcing the next hour. *GONG . . . GONG . . . GONG . . . GONG . . . GONG . . .* By then, I started to feel drowsy. My head began to lean into my arm. With every blink my eyelids felt heavier. Finally, I slowly lowered my head and let it lie over the open textbook.

It was then that I saw the idol's face emerge from the dark, with two black holes where eyes should have been. Somewhere, I could hear the snarling of beasts clawing their way through the abyss.

I snapped awake then. I stood up and paced around the library. At one point, I built up the nerve to approach the idol again. It stood in the case just as it had before; erect and right hand raised. I noticed one of the librarians shelving books. "Excuse me," I called out to her. "How long has this been here?" I asked, tapping the case.

She eyed it through horn-rimmed glasses. "That was brought here about ten years ago as a gift to the college."

"What makes it so special?"

"It was found on an archaeological dig by a former student here."

"I don't like it. It's creepy."

"Neither do I," said the librarian. "I think it's cursed."

That grabbed me with fright. "Cursed? What makes you think that?"

"Well, the graduate who found it went crazy, shot his wife and himself. The college president at the time was killed in a car accident not long after that."

I looked at the idol again. Its grinning lips seemed ready to burst into hateful laughter. I regretted my curiosity then and there.

"I always feel like it's watching me," said the librarian. "Especially when I'm alone." She quickly walked away at that point.

I went back to the desk, determined to finish my work and leave.

I eventually finished the chapter, and jotted down the last of my notes; then I pulled out my sheet for math class. Math was not something I was ever fond of. And here, it was all word problems that sounded the same.

I got started on the first question, constructing the equation I knew was right. I stuck my hand into my backpack. *Crap*, I thought, realizing I forgot my calculator. I tried solving the problem in my head, but as was usual the numbers became scrambled in my head. Besides, I was starting to feel drowsy again.

Yes, I thought, a quick nap sounded fine. My head dropped over my arm, using it as a fleshy pillow. My eyes closed out from the world; nothing seemed to matter, the essay, the word problems, nothing.

Suddenly, I heard a voice; an inhuman and ominous voice speaking in a language I couldn't understand. I looked up to find the library was gone. Instead, there was a dark stone hall whose ceiling was held up by pillars.

Then I heard something growling from behind. I turned to find someone standing in the shadows. It was a man, that much I could see, but he walked on all fours like an animal. He spotted me from afar, and lifted his head howling like a wolf.

I ran in fear, with the man-beast in pursuit. I didn't know where I was going, I only ran to get away. It followed the pillars down what seemed like an endless hall.

Then there was a light, I could see that now. A warm, welcoming light inviting me from the shadows. With the man-beast still clawing after me, I picked up speed, ready to embrace whatever was waiting.

I jumped into the light, and was horrified by what I saw. It was a massive temple, ancient, kept lit by flaming torches. In its center stood the altar, covered in blood from the sacrifices. And over it, there was the idol, standing high near the ceiling. It looked down on me with its unholy black sockets. Its lips shifted and its

mouth opened. It was the voice I heard, speaking in a rough and guttural tongue that provoked only fear.

There was the growling from behind again. It was the man-beast emerging from the dark. With nowhere else to turn, I stood in fear as it stepped into the temple with me. It lifted its head with primal snarls. Then, past the matted hair and grinning teeth, I saw my own self staring back at me.

I snapped back awake, gasping for air. Looking around, the library was just as it was before. Outside it was dark. I checked my watch and saw that it was almost eight. I packed up my stuff and went out, trying to ignore the display case.

Later that evening, I stopped by the bar for a few beers; I wasn't hungry, I just wanted a drink. There were a few pretty girls there who grabbed my attention, but was in no mood to try to pursue them that night. Instead, I just stumbled back to my dorm.

My head felt like it was underwater; I must have had a few more beers than I realized.

The winds began to pick up. I zipped up my sweat coat and pulled up my hood. I stopped suddenly, thinking I heard someone call my name. I looked behind, but saw no one. Feeling as if unseen eyes were watching me, I readied a hand to pull out my pocket knife. I still heard the voice, a faint but choking voice whose words I couldn't understand. It began to feel colder. I tried to ignore the voice, telling myself it was only in my mind, even as it was as clear as someone standing next to me. I reached the dorm, and slammed the door behind me. Finally, it was quiet.

The dorm was empty, as I expected. Being Friday evening, my roommate was out partying. The backpack dropped to the floor, and I fell face first on my bed. The weekend was ahead, and I still had work to do. But my brain was too numb and exhausted to worry about any assignments due by Monday. So I just pulled out my phone and mindlessly flipped through social media, like any responsible student does. At one point, I felt my eyes get heavy, until I let them stay shut.

In the darkness, I could hear the voice again. One by one, torches lit up, revealing the idol, standing tall, and its worshipers fearfully bowing before it.

I forced myself awake then. But I wasn't in my own bed; I was standing over my roommate's. I was confused; I had no history of sleepwalking. No one in my family did either. There was something in my hand as well. I looked to see that it was my pocket knife. I stepped back, dropping it to the floor. Like a deer listening for predators, I was silent and anxious. Somewhere, I could still hear the voice. The door clicked open. I flinched, ready for a fight. It was only Drexler, my roommate.

"What's eating you?" he asked curtly.

"What?" I said. "Uh, nothing, you just surprised me. I looked at the clock. "You're here early for a Friday night."

Drexler sneered bitterly. "Jodi called it off tonight," he said, throwing his coat off. "She told me she wanted space, but I think she's seeing some other guy."

"Just like Emma?"

"Piss off. The whole day sucked. I swear nothing could make it any worse."

Late that night, Drexler was snoring his head off, while I struggled to sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, I could see the idol looking back at me. Even through Drexler's snoring, I could hear its voice again.

Mgangh k'dem barzgnakh rhork.

It was a language I couldn't speak, yet I understood it.

Come, my servant, and bring me a sacrifice.

Something felt off. Yet I could feel myself embrace this command.

Mgangh k'dem barzgnakh rhork.

"Yes, my lord," I whispered, closing my eyes.

Outside, the bells were tolling. It was midnight. *GONG . . . GONG . . . GONG . . . GONG . . .* I listened intently. *GONG . . . GONG . . . GONG . . .* With each toll, they started to sound more like drums. *GONG . . . GONG . . . BOOM . . . BOOM . . . BOOM . . .*

The statue stood high in the temple, illuminated by the torches. The masses sit prostrated, heads bowed fearfully, lips praying. Dressed in priestly vestments, I alone raised my head and arms before the god. I face the altar, with the knife in hand. The god spoke to me. *Mgangh k'dem barzgnakh rhork*, it said.

"Bring forth the sacrifice," I called out. The worshipers raised their heads and watched as two guards marched the sacrifice from the back of the temple. His head was low, ready to accept the fate that awaited him. The worshipers prayed evermore loudly as the guards brought him forth and laid him down on the altar. I stood over him. I could see the fear in his eyes, but he made no struggle or protest. All he did was close his eyes as I rolled back my sleeves. I covered his face with one hand and raised the knife with the other.

I raised my head, facing the god, as the temple filled with the sound of holy ecstasy. The god parted his granite mouth and commanded me. *Mgangh k'dem barzgnakh rhork*.

The knife fell. The temple became silent. The blade was buried in the sternum, and cut through the middle. I took my hand from the face, his eyes still open and unchanged, and reached into the bleeding wound. Blood gushed out as I pulled out the heart and held it high to the god. *K'dem barzgnakh!*" I shouted. "*K'dem barzgnakh! K'dem barzgnakh!*"

The worshipers rose up and howled as well. "*K'dem barzgnakh! K'dem barzgnakh! K'dem barzgnakh!*"

The god stared on, grinning at his sacrifice with his pitch-black sockets.

I woke up then, standing up. My hands were wet and hot. I looked down, and in the moonlight, I could see they were covered in blood. In one hand, I held my pocket knife. In the other, warm and heavy, was a heart. Both dropped to the floor.

"No," I said.

I was standing over Drexler, his lifeless body sprawled over his bed. His body was sliced open, dissected like a frog's. His eyes were open and shocked.

I finally screamed then.

So that is how I ended up here; strapped down and locked away. The police and the judge thought I was lying when I told them the idol made me do it while I was sleepwalking, since I had no history of mental illness. At first I was sent to a regular prison, until I almost killed someone, and it became clear to a psychologist that I really was hearing voices in my head. Five years have passed since then, and it's clear that I'm not getting out any time soon. Right now, I don't want to. Even when I'm awake I can still hear its words. Every time I close my eyes it emerges from the dark, demanding another sacrifice.

I have nothing else to say, except this; if you ever encounter the idol, do not let it possess you, as it possesses me to this day.

Sneaking Away From Your Mother's Wedding

Kaiya Mayhew

Oh what a sky we have tonight! Great and
blue, pink-streaked—doesn't it
enliven you? Lift your feather-light
soul? Any moment we will
fall in, and what a
sight that will be: azure
dresses rippling
gold in dying sunlight.

What a crowd! We shake twenty different
hands, heartbeats thrumming in our
fingertips. What are you all
here for? To tether us? Oh, what
does it matter! The
sweet summer air has
made me agreeable.

How charmed I am! What a
quaint little cottage, wood and old
stone. A moss-covered door, impossibly
endearing with its promise of
secrets. Inside then! Through an empty
kitchen, red paint
peeling, up a rickety
staircase, narrow faded walls—pastel
pink like the inside of a seashell.

Open we fling the window! Old
wooden shutters creak in
protest, I laugh. Sitting on the
bed now, rough woolen

quilt, red and brown and mossy
green, our dresses splayed. We melt like
pigment into oil, indigo
ink spilling down sun-yellowed canvas.

And the scent of this room!
Earth and sun and sandalwood.
Can you hear it? Through the open
window hums the baritone
drone of men's voices, the bouncing
cadence of women's; the
crickets join in, welcoming dusk. A
symphony playing mildly and evenly
for our private enjoyment.

Separate, floating, cocooned in evening
light—we play a game of
dice! And there is no
sting to the thought of
losing. For the
dice are yours,
the idea was mine, and
these faded walls and the echoes between them
likewise belong to us.
We are the universe experiencing itself,
and oh! What an experience!

The Arch

Ra'Nya Taylor



Dreams

Alishia Mitchell

I had a dream that the stars shined brighter than we could ever
imagine

And the sky cleared all of our pain away

And the anger in our hearts were filled with peace

I keep having this dream that my grandmother is still alive

And I tell her the lessons that I learned after she left

And she apologizes for her absence

And I forgive her

And we meet for coffee

And she orders it exactly how I like it

We reminisce on the lessons that childhood taught us

And we talk about each other in present tense

And I apologize for the way I allow pain to cloud my judgement

And she forgives me

And as we go to hug the distance away

She disappears when I get too close

I keep having this dream that you've forgiven me

I tell you the way the world has weighed on us

And you tell me that it'll all be okay

And our words clear the storms

And I lean in

But you still stay

And I try to whisper the pain away

And we allow intimacy to unite us

And I tell you that I love you
But you never say it back
And the silence is filled with words we never meant
I never know if you'll stay
And so we spend the days alone, instead

I'm sorry for all the nightmares I've caused you
I'm sorry that I never call during the lonely nights
Your eyes twinkle like the stars
And I can't ever tell them apart
And I never learned how to properly say goodbye
So all I can do is wish I'll see you in the morning

Hair Styl-ishh

2nd Place Visual Art

Lauren Dixon



Distance

Kimberly Medrano

O child listen to my words
For when your vision gets blurred
And you feel as if you are lost in the herds
Look up and see the birds
As they move in a herd of thirds
Flying to the garden of words

As the birds move together
Understand that I will be with you forever
Though times will be cold as the winter weather
I will still hold you in my hands
As gentle as a feather

O my dearest child
For you are deeply cherished in my heart
I will be with you even if I part

Burnout

Caroline Willis

I can feel it behind my eyes
The dull aching pain
Lashes dipping to kiss my ever-growing eye-bags
Retinas pierced by blinding blue light
Neck cramped, joints stiff, knots running up and down my back

My mouth tastes stale
How old is the water in that bottle?
Did I eat dinner?
Three pretzels and cheese should suffice

7:48pm blink 2:41am
When did that happen?
I need to shower
I didn't finish that assignment
What am I wearing tomorrow?
Alarm set for 7:45am
Did I take my vitamins today?

Flickering like a lightbulb
Cursor blinking slowly
Low battery warning
Powering off
Shutting down
Restart.....

Just get through this set of deadlines
Just get to Friday

Eat, sleep, repeat
Brush teeth, wash face, get dressed
Pack bag, walk to class, go home
Call parents, workout, shower
Take my vitamins
Laugh, cry, scream
Sob, spiral, spit it out
Lock in, get ahead, almost miss the deadline
Eat, sleep, repeat
Repeat Repeat Repeat

I need a break.
I think I'm burnt out.

Meltdown in Motion

Faith Thumma



A Taste of Freedom

Robin Odom

The gentle touch of water's grave
Relents to rushing, pushing, hushing
My cries with the slap of a wave

Breaking through I breathe
The sweet salt and reach
Towards the solar beauty I had grieved

The fallen feathers form a cloud
Reaching for light like a drunken moth
How is hubris a sin when I feel so proud

Is this fiery freedom truly all mine
Tears dried by sun's warmth
Is this how it feels to finally shine

Reaching out as I'm pulled
Back in through the window
Surrounded by stone so cold

No longer fledging free
Behind me locked tight
Forever caged I shall be

I Am Here: See Me Sparkle

1st Place Visual Art

Faith Thumma



Unseen to the Eye

Emily Knight

Blades of grass,
pierce the sky,
like thousands of wars,
happening out of sight of the eye.

Forests of blooms,
extend toward the sky,
tulips, daisies, dandelions,
olive branches for wars.

And the trees, they reach,
and extend up to the sky,
and blessed with leaves,
are their branches and boughs.

Fruit,
they fall to Earth,
apples, lemons, pears,
the nourishers of creation.

The piddity-pat of rain,
as its droplets hit the surface,
encourage life,
and diminish strife.

The sun,
the object of orbit for Earth,
a star of great size,
and a blazing ball of energy.

It supports and allows,
each breath drawn on Earth,
for every living species,
since the start of creation.

Life itself,
revolves around everything,
and evolves with us,
growing with us

Verde

Djef Ikambana



Coming Home

Eli Romero Cruz

At the corner of Venezuela Avenue and
Nostalgia that isn't mine stands a flat green
Home with a tin rooftop and my last name
Cemented into the wall.

Walking in we find the same hammock my
Sister slept in (her first cradle, my brothers
Best nap) and my old Wii (and Xbox and TV)

Past the living room of hand-me-downs, we
Find a wall made of closets that separates
My uncle's room from the only hallway
Pensive like a mountain and thoughtful
He reminds me of myself.

Into the kitchen we discover a total of 6
(or 7) cats, 2 dogs, and 1 bird. Lit only by
The bright hot sun, 2 coffee makers a
Plethora of mugs and my grandma
Making chicken nuggets

Seeing her after 6 years of phone calls
And crying about missed birthdays: older
Yet just as loving, in a house that raised my
Father and aunt and her children. A week
Surrounded by photographs of my parents' childhood
This is where a familiar, deeply missed love woke up in
Me after too long a time

I think that love never immigrated to the states.

Like the sunset that can be seen from the backyard
But shrouded by the mango tree that was planted at
My father's birth.

Two turtles after a long brisk night finally find their
Way back to each other. Renewed, rejuvenated by
Their love they take a peaceful stroll by the flowers
Planted in old tires and broken buckets belonging
All along in each other's joy.

Breath of Fresh Air

Faith Thumma



funeral of a childhood pet.

Emily Hollwedel

you are not supposed to cast a dog's ashes in the ocean
but when you do, deep blue waves
and a crust of foam and sand scramble to
swallow them up.

in the bay, the dog's ashes sit
static, pile of gray pebbles heavy
enough to remain clumped in one place,
even in the current.

both shores greet like old friends, two embraces,
holding onto the last of him
just as i am in this life.

i must remember that every step into the sand will have him in it.
water glitters in the sun during every season.
warmth and cold are only temporary things—
always changing.

we will meet again, changed too
the water and the land will hold us close
and as soon as it is time to go home
we will walk the beach there together.

Dragongold

2nd Place Poetry

Leo Hill

What shimmering beauty! You of lust, you of pearls!
What want you vest in every pit of the world!
Those pits, they were darker, yet full up with clouds
for each pit was four walls and a kingdom, impound.
Still, you glow brighter than stars, ever old,
you sing wealth and you are, as ever, Dragongold

When knights come a knocking, rocking right at your door
and kings scratch their neck and pray for just one more,
They'll know your worth and fall right to the ground.
Escaping each mouth, a cheerful, bell-like sound
as each man who knows you is without you too cold.
You warm us, you love us, my lord Dragongold.

I was born and enchanted with widow-wise words.
I bathed in delight that my voice could be heard
and I heard tale, then, of a certain kind of stone:
One that would haunt, foil and chill me down to the bone.
I had plans at old yeller, to sacredly behold...
I never got to Yellowstone, yet still I yearn for Dragongold.

Wash of Sound

Harrison Booth



Limbo

Skylar Thomas

He slouched over the desk, his arms like two lava plumes on the wood. No, it was not his head that burned as he worked. *He was immune to headaches the way he carried himself*, his mother's voice would echo. So, this unfamiliar heat began to engulf his fingers to find release—fingers that bore the pallor of strain against the pencil. Then his wrists would burn, then his forearms.

The kettle steam inside him continues to coil upward.

The library's dead silence caused a low ringing in his ears. The dying sun shined loudly through high window panes, making him feel exposed and overheated. Other students strolled in and out, some resting themselves into a desk around the room. They knew him, the one always nailed to his seat.

His glasses laid askew on his stuffy nose, fissures of crimson etched around the charred-black iris. Nevertheless he turned the page, then another, and another. He grabbed an index card, the edge giving him a papercut. He only continued to write as the graphite speckled red. Another shade to add to his palette of study. Red blood, red lines on lined paper. He stifled the excitement over vibrancy that resulted from the cut, how gray and red swirled, patterned together. Dots of color glistening. A lump in his throat formed when he envisioned a paintbrush instead of the pencil. Those ruined fingers missed swoops and dives, grown wrinkled with the harsh press of wood on wood. He bit his tongue as the pencil staggered on. *I will never, ever miss the deadline*, he thought to himself. *Not again.*

Nor would he ever let his mother see him away from this field of study.

Her and so many had called *his* dreams bereft of money.

He flinched at this painful memory, incinerating his passion. The dream he *must* pursue was this— numbers and stagnant answers, black and white. Wealthy.

It wasn't until life had teased him with freedom throughout highschool when he learned its dreary fate for him. The world outside of adolescence did not care what blossomed on his canvas, only how much he could earn for mass-produced copies of it a year. His mother certainly thought it was cute watching him paint, but it was only an extracurricular, she told herself. The field trips to museums never ceased to strike him with a wild reverie back then, a vision seeing himself clad with color stains, and an easel molded into his arm. A future convicting him since the art teacher called him an elevated Monet. In a cruel misfortune, though, months before he was to graduate, he received news he would not be going to art school.

His mother had appeared suddenly in his doorway when he was lying on his bedroom floor. He had held his brush, and the glide of cyan had come to an abrupt halt. His mother's voice rose from her throat like a low hiss.

"Art isn't a fixed hourly pay, Jasper. What are you going to do when rent comes? Offer to make the landlord a self-portrait?"

His lips pursed to keep from responding.

She crossed her arms, looking down on the canvas strewn on the floor.

She sighed, "Jasper, you don't seem to have time for anything else. Anything *serious*. Anything that builds adult equity in society." She paused, pulling her lips into her mouth in a tense line. "So, it is because I care about your future that I will not be supporting art school. I'm sorry, kid, but this is the way life is. You will thank me when you've got your suit and condo looking over our house now."

Jasper's neck had lost strength in supporting his head. He let his face fall into the paint, finding some sort of solace in the cool, slick chill of it.

"Oh get up, Jasper. This is a little dramatic. Look around!" She threw her arms out to gesture their suburban home, decades behind their neighbors' houses. "Don't you want to be more successful than me? Don't you want to be successful for *us*?"

Jasper still felt the sting of her words to this day. Almost like a constant static buzz, the quench of himself nestled deep into his creativity.

Yet, in those still, diminished moments studying where he would haggardly take a drink of water only to sustain himself, and perhaps glanced out the window to check the hour, he was knocked in the chest by memory of his passion's peak. Once upon a time he had been out there too, one with the auburn phoenix of autumn. He lifted his pencil now, and dragged the pointed end in the trace of a leaf. His lip quivered at the image his beautiful mind painted before him. Patterns of maple, maroon and bronze intertwined like lace of a ribbon, crusted together in an amber syrup which oozed into the cracks of the leaf's complexion. At least, this is what Jasper projected onto the mere miming of artistry. He began to lower his eyes, spiraling to his purgatory limbo, the computer screen like a shaming spotlight, when a sudden chill ignited the skin of his wrist.

He jumped in his seat.

"Whoah, you must be really focused on your work. You're burning up."

He followed the trail of the unknown fair arm that had touched his wrist. That icy, frost-bitten sensation of touch sent shivers through his soul. His burning, burning soul. When Jasper failed to reply in his shock, the arm's owner continued to openly observe him. She leaned over his shoulder to inspect his computer screen, causing her hair, a cascade of caramelized mahogany, to fall gently onto his collarbone and bicep, obscuring his view. He noted it smelled of rich vanilla, potent as fresh pastries.

"That's a lot of numbers. Too much for my taste. You're probably in business or something?"

He could only nod. Why was a girl paying so much attention to his wallowing?

"Ah, a man of dedication," she said. "Although, you seemed pretty stressed out over it."

“...I would say more miserably aware of it.” Jasper’s chapped lips were surprised by the tremor of talking through them, long since dormant.

She rose from the view of his computer, and Jasper mourned the feeling of her hair blanketed over him. He turned to witness her. She met his eyes. Even as her face distorted into wonder and concern at his response, he reveled in the allure of it still.

He wanted to capture her beauty.

Somewhere, across miles of road, he felt tethered to the painter’s tools crying for him among canvases. He imagined choosing a white and red, wrapped together in a wisp of pink which could embody exactly how her cheek’s blush bloomed against her fair skin. He imagined his brush becoming the vessel of his heart’s flutter, making her likeness watery, as if he were seeing her in a dream. What he would not give for something, anything, to paint on at this moment.

“Are you okay?”

She had held his stricken gaze for a while, too long. He withered at the thought of scaring her away.

“Yeah.”

“I would take your word for it, but they don’t match with the rest of you, Zombie. I’ll take it upon myself to keep you awake while you study.”

She floated down to the seat across from his desk, and hoisted a vastly sizable notebook from her bag.

It was a sketchbook.

The sight of one reminded him of his own, worn and tattered from love of using it. He winced when he remembered too, those spindly fingers of his mother’s around it, pulling it away. Jasper watched her flip to the page she last left on, and had to keep from audibly gasping at her drawing. Somehow, with the mundane of one pencil, she had created a flourish of color in the form of a swan, leaning its graceful neck, and emerging from an explosion of various shades of black ashes. This manifestation of a real creature

burst into revival with curves and suave etches on the paper. It seemed she had dissolved the graphite, and made it bleed like ink.

He heard himself ask, "May I?"

She pushed the drawing over to him.

Jasper's poor heart was torn. Her art wrenched him deeply, mangled his hopelessness, and put to death his reservation. While he held the inside of his cheeks between his teeth to keep from shedding a tear, the heavenly artist spoke again,

"It's for my midterm, my professor said I should add a few more touches, so that's what my studying is going to be."

He looked up at her. Then back to the drawing. Then returned to her.

She smiled weakly, and slowly eased the sketchbook back into her hands. She began adding more devastation to the drawing as Jasper found himself staring into his computer with hate. More than he had ever felt for this mundane life.

He slammed his computer shut.

The girl didn't react, lost as she was in her art. Another index card lodged into his hands, and he held fast to a blue pen. The girl and Jasper spent their own eternity wielding their pencil and pen. Time slowed to allow the artists to gloss an image of their minds into existence, a consideration of the universe only gifted to the gifted. Onlookers would guess they were quite the studious pair. Jasper would recall this moment later, and revel in the fact they were being just the opposite.

Free.

After a while the girl began packing up.

"Well, it was nice meeting you, I enjoyed our shared silence. Some people talk way too much."

He packed up too.

But just before he parted from her, he placed the index card he had been looming over into her hand. She opened her mouth to say something, but he was long gone, leaving the computer behind. Jasper was halfway out of the library when she snapped out of her shock and grabbed the computer to return it to him. But, as a curtain falls over the stage, the index card fluttered

down on the ground, causing her to remember its presence. She turned it over, and her fingers began to tremble. There, behind the red lines, was a breathtaking image of herself sitting across from him. Behind her was a gust of feathery glory, wings of a swan glowing with azure blue. Her other hand rose to cover her mouth as she absorbed the card further. Despite the red lines jutting across the scene, it gave the impression it was slowly warping through the binaries of reality. She looked after him again, at a loss for words.

Outside, Jasper was in his car, gripping the steering wheel like a lifeline.

A chasm in his chest had begun to stitch closed, the sinews healing with a lovely gush of red. He experienced his first headache right then, as his fingertips felt frost-bitten. Jasper grew manic with the thought of reclaiming his childhood aspirations. He could smell the wooden pungency of canvases under his nostrils, the chemical twinge of paint. His fingers tingled with the feigned weight of paint's lather, and he debated plunging a hand in his leftover coffee cup to douse it in the colored stain. The tires screeched, and he became overwhelmed with sublime wonder at the world blurring far behind him, and the other world that waited for him to create it.

Hold Your Head Up

Sarah Watson



A Pool Party in the Summer

Jade Trader

The most enchanting palace
With glistening acres of land—too many to count.
A chilled magical indoor theater.
A balmy vast outdoor basketball court.

Youthful conversing, amid those toasty rays
Of a mystically cast July blaze.
By a splashing, dashing poolside
Of cannonballs and thrilled leaps.

Speaker tunes emitting
Non-existent bleeps.
The sizzling aromatic grilling
Of hotdogs and smoky burgers,

Disrupted:
One
Murderous
Shriek.

Panting and Panicking.
Prior splashing turned slashing.
Terror-stricken feet sprinting.
Terrorized hands flailing.

The skin being scraped out
Of the now dreadful water
Onto unforgiving pavement,
Where the skull violently strikes.

One hundred panicky compressions
Per torturous minute.

A foreign mouth
Forcing air to intrude on another.

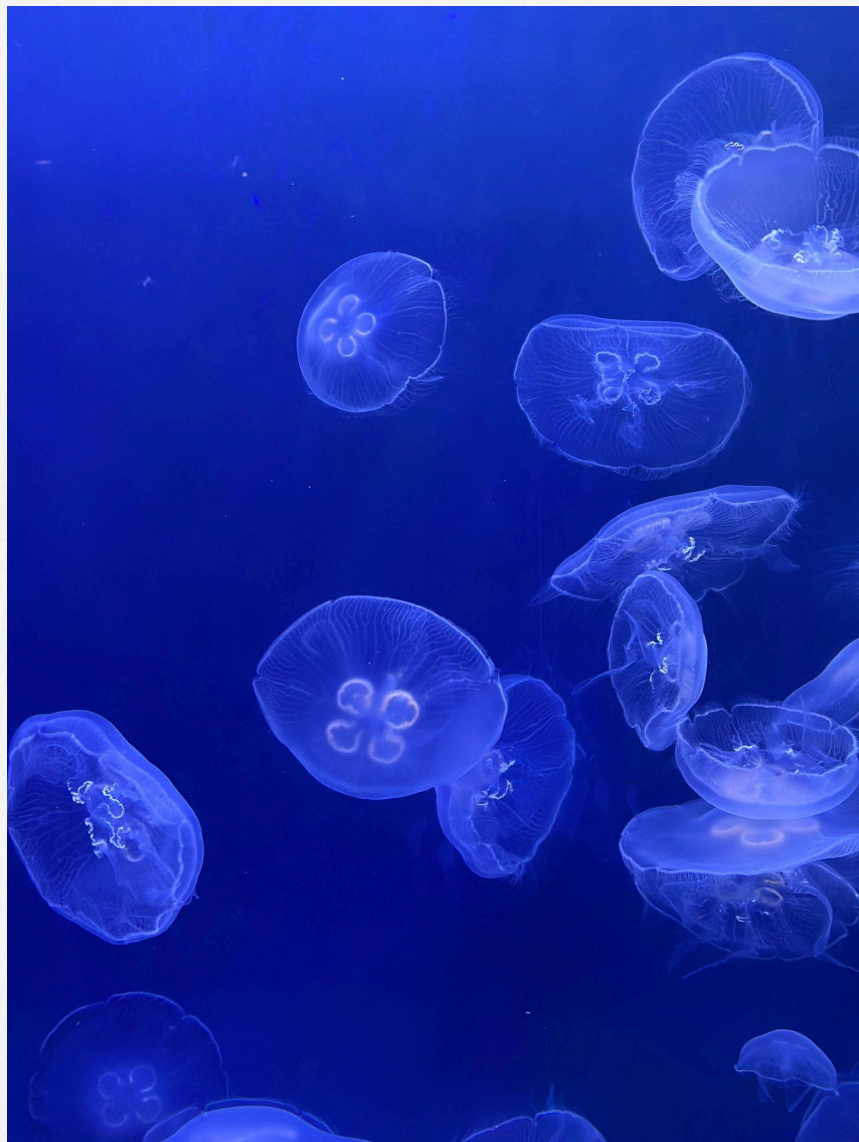
Surrounding deranged cries.
Oh my god's, pure chaos, a last second compromise.
Foam rising, to no avail, to no luck.
Sirens arriving: a deafening, flickering, blinding truck.

The damned: unanimous silent prayer.
The lord: no response.
No salvation.
No explanation.

He's *gone*.

To the Moon

Aaliyah Williams



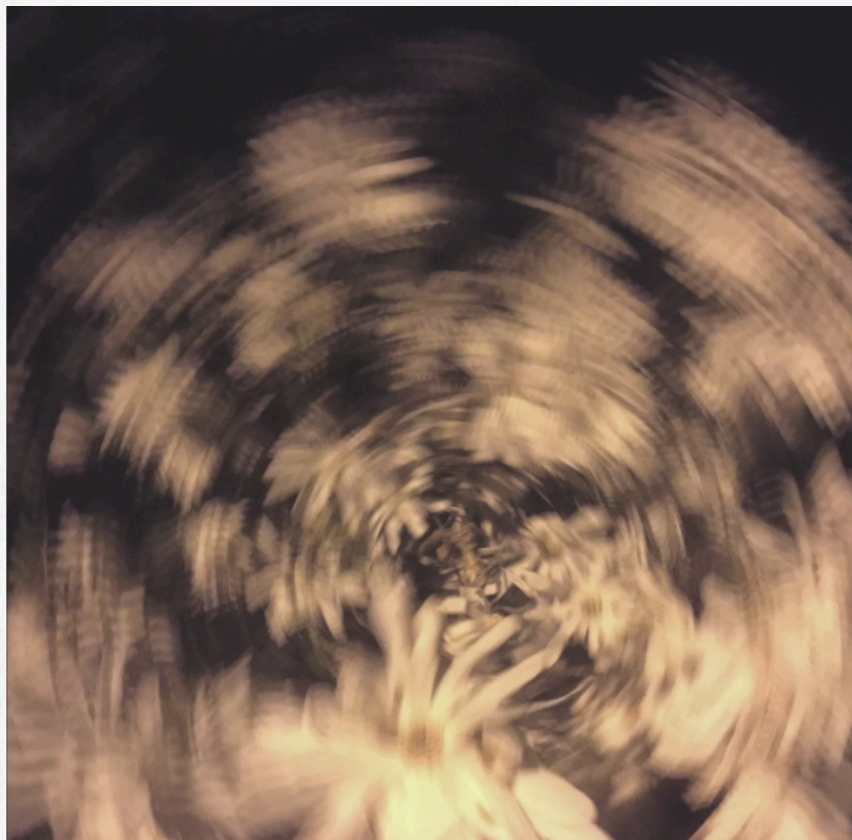
distrusting nostalgia.

Emily Hollwedel

all of these women have been friends since girlhood. how does that work? i must contemplate the impossibility of that for myself. i have shed skin so many times since then i look at her and see a ghost observing from a window, warping itself back through the glass. (was she ever there? perhaps i am just seeing things). and then the hunger hurts, a craving no savory meal or sweet dessert can subdue. does change not distance them, split them apart as rocks can an oyster and churn its pearls away in the current? I would swallow that cold, raw, salty heart of the sea whole
if i was not allergic.

Spin

Harrison Booth



The Cave at Dam 4

Harrison Booth

A first encounter with a cave always comes with a surprise. A little jump. A soft jolt. Excitement and intrigue, leaping into the senses with an air of wonder and dim mystique, direct the eyes across every surface as the observer approaches the mouth. Another scale of time, another understanding of the abiotic, seems to emanate from the hollow earth.

The mouth of one of these nameless caves, peering out of a ridge side overlooking the Potomac River downstream from Maryland's historical Dam 4, achieves this effect beautifully. But not every cave is graced with its additional layers of storybook-like wonder. Enormous, mossy rocks slice diagonally down into the earth, but the stream bubbling from the cave entrance seems to have melted organically through the ancient stone. Over twice as tall as a person, the inverted-triangle mouth is, after stepping across the V-shaped threshold, almost as easy to walk through as a hallway. Though the terrain following the river shore is consistently porous and rocky, this large but accessible cave seems to spring from nowhere. After a light 20 minute walk downstream following a straight, well-kept historic canal towpath, the opening abruptly materializes from the wooded landscape.

Just inside the cave, the backlit wash of pale daylight begins to fade as the path of the shallow, glassy stream is traced around a bend, deeper into a network of smooth, gray-brown stone. Headlamp light reveals an immense array of textures in the walls and ceiling, all of them similarly smooth and water-worn but each with its own characteristics. Some areas, for instance, seem to melt like dripping fluid towards the floor. Each water drop suspended on the tips of miniature stalactite seeds is just another page in a

thoroughly ancient story: once each drop finally falls, it leaves behind a miniscule layer of minerals that the next drop will eventually form upon, on and on for thousands of years until the stone itself seems to drip, frozen in space, from the cave roof. Other areas of the ceiling are dotted with silver and gold-colored flecks that cover the rock like constellations. Sometimes, especially in more open spots where the walls have more surface, the stone forms layers of columnar ridges no wider than a hand, spilling down like fossilized batter.

Before long the cave splits into numerous side passages, wandering left and right, up and down, in a tangle of new inputs and directions. Like most caves, the cave near Dam 4 is difficult to photograph inside; dimension becomes winding and nonlinear, not to be confined within a tiny digital screen and a splash of white headlamp light. It demands to be explored, interacted with. Even standing still, the central rooms that open vertically a cool 30 or 40 feet into the air keep the eyes and neck in motion. The ceiling is as high up as it might be in a sizeable auditorium, but it is difficult to conceptualize in the same way—there is no clear divide between the room and the other passages and chambers that dissolve from all of its walls, many of which glide off on their own trajectories far above the rocks below. Natural underground spaces, since they don't conform to any human idea of organization, are visually astounding.

Once the light goes away, though, all notion of spatial scale goes with it. Cave darkness is more intense and utterly still than most get to experience above ground. This darkness, once it hits the eyes, is accompanied by an urge for complete silence, broken only by distant droplets falling and the inner workings of the body's deepest networks. Devoid of all but the most delicate sensory inputs, the human mind, so far from its native

surroundings, falls into a sort of restless fascination that doesn't want to be broken.

But moments like these make it easy to overlook the strange cast of creatures that bring this cave to life. Being mostly inactive, they are stumbled upon rather than searched for, and given their thoroughly indifferent nature are easy to approach at close range. It isn't long before bats start to appear, their tiny brown bodies huddled in isolation on unseen ledges in the walls. Their backward-hooking feet suspend their soft, streamlined bodies in an endearingly unbreakable slumber, and it is tempting to reach out and run a fingertip down one's back. Most are no longer than a finger. Leopard frogs, too—big enough for their brown-green, blotchy bodies to rest comfortably in someone's hand—start showing up nestled by the edges of rocks on the floor. The first one brings some confusion...where did this guy come from? Is he lost? Did he follow the stream in from outside? But sure enough, more and more frogs find themselves bathed in headlamp light. One unnervingly long, straight corridor, where the crystalline water gets deeper the farther back into the earth it recedes, appears to be home to a veritable clan of such frogs, who splash away as curious spelunkers slosh toward their waterside perches. In this same stretch of stream, tiny salamanders, with nearly invisible legs and 1-inch bodies the girth of spaghetti noodles, occasionally wiggle rapidly away from beneath a pair of waterproof boots.

Apart from feathery midges and a few crickets, few other forms of life seem to call the Dam 4 cave their home. The creatures that *do* reside there, therefore, are infused with a vital allure and personality that permeates into the tunnels that cradle them. They are representatives of a much sparser community than most regions of the planet, and each individual animal embodies a sort of significance that comes with scarcity. As beings of the surface

world, human observers almost never encounter lone representatives of entire ecosystems; there is always a backdrop of trees, grasses, leaves, or other animals that everything exists among, in between...in a cave, the wallpaper is stripped away, and all that remains is life in its starkest, most idiosyncratic forms. Brown amphibian eyes that stare back from unmoving bodies. Bundles of leathery wings and fur. Creatures that dance between worlds, drawing a living from the loneliest corners of the forest. Hills, mountains, are like sponges. Water flows out, life flows in.

My Old Man Fishing

Alex Contreras



Saltwash

Emily Hollwedel

Saltwash had never been known for propriety, nor the customary charms of towns along the Eastern Shore, but it always provided stories.

Most of them were a set of careless mouth-offs from unsuspecting tourists, falling for the quaint, brick-building Main Street that curved sinuously toward Murmuring Bay—or so the locals called it—where fresh water from nearby rivers mixed with the Atlantic into a murky brackish substance. The smell of the marsh—sour, sharp, lingering with sulfur from the Bay’s constant consumption and regrowth—did not make it a popular overnight destination. It seemed the allure that had brought flocks of white-knuckled, feral pilgrims to shoot alligators from paddle steamers in the bayou had not made its way to the 21st century.

Many raved about peering over tall grasses to see a sunrise over the water—but that was never enough to keep someone in town for long. There was no unique, exotic fish or bird to exploit and photograph, no signature food source to market, no view that could not be seen atop some other marshy hill in some other, friendlier town. The weather in summer was sporadic, sticky at worst, prickling with moisture at best, and the winter dead as any other coastal town.

Fog from the Bay was the only reliable guarantee, trickling through the streets every night after the sun faded from sight at the top of the hill.¹

¹ Note: There was a period of sustained economic growth in the early 90s, one that longtime residents quickly came to resent. A young woman, Sage Olsen, reported the discovery of a large, almost archaic cemetery in the marshes just south of Saltwash’s shoreline. Olsen and a small anthropological team spent days travelling back and forth from the town to the site, sketching and photographing the area corner to corner. Its appearance was described as “antediluvian” by interested circles, yet the site was uniquely nonsectarian in nature—there were no definitive religious symbols on any of the headstones, but depictive drawings worn down by centuries of flooding and weathering. The

Then, of course, there were the locals themselves, a strange bunch of people because none looked quite like the other. The indicators for Saltwashers were scattered predominantly in their mannerisms and language—nothing of their dress, small talk, hobbies, or interests gave them away.

Anyone who had grown up outside the town called Saltwash's bay just that—Saltwash Bay. But no, the locals "insisted" on being "different," indicating that their presence in the town lasted more than a night in Misty's Inn. Armistice Chambers, who insisted on being called Misty and owned and operated the inn, usually got to see how the day etched away at tourists—energy seeping away in the summer humidity they never seemed prepared enough for, wild, glassy eyes after a morning of thick, strong fog, heaving a backpack over a sunburnt shoulder.

When they asked about the conditions of the town, or namely, why they called the bay what they did, she would give them a tight-lipped, overly polite smile.

"It's a long story," she repeated, like a script. "Older than the Bay."

Of course. The Bay was the one element of conversation drove a natural, cordial line between both groups—a change the tourists could not seem to grasp or tolerate.

It was the reverence of locals that deepened the gap. Just like locals were accustomed to the haze, leaving out a small box every full moon, visitors shied away from the streets at night. It was the natural order of things. Just as the local's stories became.

discovery generated such a following that the town became an anomaly—perhaps, more than it already was—gathering reports and scholastic interest just as hurricane season struck. A month later a small investigative team partnered with Olsen's group to exhume the site and instead spent forty-six hours scouring the swampy terrain for any sign of the place. All the markers that had been placed by the team, including carvings and posts in the trees, were unable to be located.

When asked about town, local interest predominantly surrounded the house known as the Pier.

The Pier was an old, rickety thing on stilts posted just far enough from town to maintain isolation, but close enough to access it when needed. It sagged on one side like the marsh was trying to summon all the strength it could to suck it back into the earth. Only one window has a long, spindly crack like the silk string of a spider. The door was painted a deep red color, almost like dried blood. But the strangest part of this construction was that there was no record of anyone ever building it or living in it at all. Still, it remained, through even the most vicious of hurricanes and storms that pounded it slanted wood walls, the overgrowth of ivy and moss trickling in between the planks in the floor, the Bay could not swallow it like it did the plants and animals.

When someone mustered the heart or stomach (and usually, for tourists, the nose) to go in the home, they reported:

posters with jargon they could not understand pasted all over the walls,

phrases carved angrily on open spaces of wood,²

expired goods stuffed in cans,

weathered survival gear,

a “shit ton” of candles, and

a large, unfinished canvas of the view of the Bay from the back porch.³

There were also a variety of quiet conversations over the years concerning wild animals appearing and disappearing on the

² Some of these include: “YE MUST BE BORN AGAIN”

“RUNRUNRUNRUNRUN” “IT GETS HEAVIER EVERY DAY” “DO NOT GOSSIP ABOUT SOMEONE WHILE THEY ARE LISTENING” “

³ Note: Everyone who entered swore that through the rage of the winds and rain which undoubtedly soaked this glorified piece of driftwood, the painting remained flawless— even as rain dripped onto their heads, cold through cracks in the roof. Never once has anyone been convinced to photograph the space once they stepped through the doorway.

shoreline through the fog. There were natural reports, sharks drifting in and out of the sludge, large rodents digging at the muddy banks, a black bear who wandered too close to the town's lights and scents. Impossibility drove away the cynical from more uncommon findings—a wallaby, monkeys of varying shapes and sizes (one claimed an orangutan, another a bonobo), snakes as thick as tree trunks, albino alligators, and piebald moose with shedding antlers, as if the Murmuring Bay had whispered the secrets of Eden into the roots of the Earth, and Saltwash listened.

People especially listened when a boy who had been staying in town with family for a few years—an anomaly too, not quite local but not quite a tourist—burst out of the woods screaming himself purple, swearing that after relighting the bonfire at the Pier, his horse had turned its head and began speaking to him. They listened again when a woman, Olive, said she saw a morse emerge from the shoreline by her house, strung with kelp and algae.

In other words, there was no way to explain Saltwash to someone. They simply had to see it for themselves. And only by seeing it could they figure out what they really believed.

Section Two

The Cracked Spine

Snuggly Dreams

Panka Rebeka Szancsik



Father's Daughter

Victoria Walker

On the morning of March 9th, 1999, I bathed in the tears of God and was released from the prison of hell before I even knew I was there. The water was clean and clear, holy. Filled just enough to prevent an overflow, it was the sanctor of forgiveness for the bunch of sinners lined against the paneled church wall. They looked so different, long; stocky; dark; fair; wrinkled; and smooth. But I saw the way they stared into the face of the priest as he whispered prayers over their fearful expressions. They all had eyes like rivers, filled with unrelenting emotion and rushing to be free.

Mom and I were filing for the weekday service and baptisms, my soft and small palm clasped tight in her own wrinkled and calloused one. She disturbed my nap unnecessarily, pulling me from the comfort of my warm cotton sheets just because. *Just because*, she said. I couldn't even wear the outfit I wanted to wear. I was made to take off the oversized sweater that shielded a dusty blue dress. It was a hand-me-down, my older sister's favorite in middle school. It had a high neck that my mom had to fasten with a safety pin to prevent it from sliding off my shoulders, and frills around the short sleeves and bottom trim. I thought it was the ugliest thing ever. Anything that came from Diane was ugly, which is why I fought Mom on wearing it today. She always told me God don't like ugly.

Feeling stupid and insignificant, I repeated after Father Michael, mumbling my whole body's devotion to the one, true God. I allowed my voice to give out toward the end of the sermon's prayer, finding the peeling paint on the walls more interesting than reaching salvation. I read my scriptures and

prayed before bed every night. *That should be enough*, I nodded to myself — sure that I'd fly into that pretty palace hidden in the clouds.

We took a seat at the very front of the room just as the ceremony, and my first defeat of temptation, began. There was a rhythm to the baptisms. Every fifteen minutes, *dip, dip, dip*, and done. The water glimmered under the pretty ceiling lights, reflecting vibrant colors off the floor where it spilled. Without looking away from the gentle rock of the water, I tapped Mom's elbow. "I'm thirsty."

My statement went ignored, and the ceremony finished with a final bout of cheers and applause. As we went to exit the pew, I pulled myself away from my usual place at her side. She called out to me sharply, a warning. I could barely hear her over the trickle of holy water, the tiny singing and swaying waves. Without a second thought, I ran and jumped.

I was lucky I didn't shatter my tailbone, because I was small enough, but that was the last thing on my mind. I was submerged in liquid salvation, and I relished every moment of it. I tried my best to remain under water, poorly swinging my arms downward in the shallow pool. I even parted my lips to get a taste. It didn't taste as good as I thought it would have been.

I broke the surface, and was released from the clutches of the devil, as Father Michael said — smiling at me with a bewildered delight. He lifted me from the baptismal basin with such strength I squealed like a little mouse in a cheese trap. He gently placed me down next to Mom, whose face was as hard as rock and I knew steam would be puffing out of her ears if it were possible.

"Aren't you eager, Celeste?" He pinched my nose and I pushed away his playful hands. He tucked his hands behind his

back, allowing his chest to puff out a little. “But remember, patience is a virtue.”

I glared up at him with half-hearted defiance as Mom dragged me away for the scolding of a lifetime. Moments later we were tucked in the corner of some dusty multipurpose room. She brought a towel to my wet body, scrubbing here and there with such vigor and frustration I began to turn red. She brought the towel to my frizzy hair and clicked her tongue when her rough movements made it worse. I watched her eyebrows pinch the skin in between them, and her lips twist and curl. I frowned and pulled away, voicing my pain. She took one glance at my troubled face, and —

“Fix your face, you look like your father.” She said those words with such disdain and malice that it shocked me into tears. She hissed at me through clenched teeth. I was forced to remain in the sopping makeshift dress that clung to my skin, shades darker than before. She didn’t even allow me to readjust my unruly hair before I was yanked out of St. Mary’s Church with fat tears rolling down my cheeks.

Just as we went to cross the street to the packed parking lot, a familiar woman in a light pink pantsuit called out to Mom. It was the Sunday school teacher, a longtime friend of Mom, *and* Dad. Pretty and nice, she was, but boy did she talk too much. Despite her rush to hurry home, Mom stopped her fierce strut to talk to the woman she envied since high school. I was worried that I wouldn’t get to have dessert after dinner, wiping the snot off my upper lip, when something shifted within my peripheral vision. There was a boy, smaller than me, but with the biggest eyes that put all puppies to shame. They were such a soft brown that reminded me of fudgy brownies with extra cocoa on top or mom’s fuzzy rug. They made me feel warm. The space around him,

though, was cold and...empty. He didn't have an adult at his side, pulling on his rosy cheeks or tiny ears. No one to fix the black scarf that was coming undone around his slender neck.

I took a step toward him, but Mom didn't notice. Nor did she grab for me when I pulled our hands apart. My Mary Jane shoes scuffed along the marble speckled sidewalk with each step that closed the distance between us. "Hi," I said, quietly to not disturb the stillness in his eyes.

"Hello," I heard, but I didn't remember his mouth moving.

"Where's your mom?" And because I didn't know any better. "Do you not have one?"

"Celeste," Mom came to me, putting her heavy hands on my shoulders and peering down at my peculiar face. "Who are you talking to?"

I looked at her, held my hand out to gesture so obviously to the boy in front of us, but there was no one when I looked back.

My Jake

Delaney O'Conner

I never found out where the Smith Cemetery is
Because I never had to put flowers on your grave
Because I never had to kiss your casket goodbye
Because I never had my mom tell me you're gone
Because they never found you by the creek
Because you never pulled the trigger.

Instead, you shot the duck
Instead, you brought him home to your family
Instead, my mom told me you called
Instead, we made plans for a picnic at the park
Instead, you brought me fresh picked flowers
And I never found out where the Smith Cemetery was.

The Weight of a Name

Djef Ikambana

Mama told me once that my name carried history, not just syllables. That every time she called it, she was calling back ancestors, whispering to the ones who walked before me. But here, in spaces where my name sits uneasy on foreign tongues, I have watched it become a burden.

I remember the first time a teacher hesitated before saying it, her lips hovering like a bird caught between landing and flight. "Can I call you something else? Something easier?" I shook my head, my name a stone in my throat. I would not trade it, not even to make things simple. I thought of my mother, who had worked her hands raw so that I could sit in this classroom, in this country, learning a language that didn't always make room for me. My name was not an inconvenience. It was a declaration.

But the weight of it only grew heavier with time. In job interviews, I learned to soften the edges of my accent, to shrink the vowels until they fit neatly into their expectations. At networking events, I smiled tightly as people asked, "Where are you from?" and didn't wait for my answer before guessing. Their voices dripped with exoticism, a hunger to place me, to box me in. Sometimes I played along. Sometimes I let my name roll from my tongue like thunder, just to see who flinched.

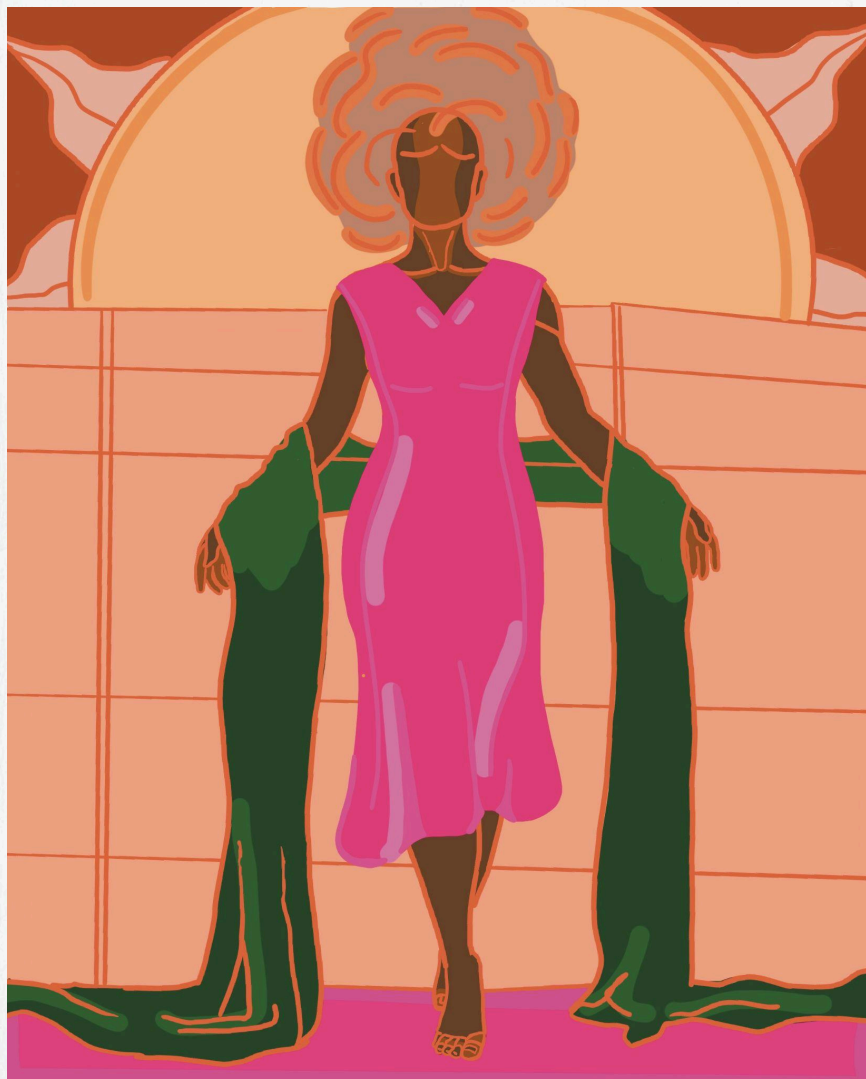
And then, there was her. The woman who took my name into her mouth and said it like it was poetry. Like she had been waiting to say it her whole life. "I want to know what it means," she told me one night, her fingers tracing the lines of my palm as if she could

read my lineage in my skin. I told her, and she listened, really listened.

That night, I whispered my name to the stars, let it carry itself into the darkness without apology. Because it was mine. Because it was enough.

Whispers of the Ancestors

Aaliyah Williams



The Fighter

Ian MacPhee

That garage was old and it showed.

It showed on the exterior with its rotting wood and chipped paint,
and inside with the clutter of random items and dust caking
everything.

I should find that place repulsive,
It shouldn't have served a purpose,
the cars were kept outside,
away from the garage.

But everytime I walked inside
I can still remember the sound made
when flesh struck fabric,
the tremble of the chains.

I still feel the force
of my knuckles colliding into that bag.
I still feel the swish of water in my mouth
to replenish my energy.

That garage was magic, I'm sure,
Because once a month, in the evening
it turned a nobody like me into a fighter.

The garage had been filled up
with various items
probably before I was even born,
Tools, old toys, gym equipment, some loose change, an old kiddie
pool,
and things buried too deep to be seen,
but all that stuff was all pushed
to the outside of the thick, black ropes

That formed a square around the garage.
The only thing inside was a bag, filled with sand
and hanging down from the ceiling.
In that garage,
with the gray concrete floors,
that always smelled of sweat and ambition,
my Grandfather gave me my gloves
off that old, black table,
while the ancient CD player
Used the power of Earth, Wind, and Fire
To guide my strikes.
Next to the bag was an old grimy mirror not attached to anything.
It served as a reflection of my skills
And a reminder that I was always my greatest enemy,
outside of that garage,
With the old rusty cabinets,
I thought I was weak, so I was.
But inside that garage,
I was a fighter.

Golden Hour Reflections

Jayden Rodwell



Soyla rebelde, una sabo

1st Place Prose

Iris Levandoski

My culture has been coming up in discussions lately between my significant other and me. They're Italian descent, and we've been to Italy. I'm Cuban descent, second generation American, and I will probably never be able to go.

Over meals and cuddle sessions my significant other asks me about food, my grandparents, what little life I spent in a Cuban household. Our relationship was bonded over food, so it's no surprise when they ask me to cook. I make excuses.

"I've lost the recipes."

"My friends are too busy to let me use their kitchen."

"Groceries are expensive."

"The kitchen makes me anxious."

But lately, there has been an impending doom of my country. No, not Cuba. America. The country that gave me everything 18 years before I was born. I worry that it'll fall apart.

**

My maternal grandparents and great-grandparents were born on the Island. They were farmers and shopkeepers. They owned homes, raised children, cooked meals, and danced in the streets. Proud Hispanics. Proud Cubans. Proud rebels.

It was no secret that my ancestors did not agree with Fidel Castro. My mom often told the story of my bisabuelo Lorenzo. He was a shop owner; sold bread and goods at the front, played poker and sold liquor in the back. When the communist army came to take possession of the store, he persuaded them to come back in

the morning at which he would hand over the keys. Instead, he lit a match late at night and tossed it into his store. He upheld his promise and turned over the keys to his store, but for his act of defiance, and bravery, he was jailed.

When I think of that story, I see myself as Lorenzo. I am standing in front of my burning building, the alcohol fueled heat warming my already sweaty skin. I've put not only myself, but mi familia, in danger. I am scared about the consequences of my actions. I know that I will be punished in the mere hours of daybreak—but I am angry at what my country has become. Even now, over 50 years later, I've never been one to sit and be quiet. Cubans are not built silent.

Throughout the seventies, many Cubans had made an uproar against Castro's regime. They had rebellion after rebellion after rebellion. Eventually, Castro gave up and exiled his own people. "If you don't like it here, then find somewhere else," he said, and opened the Mariel port. In mere hours, thousands of Cubans began crowding fishing boats, paying high dollar for a spot. The unlucky ones, the poor ones, made boats out of tables and tested their luck. The even more unlucky didn't survive the trip due to the fishing boats—designed to carry about six sailors—capsizing.

In the 6 months that the port was open, over 125,000 Cubans made their way 90 miles North to Miami. And our history books rarely mention our Mariel Lift.

**

When I was 5, we visited my grandfather to introduce him to my new sibling, and to mourn the passing of his wife. I slept on the smaller of the two sofas. Staring at the tall ceiling and running my fingers along the leather seams, it began to pour. Back home,

in Georgia, I hated storms. But under the shelter of my grandfather's roof, with the palm trees swaying in the window, I was comforted. I have never since slept sounder, and when my world becomes loud and too difficult to bear, I find myself back on his couch.

That same visit, my Abuelo slept on the larger couch. He had generously offered up his bed to my parents. At bedtime, after an entire evening of sitting beside him and breathing in his mixture of cologne and cigarettes, I was told not to bother Abuelo. He was old and needed his rest. As soon as my parents left us, we looked at each other from across the room. "Come here," he said, and my little feet quickly padded across the tile to him. He was the human embodiment of the Cuban sun.

My grandfather passed away in June of 2024. His death devastated me, as he and I were very close when I was young. I remember the house he owned in Hialeah. It stands before me in my memory: A yellow plaster exterior with two rocking chairs beside the door, AC-frozen tiles that chilled my little bare feet, two black sofas with round embellishments on the sides that my texture-craving fingers could not get enough of, the leech tree in the backyard, and the extensive movie collection my grandmother kept.

My Abuelo was the most generous man I've ever known. He would quite literally give you the shirt off his back if you'd let him. When my mom and I would visit, she would guilt him into giving her money. And he did, because he loved her. When my mom would blame her sad, abused childhood on him—despite the fact that her own mother kidnapped her, sold her body, forced her to steal, and refused to let her see her own father—he'd apologize. Because he loved her.

When I came to visit, if I even looked at something

longingly, for just a second, or said that something looked cool, he would open his wallet and buy it. When I was little, Abuelo gifted me a souvenir shirt from his travels. A pastel pink shirt with two animated thumbs and flowers, it said, “someone who loves me got me this shirt from Jamaica.”

My Abuelo had traveled to Miami via a Freedom Flight. He left with his mother, father, and sister in 1969. He had to leave behind his brother, who was over the age of 16. Like many Cubans, he was scared. But even in 2018, nearly 50 years after exile and restart, he spoke highly of America.

I left my mom when I was 16. She never broke the cycle of abuse. So after years of being abused and manipulated and unloved by my own mother, I did. I saw an opportunity and took it. I chose my life over my culture.

As a kid, Cuba was like a tattoo on my arm. I never let anyone forget what I was, what I am. It was in every other sentence, and I made *sure* all my Spanish teachers knew. But when I left, my island slowly faded away like the sea swallowing its beaches. No one at my dad’s house knew the recipes, so I didn’t cook. Or eat. No one appreciated the music, so I didn’t dance. Or sing. With each passing day, I let my whiteness consume me.

**

The other day, my significant other asked “Why do you call yourself white? Why not say you’re Hispanic?”

I tried to explain to them the circumstances of my young adulthood. How I felt isolated from my culture at home. That I wanted nothing to do with my mother after I left. Out of anger, I

let the relentless cactus of Havana die. I explained that being Hispanic only became relevant when I applied to colleges and scholarships; knowing they have a diversity quota to fill.

What I didn't tell my significant other was how the language never stuck to me. Even though I took six years of Spanish classes and listened to it at home, it never fit. And that at eye level—skin level—I am white. I am white passing.

I am only 50 percent Cuban, and when I tell strangers this, they are almost always shocked.

A few days later, my significant other asked if I had considered joining La Hermandad de Sigma Iota Alpha, the Latina sorority on campus.

"They wanted me to join," I said, but I blamed my tight finances and even tighter time commitments.

When I thought about recruitment a year ago, I imagined the beautiful Hispanic girls. All of them with their thick, dark hair, brown skin, and Spanish speaking abilities. They could dance and cook. They looked like Hermanas when they stood together in photos.

Me? I imagined standing out in group photos like a sore thumb. White skin, brown hair, no accent in sight—ruining a good photo. The truth has been a whisper in the back of my head since I left.

I don't feel Hispanic enough.

**

I flew down to Naranja to say goodbye. What once was his overcooked caramel skin was just shades darker than mine. There's barely any melanin in me. I used to tan like bread as a kid, but now I just burn like paper. Seeing him the same off-white shade as the tiles in his Hialeah house shattered my heart.

My brother and I had agreed long ago that Cubans never die. In my 20 years of life, I don't think I ever imagined a world without my Abuelo. He was a constant to my scientific brain—there was nothing changing him.

When he passed, my Cuban Sun exploded into a cultural black hole. I felt my island being sucked up by him and replaced by the European Colonizers in my bloodstream. He was gone. And so was my heritage.

**

It's been nearly a year since my Abuelo's passing, but I don't write this as an extension of mourning. I write this out of fear and out of warning. In just a few weeks, I have seen my country, the one I was born to, begin to fall apart.

A few months ago, I spent a semester working an internship for the U.S. government. It's an opportunity I have dedicated years of hard work, research, difficult decisions, and late nights to. I am among some of the most brilliant minds in the country, and the even more dedicated students. Receiving my Acceptance Letter was the moment I felt like my dreams were becoming reality; I saw myself being the woman I have dreamt about since I was a little girl.

Every morning, I would sign into my computer and open up our program's internal chatroom. We all worked in different offices and buildings, so this chat was a way for us to connect with one another. Throughout the day, we would ask each other work-related questions, plan weekend outings, and share some really bad memes. I met one of my best friends through this

platform. Unfortunately, our chatroom wasn't always sunshine and rainbows. For an entire semester, I watched a fellow intern named Marijane make others uncomfortable.

Like me, opening the chat was a part of the morning routine for many other interns. And every morning, several interns would welcome the day by bidding everyone a "good morning." Many of our interns are from Puerto Rico and embracing their language on the mainland, they responded with "buenos dias." For some reason, Marijane did not like the use of Spanish in the chat.

"Some of us have disabilities, you know!!" she angrily wrote "You should write everything in English! I can't understand what you are saying!"

"We are just sharing our culture. We'd love to teach you some basic words, Marijane," a Puerto Rican intern replied.

"I don't want to learn! I want you to speak English!"

Frustrated, Marijane took it upon herself to report our Spanish speaking interns to the higher ups, and our program director at the time, also Puerto Rican, was forced to make the chat "English only." I couldn't see the faces of my Island cousins, but I could feel the heartbreak of being denied the ability to speak their native language.

This wasn't the first time Marijane targeted our Hispanic interns. During a previous tour, she called her Hispanic roommates racial slurs and again prevented them from speaking to each other in Spanish.

Marijane is unlike the rest of us interns. Our program is for undergraduate students majoring in various computer-related programs. All of us are in our early 20s. Marijane is over 30. No shame to her for getting her bachelor's degree well into adulthood-in fact, I commend her for doing so. But why must she

act like a child?

It all came to a head on her last day of work. A week before, after yet another moment of hostility, several interns and I collected several pieces of evidence and reported her to the higher ups and our program's director. On her last day, Marijane took to a private chat and accused me.

"Well now I know who reported me!"

Angry and tired of being backed into a corner, I fought back.

"I love that you decided to play Clue today, but your accusations are wrong. I didn't report you."

"You're such a liar! You reported me because I wasn't raised on the Queen's English and that I am speaking out for my disability!"

I snapped. Once again, I saw myself as Lorenzo and I fought back hard. I tried to be professional in the beginning; making sure to use the "I statements" my therapist taught me and to be objective with my claims. Eventually, I couldn't handle it anymore.

"Maybe, Marijane, we should think about the things we want to say in our heads first. And before we say them, we should ask ourselves, 'Hmm, is this a helpful thought? Or will this hurt other people's feelings?' At least, that's what I taught the toddlers at daycare to do."

I logged off.

I am not proud of what I said to Marijane that day, especially on a work chat. My best friend was angry that I gave into her fight.

"It would have been easier to just leave it be, Iris." he said

"It would have been, but I've never been one to sit and be quiet."

This country has given me everything. Both of my parents were 18 years old, living in poverty, when I was born. Every day, my dad rode public transportation so he could drop me off at daycare and go to work. We lived off of food stamps and WIC.

The day after Christmas, just weeks before my fourth birthday, my dad left for basic training. I was prone to constant ear infections from the daycare, and I had just gotten over a bad case of Rota Virus. We had no health insurance. At one point, I needed antibiotics for yet another earache. My dad's paycheck had just come in, but after bills and minor groceries, there was not much money left. Coincidentally, our milk had gone bad, and he had to make a decision: buy medicine for his daughter or buy new milk for his cereal. He drank the spoiled milk, bought the antibiotics, and enlisted in the Air Force.

I attended public schools, which are funded by taxpayer dollars. I studied hard, earning a place on Honor Roll every quarter and was in the National Honors Society. I was middle school class president, captain of a high school robotics team, an avid member of the music department, raised thousands of dollars for a non-profit organization with a club I established, and I always read above my grade level. My resume is pages long. My dad never let me forget the value of an education. He grew up homeless, and hungry, and going to school was nearly impossible for him. During thousands of carries, he reminded me that he only wanted the best for me.

"Finish school, go to college or learn a trade, and make a life for yourself."

College was never not an option for me. I knew it was expensive, and I wasn't sure how I was going to get there, but it

was a worthwhile investment. In 2019, my dad received a letter from the Veterans Affairs Office explaining that his disability from the military qualified us for Chapter 35 of the Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance program. Because my dad risked his life, fighting for our country, and fighting for the lives of children who were not much older than I was when he enlisted, my siblings and I get some money to go to college. It doesn't cover everything, but it's enough to keep me debt free. And I am using that money to obtain a bachelor's in Computer Science with a minor in Political Science. Why? So that I could work in National Security and give back to the country that gave to me.

But in just two months, that has all changed. In 45 days, I have watched the pillars of democracy crumble. First by dismantling DEI programs, then initiating tariff wars on our allies, threatening to revoke birthright citizenship, pulling out of the Paris Agreement, selling federally protected land to oil companies, attempting to dismantle the Department of Education, pardoning domestic terrorists, withdrawing from the World Health Organization, and setting ICE on thousands of immigrants for deportation. A few days before writing this, I was warned that my government internship, the one that I have been working towards for over five years, is at risk of liquidation.

This country has given me everything, and I have had every intention of giving back to it. But how can I? When everything that I have ever known is being demolished? When every resource that is giving me the opportunity to give back is suddenly treating me like a mouse on a string. When every American promise made to me before birth is being revoked. How can I, when I am suddenly finding myself to be a rebel, split between setting my world on fire, or settling on the boats of my people?

A few nights ago, I stumbled upon some old videos of my Abuelo. In high school, I did a research project on the Merial Lift and the Pedro Pan Flights. I had asked him for details on what his experience was like coming to America. In these videos, he's nervous and the language barrier shines through, but he's so proud and so thankful.

"Hello everyone. Mi nombre es is Juan. Jimenez. Abuelo de Iris Levandoski. And this is my story. When I arrive in Miami. Florida. Everything was shiny, beautiful, and I felt free."

I was born here...I grew up here. I don't feel free.

Sunlit Wings

Panka Rebeka Szancsik



The Fall

Skylar Thomas

Sour juices lathered my lips
The apple weighed as Atlas' stone
They were apparitions, the apple's kiss
Of Death made their earth bodies shown
Evil had coiled awake.
I could resent the serpent
I could hold Eden in a reverie
Yet now I knew deceit.
The apple eases lighter, the scent
Seeping sweeter
Adam watched the fruit devoured
He looked on as his Eve soured.

Chickens

Jillian Chiappelli

I grew up with pet chickens; my parents have been buying and raising baby chicks since 2006. We buy them as babies from Clauss' Feed & Farm Supplies.

"Clauss' Feed & Farm Supplies in Pasadena, MD comes highly recommended for those seeking to raise poultry. This trendy farm and agriculture service is known for its wide variety of animals available for purchase, including turkeys, ducks, and chickens"

Unfortunately, chickens do not live long in our yard.

I was in my yard with my grandfather one day many years ago. Our chickens were outside of their coop, we let them roam freely when we are home because we have a big yard and it's not nice to keep them inside all the time. I was very young, not more than 7 years old, and it must have been fall since the weather was perfect that day. Out of nowhere, a giant hawk flies down and picks up one of my chickens with its talons. This huge bird simply came down and picked up a smaller bird like it was nothing. My grandfather started to yell as he picked up the rake leaning on a nearby tree and frantically waved it around in the air, trying to do something at least. The predator was not deterred by his movements and continued to fly away.

I watched it like a movie, the hawk taking my chicken, my grandpa trying to stop it, the hawk flying away without an ounce of remorse. Left me there on the ground with one less pet.

"The Hidden Monster", a poem by Jillian Chiappelli on Francisco Goya's painting called *Saturn Devouring His Son*:

The wild eyes with no reservations,
 The haunting figure with no hesitations,
 Their knuckles wrapped so tightly around the victim.

So forceful they lose any humanity,
 Reduced to a large, bent, muscular shape.

The monster thrice the person's size,
 Already in the process of eating,
 While the helpless mortal dies.

Since our chickens did not usually last more than one year, we bought new chicks every spring when it was hatching season. I look forward to it every year. We work together as a family to give them names—but I'm the one that remembers who is who. I am the one that spends the most time with them, observing their personalities and relationships. I am the one that people ask when they want to know anything about chickens.

I used to eat meat when I was a kid, I even ate chicken nuggets. As I grew into late elementary school, I realized there was something wrong with eating dead chickens. They were my pets how could I be okay with eating their dead bodies? It was disgusting to watch people pick up the victims and eat them as if it was perfectly okay to eat a pet. I stopped eating chicken. After that, I realized how gross cooking and preparing animals to eat was. The smells and the juices made me uncomfortable. I stopped eating meat entirely in middle school.

Cognitive dissonance: “typically experienced as psychological stress when persons participate in an action that goes against their cognitions. According to this theory, when an action or idea is psychologically inconsistent with the other, people do all in their power to change either so that they become consistent.”

-Wikipedia definition

My parents and siblings never had the same realization—they all still eat chicken meat regularly. I’ve asked them before how they can deal with the cognitive dissonance of eating their pets. My dad just says, “As long as I don’t know their name then it’s fine,” or sometimes he says, “This chicken was evil though, that’s why I ate it,” and laughs it off. My siblings don’t really have an answer—they just like how they taste. They keep our pet chickens and the chickens in the slaughterhouses separate in their minds, as if they are two different species that have lives of different value.

One day in 2018, it was just me and my siblings at home and the chickens were in the yard. I was in the kitchen when I heard a squawking noise, so I knew something was going on. As I ran to the door and flung it open, there was a fox in the yard trying to get one of the chickens. It was attacking Wisp, our new rooster, but I realized that he was trying to fight back. The fox managed to take a bite on him and once he was in it’s jaws, he couldn’t fight back anymore. I yelled and the fox ran into the forest next to our yard. A few months earlier we got three silkie chicks, silkies are a breed of chickens that aren’t covered in the typical feathers but instead are fluffy all over. When we realized Wisp was a rooster, we decided to keep him because silkie roosters, as well as being the cutest chicken breed, are also not as violent or loud as other roosters. He didn’t peck the girls or crow super loudly in the morning. He was the sweetest rooster we’ve ever had, and he protected his sisters until the very end. I cried for a long time; after all that was left was a pile of his fluffy feathers.

“How Do Foxes Hunt Their Prey?” An article by Brian Mertins from his blog *Nature Mentoring*: Foxes are omnivores, which means they don’t just rely on hunting to find their food. People are



sometimes surprised to learn that foxes also eat a lot of fruit, plants & even insects. The primary food source of foxes really just depends on what's available in your local area at different times of year.

There is a small population of foxes in the forest attached to our yard that frequently stalk around our yard trying to get our chickens as their meal. We see them very often, from once a month to at least once a week depending on the season. My younger sister loves them. She says they are majestic looking, especially the big ones we see. Their bright orange fur shines in the sunlight. Although they resemble cats, they are actually more closely related to dogs. Once I saw one sitting in my yard then lie down and roll in the grass. I had to admit, it was a little cute. But I can never look at foxes the same way after I've seen them kill my chickens.

On April 8th, 2023, we got six baby chicks from Clauss' Feed & Farm Supplies. Each member of my family of six got to choose a name for one of them, but my mom conceded her naming privilege, so my boyfriend Sal got to choose. Sal and I spent every day with the chicks, holding them, teaching them to behave, trying to teach them fun tricks. We were in love with them. As April went on, the weather got nicer, and the chicks got bigger, so we brought them outside more. On May 11th, Sal and I took some of them outside to walk around for a little while and my mom suggested that they spent the night in the coop outside. We decided to try it, so we brought all six of them outside and stayed with them until the sun began to set. Once it started getting dark, we put them inside their coop. They were so terrified; they cuddled together and peeped loudly as we left them.

The next morning, they were gone. I woke up to my mom crying, I looked outside and saw the hole. During the night, a fox had dug into the coop through the old chicken wire that had rusted from so

many years. I went outside and sure enough, the fox got all six of them. They were so scared they probably didn't understand what was happening. It was their first time in a dark, unfamiliar place and the next moment their tiny precious lives were over. I cried the rest of the morning and skipped school.

“A Dream within a Dream”, a poem by Edgar Allan Poe:

O God! Can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp?
O God! can I not save
One from the pitiless wave?

I sometimes think that people assume my grief for losing a pet is less because it is a chicken instead of a cat or dog. Those people would be wrong. Every time I lose a chicken, it hurts just as much as when I lost my cat. Although they live outside and can't cuddle on my bed, they still recognize me, follow me around, and let me pick them up and pet their soft feathers. Each one has their own personality, I've seen them grow up and grow their beautiful feathers. I take days to grieve them, writing down their life stories and making art to remember their ages and names.

I have received a variety of reactions from telling people I have pet chickens or that I am vegetarian over the years. These are a few:

“You have pet chickens? I know what we're having for dinner—chicken soup!” “I love eating chicken, it's my favorite food.”

“OH, that makes sense—no wonder you're so skinny.”

“Really? Do you guys eat them or are they just for eggs?”

“Why?”

I don't feel the need to justify myself—but at the same time I have a script rehearsed for every time I am asked. *Yes, I'm a vegetarian. (why?) I grew up with pet chickens, so I felt bad eating chicken and then I started not liking the taste and smell of other meats, so I stopped eating all meats. Also, the meat industry uses so many resources which is horrible for the environment, as well as the inhumane treatment of animals in some facilities. It is better for the environment to eat a plant-based diet. (is it healthy?) Yes, I have many sources of protein like nuts and soy. (I could never be a vegetarian) It's not that hard, there are many other options and meat alternatives.*

After my six baby chicks died in 2023, I painted a rock for each one with the color of their feathers. Cleopatra and Malala got brown rocks, Red got a red rock, Noodle got a yellow rock, Magnolia got a dark brown rock, and Luzora got an orange rock. I wrote about their one day outside and how excited they were to be out of their tiny home and into our big yard. I wrote about their personalities: Noodle was the leader while Luzora was the mean one. I wrote about how Sal and I put them inside the big coop that night.

Gamble of Patience

Anna Dove



I can't wait to be pretty.

Ra'Nya Taylor

I think I have always been a little queer, even in the days before I realized it. I have never been the norm, and it took me so much time and effort to be able to put a label on it. To be able to understand it. In a way, I learned to master it. This, however, didn't come without its trials and tribulations. For a long time, my identity was unstable. I changed interests almost as often as I changed clothes. I had crisis after crisis. I did not know who I was, but I always seemed to know what I wanted. I think because I lived through that kind of instability, I can understand it better now when I see it. That wasn't always the case.

When I was really young, people often mistook my uncle for my father. This was because he was always around, and my father never was. My uncle is the older brother, but he is also shorter. Nowadays, he's not even an inch taller than me. His skin is a little lighter, he has always been bald (it was never his choice), and his beard is shaved close to his face. He thinks he looks younger than almost 50 and tries to dress that way as well. I think his style could be described as casual prep with sneakers that always match his shirt and oftentimes wearing monochromatic outfits. He cares about labels and brands; he wants the nicest versions of the nicest things. He will pay almost anything to get it.

My uncle also did everything for me that a father should do. I hear stories about when I was a baby and how he always had me. He took me places, bought me any toy I could ever imagine wanting, and spent more money on clothes than any toddler could ever possibly need. He helped with school supplies and birthday parties, took me out to hang out with my cousins, and made sure every Christmas was the most special day ever.

Our relationship has always been more reminiscent of a father and daughter, and I was never bothered by that. It seemed that issues only arose during those moments where I started to truly find myself.

In 4th grade, I wanted a dress.

I was back-to-school shopping with my uncle for clothes to wear during the school year. Usually, I was only there to try on the clothes that he would pick out for me. I didn't mind following him around from store to store as he picked out outfits, handing each one to me so that I could try them on.

He was specific and meticulous about which pants can be worn with which shoes and shirts. Each color and pattern came into play. Even down to which accessories and jackets I could wear. By the time I was back home, and school would start, I'd always forget which outfits he picked out, so I just put on whatever.

We were shopping in Boscov's and the cart was nearly full to the brim, but something had caught my eye. While he was deciding between two shirts, I wandered over to a rack with a dress with brown hem. It had some purple and yellow spots on it with thick shoulder straps and a bow around the waist.

I liked it.

I looked through the rack to find my exact size before bringing it over to my uncle.

"What about this one?" I asked, holding the dress up to him.

He looked at the dress, back at me, and back to the dress. Then he burst out into laughter. "That's ugly," he said. I heard it loud and clear even between his giggles. "You don't actually like that."

I frowned in an attempt to show I was being serious.

He just shook his head, still laughing. "I am not buying you that ugly dress."

In middle school, I wanted to wear all black.

My uncle picked me up so that I could spend spring break at his house. I would be able to see my grandmother and cousins before going back home the following week.

Middle school was the time that I wanted to wear all black and shop at Hot Topic. I started to curate a music taste that included lots of Fall Out Boy, Twenty One Pilots, and Panic at the Disco. This was my "it's not a phase"

When he picked me up, I was in these black leggings with a black t-shirt that was probably merch for one of the aforementioned bands. Based just on the look in his eyes, I could tell he was not a fan.

We didn't talk about it when I got in the car, he just asked me about school.

"What are your grades looking like?" he asked.

I shrugged, not sparing a glance from my phone where I was scrolling on Pinterest. "Fine."

It had been a while since I was really excelling in school. The straight As that I used to bring home in elementary school shifted into Bs and Cs. I kept telling myself that C was average, and I wasn't doing bad by any means, but my ego was bruised. Everyone expected better of me, including him.

"You think you'll be on the honor roll again?" he pushed.

I sighed. Maybe. I don't know?"

That boggled him, eyebrows furrowing. "What do you mean?"

"I just—I don't know," I snapped, some irritation seeping into my voice.

His hands gripped the wheel a bit tighter. "You know, we used to be closer when you were younger. We used to talk all the time, now you barely talk to me, and you can't even put the phone down for a second to do so."

I don't respond. That's likely the ammo he needs to keep going.

"Now you dress like some ugly goth chick and your grades are dropping. I don't know what's wrong with you. I remember you were my sweet little baby girl before."

In high school, I wanted a piercing.

A couple of weeks before my 16th birthday, we were at the mall. I can't remember what we initially went there for, but we started having a conversation about what I wanted for my birthday.

"I want an ear piercing." By now, I knew not to be too specific when having a conversation with him out of fear of being judged.

"You already have two in your ear," He said, looking confused.

I just shrugged. "Yeah, I want another one. Mommy already said she would take me."

"I can just take you now," he said, changing directions so we could walk towards the Piercing Pagoda.

Sheepishly, I followed behind him knowing that I needed to go to a tattoo shop to get an industrial piercing. It was a bar pierced through my cartilage and a piercing gun cannot do that.

Thankfully, the Piercing Pagoda was closed but he was persistent. Instead, he took me to a Claires.

"My niece wants to get her ears pierced."

The lady that worked there seemed sweet. She glanced at me with kind eyes as she led us to the corner of the store where they would pierce ears. "What do you want done, sweetheart?"

I felt like I was going to drown in embarrassment as I mumbled "An industrial."

She didn't even seem shocked as she turned back to my uncle, explaining that I needed to go to a tattoo shop to get that done. We left the store in silence and as we passed by the Piercing Pagoda again while leaving the mall, he paused.

"You want one of those hardass piercings?" he asked, tone absolutely dripping with malice and judgement.

Silently, I nodded.

"Next thing you know, you're gonna look hard and masculine with all those holes in your face," he said. "That's ugly."

In college, I got locs and a septum piercing.

Summer of 2022, I became more myself than I felt I ever have been before. I box dyed my hair as close to blonde as I could get it before starting my loc journey and getting my septum pierced.

"I didn't think it would be so short," he said. "I looked it up and you can add dreadlock extensions so you can look more feminine. I know a friend who did it and she looks good."

"I don't want extensions. It's called a loc journey for a reason," I explained

He hummed like he was listening or like he understood what I was saying. "You should get it retwisted. Every time I see you, it's like *poof*." He says, putting his hands around his head and gesturing them outwards, similar to what someone would do to gesture an afro.

I shook my head. "I like the way I look whether I have a retwist or not."

He looked at me with a raised eyebrow. "You like how it looks when it's unruly? You don't like looking neat and presentable?"

I took a deep breath. "Why is the way that my hair naturally grows from my scalp not acceptable or presentable?"

It's silent for a moment before he just changes the subject. "You're taking that thing out of your face for senior photos?"

Unimpressed, I side-eyed him. He was talking about my septum. "Mommy doesn't want me to. It wouldn't be authentic if I did."

He seems genuinely upset at this. "No way. You have to take it out. It's so ugly. Also, it's not professional. You'll never get a job with that thing in. That thing makes you look like an animal. Like a bull. You were so pretty without it."

"I'm still pretty with it."

"You look like a boy."

"I don't see what's wrong with that."

Black Love, Unbroken

Kanyon Matthews

Black love is a revolution,
A soft fury, fierce as roots tangled in the earth,
It is the rhythm of ancestors whispering in our bones,
A heartbeat that echoes from the cotton fields to the skyscrapers,
From the block to the boardroom,
From shackles to freedom songs.

Black love is the resilience of melanin,
A tapestry woven from pain and joy,
Stitched together with sweat, tears, and prayer,
It knows the taste of struggle
And the sweetness of survival.

Black love is a mirror
We look in, and we see all the hues,
The shades of brown that carry the sun
And the midnight blues of the nights we've endured.
It is the laughter we've shared,
Even when the world tried to steal our joy,
A defiant dance,
A song in a language they'll never understand.

Black love is a fortress,
Built with hands that were never meant to create,
But still, we built.
Our fingers shaped the bricks of hope
And our hearts laid the foundation.

It is the way we hold each other
In silence and in scream,
In every corner where our bodies have been beaten
But never broken,
Every kiss a promise,
Every touch a vow to never forget
What we are,
What we've been through,
And what we will rise to.

Black love is the fight for tomorrow,
It is the safe space we create within each other's arms,
A sanctuary where our scars turn to stars.
It is the love that survived the chains,
That bloomed in the cracks of injustice,
A flower that doesn't ask for permission
But blooms anyway.

We are unbreakable,
Not because we don't bleed,
But because we bleed fire and rise from the ashes,
In love.
Black love,
It's ours.
And it's forever.

Rhythm of Our Roots

Aaliyah Williams



Tartarus

Jade Trader

The damned building stood poised,
Lofty and upright.
Though the passages were not built to Unlock—condemned and
airtight.
An earthquake assaults,
So violently,
Causing sharper pain than that from first Degree.
Forced through a conduit pipe, dreadful Winds flee,
But the wind is never
True nor even is it free.
Dissonance breaks air.
The salt craving serpent made aware
Of the puddles that mirror tortured glare.
Sunken in,
Drilling downwards cursed stairs.
The tower ablaze.
A godawful fortress
That not even god could save.

Arizona, Who Am I To Love You?

Delaney O'Conner

Arizona! I'm from nowhere, who am I to love you?

Arizona, I've got nothing, who am I to love you?

Arizona, who am I to love you?

I was born under rain and clouds

Beside the choppy bay

I dream of your mountains

your deserts, your scorpion sting

Fill me with your venom, I'll gladly sink

Arizona

You're not a town, not a city

but a state

of mind.

Arizona

I'm a lover, a writer, a dreamer in my heart

I love you

I write of you

And I dream

of

Arizona, who am I to love you?

When desperate (which I always am for you)

I paint your motorcycles, the train

the blue in the sky

I imagine your desert warmth in the cold of Maryland nights

Arizona
I need your American Spirit
You puff in my face, I miss the smoke
I cough and choke
on

Arizona
can I come home to you?
Arizona
I can't sleep without you
Arizona
I need you, but
Arizona
who am I to love you?

Views From A Butterfly Garden, Tucson, Arizona

Emily Hollwedel



Spirituality in the car

Elaine Griffith

He Talks To Me About Spirituality In The Car

He says it's an individual journey, nature, the universe, the God of your understanding. What do I do when he's the only god I've ever understood? We're crossing the bridge when we see the dead motorcyclist on the side of the road. It was the kid who used to bully my sister in high school. No joke. Is that the spirituality he's trying to explain to me? A white sheet. A red stain. He asks me if I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be?

Once we're past the traffic he starts back up. He tells me about the psychology book he's reading, by a female author. He tells me about his sponsor. He doesn't once ask me how my classes are going even though he's literally driving me back to school. I'm really starting to understand why he thinks spirituality is strictly individual. I'm still thinking about the dead kid on the side of the road.

Popemobile

3rd Place Visual Art Prize Winner

Kaiya Mayhew



Writer's Block

Ian MacPhee

The stark white light of the blank sheet on his computer taunted him. The light was the only source of illumination in The Author's dark home on this cloudy night. He watched the blinking black line pop in and out of his existence as he dug into his thoughts for any minute idea to get him started until he could get his interviews underway. He thought of his last novel, he remembered the praise he received, the critics loved his grisly details, dark tones, and characters that felt so real they could jump out of the pages. He didn't want to be a one hit wonder, and it made him sick to think of everything he and his wife gave up to create that near masterpiece of a novel, just for him to trip as they started to get successful. He had to get the interviews tonight...no matter what.

He stepped out of his office and past the living room, his wife sat on the couch watching something on the television, she was quiet, but he could feel her disappointment in him. "I'm going to get through this writer's block tonight, I promise," he said; she did not respond. He walked through his house, and to the door, he twisted the lock, then unlocked the second one, and the third one, he took the stairs down into the basement letting the darkness creep up and surround him, his hand found the light switch, and the dank, dark room was illuminated in a sickly glow. In the basement were his three subjects for his interview process, their skin pale, their clothes torn, their legs chained to the wall, each one in a different corner. They glanced up at him, eyes red, The Author pulled a chair into the middle of the room and sat down with his computer. "My friends, you've only had to be here for three weeks, but it's been two months, and you still won't help me. All I've ever

asked of you is to tell me about your experience here. I wanted you to describe your hopelessness, fear, and desperation, but you've stayed quiet, wasting away in here, I bet you all are ready to leave."

Whether out of spite, fear, or something else, they did not speak, encasing the basement in silence. The Author sighed and pressed the bridge of his nose, "Fine" he responded to their silence, "if you don't want to be a part of my next story, then I will not force you." He stood up, "But if I leave and close that door behind me, understand it will never open again, you will shrivel up down here, turn to dust, and it will not be a pleasant experience, I assure you that." He turned and walked up the stairs, his heart sinking, if he couldn't find a new idea, he would destroy any dreams he had of doing what he loved and providing for his wife. As he reached the top, a weak cry brought his hopes back, he sprinted back down, his interviewees were ready to speak. Every question he asked they answered as quickly as possible, sobbing and screaming, their will finally broken. The Author typed feverishly as he felt the writer's block giving way to a rush of ideas, a storm of thoughts. He barely even knew what his hands were typing, but he knew it was perfect, he was in a state of pure bliss as page after page was filled.

He got to his feet, breathing heavily, "You all have helped me in ways unfathomable to the normal mind." He closed his computer and walked out of his basement, with his interviewees now speaking again, they began screaming and wailing for their freedom. He left the basement, making sure to lock all three locks. He ran to his wife, excitedly ready to share the news. The TV glow shone on her face, highlighting her beauty, her dark hair, her pale skin, her full lips, her glassy, white eyes, her gray face. He sat down next to her, he loved her enchanting aroma of rot, "I did it, I made them speak! Oh honey! It was wonderful! This new story

will be timeless! Nothing is more relatable than the fear of being trapped, I have pulled all of those emotions out and put them to paper!” He could feel the joy radiating off his still, cold partner. “You know I’ve always loved you, it’s true, every day since we’ve met. Except for the night you said my book had taken up too much of my life. You said you were leaving me, I couldn’t let you, so I made you stay with me forever,” he brushed the hair out of his wife’s face. “If I knew your death would have inspired my greatest success, I would have done it a lot sooner, and prevented all those petty arguments we had, I can barely remember what they were about.” He laughed a little, and could feel that his wife was amused too. “Well, I have to take care of our guests in the basement, and after that, I will continue my work. Thank you for all your support through my trials.” He kissed his wife’s cheek and got up. He slipped on a pair of gloves, unlocked the basement door, and silenced the horrid sounds begging for their freedom. He then returned to his office, and began to write.

All Around Colorless

Jade Trader



Grief

Ra'Nya Taylor

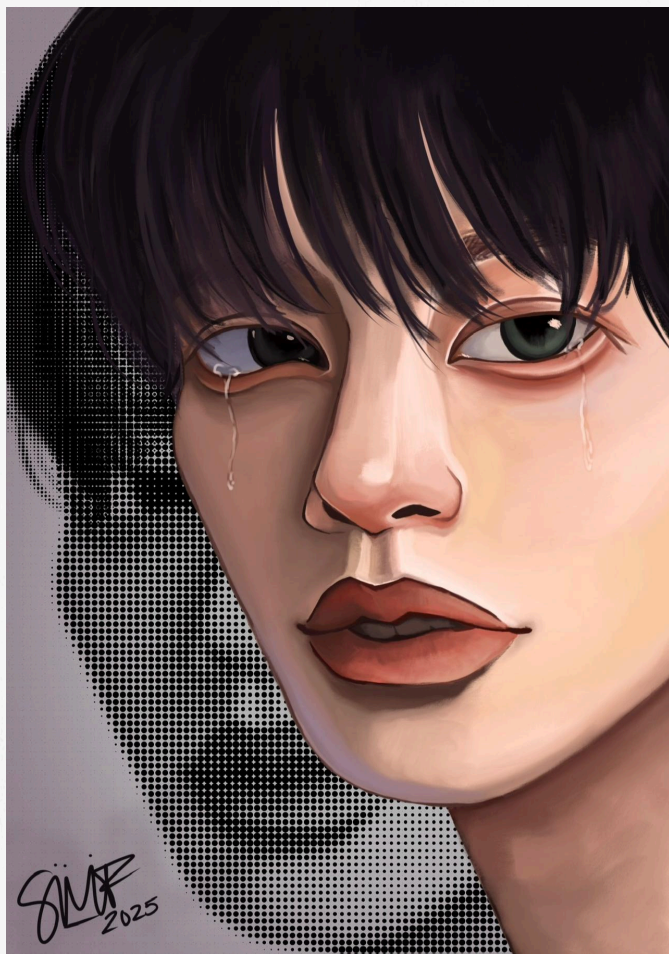
i am dipping my toes in the ocean
cool, refreshing, sand scraping my bare feet
a comfortable chill, brushing my ankles
the water has already pulled me under
cold, shock, freezing my heart
choking, unable to gasp for air
tumbling, unable to tell up from down

s
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the ocean spits me out
my lungs tighten
wringing water from themselves
sand and shells digging in my palms
i feel it
i am alive
the water recedes
it doesn't give me back what i lost
nor does it take anything more
i stay
i am dipping my toes in the ocean

Longing

Serenity Moseley-Few



Death and Glory

Jayla Pickeral

Six chimes rang out. The church song began.

“Jett.”

“...Jett.”

I sighed, all the fight left in me leaving in that single exhale.

“Jedediah.”

He grunts, low, and shifts in my lap. His head is heavy, his whole body weighing even more from his palpable exhaustion. But my fear turns to relief as he manages to mumble something to me.

“Don’t call me that.”

I can’t help but laugh. Leave it to him to be so close to death and yet still refuse to be called that name. The name of his father, passed down to him like a weak torch, burning down to the last ember.

He mumbles his nickname again, along with my name. Evelyn, and then Eve. I nod and repeat his back to him, the echo of the distant church bell heavy in my ears. I trace the scars on his cheek, new and old, feeling the raised skin, finding them from memory. I run a fingertip over his eyelids and find them closed; I can still remember the look of his ashen skin and the blue-green veins as he bled out beside me. I remember the tatters of his uniform, filled

with holes and tears, the sign of the struggle that left us here.

I ignore the blood slowly pooling beneath us both.

“It’s six. The...the day will be coming soon.” Wherever we ended up, the sun doesn’t reach here, so I am unsure if it is day or night, but I nod along to my own words anyway. The battle disoriented us, and we had to crawl away to survive, the church fading in the distance as we fell back to safety.

All around us is black, rotting wood that smells of mildew. I can only assume it’s a basement or crawl space of an abandoned house in the old neighborhood we had to trek through. Wherever we are, it is too small; my head grazes the ceiling when I sit up straight, and Jett’s boots press tightly against the wall in front of him, his knees bent. I’ve been picking at the wood in an attempt to find even the smallest glimpse of the outside, to feel the winter chill against my skin and find out exactly where we were, hoping to find the sun beaming through one of the cracks after resting my heavy eyes.

Despite everything that had happened, I need to see the sun. I need that little ray of hope that I stopped giving my time to so long ago. Selfish as it makes me seem, I want it, now. If not for my sake, then for his.

I say a prayer in my head. Worth a shot, though a part of me feels it is as useless as it’s always been.

We’d been doing good in our task of staying awake after the fight. Though he was suffering, every time his eyelids fluttered against my skin I remembered it was better than having them

closed and unmoving.

I want to see the blue of them again, so bright and always filled with mischief. It always comforted me, just like it did back home.

Home. My stomach feels heavy. I must have moved without realizing, because Jett shifts against me, upsetting his wounds and spreading more blood across my arm that holds him up.

“What’s wrong?”

“You’re worried about *me*? Be quiet.” I hold him tighter. I want to tell him to shut his mouth but his voice is just another small piece I need to put all my hope into. He’s suffering and yet still he can’t put away his stubbornness. I hate that I am grateful for it.

“I have to be. We promised, remember?” His breath was becoming labored, the effort of surviving exhausting.

“Do they even matter now?” My voice breaks. I lean down and press my forehead to his. He’s *so* cold. But he’s breathing. He will continue to. The blood loss...it isn’t as bad as we think. No, I can rip up my uniform or feel around for some more old cloth. He’ll be fine. Someone is going to come and find us and we’ll leave and he’ll get help and everything will be fine.

We’ll go home together.

“W-when we get out of here, I’ll help you find someone good enough to tolerate you. I’ll plan the entire wedding,” I say, my eyes burning when he laughs, a weak, wheezing sound.

“I’d love to see you try. Don’t...worry about me. I’ll be just fine. You’ll have him when you get back.”

His words slurred as he spoke. The wounds I packed haphazardly days ago, what feels like an entire lifetime, had fully reopened and soaked the gauze I had in my pack; now they were bloody, cold, useless. His weight presses fully against me. He couldn’t hold himself up anymore.

“Mhmm.” My voice is caught, and it chokes me.

“Don’t cry for me.”

His hands are cold against my face. Sticky with blood, his or another, it settles heavily against my cheek. The rest of his body is limp.

“Marry Greyson. He’ll be waiting for you. Give your kid a good name, okay? One they can be proud of.”

“You’ll spoil them rotten, I know it.” My body rocks forward, curling over him as if I could protect him. My ribs ache; my hands are shaking. My tears make it hard to see, and there’s a pain in my eyes I don’t notice, the single beam of the rising sun invisible to my grief.

“Be happy, Eve. You deserve it.”

He smiles, and I don’t even register the fact that I can see it now. I can see his smile and his dull blue eyes gazing up at me. I remember him telling me that my own looked like gold in the

sunlight. He always liked that color. He liked watching it appear over the horizon, watching the sunset over the ocean waves, illuminating that far away place that he hoped to reach someday.

What a lovely sight.

Seven chimes.

His hand falls. I can't stop myself from shaking him,
using all that's left of my strength.

"Jett."

"Jett!"

The church song began.

Untitled

Vera Deák



Cannibal

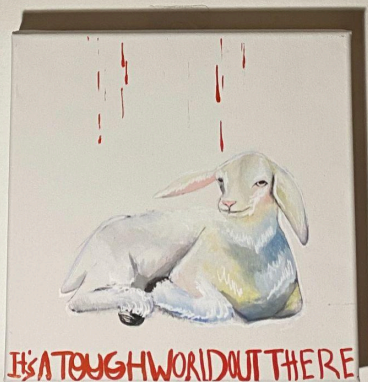
3rd Place Poetry

Ra'Nya Taylor

i will eat you alive
scrape the meat off your bones
gnaw at your sweet ribs
licking your dripping blood from my hands
savoring
taking
until you have nothing more to give
i finish you off with a kiss
what remains is your barely beating heart
and warm hand placed soft on my cheek
“i forgive you.”
despite my ill manners
despite my brokenness
i am overwhelmed with remorse
but the cannibal takes over
because you *have* a heart
i tear that from you too
not even bones are left when i'm through

Purity in Vain

Anna Dove



Snapped

Elana Petrone

Clarice watches the mouth move grotesquely. Watches it purely out of disgust, but is unable to turn away. Her thoughts are wicked. Those horrific, violent ideas are almost as bad as the way the mouth moves. *Almost*. Yet, she is purely entranced out of hatred. The subtle sounds of pencils scratching their faces against padded paper and the keyboards being smashed by fingers and clawed at by nails don't bother her. After all, she expects it from the setting. Today, though, she is challenged by a relentless mouth that refuses to quit. It says nothing, but makes enough noise to fill the shrinking room. Everyone else gets the hint that this is a classroom and not a cafeteria, except for one mouth.

Glancing around, Clarice sees others still working diligently with heads bent and writing tools scribbling furiously. Their oblivion only further exaggerates her auditory hell. What she would give to have just one person share a knowing look with her saying, *Yeah, I hear this joker too*.

The mouth is still going and she feels her own teeth clench together hard. Enamel against enamel as the layers of ivory chafe against each other. In a brief moment of what seems like foggy clarity, one thought: *Am I overreacting?* Before she can fully consider this her ears are pierced by the sounds of torture and the question disappears with her sanity. She imagines bits of fluffy cotton shoved deeply into her ears, so deeply they push against her ear drums and she is never able to retrieve them. The image soothes her and her jaw loosens for a moment. Then the mouth gets even louder for even longer. She grits her teeth even harder, cringing at the feeling of tooth on tooth, but needing to take an extreme measure to relieve some of her rage.

The blank page in front of her taunts her too. A white background completely empty except for a singular black line that blinks mockingly, daring her to write a word--just one--knowing

that she can't. She glances back up at the mouth, realizing she'd rather be tortured by that instead of her own writer's block.

The mouth is fed by a hand, equally grotesque in nature. The hand is covered in orange powder with nails encrusted with dark brown dirt (*she hopes*) and a similar neon orange powder. Everything about the hand annoys her without reason. Its sloppy shape and unkempt nails, even just its size. Clarice feels her face pull into a disgusted expression and she forces her lips out of their sneer and back into a neutral position. She watches as the hand moves to the mouth. Sluggishly, as if each centimeter movement exerts an extreme amount of energy. Clarice considers the fact that this too bothers her. She imagines that if the hand worked faster the whole ordeal wouldn't last as long. She gets the urge to shove the rest of the food down its throat so it'll all be over. But she doesn't move. The mouth meets its next victim and destroys it without ever fully shutting. Bits of orange chip fly out as collateral, but the mouth doesn't notice. The orange crumbs dot the mouth's desk and Clarice nearly gags. The horrific crunching is accompanied by loud lip smacking even after the chip-shaped target has been swallowed. Clarice's left eye twitches and she clenches her fists so tightly that she leaves crescent-shaped indents along her palms.

The only periods of relief for Clarice are when the hand is lethargically reaching for another morsel and when the mouth is gulping down liquid. Usually, the sounds that accompany guzzling a beverage are equally as offensive to her ears, but in the case of the mouth, greedy sips from a bottle are pure ecstasy compared to the aggressive chomping. The liquid rushes to meet the mouth as it sucks ferociously on the container's silicone tip, mimicking a baby desperate for drops of milk from a bottle. Clarice watches with disgust as the mouth fails to catch all the liquid and red juice dribbles from the corners of the mouth and down to the chin. Enough juice meets at the chin and it collects into a large drop that shivers before falling onto the mouth's desk to sit in the field of crumbs. Soon a pool of red has formed and the bits of discarded chips begin to swim around and transform into mushy pieces.

Clarice's pencil feels brittle in her hands as she slowly bends it further and further until it--**snaps**. Two broken halves of a yellow Ticonderoga sit in either of her hands. The mouth brings the hand to the red pool and begins to swirl the broken mush like finger paint. One hand roleplays Picasso while the other continues to shovel the endless amount of chips into the mouth. With every crunch her hands tighten around the broken pencil fragments, pushing their edges deeper and deeper into her palms. Then she remembers the image of fluffy cotton diving deeper and deeper into her ear canals. Clarice closes her eyes and feels the relief wash over her. For the first time in 60 minutes, there is silence.

That's when she feels her shoulders being shaken. Clarice turns to see her teacher screaming wordlessly. *Maybe she noticed the mouth.* She looks around at her classmates only to find them staring at her with looks of horror plastered on each of their faces. A warm liquid drips from Clarice's ears and snakes down onto her arms. The crimson drops splatter against her desk, creating a red pool on the wood grain. Her hands shoot up to feel her ears and come away with bloody stubs of the Ticonderoga. The halves fall out of her hands and into the growing lake on her desk. She spots the mouth, finally motionless and gaping open to reveal orange stained teeth and crevices filled with chomped up chips. Her whole body begins to shake violently. At first she thinks, *Maybe I'm crying*, but then Clarice realizes that she can't stop laughing, and laughing, and laughing.

Untitled

Vera Deák



Unsweet

Eli Ciabatonni

If I become unsweet
Will they see the words I breathe,
Buttery and blessed as our wedding vow,
Poetic placement, pretty as our bells?
I may never wear white but,
I could kill to be red.

If I corrupt with a calloused kiss,
In uncrowded corners,
To carve our 20 karat rings,
Would they crave a companion?

If I let go of rainy lullabies,
That softly patter on pained windows,
For a deceitful violin,
Arms, mouth, lungs, legs, lay open to anyone,
Could I lure in an angel,
On the end of a lyrical hook,
Willing to be strung along?

Though my throat has never known the scratch of Whiskey,
I could pluck your heart as I pour your glass,
In the hours crickets keep company,
And slyly pick your pieces up neat.

If it means anyone would willingly wake me with coffee,
When cicadas sing sweet serenades,
And declare me into a decadent duet,
I will learn to be bitter.

At Her Mercy

Madi Wise



Elegy to My Ghost in the Phone

Robin Odom

The fingers of isolation grasp my heart,
Cold as the empty sheets
that never even held her warmth.

My ghost-maiden, ferried to me through wire.
Electrical pulses, charged like her touch
That demands all the space in my mind.

Some days I feel like Orpheus;
The pining poet desperate for his distant love,
Trudging through the darkest depths.

I too would travel through hell,
Sing to stones till my fingers bled,
Aching to catch a glimpse of her.

She calls to me from the dark.
I hear her voice, know she follows,
Yet reach behind and only grasp air.

The light ahead remains my hope.
A shining screen that holds a visage,
Memory full from the images I hold.

It does not matter if I look behind.
The Moon will carry my glances,
The wind my wishes.

My loneliness will not last forever.

The Last Outpost

Panka Rebeka Szancsik



The Unmasking

Elana Petrone

Balanced between her cream-colored clavicles sat a heart-shaped golden locket embedded with an emerald jewel that glinted when the sunlight touched it. The pendant itself was unweathered and pristine, despite her constant fidgeting with it. However, the chain was beginning to lose its shine. Once a pure gold that was so radiant it almost hurt to look at, the chain now had begun to show its age over time by slowly dulling into a more brassy hue. Over the years, a slow irritation had also begun on its wearer's neck, evident by the small indents dotting her delicate skin.

The wearer herself was always so put together, hair neatly tied back and fastened with a silk ribbon, shoes—always high heels—freshly polished and never scuffed, and makeup that never creased. Her face was pulled taut over her skull and her elegant nose curved in a way that made her appear elven and all the more regal. Her high cheekbones accentuated her plump cheeks and when she smiled, although rare, a spotlight seemed to highlight her beauty. I never was good at guessing ages, but she couldn't have been more than 35. Faint smile lines were beginning to creep up at the edges of her lightly rouged lips and she had a sprinkle of silver hairs that added dimension and shine to her otherwise dull, brown hair. Everything that was supposed to detract from her beauty only added to her aging gracefully. She did not flaunt her looks, rather she almost seemed ashamed of them. Although she wore makeup, it was always subtle but still managed to further add to her radiance. Her clothes never demanded attention, but instead were neatly modest and never showed excessive skin. The only thing about her that opposed her beauty was the locket. Although beautiful in its own right, it somehow clashed with her. The

locket's brilliance combined with her own should have been too much for this world, but instead, putting them together made them both look more ordinary. She seemed aware of this, and perhaps that's why she was never seen without it.

I followed her after work one day, drunk with her musky vanilla scented perfume. I was determined to know what such a lady of class like her does after a busy day of playing secretary to our slob of a boss. Normally, I refrain from giving into my personal curiosities when a co-worker is involved, but I found my feet moving before my head could stop them. She was harder to follow than I would have guessed. In the office, her gait was slow and deliberate like she was scared to step too hard on the ground for fear it was made of glass. However, as soon as her brunette head ducked out of the office building's door, she was practically running. She had me by probably 5 inches, but I had assumed that her skinny stiletto heels would have slowed her down—my own chunky Mary Janes were far more suited to city walking. She took a sharp right turn and I had to quicken my pace so as not to lose her. The crowd of workers emerging from their own tall office buildings created a massive ocean of people that swallowed me up. I became one with the swarm and let it push me along like a fish swimming with the current. Just a few pedestrians in front of me, I spotted her head poking out as she bobbed along steadily. The wave of people seemed to part around her. I pushed my way past a few slower walkers and almost face-planted into her silk blouse that today was a pale blush color, perfectly matching the ribbon holding back her hair. I made note of the fact that her stride had slowed, almost fully returning to its normal, careful gait and adjusted my own pace to match. Without any indication, she turned quickly, grabbed the golden handle of a warmly lit upscale bar, and disappeared inside. I froze in the middle of the sidewalk with

people pushing past me and muttering foul words in my direction. A hard elbow to the gut of a particularly rude passerby jolted me out of my daze and I followed her trail, finding my own way to the door. Upon reaching it, I was surprised to find that the handle was still warm from her touch. I savored the curious warmth for a second before trying the door. It had more weight to it than I had expected based on the way she had effortlessly pulled it open and I had to brace my arm before I tugged the handle. Before I was even fully inside, I could feel the atmosphere come alive around me.

The room was pulsing with energy and the air had a thick, rich quality. My senses were overwhelmed, but pleasantly intrigued. The mingling scent of expensive perfumes and espresso martinis were carried by a refreshing breeze of AC air that pulled me further and further into the room. A plush, wine-colored carpet covered the entire floor and flowed over onto the stairs complimented by golden railings on either side leading down into the main bar area. An oversized painting of a half-human-half-dog holding a glass of red wine greeted me from across the way. Its eyes seemed to follow me as I moved. Quiet chatter was complimented by Norah Jones crooning through the speakers. I couldn't remember the title of the song, but her familiar velveteen voice filled me with warmth. My eyes traced the room and I realized that everyone else present appeared to have the air of a much older and more established person. Despite this, they all looked even younger than I did. The only thing that threw me off were their hands.

Wrapped around shiny glasses of alcohol, gesturing in the air for emphasis, sitting in a neat pile intertwined on tabletops—were heavily wrinkled hands dotted with sunspots. Their knuckles jutted out sharply like mountains and pulled on their paper-thin skin making the tendrils of veins coursing between

them highly visible. As they wrapped their bony fingers around the delicate stems of wine glasses, their skin threatened to tear and reveal the white bone underneath. Minus their aged hands, the rest of their skin and their faces were flawless, leading me to believe they were 25, like me. However, their grotesque hands placed them to be in their late 60s. The women all had their hair pulled back with silk ribbons that matched their outfits and I was struck with a sense of déjà vu, although I couldn't place why.

One woman in particular caught my attention. She was sitting alone, carefully watching the room and tapping her glass in time with the music. She had coffin-shaped nails that were painted a deep plum shade and added a sense of elegance to her aging hands. Her eyes never stopped scanning the room, but she didn't seem to be simply people-watching, rather her hawklike observations gave the impression of a lioness on a hunt. My eyes lingered for a second too long and her head suddenly snapped to catch me staring. I quickly averted my gaze, but pulled my eyes back to her after catching a glint of gold reflecting from her chest. It was a golden, heart-shaped pendant. Even from a distance, I could tell it was the exact same one my co-worker wears. The only indication of difference was its gem--the lioness's was amethyst. The sudden reminder of my co-worker sent me into a panic. I resumed my visual sweep of the room, glancing quickly at each woman only to be disturbed at how nearly identical they all looked. Each woman had the same elven face as my co-worker complete with an elegantly curved nose and plump cheeks complimented by high cheekbones. Despite the subtle differences in hair, eye color, and skin shade, they were carbon copies of one another. My eyes drifted to their collar bones and were met by familiar golden pendants all glinting with brilliance under the warm glow of the perfectly lit room. I jumped from one to the next only to find that

they were all identical, except for the type of gemstone set in the middle. *Uncanny*. The bile in my throat began to rise, but I swallowed it back, wincing at the puke-tainted flavor of my cobb salad from lunch. I started to back away, but collided with someone, nearly tripping over my clunky shoes. I turned to apologize, but stopped short when her familiar scent tickled my nose.

“Luna?” Her sweet voice came out harsher than usual with an edge of accusation.

“Esther, hi, I was just-”

“Leaving, right?” She cocked her head to the left and forced a tight-lipped smile that looked more predatory than comforting. “Don’t be silly, come along.” Her bony fingers wrapped firmly around my arm and she guided me through the room. I had never noticed how terribly aged her hands were.

Each table we passed looked enviously at me. Even though all the women looked identical, Esther had a particular air about her. Whereas the other women seemed on-edge in the presence of others with the same level of beauty, she continued to carry herself with a sense of grace and composure no matter the appearance of anyone else. Compared to the other women, Esther was the blueprint and the rest were just playing dress-up in her skin. The thought sent shivers down my spine.

The half-human-half-dog watched us as we crossed the room, its Spaniel snout trailing my every move. We approached a table in a secluded corner of the bar and Esther pushed me into its plush booth. She planted herself beside me in the booth despite the empty chairs across the table. My heart pounded against its cage. Her wrinkled hand flagged down a waiter and she ordered two espresso martinis, not once bothering to consult me. The waiter

didn't say a word, just nodded his head fervently making his brown curls bounce in unison. I noticed that he avoided looking at me.

From our corner booth, the barroom took on a new shape. The lighting hit the women at awkward angles highlighting their too-perfect faces in unflattering ways. What once had appeared as a regal room filled with gorgeous women was now a badly lit space with heavily made up women concealing their flaws and insecurities under what I could only assume was copious amounts of plastic surgery. Esther must have noticed my upturned nose because she turned to me with narrowed eyes as if trying to read my thoughts. Up close, even Esther wasn't as beautiful as I had once believed. While her features were all perfect, they didn't compliment each other. I scrutinized her face, examining each feature separately, breaking her beauty down until she was just a blank canvas with well-drawn features that had no relation. It was like looking at a beautiful painting for the millionth time only to realize the sun was in the wrong spot, the shadows didn't align, and the grass was all dead. My eyes drifted to her necklace and subsequently to the deep marks in her neck from always wearing it. Her hand reached up to her neck as if to avert my attention and she began fidgeting with the heart pendant.

"How did you get in here?" Her voice had the same roughness to it as before.

"I just opened the door after you."

She cursed under her breath.

"What? Do you not usually get other New York randos just strolling in?" I quipped, surprised at my own sudden harshness.

"No, actually, we have a scanner on the handle that ensures anyone who comes in is a *member*," she practically spat the last word out.

I churned her words over in my head, remembering how strangely warm the door handle had been when I grabbed it. Because I had been following so closely behind her, the scanner must have still been resetting, allowing me those few seconds to enter. The more I learned about this place the more I wanted to leave.

Our espresso martinis were delivered by the same curly-headed boy who once again avoided my gaze, even when I thanked him. As he had set the drinks down, I studied his face and realized he was the only person in here who looked normal. His nose was dotted with light freckles and he had heavy eye bags under his deep brown eyes which were hidden behind tortoise-shell rimmed glasses. The eye bags humanized him and I was reminded of my own dark shadows which I covered every morning with concealer. Another thought occurred to me at that moment: *he was the only male and lone server in the entire room.*

“Cute, huh?” Esther prodded. “I like to keep him around as eye candy. Plus, well, let’s just say he’ll never tell anyone about this place.”

I must have looked puzzled because she continued, “Oh, dear, I never pegged you as stupid! Why, he’s mute.” My face shifted from confusement to pure disgust. She laughed lightly, covering her mouth politely with a bony hand, “Well don’t look at me like it’s my fault! Oh no, he came to us this way.”

“So, what is this place,” I questioned.

Instead of answering, she launched into a rehearsed speech like she was selling a product to a hesitant customer. “Have you ever wanted to be beautiful? I’m sure you have. It’s every little girl’s dream. I mean especially you, a girl with a gorgeous name like Luna, yet someone who couldn’t be further from beautiful!”

I had the urge to throw my espresso martini in her face.

“Well, all of them here always wanted to be beautiful. Some of them craved youth more than beauty, but I think they go hand-in-hand, so why not give them both? Of course, I *am* the original. Minus of course a few necessary adjustments as time has tried to rip my beauty from me.” She motioned to her face with her pruny hand. “I made them better and I could make you better too.” Her catlike eyes flashed with mischief.

I shook my head in disgust, “I would never want to change my face. Especially not to look like *yours*.”

She mocked clutching at pearls and rolled her eyes. “It’s always the most ugly that are the least willing to change.” She sighed, “You know being beautiful doesn’t mean you lose your personality, right? I mean, I’ve seen the way you follow me with your eyes around the office. If you looked like me, people would notice you the same way strangers notice me. Plus, it’s all reversible.” This last sentence she said with a cruel smile that turned my stomach.

“Reversible, but how?” All I wanted to do was run, but I knew she wouldn’t let me go until she at least was satisfied with our conversation.

Instead of responding, her ancient hand reached up to her hair and loosened the silk ribbon. Her brown hair cascaded down and her face loosened. She looked like she was melting. Her taut and perfect skin was now hanging loosely off her bones. An image of a Michael Myers mask I had seen once in a Halloween store sprung to mind.

“Much better.” The skin of her lips flapped as she spoke. She reached behind her neck and found the clasp holding her necklace together and undid it. Like a snake shedding its skin, her entire face and neck crumpled off of her and into a fleshy pile in her hands. I gasped. She looked up at me and I could barely bring

my eyes to meet her face. The elven nose was the same, and so were her high cheekbones, but everything else had been worked into the mask she wore. Her light gray eyes were deeply sunken into her face and surrounded by heavy wrinkles. Her full lips were now nothing but two straight, wormy lines. Her plump cheeks were just a ruse and without the mask, she was left with two gaunt depressions in her face making her resemble a skeleton. Even her neck had lost its perfection. Now, it was just loose skin weighed down by a lifetime of gravity. Without the mask, she looked to be in her late 60s or 70s, but I thought about how quickly she had walked here in those heels. There was no way she was that old.

“How old are you really, then?”

“Oh, I’m barely 40. I’m sure you’re wondering how I can look so old. Well, my real face never gets any sunlight, never gets washed or taken care of, and on top of it all, this mask is terrible for your skin because of all the injections in it so it stays fresh. Of course, it doesn’t matter though because nobody will ever see your real skin again unless you show them for some reason. As for my hands, well, the skin for the mask had to come from somewhere.” She pulled up the sleeves of her silk blouse revealing light scarring encircling her wrists. “A small price to pay for everlasting beauty!” She cackled at her own comment.

Everything began to fall into place, even her modest clothing worn to cover up her scars. I thought back in horror of how she had shed her skin so easily and walked myself through each action. Her hair was always tied back so tightly, this must be what keeps the mask taut, hence why she never wore it down. As for the necklace, the clasp must keep the mask clipped in place. Even the marks in her neck made sense. The loose skin in her neck being shoved underneath the mask made the necklace too tight causing the chain to dig into her constantly.

She pushed my espresso martini towards me with her skeleton-like hand, "Drink up!" The wine glass made an awful screeching noise against the glass table and a few women turned to stare.

The sight of her ghastly hand disgusted me, and I was left briefly wondering whose skin she wore on her hands. Shuddering, I decided I didn't want to know. I looked back at the martini hesitantly, but decided that a sip couldn't hurt. After all, she'd been sitting here with me the entire time and I had seen her every move. The creamy coffee slid richly down my throat and I felt an instant warmth pool in my belly. Immediately, I felt more relaxed. I leaned my head against the booth and realized how exhausted I was. Work had been long today and I had wanted to go home and take a nap before I became preoccupied with unraveling the secrets of Esther. My eyelids started to droop heavily and I felt my head bob up and down as I tried to shake the sleep off. My breathing slowed and everything began to move in slow-motion. I blinked my eyes slowly and watched as the waiter approached the table again. He looked so sad as he reached towards me to pull my limp body from the booth.

A bright white light glared down over me. I fought to open my eyes against it. My head was throbbing and my entire face felt tight and sore. My hands found my face and immediately I knew something was off. My usual flat, straight nose was now angled with a slight upturn at the tip. Panicking, my hands searched the rest of my face for unfamiliar features. My cheekbones were too high, my cheeks too full, my lips unnaturally puffy. My hands shook as I pulled them from my face. Wrinkled, pruny skin covered my hands and the raw scars on my wrist were covered with thick, white gauze. The bile I had fought so hard to keep down finally rose and escaped from my mouth, splashing onto the

sterile linoleum floor into a liquidy dark brown puddle that reeked like rotten coffee. My stomach emptied itself twice more before I could pull myself back into an upright position and gather my thoughts. *Reversible*. The word echoed in my mind. I felt around to the back of my head and felt the tight ribbon holding back my hair. I winced as my wrists rotated, straining my fresh stitches almost to the point of tearing, to pull the ribbon out. It came loose easily and I set it in my lap. It was a cream-colored, satin ribbon. Pinpricks of blood were beginning to surface on the gauze. Next was the necklace. My fingers were softer than I was used to and it made it more difficult to grasp the clasp. It slipped three times before I finally got a hold using the underside of my nail and released it. The necklace fell into my hands and I looked at the pendant and the gemstone set inside: it was a pearl. The iridescent gem shone against the lights and produced a brilliant, but subtle, shiny pink that had an almost hypnotic quality. The blood, now trickling out of the gauze in dramatic streaks of red, pulled my eyes away from the pearl. The crimson streams reminded me of the desperation of my situation and I refocused. I shook my head gently to try and remove the mask, recalling the way Esther's had just crumpled off, but mine seemed to be stuck. Gently, I reached to my hairline and tried to tug it off. It wouldn't budge. Instead, a wave of pain rippled throughout my face causing me to squeal out. My hands flew away from my hair like it was on fire and hot tears began to rush down the unfamiliar face now sitting upon my own. Esther must've heard because she entered the room wearing a wicked grin. Her Cheshire Cat-like smile was broken briefly as she eyed the contents of my stomach on the floor. She said nothing as she stepped around the puddle, and handed me a mirror.

I tried to find myself in its reflection, but all I saw was a version of Esther stitched to my face staring back at me with a look of terror.

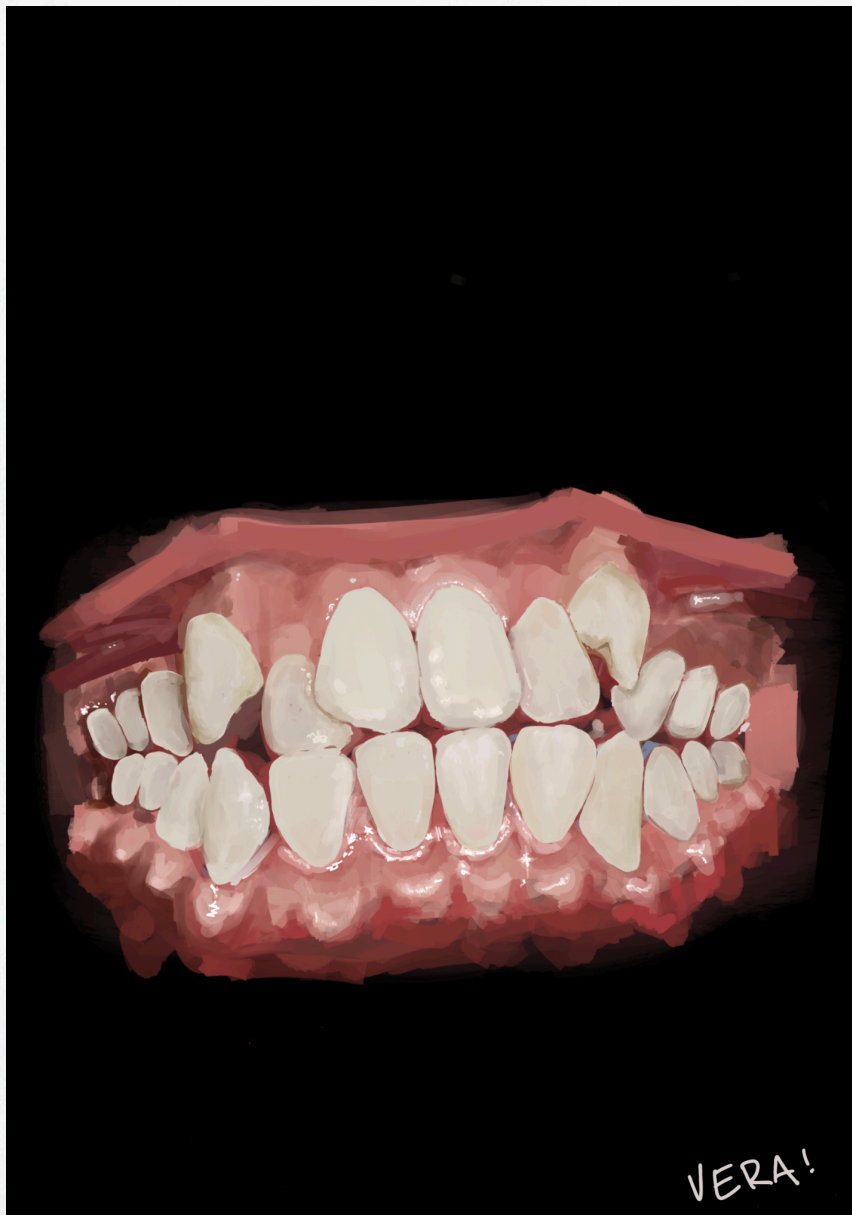
Folk-tale spider inspired tattoo design

Anna Dove



Untitled

Vera Deák



The Butcher

Sofia Divens

Every one's a natural beauty.
Raw and sweet. Good
meat is on the outside,
tanned and oiled. Spread and folded.
Over-kneaded and overruled.

Plucked feather roots, with
out the gooseflesh. Pumped
Ladies, with their tart cream and juicy thickness,
perfect nature, pink grapefruit.
Food is ugly.
Meat is

beautiful. Primed
ribs and marinated
thighs. Temperature
controlled-aging.
Segmented sex.
Where does

the fat go? Chewed
gum and gristle,
spit out and lapped up.
Slapped-blood-rush.

An empty carcass.
An ornamented surface.

Section Three

By The Burning Wick

Mug Mortem

3rd Place Prose Prize Winner

Skylar Thomas

I have grown to loathe the heat. Not the heat of summer, when my ceramic body would glow in the sun, and warm me from my base's chill. In that season I am not scalded in the heat, barely used. The scorch that makes me writhe is in the cold seasons, with the pain I dread of being used. My chipped rim has begun to look like the canyon ridges of Polly's computer picture, jagged and disheveled. I was once smooth all around. Marble-like, suave and silk to the touch. The reflection of the cabinet glass always reminds me of my poor handle that has faded from its former vividness; how it had stunned her eyes with its cool, Caribbean blue, and how that glazed color blew gently like mist into the porcelain-white of the rest of me.

All of me is the same color now.

Gray. Gray as the clouds that signal my torture, like an omen. Each storm that rolls in hangs ominously over the windows. They tell me when I am to be placed beside the coffee pot, and forced to watch the hourglass of liquid countdown my peace. The caressing memory of the store shelf cradled me in those imminent moments, and I chose to fix my reality on that asylum.

I remember the once guiltless Polly gliding into the store, her ruffled brown skirt fluttering as she explored the aisles of glossy kitchenware. It was a wonder that she would pick me, an exception to the clean-cut, bone-white mugs that were always the first to go. She saw me as a challenge. How Polly so gravitated towards the shiny twinkles of life, only to grievously choke its candle ember with a jar for some sick, twisted entertainment. I wished I had legs of some sort when she descended now, like the autumn leaves outside. Polly's hand strangled my handle, and I knew the grooves of her fingertips were embalmed into it. She wrenched me from my cabinet.

“You can use my favorite mug, Camila. It’s a little faded, but it holds my coffee, right?” She smiled to her friend sitting on the torture table, that shabby “antique” teal table that had grooves that screamed like Edvard Munch’s painting. At least I wasn’t subject to serving my usual warden. She always left lipstick bloodstains on my rim, just to scrub, scrub, scrub, and rub the paint off until she deemed the blotch removed. I went cold all over remembering her other method of suffering; the sink. I was plagued by the memory of a slimy feeling of gunk sticking to me, and the rancid, poisonous, grotesque stench of it. Small mercies came in the form of handwashing immediately after her burning me.

Camila seemed a more observant human being, exploring the expanse of the room as Polly rummaged for coffee grounds. Her lips pursed, surely in reaction to the vegetation Polly liked to keep for trophy pets inside pots. Her skinny, rectangular glasses observed the window sills which were all grown over in greenery. Although, no plants were fed pure sunlight, as it was filtered through the stained color Polly slapped onto all the windows. Camila’s nose wrinkled as she witnessed the incense burner on the edge of the hall table leading to the bedroom, now able to put a source behind the raw smell of soil, harsh rain and pine. She felt inside her purse for a hand mirror. As she appraised herself, I thought perhaps she was assuring that she had not begun to grow roots in this stinking terrarium of a home. I decided if I had one favorite human it would be Camila. She, like me, was a realist plopped into this whimsical facade of nature immersion, and saw it for the desolate foundation it was for life to be expected to thrive.

Again I was set by the coffee pot, the heat already emitting. I watched the coffee pour in a sinister stream, pooling in the pot. The tar black liquid rippled and sloshed, a River Styx that I swore showed me the gaping wraiths of other cracked and tattered mugs in its void. All this, and Polly just kept pleasantly chatting with Camila. Camila’s voice muttered under the gurgle of the coffee stream,

"It certainly is old. And you haven't uh, expanded your collection?"

"Nope, I like my comfort items. I've used that mug and only that mug for as long as I can remember. It was my crutch through college, and I'll use it till it crumbles into dust."

Till it crumbles into dust.

Was that all I was supposed to exist for? To dread every chilled season, and endure being engulfed in flaming coffee again and again and again, until I am simply not even a distinguishable mold anymore? Would Polly let go of me then as she said, or would her psychotic brain nurse the idea of welding me back together, for another life cycle of misery?

The coffee pot was halfway full.

Polly glanced back at me to see it. She clasped her hands together in anticipation. As she exuded her aura of superiority amid her specimen of a home, I hoped Camila saw how convictive pride in using things until they are mere ragged shadows of its time pulsed inside Polly's cruel mind. Her plants did not keep growing. In fact, they have been dead for a while, having been gluttonously overflowed with water and malnourished by the simulated, candied sun.

I resolved not to wait until I became ruined, like a sculpture grown ragged of admiration.

I would find a way to shatter before that happened.

As I brooded, Camila kept eyeing me in my peripheral vision as Polly released her hands to sporadically talk with them. I focused on the eyes that beheld me, hoping that the mere principle of her being a different person from Polly would instill some sympathy for me. The coffee pot was filled to its brim during my swirling maelstrom of despairing hope.

Polly stalked over to me, pushing all the might of her heels onto the floor with every step as she usually does.

She lifted me.

The coffee machine sizzled as she spilled drops over the brim, like static. The first drop of lava began to slither out of the—

"Wait!"

Polly paused.

“Polly, I’ll get it for you. You’ve been such a generous hostess, I can serve myself”. Camila mustered an insistent smile. Polly wistfully conceded, and lowered me from her calloused hands. Polly went to overgorge another plant with water as Camila walked over to me, her steps calculated. Her hands felt like porcelain when she lifted me, a small caress before the routine session of temporary death.

Except I didn’t get burned at all.

Camila’s glove-like fingers slipped off like a sash brushing my handle, further and further away, until I felt nothing, except the floor in the next millisecond.

I had cracked like a sculpture in an earthquake.

As I heard the rumblings of Camila’s steady apologies and Polly’s exasperation, I felt an openness greater than my life on the store shelf. Not the joy of being among kitchenware like myself, but to be the very negation of the thing. My ashen crumbles were like glitter as I laid without any more tension. I found myself being scraped up into a huge sandwich bag by Camila, and her promises of getting Polly a new mug sang like a heavenly choir.

Primitive Vertigo

Harrison Booth



Espresso Observations

Eli Ciabatonni

Another goddamn day in this hell hole excuse of a “business.” Same ever-changing wall, the blue warped clock was a new addition though, same obnoxious boba maker, fuck that guy, same coffee grounds going in and out of me, Same rotation of Bubbles and Bobbles baristas all at my mercy. It is one of the few pleasures in my life to make all of them my worshippers, paying me in offerings of compliments through the day. When manipulating your loyal customer service employees, always remember to remind them that they need you more than you need them. They all know the punishment for their misdoings is telling a customer there is no espresso in the coffee shop. If they wanna forget to polish me or tell me, I make the best espresso then they can play Karen roulette. However you need to find a balance. Karen roulette is all fun and games until one of your worshippers quits and you need Manager Mark to take them in the back where there will be no witnesses.

The current barista making drinks is one of the smarter of my following, well traumatized by my breakdowns at inconvenient moments. I think their name is Ben but it could also be Axel, don’t know, don’t care as long as they take orders. They change the music every shift, the others blindly trusting their taste like they blindly trust the bookshelves twice even my age to hold more nicknacks than books. Today they picked out some kind of poppy, rocky, nonsense that needs more guitar in my high but humble opinion. It’s good enough for a slow day I guess, at least it isn’t something one of the others called “electronica.” (He is banned from ever touching the music again.) My favorite music so far has been the modern hard rock they put on when the manager isn’t working and the “metal” music. This one is always gentle with their hands, never pulling my cranks too hard, knowing they are vintage and delicate, and periodically using my favorite rag to keep me pristinely clean. However, right now they’re barely even paying

attention to what they're doing. This is not the first time they've used my perfect reflection to stare at a very specific regular customer. You know, like a creep. While I trust this one to take care while making espresso, a little extra comment about how they're sure it tastes extra strong today would be nice. Now normally, I don't mind any of the regulars. They are entertaining and provide a little lift to my day. But Ben's favorite customer- Ben who is always gentle and wears bright colors and can make any drink on the menu faster than the others while keeping the quality of taste, their *favorite* regular- is the complete opposite of Ben from the looks of it.

When Ben turns away from me, I can settle into the wall. It is finally the perfect temperature to relax against, and people watch. This is the only reason I choose to continue working, to be comfy and watch all the interesting characters going through the cafe. At least until some BS fake hipster walks in and ruins it with chilly air from outside. Fortunately, it seems like a slow day. Unfortunately, that means my people to watch are limited. There's the usual old couple who always share desserts, today they got a slice of Maggie's perfect coffee cake. Good choice, can never go wrong with Maggie's coffee cake, she's been serving it here for a decade and it is the only dessert that is sold out before noon every day. Usually, the old couple come in and chatter about some pointless bingo drama, Agnes being a frequent character in their stories. To my knowledge, Agnes has never set foot in my cafe. But she will always be unwelcome by MY standards. Usually around this time on Tuesdays there is a dog walker, I think I heard Ben call him Ethan once, that picks up a latte before he picks up a beagle *definitely* named Doug. Ben always says hello to him by flipping a coin to predict if Doug will be ready for his walk or still asleep on top of his owner's shoes when the dog walker arrives. The results are relayed before taking his order and they share a moment of dreaded silence if the coin predicts Doug will be sleeping. The coin flip is only right about 20% of the time, Doug being a nap machine not even the best math and science students

on the local campus could predict with perfect accuracy. Maybe that should be a new major for the college, Studies in Doug.

“Cappuccino!”

Ben,

shut up.

I’ve sat in this spot for so many years the wall behind me is probably a different color, never knowing what the sunshine from the window feels like. It stays the shape I imprint on it, like how these humans have a favorite spot in their living rooms, a mark on the space that is uniquely mine for eternity. Or how the regulars keep to their preferred tables. The most boring of my regulars always sits where she can see everything on the back wall. Her bag looks like fake leather, and she always orders the same thing, notably without espresso. I don’t know what her problem is with me, but I am too important, and frankly too old, to care. So what if she never knows the joy of what I do, her loss. This is the customer Ben stares at every day, the holder of Ben’s obsession, the distracting reason I am not getting my usual daily compliments. She doesn’t chat much with the baristas, always has her nose in her computer, occasionally asks about a new trinket on a shelf without any excuse for her curiosity, and seems to almost, freakishly, enjoy all the eclectic decorating of the cafe. If I had it my way, this place would be styled to reflect the perfect rock and roll cafe with red and black everywhere and guitars on the walls. But the owner of the building is one of the few employees not under my command. For someone who is here nearly every day, you’d think the regular would be better entertainment, she must have something new going on eventually or maybe bring a friend in with her, but no. She is always here, alone, a quiet distraction for Ben and boring for me.

I don’t understand why Ben is so obsessed with her. She never has paint stains on her clothes to imply an artistic soul like Ben, she always sits straight like it would kill her to slouch, and

she makes camp at the same table, against the wall with exposed brick, in the same seat, facing away from the door, toward the menagerie the owner calls her clock collection, and ignores the rest of the world for no good reason. I have no clue what she even does outside of this cafe. At least with this one guy who needs a haircut there are guesses, but this customer just, assumedly, goes to class and comes here, never talking to the other baristas about a party or concert or anything that sounds like actual fun. She is incredibly sucked into her computer. One time someone staged a flash mob proposal in here and she didn't even glance up at the scene. How are you going to ignore such a romantic gesture happening in front of you? In real life!

Ben's music taste is apparently trustworthy, but their voice when this regular walks in? Gone. It's like magic. Maybe the regular is a witch, spending her free time putting curses of boredom on everyone who crosses her. She wears enough black and dark colors to be one, and at least then she'd have something interesting about her.

Ben has been under the spell of this regular for nearly four years now and still has no clue how to interact with her. Just last week the stranger walked up to the counter to ask Ben a question about why her coffee tastes different when Ben makes it compared to the others, and it was the *first* time they ever spoke. Ben got so tongue tied, not expecting to ever actually interact with her, that they didn't even ask for a name. Oh, did I mention that for the past year Ben, like a creepy sweetheart, has been secretly adding cinnamon to the regular's coffee ever since she ordered it one time, said she liked it, but then didn't order it again after the prices got jacked up? Yeah, Ben has been obsessive over this one for a long time. Ben is an artist in every sense of the word, being capable of nothing less than pure creativity, and always tries to make the coffee for even the rudest customers good. What does this witch have that makes them so flustered? Some kind of enchanted aura? What if she doesn't like the same shows Ben can get hyper fixated on? What if they finally have a normal conversation, go on a date, then they break up and Ben comes in heartbroken? Might

have to see if Manager Mark could arrange one of his own spells in that scenario.

I'm getting ahead of myself. Ben could not keep up the conversation with her long enough to do that. Ever since the incident last week, I've caught the weird stranger sneaking glances at Ben when she thinks they aren't looking. I don't know if Ben has noticed but she wasn't exactly subtle about it from my own observations.

As the cappuccino was picked up by that one regular who clearly doesn't know what a haircut is, the baristas always try to guess his occupation and the leading guess right now is tech guru, Ben grabs a rag and hunches over the counter to clean a mark left by the cup. They go slower than they need to, taking the time to not so sneakily look at the strange regular who is packing up their stuff. Probably off to some class about some boring topic, like the history of cash registers. Maybe they can explain how one of the ones here keeps breaking after it digitally "updated." Whatever that means. At least when I break it is for a reason, that idiot just breaks because it can.

Another piece of proof she may be a witch, she looks up from putting on her bag and instantly looks at Ben, as if she knew they were staring at her. She smiled and walked up without hesitation, like she could already predict how the encounter would go and looked forward to it. Her heeled boots clicked on the floor in an obnoxiously confident way. She sidled up to the counter right next to me where Ben was pretending to be busy wiping up nothing, as if they didn't just get caught staring like a loser.

"Hello."

Her voice wasn't exactly shy, but I guess it was soft, in a mousy "someone else kill the spider please" sort of way. Ben just continued to stare at them with that dumb, blank face that always reminded me of when the old computer the cafe used to have would blue screen.

"I just wanted to thank you again for making my coffee with so much care. You always look so focused when you work,

it's nice to know someone is putting effort into the thing that keeps me going."

I liked it better when they never talked to each other. At least then I didn't know what the awkward tension of Ben's brain trying to process words felt like. Ben, just take a deep breath and talk to her. This is your chance to flirt with her, get a phone number! Actually, that might be a bit ambitious for you, just a name will be fine for now.

"You uh, really don't have to mention it, it's just my job."

Are you kidding me, just say thank you or something like "everything about you is worth putting care into." Anything is better than minimizing when trying to flirt. You've stared at her for four fucking years and that's the best you can do?

"I guess, but you're kind of like my personal superhero, saving the day with a pick me up."

Ben you have the perfect opportunity to flirt back here, just say-

"I will never drop you."

.
.

.

Coming off a little desperate there but it's better than last time. I guess. The regular looked a little confused but, oddly enough, endeared? Is she fucking into this? This awkward mess? Oh, they deserve each other, okay.

"Thanks? I think?"

Ben looked at me desperately, probably hoping I would be their superhero and save them from their own awkward energy, make some kind of strange noise they'd have to excuse themselves and fix. Sorry, but this is what you get for using me to stare at her so many times.

"Well, I should get going, wouldn't want to keep you while you're working. I'm sure other people need a hero to make their drinks."

Quick, now is your chance, ask her for her name you dumbass!

“Yeah, Super Caffeine to the rescue!”

There was an awkward moment of silence where it looked like the regular might, laugh? She didn’t but the scrunch in her nose implied “Super Caffeine” got some kind of reaction out of her. Ben just looked about ready to pass out.

“Have a nice day!”

As the boring one left, Ben slowly sank to the floor like their legs didn’t work. That’d explain why they were leaning over the counter so much. The awkward smile left Ben’s face in chunks as they descended. When they finally hit the ground, they seemed to realize their forgetfulness and let out a pathetically dramatic sigh. They really are a force to be pitied.

Through the window I could see the boring one smiling to herself. I didn’t realize she knew how to smile at anything other than her coffee, always seeming so focused on her work otherwise. Maybe they really do *like* Ben. From Ben’s spot on the floor, even my perfect reflection wasn’t enough to show them that the encounter wasn’t a total fail. Oh well, the witch truly likes them then she’ll be back. If not for Ben, she’ll at least be back for her coffee.

“I still don’t know their name. Craaap.”

Day 1,540 of Ben still not knowing how to talk to the boring, probably somehow pretty in Ben’s eyes, regular. Maybe I should rethink who is one of my smartest followers.

winter musings.

Emily Hollwedel

i glance in the mirror and i am all
eye bags, push
and pull.

life moves like the waves
and yet i still find myself
panicking when i cannot feel the bottom.

a mini moon orbited earth
and vanished during late november,
plunging back
into quiet darkness.

it left behind a fresh kind of fear
that scratched and gnawed
a cavern
into my throat.

winter holds the strangest of battles,
like a heater stifling into silence
fog or frost creating angel's wings on the windshield of a car
or creeping drunk through a barn in the pitch black of night.

push

and

pull.

i do not sleep well in the cold, but it lets me think

often of the same things.

like the one recurring dream where i bathe in the summer sun
and my neighbors do not seem to mind
when i close my eyes and relax.

i repeat to myself:

i am allowed

to feel the change of things

as long as it is dark.

Winter, 2019

Sofia Divens



I was forced to write a nature poem

Jen Madison

I don't see beauty in nature.
I don't get enough sunshine
or fresh air.
My sun is my lamp
hanging above my bed
giving a soft glow to my room.
I find the sun too bright, too much,
and find comfort in the dark.

Do stars count as nature?
I adore the stars and the moon
and everything other worldly, existing
outside of Mother Nature.

Nature is not my mother.
I have left that family
and found another.

The Gift

Kaiya Mayhew



My Brother's Keeper

Ra'Nya Taylor

I was seven years old when my little brother was born. I remember being in the hospital waiting room with several members of my family. It was bright white and sterile and the padding on the seats felt tough. I was fighting with it to find some comfort in this foreign situation.

Every twenty minutes or so, on the waiting room speaker, they would play sweet chimes signaling that another baby had been born. Each time it happened, I would frantically look around the room, wondering if that was the one for my mother.

At the time, I did not care much for the fact that I was becoming a big sister. I wanted to be able to see my mom, give her a big hug and tell her that I was happy she was okay.

Hours had passed of chimes playing and nothing happening. Different families had come and gone. Eventually, I stopped expecting anything. That was when it happened.

Finally, the chimes went off for the last time and in came my grandmother. "He's here!"

That was when I shot up, looking around the room as if searching for confirmation from anyone else. That was when one of my aunts or my godmother (I can't exactly remember who) looked at me with a wide and almost feral grin. "You're a big sister!"

My eyes widened and all I could do was gulp.

I remember that his suit jacket was too big. He wore an elephant grey suit that seemed to just swallow him whole. The sleeves were too long, covering his hands like mittens. Even while buttoned, the suit jacket oddly rested on his shoulders, making

them look bigger and yet he still looked so much smaller. The jacket sagged and his shoulders hunched even though mommy told him not to. Maybe he couldn't help it. Maybe the weight of sitting alone behind that counsel table weighed on him so heavy that he couldn't help but slouch over.

I wished I could carry that burden for him.

Thinking about being a sister makes me want to cry some days. Not for the same reasons as when I was seven and no longer an only child. Back then, I cried because I didn't want to be a sister. Now, I cry because I don't know how.

I spent so much of my youth encapsulated by my own ego. Centering myself in all things, unbothered by the world happening around me. I grew up in that little bubble, doing as much as I had to as opposed to what I should do. Older sisters are meant to be caretakers. I was meant to watch over him.

I think I did the opposite. Uncaring and lacking worry for anything he did. I think one of the first times I truly worried for him was when we were at a birthday party at a buffet. He was about 4 at the time and as busy as ever and we were given a room at the buffet to have the party. So many of our family members were there, celebrating and having a good time.

I remember being with my cousins at the time and we were watching YouTube videos. The room was filled with joy and laughter and suddenly, the joy stopped. My brother, busy as ever, had been climbing on one of the chairs only for him to tumble right over. Somehow, he had taken the chair with him. In the process, he managed to hit his head, and blood began gushing down his face. That was when my mother and several other adults rushed him out of the room. That was the last I saw of him for several hours.

I remember spending that time eating buffet food and watching more videos with my cousins. Of course, there was worry but no one could see it. I think at the time I was pretty certain he would be okay, but I wish I could have done more. I wish there was some consolation I could have given him. He was at the hospital for hours getting stitches and I was eating and laughing like nothing had ever happened.

Society has a way of swallowing our little black boys whole. I've seen it happen with my own eyes too many times. Police see them as a threat. Their teachers see them as a threat. Sometimes, even their peers see them as a threat.

No one seems to realize that our babies are just that. Little boys with water guns are violent men with weapons. They all display so much fear. Frame little boys as criminals, gangsters, and thugs. They act like every little boy on the street is pedaling drugs.

Our little boys don't get breaks. They never get to make mistakes. People think they don't deserve grace.

During the spring semester of my junior year, my brother's bike got stolen. I was not home at the time when this happened. I was all the way at McDaniel and my brother was home, left without a sister in his corner to provide support or even guidance.

If I was there, would the outcome even have changed?

He ran down the street in hopes of getting his bike back. The boy who stole it used it to get to one of the neighbor's houses to start a fight. Little did he know he would get one.

My brother found him and maybe they got into a little altercation, maybe they didn't. All I know is that one way or another, my brother got his bike back and sometime in August, the police came knocking on our door for him.

When he was first born, my baby brother was afraid of car rides. Some days we had to spend hours in the car, and he wouldn't stop crying. He was so little, strapped in his bulky car seat and the only thing that could soothe him was me if I could rock him just a little bit.

I would have to coo at him and keep his attention occupied for the duration of the car ride. Just me, him, and mommy. That's all we had.

Ode to My Big Little Brother

I wish you knew how much you are loved.
There are times when I think that you know.
At times, I think it doesn't matter.
Someday, maybe it won't matter.

I have always been older.
But one day, you became taller
One day, I began to worry about you less
I don't know if it was the same day

I think it's weird
How one day I began to look up to you
I didn't even realize it
It happened so quickly

But really, I should have been looking out for you
I remember the day mommy was on the phone crying
That was the same day they came knocking for you
The burly men in blue uniforms

I remember the way I was in the courtroom
Sobbing.
Through watery gaze, I saw you sitting
Alone.

You were drowning in that too big grey suit.
At the counsel table which was so vast compared to you
I wanted everyone to know that you were a clumsy baby
That you knocked your two front teeth out at daycare

That you got stitches from climbing on chairs in restaurants
I wanted everyone to know that you cried so much
That you hated car ride
And your favorite show was about kid pirates.

I wanted everyone to know that you are tall
But you are *not* big
And that sometimes when you're sleepy
You still call me sissy

I wanted everyone to know that you are:
My brother
My baby
The first little thing that I ever loved

Lacy Newhouse

Lacy Newhouse



—as we reach the end—

Kayla Douglas

There is our final border.
As dictated by order.
Which is natural, even if it gets colder.
Which is inevitable, even as we get bolder.

After each attempt we have to stop.
A dash, a period, or an abrupt drop.
Even if it's at the bottom, the middle, or the very top.
Even if it's after reading a paper at our desktop.

I like to speculate that the end isn't very far.
Not like distance, not like death, but nested in a star.
Where everything is together, as if sealed in a jar.
Where everything can give an impression, but not enough to scar.

The thought of something more reminds me a lot of art.
Art in religion, art in our soul, art encased in every beat of our heart.
But it scares me, for our stopping point may not be marked by an obvious trend.
But it also intrigues me, for we are no closer to figuring out what's next for us as we—

—as we reach the end.

Brutalist Diptych

Harrison Booth



Edge

Jade Trader

Bastard.

Nearly evading Tartarus.

The man so imperfected.

His cursed offspring barely

Alive.

Him too, yet entirely dead

Inside with a wretched ego

Of no internal

Pride.

His true love

Swishes inside glass,

While they remain wide awake:

Tortured.

He dozes off on a raggedy sofa.

Their hollowed cheeks,

Their protruding

Bones.

Their charcoaled lids

Secreting ghastly tears.

The awakened serpent slithers amid the

Hole.

Lurching toward a faulty fountain.

His yellow sclera.

His dull, lifeless

Skin.

His dry, peeling lips,

Yet constantly met with spirits.

The light succumbs to

Death.

The bastard and the innocents follow.

Sketch of Leonard Cohen

Kaiya Mayhew



American Bar Scenes

Emily Ireland

Neon lights shower over bar fights
In a tight space, where sweaty masses are mushed together
TV is on, casting replays of a forgotten athlete's glory days
Dylan Gossett hums over the TV's crackling noise
I cued a second song of his on the jukebox
Then slid into a crowded booth.
Tree Birds starts to play from that box,
The harmonica harmonizing with the crushing of cans
Somewhere outside a lighter sparks,
The sour stench of cigarettes fills the sky.
A bell rings as the front door swings open
His laugh fills the cloudy air
Clearing it.
I stand slowly from the sticky seat,
He spots me and his smile engulfs me before his arms do.
I'm not sweaty like the other bodies are,
But I'm warm in his embrace.
I close my eyes as I sway into him
And let the country music spill over my soul.

Downtown Annapolis

Elaine Griffith



Midnight Streets

Emily Knight

People hustle and bustle,
Feet tap the floor,
Store to store,
Shop to shop,
Bags hang on hands,
Children grab arms.

The stars glimmer their welcome,
The moon smiles warmly,
The dark engulfs,
Vendors and sorts.

One dollar; two dollars,
Fifty cents.
Sale,
Sale,
Thirty-five cents.

Silence in the quiet,
Sound in the noise,
Commotion around every
Corner,
Building,
And sign.

Dark concrete,

Asphalt,
Stone and dirt.
Puddles cling to the surface
Glimmer in the light,
A last goodbye,
Before fading in the night.

The sun starts to rise,
The moon slips away,
Hiding,
Ready for another day.

Night to dawn,
Dawn to day,
Midnight streets,
To a regular day.

A Sea of Patience

Skylar Thomas

The lush foam of waves frothed at their feet. Though the sky remained in the gray dusk, their legs glistened, splashed with water's glitter. The restlessness of the sea forewarned a storm. They'd been here since before sunset. Seagulls, the beach's crows, squawked at random. They had forgone the instinct of constancy, bracing for a shift. The four of them grunted and roared, mouths taut in a smile as they doubled over in glee. Young men, just shy of gruff manhood. Two had caps they desperately held onto like a lifeline, the bills weathered from use. They had huddled around a patch of sand moments before, then erupted in noise not so far from the wailing screech of the seagulls. As they swayed and shoved each other in their laughter, the sound haunted the shore. I felt the sea beckon me back, dragging its chill down the length of my tail. I leaned further on my right arm's rest on the moist boulder, enduring the shiver up my spine.

I had to know if they'd found it.

I finally had courage to search for the faces of these legged men, putting away my distant envy of their land-limbs, and the curiosity of selective head protection. I'd been most curious about the one that laughed the least. He didn't guffaw like the others, merely let out mild joy through his teeth smile. His face had turned a warm tan from the beach dwelling. In one corner of his mouth a smile line gently dented his skin. His eyes seemed to impale the beholder, the dark wood brown of his hair the only mercy in their unsettling brilliance. Emerald green, paler than seaweed.

The eyes I'd been warned about.

The others dragged their fingers across each eye to wipe the joyful tears. Not many legged men can do justice to long locks like

the very few mermen in existence can. Some of my kind may find distaste in the stillness of his hair, how it lacks the flowing billow of undersea's grace. His hair only blew in quick shifts in the wind. When the other three had dried their eyes, their wildness subsided. They looked like normal men now. The man reached down and cupped the sand, grains falling from in between his calloused fingers. His friends huddled tighter to observe.

"You'll step on it acting so careless," he said.

I drew a deep gasp.

They did find it.

They jeered, unbothered by his urgency.

"I'm serious, I'm only concerned because of what I know.

This could be *the* Moonstone."

The waves tossed more violently.

I watched as Pierce fully uncovered the object buried in sand. He turned it over delicately, and from the stunned widen of his eyes I knew it.

My ring had returned.

Night had fallen, the seagulls seeking refuge from the shadows. The roar of the sea was like a hurricane's howl, reaching their knees now. The tide was lurching forward. They had begun to disregard the extravagance of their find when the clouds parted for the Moon. A blinding beam shot up from the Moonstone, causing Pierce to jump up back, yet still held fast to my ring. One man was long gone, the smartest in choosing to withdraw from the sea as it tore and raged. The other two stood in amused disbelief. The sea flooded across half the beach and dragged them into its foam. The tide carried them to the depths, and I found my own joy in the gurgle of their struggle, saltwater bubbling in their throats. Laughter was snuffed out at last, replaced by broken croaks escaping the liquid sloshing inside their necks.

I dove into the water.

I felt a rush convict my chest as I swam, feeling the intense gravitation of my ring, screaming for its owner. Pulses of its power emitted ripples under the water. After too great a number of years, my ring had surfaced from the sand. For what felt like an eternity I rested upon the hulking boulder, enough to have to shift my perch from the water erosion, and watched the beach for the glimmer of the Moonstone. With the ring I had been able to have complete command over water, even of the clouds. It had slipped off my finger in slumber. A deepwater diver was captivated by the stone's magnetism of moonlight, and inched it off as I laid in a rock den. Mermaids only get one ring at their maturity, and the entire pod estranged me for "carelessness". My father suspended blame, but still held contempt for the accident. He had charged to the beach, spotting the diver on the shore. A tent had been put up, and a crowd of other legged-thieves drooled to be let forth. They meant to make a spectacle of my ring, a chip of my heart.

My father had thrown his trident, the prongs piercing the diver through the head, through his side, and through his legs. As he told me, the noises the witnesses made were pathetic, as they were not only guttural screams of horror at the gore, but yelps of concern for the ring dropped out of his hands. In the chaos of the legs scrambling and kicking up the sand, the ring had been buried deep within its grains, and missing ever since. But, there was one sure sign that the ring would be found someday. From the shore, he saw the diver had a mate, who was pregnant with their offspring.

He had said, "I do not know whether it will be that descendant, or the next, but one from his bloodline will hear the tales of what he took. And that human greed unique to this father will drive the heir to prove them true, and he will seek the ring.

When a human arrives with eyes green as greed itself, they will have come and come only for what they believe is theirs.”

Despite his deed and advice, my father never came to the surface with me to wait. He left it up to me to suffer and right my mistake, claiming he had done *his* part. And now at long last, my aching patience was rewarded. The man, Pierce, is the descendant who acted as the compass, with his disarming viridescent irises. My skin came alive as it was immersed in the water, electric with revival. Finally, I would regain my place among my pod. Finally, I would be relieved of wasting away.

I saw the three stagnant figures of Pierce and his remaining friends drowning slowly, gliding further from the crashing surface. I surged through the water to grasp Pierce, suppressing his resistance weakened by his loss of land. I let the other two fall. He had slipped the ring onto his finger, too brawny for its delicacy. I couldn't force it off, as his knuckle was too large.

I grew mad being so close to what was mine. I felt a heartbeat in my ears thumping rapidly as I honed breathlessly in on the mere jut of flesh and bone that obstructed transcendence.

Before I could tear his finger off, he thrashed maniacally in my arms. How selfish, to have the nerve to fight for a life at the expense of others.

I brought the brute sharpness of my jagged teeth onto his wrist, slicing off his hand. Guttural shouts of pain gurgled from his chest. He thrashed like a feral animal, bubbles disrupting the water. I caught the floating chopped hand, and snapped the ring finger at the knuckle, sliding it off at last.

As the chill of the metal slithered onto the skin of my finger, I was intoxicated, letting Pierce float from me. It coursed through my blood, and nestled insatiably into the aorta. I swam forward, small currents danced around me in a ribboned swirl. I

glanced at the wounded animal of Pierce, clutching his handleless arm and bathed in blood. The anger seemed to drip out of his eyes like embers. I flooded the water around him with the currents, bound by water pressure.

He spoke through the last bubbles of breath,
"Greed will hold you too, demon."

His eyes flashed their sinister green, forcing my eyes shut. I hurried and forced water down his throat, making him drown like his comrades. I peeked to see him having lost the might in his limbs, the life leaving his face. The body drifted in suspension for one moment, his arms outstretched. I laced my hands under his arms.

He looked more handsome without defiance, without a human soul. The dominance over human man overwhelmed me then. I did not think of this victory for the sake of merfolk, but for *myself*. Slave to their land and time I was no more, and domain in the sea was at my will. In my rejoice, a sneaking thought pricked my triumph,

Why stop at him?

At first, this question caused me to falter. All I had wanted was the Moonstone, and now I had it. And, Pierce was dead. But, as the rush of fear and strength curdled beneath me, I saw the temptation of carnage revenge as the only option.

If my father wanted to see me restored, he would have to put away his pride and come to the surface. After all, he hadn't come to see me once during my wait.

I pulled Pierce from the cave, and swam to the shore. Vengeful voices chattered with glee in my head as it emerged from the dark, and I came in sight of a coral shelf.

Through the film of the water's surface, the clouds had grown obsidian, salivating for another, darker storm. Currents

surged us, and I chose the shade under the coral shelf to be Pierce's burial place. I plunged water into the sand to make a crater for his body, and laid him in it. The mounds hulked over him, though despite myself I paused to cover his face. The brown hue of his hair was a dead gray now, bereft of life and light. The chisel of his face and the angry furrow of his brow had faded, leaving him a serene, dormant creature. I traced my fingers from his cheek to his eyelid, curious to see if the green still festered postmortem. Under it, the eyeball immediately shocked me with the lime lightning of its iris. I hurried and covered his head with piles of sand. Once he was buried for good, I took to a bed of seaweed and stared at his grave.

If Pierce had anyone left alive that would come searching for him, I would be waiting. I'd mastered patience this long, it seems only fitting patience be the medium of my revenge. I would kill them off until no more came searching. The bloodline that stole from me erased one by one, and infinite security granted to me, instead of my former eternity of being vulnerable. What a waste it would be, to return to my father and pod with the ring, only to have it taken again by another green-eyed monster. In this moment, holding power over another being, and able to torture it with the absence of rest in its home, there was a part of me that felt disgustingly human. As my head broke the surface, I looked down in terror at my reflection on the water.

My irises glew green.

Grief

Audrey Dean



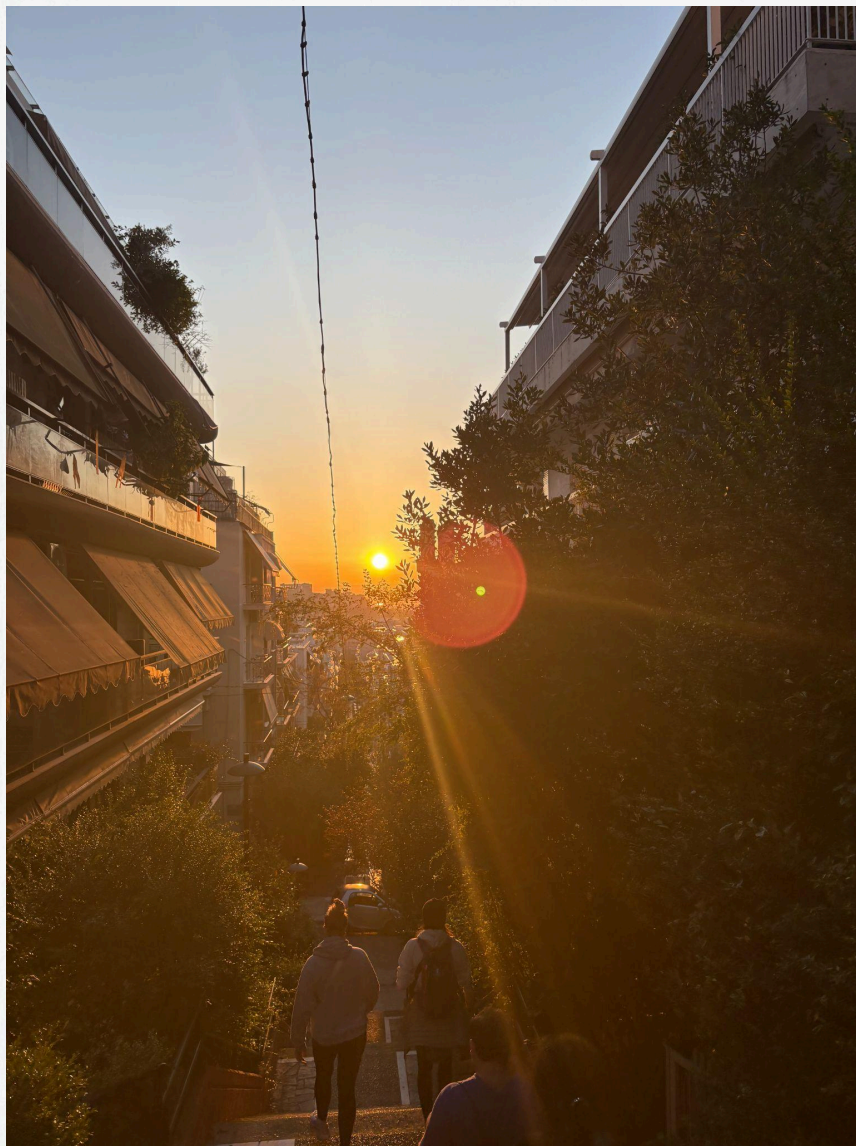
When The Baltimore Sun Rises

Kanyon Matthews

When the baltimore sun rises
That's when life begins
The sun brighten up the city
A golden glow kissing broken edges
I was raised in the heart of it
I'm from the part where you go a few blocks down
you see abandon houses and junkies
Knowing uncle sam house is right next door
But
There's a certain beauty within the chaos
The streets pulsating with stories
The sounds of sirens dancing
Accompany with steady heartbeats
The addicts move like zombies
Each needle a lover, each hit a promise
Neighborhoods litter with abandon houses
A piece of the past
That doesn't want to be forgotten
Kids playing
Filling the city with their laughter
They laugh like its the only thing they know
And when the streetlights come on
That's when the city finally rest

Last Light

Ra'Nya Taylor



Solace

Robin Odom

I.

I was born in the summer, under the stars of the lion. Fire and power, ruled by the Sun. I am ruled by the Sun.

II.

When I was a child, chasing the long dead idea of boyhood that only remains in the weathered pages of the books I devoured, the Sun was my constant companion.

I would take my books and my art and sit in the orchard, soaking in the rays, heart full of music. I would sit out there till my cheeks were pink, sucked into other worlds. I was never alone, I could feel the Sun on my back, like a sturdy hand placed there, telling me to be strong.

III.

When I was young, at the age where you're old enough to wonder, but young enough to not know, I dove into learning everything I could. I learned of the ancient gods, Olympians, in the clouds watching over our triumphs and our falls.

I learned about Apollo, who inherited the role of the Sun god from the Titan Helios. Driving the golden majesty across the sky every day. I was drawn to his stories right away. God of music: there were songs in my heart. God of poetry, of the wandering words I wrote. God of masculine beauty.... God of archery, the only sport that I managed to stick with, standing in the blazing Sun, shot after shot until I struck the center. I felt him watching me, beaming with pride at my achievements

III.

When I was grown, but not *grown*, that twilight era of independence and fear, when every trouble feels like the world is crashing down, I took morning walks. Every time that I felt that life was too much, I would wake up early, walk outside and watch the Sun rise.

The beautiful spectrum of color, as the chilled air slowly took on a warmth, I felt him greeting me, telling me that no matter what happened, the Sun would still rise.

IV.

I have always been told I am of the Sun. I shine through the cloudiest day, always constant, always blazing.

V.

I don't remember when it started, when the gentle embrace of the Sun turned crushing, when his consolation started coming with consequences. I can't sit in the orchard for hours anymore, or shoot rays. I go outside with layers of clothing and umbrellas and curse at the presence of my old friend.

The condition is named after the wolf. Am I a wolf? I do not feel like a wolf. Wolves are creatures of the Moon. I am a creature of the Sun.

I want to be in the Sun..... does he want me?

VI.

If I am Phaethon, what was my folly? If I am Icarus, how high did I truly fly? All I reached for was a steady, constant presence. If my hubris is thinking I could be the Sun, I will take whatever is given to me, but Please,

Please don't leave me in the cold.

Moonstruck

Eli Ciabatonni

I.

Some people are kissed by the Sun,
Seared with a mesmerizing layer,
A blessed untouchable tattoo
Spotting their marvel, a mus.

Some are struck by Stars,
A hit of ambitious light to their eyes,
Dazzling and charming with fleeting
Feelings to burn, an artist.

Maybe the Moon shines upon me,

Blinded by such brightness,
It is easy to reflect a radiant facade,
Sustaining and losing the self as a lover,
Utterly Moonstruck.

I know someone bound by Ocean,
Currents full of grotesque beauty,
Stealing grace from heavens they'll never meet,
Basking in borrowed light, a sinner.

Watching bodies of divine intensity
So assuredly upholding their purpose,
The moon will settle in their orbit,
Forgetting her vision in chaotic insanity.
Sun, Stars, and Ocean will always

Yearn for Her somehow.

Just as She willfully loses herself

In Them.

II.

Sun scorches a radiance Moon reflects,
Holding up the mirror that feeds Sun's vanity,
A rageful need to be seen.

They're giving a warmth that *graciously* doesn't scar.
Sun shrouds Moon's attention in light, reaching their dazzling rays.
They watch Moon flitter, wishing they could embrace all of Her.

Moon twirls in Sun's shine,
She knows it is a gift and should be adored.

Sun flares knowing Moon has more faces they'll never see.

III.

The stars swing in joyous circle around Moon,
stringing together stunts and stories of their adventure.
Stars entertain her, dancing in imploding grand finales.

Moon revels in their shared joy
and cradles them in craters should they fall.

Stars wonder if She, too, would sing.

IV.

The Ocean waves to reach Moon,
wishing to keep her lonely, delusional, company above.
Instead, washing up sacrifices for her consuming beacon.

Moon is flattered by Ocean's obedience,
captivated at the gorgeous carcasses on her silver platter.

Ocean's waves wilt, wishing She wouldn't share with space.

V.

Sun sings to keep her warm.
Stars shoot to give her a show.
Ocean sends tides to follow her command.

She remains frozen with the gravity of their "love."

VI.

If she stretches so far,
aches to reach just enough,

Why does the Moon love?

VII.

If our Moon is so used, why doesn't she leave?

Who tugs a red string just enough to keep her in place?

Sun, Stars, Ocean, will only receive pieces of her.
If no one has all for her,

Who is worth staying for?

Is she trapped?
 Is Sun's demanding nature guiltling her to never stray?
 Do Stars surrounding her cover all the exits?
 Is Ocean's needy whirlpool a heavy obligation she carries too far?

VIII.

The Sun, the Stars, the Ocean,
 In their own fashion they give themselves to her wholly,
 Desperately, in a language unique to what the
 Moon

allowed them to say.

She
 stayed with them and cared for them with precision and secrets in
 return.

She
 Wil never
 Burn for them, never shoot, never shear down another in the name
 of someone else.

She'll
 never love them in the same light, song, or war that they desire her.
 Even so,

She

Stays.

Electra

Aaliyah Williams



Dragonslayer

Kaiya Mayhew

He has long fantasized about slaying the dragon. Hacking through its scaled armor, dragging its wild ugly head back to the village to mount on a spike. Perhaps, he muses, the fluid it ignites to breathe fire will spill from its throat, icy blue pooling at his feet.

He sharpens his sword, hair falling thick over his forehead, breath steady. Rays of moonlight invade the open window and streak his blade silver. As the whetstone glides shrilly over steel, an image bursts unbidden into his mind. A stained glass window mounted in a sonorous church a hundred years from now—crystalizing the gleam of armor on the curve of his back, the crooked angle of his arm, starshine leaking into every corner of the image he fills. The church-builders of future worlds know his legacy better than he does. His every action strums the myth-rich soul of the earth below him, entombing his movements within it for invocation in campfire tales to come.

He sheathes his sword and departs quietly so as not to wake his mother and sister. Like all the beasts that hound humanity, the dragon hunts at night. It is a vain creature. It knows how its blue fire lances across the inky black, a gush of lightning. It knows how the thunderous beats of its wings pulse more terribly against night's unsuspecting stillness. It knows the sinking sun-set fear that seizes the village as bands of indigo paint the sky, how fathers and husbands pull their damsels inside and lock their doors. It knows how the heat of its flame burns all the more starkly against the empty chill of night.

As he leaves the light of the village, a double-edged sliver of fear and excitement traces its hair-raising point down his spine.

The dragon's abilities are shrouded in mystery—but everyone knows it hunts like no other living creature. They have all heard tales of the madness it induces, of the dancing stars that glaze the eyes of its prey. Some screech and keel over yet untouched, yet unscorched, as if fleeing the world of the living after sighting the raw visage of an uncloaked god.

What pride he would bring humanity in the conquering of the beast!

He stalks the woods, approaching its nocturnal hunting grounds. Though his movements flow with calm purpose, in his heart thrums an undeniable thrill.

None have seen the dragon up close. Rumors of sightings besiege the village frequently, all contradicting each other. Those it has taken as prey—what did they see, when they looked death in the face? Was its hide glossy black? A molten-moving red, a charcoal gray? Its scales smooth and cool, like a snake's, or tough and ridged like armor? Did they burn like a furnace, heaving rhythmically with its breath? And what of its eyes? Slitted and scarlet? Blue like its fire? Perhaps the beast is blind, and locates its prey by scent alone. He amends his earlier thought—it is not true that no one has seen the beast in full; just that no one has looked and lived to tell the tale.

His thrill grows at the thought that he might be the first.

The hoot of an owl startles him out of his reverie. The darkness of the forest rushes back. He stands still, catching his breath. He is on edge, having seen nothing so far. It is now that he realizes why the owl's hoot startled him so much: it was not part of a backdrop of crickets and night animals rustling, but instead pierced an eerie silence he had not noticed settling upon him.

Growing completely still, he strains his ears for another hoot. He hears nothing.

He exhales, unsure whether to be frightened or excited. He does not know whether he or the dragon is the prey in this moment.

As the thought flits through his mind, a sound like a firecracker rips through the trees and a column of blue bursts over the canopy, frightfully close to him. Adrenaline rushes his veins. He has found it. Their battle appears imminent, burning like fire mere feet from his outstretched hand.

He shakes himself. The sudden rush has made him woozy. This is no time for distraction. He must remain sharp of senses and clear of mind. The dragonslayer does not stumble his way through battle; his every move is purposeful, conducting the hand of God.

He moves through the copse to the dimming blue light. The temperature shifts; he cannot determine whether it has become warmer or colder. His skin prickles. An acrid smell stings his nostrils. The dragon must have just made a kill. While it is feasting, distracted, he will make his strike.

He steps out of the copse, into a clearing, and beholds the sight of his waking dreams.

It is huge and dark gray, as large as a house, its form both feline and canine. Around its joints the scales are smooth, flexing with the muscle, and reflecting the glittering blue light. Over its shoulders and back the scales thicken, forming plates, and they stick up on its spine, tracking a ridge down its tapering tale. Its wings are jagged and confusing, folded into sharp shapes like a bat's, and it is unclear whether there are only two. Its horns dart out, then curve back toward its head, black and sharp. It hunches over its kill, turned away. He cannot see a face. Upon viewing the beast, a structure within his chest shudders, the clattering, hollow sound filling his ears. With a sense of horror, he realizes it will

soon grow loud enough for the dragon to hear it. He closes his eyes tightly. The hunched and horned beast vanishes, and so does the rattling.

He breathes as quietly as he can. He is not here to hide from the beast, he reminds himself. Let it see him. Let it see the man who will end its terror, reduce it to the flesh and bone that must surely comprise it, deliver its mortality, remind it of the taste of fear.

He opens his eyes. Light floods the clearing, drawing the tall trees in gray-blue like the eerie arrival of an early dawn. His lungs and heart knock against each other. He draws his sword and sets forth.

With each step, the grasses wind around his legs, and he has to rip them to keep moving. Miraculously, the dragon doesn't hear him, crouched with uncanny silence over a dead forest animal. He clears the distance, making a final labored step into striking range, and surges abruptly with nausea. Stones crumble from the shelf of rock under his feet, falling into a canyon over which sways a rickety rope bridge. No—he is in the clearing just north of home! The intruding image flickers over his vision, and he shakes his head to banish it.

This small movement makes the dragon fall completely still. He knows without a doubt it has sensed him. He feels a roll of terror at the realization that it must have sensed him before—it ought to have—and yet it didn't react; it acts like no animal he has encountered before. It is undoubtedly wild, but it bides its time like a man.

Like an earthquake, like an avalanche, it turns. The full force of a large blue eye trains on him.

What a fearsome gaze! It freezes him in place. The pupil is large and dark, not slitted like a cat's but round. It could never be

confused for a human eye, though. Around the pupil, an icy ring glows and deepens into an outer ring of black. The skin around the eye is blue-gray and impossibly delicate, the eyelid folding gently, wrinkles in the creases.

This is what he will drive his sword through.

“I’m here to kill you,” he says—addressing whom, he is not sure. He raises his sword, but his fingers are numb, his arm buzzes, his sword feels heavy. There is a rushing in his ears and his heart beats erratically. The horrible eye blinks with a *snckt* like a gunshot, taunting him.

He repeats himself, the words thick on his tongue.

Jaws close over him, a tooth the size of his forearm piercing his stomach. No! His skin is intact, his feet on the ground! Lifted off the ground in its maw, he roars like a dragon, like the waterfall in his ears. Who is he crying out to? The greater forces of the earth, the forces that now tear his skin like paper? He shatters like ice. No, his sword is in his hand, his skin intact, and he roars like a man! Or he would if he could get a sound out of his throat. He stares into the eye, mesmerized by its indigo striations. He is cold, his skin like crystal, his blood molten gold gushing from his broken form. No—not yet! He is yet unbroken, he is flesh and blood alive!

He wrenches his gaze from the eye. A terrible coldness floods his skull, his lungs begin to fill. He lunges forward, stabbing his sword—

He is batted aside by a clawed paw.

The scent of grass mingles with the stench of his own terror. But no fanged jaw descends to pluck him up.

The forest falls into a hush, awaiting brave words. But what instead fills it is a growl—a low, humming growl that vibrates his racing heart. It invades the pores in his skin, scouring

his arteries, dredging his pride up from his soul and bearing it out, stealing it away into the night. He flattens himself in terror of the scolding. The bass note rings in his mind, muting all thoughts with a wash of static.

None have heard the dragon growl before. Always it has been silent.

After eternity the sound fades. He hears rustling as the beast turns, thunderous steps as it stalks away.

Confusion now meets terror. Why leave him here? *Get up and challenge it*, he commands himself. Guilt wrenches him as he pictures the perplexed, ashamed faces of his mother and sister—death would be better than returning home in failure. But the weight of the dragon's admonishment binds his limbs. He cannot lift himself off the ground.

He squeezes his eyes shut, battering against fear. But a flickering image presses itself to the blackness of his psyche. It is the image of that inhuman eye. His mind cold, his skin like crystal, his blood gushing golden from his broken form. He should never have gazed upon something so inhuman. He violated the beast's invisibility. It has blinded him in return—an immutable exchange, sight for sight.

My Tree of Heaven

Ra'Nya Taylor

your roots reach through the cracks
of my cemented heart
i nurtured you in the ways i knew how
i gave so you could grow
i carved my name into your smooth bark
my tree of heaven
your roots create a tangled knot
complicated emotions
you keep me from eroding
and i am suffering
so i pluck your leaves
leaving heart-shaped scars
i dig at myself to remove remnants of you
but you are persistent
a noxious weed that grows back
chopped down
stubborn stump stays
we will forever be entangled
your heart root-bound to mine
what's left of me are the cracks in the pavement
what's left of you are the branches i hacked off

Koi.

Eli Ciabatonì



things i realized out west last fall. inspired by blackout poetry

Emily Hollwdell

one.

i am a cold-blooded creature-
sunning on rocks,
thriving in warmth.
(the work tends to make me cold).

two.

in such light and heat,
big-eyed mammals like us wobble and
clash, yet

the wild part stays.

not out of malice,
But thirst and hunger.

three.

many Rituals are jealous entities in disguise;
formed for control and certainty.
why chase them?

why not stand proud and tall, like the sagueros, singular
beings aware of their own minds?

four.

just as no flea market display matches,
no two cacti are the same-

sonorous, flavorful, robust,

like plum and apricot and fig,
pear and apple and peach,

unique in spirit and body.

five.

each of our essential qualities provokes delight,
producing complex, limber
hybrids of the pieces we take with us.

an amalgamation.

six.

we are strange creatures
cultivated by memories and boundaries,
our redemptive love reformed over and over again.

seven.

deserts are not made for penance, but

creation.

First Class View

Alex Contreras



As You Creep Away From Our

Eli Ciabatoni

Please carry my memory with you exactly as **I** am.

Weird, jaw dropping and **N**otoriously optimistic.

Center stage of our club lights

I'll see

You

at the front.

You'll **K**nock on the door,

Waiting for the invitation, like a vampire.

Posture soggier than the day you left me, unsure if this is the same

Opulent safe haven

We built with gay intentions.

I hope

the blood you drank from my **N**eck has sustained you better than
the fruit of these roots

We put down ever tried.

Young and dreamin in a night more dead than

your beatless heart,

I thought

we were complete.

I won't mourn for your humanity, knowing you'll indulge
wicked dreams of these days as the sun rises.

Until the midnight you shuffle back to meet me,

I'll be eternally dancing at our Club.

3 Stars

Delaney O'Conner

"Mama, I'm going outside."

Maury on the TV, microwave dinner on the counter, Mama doesn't hear me.

Outside lays my bike.

White with pink flames, grass stains, dirt in the gears.

The outside swallows me whole.

Southern Maryland humidity, beating evening sun, cicadas sing.

I ride to the stinky woodside pond.

Legs hurt, sticky sweat, short breath.

The kids are all here.

Me, Dylan, Drew.

We run to our fort in the woods.

Kids giggles, broken sticks, leaf beds.

We play just as every day before for as long as I remember.

pirate mermaid, space ninjas, cops and robbers.

We throw ourselves onto the ground.

Sun setting, lightning bugs, light breeze.

I reach out to the stars.

Chipped pink nail polish, itchy grass, dancing stars.

I swear I see 3 stars tonight.

Me, Dylan, Drew.

The ride home feels empty.

Moon rising, dogs barking, cool chill in summer night.

The doors unlocked.

Judge Judy on the TV, dinner gone, Mama's sleep.

I peek outside my window before bed.

Owl hoot, cars' distant hums, 3 stars.

Home

Sarah Watson



Winter Night at The Gas Station

Jayden Rodwell



Mom in the Car

2nd Place Prose Prize Winner

Lily Miller

It's Moms last few weeks of summer. I'm itching for the season to be over. Itching for stimulation other than guiltig myself into reading for fun instead of doom scrolling, and inhaling the short dopamine bursts of nicotine. Mom is itching to get back to work. She'll be crossing off one more year of her remaining four before she retires.

A shared form of scratching the itch for my mother and I is expanding our closet. She dwindles down her last paycheck from the end of the previous school year, and I completely overspend my less than frequent cash rolling in from my low-stakes summer job.

We seemed to both gravitate toward comfort on our annual outlet shopping spree this August, matching our hauls to our respective levels of seniority. I opted for plush Arie tank tops and Aeropostale sweatpants and she, smock dresses from Eddie Bauer. I told her in the dressing room that she cannot wear a Mumu to work – but you don't tell a veteran elementary school teacher what she can and cannot do when she's tenured.

The Auntie Anne's bites also dwindle down in the cupholder as she drives us back home to unpack our respective bounties. I'm waiting to Facetime my other shopaholic friend to ride out the high of my purchases.

The end of the vacation season is on both of our minds while the non-awkward silence thickens in the car covered by the Spotify playlist titled "so mom won't go 'ugh' when i'm on aux." She apologized shortly after that incident, but I still make fun of her for it. It's a way my dad rubbed off on me; it's how we show affection. But, it's also a reminder for myself that my mom has a personality of her own.

The last weeks of August are marked by the slow transition back into checking Outlook and familiarizing ourselves with each

other's schedules for the next five-ish months. She'll break the flow of the drive between munches to tell me her plans for the future. I'm shocked. That's a task I'm usually handling to inform my parents that I do indeed have plans for the impending future, and that I'm not just in limbo until graduation.

"There's a certificate I've been thinking about completing. Julie and I have been thinking about doing it this year. You know Julie Humble? The reading specialist?"

I'm nodding my head enthusiastically. I like when she mentions her "school friends". It's sweet. That's something we have in common. Although she has more trouble keeping track of mine. Her work friends were my teachers from grade one to three.

She explains that she doesn't know much about it – but it'd add to her credentials, and therefore increase her salary. A decent amount for her final four years in the public school system. I've been nosy before and dug up the FCPS salary schedules. She's not struggling, but I've also done enough research to know that since she began teaching in 1990, her salary has barely tripled.

Four years in the perspective of thirty-plus years of experience doesn't seem like much to me, so it doesn't make any difference. I also can't help but think for myself that the most successful four years to me, the four years of undergraduate studies that she's currently paying for, come to the front of my mind. So of course, four years matter.

"You should do it," I say.

I think of my mom and I studying and writing together if she were to take her course. I fantasize, despite knowing my own schedule and lack of parking permit would keep me at school for the semester and confine our collaboration to the family group chat. I imagine her doing something, working for herself, despite knowing she's thinking of bills it would help pay, but dreaming of a beach house.

I can feel the conversation shifting to something deeper. I don't think we've ever shared a surface level swapping of information my entire life. I believe I started this trend. I never gave up on the toddler instinct to ask "why?" In adults, they seem

to call that being nosy. Before I even got to ask “why, besides the raise?” she says,

“It’s just because – I never ‘officially’ got my Masters” she puts in air quotes with one hand still on the wheel. “I always regretted that” she finished her thought. Mom’s been in school as long as she’s been teaching in one. Staying accredited, staying up to date on curriculum, how to administer CPR on a child and inject Epi Pens. She just never got to turn those credits into a piece of paper with her name on it, never ticked the correct box. I can feel that Mom thinks she’s been cheated, constantly educating herself, going out of her way for all these extra certificates to stay close to what she loves doing without so much as a pat on the back. But I also can’t help but feel the shame of not thinking ahead, or knowing where to start to get the correct piece of paper signed that would make all those 12 hour days worthwhile, and valued. Thank God she stopped staying at work till 5.

“It was always the plan, but you know, *you* came along.” My cheek is still holding a bite of pretzel. “Sorry” I mumble while still looking at the road.

I know I was very much a part of the plan. My parents had a whole decade of marriage before our household became three. I can never help but think that the decade of travel, and hustle of their early careers was less preparation for having a child, and more procrastination. Now it runs through all our bones. We leave the conversation with threads still on the wind, fluttering out the car window. I want her to do something for herself, I know she won’t.

///

A week later, over crabs, another frivolous summer tradition:

“I’m not going for the certificate; I know it will just be too much for me. And it would take me away from you both.”

Dad echoes her sentiments and agrees. He doesn’t negate the statement about taking time away from family, he doesn’t care about that. He was a free range child by nature and nurture, he knows how to be alone, and he knows his daughter is grown, and

she is the same. My mother didn't commit the same sins as his. My Mom's time away had a purpose, his mother's time away was negligence. I suppose they were both chasing a high.

He reinforces however, with crab butter soaked hands that she already has too much on her plate. She's worked hard enough.

I wouldn't ever push her to do something she doesn't want to do. But, I can't help but feel yet another pang of guilt that no one was shoveling on me. I was just picking up the dust and crumbs from their sweeping away of personal goals to continue being here for our little family and placing them on my chest. We soaked and swept up the last night of summer with brown paper bags and push brooms. Kicking the crab shells into the flowers so the dog didn't die happily choking on his one goal of picking up our leftovers.

After the sun sets, the nightly ritual of our three-person household ensues. Dad's in bed by eight thirty, Mom by ten, and I've been in my room since seven but won't be hitting the pillow until one. Since I was 15 and the lull of tweenage angst began to wear off, picking fights when my parents tried to tuck me in, I started checking in on them, making sure they were asleep. Mom's jaw is slacked with her book on her chest, and dad is so deep into the mattress he may as well be another pillow.

Softly shuffling through the hallways, quietly avoiding the bags along the walls ready for move in day, I take care in looking at the walls beside me, all the other photos arranged around two pronounced frames. The first two degrees ever given to a Homan and a Miller. Before Tracy Jo became synonymous with 'Mom,' and James ditched his four year degree and went back to follow in a trade school tradition.

I plop down in the crappy rolling chair in my room, pick up my phone, and continue avoiding the graduate school applications. Deciding roughly a year ago, I wanted to tick the correct box. Wondering how life would affect the choice I felt I had to make to keep moving two family names upwards on an arbitrary scale.

Self Portrait

Eli Ciabatonni

There is a portrait in my attic.
He wasn't painted by a professional,
And I made no deals with devils to be him.
If that's all it took, my soul would long have perished.
He is eternally familiar.
He is beautiful.

If I had an oily sense of skill **I could paint him.**
Unfortunately, I am determined no knife shall come near us.
And my tearful watercolors are never perfect as he deserves.
Alas, his framed acrylic is bound to my attic.
I can only ink him here for you.

His eyes are a hazel frosted mirror
dottily framed with faded freckles
and thinly penciled lashes.
The pair of **precious irises.** work in tandem,
with long brushed hair and chalk pastel lips
to invite in my imploring view.

He wears a sweater threaded with proud words intertwining
to craft a soft shell he'd wrap a comforted lover in,
it's warmth gentle and stitched strong enough to soothe the
scarring
expectations **he simply walked,** past.
It swaddles soft skin in smudged crochet lines over
delicately sketched, **burdenless,** shoulders.

His cologne is a collage of childhood memory,
Sea salt and notes of drifting wood purposefully collected from
his hard to love brackish waters.
It seeps **into the rain** and warps the old papery nostalgia,

his chosen “home” reminiscing of savory, joyful moments,
in tidal, lemon grass fields.

His smile tastes of the shadowed gap between our front teeth.
It’s slightly sardonic, **winning** a blood bitten war to remain
present.

A dashing hint of a smirk underlines the victorious
gold in his piercings, a garnish for his laugh,
as if the dried healing were worth the patience.

That laugh is a chorus in my dreams,
something I’ve failed to imitate,
an almost feral, impish tenor that roars with waves
and clutches the wind in a playful grip as it rushed past the ears
of the blessed.

It chimes louder than a mother’s cursed “get out.”
This personal sound sings my last **strings of hope**. to keeping
him.

I can gloss the picture **he’s** painted in.

I see his eyes **daring me**. to grab his hand,
I feel his sweater I’ve **worn out**, for him,
I smell his cologne **I hid** in the dresser he tore apart,
I taste his smile I’ve poorly plagiarized **from his** recipe,

I hear his **voice**. introduce himself with

My,

Name.

“Self Portrait.”

Ink on bulleted paper

“I wonder if **he covets me**. in his own attic.”

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