

SALMON CREEK JOURNAL 2023
REBIRTH & REEMERGENCE



Front cover art

“Eden” by Tanisa Kang

Artist Statement

Tanisa is a Washington State University alumni, digital illustrator and mixed media artist based in Jakarta, Indonesia. Her work has been shown in Indonesia and the United States and can also be found in print. In her work, she often explores relationships between human experience and our living ecosystem. For this piece, the pigment was made using handpicked butterfly peas from the artist’s garden. In giving them a different form as ink, the flowers adapted to a new purpose, aiding the human artist in her visual expression. The painting itself shows a gate, a symbol of rebirth and starting anew. A gate out of Eden, a pathway to truth and freedom. By gaining the power of sight and the ability to perceive, we can see the world in a new light.

Visit Tanisa’s website at xtanisa.com

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Slow reverb

By Bethanie Collette

Soft pink skies,
fading from yellow
to blue.

Please ask me to stay.

My heartbeat is uneasy without the echo of yours to accompany.

A gentle breeze
tousles your deceptively dark hair
(most would call it black)

The trees sway delicately above us
so let's drive,
watch the sunrise,
and wait for it to set again.

Take me away from here,
to a new coast,
far enough that
the green mountains have all turned brown.
I remember every moment with you



Con Amor

By Jessica Miralrio

No Epitaph

By Fenn MacDonald

“The body unburies itself,”
I whispered to the mud.
The gravedigger laid a hand on my shoulder and said,
“Come away. It’s done.”

Before the dawn, I paced the hallowed pattern round
the woods, shrouded thick with mourning mist,
slowly emptying my pockets of nameless ritual grist
I laid unseen foundations on forbidden ground.

A patchwork scrapbook spelled the name of what was mine to be
regained;
long-forgotten photographs and taped-together phrases conspired to
obscure the stumbling, shambling progress
of my breathless rediscoveries from those without the eyes to see.

I waited 'til the stars were right -
sought the mercy of a moonless night.
Coyote cries swallowed the sound
of what was lost becoming found.

The body unburies itself;
the woods, shrouded thick with mourning mist
obscure the stumbling, shambling progress
of what was lost becoming found.
The body unburies itself
and comes home again to me.



Collage300

By Juan Carlos Garcia Gonzales



past sentences

By Uzomah Ugwu

Old Wounds

By Fenn MacDonald

In retrospect, maybe I should have said something sooner. But it's not like I want to have the conversation with every person I meet, and sometimes it goes really badly, so I keep pushing it off more and more. Lately, I've been telling myself that if we make it through the door, I'll bring it up. Surely it can't actually be that difficult to tell people that I'm well. You know.

We made it all the way to the bed before I remembered that I should probably mention it. In my defense, I was thoroughly distracted by the blond stubble on the jawline of – Alex? Albert? – and it sort of slipped my mind. Well, right up until his hand slid under my shirt and the lights flickered and he said, “Oh,” and I abruptly remembered that we needed to have The Conversation.

“Yeah,” I said. “So I'm –”

While he was also saying, “Are these –”

Oh, and also the lights went out.

Andy, or possibly Alan, I honestly don't recall, changed what he was saying to, “Uh,” which I felt reasonably summed up the reaction that people usually had, right up until things took a turn. Which, in this case, consisted of a long string of high-pitched giggling echoing down the hallway.

I fumbled around for a pillow and slapped it over my face to muffle a groan.

“... is there someone else here?” said Aidan.

“... someone else ...” said the voice outside the door.

I groaned again, louder.

“What the fuck,” said Aaron.

“Look,” I said through a mouthful of pillow, and that was really not how I was hoping to be biting the pillows tonight, but what can you do? I tossed the pillow aside and propped myself up on my elbows. “It's really not a big deal. I'm just like any other guy. I just happen to be –”

The bedroom door swung open. In the dim glow from my frankly pathetic hallway light fixture, a crouching humanoid figure was silhouetted in the doorway. Upside-down, naturally, limbs bent the wrong way and everything, which is such a B-movie rip-off move, but there's no accounting for taste. I mean, the fact that Alistair was straddling me was proof of that, but I'd been getting quite desperate recently, for obvious reasons.

The creature's head rolled around in an owl-like motion that used to make my stomach twist, but now just looks like showing off.

“Peter,” hissed the shape in the doorway, in the voice of a really pissed off girl of, oh, about nine years old. “You have a guest.”

“- haunted,” I finished, waving a hand in her general direction, but I don’t think Adam heard me, because he was busy scrambling into a semi-upright position, made more complicated by his jeans being around his knees, and his knees bracketing my waist. Look, it was a mess. I was just glad to not catch a kneecap anywhere sensitive.

“Holy shit,” he blurted, grabbing at his waistband almost as an afterthought.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s really not a big deal, though, I mean, I’m still down if you are?”

But I don’t think he heard that part, because the guy – whose name probably started with an A but I guess I can give up pretending to know – was busy hiking up his pants with one hand while launching off the bed like it was springboard. In a near-Olympic feat of athleticism, he hit the floor already sprinting and hurdled the ominous figure, who hissed like an angry cat and took a parting swipe at him.

For a second or two I could hear his footsteps pounding down the hall, and then my apartment door slammed. I flopped back into the bed, sighing a little as I pondered the apparently remarkable physical prowess of the individual who had just thoroughly declined to hook up with me.

“Peter,” hissed the creature.

“What is it, Sonya?” I said. I may have snapped it, actually. I wasn’t feeling particularly patient at that precise moment.

“. . . hungry,” she said. “Must . . . feed.”

“I literally just fed you,” I said, scowling at the ceiling.

“Yesterday,” she hissed, reproachful.

“Fine,” I said. “Give me the lights back.” Naturally, I was looking directly at the overhead light when it returned to its full blazing strength, and with nary a flicker this time, I noticed. I groped my way to the door while blinking spots from my vision, and Sonya skittered halfway up the wall to keep pace with me.

I had a whole shelf of the pantry dedicated to tacky throw pillows from the off-brand dollar store down the street, right below the shelf dedicated to instant ramen and Taco Bell coupons. I threw Sonya a pillow before starting on my own dinner. She crouched in the center of the kitchen and made a sound I can only describe as the whine of an engine that’s about to explode.

“What?” I said, again.

“Hair,” she said.

Sighing, I fetched a hair elastic from my junk drawer and crouched in front of her. Sonya flipped herself over so that she was at least the right way up, and looked up at me with her painted eyes, the exact same shade of green as mine. I carefully gathered the long strands of yarn that trailed from her head into a loose ponytail while she stared at me, unblinking.

“Happy now?” I asked, and she vibrated like the tail of a rattlesnake before her painted face split open into a gaping maw of needles, into which she shoved the throw pillow. I left her ripping the thing apart so I could stir my noodles and mourn my evening plans.

After I’d finished my ramen and Sonya had finished pouncing on every last trace of pillow fluff and cheap polyester, I fixed her with my best serious stare.

“We should talk,” I said, and Sonya hissed.

“Really,” I insisted. “You can’t keep doing this. This is my apartment. I can have someone over if I want.”

She rolled her head upside down again, unblinking. “Don’t like them,” she said.

“You don’t have to. I like them! That’s kind of the point.”

“Not good enough.”

“I think that’s my decision to make, thank you very much.”

She hissed again and rolled into her favorite upside-down, crab-like stance. I never should have shown her how to use Netflix, even if having access to horror movies did keep her from chewing the furniture.

“Mine, too,” Sonya said, showing all her needle teeth.

“It’s really not,” I said, and that’s when she threw a proper tantrum.

While Sonya was busy flashing the lights, throwing dishes around, and shrieking like an off-brand banshee, I poked my head out from under the table and said, “Look, we can’t keep doing this. The people at IKEA think I’m running some kind of shady second-hand dish dealing business.”

“You will never be free of me!” Sonya shrieked from her perch on the ceiling. She’d ripped out her ponytail at some point and there was a curtain of yarn dangling in front of her face.

“I’m not trying to be,” I said, and ducked back under the table as she launched a plate out of the dish drainer and in the general direction of my face. “You know that.”

“Your past *lingers* like a *shadow*!”

“I’m aware,” I said, as Sonya’s literal shadow fell over me. She was blocking the ceiling light. At least she hadn’t shattered the lightbulb this time. I really was tired of picking glass shards out of my hair.

She made that awful high-pitched giggling sound again, and then she said, “Your mother loves you.”

I took a deep breath in through my nose and pushed it out again.

“We both know that’s not true,” I said, and I was proud of how steady

my voice was.

“She wants what’s best for you!” Sonya screamed, obviously not pulling her punches anymore. “She loves you and always has! She died alone wondering where you were!”

“She told me I could come see her when I had clawed my way out of hell,” I pointed out. “Since that’s where she thought I was going.”

“Loved!” Sonya shrieked. “Neglected! Abandoned!”

And then she fell off the ceiling.

She made a sort of wet flumping sound when she hit the floor, which surprised me. The wet part, I mean. Usually Sonya has roughly the same density as a rag doll, since she’s basically just a fancier version.

I emerged from below the table with perhaps less caution than I should have, but the lights had stabilized and the dishes weren’t smashing themselves on the walls anymore, and Sonya was laying on her back staring upwards and not moving.

“Sonya?” I said.

“Peter,” she said, and I carefully brushed the hair out of her face. “Bleeding,” she added.

Sure enough, the button-up lavender cardigan she liked best had a red stain on the front, spreading slowly as Sonya lay there, limp as a doll.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m getting the kit. We’ll have to wash your cardigan, but you can wear your pajamas instead, okay?”

She made a faint snuffling sound while I fetched the second of four emergency sewing kits stashed throughout my apartment. I’d gotten the fetch time under six seconds, which still didn’t seem fast enough.

I’d hated every sewing lesson my mother had ever forced on me, but since the estate lawyer dropped Sonya on my doorstep – one last twist of the knife from good old mom – I’d found myself grudgingly grateful that some things stuck around.

Sonya’s stuffing was leaking out of my last set of stitches, seeping blood the same color as the embroidered heart that I’d sewn back together so many times that I’d given up counting. She lay perfectly still while I carefully pulled out the frayed remains of yesterday’s repairs and discarded them before threading a clean needle.

I’d stopped asking if it hurt her to be sewed up again.

She didn’t make a sound while I pressed her stuffing back under her heart and stitched it closed, only offering a weird sigh like wind over the neck of a bottle when I tied off the thread. I set the needle aside to clean later and carefully tested the stitches, pressing gently on the embroidery with my fingertips.

Sonya picked her head up to watch.

The stitches held. I’d gotten pretty good at them.

I traced one finger over the words embroidered in a circle around the

heart, although I wasn't likely to ever forget them. They'd been burned into my brain since my ninth birthday.

For Sonya, my little angel. Stay this perfect forever.

Sonya lifted one stuffed fabric hand and placed it on my chest, right where my heart would be. Then she slid it a little lower.

"Yours don't bleed anymore," she said.

"Mine have finished healing," I said. "You'll get there someday."

It was amazing how sad she could look without changing her expression at all.

"Peter," she said. "They aren't going to be good enough for you unless they can accept me."

"I know," I said. "I just want to decide when to tell people. That's all. It's not like I'm embarrassed or anything, I just . . . I want to be able to make that decision."

She made that faint whistling sigh again and blinked, just once.

"Hey," I said. "I've got to restock the kit, but then do you want to watch a movie?"

"I get to pick," she said, instantly suspicious.

"Sure," I said. I needed to get off the floor. I needed to clean up the kitchen. I was going to get up, any minute now. "Whatever you need, kid."

Sonya unleashed a wave of giggling and I fought the instinct to close my eyes. She deserved better than that. We both did. "Okay," I said. "Let's get to work."



Dwelling in the Garden

By Stephanie Walsh



The Divide

By Jacob Boucher

Brad Dunning, Former Starting Center

By Rhett Milner

Working in the dairy department was chilly, but there's nothing wrong with being cold. Boredom was what got to me. Not that I'm not complaining—it isn't Alaskan crab-fishing, but summer had just ended. Teens were falling in love on sunny beaches while I was unloading almond milk. Again, not complaining, just saying it as it is.

I was restocking half-carb butter one Sunday when I saw Sidney McPhillips, volleyball captain at my old high school. I call it old, but I only graduated last May. She came in with a cart, and I tried to be inconspicuous, which is hard if you're six-foot and 260 pounds. I accidentally made eye contact with her. She waved, but I looked away, imagining what she'd say to her friends, and the guys that used to look up to me. "Yeah, I saw Brad working at Warren's, stocking butter. You get what you deserve." Hometown zero.

She left, and it became easier to breathe. I always had things to do working dairy, and my shift was over soon enough.

Derrick, my ride, had coffee as usual.

"Good day?" he asked.

"Yeah, it was fine." I dropped into the seat, rattling the chassis. He handed me a thermos.

"Dark roast for you, friend-o."

We took off towards Webb Road.

"Might get promoted soon," he said.

"Manager?"

He nodded.

"God bless."

Derrick worked at a cyclery. If it had a wheel, he knew his way around it. Bike, scooter, chariot, whatever. Hard to believe that two years ago, he was second string quarterback, treasured duke of the Islanders. On runs, he'd block like the best of us, and he was wild as a jackal on Saturday nights. It wasn't much of a surprise when he got a DUI. What caught us off-guard was the half gram of coke he was possessing—a felon overnight. In an instant, he became a cautionary tale, a wretch our advisors would bring up to keep us in line.

It was Fall, and I thought about rising smoke, and bonfires outside city limits. Good place to meet girls, with music, laughter, and crackling flames, way better than stale, static chatter in the school's halls. Still, the hallways weren't awful, especially if people you didn't know watched you walk by.

Teachers would give you a nod if you aced their last test, but if you played a damn good game last Friday night, they'd shake your hand and slap you on the back.

I hear college is different, like I could believe that. I bet it's crazier. I wish it wasn't and that I'm not missing out, but I don't buy it. Bright lights, Green turf. An ambush of happy bodies after a win. I'd never feel joy like that again.

I saw Sidney a week later. I usually work in the storeroom—not out in public. Sometimes I'd peek out from the shelves, behind the gallons of milk, and see the blur of people walking past. They looked like ghosts, or rather, what a ghost sees when it watches the living. I wasn't looking when Sidney came quickly around the corner with her cart. She halted. The wheels squeaked.

"Hey, Brad."

"Hey, Sidney."

She moved some hair out of her face. I looked down at my shoes and felt the insides of my pockets.

"How have you been?" she asked, her voice a little croaky.

"Pretty okay. You?"

"I'm alright, season's off to a good start."

"Go Gish."

"I'm also sending out college applications."

"Yeah, yeah." I crossed my elbows and leaned on my heels. "I get that."

She stared at her cart.

"I better get going."

"Sure."

"See ya." She wheeled away. I offered a wave she didn't notice and put the hand back in my pocket.

A car ahead of Derrick's had an alumni plate from Lincoln with Huskers shining in a proud, creamy font. I couldn't look at the word without feeling nauseous. Derrick had his eyes on something above us, probably birds.

"Do you remember Sidney McPhillips?" I asked. "She would've been a freshman when you graduated."

"No."

"She's been coming to Warren's."

"Probably because of their sexy milkman." I kept quiet. "What were you saying?"

"Forget it."

"Sorry." We stopped at a red light.

"I want to try baking," Derrick said. "Something like sourdough."

"Maybe you should become a baker."

"Maybe, if I stop loving bikes. What should you become?"

"Someone else, I hope."

My driver disapproved, but that was his story. Him reaching out to me last April was like an alien encounter. Two years earlier, he had a strong jaw and a smile that said he wouldn't remember any of us. Across the table at the sports bar we met at was a pale shadow donning a raggy beard. He was six months sober then. He told me about his recovery. I kept my eyes on the door, hoping no one I knew would come in.

He asked what I was charged with. I don't know why, but I told him everything, even my parents having me work to pay off the insurance deductible and hospital bills, though I couldn't drive for work. He offered to help, so long as I had the right hours. He stopped being Derrick, second-string QB and became Derrick, kind stranger that drives me places. I couldn't unify the two. This was a new life he had, and I liked the idea of it.

It snowed the third Sunday of October. I was expecting to see Sidney, since she'd been in the last two weeks. We'd talk, and I looked forward to her visits. A little past two, she came in powdered from the snow. I saw a bag of flour in her cart.

"You bake?"

"Yes!"

"Bread?"

"Sourdough."

"Oh, I love sourdough."

"You do?"

I nodded. "Yep."

"Well, I'll let you know how this starter goes, then."

"Yeah, starter, that'd be great."

She reached for a carton of eggs. "There's a game this Saturday. You should come."

"Attendance low?"

"Nope, just something you don't want to miss. See you there."

"Maybe."

"Don't flake." She stuck a stern finger at me, then went on her way. I waved, and she waved back.

Later, in the car, I swirled my thermos.

"So, a trip down memory lane," Derrick said as flakes fell on the window. "I can see her now, eyes scanning the bleachers, looking for that Brad Dunning."

"If I had to go, I wouldn't want to go alone."

He smiled, and did his best Val Kilmer. "I'm your huckleberry."

The school was a citadel in the dark. The dashboard clock said we had seventeen minutes to spare. Derrick sat still, scratching the steering wheel with his thumb, stone cold. He might've been ready to book it, or he might've been thinking about groceries. I was ready to book it.

We got out of the car. I had a gut feeling I couldn't turn back. I had to show some follow-through, at least for Derrick. It felt like trespassing. At the door, the women selling tickets would turn us away. We wouldn't be welcomed back.

We sat near the top of the bleachers, which were filling up fast. The young, purple wave that once cheered for me crept closer and closer. Derrick was on his phone looking at mountain bikes. Then, the players ran onto the court. The applause was loud and instant. My eyes darted between them as they set and passed the ball, the crowd electric. One of the taller girls tossed up the ball to serve, and I sort of knew it was Sidney. She was on the court now, absolutely unfamiliar from whoever it was I kept seeing at Warren's.

The game began and Sidney's team started strong. I looked at the student section. People weren't noticing me. There were no turned heads or looks of scorn. I was just another face. I was anonymous, no one of any relevance. I felt a sudden hardness in my chest. There were cheers, squeaking of shoes, buzzers, but I belonged somewhere better. The University of Lincoln offered me to be a walk-on. This charade of high school athletics was all beneath me, and I suddenly couldn't stand being here, watching a game that didn't matter.

Sidney's team won in two sets. The crowd trickled out. I kept a quick pace to the exit. Derrick stopped me.

"The players are gonna be out soon, you want to say something to Sidney?"

"I wanna get outta here."

"Well, maybe I want to say hi."

"You don't even know her, goddamn it," and I kept walking. Everyone around us had these soft smiles of pride like a bunch of idiots thinking it was them who won the game. We were at the doors when the players came out from the locker rooms. Everyone clapped and cheered and my ears hurt and I wanted this whole town to go to hell.

It was cold outside. Derrick started the car and let it idle.

"You all right?"

"I'm fine."

"What are you so pissed about?"

"I don't know."

"We can go back in, say congratulations, and then leave."

"I can't go back in, I already walked out, I'd look ridiculous."

"To who? Who's watching you?"

I looked out the window at the track and field across the street. The lights were out. It looked dark and empty.

"Just take me home, man," and he did.

Tail lights flooded our faces in red. I watched the streetlights running by. My window was cracked, and it suddenly smelled like Trey Baxter's basement, old carpet mixed with fruity liquor.

It was like that night in April, with Trey's red hair coming in and out of focus. If you're big enough, people'll want to see how much drink you can take. They keep cheering and handing you one can after another. I was sleepy, and grabbed my keys. I slipped out, and the sounds of the basement became distant humming.

I remember the air was cold. The radio was playing soft country. The pedals were thin under my boots. I was cranking the window down when my seat lifted up.

Slam. A hubcap hit the road. Shattered glass in my lap. My face was warm and wet. A car next to me was sitting still, lights flashing. I did the one thing I could think of to make it all better, and I put on my seatbelt.

I ended up in the back of a police cruiser, thinking I was dreaming. I tried waking up, but it was real. Nothing feels as real as cuffs around your wrists.

After Derrick dropped me off, I laid in bed, thinking of everything I could have done differently. I could spend the rest of my life imagining everything that could've gone right. A designated driver, curfew, or just common sense could've kept me from colliding with a senior citizen. I sent someone's Grandpa to the hospital and could have killed him. I tossed and turned. It hurt to be myself, and I knew that if I could do the whole thing over, I would.

I got goosebumps ten minutes into my shift. It happened all the time. I wiped down the baskets, and figured life isn't adventure so much as it is work, and maybe there's nothing wrong with that.

Sidney rounded the corner. My chest got tight. Her eyes were narrow and her smile was wide as she pushed her cart to where I was.

"Did you make it to the game? We won."

"I know, I was there."

"Did you stick around? I didn't see you."

"My ride had to leave early."

"Oh, you have a chauffeur?"

"Something like that. It was a good game, though. You did well." Her eyes on me were like a comforter. "How's your bread?" I asked.

"It's ready! I'm trying some tonight."

"You'll have to tell me how it is."

“Why not have some yourself?”

“You have some?”

She gave me a straight look. “Come over and try some bread, if you want to.”

“Oh, okay. I’d like to.”

She gave me her number. Once she was gone, I felt uneasy. What did she want? Derrick would make me go. I couldn’t let him know.

Derrick dropped me off in front of Sidney’s house an hour later. I rang the bell with a shaky hand. She came out wearing a dark cardigan and jeans.

“Come in.” I followed her into a family room with dark, rich colors. We sat down on a brown, wooly couch, the room filled with a cozy, yellow light.

“My parents are at league, but they’ll be home soon. I bet my dad would love to talk with you.”

“A fan?”

She nodded. “You guys had a good O-line last year. And, you never missed a snap.”

“Yeah, I suppose I didn’t.”

“Would you ever want to play again?”

It was still April when Lincoln sent the official statement to my dad. He handed me the open envelope with soft, red eyes. Mom was crying in the living room. It was like someone had died. I had a court date coming up.

“It was bound to happen,” she eventually said. “We can’t play forever.” They had a nice, big television screen, and I thought of game day Saturdays with my dad. Then it was third grade flag football or summer fundraising before highschool.

“We get to become new people, do new things,” she said.

My eyes stung. I felt a bearing go out somewhere.

“I almost—I almost—killed a guy.”

It was over. I was done.

I covered my face with my hands and curled into myself. I kept curling, and tried to get so small I’d stop being there.

“Whoa, hey, it’s okay.” Her voice was hushed. “He’s alright.”

“What if I had killed him?” I felt a hand on my shoulder. “Everyone hates me.”

“No they don’t, Brad.”

“My life is over. I hate myself.”

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s all okay.”

“God. Oh, God.” I took a breath and shook. I breathed again, then again. It was warm in my chest, like I was melting. A few minutes passed, and I opened my eyes. Sidney was wide-eyed, wonder on her face. She leaned forward, stood up, then walked into the kitchen. I stared at a wall and wiped my face. She came back with tissues and a glass of water.

“I’m not—” I cleared my throat, “I’m not usually like this.” She gave me the glass. Relief, that’s what I felt. Like playing Ghosts in the Graveyard, the feeling when I made it back to base and knew I was safe from getting caught.

“Well, how are you?” I asked.

We talked for an hour. I left before her parents got back. I got into Derrick’s car, looked at him, and felt like she was still nearby. We slipped through the streets and avenues. I saw flowerbeds I had never noticed before, and the lights above us burned the same way they did all those years ago on Halloween night, back when streets were things you crossed with friends, and masks were what we took off when the night was over and another day was coming. Or so it seemed to me.

don't weep child

By Brandon Shane

bells atop the church
toll and Christ stands over
boys keeping a dark secret

they look at each other
when no one is around
and sometimes smile

in the house of God
they hide from the pastor
hide from their fathers

never to confide
but knowing the truth
having made a silent pact

that loving other boys
men growing to love
other men

in the face of eternal
damnation and social
castigation

is not a sin
but the ultimate
form of love

Stygian Night

By Amelia Díaz Ettinger

seeps through the window
like a slithering,
wary paramour
bringing with it a specter of petrichor

the rot takes out the rhyme
of yesterday's morning blush
without the Milky Way to brighten
this impotent cavity

there are no tales
in the zero moon, the lack
of stars

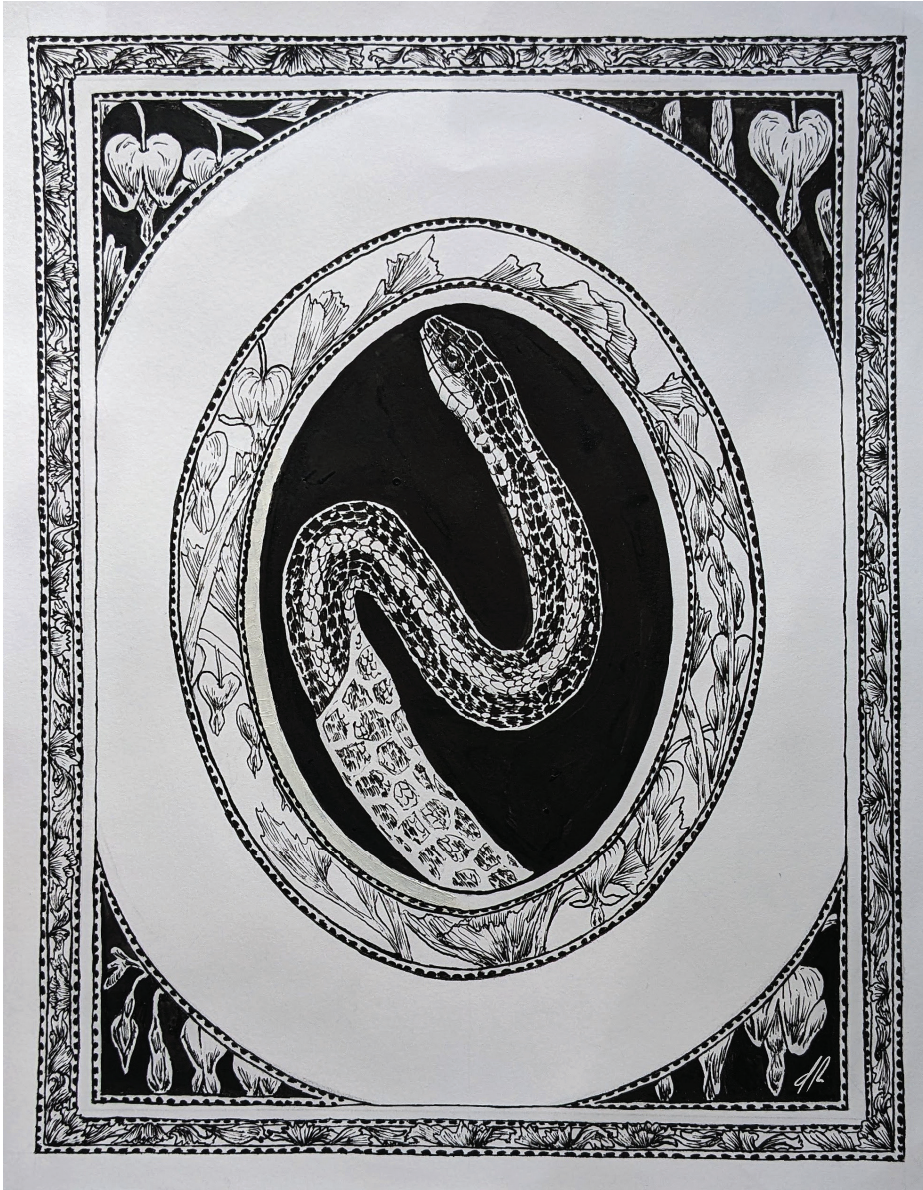
just reproaches—

the warmth deep
of those woods
where devotion
fails to kneel and pray at this void



est-ce que je t'abîme?

By Sujash Purna



Of Snakes and Bleeding Hearts

By Jaycee Ritola

About Hesperides

By Morgan Doerr

In regards to dragons, I understand them well—the affinity for water and gold, for sleep and for anger.

Dragons cannot see us when the moon is new; they can only see what creeps beneath its light. The great serpent sleeps on top of itself, weaving and winding around the world's old apple tree, slinking with its own breath. In youth, I remember crouching down beneath the grape vine arches and never daring to get any closer than this. It was enough for me to see her milk-skin and thick clouded puffs of air. Our skinny limbs stained green from leaning too long on poa grass, and from above us we stole grapes that were bruised to the touch, spitting the seeds and saving them for later. It wouldn't matter; nothing from this garden should be grown elsewhere, but it was enough to know that we stole them anyways.

The two of us wandered alone in the garden, save for the dragon and her daughters. "Come here," she said in the dark. I could scarcely see without the moon, and I wandered around the low-growing grove until I felt the pull of my wrist. Above us, out of sight, a slumbering dragon. She whispered so quietly, I almost could not catch it. "One day I shall steal an apple, crack it in half, and we shall share it together."

Her eyes curved into a crescent smile and I knew she wanted only to please me.

"We can steal apples from any other garden, and eat them in plain moonlight," I said. "No gods shall care for us if we steal from this place."

She stiffened in the darkness, and my ribs laced with regret for saying anything at all. As she pulled me down the hill, she spoke low so I could hardly hear, "I fear that few of them care for us at all."

Then, as if she said no such thing, she clasped her hands behind her back and walked back towards the vineyard, singing loudly a jubilant melody. With such a voice, so clear and resilient compared to my own, I would follow her anywhere. And I did.

Liverpool, 1962

By Maddison O'Donnell

“There are a lot of things you can catch from kissing,
like pregnancy,” whispers Father John but
Doctor Forthlin tells me it’s the glandular fever
“It’ll lead you straight into bed”
is what he says.

The dentist on the corner preaches that sharing
saliva causes tooth rot, and rot besides –
I think about my grandparents’ cavernous
mouths, lined with wet, pink tissue and how
they kissed each other before they died.

My mother delivers warnings
that you’ll catch yourself inside the grapevine
“This morning’s vinegar was yesterday’s wine–”
and sister Doris shows me little red sores around her
mouth that she covers with her lipstick, a red shade
called Habit.

But the only things I have caught
(so far) are:
The flavour of a cigarette I haven’t smoked and
an underground bassline keeping its time with
the thick thrum blood pulse of a schoolboy reject and
the smell-taste of minted aftershave, warm beneath
a smooth-fleshed, young-boned jawline.

And feelings, of course, I dare not describe.

The Crows Saw Everything

By Artemis Asbury

Two voices ring clear through flat autumn atmosphere.
Two kids at their neighbor's farm stop to admire whistling wind.
Two shadows side-by-side on the wall of the sun-bleached barn.

Finding a palm-sized stone, one throws it at the other's back;
the culprit turns and sprints off with wild, taunting laughter,
crashing destructively into the cornfield.

Rubber boots stomp through sticky mud and leaves scrape their bare ankles in pursuit,
spewing most vicious insults, and returning cackles through the wind with revelry.
Feet furiously pound dirt to close the gap between the two.

Each face a grinning skull as the space between them shrinks with a halt.
A ferocious little hand attacks, swiping at his rival's shoulder,
but feels only the agony of empty air, a hand closed in vain around nothing at all.

Eyes widen in search of his target, scanning the dark cornfield.
The silence grows loud as his gaze meets no one,
and when he calls out, only the crows circling the pumpkin patch can hear him.

...

He waits for the punchline of this sick joke until his fingers go numb
and tears burn hot like fresh wounds down his freezing face.
Wind whispers conspiracy through the leering leaves of swaying stalks.

Soon, his throat bleeds from screaming for answers, his stomach snarling even louder.
At home, Mother waits with a steaming pot of tomato basil soup.
He walks back for years and years, and the wind cuts his soft skin without mercy.

Along the way, the red sun
stretches his shadow into a tall, tired man
and the crows feed.



With Pollen In His Voice - Hashje-altye

By Delancy Hizer

The Purple Orchid

By Angie Loveday

During my first semester at college, I had this purple orchid sitting on my desk. It was a tiny thing, fragile, barely holding onto any life. My mother gave it to me right before I began my big college adventure.

I moved into the college dorms on a Thursday and got one last visit from my mom on Sunday, right before she flew back to our country on Monday—the same day my classes would start. She showed up with that tiny flower, bought from a supermarket and wrapped up in a plastic bag. Perhaps she thought it would remind me of home, even if it was a knockoff version of the real purple orchids that are considered our national flower.

I regretted that day a lot. Rather than enjoying the little time we had left together, we were running around trying to sort out some last minute financial issues. We then hurried into the school store, trying to buy college apparel that I didn't get for myself because I thought it was too expensive, but she wanted me to have it. And then, I ran off to one more induction meeting, barely hugging her goodbye because I felt so pressured by the ten missed calls from my peer advisor asking where I was, only to sit there hearing the exact same words of welcome we'd already been through over and over throughout the weekend.

And I broke down crying.

What was so important that I couldn't properly say goodbye to my mom? I remember trying to keep myself together so that my breakdown wouldn't be too evident in a room full of freshmen students, clutching onto the bag of apparel we'd just bought and wanting to throw it out, to scream, because why had I been so stupid?

When I made my way back to the room, there it was, the purple orchid. I took it out of its bag and set it on my desk under a spot of light that was able to sneak its way in through the blinds. Every day, I watered it with the amount of an ice cube, just like the instructions said. At first, it was alright. It held onto its beauty. But soon, the flower was down to a couple of browning petals.

I thought I was doing things right. I was following instructions. The leaves seemed to still be alive, so I hoped it was just part of its natural cycle. Around that same time, I started having trouble in school. I was only taking one class related to my major that first semester—Honors Calculus for math and science majors—and I was failing. Badly.

Me. The kid who'd participated in the National Math Olympics. Me, who was always top of her class. Me, who was considered a know-it-all among her classmates. That kid was no more. While people joke about over-achiever kids freaking out over getting less than excellent, not only was I no

longer excellent, I was failing. I was the worst student in that classroom. And it hurt.

But more than being hurt over my grades, I was hurt because I didn't know who I was anymore. If I wasn't the nerdy kid, a title that I had struggled to change from a bullying insult into something I was proud of, then who was I?

I attended tutoring. I asked my friends for help. I looked for online resources. Nothing helped. I wasn't improving. Rather, I was getting worse. I couldn't handle another week of being in that class, much less seven more semesters. As the last dried up orchid petal fell off from my little plant, I knew I had to change my major. I didn't know what to swap it with at that point, but I knew that I had to.

The leaves held out a little longer, although not very much. Those too, started losing their color. They weren't as lively anymore, just like I'd lost my excitement over my future dreams, and just as I was losing my romantic ideals. I was also failing at love.

I was seeing someone, but suddenly I wasn't—except maybe I was? It was one of those things where you're so deep in your feelings for this person, no matter how much they keep hurting and leaving you, the moment they call you up again, there you are, only to be left again by the end of the night.

As I felt this toxic relationship slowly drain me of any sense and will to move forward, so too were the purple orchid's leaves browning, all the life left in them being drained away. In that state I kept going, until one day, as I was in a rush to meet with this guy—quickly getting ready before he'd change his mind again—I grabbed my key lanyard from my desk...

And pulled the entire flower pot with them. It crashed onto the floor, breaking into a hundred pieces, soil all over my dorm floor. There was no saving it. Seeing the orchid in that state made me feel like I had also been broken into a hundred pieces. This plant that had been a constant reminder of home and, more specifically, my mom, was no more.

I couldn't stop crying. My body was shaking uncontrollably. I couldn't even gather myself enough to pick up the broken shards of pottery.

I called my mom. Before I could even say anything, she asked, "Do you want to fly home for break?"

And in that whole semester, I'd never felt such a sense of calm.

"Yes."

Luckily, I turned out to be more like the purple orchid in our backyard back home—stringy, dried up roots hanging midair from a metal post that bloom when you're least expecting it.



¡Calaveras con Ritmo!

By Marianna Cruz



Frozen in Drought

By Serge Lecomte

Raiment

By Ellen Malphrus

You left me stripped, to find my way alone
through brutal emptiness that slashed my skin.
I roamed among the slaughtered promises
envisioning the day I'd rule again.
With no one there to dress my wounds, I made
Nepenthe cloth myself—but first I set
out gathering golds of memory outweighed
and wove them through the silvers of regret
with bits of colored hope to catch the light.

From these, a mantle shimmering
and sound increased in length each year until I
spliced in fortitude, and now it skirts the
ground.

I could elect you bearer of my train.
Instead, you'll bear—or not—these scraps of
pain.

~



Venice

By Isabelle Goff

The Colossus

By Amelia Díaz Ettinger

Everyone remembers their first kiss, but for Elsa, it was a matter of trying to forget it. That first mouth-to-mouth kiss was as disgusting, sloppy, and wet as it was unexpected. She was, after all, a mature woman of thirty years, and the kiss hadn't been invited. She was waiting for the B-67, a direct route to her apartment, in a district not far from downtown Portland. As the weather would have it, it was raining, and Elsa was anxious to get home to her canary, Rosie. A little ball of feathers and scaly warm feet; Rosie was always scratching and digging in her hair and shoulders when she got home from work. The little yellow menace liked to sit for hours on Elsa's hair while she worked on the computer to finish reports. This bird, who seldom sang a single musical note (though they had told Elsa in the pet store that she was a regular soprano) was warm and funny and filled Elsa with smiles and one-sided conversations. On the morning of the kiss, Rosie had flown from her perch and landed on Elsa's cereal. She got her tiny foot, which looked like a dry branch, hooked on a single Cheerio. Then the bird hopped around Elsa's table, leaving tiny 'W' prints and shaking her leg in a futile attempt to dislodge the 'doughnut' off her skinny leg.

"Oh, Rosie! You silly bird. Here, let me."

Why did Elsa call a yellow canary by the name of a different color? Who knows? But that was Elsa to a 'Tee', a woman of contradictions. Despite being taller than any of the people who worked for her in her law firm, *Elsa Dávila and Associates*, she insisted on wearing five-inch heels, making her a sort of freakish giant—though her bunions gave her pause, even when she was sitting. Frivolities were not in her dictionary, unless you considered the 68 pairs of Miu Miu, Christian Louboutin, and Jimmy Choo shoes she displayed in the spare room of her apartment—all of them with 5" heels. In every other aspect of her life (besides her shoes), she insisted on efficiency, comfort, expediency, and sobriety. It was a provision that kept her associates, and other employees who ran amuck with folders and Starbucks coffees, in nervous conditions—an array of ticks and prescription medications accompanied them.

On the day of the disgusting kiss, Elsa was waiting for the B-67 late at night. It was already 11:45 PM. Why was she waiting for a public bus and not her private car? Another contradiction. Elsa never drove anywhere and never learned to drive, even though she was fiercely independent. *No thank you, I can manage by myself.* She didn't even own

a car—though she could easily afford to have a whole fleet of cars if she chose. This was a matter of practicality. Without a car, she could work without interruptions during her commute.

When Elsa got on the bus, she was busying herself with notes and checking her mail on her cellphone. She did not like surprises. You never knew what file or letter would creep into that sacred inbox late in the night. So, she was distracted when she bumped into the back of a young girl. She smelled of patchouli, sweat, and vaguely of marijuana, and Elsa knew the aroma of the drug from clients. She did not approve.

“Hey, watch it,” the girl exclaimed. Doing a double-take. The girl’s eyes met Elsa’s waist. Elsa’s eyes were a full torso above hers.

“Whoa, you are a colossus!” the girl laughed, showing a gap in her upper teeth. *Those teeth don’t look too clean*, Elsa thought. She did not smile, but managed a grumbled apology.

The lights in the bus were unduly bright, giving the three occupants of the bus a ghostly blue countenance. Elsa hurriedly sat on the seat behind the driver, who stole glances at her from the rearview mirror. He, too, thought Elsa a leviathan. She was familiar with that kind of stare. A kind of befuddled, *I don’t believe I am seeing what I am seeing*. Elsa continued checking her mail and taking notes. But mostly, trying to ignore the aromatic girl who chose, *for Christ’s sake*, to sit next to her, even though they were on an empty bus. *Good, God!*

“You must be a very important person.”

“Excuse me?” Elsa said.

“Yeah, you’re holding that phone like it contains the universe, right on your palm.”

Stoner, Elsa thought. But the girl sat close, as if she wanted to read the phone herself, or worse—climb on her lap.

There was no more room on the cold plastic seat, but getting up was out of the question. She was being scrunched into the metal pole on her left. *Damn it, damn it!* Seats of any kind had always been a problem. Elsa hated all kinds of seats and felt none were meant for a woman close to seven feet tall.

This god-damned plastic seat on this god-awful bus is a bloody trap!

The patchouli-smelling girl was wearing heavy black boots with a million buckles. *How impractical. Must take an unnecessary amount of time to put those on. Imagine if there was a fire!* The girl’s black stockings were full of holes, and Elsa wondered if she bought them like that. *Ridiculous how people pay for things that look used, a sad outfit.* A patch of very white skin poked through the stockings on the girl’s left thigh. It looked like a soft bubble, a little mountain of flesh, almost tempting to be touched. *I wonder if the bubble goes down if you touch it. How soft could it be?* There were fifteen unanswered messages in her mail.

They rode in silence for a while. Elsa did her best to concentrate on her mail, though the girl's skinny hips were smashing into her own. The girl slumped on Elsa's shoulder. Actually, more like on her right boob. *Is she asleep? How can anyone fall asleep so fast, and on public transport? Dear God!*

Elsa was unable to bugger her off. *Great. Just great, I bet her dirty hair will leave a stain on my silk blouse.* With the annoyance of not being able to dislodge the sleeping girl—*was she sleeping or comatose?*—Elsa pushed a bit more forcefully this time, and as luck would have it, the driver slammed the brakes for a cat, or some other mammal, at that same moment. The driver cussed out loud, a large resounding, “Fuuuuckkkk!” Elsa's head slipped sideways, bumping into the girl's lips, lips that pursed and puckered, giving Elsa a resounding and wet first kiss.

For days afterward, the moment continued to play on Elsa's mind. She could feel the wetness and the confusion of those lips. *Dreadful, just dreadful!* She had never kissed anyone before, though she had come close once: Ricardo Villanueva in tenth grade. They had been doing trigonometry—well, more like Elsa was teaching trigonometry, and Ricardo, who everyone called Dick (or worse, Dicky) was doing some sort of ‘geometry’ on Elsa's boobs. He looked at them while she was trying to explain how to solve the problem.

“Take this isosceles triangle and divide it into two congruent... Ricardo, are you listening to anything I am saying?”

But Ricardo, Dick, or Dicky, instead of following the line of Elsa's finger on the paper, timidly, but passionately, lurched his head forward to plant a kiss on Elsa's slightly peeling lips. Elsa, sickened by the movement, slapped him, laughed, and left him to fail trigonometry. After that, there was never any contact of lips, or even attempts. Elsa made sure of that.

But now, this kiss had sent her straight into the fabled ‘rabbit hole’. The very next day, she avoided the B-67, choosing instead to take the Max. She was afraid of encountering the girl with black stockings that protruded soft skin. But even in the crowded subway, the kiss would not go away. She found herself scanning the Max for the girl. The girl and the kiss were in her mind, like the stain the girl had indeed left on her silk blouse that day.

As the days passed, things went from bad to worse. She found herself thinking about that abhorrent kiss during a deposition. The warmth of the kiss was so real—the pressure of the teeth behind the girl's lips. The prosecutor gave her a funny look when she stopped mid sentence. *Dear Lord, did I just touch my lips?* The next day, when a woman with a thin mustache sat as a witness, Elsa wondered if the hairs on the woman's upper lip would tickle. *Good heavens, did I just reach with my hand to the witness?*

The judge snapped her out of her reverie.

“Mrs. Dávila! What in the world are you doing?”

Elsa found herself so confused. Nothing like this had ever happened

to her before. The god-awful kiss would appear out of nowhere in the most inconvenient and unexpected places. She was feeding Rosie, who had coincidentally stopped singing altogether since the night of the kiss. She was thinking of the wet, pursed lips, when she noticed she had almost filled the entire cage with grain. *Poor Rosie, I almost drowned you in millet!* The bird gave Elsa an accusatory stare.

Many strange things happened to Elsa for weeks. She stopped arranging her hair in a tight bun. Now she let the curly tendrils down looking like a riot. She felt liberated.

Even her beloved shoes now disappointed her. Standing in front of her collection, she found she no longer cared for her Miu Miu's, or any other of her heels. She, in fact, stopped wearing them. She bought a pair of Nikes' trainers. The kind of shoes she swore to never wear.

She had seen the neon-green trainers at a window in Nordstrom. And for the first time, she saw them for what they were: practical and fast. She tried on her first pair and saw herself smiling in the store's mirror, even though she saw the clerk's astonished look as she brought an extra box of Adidas, men's size 15 and a half. *Why, for heaven's sake, have I not used these before?*

Things were just not the same. Words evaporated in her mouth right before she used them. Telephone calls went unanswered. Worse still, a couple of times, she found herself calling the same client twice in a row, giving facts and information intended for another client. People in the workplace were looking at her strangely, and the normally quiet office now had a nice, delightful buzz. *Is that music?* Now employees who had always looked nervous and uncomfortable brought her coffee and smiled!

At home, things were different too. Rosie gazed at her from her perch with her beady black eyes, as if she was looking at a stranger. She would hop on Elsa's shoulder, and since Elsa was so distracted, Rosie bit her twice trying to get attention.

One day, Elsa noticed she hadn't fed her, and the water dish was bone-dry. Rosie looked as disheveled as Elsa felt.

"Oh, poor baby. Look at you, you are all feathers and bone."

She went to the sink to fill the dish, and the 'bird dish smell' reminded Elsa of the aroma of marijuana, a smell she used to find offensive, but now made her chest tingle. Ebullient with the sensation, she opened the kitchen window of her apartment to let Portland's night breeze in. Distracted, she began to open the buttons of her blouse to get more air. Rosie came to perch on her shoulder, but the breeze was too much of an invitation and the yellow canary flew right by Elsa's left ear.

"No, no no!"

Rosie's escape gave Elsa a migraine. She ran through Portland's streets, calling Rosie's name at the top of her lungs. She could see the yellow flutter of

wings ahead of her. Twice, she stumbled on some poor soul sleeping on the sidewalk. She apologized, but never left sight of Rosie. At Madison and 29th Street, missing the curb, Elsa fell down like a sequoia. In that brief instant, she lost track of her baby bird and when she looked up, Rosie was nowhere to be found.

“Oh, Rosie, come back, please!”

The next morning, she called her office and canceled all of her appointments—something she had never done in her entire life. Elsa stayed in bed, suffering from her migraine and blaming the girl that called her a colossus. She knew it was irrational, but she felt that Rosie’s escape was her fault.

“Oh, Rosie, where are you?” she said aloud, but would close her eyes and wonder where the girl was instead. In the middle of that strange week, she went to the bus station telling herself she was looking for Rosie, but she found no sight of her, or the girl. Elsa began to question her sanity. *Maybe I just imagined her.*

After that week was over, she looked at herself in the mirror and said, “There is no ill that work can’t cure.” With that, she dressed in one of her most expensive suits. Her hair was without a bun, unruly curls without their bob-by pins and elastic. With Nikes’ green trainers on her feet, she took long easy strides in the direction of her office.

She watched the top of people’s heads who went by. *I never knew there were so many different shapes to the tops of people’s heads.* Pedestrian stares didn’t bother her. Her reflection in the glass of stores she passed showed she was the tallest person around. At a boutique that sold lingerie, she was surprised that her reflection was smiling back at her.

She reached Pioneer Square and saw Rosie perched on a Douglas Fir.

“Rose, Rosie, here birdy!” She called to her bird, “Rosie, you devil bird, get over here!”

Rosie was having none of it. She walked back and forth on the branch as if she owned it.

“Damn it bird, get over here!” Elsa was aware she was making a scene. Rosie pooped right on Elsa’s neon-green athletic shoes.

Elsa stopped screaming and began to quietly laugh. She chose instead to watch her bird. Rosie cleaned her beak on the Douglas Fir and began to sing.

“Well, look at that! You found your singing voice.”

“Hey, Colossus!”

The voice! Elsa closed her eyes. *Please, let this be real.* The sound of that voice and the smell of patchouli so near. She did not want it to be her imagination.

“Colossus!” The only nickname she had ever had. The contradiction within her kept her grounded on the spot, eyes unopened, just hoping for the tenderness of soft lips and a second chance.

Supernova

By Joseph Reyes-Hernandez

Why ask the soul for one more year,
When it can barely manage a month?
Why ask the soul for one more week,
When it cannot predict the future?
Why ask the soul to keep on going,
When it's been drained of life?

Instead,

Ask the soul for one more day.
One more day of thoughts.
One more day of emotions.
One more day of existence.
Because tomorrow may finally be the day that the
stardust within you shines.
Tomorrow may finally be the day when life returns
to the soul.
Ask the soul for **one. more. day.**



Metamorphosis

By Larissa Hauck

Dawn

By Oladejo Abdullah Feranmi

May you be the happiest of sunrise.
May you meet yourself on this side
of the road you are walking
or under its tree; crying or laughing
or sleeping and collecting what is bigger
than your hands (of its warmth) as you
wrap your trunk around shadows. May you
hold the branches of our hearts till they
become heavy with fruits and flowers and
everything else that knows the sound of fall.

A Sugared Sky

By Kaleigh Dixon

For days, the sky has bubbled a threatening white-like the froth on the lips of a rabid animal. I sit at my dining table, the sky pulsing through the small picture window above the kitchen sink. Cream and coffee curl into each other within the ceramic mug warming my palms. On the radio, through the rushing static, the reporter's voice muscles through: "Remain indoors...record-breaking...at all costs." I move to the window, squint against the menacing glare; I want to see the sky when it finally peels open like an inflated blister, letting loose great gusts of snow that have been festering behind the milky wall of clouds for far too long. I pull up a chair, the metal legs screeching against the cold, seafoam-green tile, press the mug against my lips, let the steam breath dew on my eyelids, and I watch.

I've not sat and watched the sky like this for some time.

Sitting here, eyeing the white, I am reminded of my grandfather. It's strange, the memories your mind will keep tucked away in its folds, only to resurface on their own volition; those that, like the actors and fine wine we admire so much, have aged with grace. Distant memories uncrumpled, clean, suddenly searing. As a child, coming home from school, I'd often find my grandfather on the front porch swing, an unread newspaper face down on his lap like a flimsy blanket, his wire rim glasses perched on top of his freckled head, a cup of mint tea by his foot, undrunk.

"What are you looking at?" I once asked, straining my eyes to find a funny cloud or a bird or a loose balloon or perhaps a vapor trail gone astray—anything that might transfix him so—in the sky.

"Same thing as you, June Bug," he said.

Catching a glimpse of my mother thumbing the blinds from inside the kitchen, prying them open just a sliver, I said, "She's watching you."

He drew back his head, hardly an inch, casting a sudden flutter in the blinds. He dispelled a gravelly sound that wavered somewhere between a grunt and a chuckle. I wondered if she was worried about his new hobby—if I should be worried, too.

My grandfather seemed to most enjoy the air when it swelled with the beginnings of a storm, sucking down one of his rum-soaked, strictly special occasion cigars under bloated skies the colors of deep rot, until they unleashed whatever had been brewing inside and my mother corralled him in.

Outside of my window now, there is a thick stew: a thin veil of clouds curdling, still brightening somehow, blistering white like an exposed bone. I think he'd have loved it. I don't smoke cigars, but I decide to indulge in his honor. I pull the chair across the kitchen, the metal legs screaming against the tile, and place it next to the fridge. I stand on top of it and blindly rustle through the cabinet above the fridge until my fingers meet dusty glass. I pour just a nip of whiskey in the coffee. Remembering I've not yet eaten, I pull out a box mix of angel food cake my daughter left here probably two years ago. I fold the contents in a glass bowl with milk, pour the batter in a box pan—I don't have a tube pan for the classic angel food cake, but figure it'll taste the same—and set it in the oven. Yes, spiked coffee and cake in the early afternoon is extravagant, but a little extravagance, under the circumstances, can certainly be afforded. I bring the chair back to the window, sit.

Years ago, I remember, I found myself under a festering sky such as this, though that one had been brimming with bulbous, gray-green clouds. I was in a small, coastal town in New England, where my boyfriend Bridger and I had gone for our final spring break of graduate school. The storm didn't wait for us, having buckled and broken open like a swollen, overripe fruit before we'd even gotten to shore. Balancing our surfboards on our heads, we ran to the rental shop, returned them. We were ill-prepared for a rainstorm: me, in just a blue bikini and a pair of tattered jean shorts; Bridger in a threadbare t-shirt and a pair of checkered trunks and canvas sandals.

The sky was on a rolling boil, spilling fat, messy sheets of rain without a sign of letting up. We found a strip of shops, figured we'd kill time beneath the safety of the candy cane awnings. We could have called a cab or waited for the trolley, but with an expiration date looming over us (he was going to Europe for his PhD, and I back home to Montana to be close to family), we preferred spontaneity. Our backs pressed to the warm brick wall, he fished a cigarette from my bag. He pulled my hands to cup the cigarette while he flicked the flame to the tip until it latched on. I never liked the smell or taste of the smoke, but watching his cheeks sink in, his sun-washed skin pulled taut over those marvelous, sharp bones, I felt a heat yawn through my chest, behind my eyes. For all I cared, he could smoke the whole carton.

We stopped first in a candy store, sampled our fill of chocolate and honey dipped cherries, sugared walnuts, sea salt toffee freshly stretched, then settled at a tiki-themed restaurant. Yes, it was an afternoon of sugar and booze like this one, but we were twenty-four and vibrating with desire; yes, extravagance could be excused.

We sat at a bright red booth in the corner, the leather seats gummy and crumb-dusted, their deep, snaking cracks exposing shocks of yellow foam beneath the surface. He ordered the spicy margarita, and I the blue lagoon, and we both opted for the fishbowl.

The table was soon filled with plates of oysters and coconut-crusting shrimp and our unnaturally neon drinks in their gigantic glasses, with umbrella skewers of fruit propped on the rims. We squeezed lemons over the oysters, sucked the fleshy, cold pools clean from their shells and drank our drinks so fast it made our eyes numb, my tongue lunar blue. We spoke of our professors, our favorite poets, the rain. It was a warm rain, the humidity bleeding inside and clinging to the glass of our drinks, the curled wisps of hair framing Bridger's face.

I was submerged in a haze, weak but giddy from hours in the sun, the sugar, the drinks, yet my vision was sharp. It felt as if, for the first time in my life, I knew exactly what I wanted.

"I wish I could swallow you whole," I told Bridger. I hardly knew what I meant then, yet it rang inexplicably true. I'd never felt such potency, such intoxication from another, and my hunger for him couldn't be satiated. Perhaps if I pulled him in so deep his flesh congealed with mine, perhaps if he melted into the marrow of my bones, I thought, I would finally be satiated.

He smiled, brought the pulse of my wrist to his lips. I wondered if he could feel my heartbeat in his mouth. "Candy and seafood and booze hasn't filled you yet?"

Emboldened by the fishbowl, or perhaps the moment, I leaned over the table and plunged my tongue in his ear. All the smells from the day seemed to pool in the nook above his collarbone: smoke, sugar, seawater. "Should we catch the trolley?" I asked.

On the trolley home, I looked out the window. The downpour had oozed to a soft drizzle, and the sky had darkened to inky blue. Suspended there, in the glass's reflection: two people, *kids*, my parents still called us endearingly, fueled by mouths and hands and want.

At the sound of a knock at the front door, I come to. I don't realize my eyes were closed until they open again to the brutal white outside. On the glass of the window, a dusting of snow. The sky has broken.

My daughter comes in with my pink-cheeked grandson perched on her hip. She explains her surprise drop in; I catch some slippery words through waterlogged ears: "This side of town...slick roads...couldn't make it."

In the kitchen, she puts down Grady, waves a hand before her nose. She opens the oven, which belches a plume of milky smoke—"Jesus, Mom"—pulls out the pan with a towel. The smell of charred sugar swells in the kitchen. I sit again at the chair by the window, spent mug cold in my palms.

"What are you looking at, anyway?" she asks, stooping to my side, resting her chin on my shoulder.

I consider her question, smile. "Same thing as you."



MISSED CONNECTIONS: PAPER MILL BUG OWNER

By Megan Tuthill



Desire

By Jamie Anoa'i-Shroyer

Essence

By Malakai Amani

I am not what my mother saw in me
I am not what my father did not
nor what lovers desired
to fill cavities from saviors
later unveiled to be sadists.
I am all that I dreamed up
in classrooms during lectures
with faces that never felt familiar.
In cars, starrng out of windows
watching realities I daftly envied
at jobs I execrated
distracting myself from tasks at hand

No need to dissect whom
that may be
watch and listen, marvel and wonder
taste it, breathe it
Grasp the concept of me
being who I have not disclosed
not what benefits you
not what's congenial
not for you to discern
but a vessel for advent to hold.
If possible gas me
as I'm in mode
don't distract me, aid me
Encourage, uplift me
avert the pressure needed
for rubies and diamonds
foster space for organic life to grow

Idiom-Mannequin

By Kira Adams

“A picture is worth a thousand words.”

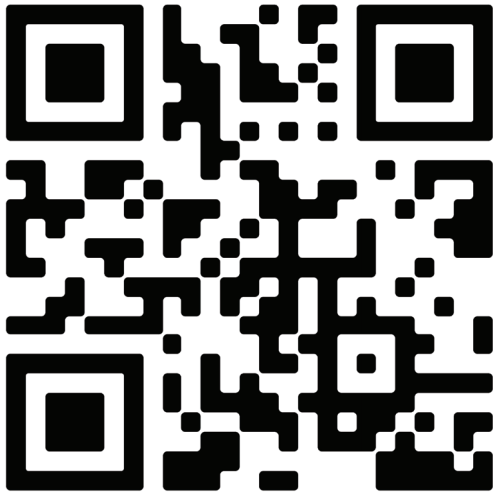
There is a mannequin, blank in and out. A fresh slate, a white canvas. If the mannequin were to be touched by a word, it would fill with color, shape and brightness. Molding itself to fit the text. Each mannequin can be impacted by other words.

A whole novel’s worth—what would it look like? If a reader could see the embodiment of a novel painted onto a mannequin, they would instantly know its entirety.

Feeling them in fragments
Into a physical being slurried together
The idiom-mannequin deserves to be gazed upon

Love.

Because each word needs to be caressed as it leaves the womb of my mouth. How can they exist in the universe if they aren’t loved? What are words but sound, and graphite, and ink, and binary code? Without a representation of their existence, then are they even there? Love, and eat, and be the words for what they mean.



how to find your purpose

By Jessica Miralrio

Mother

By Adrienne Pine

Content warning: parental abuse

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

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

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

“We’re all dying,” he replied.

“No, I know I am dying soon,” she said, “and it’s all right.”

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

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

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

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

It is one morning at breakfast, and I am three or four years old. I don’t know what started their argument, but Daddy wants to leave for work, and Mama is angry and threatening to pour coffee on him. He is angry, too, and taunts her that she won’t dare do it. “Don’t you believe it,” she cries, grabbing the coffee pot from

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She knew what I was doing, and it infuriated her. Even though I tried as hard as I could to be a stone that absorbed nothing, I didn't completely succeed. There was a part of me that took in every word she said and believed it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The pleasures of her life slipped away from her; she could no longer concentrate on reading, or watching television. Eating, walking, going to the bathroom, getting dressed were no longer activities of her daily life. Given this state of things, did she make a conscious decision to die sooner rather than later, in order to avoid the misery that lay ahead of her? Did she will her heart to fail, her lungs to fill with fluid? I wonder what it was like for her in those final moments, alone in the hospital room. I admire her courage, and I love her for not fighting the inevitable. If I were in her place, I would prefer it her way.

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

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

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

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

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

"Nah, she didn't mean it," he replied softly, twisting his body with shy-

ness like a schoolboy. Or was the gesture just a manifestation of his Parkinson's disease?

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

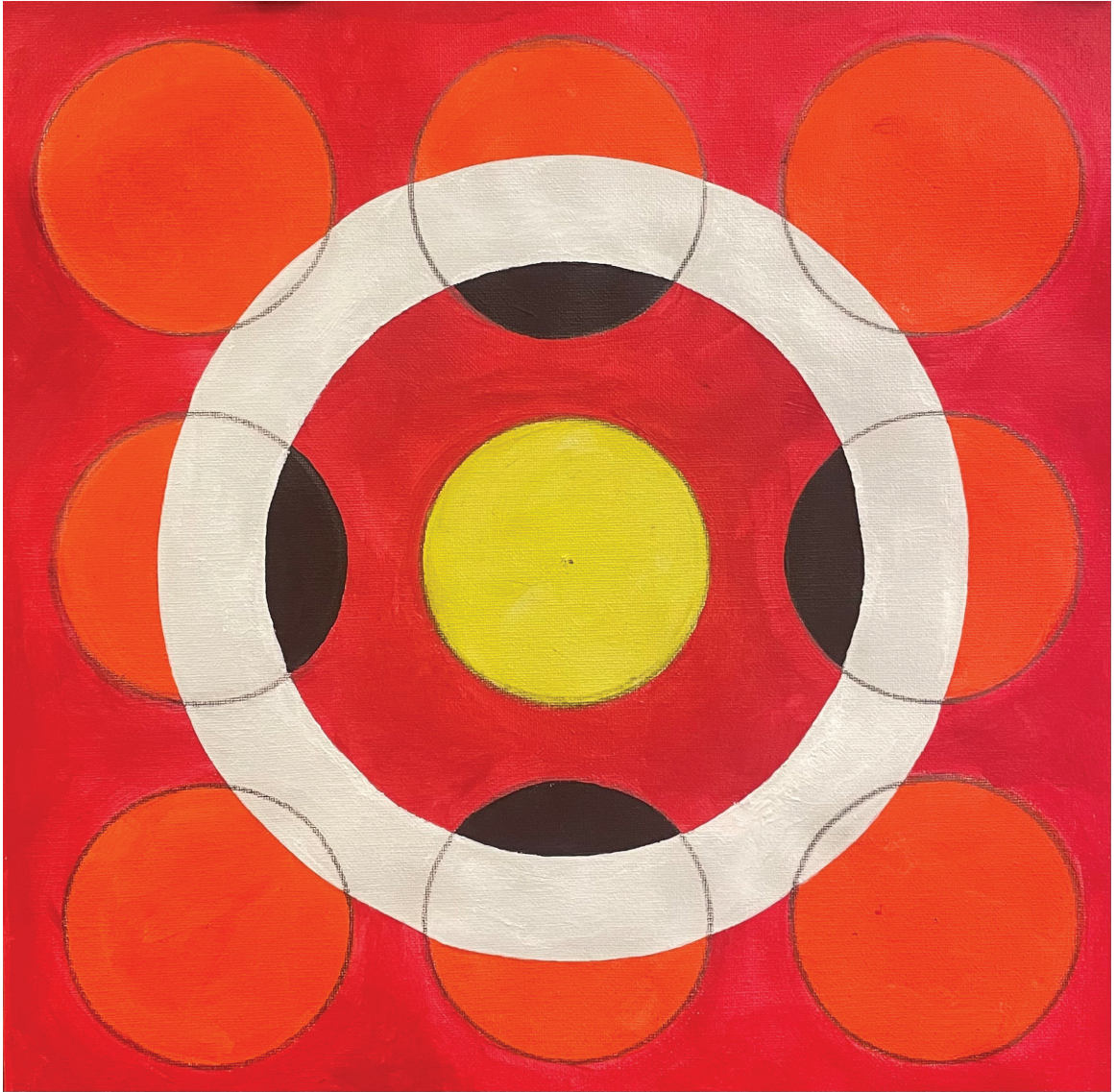
I find this metaphor rich and suggestive, as it hearkens back to the maternal ideal as intermediary, shelter, protector. I picture the black sky, pricked by stars. I feel the cold wind. But I don't feel the same way that my friend does.

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

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

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

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



art class americana

By Olivia Eldredge

We all waited anxiously for a storm

By Bethanie Collette

Sweeping through the coast.

The earth fell silent
the birds as well.

But the weather slowed right as it made its way
towards us;
anger, wind, passion, and snow
sent chills through our bones
only to dissipate before our eyes.

But the earth is still silent,

and we never had that fight.

Seventy-One, 1940

By Karen Beardslee Kwasny

Content warning: themes of grief

The nurse, wide-eyed, looks at the sheet of paper again,
“71?” she questions my mother, who is small under the thin blanket,
her blue-veined hands bone against the white cover.

“You look great! What’s your secret?”

My mother smiles,
lifts her head, and calls it genetics.
As if that’s all there is to it.

I look up from my papers and watch the nurse
study my mother’s face, searching for a lie.

For me, she is the miracle of no-bake cookies
right before dinner.

I am 7; she is 32.

Virtually unlined and lovely still.

“71.”

The nurse says again, and taps her pen.

Confirmation.

When the doctor comes in, he takes my mother’s fragile hand
and tells her she looks as good on the inside as she does on the outside.
He laughs, throws his head back at his own joke.

My mother smiles,
real, open.

I think I would like to climb into the hospital bed
and hold her.



Peace Offering

By Serge Lecomte

Gasoline Shampoo

By Julie Alden Cullinane

Content warning: parental abuse

My father washed my hair in gasoline once when I was eight. Not because I had lice, but because a letter came home from school saying that my whole class had been exposed to it. My father thought he was being pre-emptive against the little white invaders, but really, he was just too cheap to buy the eight-dollar lice shampoo they sold at CVS that came with the little wire comb. You could get a gallon of gas back then for less than a dollar--pocket change, or as we called it, couch change. There was always a red plastic gallon of gas in the garage for the lawnmower. To him, this was a genius solution. *'Those little suckers will never live through this!'* He laughed, all too pleased with himself.

He laid me down, looking up to the sky on his newly built picnic table--the wood still yellow and alive. My head hung off the edge like a face up guillotine. I remember my neck aching from holding it steady above the red bucket on the ground to catch the runoff for reuse. In my memory, it was a warm season, because the backyard was green and the sky was blue with cotton ball clouds.

My skull was on fire, and I was dizzy from the gravity, sunlight, and fumes. I remember my father's rough, fat, calloused hands as they pressed into my scalp.

Afterwards, I ran for the safety of the shower. I used all the hot water I could trying to shampoo and re-shampoo my hair with my older sister's strawberry *Suave* to get rid of the horrible smell. That week in school, I had mysteriously lost a bunch of friends overnight for no reason. When I finally gathered the courage to ask a girl from the neighborhood why, she said it was because I had been wearing my hair curly and that no one liked my curly hair. As I washed and re-washed my scorched, now straw-like hair, all I could hope was that maybe, if I was lucky, the gasoline had magically taken all the curls out of my hair. Maybe it would become stick-straight, silky and shiny like all the other girls. Then they would all be my friends again.

Revenge Fantasies

By Ava Wisely

One day, they will gut you alive.
And you will have nobody to blame but your own cowardice.
I will not come back if, and when, you call my name.
I will stand back and watch
as the flames engulf you,
as they did me.

Doesn't it hurt?

The difference between the two of us
is my ability to tend to my open wounds.
You will allow yours to fester, and boil over
because you lack the courage
to look at yourself in the goddamn mirror.
When they hurt you,
you will instinctively reach for my comfort
and you will feel as though you could collapse when you remember
that I am no longer there

and never will be again.

If I were to give you my advice
one final time,
here is what I would tell you.

Think about what you've destroyed, and suffer.
Grit your teeth and bear it
instead of running away
like you always do.
Endure the pain, not because you want to
but because you caused that pain for someone else.
It is now your duty
to trudge through the flames.



Spring Blooms

By Hannah Burbach

CURVING

By J. O. Winberry

I learned to balance
between trees
and to sleep
where my body takes me.
I woke
in the Nordic light,
facing only my shape, coiled
against the wall.

I felt hollow, carved-out
like an outline,
cold geometry curled
wall-side
in some sticky
unknown bed.
Waking,
sweat-shivering

to the birds
who sang songs
I'd never heard
and the people, who looked
like birds,
whose voices
sounded like songs.
What was I looking for?

Some face to inspire
some epic simile, some smile to erase
other smiles? Something clean
on which to paint a fabulous
curve and call it me?
Or was it just that silhouette,
that shadow cradled
on a dirty wall?

White Fish

By Kirby Wright

Content warning: themes of suicide

Wendy Adams was prone to crushes because she was lonely, a loneliness veering toward desperation during the holidays. Two years had passed since she'd had a fling with a Bellagio acrobat in Vegas. Her secret desire was to make-out with John Elway. She imagined him nibbling her neck with his full lips and wolfish teeth.

I usually cross paths with Wendy at department Christmas parties. 2022 is no exception. I spot her sashaying in a little black dress. There's a pewter chain around her neck, and she has a model's strut. She turns a cheek to me, inviting a peck. I peck. My lips leave a grease spot on her foundation. I ramble on about literature, favorite authors and applying for a guest lecture spot at Trinity College Dublin. Her vivacious green eyes turn dull, making her look old.

"What's the last book you read?" she quizzes.

"Black Like Me."

"Read that during Woodstock," she smirks.

Wendy brags about being photographed as "the Colorado blonde" in Osaka while posing with local doctors at a seafood restaurant. She was in Japan attending her husband's lectures on cutting edge treatments for third-degree burns.

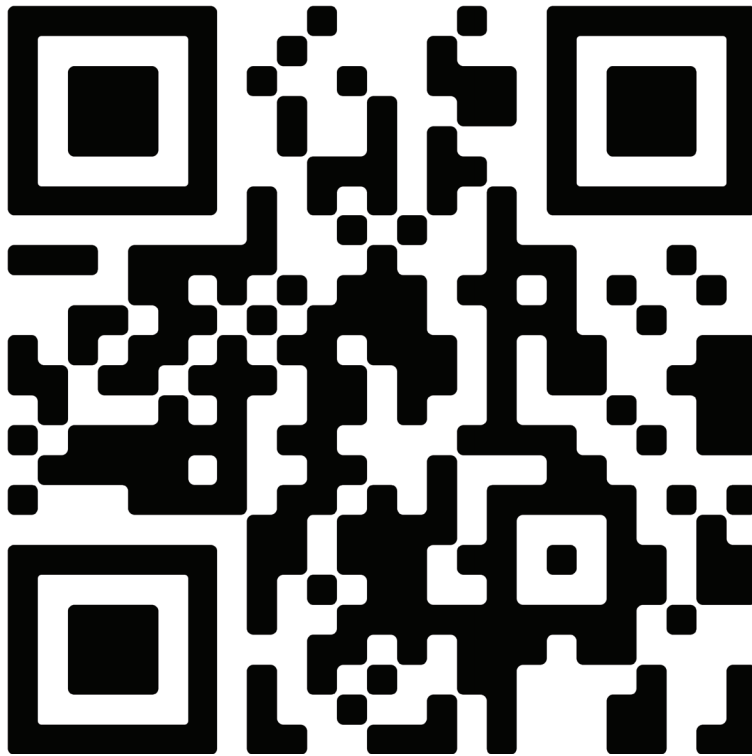
"They served white fish," she tells me, "which I flat out refused."

"They serve you the whole fish?" I asked.

"Head to tail. Even my man passed," she said, "and he was a fanatic for Asian cuisine."

Wendy's forehead, brow, and eyes have zero wrinkles. Botox? She keeps her white-blonde hair shoulder length. Her perfume smells flowery. Yellow roses, I think. I suppose she's attractive, but I remind myself I'm taken after swallowing a cream cheese hors d'oeuvre.

Wendy's man committed suicide after failing to deliver the required research for a federal grant. He spent the entire million on solo global travel, luxury hotels and sportscars while Wendy slaved away in CSU's nursing department. Her loss blew holes through heart and pocketbook. The feds attached the Del Mar mansion, but she paid off the debt within seven years. She has LA Chargers season tickets, a game she got hooked on with her husband. She cheers and shouts with the usual gang of beer-drunk men, her soprano voice rising above their deep chorus into the lights.



'The Art of Zoning Out' (Pokémon Violet/ Mystery Dungeon ReMix)

By Truong-Son Nguyen

Bronzed Saturation

By Kira Adams

Veins inside my body, like highways interconnected to transport blood and cells, are endless chasms for stress to leak into. It pours into my capillaries like cement, filling every crevice and artery with weight. Hardening over time, it drains my strength and reaches the very hairs littering my skin. Femorals become like marble vines, stretching their limbs anywhere they can touch. The high arches of my feet imitate dense drain covers, taking three construction workers with chipped crowbars to lift each one. Steps I'm forced to make drag the metal across the hallway, skittering and screeching as it carves floor tile. I can hear it echo in every classroom of the building. Walking inflicts reverberating percussion, forever pinching my eardrums as the canals tighten in a hopeless effort to keep the sound out. A pointless endeavor, when the anxiety in my mind is igniting my skull in neon warning signs.

Heartbeats pace miles a minute, taking in every physical stimulus regardless if it's welcome. And yet, time slows to a sloth's pace, continuing the torture for as long as possible because giving up is weakness, and having a break is not necessary (*lazy*).

It sets my spine ablaze, whilst igniting my skin with thousands of buzzing fireflies. A green glow, but toxic to touch. It crawls inside my bones like maggots, thriving in the gelatinous hollow middle. The poison runs deep, dripping down branches of roughness; dripping mud. It infects my body with black sludge, filling it with shiny oil and morphing through the maze of concrete. Vines twisting inside me, restricting my limited movement as the poison brims.

It's hot.

Boiling.

Overflowing my mouth and staining my teeth, cauterizing every taste bud. Dripping out of my nose—pouring out of my ears. Crying turned poisonous. My feet leave carvings of black entrails in their path. It coats my being, sprouting from strands of hair down to the roots of my toenails...

...D R...

...O W...

...N I...

...N G...

Drip

Drip

Drip

Drip

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Drip

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Water hits the mud-thick oil, leaving tiny craters in an attempt to break through. Pounding into the wreckage, it sloughs poison off in strokes, clots of mass drop in splats. Sludge litters and clumps around me, like pungent decomposing waste. Corroding the surrounding living, it sinks into the ground, mimicking acid. Burrowing deeper and deeper.

Rain surrounds me, creating curtains draping across my body, folding an endless litany over itself. It melts sludge and replaces it with relief. Soft bronzed light blooms in its wake with every ounce it leaves me drenched in.

The Pregnancy Wheel

By Prasanna Surakanti

Once you are on it
the cycle of birth
the cycle of rebirth
when the tail
reaches the mouth
you have disintegrated
without loss of connection



Lucia

By Larissa Hauck

Hope Reincarnate

By Ava Wisely

Content warning: themes of suicide

My beloved murderers,
life is more beautiful than I remember.
It's been almost a year since the barn burned down
and my body was abandoned in the wreckage.
But the afterlife is ripe with opportunity, and new decisions to be made.

I have been reincarnated into plenty of things:
A mouse, a lion, an owl, a raven.
None felt right.
But the choice is mine, and though I still lack control of my spirit,
I am free to flourish now, unrestrained by the confines of blood and air.

The sword you impaled me with, I brought it with me.
Drenched with blood, I washed it off in the river,
and now I use it to keep myself and my loved ones safe.
You would have liked them, all the new friends I've made, the family I've
built.
I still struggle to open up; it's difficult for me to trust them
as I once trusted you.

But Love is patience, and I am learning to soften my fear
in Its name.

I know you would be proud of who I've become.
The version of you that I trusted, the version of you I adored
is one whom I hold dear as a lesson and a memory.
In the end, you taught me to dehumanize myself.
But in the beginning, you taught me to laugh, and find comfort in the
little things.
I will treasure you the way I loathe you.
Though I may never be comfortable with that conflict,
feelings will always be messy,
and I accept that I will never be able to definitively decide who you
truly are.

I understand now that if you had it your way,
a noose would silence me
and you'd never have to hear from me again.
But I also understand that my life is not a card to be drawn in a game.
It is not a tool of revenge.
It is my life.
And by God, I'm going to live it well.



Go Forth

By Ashley Freese

Queer Temporality

By Shain Wright

Queer temporality

A Queer time

These have come to mean youthful lives

Full of parties, clubs, all nighters,

Things of our youth, elongated

Queer time as in developing families

Chosen, supportive, unconditional love

Oftentimes the opposite of our families of origin

Sometimes it feels like the opposite of marriage

The institution at least

And most certainly of 'family time'

The business of raising children and being beholden to time according to our children's needs

My god those needs are never ending

But did anyone ever stop and wonder if we just created a new binary

A social expectation, an inherent hierarchy of what queer

Should be

Can be

Should look like

Does look like

A temporality infused with the expectations

Reinscribing the othering that we are all so desperate to escape from

Maybe a queer temporality means raising your children with your queer ass partner *and* ex husband, co-parent,

A timeline interrupted with self discovery,

Liberation from gendered expectations

Maybe a queer family life is not one absent of children, but filled to the brim
Genderless expectations creating so much room in your life that your children's
friends and classmates flock to your home,
A sanctuary

Perhaps
Queer temporality is a
Slower
Paced
Life

And perhaps that is only imaginable to me in all my class privilege
Despite the constant question: 'How can we live our values within this system?'

A system where neither the consumer nor the producer pay the full cost
Instead the *earth* grows deeper in debt

Perhaps a queer temporality is not one absent of children and 'family time'
But one that resists the forest for the trees
The oppressive roots holding the very ground beneath our feet together

Perhaps it is selfish to have children, regardless of what it means or don't mean in
queer time
Except children are our future
They must be centered
They *are* central to a queer futurity

My children, your children,
The queer youth of tomorrow
Anyone's child
Everyone's children

But forget about a queer temporality
Forget about a queer futurity
We are all just trying to survive today
Surely this is all by design



To Become a Butterfly

By Cynthia Elizalde

Time stops

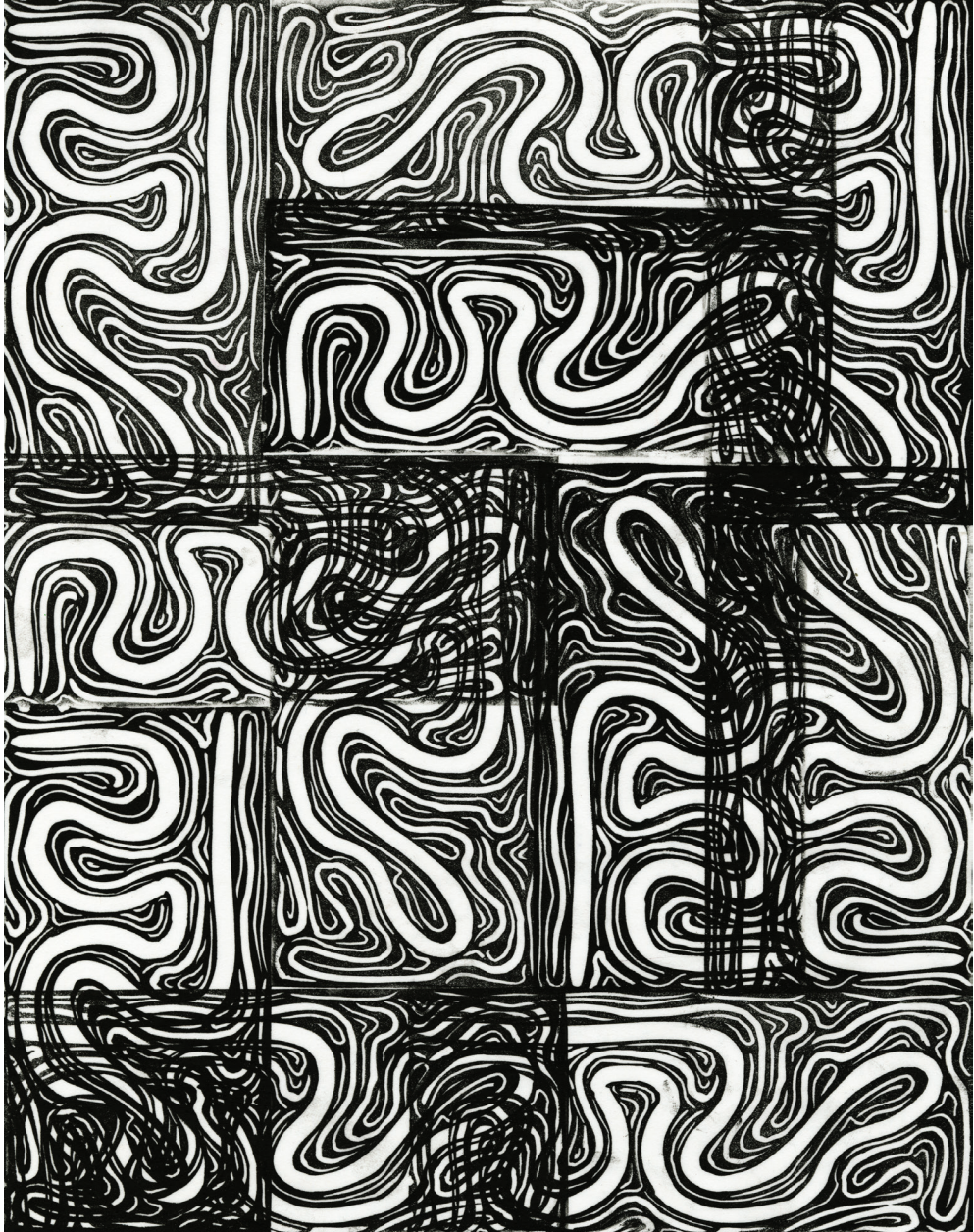
By Teresa Patron Rivera

It happens when we least expect it
It stops in big ways
A new move
A truth
Loss or stalling
Sometimes the world's time stops at the same time
But restarts later than others
Many things happened
Despite nothing moving
Some are more afraid
More adventurous, bolder
Some went cold
Heartbroken
Or
Time went backward for some
Other's time still hasn't moved
Maybe a little, or not at all
Time is funny in a way, ain't it?
It stops yet it keeps going
With or without you
What about you? Has time moved?
Mine is moving, slowly but moving
I think I'm more self aware
I'm more outgoing
But I'm still shy, I get nervous around people I wish
time moved faster, or I might be too slow Who
knows?

WRITING INSTEAD

By J. O. Winberry

Instead of writing,
I obsess about my health,
about the squirrel I watched
as the car clipped its back legs,
crawling into the roadside bushes.
No amount of walnuts and wishing
could overcome his instinct
to fear me.
I limped home holding
the empty shoe box
and my gardening gloves,
an unfamiliar throb in my left thigh,
wondering whether my legs
look good enough to be wearing
this length of shorts,
wondering if I was relieved
that the squirrel feared me,
that I could spend
the rest of my day
writing, instead.



Meandering

By Travis Morey



Fleuri du chagrin

By Hunter McLamb

Queen Alberta Mae

By Lindsey Pierce

You were small, but you were mighty.
Inside that barely 5-foot frame
was a woman who had something to say.

Although you were mighty, you didn't always
know your own strength.
Self-deprecation too often reigned.

But you were strong like David to Goliath.
Atop those Bertie bird legs
stood a mother of four strong women.

As a mother, your nature was not
always nurture.
Your affection was sparing but true.

You were mini, but you packed a punch.
Behind those glamorous eyes,
a sharp wit was lying in wait.

You were loved, Grandma, but also feared.
Not by your hand,
but by your regard.

You were devout and you were dear.
While many fawned at your pedicured feet,
your higher power always held your heart.

Great Grandma Bertie, though great,
ninety plus years
tried to overthrow your sharp wit.

Yet you had spirit, yes you did!
And nothing could take that away.
You still had something to say.

Even in dying, you held tightly to life.
You were still you—
the ruler of your own domain.

But as mighty as you are, this world is small.
Beyond this plane lies another domain,
and it's your turn to enter.

So make way for Queen Alberta Mae:
the matriarch of our world
and a princess of heaven.



Garden Babe

By Bibiana Picho-Garcia

On the Cusp of Spring

By Catherine Hansel

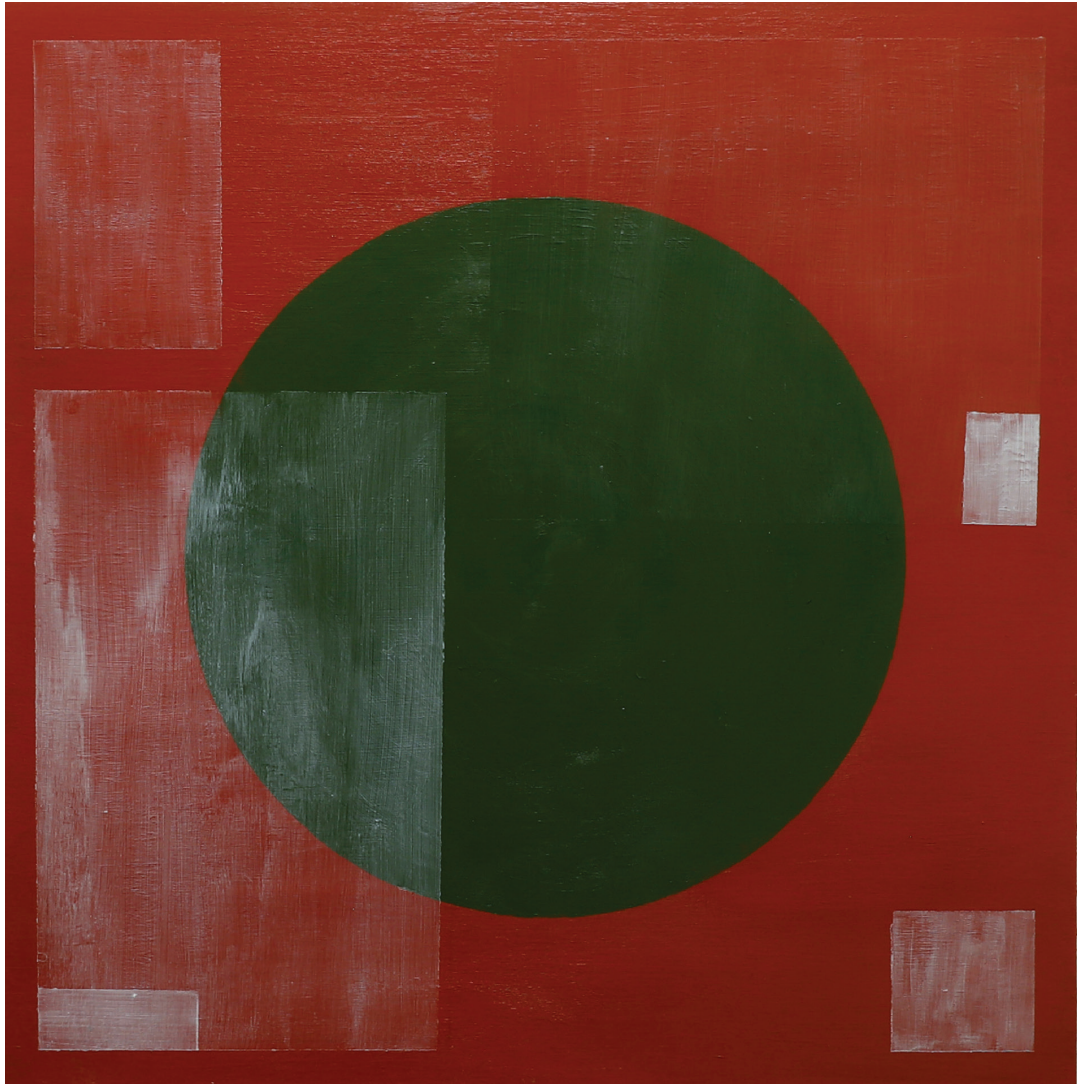
Sun with summer sting
On the cusp of spring
Coldness melting into warmth
On the horizon: a thunderstorm

Though cold nights still bite
Spring days bring warm light
Rainbows, flowers, sprouting leaves
All a reminder of warmer things

12:13 am

By Nicholas Barnes

my mouth tastes like an earthen ashtray. the silver jewels roll around in my yellow walkman. my body has become part of this mattress. lying down, sheets up to my chin, my head is tilted to the right. you see, i snooze with the window cracked open in hopes of cool air. observing whatever i can before the sandman takes me. haven't seen a star in a blue moon. the light pollution is an entrance exam which only lets the truly bright pass over. sometimes, in the early hours, it's just wind in the trees. or an owl coming home to roost. but usually, i see a lot of seraphic cushions. they're mirrors for the shuteye deprived. that one looks like a pheasant. that one resembles a pilgrim's belt buckle. that s-shaped cobra stratus will slither away come morning. i'll keep waiting, watching the sky. longing for an escape from my insomniac gadfly. time to visit the sleep bank and make a withdrawal. let's spend our hard earned zzz's. i want to die. for one night. and be resurrected when the rooster crows.



Beyond the Surface

By Josalyn Ortiz

All Those

By Charlene Stegman Moskal

All those things I couldn't change:
sounds that broke the silence
into pieces of abandonment;
all those times I embraced inanimate loves,
protection from monsters under the heart;
all those words when I wanted to transform,
enter the pages of someone else's life.

There were prairies, wilderness,
the scent of pine trees and horse sweat
riding hard on someone else's words,
purpled nights seen through embers
that rose into a sky with all the stars
I never saw from my city streets,
visits to places that were never mine
with siblings I would never have.

All those things I have stumbled towards,
as I grasped at alphabets in the air
while my story has always been beneath my feet,
birthed in the dust of generations,
to inform my hand, take me to then and now,
offer messages shared by other sisters
who have invited me to run with them
as they write and sing their solos,
dance in their own footprints.



RED RASPBERRY

By Madeline Goolie

A Steamy Cup of Joe

By Jason Ross

There I hung on the mug rack, empty. It was just another morning, and I had a hollow feeling of needing to be filled—my one and only purpose. I don't enjoy the feeling of having empty space.

All of a sudden, I saw the human come downstairs, and I knew that it was time. I grew more excited and full of anticipation; he always had a habit of selecting the mug of choice prior to brewing his drink. There are other cups here with the same yearning desires of having that delectable liquid; coffee, filling us to the brim and giving us purpose once more.

As the great hand of power began to reach, the other mugs and I all held our breath in excitement, hoping we would be selected. I tended to be a favorite choice, but sometimes someone else would appear more appealing.

The hand grew nearer and nearer. It had to grab me, it just had to.

And then, it did! He grasped my handle, took me off the mug rack (our unhappy prison) and set me gently on the counter. The human then went on to start the coffee machine.

Mr. Coffee™ gave me the usual wink of approval.

“Thank you, Mr. Coffee™,” I silently acknowledged back.

The liquid was starting to brew, the wonderful liquid that provided my purpose! I gleamed, knowing that soon, I would be filled. Minutes passed, and the other mugs gave me anger inspired glances from the rack. Jealous fools! They would get their day at some point, but today would not be that day!

Finally, the golden liquid was finished, steam rising out of the top. The human grasped the coffee pot, still steaming. Woo! It was time!

He tilted the pot of piping hot liquid and started to fill my empty contents. Yes! My purpose was getting fulfilled! The human was holding me in one hand, and I was almost full when...suddenly!

Oh, no!

NOOOOO!

OH GOD, NOOOOO! WHY??

The scalding coffee accidentally spilled over his hand, a loud scream escaping him. He....he... HE LET GO!

I came crashing to the ground. The fall seemed to take eons, but in reality, only seconds. I laid on the ground now broken; shattered. Useless! My existence would soon be coming to an end. A tear rolled down my disassembled porcelain body.

A final realization hit: I would never be filled again.



Ode to the New Moon

By Larissa Hauck

Angel of the North

By Rohan Buettel

(Inspired by Angel of the North by Antony Gormley in the Sculpture Garden of the National Gallery of Australia)

The outstretched arms extend to hug the world.
His body a rusty brown, encased in lines;
a flattened iron form whose folds unfurl
an aircraft wing to soar beyond confines.
He stands within a frame of boughs and leaves;
a silhouette foregrounding lake and sky
and lifts the hearts of those who need relief;
in awe, their burdens lost — the stunning sight.

I was the understudy for a role
of sacrifice for dying northern towns.
They cast another lead to touch those souls,
but left bereft I found this tranquil ground.
Upon a plinth I stand here crucified,
a centrepiece who won't be brushed aside.

Firefly Tale

By Morgan Doerr

There once was a lost princess. She had strayed too far from her procession one evening during a resting period and had fallen asleep beneath a bed of poppies. Since no one could find her for a long while, and the dust from the poppies kept her so deeply asleep that she could not hear their calls, she was sorely left behind. When she awoke, she could not again find the path on which her procession was following. After realizing what she had done, she wept and wept until her tears covered the land like a shallow swamp.

Finally, after a whole month of weeping, the moon was finally able to turn its whole face to the Earth to see what had happened.

“If you keep crying, you will fall into your own ocean. It will fill up like a basin and spill over you,” the moon warned, but still, the princess could not dry her welling tears.

“I cannot stop crying until someone returns me home, for I’m too sorrowful and completely alone,” she explained, falling once again into her pathetic, crumpled form. The moon could not help but take pity on her, for there were so few people on Earth with no one but the moon to talk to.

“Perhaps the reason no one has arrived is that I have not shown my full light,” the moon said. “Wait one more night, and surely someone will see you if I am full and bright enough. Come to the highest mountain, and you will be returned home.”

Wiping her eyes, the princess agreed, supposing that if a great spirit like the moon could believe in her safe return, then she could too.

Beneath the light of the milk-white moon, she waited on top of a tall mountain, hoping that the moonlight would guide her company back towards her, and she would be returned home. Unfortunately, it was not to be, for the few people that were nearby could not see through the flourishing trees that concealed the mountaintop. All night she waited, and it was the darkest hour before dawn when the princess fell to her knees, and she was in such anguish that she could no longer cry. It was as if the wellspring within her had dried up. The Moon had failed to return her safely, and so out of great regret, offered one last piece of hope. “Come to me,” it said, “Come stand upon me and all shall see you. Then you will surely be returned home.”

So the princess tossed up the length of her hair and began to climb to the moon. Just as she was halfway there, a bright star grew brighter and brighter until it broke through the sky and across the clouds, crashing into the young girl where she hung like a spider from the moon. Her body broke, shattering into a thousand pieces. She tumbled down, but as she fell, each piece of her being connected with a piece of light from the star, and they all fell into the swamp she had created with her tears. Each piece was revived and lit a path all the way back to the procession.

But no one knew that every light was a piece of the princess. Everyone rejoiced and admired the beautiful creatures that lit up the forest, and the thousand-bodied princess felt her sorrow melt, feeling joyful all the same.

My mom says this is how fireflies were created.

Phosphorescent

By Kira Adams

My torso ascends its vessel, organs shifting
within the cage enclosed in bone,
in muscle and tissue.

Lungs fill with air:
inhale. exhale. inhale.

Glasswalled cannula
brimmed with water.

Warm suffocation without oxygen;
shifting, morphing movement
pushes past liquidated gel,
and conditioner water.

Measured beats and lily pad breath.

Thick essence flushes in valves.

Spirited.

Soulful humming and buzz lighting,
expands and deflates
in continuous moments.

No measure of bronze softness;
fluffed warmth in bee colors.
exhale.



The Swiss Cheese Complex

By Kevin Lennon

My Little Sun

By Leah Browning

The old words are coming back,
my dear, my darling;

perhaps we're entering
a more genteel age.

I will sit as he did
in a wingback chair,

wearing a velvet smoking jacket
and reading the newspaper.

There will be a fire burning in the fireplace,
bottles of gin and vermouth on the bar,

and we will kiss on both cheeks
when you return from Georgia.

And we see each other again.
It will be a different time.

Pretty Bird

By Amanda Gibson

Pretty bird, rolled tight as a tobacco bundle, sent hurtling in front of my car as I approach the stoplight. White stripes on dark gray. A mockingbird? The little package comes to rest by the curb. Commuters, in a rush to get to the office, or the dentist, or everywhere, are oblivious. A life taken, reduced to the status of a discarded McDonald's wrapper. Downy neck feathers ruffle in the whirlwind from passing cars. I consider retrieving the bird for a proper burial, but the busy intersection intimidates, roots me in place. Instead, I imagine cupping the bird in my palms and lifting it skyward, channeling Hazel Dickens' clarion voice. *Fly away, little pretty bird. Fly, fly away.*



The Fruits of Fall

By Catherine Hansel

Ungrateful Hands

By Amelia Díaz Ettinger

all I ever wished was right behind me
 the aroma of tubers in the open market
 the calloused hands of the blind man, José
 as I placed a nickel in his palm
 my father covered in white paint
 a can exploded, his first attempt at art
 —how we laughed at one other—
 to this, I add
 the neighbor's love of thread
 her careful instructions on the cloth
 the old spinsters across the street
 their gifts of borrowed books
 fantasies of lizards with tears of pearls
 the nun's insistence on 'decorum'
 my reluctance to steal their habits
 but there was more
 a sunset of egrets above palm trees
 twelve kinds of lizards, one with eyes so blue
 grackles, iguanas, and red twine
 stolen cigarettes behind the cemetery
 loud nights filled with a frog's sweet voice
 the echoes of people making love

and yet,

how I hungered for a kiss
 a bedtime story,
 a lifting word
 to hear, 'you are loved'
 these things were not for me to have
 but time showed me
 they were mine to give.

September to September

By Mallory Culbertson

In my dreams, my mother is always forty
with a head of long dark hair, and she loves me.

We find soft-paged books with torn covers,
and she reads to me.

In my dreams, the trees are burning, or verdant, or both.

The hill blazed last September,
swathes of oaks and binding ivy sharpened to ashes.
Now the cinders lay heavy.

This year I watch the falling leaves in the yard,
where the apple tree is growing.

This September brings clouds like grey down,
like the blankets she tucked around me.

The rain soaks into the moss-soft lawn
and sinks into the aching black ground of the hill.

Maybe someday the ferns and saplings will grow again.
Maybe this scar will always be there.

In my dreams, my mother is forty and she loves me still.

In my dreams, the trees are burning, or verdant, or both.

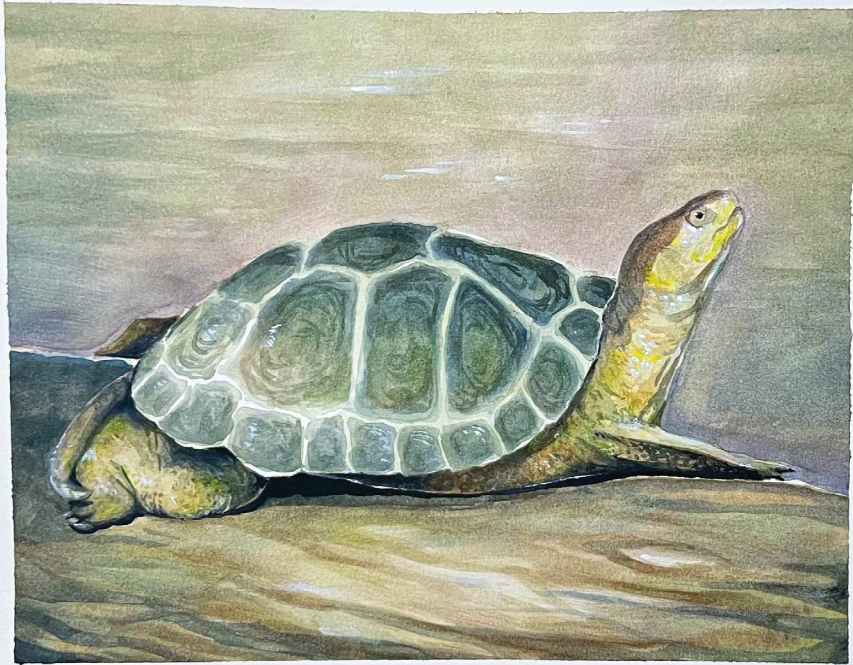
In waking, I am closer to thirty, and my husband loves me,
and the hill is black and burnt.

I don't look at it anymore.



Goblins in Mist Painting

By Mallory Culbertson



Watercolor of Pacific Pond Turtle

By Brynna Hosszu

Dreamers

By Jessica Judd

“Head in the clouds,” they say, a cliché
for prosaic potted plants rooted in dirt.
Light and water likewise bring life –

cumulus castles form havens
where fragile souls flourish
while courage gathers on the horizon
where truth meets hope

that somewhere a new world awaits,
glittering, pearly gates spread wide
to greet refugees of realism
and pilgrims who pine
for poetic justice.

Oceans Without End

By Maggie Frank-Hsu

(Title influenced by a course taught at Poetry Forge)

I've heard the herons extend their necks
in the concrete creek behind the In-n-Out

and

even though I know they grow dull as
soon as the seawater dries
every time

I collect shell shards at the beach because they shine.



The Lighthouse Keeper

By Catherine Hansel

Abortion and the Cost of Choice

By Jeri Cafesin

Content warning: abortion/child loss

I was 16 weeks pregnant with my first baby when the results of an amniocentesis told me that the child I was carrying was not healthy. I have always been pro-choice, and never considered it a moral dilemma to terminate a fetus with life-threatening or debilitating abnormalities. Although I was aware that my advanced age of 39 increased my risk of potential problems, I was totally unprepared for the results of this test, and the choice I would have to make.

We received the news on a gray Thursday afternoon in late December. The baby girl inside of me had an extra X chromosome, also known as Trisomy 47XXX. While waiting for clarification from a genetic counselor on the following Monday, I spent the next three days searching for information. I sat in the old, stone library in Concord, Massachusetts, crying uncontrollably with each line I read from a Psychology Today article on XXX. “Severe learning disabilities.” “Severe emotional disabilities.” “Slow motor development.” “Shy.” “Withdrawn.” I rubbed my swollen belly, trying to feel my daughter inside of me, my fear welling up and gathering momentum. My stoic husband sat next to me, silently reading along. On the way home we talked, we cried, we argued about what to do next. We decided to wait to make any decisions until we could get more information, except there was little out there, and everyone we spoke with had some kind of agenda.

The genetic counselor insisted that the information we had gathered over the weekend was outdated and biased. A few minutes later, she called in a staff OB/GYN who showed us a picture of a beautiful 8-month-old XXX baby, swinging in her electric swing on a whitewashed, sun-drenched porch, smiling happily for the camera. The doctor then asked us if we would be willing to participate in her study if we decided to “keep our daughter.”

During the following week, we spoke with doctors from around the world with any knowledge of XXX, who gave us a positive or negative spin depending on their personal views on abortion. We spoke with a social worker that dealt with the parents of handicapped children, who was subtly, but clearly for termination.

I solicited advice from my parents. My father (who never changed a diaper in his life) told me to keep her. My mother said not to. We spoke with parents of XXX children. All of the children had suffered learning disabilities, delayed motor skills, were withdrawn, and had required special education. They told us

how exhausting it was, how expensive it was to raise a handicapped child. They spoke about mortgaging their home, and going into debt to afford the special care they needed for their XXX child. They spoke of the constant heartache watching their child struggle with depression, anger, loneliness, growing up both physically and academically challenged. But all the parents claimed they loved their daughters.

A decision had to be made quickly, before I felt her moving inside me. I knew if I felt her, I could never give her up. At just 4 months, an insentient collection of cells, she was still an abstraction, even though on the ultrasound I had seen her entire body, the emerging vertebrae of her backbone, the two hemispheres of her brain, the protrusions of tiny feet and hands. “The ghost in the machine,” my husband had called her. I held my belly and begged my daughter to tell me what she wanted me to do, knowing the decision would be mine, feeling the weight of that decision ripping apart the fabric of my tightly woven self-image.

What kind of person was I to kill my daughter just because she wasn’t perfect? Faced with the probability of a slow child, spending the rest of my life watching her struggle to fit in, feel accepted beyond our family, focusing every day on the care of a handicapped child, seemed overwhelming. The cost of raising kids without illness would require both my husband and I to work till we died. And while I’d always pictured having two children, we’d have to forego having another child to afford the continual care required for our XXX daughter.

It occurred to me that most of us go through life thinking we are generally good, honest, caring people because this view is rarely challenged, as most of our actions aren’t based on critical, pivotal, character-defining decisions. From the moment I got the amnio results, I knew my life would never be the same again. Technology had given me insight, and now forced me to make a choice.

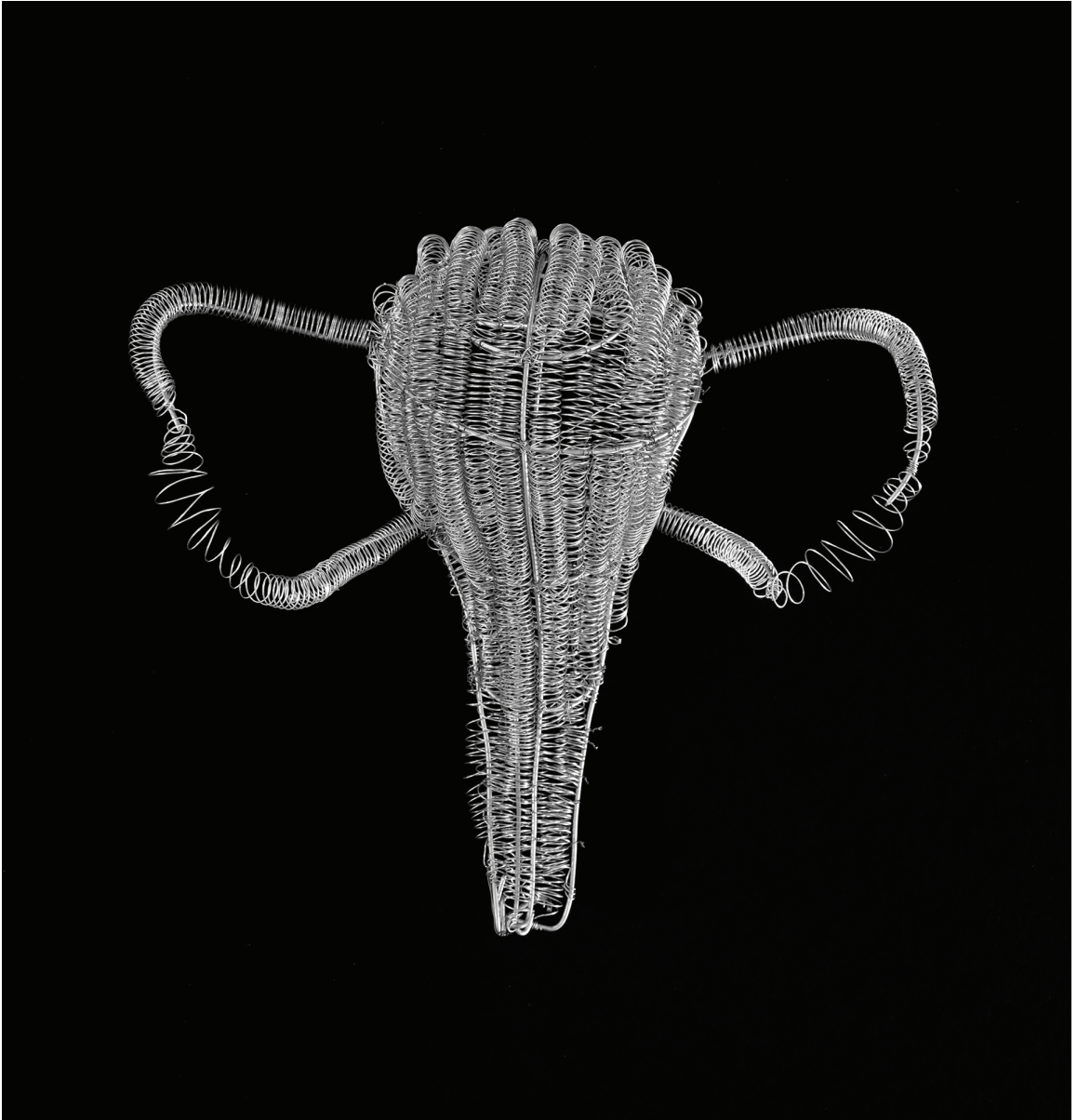
This was undoubtedly the hardest decision my husband and I would ever have to make, but it was ours to decide, granted to us alone in a state where abortion is still legal. Only we, the parents of the pregnancy, could decide what we felt capable of providing our child. If we lived in Texas, the state could force us to give birth to an ill baby, spend everything we made on drugs, specialized schools and care, and damn us to the unbearable torture of watching our daughter struggle daily, likely for the rest of our lives.

A week later, we arrived at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Waltham, and were assaulted by protesters. They held signs that read, “Save Unborns,” and “Choose Life.” They crowded around my husband and me shouting, “Baby Killers!” and “Murderers!” They prevented us from getting into the building until a

cop came out and pushed them back. Amped on self-righteous indignation and full of religious fervor, they'd go home to their conservative families feeling proud of themselves for making our passage into the clinic even more a nightmare than it already was. Most were young, more men than women, in their teens and early 20s, and likely had no children at all. They had no conception of what it took to raise healthy kids, yet alone devote their lives to caring for a physically and emotionally afflicted child.

Doubting our own abilities to provide for a sick child pushed us into the decision that to this day, 25 yrs later, I still find shame in. But I honestly don't know how the other decision would have played out. One of the mothers of an emotionally and physically disabled XXX 8-year-old told me that if she had known that her daughter had the anomaly before she gave birth, she doubts she would have chosen to keep her. I guess when we make a decision with no good choices, the decision we make will never be okay. While I am grateful that the choice was ours to make, the trick is finding a way to live with that choice.

A year later, and two after that, I was graced with two healthy children, now grown and on their own. But I think of Sierra often, who she would have been, how she would have been, and the lives we would have led with her. And I still ache for her. Through all the heartache that comes with raising a handicapped child, I know I would have loved her passionately, and wholly. I would have felt that awe-inspiring humility, that magnificent intensity of love for her that I get to feel for my kids every day. And to this day, I still question my choice not to have her.



Expand/Contract

By Delancy Hizer



Cezanne's Magazine

By Olivia Eldredge



Eden

By Tanisa Kang

Nursing Shortage Dilemma

By Angela Brittain

Nurses – simultaneously caring providers and overlooked laborers,
Quietly waning while increasingly weighted down by growing burdens.
Heavy bundles rife with fatigue, moral distress, and pain.
Grieving not only what is lost but also what continues to be found.

The spreading plague served as a spotlight,
Shining through and illuminating the cracks of all that was broken.
Awakening hate and spreading disillusion,
Serving, ultimately, to vilify the very nurses once most trusted.

Vacancies, shortages, and crises – abound.
Well-intentioned cases made on how to multiply those who give care.
What if the solution lies not with multiplication, but with restoration?
Rather than supposing what is needed – what if we listened instead?

Homing Pigeons

By Cynthia Elizalde

On my way to go far
from this endless war
I lost my sense of time.
As homing pigeons fly high
I observe.
Oh, how I wish I was one of them!
They inherit a homing ability,
which allows them to find their way home.
No matter how far they fly,
they always find their way back.
While I fight in the front lines of this internal war,
I remember life back home
as I close my eyes as I reach for the sky.
My flock has arrived.:

“Welcome back! Are you ready to go home?”

Division

By Jacob Boucher

i.

Gentle hum, warm glow

The harsh wind cuts and rustles

The division, thin



Plastic Mountains

By Ying Zhao

Time's Old Tale

By Kira Podelco

There will be days when you feel stressed and heavy, weighed down by an invisible force clinging to your back. It will feel like an overgrown child, still trying to get piggyback rides from adults who they know won't shove them off. The name of that child, of that weight...is Time. Time wants you to give it the attention it feels it deserves. And it will make you pity it—make you feel in debt to it. You'll want to give in, and allow it to ride on your shoulders every waking moment of every living day. But there's an ugly truth here.

You can't let it.

You *have* to recognize the pointlessness of it, the irony: the absolute ridiculousness of this whole situation. Because Time is much, *much* more than a delusion-led adolescent, clinging to the last strings of childhood. Time is *older* and *wiser* and much more *aware*. Time understands that it is a burden by simply *existing*. It knows. But it wants to keep your attention regardless, because it is vain. It has been made vain by the endless pamperings and justifications supplied to it by those who believe it to be their sole guidance. To put it simply, Time is *spoiled*. Spoiled beyond any definition of the word. *Entitled*. Time was fed honey and sugar from the tip of a silver spoon. But remember, *Time is not a child*. Do not treat it as such.

That's easier written than it is done, of course. But you *must* understand that, although Time is old, it is *so easily* intimidated. If ever you feel it begin to creep up on you, simply pause. Turn around and walk back the other way. Breath. Ignore its constant poking and prodding; whatever nasty words it will throw your way. (And it will throw them. It has had an eternity to add insults to its repertoire, and it would rather be damned than to let them go to waste.) Leave it to ponder. And if it's already made itself comfortable, resting contently atop your shoulders, or hooking its restless arms around your neck as it hangs off your back? Simply find a safe space to stop, and drop everything. Turn your body to jello. Sigh deeply and roll your shoulders. Repeat these words:

“You're getting a little old for this, don't you think?”

Stretch and shift in gentle motions until it has no choice but to slip from your body like an old worn jacket. Let it slide to the ground behind you, and don't look back. It might try to follow you. It *will* try to follow you. But be resilient. If you stay strong, it will come to understand.

It will learn that you can no longer bear its heavy burdens—along with your own—and it will see this as a gentle nudge, urging it to move along.

From there, things get better. Time will mature in your presence. Instead of forcing you to carry it, it will walk along beside you; no longer a stubborn babe that refuses to grow, but instead, a helpful companion that wants to do right by you. You'll never be able to leave it behind. But as has been stated, Time is *wise*. Time will compromise. Time will consider.

On occasion, Time will slip up, and you will want to offer it a shoulder to lean on. This is what you cannot do. Time will right itself again. Your company will work itself back into place. And when finally, *finally* you come to an end, you and Time will have grown close. Closer than you could have ever imagined, especially looking back at your rough start. But Time is good. And if you treat it kindly, it will be there for you when you need it most.

It will return every favor you ever granted it, holding your hand as you work towards the unknown. And when your soles ache...when you're hunched over, a heavy weight in your back...when you're sheltering your dry, straining eyes from the ever-burning rays...when that sharp pain begins to knot up your insides, Time will notice you've reached your limit. You've walked thousands of miles together now, and it knows you're getting tired. And Time will pause...and Time will first offer its shoulder to lean on...and then, it will turn 'round, and offer you a ride on its back. And Time will carry you, much in the same way you carried it, all those years ago. And Time will bear your burdens...support your weight. And Time will tease.

"You're getting a little old for this, don't you think?"

And you'll smile. And you'll let your friend carry you away. And maybe you'll re-visit some old memories as you stroll by. But Time never stops for long. It will carry you back...all the way back, to the very beginning. It will not be your beginning...but a *beginning*. And you will feel warm, and welcome, and grateful...so very grateful for this wonderful companion. And just before you drift off to sleep, you will pray. Pray that Time will accompany you again for your next journey. And Time always does.

You only need to promise it a shoulder to lean on. And a gentle nudge, to help it get moving once more.

Winnie

By Shain Wright

You were a choice, intentionally made, with great thought and effort.

You are a gift, perhaps the greatest gift there could be.

It was a journey to make you, I grew you in my mind, a thought before you took root in my heart and developed in my own womb.

Despite the planning, loving, and thought that went into your conception, your birth, your name, and raising you, I didn't think about our larger relationship to the world.

Didn't realize that to acknowledge our connection, the great gift of growing and birthing you, that I must also reveal deep parts of myself and my gender.

Didn't realize that it would be so hard to choose between being vulnerable and raw and lying, if only by omission.

To the barber who cut my hair and assumed that what must be the gay couple had a surrogate.

To the PFLAG mom at pride who asked when "we got you", because you must have been adopted.

To the stay-at-home moms who believe that we are "pretty much straight" because they assume your Appa is cis and I don't have the energy to explain not one, but two trans identities.

There is a conflict inside me.

It demands recognition, and acknowledgment as your birth parent.

It questions the importance I place on this fact and the implications on the importance of having a sperm donor.

I cried when you became obsessed with playing "mommies and babies".

"You be the mommy," you would say.

I asked other queer and trans parents about this,
“it’s a phase,” they said
“All kids go through it, they are just repeating what they hear
and see...”

Is it wrong to wish that you wanted to play Momos and babies?
That your ideal model would be what I am to you instead of what
you learn in our broader society?
Where did you learn this?

Long before you understood the significance I read to you books
where kids and animals had families with Momos and Appas,
I took whiteout to your books and forced my way into your sto-
ries.

Today you stop me when I read Pete the Cat.
“No,” you say, “not Momo, Pete has a Mom.”

Where did you learn this?
What will you be taught when you begin kindergarten?
Elementary school? Middle School? High School, College?
What will you teach your peers?

I hope we have taught you to be proud of your family.
I’m still learning to be proud, maybe you’ll teach me.



Bergamot and Honey

By Morgan Doerr



Through the Frog Pass

By Morgan Doerr

temporarily not nothing

By Jacob Jaggi

i wore striped pajamas that night
and dug a small hole next to the shed.

my mother,
dressed in her nightgown,
bent at knee and waist
and filled the hole
with tears
and
a kitten.

and i saw bodies bend
and tear
and spirits drop tears
and the earth take it all

and i saw night come
and fade
and trade with light

and i saw death
and life, alternating in stripes.

does it matter
if we have night on light or light on night,
death bands or life lines?





The Darkening Day

By Normando Quinones



Wild Rose Acres

By Ava Wisely

hallowed songs

By Nosakhare Collins

dad and mom sit on the lounge
their songs, soluble;
rummaging the air as vestiges of a war forgotten

nodding like broken lit candles
naming each night with tales. that's curved in their mood

dad and mom speak in voices
that thrill and take away hallucination
i now understand the night can be dark to create empty space
and a man can derive no meaning
from living on the edge of death
the night keep our eyes open
and we are about to sing in a chapel

Grey Memories

By Emerson Spruce

The unpolished pane let in the fading light;
Shadows from the ferns disrupted the flat white of the wall.
All I could do was watch their still movements ignore the draft.
The modest outlines reluctantly gave amusement, geometric and plain.

If I were to roll myself over, I'd have been greeted by the window's wide
stare.
From here, the streetlamps were blurred by the dull fog that sprawled
across the street.
The shapes concealed by mist offer a depth that no painted canvas could
compare.
My eyelids opened enough to project scenes onto the soft screen below.

Soon, the streetlights were those of the town we strolled in under the
moon's blessing;
The fog's color like that of Luna's rays, those that created the very shad-
ows I saw dancing.
Holding hands, they happily pushed through the frozen air.
I remember myself as one of those figures, and I wish that the other was
you now.

As clouds cued the moon's exit, she reigned the winds she brought in.
We assumed our place on the now empty stage, the streetlights setting
our blocking.
Here in the center, we spoke softly, with only our laughs reaching the
ears of our audience.
I can still remember how your fingers brushed against mine, as if pushed
by the absent wind.

How strangely us friends acted, giddy to the touch, yet familiar for years.
Our quiet audience watched the act unfold, as one actor moved to anothe-
er.
Unscripted and tame, in each other's arms we held, as your lips drifted
toward my ears.
I remember the routine they danced, rehearsed and practiced; a perfor-
mance for our listless peers.

Yet the seats were empty, save for the bench we shared.
I remember how gracefully your lips moved to mine:
Perfectly nestled in the flow of your face, I was taken by your tide.
Each stolen peck left a note asking for more, and who was I to deny
someone with love to spare!

As the curtains closed, I remember how we took our leave,
The spotlights would dim but your glow filled the streets.
As you leaned against the set, I relished in each bit of affection you
would thieve.
As quickly as it had opened, the show was done and I was brought back
to my sheets.

The fog would clear and the figures that played the scene revealed their
evanescence.
Betrayed by that sweet dream, I wondered if you would be here now.
If it wasn't part of your opening act, would you have spared such ex-
pense?
If we ever meet backstage again, to distract you once again would be
worth that final bow.



Onrage Pnaitnig

By Jamie Anoi-Shroyer



A Jazzy Tune for the Lighthouse Man



The Lighthouse Man

By Keegan Sanchez



I Believe

By Titania Hunter

Set of Haikus

By Morgan Doerr

I.

little flower bud
perched on the great stone tower
blossom in the storm

II.

the tallgrass shivers
lost ghosts embrace the dream walk
same as us it seems

III.

wild water serpents
dancing through the springtime rain
friends are they tonight

The Mending Plough

By Brandon Janse Van Vuuren

Around its plough a town was built
from farm to farm it went.

Returned from the corn man saying
The corrupted blade his harvest poisoned.

To the mender for repairs it went...
The mender wept for none to do.

Returned from the wheat man saying
the crooked beam his crop destroyed.

To the mender for repairs it went...
The mender wept for none to do.

Returned from the oil man saying
the bent board his harvesters harmed.

To the mender for repairs it went...
The mender wept for none to do.

After all the mender said:
a corrupted blade
a crooked beam
a bent board.

So is the mending plough and so it will always be.



Moon Wrangler

By Josalyn Ortiz



Comissioned Portraits

By Donald Patten





Self Portrait

By Jaclyn Hannemann

Absolution

By Ava Wisely

Content warning: abuse and implied suicide

In the modern age of cordless telephones and tabloid magazines and pop up ads, isolation has become a common pastime for older generations. Specifically, people that have a void to fill within themselves that can't be satisfied by family, or friendship, or even good food. Rosanne was one of these people. Born in the mid 1930s and raised under a strict denomination of Christianity, Rosanne lived her life as the religiously devoted housewife and mother she was *supposed* to be. Living alone in a small house in what had once been a wild, overgrown field but now had become a subdivision over the span of 68 years, Rosanne cooked for herself, and cleaned the carpets, and scrubbed the floors and dusted the windowsills. Her husband had passed 11 years earlier, and she no longer had any friends or family who visited her. Not anymore.

There was a Bible, a frayed leather copy, sitting on Rosanne's bedside table. Since the day she had walked back into her house, unaccompanied by her husband with a bouquet of roses provided to her by the funeral home, it had sat untouched and gathering dust. It stared at her like a poised tarantula waiting to strike, morning after morning. Even in solitude, with silence perpetually ringing in her ears, Rosanne recoiled from the onlooking judgment of a non-existent bystander. The show was over—there was no longer anyone left to perform for. She had given her *life* to this, because she had been told it was the only thing that could make her happy.

Well. That, and a reprieve from eternal hellfire.

The day our story takes place was one of the same days that Rosanne had already lived over and over again--or so it seemed. Unlike most days, today was her 68th wedding anniversary. Rosanne wasn't sure if marriage anniversaries still held any weight to them once the partner in question was dead, but it was on her mind regardless. Her wedding night, full of white fabric and champagne glasses and solitary tears shed privately in the restroom, was the day she signed herself over to something larger than herself. She'd traded her autonomy for what she'd been led to believe was a superior life—a ticket to paradise. Except, she quickly became aware that the afterlife she was living for was just that—an afterlife. Key word: *after*. Having screaming matches with her husband while he was intoxicated wasn't the way she wanted to spend her *current* life, but she told herself then that it would all be worth it.

Repetition and boredom made her eyes water and her throat scratchy, and so it was while she was preparing herself her regular cup of morning tea that she felt something was wrong. The clink of Rosanne's teacup against the tea plate was the only sound in her kitchen, aside from the two clocks ticking in the adjacent room. She placed the cup down upon the table, glassy eyes drifting upwards and gazing off at nothing in particular. She couldn't place it, but today, the air had shifted somehow. Something had

changed. And it was with this thought that the hair on the back of her neck stood up, and the temperature in her house dropped several degrees. She didn't even need to turn around to realize someone was behind her, because they gave themselves away within seconds of her sensing them.

“Hello, Rosanne.”

In an obligatory movement, Rosanne shifted around in her chair to find the source of the voice. A demonic figure leaned against the entryway of her kitchen, posture lazy and relaxed. He adorned a finely tailored suit and a cocky grin to accompany his yellow eyes and curled horns.

“It's lovely to finally meet you.”

Rosanne remembered when her own mother had accused her of being possessed by demons. Grabbing her by the hair, her mother had forced Rosanne to look her in the eye (because all children should look at their parents when they are spoken to) and when nobody was around, she had screamed at Rosanne for asking the pastor too many questions after her first church service.

“Questioning God, *doubting* Him!” she'd spat. “What are you trying to do, *embarrass* me? *Get the demons out of your head, girl!*”

The man in her kitchen now did not resemble what she had always pictured herself as from that day forward. He extended a hand to her—one that only vaguely resembled that of a human's. And perhaps Rosanne had simply grown desensitized to the feeling of terror, but she could not find it within herself to be even the slightest bit surprised by his presence, nor appearance, as she stared blankly back at him.

The man—or, rather, the demonic entity, seemed entirely unfazed at her lack of reaction. His smile only widened as she watched him—as if a suspicion of his had been confirmed. He retracted his hand casually and adjusted his tie before speaking again.

“I wanted to ask you a few questions about your faith.”

Rosanne contemplated her new reality. She knew there was a real possibility that this was just a hallucination, or maybe a dream. Nevertheless, on the off chance that this figure was, in fact, a real demon, placed in her kitchen by God as a test of her faith, Rosanne was determined to prove herself a worthy follower. She may not have been a good person by any means, but that didn't mean she wasn't a good Christian.

“Come sit, then,” she said swiftly, her voice hoarse from disuse. She gestured to the chair directly across from her at the table—a subtle effort of hers to put distance between her and him. The man noticed this—because of course he did—and with a mockingly gracious smile, he sat at the chair right beside her instead.

“Throughout your life, you’ve been a pretty devoted follower of your Lord and Savior, haven’t you, Rosanne?” The demon began, crossing his legs to prop his elbow up on one knee, a palm resting on his cheek. “I’ve been watching you for a while now.”

Rosanne narrowed her eyes.

“Watching me?”

The demon grinned, fangs twinkling in the overhead lamplight of Rosanne’s kitchen. He said nothing.

“Alright. So you’ve been watching me. With bad intentions, I’m assuming?”

“Oh, not at all, Rosanne! Like I said, I’m curious about your faith.” The demon cocked his head. “You haven’t read a single word of your Bible in over 10 years.”

“I’ve memorized it,” Rosanne said automatically. It was a knee jerk excuse--the only one she could think of. And the truth was, she had memorized certain passages, but only the ones that validated her ego as a Christian woman (when she was younger, she had especially been a fan of Titus 2:5).

“But, Rosanne, does He not command you to read your scripture by night and day?” The man cleared his throat, before reciting a line Rosanne had heard before--though it was eerie coming from the mouth of a creature created from sin.

“This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it.” The demon’s voice was dripping with cynicism as he spat out God’s word, but he seemed satisfied with himself upon finishing--as if he’d proved a point.

“Joshua 1:8,” Rosanne mumbled. “I’m well aware.”

“But that’s just the thing, Rosanne,” The man said, drumming his claws on the table as he gazed at her, unblinking. “You’re well aware, yet your faith has faltered.”

Rosanne got up from the table as quickly as she could manage, grasping the countertop behind her to maintain balance. Her hands, pruned with age and fatigue, shook with anger as they clenched down upon the granite.

“Tell me why you’re here,” she said sharply.

The demon smiled. It seemed that he was done beating around the bush. He took his time smoothing down the lapels of his suit before he spoke.

“Alright, to get straight to the point, I want your soul. That might have been obvious already.” He flashed Rosanne a brilliant smile, one which she did not return.

“The process doesn’t have to be difficult, despite popular belief. We aren’t the only ones that benefit from the exchange, you know.”

Rosanne looked at this demon--this thing--and felt disgust. And yet, she also felt a strange bit of envy. This being, detached from God in every way, had no reason to worry about absolution. It was already damned. For this reason, Rosanne felt her contempt surge. Still, she stubbornly maintained her composure, despite the fact she knew the demon wanted it to slip.

“And what do you think I want from you?” she said, voice flat. The demon looked at her, a mocking sort of pity in its eyes. “You want to forget.”

Rosanne wished this demon had a name, if only to curse it. Instead of denying his assumption, she scoffed humorlessly, a puff of air escaping her nose. Without a word, she reluctantly sank back into her chair. The demon grinned.

“I’ve seen it all before, you know,” he commented, watching Rosanne’s gaze shift numbly to the table in front of her. “Humans hate themselves more than demons do.” “I don’t hate myself,” Rosanne said, seemingly just to say it. “But I’ve done things I wish I didn’t. Everybody has.”

“Wouldn’t it be nice if you could just forget about all those mistakes?” He pressed, raising an eyebrow. “If you--”

“They weren’t mistakes.”

The kitchen fell quiet. Rosanne could see the demon watching her from the corner of her eye. She didn’t know if she was saying it to convince him or herself.

“They weren’t mistakes.”

Rosanne remembered the way her husband had screamed the day their only son confessed to them his sin. Evan had been hoping for acceptance, or perhaps forgiveness. There was none to be found in his father’s eyes, and Rosanne did nothing as her husband physically threw her child outside onto the front stoop. She made eye contact with Evan before her husband slammed the door, her vision unobscured by a lack of tears. Eyes wide with fear and despair, he wanted her to save him.

As a mother, Rosanne wanted nothing more than to bring her son into her arms, consequences and morality be damned. But as a Christian, she had no other choice. She looked away, and the door slammed shut, and she wasted the final moment she ever saw her child alive.

She had wondered then, if perhaps the demons her mother always swore were inside her had passed into her son instead. And when she and her husband received the news, there was a sickening relief that accompanied the despair. Maybe Evan had taken them with him. Today, in her kitchen, she knew he had not.

The demon allowed her words to sit in the air for a moment, pondering them. And then he sighed, leaning back in his chair.

“I’ve never met a human as boring as you. Do you know that?”

Rosanne looked at him, face empty. A moment passed, and then he groaned, and rose from the kitchen chair.

“I’d like to make a deal with you.”

Rosanne turned in her chair, watching as a flicker of red light engulfed the demon’s claws. He now held a shiny copper penny, and as he turned it over in his fingertips, it caught the light of the overhead lamp.

“I’m going to flip a coin,” he said. “If it lands on tails, I’ll leave you alone to drink your tea, and never bother you again.”

The demon’s lips tugged into a sly smile.

“But if it lands on heads, you’ll get to choose any moments from your past that you regret, and I’ll erase them from your memory.”

Rosanne gave him a sour look.

“Yes, and I’ll take your soul. I thought that was implied.”

Rosanne *knew* not to make deals with the devil. She’d been taught as much in church, but there was a deeper meaning there, a deeper reason beyond all the basic, surface-level shame inherited from Adam and Eve. You see, a human can’t make a deal with the devil, because once they do, their eyes are opened to the abject horrors of their own life—the things they’ve done, the people they’ve hurt in the name of God. A human cannot allow Satan to tempt them, because the moment they step off the Lord’s yellow brick road, they realize how much time they’ve wasted restricting themselves to it. Reality is a curse that only the devil can grant you, and once you’ve gotten a taste, you’re never able to go back.

Now that this demon stood in the same room as her, his mere presence forced this realization into her head, and forced her to take that final leap into the pits of damnation.

“Do it,” was all Rosanne said.

The demon obeyed. He flipped the coin into the air, higher than their heads, higher than the overhead lamp. In a bizarre illusion of demonic trickery, the ceiling seemed to fold apart like a kaleidoscope to make room for the coin, reality itself shifting to accommodate it. And then, the penny came falling down, and the demon caught it, slapping it against the back of his palm. Impatient, he took his hand away, only for his face to fall.

Whether it was dissociation, or emotional numbness, Rosanne wasn’t sure. But she felt like she had just witnessed a car accident, and the wreckage was slowly being pulled back to reveal who had been killed.

The demon set his lips in a grim line, and presented the penny to her.

Tails.

Relief shuddered through Rosanne’s chest, so immense that she nearly lost her breath. And yet, there was despair there too.

The demon cursed under his breath in ancient Latin, irritation in his stature as he threw the penny to the floor. It chimed against the wood, taking a few moments to stop spinning before it finally became stationary.

“I could have manipulated the way that turned out,” the demon scoffed, straightening his shoulders as if he were trying to make himself look taller. “I could have enchanted that penny so that there were heads on both sides.”

Rosanne watched him, vaguely amused by the attempt at regaining his lost pride. The demon reminded her a bit of Evan in that way. Always a sore loser, never wanted to be the one to admit defeat. Faintly, she wondered if he still thought about her. She wondered if he forgave her.

“But, games aren’t fun if you don’t follow the rules,” the demon grumbled, finally relenting. “And I’ve enjoyed our game, Rosanne, but I have souls to damn.”

Before the demon could take his leave, Rosanne heard herself speak aloud.

“Is my son....?”

A painful silence blocked Rosanne’s throat. She wished the thought hadn’t even occurred to her, as she saw the demon pause.

After a moment, the creature of Hell turned to face her, yellow eyes glinting. There was a long moment where he simply looked at her. He watched her, as if he was looking at an impossible puzzle--mystifying, and frustrating. And then he gave her a smile--a contemptuous, pitying one.

“Goodbye, Rosanne.”

Rosanne had barely blinked, and then the demon--the man--was gone.

Standing Apart

By Jacob Boucher

Concentric circles
Moving apart together
Crashing so gently



Moving Apart

By Jacob Boucher

Molasses

By Kory Vance

i saw a ghost

it was slightly transparent and sported thick, vascular fore-
arms

the ghost drilled a hole into an eight-ounce, glass jar of mo-
lasses and glued in a spigot

we exposed our tongues and waited my whole lifespan for it
to drip empty

what is on the other side? what is on the other side? what is
on the other side?

i told the ghost, on this side it is dusty-daunting-dead
we're racing through yellow lights, filled to the gills with sug-
ar and opioids, addicted to barstools

and youtube

and me and my friends believe the devil is freewill

the ghost said, "fill your stomach. this is all you'll accomplish
in life."

i gave my last drop of sweetness to a cactus blossom



Koi Clouds

By Morgan Doerr



Amarillo Feels Too

By Jessica Miralrio

You Were Always Behind Glass

By Leah Browning

I would catch a glimpse of you
here and there

in the secured area

of a crowded airport
or through a window

as I walked past a store

riding the down escalator
when I was on my way up

or vice versa

turning toward me, but always
traveling in another direction—

last night in the hallway

you opened a cupboard
and along with the towels

were a few chocolate coins

I said, you really love me
don't you

and you smiled

and put your arms around me
and let me touch your face

again

The Parable of Farren the Bear and the Crow

By Steven Osman

Farren was a brown bear who wandered the woods, trying as any bear would to live a simple bear life. All he needed to be happy was food in his belly and a nice cave to spend the winter. Upon maturity, he had left his mother's care and went out on his own, with plans for a simplified life.

One sunny day, as he journeyed through the forest looking for food, he spotted a beehive up in a tree. He could smell the honey inside. As he approached the tree, he noticed a crow perched in an adjacent tree, watching him.

"Hello there, crow. Beautiful day, isn't it?" said the bear.

The crow shrugged. "Who can say?"

"Well," the bear said, "it's nice and sunny out, and I'm about to treat myself to some honey. I'd say it's a good day."

The crow just shrugged.

Farren began climbing the tree, whistling a carefree tune, excited for the prize that awaited him. All the while, he thought to himself, "Today is a good day." However, when he reached the beehive and started pawing at it, the bees became angry and started swarming the bear. As the bees stung him all over, he became overwhelmed, lost his balance, and fell to the forest floor, landing with a thud.

"Oooowww!" yelled Farren. "My arm! I can't move my arm! Oh jeez, this is terrible!" He rubbed his arm as it throbbed in pain. He yelled up to the crow, "This has turned out to be the worst day ever!"

The crow just shrugged. "Who can say?"

The bear started limping back to his den. He thought to himself, "If I can't catch a decent meal before hibernation, I'll never last through the winter. Dang beehive, what a lousy day this is!"

Just then, he noticed a freshly killed deer laying off in the distance, apparently shot illegally by a poacher and left to rot.

"Oh my! What a lucky day! I'm saved! Oh, thank the maker!" he exclaimed as he approached the carcass. Up in the tree above the deer was the crow, observing the whole situation.

"Would you look at this, crow! I was facing certain death, but now I am saved. This is the best day ever!"

The crow simply shrugged. "Who can say?"

"Well," said Farren, "I was in serious trouble, and the fates have conspired to help me, so I'd say it is a great day."

The crow just shrugged.

After consuming his last meal for the winter, Farren headed back to his den to hibernate for the season and recover from his injury. All at once, he realized there was a large grizzly bear, about twice his size, guarding the entrance to his cave.

“This is my cave now,” roared the grizzly, standing on its hind legs. “You best move along if you don’t want trouble.”

All Farren could do was back away, feeling scared and dejected. As he limped along, he came upon the crow again, sitting up in another tree.

“Well, crow, I’m really in trouble now. I’ll never last through the winter without my shelter. Today will definitely go down in history as one of the worst days a bear has ever had,” Farren sulked.

The crow just shrugged.

“Yeah, I know what you’re going to say,” said Farren, “but I know, for myself, that today has been a horrible day.”

“Actually,” said the crow, “I was going to say that I can show you to another, *deserted* cave, not far from here, where you could safely recover for the winter.”

Farren looked up, bright eyed and bushy tailed. “Really?! Oh, thank you crow! You are my savior! Thank you so much! Gosh, today is the greatest day of my life!”

The crow simply shrugged and said, “Who can say?”

It's Impolite to Check Your Texts at the Table

By Fenn MacDonald

I'm eating French toast with lemon curd while my sole surviving grandparent fights for the right to forfeit the title and all I can think about is whether to order the lavender chai. Nobody asks if I'm okay and all I can say is take the strawberries. Take the eggs. Take my love, while I can give it. While we're both still alive. Take what I can give you, let me love you, let me try. It's all I have. She's going to die.



Wedding on the Willamette

By Taryn Evans

Faraway Wanderers

By Morgan Doerr

There lay a hill in wild winter
that sleeps above the land,
and faraway wanderers, brave as they are,
will bear it hand in hand.

There were wars here, so they say,
fought in springtimes snare,
yet far from war calls of a darker time,
the ravens don their airs;

They sing; listen! the earth is vast, and old, and new.
unaware though we do seem,
our stretching sky is none compared
to your goat, its hide, the cream.

And in this world, all things sleep
in blankets, sea, and grass.
The morning sun is sure a sign
that all is bound to pass.

Faraway wanderers, hand in hand,
cross over rock and sea,
waiting for the Earth to silence,
to see what can't be seen.

Shrouded Shell

By Emerson Spruce

My flesh is shrouded, my heart sits walled;
Lying beneath reeds thin and tall.
Narrow eyes to seek my prey,
Through leaves that block the light of day.

With clawed feet I do paddle,
Under winding streams that babble.
No compass have I to find my home.
Retreating still that sacred dome.

Over mud and silt I do trudge,
Serving solely as nature's drudge.
Innocent, fair, and never dry,
No other is fabled such as I.

Snapping jaws and writhing tongue,
This life has but room for one.
The stream swirls above its bed.
Laying still like the lonely dead.

Not of land and not of sea;
Betwixt those that fight to feed.
To swim and crawl is all the same:
For my path ahead holds no shame.

untitled haiku (3)

By Deborah LeFalle

ferocious spring wind
blowing tree blossoms that land
gently pink snowflakes

i forgot about
freesia blubs i planted
till blooms surprised me

japanese maple
new growth weighted from rainstorm
branches bow in grace

Hubris II: Dead In The Winter

By Morgan Doerr

I can hear it now,
the voice in dark glaciers blue.
Its song sinks into the bones and prays to make me new.

And a million gods are not enough
to make me pray and tremble on my knees.
I feel my blood is as old as theirs,
though it's sacrilege to say it's so;
it's in me, the wild and the hunt.

Say it's not so! I can't look at my friends
and know this cloud is stretching thin.
It threatens to let the dawn burn us through
and through and through,
till great colors unbeknownst cleanse the sky anew.

Yet we clasp our hands with silver white
and slip away from the warm green glen,
exalted in some endless prayer
that never sees the light.

If this should last forever,
I pray to death I'll never know.
I'll be waiting on the ivory edge
with a million things to say
that I'd abandoned in raw snow
one hazy summer day.



Overwhelm

By Ian Wells



Rising to the Surface

By Sammy Garcia

How to Become a Medium

By Victoria Gransee

Move to Wisconsin.

Actually, this works best if you've moved there twice.

The first time, be young. Braid feathers into your hair, tell the Catholic school-teacher that her

classroom is haunted by a young woman named Clarissa. She has a daughter, this ghost, and once lived in a jukebox in Memphis.

Hold a funeral for the grandfather you never met; the one who died before you were born. Stand

in a circle with your round-cheeked primary school friends and say you miss him.

You met him once in a dream. He pushed you on the swingset, so high you lost sight of the ground. This will make your mother cry when you tell her.

Visit the free zoo every weekend. Have you tried log rolling? You are very bad at log rolling. Say you want to see the wolves. You've been to this zoo enough times to know there aren't any wolves, but

their absence doesn't deter you from wanting to see them. Watch the polar bear instead. Be bored; go home.

You don't feel particularly connected to the house you live in, save for knowing that something bad happened there.

Throw up on the stairs. Watch half-chewed oranges crawl from your throat.

Curse the nuns who work at your haunted little school. Think about divinity. The holy spirit is still just a holy ghost, yes?

Move back to Indiana. During 'Nature Day' at your primary school, Mike Pence's wife will tell you that polar bears sometimes eat their young. You will think about this a lot. You will write shitty poems comparing your own parents to that of a polar bear cub's. You'll think about that free zoo and the absence of wolves.

Move back to Wisconsin. It's been four years. You don't recognize any of the people you once invited to your grandfather's funeral. You don't believe in ghosts openly, but the presence lingers.

Try tarot cards, pendulums, spell jars. Pink Himalayan Salt. Egg shells. Cinnamon. Sigils. Runes.

Your parents are looking for a house on Lake Kegonsa, a small inland lake most highly esteemed

for duck shit and boys who never outgrew their 'highschool glory' days.

It's a tough market. Every property for sale is under a bidding war, for some inexplicable reason.

You see one decent house, with a cramped staircase and tiny, windowless bedrooms. It feels neutral, which is why you like it. You can't picture anything horrible happening in a place that looks like that.

Someone else buys it.

By next weekend, you're visiting another option. It's two stories, boasting a screened in porch and a wet bar, both of which are a reasonable distance from the wood-clad office space. It's a melancholic house. You know immediately.

He (the realtor) explains that this house belonged to a very lonely, very ill, old man. He speculates that he died in the upstairs bedroom. This becomes a sort of self-contained gossip among your family. Your realtor's daughter is dead. You loved her. House hunting is an odd affair. Hunting and haunting sound too similar.

You can tell the house is melancholic—not by the dead guy upstairs, but by the wooden floors. They run at odd angles, too dark and warm to be anything other than menacing. You died in a house like this, back in Indiana.

Your parents would be very happy here. You can't let them have it.

They don't believe in ghosts. You don't either. You try to tell them this on the ride home, but all that comes out of your mouth is, "There's something off about that house."

Someone else snatches it.

The bungalow you visit next isn't quite so sad. It certainly is organized wrong, with the bedrooms branching off the kitchen rather than a living room, but that's not an indicator of your future suffering.

You say it's 'fine.' Decisions like this are heavy, especially when you know you will somehow be the only person really affected by the house they choose. It's heavy, and you're tired, in some purgatory where you simultaneously want to see the realtor, and never think about the situation again.

His daughter speaks to you in dreams sometimes, walking in step with your spectre down busy avenues you two used to frequent. In one such dream, she takes you to the Catholic school you loathed. It's average, you suppose. The muted yellows and deep maroons on the walls are off putting. It looks ancient. It reminds you of ghosts, but not of the monster kind – of the kind that could have been you. You're glad you moved, glad you met Mike Pence's wife so she could tell you that thing about polar bears.

They pick a house you didn't come with them to see. It's floodland, a decent-sized lot downhill from the state park. Your parents tell you that, if you have friends who want to come over, you can tell them to 'follow the signs to the state park.'

Introducing them to GPS systems is pointless, so you let it slide. You nod, think about it some, think about it again, never stop thinking about it. Your mother calls this your 'funeral memories.' She wants a funeral like her dad's, where all the kids went around and quoted something their dear old man used to say. You don't think your mom's funeral soundbites would be as sentimental as her father's.

"You'll miss me when I'm gone" is one of her favorites. She says it every time you're wounded.

"Bueller?" She asks an empty house.

The house they chose doesn't answer. They picked the only house in which you'd be the ghost, flitting between your life and theirs. It's your parent's house, a place where you'll only spend holidays. It's drab. Neutral. Your mom will try to fix it up with turquoise and tangerine. It won't work.

You'll see no ghosts, only yourself in the mirror. You'll wonder about the inhabitants of the houses they didn't pick. You'll take pills trying to see the realtor's daughter again. After a while, she'll stop coming to you.

You'll feel the absence, no matter how painful the presence was.

The absence will be worse.

Move away from Wisconsin. Move anywhere. Check every house for threads of future suffering.

ii.

By Halla Hughes

ii.

fiercely as the sun
wild moon forges a new path
huntress strings her bow

Lorn

By Halla Hughes

I still remember the purple-shrouded haze.
Slipping beneath twin peaks, we bid
our sunlight farewell, watching it fade into the
red of night while the wild grasses blazed beneath
our feet.

We slept a dreamer's slumber that night, lost
in the burble of our cold stream, barefoot on
smoothened river rocks. The moonlight never left us.
It became ever-present like the redwood tree, her kiss sweet
as honeysuckle.

We are old now, though I remember those first steps of ours.
So young were we, burying our toes into cool soil;
a reprieve from the day's harsh rays. I still think of
fresh-plucked peaches, juices sticky on our hands—

One day, I will return.



Offering on All Saints' Day

By Serge Lecomte

Visit

By Terry Jude Miller

To Lyssa Smith

one of the five—she opens the cemetery gate
as one would open the door of a church
unoiled hinges announce her—she gives the dead
her name

because so few come—she comes
to tend forgotten graves
to hear lonely laments
to offer her ear to the hereafter

she walks about the stones
drags fallen limbs away
brushes detritus from carved callings
rights humble plastic flowers
in label-less soup cans

the buried are many
her hands but two
each stone is caressed
by the madonna's palm
each name is given
to the first day of spring



Signs of Life

By Catherine Hansel

eternal return

By RC deWinter

i reached down into the depths of me for the words
i want to shout from the rooftops of times square
so the wind could take them over land and sea

to ricochet off the hindu kush balconies in paris
the solemn cathedrals of antiquity
every minaret and monument decorating the earth
the memory of the unknown graves of millions

to be carried by bright birds to every steamy jungle
to rise in the breath of waking volcanoes
float in the great swamps where secrets live
to fall over frozen snows north and south
to sing in the slap of waves salt and fresh on every shore

spring melting the harshness of winter
sending cold sweet water rushing down the sides
of great gray mountains
the night sky shedding silver light on dark prairies
the blue or green or winedark beauty of summer seas

rain softening frozen ground
siroccos cooling burning deserts
flowers painting and perfuming the earth

crops ripening fish spawning
lovers finding each other
children being born
souls returning to stardust
and every other transformation time delivers

but fished up only the dust of despair
the glitter of pyrite

so here – here! – are the words i would have sent you

everything that lives in wind and water
in birdsong soil the rustle of leaves
and every language known to man
still lives somewhere deep and quiet in our everdreaming minds

When Love Becomes Both the Fire and the Fuel and Will Not Let Itself Die

By B.A. O'Connell

I think of you as sleep does not come
and wonder if you too are lying awake
in the oil of nighttime—

I would strike a match against your
perfect neck
to provide flame
and to end the maddening hunger
that comes before dawn.

And now
I burn in an invisible way
in the rotating
clock of my bedroom;
in here, I am all things at once.

The Lord
holds His breath,
knowing he could subdue the fire
around my anguished heart,

and the Devil gently laughs
behind the moon.



(re)site

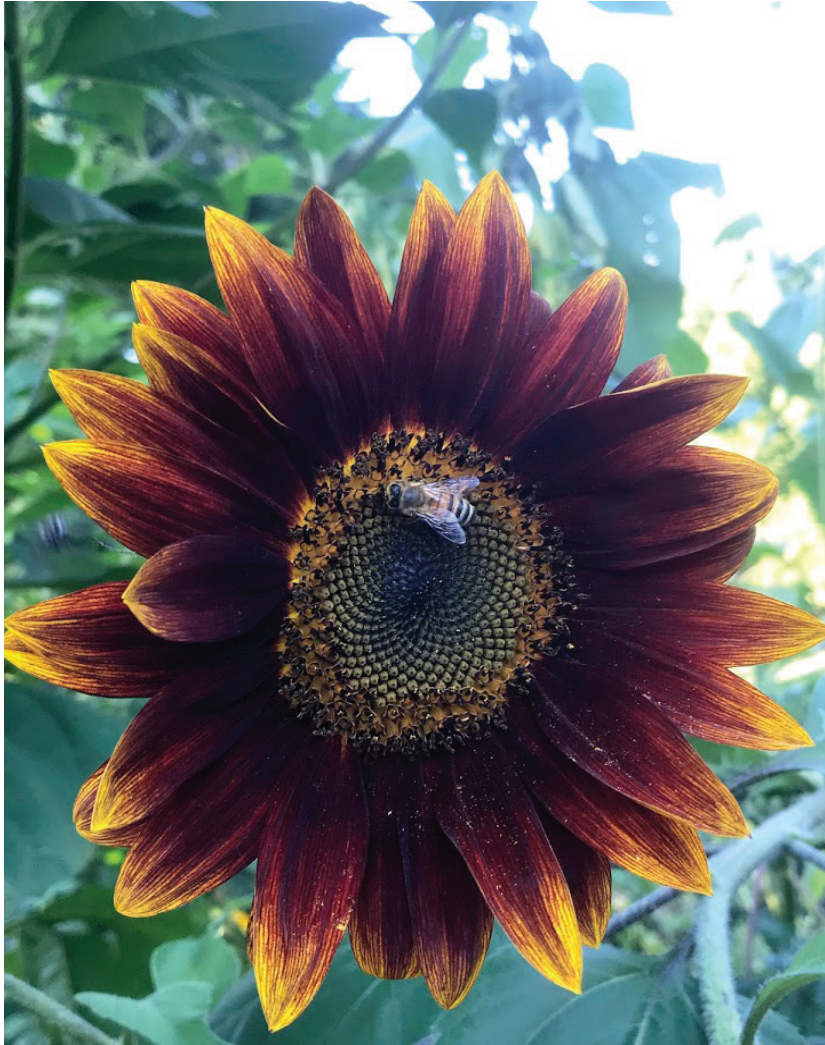
By Karl Burkheimer (student collab)

(re)site was an exhibition by artist Karl Burkheimer in the Dengerink Gallery from January 18 to April 9. It included a drywall monolithic structure that served as a platform that encouraged collaborations and interventions from the students, staff and faculty of the WSU Vancouver community. By drawing, painting, printing, and wheat-pasting on this surface, either through specific prompts or pure intuition, the piece soon became the work of not just one artist, but the community of our campus.



Aphid crew

By Zachary Hipple



Honeybee Sun

By Zachary Hipple

Fall Semester Sunrise

By Jessica Judd

Through clouds and mists,
the impossible glow of sunshine
illuminates streaks of raindrops
adorning eastern windows with
translucent golden pearls.
Beyond, yellow leaves linger
like low-burning lamps
lighting dull wet pavement,
slick-roofed dark-brick buildings,
abandoned outdoor tables,
a silent fountain,
unlit lamp posts,
and a damp-furred squirrel
eating ham from the trash.
At the whim of the mists,
the campus glows in subdued magic,
then shines in glittering grayness
through the cafeteria window.
There, a sweater-wrapped senior
finds the cold dread of deadlines
melting in a steaming mug,
and a sunbeam.

Graceful Fortune For the Damned

By Aisan L. Afshar

The faces of women are wrought with flashes of age. It is not age brought with time. It is a maturity that comes with a lack of privilege. So when she smokes, she does it in defiance of the lines that are mockingly etched around her mouth. A painted smile, a harbinger of fake joy--because that's all there is.

But the smoke doesn't lie. It burns a bit, and that pain is real. It's something to do in a place where nothing is left to salvage.

There's a tiny crook that they all have for smoking, a hidden paradise encroached by tall bushes and drooping pine trees. Right by the faculty too. A bit of cosmic irony for those who bother looking for such things. They defy under the eyes of the watchers. Smoking is swiftly prohibited in Uni.

She and the others huddle in the self-proclaimed paradise like tiny birds, cigarettes rolling between their fingers and petite flames flying from mouth to mouth. There is no gender, no novelty, or even recognition in the act of smoking. It's a proliferation of quiet destruction. She relishes in it. It's fine if her hair is down, and it's fine if the cigarette ash burns tiny holes in the attire she so promptly abhors.

Nine calls her a brood. He is, in her mind, the reason why people brood in the first place. Nine is not his real name. She really calls him that because his real name is too loud. Too long. Too much. And he doesn't mind. He agrees that Nine is a quiet number like her, and he basks in the calmness of it the same way he allegedly enjoys her company. Nine is *Backpfeifengesicht*.

A face that begs to be slapped.

But he makes paradise more of a humane place. Not a pit for squalid souls to quietly choke themselves with smoke. But more of a hiding haven, as though they are all playing a game of hide and seek and being playfully rebellious. In a world, a place, where they need to be so careful about what they wear and what they say and the places they go... Nine is like a tall glass of ice water. Not in its refreshing element, but cold and pleasant all the same.

Nine doesn't have lines of age on his face like her, but his hands are callous. Rough when they hand her a lighter, but gentle when they play with her fingers. She doesn't quite feel up for a hearty expression of passion when it comes to those around her, but with Nine, there's dim light.

"The mother of a country belied," he teases her some days, carelessly flinging an arm around her shoulders. Definitely, something to frown upon had they not been in paradise. She humours him even though others laugh. They didn't truly get the joke, she knows. Nine knows as well. It's in the gaze the two of them share. His fingers trace the fake lines on her face as a beckon. A nudge of his thumb as he flicks on the lighter, and they both ease back in the flimsy benches.

Nine isn't sunshine, she knows. Nine is scared too. Nine is loud and careless with his touches because he thinks himself to be a sponge, soaking up all his energy before he leaves. Before they all leave. Their paradise has an expiration date, as they do too.

Unlike her, Nine wants stains. Things that stay. And she wants everything to just go away. They're a lousy bunch. She has lines, and Nine has a stain. They could be synchronised, back to back.

But in their tiny paradise under the eyes that unwillingly set out to pull them apart, she and Nine smoked.

Grandma's Sun Room

By Lindsey Pierce

Grandma once had a sunroom in the duplex up on the hill. It was her space, laced with all things opulent, including a telescope to spy on outer space. Upon my first view, I saw multiple falling stars, and Jupiter too. But maybe that's an embellished memory made up by the child in me. Children's minds honestly operate out of whimsy. Truly, the room appeared transparent with floor-to-ceiling windows imploring light to occupy every square inch. A Swarovski crystal menagerie opened my eyes to hundreds of rainbow refractions dancing upon the wall. Twilight was the most beautiful time of all. Opposite the cascading glass, a hearth warmed what wasn't appeased by the sun. I made a space of my own in this room, plopping my whole self on the plush white carpet to line up my marble collection, one by one. The sun knew how to pop the aquamarines, indigos, greens, pearls, pewters, and coppers in each, making them even more special to me. The room's view proved an un-ironic contrast. Capturing Casper's un-developed hills: rolling brown with sagebrush, bold sky, and antelope.

Looking out from my white glass orb, I suppose the plain, uncomplicated wilderness warmly appraised my introverted existence. The sunroom was a place I could escape from the noise, the conversation, the competition. A place where the only gaze I had to face was that of the twinkling crystal blowfish upon the shelf. Transparent to me, the world around. Transparent to it, all of me. Safe, though, in a glowing space full of soft white noise, created by Grandma.

You Are Beautiful

By Stephanie Prado

you are beautiful.
and i'm not talking about the kind that society
measures,
i mean the type where your heart outweighs ev-
erything else.
so let me be the one who tells you this today
so that tomorrow
you may hear it from yourself instead.
because trust me,
you are even more beautiful on those days
when you feel like shit,
when your mind isn't being kind to you,
and your skin doesn't feel like a home.
you are beautiful because you care so deeply,
because you apologize,
and you forgive.
when you fall down, you get back up and inspire
others to do the same.
and no matter the circumstance,
or what you're going through,
you're always there for others.
you see,
i could keep going for hours
and never run out of space through my eyes,
but above all,
you are beautiful
because you love

Heaven

By Ava Wisely

Yes, I'm sure you've tried very hard
to board up the windows of my bedroom.
You haven't let your feet touch those rusty floorboards
since the day I died.
Does everything look the same to you?
Or have you not allowed yourself to look?

Don't speak ill of the dead, they say.
You've done more than enough of that for the both of us.
But I think that now
you may be beginning to regret all that hate.
Because now, the sun is setting on my corpse,
buried out behind the barn,
and the flowers are growing around my limbs, and twisting around my joints
and I've become something new.
Something better.
The Earth thanks me as my skin becomes Her soil.
And what have you given to her?

Nobody visits my grave anymore.

But even a dead girl knows
that sometimes, in the late hours of the night
when the owls are wailing and the bats are hiding in the trees,
that one of you visits me.
It's mostly in your dreams, of course.
You couldn't bear to see my body in the daylight.
Because then you'd have to see the sword that you planted
rising from my battered chest.

Doesn't it drive you mad
to hear silence coming from my lips?
Don't you wish I'd say something?
Scream at you, or
cry and moan in anguish, asking
why you've done this to me?
If I was loud, and abrasive
you could be angry, and kick my body while it's down.
But no.
You're met with silence.
Because dead men tell no tales, and my tales
are not the ones you would ever take the time to hear, anyway.



Offset

By Jacob Boucher



Windprint

By Juan Carlos Garcia Gonzalez

Letter from the Editor

If you have decided to adorn your bookshelf with this year's issue of the Salmon Creek Journal, I extend my deepest gratitude.

Our organization has been around for upwards of three decades but was nearly laid to rest in the aftermath of system-wide chaos brought about by the pandemic. Our team has been working tirelessly to make a final product that does justice to the artists and creatives that have allowed us to showcase their work. Last year, two students passionate about preserving the journal's legacy spearheaded the initiative to market, edit, layout, and publish the journal without a support staff. Their hard work had almost slipped through the cracks due to internal administrative turnover. As of December 2022, I was the sole member of the journal. We were months behind the usual publication schedule, and the timeline to send to print was accelerated. This year would have been the last if not for the countless individuals who were impassioned to highlight our community's outstanding talent. For all of our extraordinary employees, advisors, and community allies, you are the heart of this publication. I could have never dreamed we would be able to accomplish all we have; words cannot describe my appreciation.

This year's theme, Rebirth and Reemergence, is a compilation of all the trials, tribulations and triumphs we have experienced while navigating the publishing landscape. Rebirth refers to the resurrection of a nearly forgotten university staple. At the same time, reemergence symbolizes a whole-hearted embrace of our origins and the artistic choices made by our far-away predecessors. When we began envisioning what we wanted this issue to look like, we collectively fell in love with elements from our 1997, 1998, and 1999 issues.

We hope the pieces we have selected have resounded with you as they have us. The goal of the Salmon Creek Journal is to elevate artists on the WSU Vancouver campus, within the WSU system, and across the globe.

We hope you will continue to pick up subsequent issues of our journal, and thank you again for your support.

Sincerely,
Bethanie Collette,
2022-2023 Editor-in-Chief

SCJ TEAM 2023

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Ava Wisely

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Normando Quinones

Zachary Hipple

Yashar Hall

Jessica Miralrio

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Tamara Crooks

Mariah Inman

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Noah Matteucci

Megan Tuthill