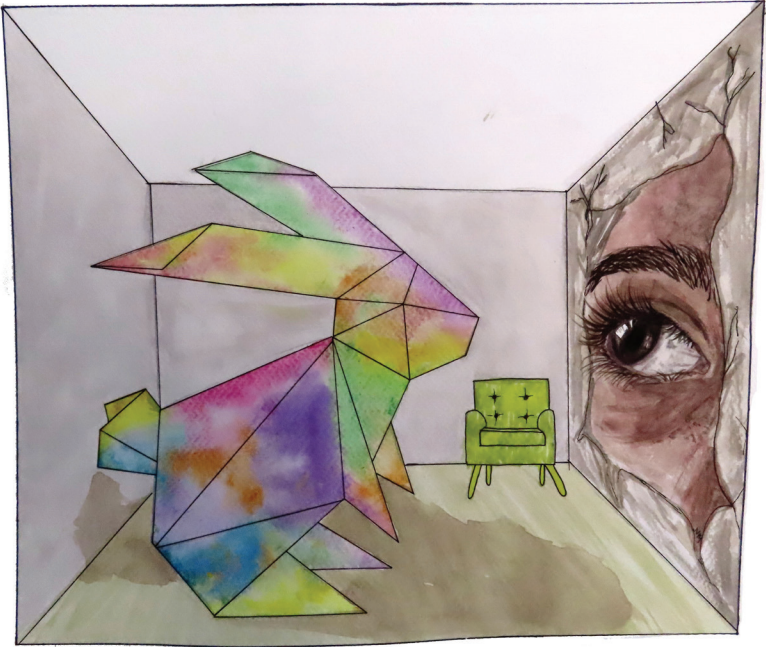


# Red Wheelbarrow



## Student Edition 2023

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screenshot from "Eco Mobsters" by Lennon Lilienthal-Wynn

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special thanks to

Ken Weisner

From 1976 to 1999 this magazine was known as Bottomfish, a name that referred to neglected, overlooked writing that had (metaphorically) fallen to the bottom of the sea. We hope that Red Wheelbarrow also signifies unpretentiousness and the casting of a wide net in search of new, exciting young writers as well as an ongoing commitment to originality, courage, and craft.

Red Wheelbarrow publishes twice a year. The National Edition publishes literary and artistic works from all over the country and the world. The Student Edition is open to De Anza students. We welcome submissions of all kinds, and we seek to publish a diverse range of styles and voices. We accept student submissions from September to mid-May and publish by the end of spring quarter.

Poetry: submit up to five poems

Fiction: submit one short story (up to 5,000 words) or up to three flash fiction pieces

Drama: submit one play or screenplay (up to 5,000 words)

Creative Nonfiction: submit one personal essay (up to 5,000 words)

Photographs and Drawings: submit up to five b/w prints or digital files (.jpg, .tiff, or .psd format); please do not send originals.

Comics: submit one b/w strip

Other: submit one!

Preferably please submit text files in MS Word (.doc or .docx) format.

Keep your name and contact information separate from the actual submission.

All Red Wheelbarrow submissions are judged anonymously.

Judges for all contests make their decisions independently.

Red Wheelbarrow

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**Front Cover: Miyako Fukuoka, “Summer Afternoon at Suirokaku”**

**Frontispiece: Jean Samson, “Easter Egg”**

**Back Cover: Aurora Wong, “Miroirs”**

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# Tipping the Scales of Perfection

Liana Bragado-Zahn

Sometimes I couldn't decide which was worse – the discomfort of every single seating option in Dr. Hatter's office, or having to talk to him every two weeks. Twice a month, I had to make the choice to either lie in his cliché chaise lounge, sit criss-cross-apple-sauce on the ground, or pace around the room. I could appreciate the variety of options he offered, but every single one made me hyper aware of my body. The recline of the chaise lounge enhanced my double chin, sitting on the floor cushion with my legs crossed emphasized my belly rolls, and if I stood or paced around the room, all I could think about was the weight of my body shifting, making the floor creak and certainly annoying the tenants of the office below.

Talking to Dr. Hatter was just as uncomfortable. He was around my father's age, spoke so slowly I could fall asleep between words, and he reeked of cats and cigarettes. He liked to compliment my outfits when I came in, which I knew was because of his interest in fashion, but I couldn't help but think every compliment was really some kind of disguised comment about my body. When I spoke, he always nodded and smiled, squinting his narrow eyes whenever he was particularly engaged in what I had to share.

Despite the discomfort I felt in our sessions, I had no choice but to show up.

Showing up to meet with him meant I was making progress, and like Mom always said, progress makes perfection.

But how many sessions did I need to finally be perfect?

"Good afternoon, Zora! Wow, your blouse has such a fun pattern!" Dr. Hatter greeted me as he opened his office door.

"Hello, Dr. Hatter. Yes, a fun pattern..." I responded, avoiding his eyes and lacking his enthusiasm.

"Please, make yourself comfortable! We can begin whenever you're ready." He took a seat at his own chair, gathered his notepad and pencil, and smiled as he waited patiently for me to get settled. I eased into the chaise lounge and tried to shake off the heaviness sitting in the pit of my stomach. Already feeling insecure from his

comment on my shirt, I couldn't help but begin worrying about how my side profile looked, where my arms should be placed, and whether he could tell I was sucking in my torso. My concerns consumed me and I didn't realize I was holding my breath until I heard him take a deep breath of his own, as if to gently coax me into mirroring his actions. Something about it worked, and I immediately felt a hint of sadness that Mom couldn't do that for me last Saturday.

#

Mom liked to go shopping every other Saturday to get out of the house. She called it our 'special girl time' and insisted that it was important for the sake of our relationship. If you ask me, I think she just wanted to get away from Dad. She insisted that when I grew older, this tradition would be one of the most memorable ways we spent time together. Sure, I could agree that it was memorable, but not for the reasons she probably hoped.

How could I forget how it felt to suffocate in a claustrophobia-inducing fitting room, shoving limbs and torso into clothes that refused to fit me? Every single time I had the same internal monologue, coaching and berating myself through the experience.

*Inhale. Easy enough. You got this.*

*Okay, now exhale. All of it. Shrink that belly!*

*Stuff your dumb sausage thighs into the fabric you just had no problem sliding over the lower half of your legs. Once you're a bit too aware of the peach fuzz you never shave, you'll know you're doing it right. Those little hairs should now be a tingly sensation between your skin and the compressive fabric you're shoving yourself into.*

*Do you taste the saltiness of the little beads of moisture breaking through the skin of your upper lip? Well, you'd better move quick because the rest of your chubby body will soon follow.*

*Don't even think about how hot & humid your underarms are becoming. Ignore the stickiness of your hands. Pretend you can't tell that the lack of oxygen is making you feel like you just stepped off the Disneyland teacups. The little spots you think you're hallucinating will fade away soon.*

*Maintain steady breath control, and gently hop as you squirm into the bottoms. Gravity is both your friend and your enemy here. Wipe your gross, damp, finger pads onto your shirt, (or I guess any part of your body that is miraculously still dry) do one quick abdominal vacuum to ensure enough space, then hurry to fasten the button before you pass out.*

*Keep your belly button pulled toward your spine, and only allow your chest to rise and fall as you come back to steady breathing.*

Last Saturday was different from our usual shopping outings because this time it took me longer than usual to get myself into this week's recommended too-tight pants.

"Honey? Are you having trouble getting them on? Is everything alright in there? Oh no, I knew we shouldn't have eaten lunch before shopping today. Do you want me to ask them for a bigger size?" Mom worried.

God, I hated when she did this. It was always like this. Everything she ever talked about always circled back to food. Or clothing. Or my body. Not hers, but mine.

"Mom, I'm fine. They fit, I promise. It's just feeling a little hot in here," I mumbled.

"Hot?! I'm freezing! Our lunch was certainly a bit heavier than what I'd prefer us to eat...maybe that's making you feel a little warm."

"Mom, I'm not feeling we—" I tried to warn her.

"Come out and let's have a look at those pants," she interrupted. "I'm sure it's much cooler out here than in that stuffy dressing room. You and your belly must barely have any room to breathe in there, let alone fumble around with clothing! Come out, come out! Let's see."

"I think I'm gonna pass out. I'm really dizzy."

"Oh, stop with that. You'll be fine. Relax! Get that big butt of yours moving! The sooner you come out here and show me, the sooner we can get them off of you," she insisted as she pulled back the curtain of the fitting room.

At the sight of her, my fingertips instantly became full of



pins and needles, the feeling spreading rapidly through the rest of my arms and up into my shoulders and neck. I knew what this meant. I knew what was coming.

“I think I’m about to have a panic attack, Mom. I really don’t feel good,” I pleaded with her as tears formed in my eyes.

“You’re overreacting, Zora! It’s just a silly little pair of pants that don’t fit you right, nothing to get all worked up about!” she snapped, raising her voice.

Through blurred eyes, I looked beyond the curtain of the dressing room and saw an employee lingering, a look of uncertainty on her face as if she couldn’t decide whether to step in or simply leave me to handle my mother on my own.

“Hi, is there anything I can help you ladies with today?” she asked in a gentle voice – the kind I wished my mother had used with me. The employee must have sensed the desperation communicated by my body language if she made the choice to intervene.

“Oh, we’re just fine,” Mom said with a nervous laugh. “My daughter here is just having one of her usual so-called panic attacks, but we all know she’s just being a drama queen! Thanks for asking!”

By then, I no longer had control of my body. Tears flooded my face. I began to hyperventilate. My upper body had gone from feeling numb to shivering and shaking.

She pulled me into the fitting room, closed the curtain, and whispered through gritted teeth, “If you don’t get it together right this instant, Zora, I swear to you that I will leave. I’ll leave your father. I’ll leave the house. I’ll leave you. You two will never see me again. I have had enough of your nonsense! Pull. Yourself. Together.”

#

Back in Dr. Hatter’s office, the memory of the incident had triggered a river to rush from my eyes. I tried to restrict its flow, but it felt like every tissue I grabbed activated a new stream of tears. I sighed in frustration, yet again feeling out of control of my body. I could only hear my mother’s voice in my head: Pull. Yourself. Together.

“Take your time feeling whatever you feel right now,” he

gently reminded me.

Embarrassingly enough, his words made me cry even harder and soon my entire face was red and wet and snotty. Once finally tired of sitting here sobbing, my lungs forced me to breathe deeply. The first breath was shaky, as if it got caught on something on the way in and couldn't find its way out. The second breath was just barely smoother. The third one felt as though it reset my entire body, like I breathed in all the way down to my toes and all the way out of my head. Once I had regained my composure, I told Dr. Hatter everything – more than I had ever shared with him in any previous session.

I started with the shopping incident and Mom's failure to console me in a time where I felt I really needed her. I told him how every one of my struggles got flipped around into a story where she was the victim. I shared about my parents' arguments they didn't think I could hear every other night. I went into detail about how it felt to always feel the need to be skinny like Mom, beautiful like her, perfect like her.

"I just feel like I need to have my life together all the time," I sighed.

"What does it mean for you to 'have your life together'? What does that look like?" Dr. Hatter asked, and even though I couldn't tell if he seriously hadn't heard a single thing I just shared, or if he was trying to play some psychological trick on me, I still explained.

"It means doing and being everything all at once. I can't be too skinny, I can't be too fat. I can't sit on my ass at home and I also can't spend all my time out with friends. I have to get good grades but can't hole myself up in my room studying. Having my life together means doing a balancing act in the middle of a circus that's literally on fire, all without falling over and without getting burned."

"What would happen to you if you stopped?" he squinted his narrow eyes as he asked.

"Well, like she said - Mom would leave! And then of course Dad would probably fall into a depression without her even though all ever do is yell and fight—"

No, Zora," he interrupted. "What would happen to you?"

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to get at.”

“Let’s roll with your circus metaphor – what would it be like for you to stop the balancing act? If you didn’t worry about the way your body looked, your grades, or who you spent time with... could you allow yourself a bit of imperfection, or even give yourself permission to be out of control? After all, the show must go on.”

“I’m allowed to do that?” I asked. It had never occurred to me that I could just stop trying to be this person that someone else wanted me to be. I didn’t know I could let go of control. All I ever fucking thought about was perfecting myself.

“Oh, Zora. It’s your life. Not your mother’s. Of course you’re allowed to do that,” he laughed. “I invite you to reflect on that, and perhaps practice it, before our next session. Our time is up for today.”

He gently returned his notepad and pencil to his drawer, straightened the collar of his shirt, and smiled as he stood from his chair. I got up from the chaise feeling lighter than I had ever felt walking out of his office. Maybe even light enough to fit into last Saturday’s pants.

#

# All Leaves Turn Brown

Gabriella Anaya

It crackles under my touch.

My fingers don't necessarily glide, but bump along the ridges of its dried  
out structure.

I think about how it used to be. Green, lush, a part of something bigger.

But now, it's disconnected, abandoned, and all the vibrant life has been  
left behind.

Gone is the silky smooth exterior of youth.

All the life and color has been drained from it, leaving behind a shell of  
what once was.

The severing has taken its youth, its beauty, and left it riddled with dirt,  
disintegrating with holes, withering away in a curled up fetal position.

Left completely vulnerable to the whims of a random girl that wants to  
write about its tragic fall from glory.

# Nice Kicks

Wouter de Hoogd

The massive cat leapt over the neon installation of P U M A, landing gracefully on the other side. The sound of a dozen NIKON camera shutters capturing every frame of the animal's trajectory resonated through the room like a deafening applause. And then, it had been quiet. The photo shoot was a resounding success, they all felt it. But the beast now stirred, its guttural purr rising, growing more and more adamant. More insistent. The photographer's eyes glanced briefly at his PA from underneath a branded sports cap. The PA nodded and put the events in motion. The stage hands moved to the writhing tarp, grabbed its edges, and yanked it off the gagged and nude interns underneath. Once so eager to participate in the joys of capitalism, these young men and women now shone bright with terror, their eyes adjusting to the low light in the room before spotting the beast approaching under the cover of low impact neon. The sight that followed was gruesome, but necessary. After all, for high quality sneakers, a beast must be pleased.

# The Ocean: A Reflection of Myself

Nikita Bankar

The ocean is a mystery to me.  
How can it show two sides of who we are?  
Its roaring waves, so peaceful and so free.

It almost feels like it shares a story,  
Of feelings we must battle, giving scars.  
The ocean is a mystery to me.

Its water, tears that fall down to our feet.  
Yet spreads along the sand, stretching so far.  
Its roaring waves, so peaceful and so free.

Emotions often shift inside of me,  
Like waves that seem so gentle from afar.  
The ocean is a mystery to me.

Am I one person holding in the sea?  
Its waters crash like me, it's so bizarre.  
Its roaring waves, so peaceful and so free.

It feels as though I have duality.  
Just like the sea, emotions shake my heart.  
The ocean is a mystery to me.  
Its roaring waves, so peaceful and so free.

# Trapped

Maliyah Salinas

Melancholy surrounding,  
in the thoughts; I am drowning.  
In my head; a loud pounding--  
with the beat of a drum  
and the ache of a squeeze.

I need to escape.  
I need to be free.  
From the conniving thoughts  
that relentlessly haunt me.

So starved and so desperate,  
using me as their feed,  
tearing limb by limb,  
ever so torturously.

I am falling apart;  
struggling to restart--  
this life after you,  
that life I once knew.

# I Am Not a Poet

Clara Medrano

I am not a poet  
And yet I sit in front of my mirror  
And recite lines to myself  
Poetry that my naive mind spins  
Raw and surprising  
An understand of my own feelings  
Revealing themselves as I serenade  
The only listener each night

I wash my face and ponder  
Questions that I haven't asked  
Answers I don't believe  
Emotions I don't feel.

I become a poet and I proclaim  
To myself in the mirror.  
And she listens.

She doesn't wonder if it is  
Romantic or cowardly  
That my poems will never  
Interact with the minds of others.  
She understands that I am a poet  
Only for the brief moments  
Where I see myself in the mirror,  
And then I look away again.



# Sum of My Parts

Clara Medrano

I am the sum of my parts.  
Who decides which parts I am?

Am I my strengths or my weaknesses  
My desires and my vices  
A secret I have kept or the ones I have told  
The love within me or  
The love given to me?

If I am the sum of my parts  
How many parts do I get to pick?  
Is it my favorite parts that define me  
Or the ones that I despise?

Will the world know  
Which parts I choose?  
If I tell the truth,  
They can see that I am only  
The parts that I haven't hid.

# All It Takes

Bethany LaRussa

Waking up in the morning was a chore for Weiss. Just fifteen and already taking care of her younger sister while her mom lay passed out in the living room. She clenched her teeth as her eyes grazed the woman who gave life to the two of them. Multiple bottles of downed alcohol littered the floral carpet, obvious darkened fibers where she dropped them in her frenzy. Just another thing to add to Weiss's list of chores.

Carefully stepping around the putrid-smelling damp spots and loose shards of glass, Weiss made her way over to Lilith's room. She opened the sticker-covered door with a soft grin, her steps gentle as she approached the bed. Her eyes flicked towards a picture of her family on Lilith's nightstand, one where they looked like a genuine family.

Lilith looked most like their mother, with black locks of hair framing her face. Her olive skin was dusted with arrays of freckles, something Weiss was glad to share. But Lilith's green eyes, the eyes of their mother, dampened Weiss's brown ones.

Besides her freckles and olive skin, Weiss was the spitting image of their father. His haunting features were reflected by her own high cheekbones and sharp jawline. She shared with him his mangy brown strands of hair, which could never be tamed to sit properly on her head.

Weiss tried to hide from her father's looks, dying her hair wild colors at the earliest opportunity; red as of lately. But she could never escape the haunting eyes of her father she saw every time she glanced in a mirror.

The picture felt as though it glared at her. A similar picture once sat on Weiss's nightstand, that is until she scratched out her dad's face. Only a few weeks later, she had to scratch out her mother's as well.

Part of Weiss felt envious of Lilith, who remained tainted by her youth and viewed the world in innocence. But Weiss knew that at some point the curtain would come tumbling down, and vowed she would be there to pick her little sister up when it inevitably did.

“Lil, time to get up.” She refocused on her task, gently rubbing the peaceful body of her sister. The only genuine joy Weiss felt came from waking her sister up in the morning, watching her little eyes struggle to open. Lilith clearly felt the same, a bright smile quickly replacing her sleepy face. The two may have lost their parents, but they had each other. Sometimes, that was enough. The day already felt like any other. Later, Weiss would find herself wishing with all her heart that it was only a nightmare.

Weiss and Lilith stepped in unison onto the waxed linoleum, the luminescent lights intruding into Weiss’s vision. How the school thought bright white floors were a good idea in an elementary school filled with dirty little kids was beyond her. She peered at the walls, remembering when her terrible drawings had been pasted in the corridors for all to see. Her stomach tensed at the silence, every day she dropped off her little sister the halls were bursting with noise. What made today different?

“Weiss?” Lilith piped up abruptly as Weiss walked her to her class.

Weiss felt the tug at her hand, coming to a stop a second after her little sister had.

“What’s up, Lil?” She spoke softly.

“I don’t feel good. I wanna go home.” Weiss frowned; she couldn’t take her sister home, especially not when their mom was a walking safety hazard. Her shoulders dropped, eyes darting around as she contemplated her decisions. Lilith held out her hand, where her usual dusty freckles were invaded by angry bumps, probably chicken pox. “Shit,” Weiss murmured, softly caressing her younger sister’s hand.

The bumps were hot to the touch, Weiss nearly retracted her arm when she felt the sting on her fingertips. Her flinch was caught by Lilith, who reflexively pulled her hand away and glanced to the floor beside her. Weiss stared at her younger sister, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth as she thought of a way to brighten the mood. Her eyes danced over her sister’s inward stance.

“How about this,” Weiss began, Lilith lightly tilting her head up to meet her eyes, “make it through today and I’ll take you to get a treat after school.” She smiled, hoping that for her six-year-old sis-

ter, this idea was a bargain. Her face dropped as Lilith kept staring blankly at her.

She stared at the soft pout on Lilith's chubby face. Her beady eyes glossed over; cheeks tinted pink. "Lil I can't, you know this." Weiss managed to tear her eyes off her younger sister, knowing the sight of her would only make it harder.

"You're not safe at home. Mom's drunk again." Weiss put her slender hand over Lilith's shoulder gently. "Just make it through today, okay? Everything will be fine." Lilith gave her one last longing look before turning to enter her classroom. Weiss stood there, watching her go. "Everything will be fine." She muttered to herself.

Weiss truly believed that, too.

She stared at her converse, ripped and coated in an unflattering brown. The soles were worn, and she had begun to feel a dull ache whenever she wore them. Not that she would complete her journey to her high school. She hadn't made it very far from the elementary school before she heard a high-pitched scream. Weiss stopped, hair standing on the back of her neck.

She turned herself around, staring at the school she had hoped to leave behind peacefully with some ease of mind. The scream came from an adult woman, countless scenarios stamped-in her thoughts.

But not one single scenario conjured by her anxious mind reflected the one she turned to see. In the distance was a struggle between a woman and what was likely her son, whose arms were flailing maniacally as they aimed to tear into the woman's skin. Her clothes were stretched and torn by the small hands of her child. Weiss felt her stomach tighten and her pulse as it picks up speed.

"Please! Someone help me!" The cries were sharp, Weiss glanced around in a panic, hoping someone else could de-escalate the situation. Scatters of people lingered around the entrances to the school, but no one was closer than Weiss.

"Shit," she muttered, tightening her grip on her backpack as she prepared herself. She ran, quickly, still unsure of how she could help the woman without getting torn apart herself.

As she neared the woman, she heard her struggles more clearly, "Get him off! Get- agh!" Weiss watched in horror as the

kid tore at the woman's face, blood gathering on his fingertips; his fingertips which were infested by the same red boils on Lilith's skin.

"What are you doing? Help me!" The woman's eyes were wild as they met Weiss's. "Get him off!" Weiss flinched before moving forward, grabbing the kid by his waist and planting her feet into the ground to pull him off the woman. Having removed him successfully, she struggled to hold his wriggling body back.

The woman coughed, getting on all fours as blood spattered to the ground from both her wounds and her mouth.

But, before the woman could give her thanks, the wriggling child elbowed Weiss in the stomach, causing her to hunch over and release the child. Weiss coughed as she tried to regain control of her breathing, her chest heaving as she placed her hands over her knees. The woman was once again tackled, her arms trying desperately to keep her distance between her and her child.

"Roman please, it's your mom! It's me, Mommy!" Shrieking cries of desperation plagued Weiss's mind. Her heart continued to hammer; why was she the only one helping? Taking her eyes momentarily off the struggle in front of her, Weiss took in the chaos around her. It seemed the mother and child were not the only ones in a struggle.

Children were attacking parents left and right, cars lined up in the drop-off were either deserted with open doors or crashed into one another in the panic. Screams could be heard for miles as parents fought their children.

Weiss watched as a child took a pencil in her hands, driving it in and out of her father's neck while he gagged on his blood. Dread found a home in Weiss's body, seeping into her bloodstream. The landscape was filled with violence, not a single spot left untouched by the rampaging children.

Hearing the woman scream in front of her again brought Weiss's attention back, and the picture had somehow grown to be even more violent than before. The woman's left eye had caved in, blood dripping down her face as the child continued brutalizing her. Her right eye made haste eye contact with Weiss's, pleading for the fifteen-year-old to do something. Weiss stared back, and after taking one more glance at her surroundings, decided she could do

nothing to help.

All that she cared about was finding her sister. Weiss pushed aside any thoughts of the red bumps she saw on Lilith's skin merely ten minutes ago – it had to be a coincidence.

She couldn't lose Lilith.

Her Converse slammed into the pavement, dodging the woman who had her body torn and mutilated by the aggressive child.

“No, please! Come back! Please!” the woman gurgled out, but Weiss didn't stop. The woman's screams ensued, but they meant nothing to Weiss; all that mattered was finding and protecting her sister.

Upon entering the school again, the once blinding floors were now coated not only in wax but smears of blood. Weiss felt the panging of her heart as it worked overtime, sounding in her ears. She continued forward, cringing every time her old shoes lost traction. She nearly slipped from all the blood on the ground. She came to a stop, her breath growing heavy and her eyes quickly surveying her surroundings. Bodies, big and small, littered the floor. It seemed some teachers or parents managed to fend off the children. Her heart lurched at the sight of one of Lilith's classmates, whose neck was bent at an unflattering angle. His bloodshot eyes were open, the frenzy oozing from his irises. She tore her eyes away from the boy, clasping a trembling, sweaty hand over her mouth. Shaky breaths spilled from her lips, her eyebrows creased and eyes taped open.

Her heart stilled when she heard the irregular patterns of footsteps coming from around the corner. “Shit,” she breathed out. She searched her surroundings, adrenaline taking over her senses. There were two doors, one on her right and one on her left. She hoped one of them would provide her safety, she faintly recalled one had to be the janitor's closet she had always snuck into when she wanted to avoid her classes at Lilith's age.

Her eyes darted between her options, her eyes lingering on the left door as she frantically moved towards it. Her fingertips gripped the door handle, pulling it down and tugging harshly. The door wouldn't budge. “Fuck!” she yelled.

The steps picked up their pace at the sound of her yell, and Weiss swore she felt the hands of the grim reaper graze her shoulder. She snapped her head around, bolting for the door on the right. Her sweaty hands gripped the right door's handle, tugging it downward.

With a small creak, the door opened and relief flooded her senses. Breathlessly she thanked whatever gods were watching her. She closed the door behind her, pulling her backpack off and gripping the straps. Her back was against the shut door. She cradled her backpack, her heavy breaths the only sound in the room. She clenched her eyes shut, placing her head against the door. She felt a bead of sweat roll tauntingly down her forehead.

The door muffled the sound of approaching footsteps, but Weiss counted each one. They came to a sudden stop just outside the closet, Weiss was sure. She heard squeaking from shoes dragged against the bloody linoleum, small croaks accompanying the sound. Weiss sucked in a heavy breath, ceasing her breathing in case the child could hear her. Her chest felt tight as she reached her hand over her parted lips. The corners of her eyes stung; she didn't want to die in a damned janitor's closet. The squeaking ceased, as did the croaking.

The silence was thick, Weiss expected to feel the door push against her back in a matter of seconds. But nothing happened.

After a long moment, Weiss heard the footsteps continue until they faded into the distance. Weiss released her breath, letting her chest fall. Her head fell forward, dampened strands of her red hair shielding her face as she tried to calm her breathing.

Slowly, she stood up. Her hand teased the door handle again. She was safe in here, why go out? The face of her little sister plagued her mind, the dark closet seemed brighter in its presence. She knew this was her fault, that she should've just taken Lilith out somewhere for the day.

"I have to find Lilith." Weiss chewed her bottom lip. "I owe that to her."

In the back of Weiss's mind, she knew. There was no reason for her to assume Lilith was any different than the kids who she had seen attacking their parents or teachers. But denial took control of

Weiss's thoughts the moment she saw the boils on the child who was attacking his mother. In her mind, Lilith was just scared, cowering somewhere as her classmates attacked everyone in sight.

Her sweet baby sister, Lilith. Weiss had to find her, she can protect her. She can protect them. Weiss felt the coolness of the door handle fade away as her sweaty hand lingered on the metal. After a few minutes, she opened the door once more and slid out with caution. She kept her hands on the straps of her backpack, prepared to use her choice of weapon against a raging child if need be.

To her relief, all that remained in the hallway were bodies, no rabid child in sight.

Stepping forward, she winced anytime her shoes audibly slipped against the flooring. She made it to the corner, peering around it cautiously. A child stood at the end of the hallway, their body slouched slightly. Weiss pulled back immediately, back flush against the wall. She gripped the straps of her backpack even tighter as she focused on pulling herself together.

Gathering the last of her courage, she peered again; the child had remained dormant. She got a better look now though; it was her. It was her Lilith. With her heart leaping, she turned the corner without much of a second thought.

"Lilith!" She yelled, advancing towards her.

Lilith's body jolted. Her head snapped up, and those gentle black locks of hair flew in her face wildly.

"Lilith?" Weiss slowed, stopping merely ten feet away.

Weiss's delusions were slapped from her mind the moment she got a closer look at her little sister. Her olive skin was tainted by the red boils she saw on the child outside. The boils spread from her small hands to her neck, deep red veins spreading from her neck to her face. They wove together, seemingly in and out of Lilith's freckles. Her green irises were accompanied by a sickeningly crimson shade, indicating Lilith was long gone.

But nothing prepared Weiss for the sight of her baby sister being coated in a familiar deep red color. Her clothes smelled of metal, and her hands were painted. Weiss felt a sickening lump in her throat, the texture of the backpack straps playing in her mind. She held eye contact with Lilith, feeling her eyes begin to sting.



“Please, Lilith. It’s your sister.” Lilith showed no sign of recognition.

“It’s Weiss, Lil.” She pleaded.

“Weiss.” Lilith slurred. Weiss smiled, “Yes! It’s me, Weiss, your sister!” Her hopes soared. “You’re okay. I’m here now, and I’m sorry I left you. I shouldn’t have left you here.” Lilith stared at her, showing no sign of cognition. Weiss let her hands loosen for just a moment, an action that would nearly cost her. In a split second, Lilith dashed forward, knocking Weiss to the floor. Weiss lost her grip on the backpack, helplessly flailing her arms as it fell a few feet away. Her back slammed against the floor, a sharp pain rushing up her spine.

“Shit!” Lilith tore at Weiss’s face, as though she was trying to peel every freckle from the girl’s cheeks. “Lil, please!” Weiss screamed in pain, quickly pushing her sister off. She scrambled towards her backpack, but Lilith was quick.

Lilith grabbed Weiss’s messy hair, slamming her head against the linoleum. “Fuck!” Weiss yelled, a sharp ache filling her senses. She saw the backpack out of the corner of her eye.

With one hand against Lilith, she reached for the backpack. Her fingertips just barely brushed the strap.

She was still too far. With adrenaline nourishing her body, Weiss gave a harsh shove, sending Lilith toward the wall. She tumbled, taking a couple more seconds this time to get up. By the time Lilith aimed to make another attack, Weiss had gotten to her feet and gripped her backpack.

She swung. The backpack collided with a crack against Lilith’s head. She was sent to the floor rapidly, her head slamming with a sickening crunch.

Weiss wiped her face with her jacket sleeve. A mix of blood, sweat, and tears gathered on the navy fabric. She stared down at her sister. Only now she realized the gathering pool of blood beneath her sister’s head. She dropped her backpack.

“Oh my god.” Weiss fell to the ground, cradling her battered sister. She held her head gently, tears mixing with her sister’s blood. “What did I do?” Her hands were shaking rapidly, desperate whimpers falling from her lips. “Lilith?” She shook her sister gently,

clinging to false hope. Her baby sister, the one she vowed to protect, lay limp in her arms. Her eyes tore away from her sister suddenly, catching movement in the corner of her eye.

A horde of rabid children piled in the hallway, nearing her rapidly. She stared for a few moments, watching them grow closer and closer. Turning her eyes back to the limp body of her sister, Weiss could care less. She had lost everything. She clenched her eyes and tensed her shoulders, cradling her sister closer. "I'm sorry." Her sobs were drowned out by the frenzy of footsteps.

"I'm so fucking sorry!" she cried out as she felt the horde of children jolt her around. The squeaking of shoes faded down the hallway.

Weiss dropped her shoulders, turning her head to watch the horde turn around the corner to exit the school. They passed her as if she meant nothing. They just... passed her? Confusion flooded her body, weighing her in place. Looking at the peacefully still body of her younger sister brought her back to reality.

She stood up, continuing to cradle the small, limp body to her chest. She walked down the hallway, back out the way she came. Children were rampant, adults were screaming, and cars were honking. Smoke coated her lungs and the sky. She walked further; nothing bothered her. No rabid child attacked her.

A dull stinging feeling came from her hand. She peered over, a bitter smile stretching her cheeks. She laughed, throwing her head back as her body shook.

She walked with her sister in her arms. She took in her surroundings one last time. The usually peaceful walk home grew chaotic. Planes fell out of the sky and explosions rumbled the city's foundation. Cars with stacked suitcases strapped to their roof crashed into houses and trees. Children ran free, rampaging everyone and everything in sight.

But not Weiss.

Her whole body stung. The same virus causing the children to go rabid had likely reached her bloodstream by now. She knew had minutes. Luckily, the haunting sight of her front door shone in her eyes. Weiss's face lost all emotion, her muscles relaxed as she limply staggered towards the door. She never locked the door in the

morning, maybe because some days she wished someone would break in and kill their mother.

But of course, she had to do everything herself.

The door creaked open, the outside light brightening the dark corridor. With Lilith still in her arms, Weiss stood at the entrance to the living room. Her mother turned to her in anger, meaningless words flying from her mouth with speed. Weiss registered none of them as her pupils dilated. She placed Lilith down on a soft chair, carefully closing her small eyelids shut, a bitter smile painting her features.

When she stood up again, she felt the world slip away from her fingertips. She let the infectious thoughts of violence run rampant in her mind as she gave up her control. The last thing Weiss would remember was the flash of fear in her mother's eyes.

With no regrets, Weiss lunged.

# Frozen Over and Half Dead

Arianna Pogue

I

The air between cliff and water is colder than any winter lake.  
Angel wings frozen over, God plucking them from bleeding shoulder  
blades,  
falling like red hail.

II

The fish stuck under the frozen lake are silent.  
It's impossible to speak to you without screaming.  
You have made me more miserable than anything.

III

Tears freeze in your eyes, you can't blink.  
Your head is tilted back and salt  
is poured over your eyes.

IV

You're driving on black ice, pushing 100.

V

You're aiming for the oak tree to cushion the blow,  
to break your fall.

VI

You break your bones, every single one, and your voice  
because you're screaming too loud, you're reversing your car,  
you're aiming for the same fucking tree.

VII

You go to church to be exorcized, you say there's a demon in you  
Everyone is telling you there's nothing wrong,  
but the priest looks like your father,  
the holy water is poison.

VIII

You learn one day,  
the blood inside of you is just plain bad.  
That your scream mirrors your mother's and brother's, that  
hail hurts more than it should.

# Dear Life

Arianna Pogue

dear life,

I am blunt in the way  
your nails are blunt,  
scratching the skin of my back  
as you hold onto me like  
a roller coaster, for dear life.

Like saying I don't like you like you like me,  
So then you pour your tears out into a pot, into a hole that you dug  
but I turn to you and appreciate that it's not your body in the hole.  
It's too small anyways I would have to make you curl in on yourself like a child  
with your head between your knees, gripping your own shoulders.  
I'd crack your spine, each notch like crawfish or shrimp  
but not lobster.

You don't have their claws you don't  
have the heart to do real damage.

I fear I stole something from you,  
something you can never get back  
and something I could never let go of.

I am the hurricane,  
and the house that's falling apart,  
and the shelter you hide in.

# Black Fox

Anna Burt



# Blackberry Bush

Arianna Pogue

I'm sitting next to your skeletons and old coats in your closet,  
I don't mind, as long as I can stay in your house.  
Blackberry season is only so long until you throw your old phone  
against the wall and throw out your ripped shoes.  
I can only do so much before everything ends.  
The kitchen's honey lights make your eyes brighter,  
your sweats have stains from three days ago,  
that was my bad, sorry.

I say I love you in your mother tongue because you feel homesick,  
You turn 18 tomorrow at 5:06 am, will our love last through adulthood too?  
It's okay if we don't,  
it's okay if you leave tomorrow, if I die next week,  
this will be enough  
to raise my corpse from my casket.  
I saved it for you,  
a slice of your favorite cake, a seat at the table, a spot in line, all of me.

Blackberry season is only so long and I'm so tired.  
Will October finally end in death like Halloween night burning down  
from booze and candy wrappers,  
how many questions will I have to ask until I get a response,  
even this is a question, even my dying words will be a question; asking  
you if you ever thought of me before you slept.  
You peel clementines and eat the bitter, white veins from them. Like a  
kiss, you press each piece against my lips, you wait for me to swallow,  
then you feed me the next  
and the next and the next. You've never said I love you and I've never  
felt happier.

# Life Measured in Tablespoons

Arianna Pogue

I watch an ant mourn another ant  
then I watch my dad rub my mom's neck  
and how the sun highlights my sister's face  
I see my middle school teacher in the grocery store,  
frowning at the egg prices  
and the dead crow outside of my work.  
I see kids grab each other's hands and talk about books,  
I read these books and they're written for seven year old's,  
and they're great.  
I watch my high school sweetheart  
wash the bowl we used to make lava cake  
and he says "don't forget to wash the tablespoons".  
I watch his fingers wet with water and dish soap,  
I rub his neck, I feed him cake.  
Pigeons mate for life and they always  
find their way back home.  
I'm terrified of birds,  
I reach for a garden snake.

The garden of roses has no roses but  
I wait for the sun to get a little warmer,  
to burn on my sister's face a little more, and  
I wait for the roses to bloom.  
I get potted flowers as gifts and  
I always want to say "I don't understand plants"  
but I can never break it to them.  
The flowers die but the pot remains and is always  
beautiful. I can always go to the rose garden,  
I can always wait for them to grow.



# This House Is Not A Home

Katrina Bui

Neither is this 1-bedroom studio apartment  
Or this refurbished shed with central heating in someone's backyard  
Leased, leased, rented, subleased  
Margins expanding like bread in the oven  
Everyone on the chain gets their slice  
Except for the ones who actually breathe life into those 4 walls  
Those who need it most  
Are dealt the worst  
While those above them count their money.

Everyone needs a home  
A place where they are supposed to belong  
Where they can be themselves  
Where they can kick up their feet  
After a long day  
Trading so many hours  
So much energy  
Years of experience  
For some semblance of a such a basic human need  
And yet somehow  
It's still not enough.

This house is not a home  
It's a commodity  
On its way to becoming a luxury  
Haven't you heard?  
Only the successful ones get to live.  
Everyone else  
Is relegated to a never-ending cycle  
In the shadows.

This house is a balloon with lots of strings  
Each one tied to something different  
It rises as we continue to inflate it  
Pulling everything along with it  
If we don't weigh it down soon  
It could fly beyond our reach  
And leave us behind.

This house is not a home  
It's a vessel  
For a black hole called greed  
that bleeds us dry.

# A Wax-Sealed Fate

Arissa Ventura

- for H.

A red-eyed scratch, a bone  
that has never quite set.  
A swollen burn, left out  
in the sun. Red-raw  
cracks running down.  
Skin that will never  
touch the same

as a fallen boy,  
with the wax-sealed fate.  
Does he die from it — the fall  
or what came after, a pity  
from the waves, his only mourner.  
So tell me, you sunken boy,  
is it mercy? The warmth or  
the water?

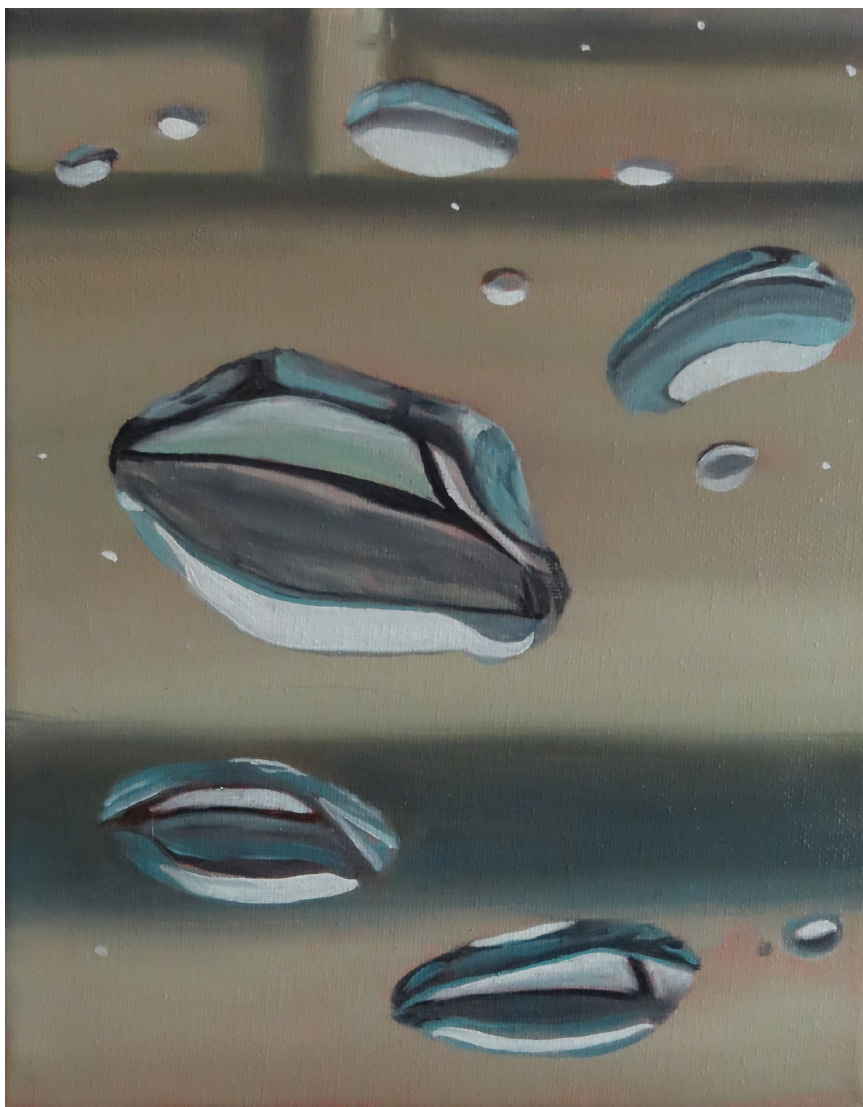
# Vanishing Point Hill

Aiden Jasper



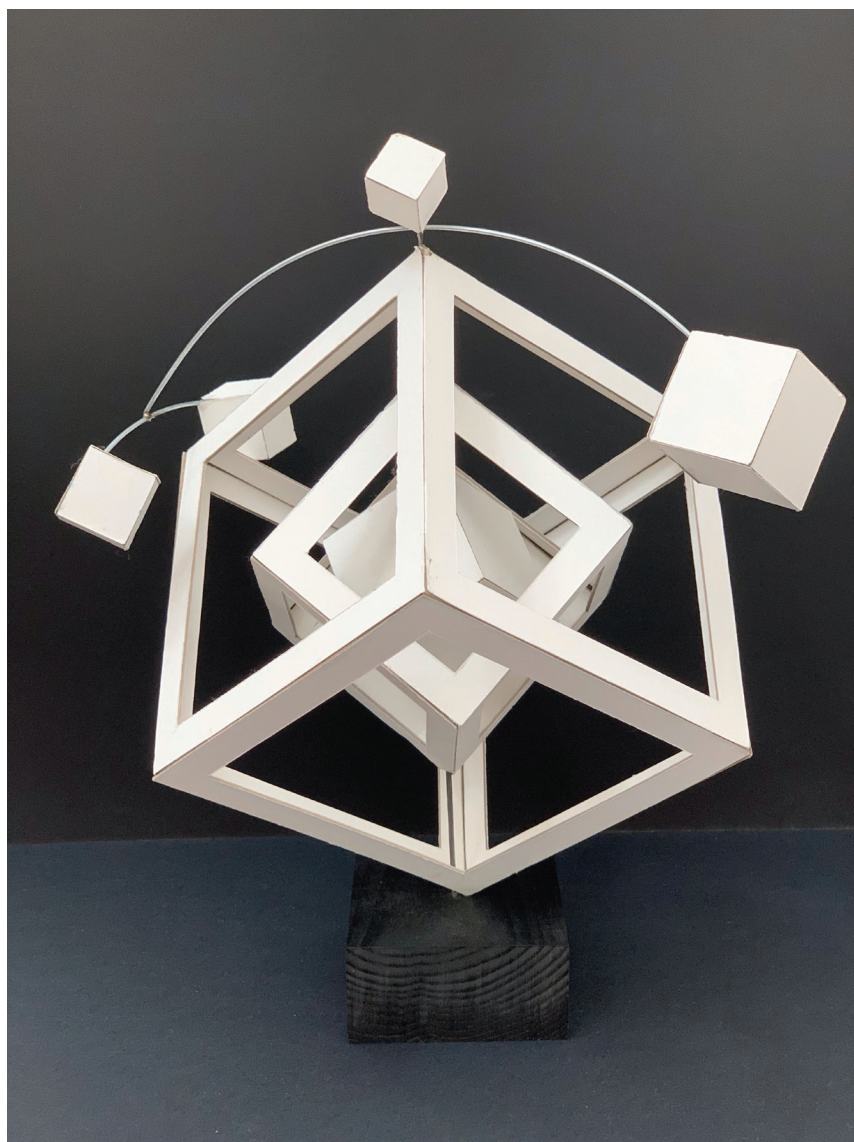
# Rainy Days

Jean Samson



# Balance Cube I

Miyako Fukuoka



# Duality

Anna Burt



# Good Morning, Body

Mia Rodriguez

I wake each morning to notes.  
Written all over the bathroom mirror  
In ink that only I can see.

Good morning tired eyes,  
That crinkle like rip tides.  
Small, yet carrying the depth of the world.  
Expressive and shameless.  
You don't care about what they say.  
"Too squinty" they critique.  
"Can you see?" they question.  
But your smile is so bright,  
Your eyes so crinkled with joy,  
That they can't get through.

Greetings, lovely belly  
That feeds me.  
Holding nutrients for living,  
And saving a spot for future life.  
Your belly button that holds your entire past,  
A key to the lifeline that brought you here.  
With care and comfort  
You toss and turn through the night  
So I can wake up feeling cherished.

Hello there, dear arms and legs.  
Strong and resilient,  
To carry me through the day  
And gift me with all that I need.  
The stretch marks that litter your thighs  
Not a sign of fattening,  
But a show of growth.  
For all that you do to get me here,  
And all that I learn to stand for.

Oh how I love you, little beauty marks.  
Littering every inch of my face.  
All 13 bold and dark marks of love,  
Impossible to ignore.  
And the countless more that follow  
Down my shoulders  
To my arms,  
Until they reach my toes.  
A constellation across my body,  
This body I call home.



# My Mother

Jillian Miller-Mitchell

I

In my mother's eyes are the rolling green hills of West Virginia  
Brick houses, smoking on screened-in porches, gossiping with the  
neighbor

Hot sticky summers

Buying ice cream from the gas station

Constant chirps from crickets in the creek

Cold, snowy winters

II

In my mother's eyes

Years of work, reading, knowledge

Always having the answer to any question

Proving herself over and over again

A young woman in California flying to New York

III

In my mother's eyes

I am standing there

Asking to take all the wisdom that she is able to give me

# Flowers in December

Ariana Lara

Flowers bloom in spring  
Admiration follows tight  
Bodies hungry for beauty  
Grabbing at all that brings light

Beauty does not cease to exist in the end  
She is not with me  
It's a world unknown, rooted by light  
A world in which the flowers grow

Up here, it hurts  
Its darker up here

Effervescent beauty in a vase  
Emanating luminous warmth  
Dangling off the side  
I do not wish to continue  
I beg to return, the glass is not for me

There is no warmth, no light here  
Being your color hurts  
Take me home,  
to the world below.  
Take me to where they continue on,  
where the flowers continue to grow.

# Sarah

Wouter de Hoogd

Dearest, sweetest Sarah.

Sarah, carrying a blight unknown to her. Think of lineage, think of family. Think of your brother, sweet Sarah. Think of Daniel as you stand in the kitchen, cranking the kitchen timer - you don't see the irony in its shape. Daniel had a girlfriend; can you remember her name? He left her and he left you. His life was taken by a man in a car. Can you remember the smell, Sarah? Alcohol wafting in the wake of the crash, as you rushed to what was left of your brother. Do you remember your screams? Were they yours or hers? Your brother left you and your brother left her with nothing but photographs and memories as a legacy. Think of lineage, Sarah. Think of family. Think of your sister. Remember her operation, the smell of sickening sterility as you sat by her hospital bed. A condition you could not pronounce but the scarring broke the family name. Think of lineage, Sarah. Batter up, Sarah. Take the pain. Take the filth in stride and wash yourself clean afterwards. Ugly, fat Sarah. Unloved. Uncared for. You stayed untouched until then. But now you must think of lineage. You must think of family. You stand in strobing lights and you buy them drinks. You buy them shots and watery beers but take none yourself. Sweet Sarah, no. You must stay pure. You must take them home. You must take them to the car. You must take them to the streets, if you must. But oh Sarah, you must take them. And in return let them take you. Unguarded, unsheathed. Wrap your legs around theirs as they sweat, and grunt and turn red, and receive them, Sarah. Think of lineage, Sarah. Think of family. Lay the test on the box; 4-5 minutes. You lay the timer next to the box. As you have done many times before; it's become a habit. You move to the counter and hold a glass under the silver faucet.

You twist and turn and twist and nothing comes.

Open a cupboard and grab the torch. Get on your knees and open the pantry underneath the sink.

*Click.*

Darkness illuminated.

It breathes, Sarah. It breathes. Like a lung it pulsates and inflates. It jitters in the pipe, flexible as if organic. A living egg sac the size of a melon under your sink, lit up by your torch. What do you do, Sarah? You gasp, of course but something itches inside your brain. A flickering feeling that overtakes your sudden urge to vomit. Curiosity, Sarah. And it's making you reach out, reach out with your torch. It's making your head and body move deeper and deeper into the pantry. Closer and closer to the swelling thing in your pipes, until you whack it with the torch. Too hard perhaps, Sarah. Too rough. But you get a response.

Something is screaming, distantly. Some sort of animal; a dog with its leg trapped in a bear trap. A hare choking, tied up in razor wire. And something familiar too, Sarah. Perhaps the last thing that Daniel heard before coughing out his terminal breath. Would he have recognized you as he lay dying, crumpled up and broken like a wretched shell of a person?

You hit your head in the pantry, scrambling to get away from the thing in your pipes, away from the screams. You're sweating and red, Sarah. Like so many men have seen you: repulsive and weak. Are you thinking of lineage, Sarah? Are you thinking of family? A cold sweat has hit you hard and you're shaking on the kitchen floor, staring at the darkness of the pantry. You can feel it move inside of there, vaguely. You can feel it move, Sarah. That means something. You gather yourself up as you do when men have finished and you have gotten what you need. But you're persistent. You get back on your knees. You take the torch in your mouth to have your hands free and, oh God, Sarah, this takes you back to places your mind does not want to go. The alleys, the clubs, the strangers' rooms; you get angry, Sarah. You get angry as your light finds the throbbing and your hands reach through the dark and grab the pipe right under it.

Somehow it's soft. Somehow it's malleable. And your grip tightens.

And you try to force the sphere up the pipe. And the screaming starts, worse than before. And you're sweating, sweet Sarah, trying to force it up that pipe. And it's moving, but ever so slowly. And the screaming becomes louder, it becomes closer as you keep it moving, as you keep forcing and forcing it up, and you're sweating, and you're red again and your puffing and groaning and it's almost gone, sweet Sarah, you've almost done it, keep going, keep going, harder and faster and yes, Sarah, yes, it's out of sight now!

The torch drops from your mouth as you fall back onto the floor, spent. The scream fills the room utterly while you collect yourself. Water. Your body aches for it. Your mind screams for it louder than the death rattle of the world around you. The sound has changed, hasn't it, Sarah. It's more human now than ever before. It's a sound you long for. The sound you've endured so much for. You get up, stumbling. Heaving as you clutch unto the sink. Water. You are not thinking of lineage now, Sarah. You are not thinking of family.

Water. You turn the faucet and close your eyes. The screams are now cries and the cries are deafening and oh, Sarah, you want it so bad. You don't hear the struggling pipe as it vomits forth the liquid. You feel it on your hands, your arms. Involuntarily you moan with delight, although you can't be sure. You couldn't have heard it if you did. And suddenly it's over. The egg timer rings loudly through the kitchen, washing away the cries completely. It hurts you, doesn't it Sarah. You feel empty now. Until you look at your hands; your hands, covered in red, and what they held. Do you laugh, Sarah? Do you cry? Can you see the features on its broken and distorted little body? Can you make out a mouth? An eye? Hair? Can you raise this? Can you treat it as your own? Think of lineage, Sarah. Think of family.

# Pain

Lennon Lilienthal-Wynn

Not ten minutes in and I'm already sweating  
I stain the steel with my blood  
I butcher, I boil, I fry  
Nearly deaf from the sounds as they hit the heat.

Now the fridge is hard to close, it's stuffed, cabinets stocked to the brim  
Options overwhelm me  
Not to mention the deadly fireball in the sky,  
With its evil golden light hitting the pan just right from the open window.

The taste, it's unexcusably edible, with colors and flavors some  
French rat would love.  
Just don't get me started on the nauseatingly beautiful smile it puts on your face.  
For you, those I care for, I cook.  
I pick rice out of my hair  
I wipe oil off every surface  
I stand in the heat and I burn  
I do it for you, and I'll do it again.

# Time Before We Fly

Nikita Bankar

When butterflies fly how do they stay strong?  
Their wings so bright, their colors masking fear.  
They slowly flap, the journey seeming long.  
Their bodies tired, drowsiness is near.

It may seem difficult to take their path,  
They face the strength of rain and winds from sea.  
No calculations taken, without math.  
Their dedication like a melody.

But why do butterflies have such great strength?  
What gives them power to survive such hell?  
Their time as worms as short and small in length,  
When bodies curl while forming a thin shell.

Cocoons for them are just like us, you know.  
We need some time to rest before we grow.

# Chestnuts Are Sold in Half-Pounds

Arissa Ventura

Smaller than my palm,  
like a shrunken  
heart. Child-like in  
its waiting for growth  
and hunger. I hold  
one  
in each hand.  
Against the chill,  
they keep me  
warm. This is their  
only job,  
and they do it well.  
Their full bodies  
are easily ruined,  
no matter how hard I try  
broken halves  
crumble  
to  
the floor.  
Ma says — that's  
the problem.  
You can't  
try too hard.  
You can't  
bite too much.  
You just have  
to lean  
into  
their soft-thick layers,  
as if you still have  
your milk teeth,  
as if you can put  
anything in your mouth

and not hurt it.  
But still I could never  
do it, but that isn't  
their fault.  
It is my bad. Purely  
mine. So, I sit  
in the passenger seat  
and I hand Ma  
one  
and hold onto the other.  
She cracks;  
I peel.  
We are taking turns on  
finding wholeness.  
The funny thing  
about chestnuts is  
you can never  
be full on only  
one  
and just how we both  
began, I am warm.



## Dear Me,

Cohl Maguire

Dear Me,

It is 11/2/2022, I have cleaned and vacuumed my room, and yet the dirt still lingers. The dust in the air makes me cough, but the air is clean. I stumble on obstacles in the dark I have long since moved. I open the door, slamming it into my own foot, and it pushes me back. Back further into the recess of my mental dwelling. I leave my room, but I haven't really left. I stand in the shoes by the door. If only I could open up the curtains and let in the light. The door remains closed, trapping me inside. There are so many doors in life, but only one door to my room. The door is my Berlin Wall, and it is my shield against terror. The door must open... I need to open the door.

Dear Me,

## Fight Time

Wouter de Hoogd

I did this thing  
I hit his chin  
It skims his skin  
It digs right in  
I grip his hip  
I rip his lip  
His rib is king  
It tips right in  
I fight, I sin  
I hiss, I win

# This Is Bliss

Wade Frandsen

Sun is down,  
Power is out,  
Pouring rain harasses the ground.  
On this frightful night,  
Not a soul in sight,  
Within this lively town.  
I pass three vultures in a tree admiring their own red sea,  
Blood and bones sit upon the stones,  
Of what used to be a coyote.  
There are no leaves on the trees,  
Simply skeletons of what can be.  
I take a rest near the battle scarred tuxedo cat,  
On the wooden bench,  
Even with the stench of piss,  
I've come to terms that this,  
This is bliss.

# Little Bye

Wouter de Hoogd

Goodnight, little bye  
The moon is half descending  
I run a lie by your ears, pretending  
My hand on your thigh  
Imagine all life is ending  
  
Sweet deception, away  
Light wanes, this process  
Can't happen again  
On cotton beds or hallowed grounds  
In locked rooms or without bounds

# A Lull in Conversation

Katrina Bui

Oh my, a moment of silence... could this mean  
we're totally incompatible? Are you feeling awkward? Or am I  
Being too boring, guarded? Are you bored of me?  
Should I let it linger  
Just a little while longer while I bounce my leg, or  
Keep talking, inevitably oversharing or  
Reaching a dead end in my rambling  
Then I'll repeat the last thing you said a couple of times  
Until I can think of something new  
What was that you wanted to say earlier?  
Maybe I can bring up something mundane and complain about it  
But what if you can't relate? Are we  
all talked out? I guess we can exist in the quiet, too  
Sorry, but it kind of scares me, the possibility  
Of us, and what we have  
getting lost  
In the silence of this moment.

# My Best Friend

Mateo Ramirez

Your voice still resonates in my head,  
able to fill the deep silence.  
The voice I know well but can't describe,  
for I wish there was a better word than beautiful for you.  
When my eyes fall upon you,  
The time around stops.  
Just like that, it's been five years.  
After all this time I have come to know,  
how much I appreciate and care for you.  
So to my best friend,  
the words I am too scared to say.  
I love you so.

# Remember: Forget

Anonymous

Forget what was said. Remember the dust. Picture the window on a black painted door. Feel the chair: plastic, copied. Look at the room: cornered, distant. This is where you feel home. Remember her face, fading, warped by the memory-eater and made not quite whole. Forget what was said. Remember what should have been said, what you'd like to have said, what you think she had said, what you know had been said. Step on the floor, polyvinyl tile, stretched rubber cold like ice. Listen to the paint, almost peeling, ruffling curtains in an afternoon breeze. Make this more than it was. Hold on longer than reason suggests. Idolize, fantasize, realize, imagine.

# Faded Dress

Van Truong

She wore a faded dress  
Dirty and soiled  
Strong and fertile  
We wore a torn faded dress  
Dirty and soiled  
Strong and fertile  
Woman is there  
He can be in two places  
She wore a faded red  
In my eyes  
In my face  
We would've...  
We would've...

# Bloody Steel

Michael Reynolds

July 5th, 1943.

Bridgett told me to start a diary. I guess I'll keep this up for a while. It is boring navigating miles of barren landscape without anything to do. I'm colonel Adam Fisher of the United States Army, part of the 42nd tank division. To anyone that isn't in the army, that means I pilot a giant behemoth of a tank with my crew. I guess I'll talk about them? Bridgett, the bubbly and annoying radio operator, Miles the aloof driver who swears he sees things that are not there, myself as the gunner and commander, and Eric, the loader, and the only one who seems to be sane. We work great together, our shell output is through the roof compared to other squadrons. He loads, I shoot, and we make giant explosions.

Despite how much I ragged on my crew, we're family. We've been through thick and thin. Maybe in one of the more peaceful times, I will write an entry about our successes. But I think we're about to enter an offensive on one of the towns here. Will update at my next possible convenience.

July 7th, 1943.

Eric mentioned craving Texas toast, and honestly, this army slop has never look so unappetizing. I wish I could just eat normal food, like a normal person. Instead I'm in a tank driving through northern Africa because my highers ups say I need to. Can we just get a move on so I can get back home? Besides, America always says the Germans have nothing for land units. Why can't we just take them head on?

July 12th, 1943

Miles is hallucinating again. I swear it's like that oasis thing from movies. He swears he sees little gray things in the sand. Pfft, like, what? The sand is yellow. Also sidenote, what are the higher ups doing? We move like 50 miles a day. Which might sound a lot, but

really it means we move at like 10 miles per hour a day, and spend half of the day stopped. We have the entire top of Africa to go through. I have to live with these lovable idiots 24/7 in a hot tank that makes me feel like I'm melting. I just wanna go home. I'm going to write the date in for tomorrow, I guess. If we're doing nothing all day, may as well.

July 13th, 1943

I can't believe this, I wont believe this, Im too young for this, please help, please help, please help, pleas /

July 29th, 1943.

Colonel Juan Sanchez, reporting. I am writing in this journal to prove the recovery of the M4A3E1 Sherman on the African front. It appears this journal belonged to colonel Adam Fisher of the 42nd division. Every soldier was found dead inside upon arrival, barely more than a pile of guts. Given the damage to the tank and the soldiers, it appears they stepped on an anti-tank mine. No gun or weapon could do this kind of destruction.

May God rest these poor children's souls.

# Balance Cube II

Miyako Fukuoka



# Who's There

Jean Samson





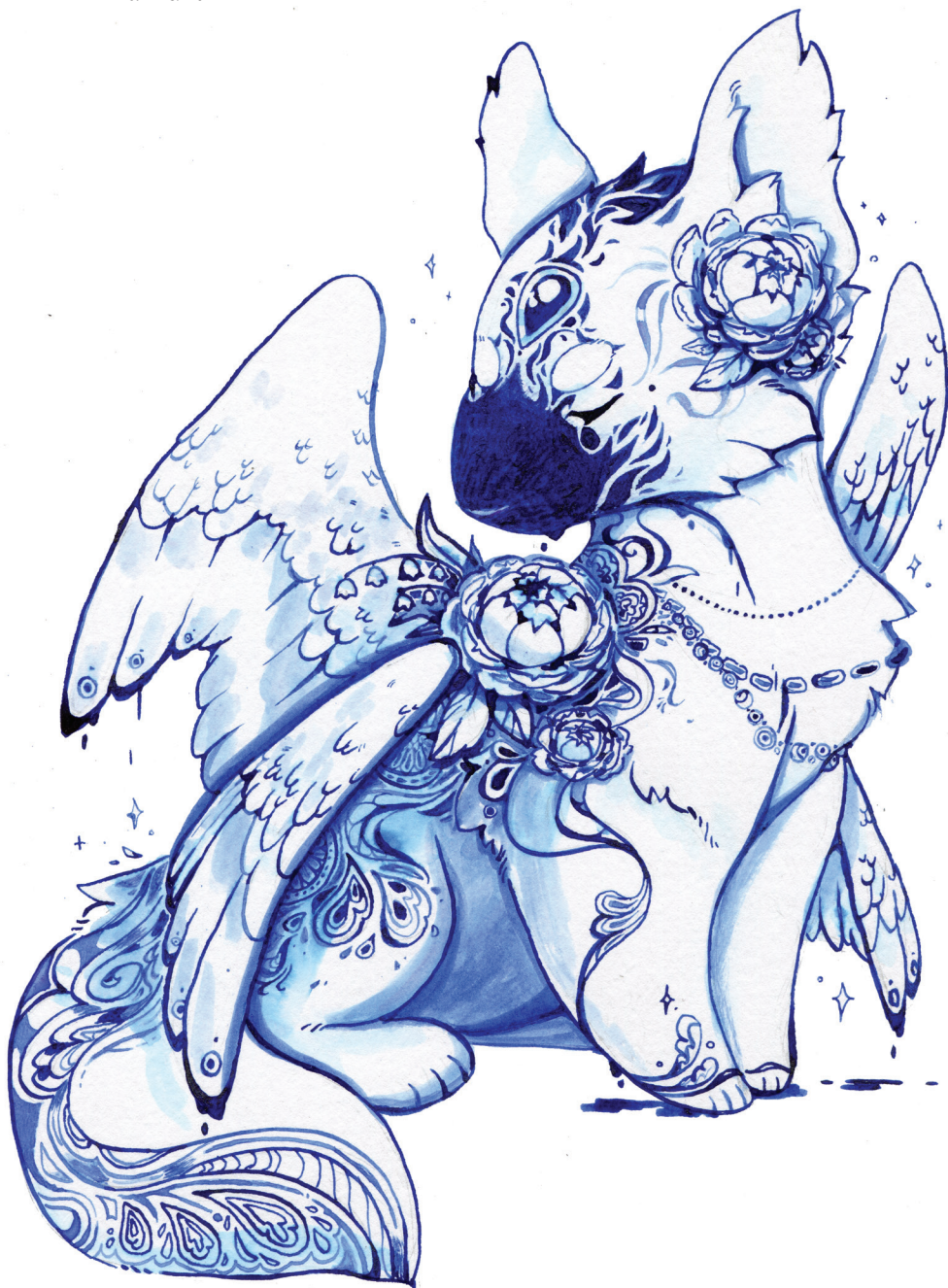
# Flush

Jean Samson



# Blue Fox

Anna Burt



# Frostfire

Mira Than

She was so used to the coldness of solitude that, despite the temporary warmth she had been in, she quickly acclimated back into the cool. Even when she thought she had it all, she always remembered what it felt like to have nothing. So when he came into her life, as bright as the sun, and scorched her world with his solar flares, she was ready for when the sun set and the moon would once again reign over her life. No matter how good the sun felt in comparison, or how his fire warmed her shivering body, how it seemed to cure the permanent coldness she had. The way he would suddenly set the world ablaze and take her with him for the ride. Even though the droplets managed to slide down her face, they would soon be another piece of ice. She couldn't deny he had charred her heart well through, but it was no less damaged than any other part of her, and could be iced over just like the others. She looked to where his rays shone now, and the people that could bask in his warmth, whose lives he would change forever, before he once again vanished in the night. Poor things. Summer is only a season, but the frost is permanent.

harsh blizzard scorches  
the old fox sleeps, a north wind  
nips a naive bud

# Wolf And Butcher

Eira Astrid

The Butcher, or Butch - and for those who did not need to know of The Butcher, Marcelo Castillo - felt exhaustion pouring over him. He was always tired nowadays, torn between two jobs, neither of which he was willing, or, in one case, physically able to give up.

The Heart of Mercy Mortuary was a small funeral home he ran, with his own home in an attached upstairs apartment. It had been a long day, embalming the dead, making sure that they would be fit for their families to see them, and then being a surrogate therapist, working with the deceased loved ones, guiding them through the grieving process. Given how small of an operation it was, given that it didn't give him much profit, he was always working himself to the bone for it, and today had been particularly taxing.

(Marcelo Castillo worked on the ground floor. A kind, patient mortician, gentle with the dead and the living alike.)

(The Butcher worked in the basement. It was best to not know what he did down there, what he had to do to soothe the Itch that made him a danger. What he had to do for a debt he could not repay.)

He stopped. He forgot to lock the back door leading to the narrow alleyway and forgot to turn out the oil lantern there. Four above, he just wanted to sleep, but there were simple security things that Butch needed to do to keep the mortuary, himself, and whoever would be foolish enough to enter, safe.

It was raining when Butch stepped out, near black with night. He stayed near the door where the roof still kept him dry. He could barely see the dumpster, the brick walls crumbling with age.

He reached up for the oil lamp, and then frowned, eyes scanning the alley again. Call it paranoia, but he could swear that someone was there.

Yellow met his eyes and Butch took a sharp breath. Tucked next to a dumpster and behind crates, he could just barely make out the shape of a large creature, sharp yellow eyes. It had pitch black

fur, giving it camouflage, but that -

That was a wolf. A large one. Most of the creatures were dead in Iram, cast out as the cruel urban landscape had expanded.

But more peculiar was what was tucked into the beast's own side. It was wearing a black cloak, but he could see pale skin peeking out, making a small clawed hand. A face with young features. Boy or girl, he couldn't tell, but there was a child sleeping at the wolf's side, using it as a bed. Butch squinted, and thought he saw the child shiver.

In his attempt to look closer, he shifted forward, almost miniscule, and the wolf's ears went back. The human's eyes snapped open and towards Butch with a speed that seemed unnatural.

*Oh. Well then.*

Both the child and the wolf had the same yellow eyes.

The beast began to growl, so Butch put his hands up, abandoning his previous goal of turning off the oil lantern.

With a low, quiet tone meant to soothe, Butch said, "Sorry. It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just turning off the lamp." He gestured up towards the light.

The duo stared back, but didn't make any aggressive moves.

"Are..are you okay?" he asked, because even as unusual as this sight was, there was still a child in the cold rain.

He could have sworn that both the child's and the wolf's heads tilted at the exact same time.

Butch turned out the oil lamp, slowly, and locked the door as he came back inside.

He left a small satchel of food out the next day at the step of the back door with meat and bread, even though the pair were gone. Just in case.

He had thought that perhaps, he had just had a particularly vivid dream, but in the day, he could see footprints in the mud, belonging to some kind of large dog and a younger person. The food was gone when he went out to lock the back door that night.

----

Butch did not see the odd pair again for a week, though he

continued to leave out food and it continued to disappear.

He was carrying out old boxes from a supply shipment to restock the mortuary's materials when he felt that weight on him again. He looked and the pair were there again, sitting in the same spot. In the warmer weather, the child was no longer tucked into the beast's side, instead sitting against it leisurely.

All three of them tensed up looking at each other, the air growing thick between them.

The beast was indeed some kind of black wolf, he had been right about that. The child was pale, almost completely covered in a black fur cloak that matched long, tangled messy black hair. Their eyes had a wolf-ish shape, unnaturally so. What Butch could see of them peeking out from the cloak was concerning. The child was underweight, small. They looked twelve, but could have easily been multiple years older. They had dirt and blood coated on them.

Some of that blood was very fresh, splattered on the wolf's maw, onto the child's face and hands. Butch knew from experience.

There was a lot of blood, and Butch knew that there weren't any big game to hunt here. Was that blood from an animal or from a human?

Butch slowly set the boxes down. "Hello. I'm Butch," he said, keeping the same tone he had used before. Butch seemed like the name to use. Wherever this child was from, they were a part of the underbelly of the city.

The child glared at him and bared sharp teeth, mimicking a growl. There was blood in their teeth - were those bits of gristle?

Butch crouched and didn't try to go closer. "I've been leaving out food for you. Have you been taking it?"

Because with his closer examination, some instinct of his had told him to take care of the odd creatures, and they clearly had not been eating enough.

(Did this child have the Itch too? Some innate need to kill? He would ask if there have been any animal attacks going around recently after this. He was aware that this area had...people keeping an eye on it, and if this pair was killing here, it might not be safe for them to do that.)

The child's gaze darted to the step where Butch had been

leaving the bundles, and that gave him answer enough. He smiled at them warmly. "The food's for you," he said. "Do you like it?"

There was no response and he didn't want to push it, so he got up, broke down the boxes and left them out. He made sure that they could see his hands the whole time, keenly aware that he was being watched. Forced himself to not look back, to be predictable in his movements.

He heard the noise of thumping metal and looked back. The pair climbed out the alley, jumping on the dumpster and then up the wall before they disappeared from view.

When a family came in for a funeral request, with a corpse of a man who had been mauled by an unknown wild animal, half-eaten, he thought back to the child and wolf that watched him with big yellow eyes.

----

It continued like this for three weeks. He left out food and he would sometimes see them.

They had stopped growling at him, though they still kept a close eye on him and didn't like it when he got too close. Sometimes they showed up bloody. Sometimes they didn't. The child never responded to him, but he kept talking to them anyway. It was like getting the trust of a wild animal. It required patience and Butch had that in spades.

The most curious thing was watching the wolf and the child interact. Sometimes the child would suddenly turn towards the wolf and smack him lightly with an annoyed expression, like reprimanding a sibling that was being a little too underfoot.

On one occasion, when Butch had been talking to the child, telling them about his mortuary business and what he was doing out back, he had accidentally taken one step too close. The child had made an inhuman snarl and then the beast had nipped them gently, causing them to smack it back before settling back down with a huff.

Not to mention that whenever Butch saw them leave, it was always in complete coordination. They'd get up at the same time. Or if the child got up first, they would start moving and the beast

would follow. The child never spoke a command to heel or to come, never made a gesture or a noise that would indicate some kind of training.

Butch pondered this as he poured a hearty stew into a wooden bowl. It would likely be cold by the time the child got it, but it had to be better than what they would be eating otherwise, and he wanted to get more calories into them. He wrapped it up with a spoon and some bread. Last minute, he got out some raw meat for the wolf and wrapped it in much the same way.

He stepped out the back to set them out and was surprised to see that the kid was already there, in tow with the familiar black shadow.

Butch held them up. “You’re just in time, it’s still warm. Here.” He held them out, hoping that they would come and take it from his hands.

He was being patient – but it was dangerous here, and Butch didn’t like that they seemed to be homeless. He had space in his home. By the trail of bodies they left behind, they were dangerous too, but that didn’t bother Butch. If they were to kill him, that would be a better way to go than most.

(There were very few places for a child so violent where they could be safe. Where they wouldn’t be endangering those they lived with. He thought about the family he had to leave behind for their own sakes, before pushing his thoughts away. He was dangerous himself. He could help this child, help this child in a way that could possibly atone for the damage he did to his own family.)

The child froze, eyes narrowing, but the wolf seemed much more relaxed, ears up and tail wagging. It nudged the child with its muzzle and the child glared down at it. It nudged more incessantly, and the child scowled.

The child crept forward - had their face filled out more with weight? He hoped so. Once at arm’s reach, they snatched the food out of his hands and bolted away, climbing out the alley again – slightly slower with how they needed to be careful of the food, before the wolf followed.

That night, the bowl and spoon were left on the back porch.



----

It was raining again.

“Would you two like to come in?” Butch asked the child as they sat in the rain. At least this time, they were under the part of the roof that jutted out. Closer to Butch, he noticed. That warmed something in him. “We have space for you.”

The child looked at the wolf, then at him, and shook their head.

“It’s an open offer,” he said, a little disappointed but smiling because the child had communicated with him back, as brief as it was.

----

Butch was worried.

The food he had left out was untouched.

It had been a month and a week since Butch had started to feed the child, and they had never missed out on food. They had even started eating in front of Butch. Butch sometimes brought his own food out, still sitting several feet away from them, and they all ate in silence.

Had something happened to them?

Had someone caught up to who was behind the animal attacks and shot them dead? He found himself looking outside, like maybe they were just hiding, and his heart sank as he found nothing. Heart heavy, he went back inside, hoping that they had just gotten caught up in something.

Butch was about to head upstairs when he heard a scratching at the door, followed by a whine. The scratching grew more incessant, the whine louder, and Butch hurried over to open the door and look outside.

It was the wolf.

The child was nowhere to be seen.

“What is it?” he asked, like the dog could understand him. The wolf ran to a corner of the alleyway, behind crates.

Butch stiffened. There was a small trail of blood. He pushed one of the crates to be able to see what was in the corner, what the wolf was clearly trying to direct him to.

It was the child, sweating and pale, putting pressure on their leg as they tried to staunch the bleeding from some kind of surface wound. It looked like...

It looked like they had gotten nicked with a bullet, and had a piece of their leg's surface taken out. The child looked up, tense, but seemed to resign themselves to Butch's attention.

"You're hurt!" Butch crouched down, heart hammering. He needed to see the wound, clean it to prevent infection, but that required him to touch the child, when physical contact had been off limits. He needed to bring them inside. Also off limits. "Hi, angel," he said, soft. "I can help you, but I need to take you into the mortuary, okay?" Behind him, he could hear the wolf pace, making small whines.

The kid shook their head, adamant.

"Your friend can come too. I just need to get it cleaned up and stitched, okay? It needs to be washed."

The kid paused, face scrunched up in pain, eyes hazy as they seemed to focus on something. They nodded slowly.

"Do you need me to carry you in?"

They shook their head.

Butch stepped away and ran into the mortuary, leaving the back door open and getting out his emergency aid kit.

The wolf came inside, the child sitting on its back, still holding the leg. There was blood dripping onto the floor.

Butch pulled out a chair on one of the tables, grateful that the mortuary was closed. "Here, sit here."

The child limped over to sit down. They seemed paler than usual.

Butch kneeled in front of them. "Do you want painkillers?" he asked. "This needs stitches, it's going to hurt."

A long pause, and then the kid shook their head.

Butch nodded and then focused on their wounded calf. The skin there was scarred. Were those..bite marks? Deep ones, from something larger than the wolf. Things to think about later.

The wolf took up a sentinel position next to the child, letting them grip his fur in a way that must have been painful. Butch was careful when he first touched their leg, looking up to make sure

that they were okay, but the child just seemed to steel themself.

Butch focused himself and got to the work of cleaning the wound and stitching it closed as quickly and efficiently as he could, holding the leg still whenever the child jolted with the pain. He pretended he did not hear them breathe harshly, making agonized noises through gritted teeth. The wolf had put his head on the child's lap, trying to soothe them.

When it was over, Butch was very grateful for it.

"Okay. You're gonna be fine, but you're going to need to stay off the foot, okay?" The child, now looking white as a ghost, nodded. "And you can't get it dirty." Another nod. "Who did this to you?"

(The Butcher wasn't a revenge killer. Anger wasn't often attached to his work, only the kind of joy that indulging in the Itch gave him. But some twisted, protective instinct had taken a hold of him. The kid and wolf had come to him for help. For protection, for care.)

The kid opened their mouth, then closed it and shrugged.

Butch's demeanor softened. "I'll get you something to eat, and then you can stay here tonight."

The kid perked up at the promise of food, but then frowned and shook their head no again.

"You need to be somewhere safe right now. If you want, I'll get you some blankets and you can sleep near the door."

The wolf and the child made eye contact with each other for multiple moments, and then the child slumped in the chair with a nod.

Thank the Four. If he had to argue about why sleeping outside in the dirt with a bloody wound was a bad idea, he was going to be unhappy.

Butch fed them, and then got them blankets when the pair had made camp right next to the door near the exit. As he set them near the pair, he asked, "Do you have names I can call you?"

The kid was looking at him with a small frown, like it was unexpected. They opened their mouth several times, licked their lips like they were thinking. "Lyca," they said, voice raspy.

Young, but not as young as Butch had first thought. Their

voice sounded like a young teenager, not a preteen like he had assumed.

Lyca pointed at the wolf. “Mongrel.” Mongrel’s tail wagged.

“Well,” Butch said, hiding his delight under a calm mask. “It’s nice to meet you, Lyca and Mongrel.”

----

When Lyca was healing, they stayed outside the mortuary with Mongrel full time. They insisted on staying outside after that first night.

It was like a dam had broken. Lyca was still a creature of few words, but spoke, albeit in sentence fragments. Mongrel’s tail would start wagging at the sight of Butch, even though it made Lyca glare at Mongrel.

Butch was just glad that they weren’t trying to run off.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” he asked. “I won’t be mad.” Lyca shrugged, scratching Mongrel’s head. “Hunt went bad.”

So they did hunt people, just like Butch had thought. Did Lyca eat the corpses too, or was that only something Mongrel did?

“Did they see you?”

Lyca shrugged. “They’re dead.”

So it didn’t matter that they had been seen. That was a relief.

----

Butch lit a cigarette, inhaling and breathing out slowly, leaning his head back on the brick wall.

Lyca made a disgusted noise. “Reeks,” they said, with such contempt that Butch tossed out his cigarettes that night.

----

Butch stepped out, shutting the door behind him, and was nearly tackled by a wave of fur.

“Oi!” Lyca shouted at Mongrel as Mongrel attempted to lick Butch’s face. Butch sputtered. “Down please!”

To his surprise, Mongrel did, wagging his tail and sitting down in front of him. “Uh...hi?” Butch offered as the beast began

to sniff at his hands.

Lyca scowled and made an annoyed noise from their spot on a crate, folding their arms childishly. “He wants pets.”

Butch blinked owlishly before putting a timid hand on top of Mongrel’s head, slowly petting him, before getting more confident in his motions. Butch smiled.

When he looked up, Lyca had stopped scowling.

----

“You two seem very close,” Butch commented. “It’s like you know what the other is thinking.”

Lyca looked up. “Oh. We do.”

“You know what the other’s thinking?”

Lyca nodded, completely serious. They tapped their head, then Mongrel’s. “Linked.”

Butch had heard of the phenomena. A beast and a human, linked together mentally. There had been experimentation done about it, to see if better soldiers could be created. But it was costly and unstable. Older people had a harder time establishing the link, and younger people had the tendency to go...feral. Was that what had happened to Lyca?

“Must be nice,” he said instead. “You never get lonely.” Lyca nodded, but their face tightened.

To have violent instincts so young...it would explain why they seemed to have no family, nowhere to go.

Had anyone helped them? Or had they seen the blood splatters on their face and slammed the door in their face?

(The Butcher, who was covered in more blood than they were, would offer them a home. A sanctuary, built on a foundation of gore and bones, and would shelter them if they only gave him the chance. Who was best fit to care for a monster than another monster?)

Butch reached out slowly, enough so that Lyca could move away if they wanted, and pat their head once, twice.

Lyca looked at him with surprise, and Butch smiled at them, and he wondered if the look flashing behind their yellow eyes was something like nostalgia or grief.

----

It was raining again, and Lyca and Mongrel were sitting by the door. Butch, even in his coat, found the wind and cold biting. “Pups,” he said, a new nickname. “Would you like to come inside?”

Lyca hesitated, and he now recognized that their pause was them communicating with Mongrel somewhere in the back of their mind. Lyca chewed at their cheek, then stood up with Mongrel following suit. “Okay,” they said, a little too casual for something that was outside of their comfort zone.

Butch smiled and opened the door for them to come inside where it was warm and comfortable.

That night, Butch looked at the duo, sleeping on the floor, Lyca a sprawl of limbs, all while the rain hammered outside, and smiled.

# Ode to the Printer

Katrina Bui

Performer of many skills  
Churning out artwork of  
Accuracy and precision  
Just as we command it  
A master of rainbows,  
Interpreting a world of hues even in black and white  
Passing on words and ideas  
To anyone who can pay it mind  
It is a purveyor of free will  
But sometimes, the freedom gets to its computer machine head  
Treat it well or it will forsake your existence  
Under pressure it does not become a diamond  
Instead it initiates a strike on its own  
No matter how much you hit it  
Kick it  
Reposition it  
Turn it on and off again  
It perseveres  
Enigmatically  
The printer is an empath  
It can sense your stress and fear  
As you painfully await your documents  
It's like looking into a mirror  
Sometimes it just doesn't listen  
Mixing up the colors,  
Adding ad-libs as it sees fit  
It creates a whole new work of art  
Regardless of whether you want it.  
It only consumes the finest of foods  
Ink and lasers more expensive than life itself\*  
Tailored to its picky particular tastes.  
Call it high maintenance,  
But you can't live without it.

It's just a machine  
But it's possibly the closest that technology has gotten to humanity  
Even more than anthropomorphic androids  
Or artificial intelligence or neural networks.  
So the next time my printer runs out of steam  
Jams a paper  
Gets the colors wrong  
Even if it spontaneously bursts into flames  
Just as I'm printing hours and hours of work  
And I'm already late for class  
I won't scream  
Or cry out of frustration,  
Cursing it and all of its printing predecessors,  
I'll just slump down next to it and say,  
"I feel ya, buddy."

## Frozen Heart

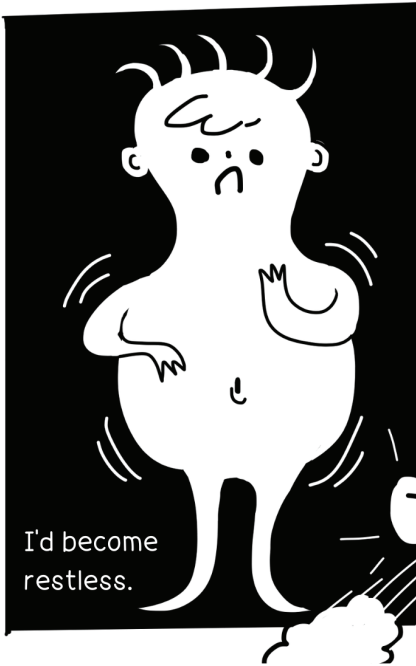
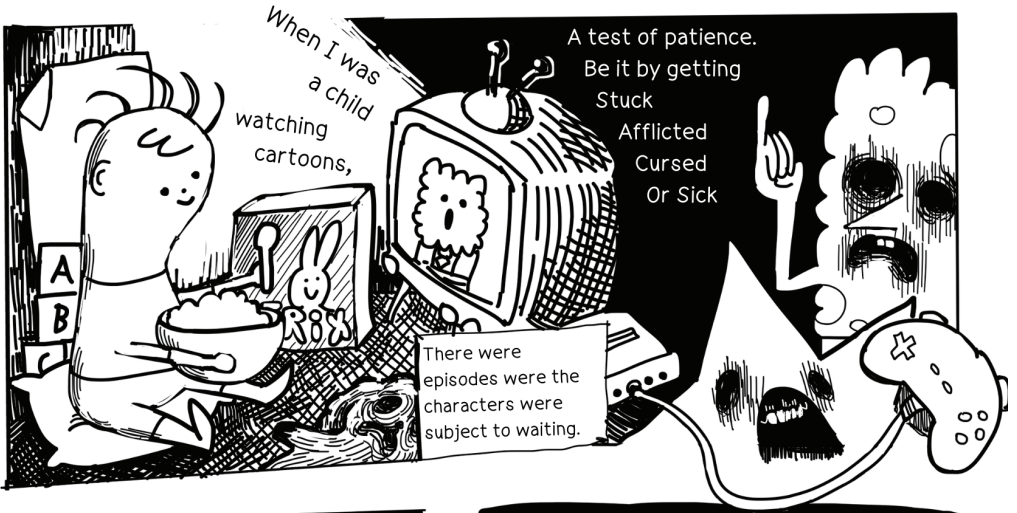
Louis Jacob Santos

An eternal winter rages within  
Endless blizzards conceal my lonely soul  
Vulnerability dug a deep hole  
Now I have froze my heart, none can get in  
But a warm angel found where my walls thin  
I notice their eyes, her gaze takes its toll,  
Do I let her melt my walls, make me whole?  
Let summer in, a long awaited win?  
But I remember my flames of the past  
I let my guard down, for I was not smart,  
They stole my fire, altered my broadcast  
Left me in ruin, my life torn apart  
I permit the winter tempests to blast  
Allow no one to thaw my frozen heart.

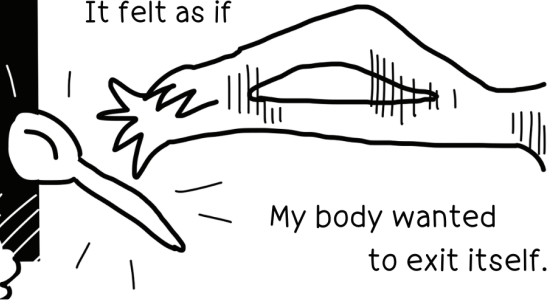


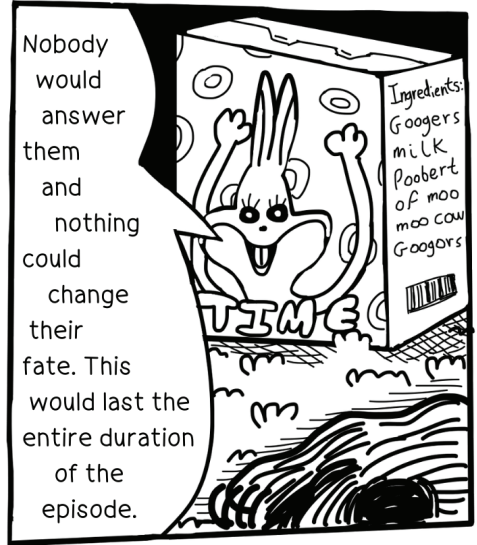
# Comics

Tobias Hernandez



It felt as if





Time feels different for a child. So these types of episodes felt as if they lasted a lifetime. By the time they'd end...

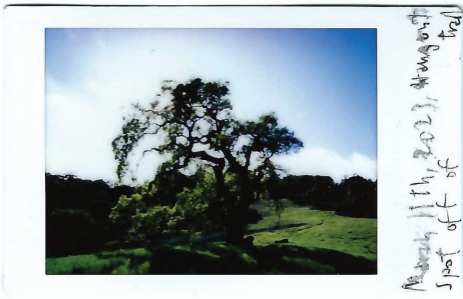




I would feel relieved.

# Polaroids

Aiden Jasper



# It's Starting to Hit Me

Mia Rodriguez

I've never given much thought to the process of growing up. As children, we look forward to that feeling of being an adult. I used to envy my siblings, watching them go to parties and stay out with friends to see R-rated movies. The mundane activities that we want to experience as kids, all taken for granted once we reach them. Somewhere in between wishing I could be a teenager one day, and drowning in college assignments, I grew up. Years left of waiting to be an adult turned into months, and suddenly I was 18, discovering my love for education and literature. The same 18-year-old that finished a book in one sitting and immediately dove into the next book afterwards. The 18-year-old that stayed up late at night, simply to see the moon cast shadows on her bedroom wall, painting pictures of a film noir. The 18-year-old who realized, too late, that life is full of little things. Miniscule, fleeting, beautiful little things.

Then I reached 19, and it was like I came alive. As if I ceased to exist before those last two years. This 19-year-old woman with a dream job, a passion and drive to have her book published one day. The 19-year-old woman who drove down to Santa Cruz with friends or family at least once a week, knowing one day she was determined to call that town her home. The 19-year-old woman who stopped in her tracks when an idea popped into her head, something she could write about later in the night. The countless notes and prompts jotted down on receipts and the backs of flyers. All reminders of those little fine lines in life. I lived my entire life waiting and longing for the future, never did I think I'd reach the moment where I realized I've arrived at it.

But here I am, and it comes to me all at once: In a quiet, quaint restaurant in Santa Cruz, surrounded by people I will never see again. An array of plants and soft lights that scatter the dining room. It feels unreal, not just because of how beautiful it is, but because of why we're here. I just got accepted into my dream school, in the town I've longed to live in for years; with a plan in my back

pocket to pursue my dream career. Up until this moment, I realize I've doubted myself. But right here... this, this is the moment I realize it's all happening. And as I stare at my parents who have helped me get here through it all, I share a knowing look with my father. He hears me say it before I even realize the words have left my lips:

"It's starting to hit me."

I say nothing else, and he smiles, then bursts into tears. In the moment I didn't know exactly what I meant when I said this. Whether "it" was the feeling of growing up, or the feeling of knowing I have so much left to grow. Maybe "it" was the feeling of approaching my dream, or the thought of not knowing where the hell it all goes next. Or perhaps, "it" was the insatiable eagerness to find out. Most likely, "it" was a mixture of all of these things. But as I watch my father cry with a look of pride on his face for how far I've come, I know it surpasses every possible dream I've ever had in my childhood. All the longing and wishing and daydreaming, and how proud that little girl would be of me now. For how wholeheartedly she would want to be like me, and how deeply she would wish she could start it all now.

I have no clue where it goes from here, or how long it'll take, but as I watch my dad cry for me with an emotion so unprecedented, I now realize exactly what "it" is:

I've already made it.

# Sestina on the 30th Floor

Wouter de Hoogd

As I often do, I linger on my balcony  
I shift my hands on the railing and I imagine the fall  
From up here on the 30th floor  
And the howling, passing wind  
As speed diminishes height  
And I brace for an inevitable crash

I imagine the sound of the crash  
And whether I'd be seen on the balcony  
Or seen falling from a great height  
I wouldn't want to affect anyone with this fall  
Save maybe the currents of the wind  
And the concrete of the floor

I step back inside, onto a hardwood floor  
The only thing close to a crash  
Is the closing of the glass door to stop the wind  
It seems distant and calm now, the balcony  
But I'm kept sheltered from the cold breeze of Fall  
And I'm able to ignore the looming height

Intrusive thoughts have reached a new height  
A beckoning omen takes the floor  
All my apprehensions, into place they fall  
Collision of contrasting emotions with the force of a car crash  
Like the one I once observed from my balcony  
I wave the thoughts away away when I catch wind

I yawn, hotness escapes my mouth like a wind  
When I walk to bed, carrying my height  
Mind fixated on the angles of my balcony  
My feet scrape the floor  
My toe hits the coffee table with a loud crash

Clumsily I trip, clumsily I fall

I'm confronted with an unexpected but survivable fall  
On my way down, I feel the restrained rush of wind  
As I prepare for an unimpressive crash  
From an unimpressive height  
On my unimpressive floor  
I should spend less time on my balcony

The impact of a fall  
Isn't only decided by height

The impact of wind  
Is not only decided by distance from the floor

I won't let the impact of my crash  
Be decided by my balcony



# Actor's Masked Love

Maggie Singman

Upon life's stage, we don our masks,  
In this grand act, we perform our tasks.  
Your feigned sadness, a poor disguise,  
I play the fool, blinded by lies.

Why not speak in words so true?  
No need for pretense in this lovers' duet.  
You act out love as if it's our play,  
Yet the scripted scenes seem to betray.

When masks fall, we stand exposed,  
A final act, a love decomposed.  
I, the lone spectator in your theater,  
Seek truth's release, no sweet pretender.

We played our parts, in love, in strife,  
This stage our world, this act our life.  
Your love, a script, my heart, the reader,  
The final act where I become the leader.

Now I rise, in this grand play,  
Shedding the role of love's dismay.  
In the grand theatre of life, I find my strength,  
Moving on from a love held at arm's length.

The spotlight fades, I stand tall,  
Surviving the daunting curtain call.  
With hope as my guide, and resilience my friend,  
Ready for love's encore, for a new act to ascend.

# Notte di Promesse Rotte

Rose Schemmel

“You swore to me you would remain impartial! That you would not interfere! And yet, here I find you, amidst a pile of what I can only assume were once German soldiers! Per carità! What were you thinking?! What if you had been seen?!”

The man in question seemed unfazed by the portly cultist’s tirade. Rather than reply immediately, he continued as he had been since the last Nazi had fallen – leant against the wall of the humble shop, twirling a tattered ribbon between his fingers. The color was so faded that it appeared to be almost gray, but if one looked closely...

As the Chancellor did. The ribbon quite suddenly found itself clenched in the apoplectic leader’s fist, shaken at the face of the one who had been toying with it.

“Listen to me when I am talking to you, *coglione!* We had a deal! I give you free rein of the country, so long as you stay out of my business!”

“I wasn’t aware that I’d violated the terms,” he replied coolly. “And though you are correct in your assumption, I imagine it never once occurred to you what that idiotic military disturbed when they entered the Forest, hmm? I am not the only one stalking the streets tonight – and you are so far from prepared to deal with most of them that it’s almost laughable. *Almost.*”

Now, he stood, a kind smile on his face that didn’t quite reach his eyes (none of them ever did) as he extended a hand, palm turned to the sky. “I’d like that back. Now.”

“They were my men, Ivan! *My* men, and now they are useless!”

And quite suddenly, the air...*shifted*. The lights dotting the sidewalk flickered faintly, as if the bulbs were dying. The screams from the streets surrounding them, the gunshots and such, all fell away to a ringing silence. The smoke seemed to tense, thicken, and the very buildings themselves seemed to draw in a shuddering breath of dreadful anticipation.

“*Your* men? Well now...that’s interesting. *Very* interesting. You see, Chancellor, I found your men dragging a girl no older than ten out of her home in the dead of night, the last to be discovered because her father had hidden her away in the storage space beneath the floorboards. Normally I would pass on by, but you see, I came here tonight with a goal in mind. One that has been delayed, time and time again, by chance, fate, whatever the hell you humans like to call it. And your men ruined it. They nearly killed her, and if they were acting under *your* orders...”

A gust of wind, a wet crack, then a sickening thud, crimson oozing molasses across the street, flickering orange and red in the fire. A choked gurgle cut off by another squelch.

They were impossibly dark, mere shadows if not viewed from the proper angle, but the Chancellor could see them all too well. His shocked gaze followed the tendrils impaled in his shoulders to their source, and he stilled, a proverbial deer caught in the sights of a predator beyond imagining.

There was something malignant in its stance, like a panther sizing up its prey, though there was something decidedly cold in its demeanor. Distantly, he felt the gentle tug of the faded ribbon being pried from his grasp, and the moment he lost hold of the threadbare silk, the pain hit all at once like a tsunami, and he screamed until a third appendage choked him into silence.

The ripper, Ivan, the man of many names, paused, sizing the Chancellor up with a critical eye. “...a member of the Order, then? There will be nothing blessed about this agony, I assure you. I might have shown you mercy, killed you quickly. If only your *god* had favored you. I imagine that when he’s done, he’ll hollow you out to make use of you.” The man, Jack, turned, fingering the ribbon thoughtfully as he strolled past the abomination, whose attention remained fixated on its prey. He felt no need or desire to make eye-contact. What would the point be, after all? But still, the message should be conveyed.

“They were attempting to divest little Renata of her nightclothes when I broke up the party. I believe the goal was completion of the third ritual – the mother was the one holding the knife. Rest assured that *I* am not the one who snatched the whore up in

the chaos. I was a bit busy, what with a traumatized child clinging to my coat while I was busy mutilating her attackers.” He smirked then, a hint of self-deprecation in his tone. “But then, that’s it about children, isn’t it? Always getting underfoot. Always caught up in something much too big for them to handle on their lonesome. Which is why I passed her off to a new family in America. Never you mind where – they owe me more than a few favors for what I’ve done. Besides—”

He continued on his way, winding the tattered blue ribbon around his pinkie as the fog cooled and twisted around every last bit of light struggling to pierce the veil from their dying metal shells.

“—I know you’ll find her again eventually. It’s all a game anyway, isn’t it, Llewellyn?”

---

She awoke with a gasp, scrabbling at the heavy blankets and knocking her pillows askew. The alarm clock on her bedside table hit the ground with a harsh *clack*, the thick plastic too durable to shatter easily. The sound roused her fully, dragged her free of the nightmare that clung and clawed at her senses.

Rebecca made the mistake of opening her eyes to the darkness that engulfed her room. There, in the corner. That *fucking* face again. Her eyes snapped shut, and she fumbled for the flashlight she kept in the drawer. The tissue box joined the alarm clock on her bedroom floor, but she managed to switch the flashlight on. Becca waited, trying to listen past the sound of her own racing heartbeat. Was that breathing? Was it still there?

A few moments passed, and nothing in the room seemed to move. Cautiously, she opened her eyes, and sagged in relief. Gone. It was gone. Still, she carefully slid out of bed, grimacing at the icy floorboards. Becca caught herself before she could fall, cursing at the aftereffects the nighttime visit had left. Hopefully *this* wouldn’t be the time the ice decided to melt and leave a big mess for her to clean up in the morning. The baseball bat was, as always, tucked between the wall and her nightstand. At least this one had the

decency to leave her only means of defense in place. *But maybe*, she thought to herself, *That was because she never had any hope of hurting it in the first place.*

Rebecca Tafani was never going to take anything that had any chance of assigning her a family tree project ever again. Christ, she should have talked to her father before doing her research, but then, her questions likely would have been brushed aside, just like with her mother.

*“Make something up, mi amorina, it’s not like they’ll be calling the hospital to check for your birth records.”*

*“But Mama, you never talk about Nonna. I dunno what to say!”*

*“Well, she had brown hair. Gorgeous curls, she used to tell me all the girls in her class were quite jealous.”*

Brown hair. Blue eyes. Pale skin. Physical descriptors, one and all. Things that could just as easily describe her, right down to the curly hair. Rebecca had never seen a single photo of her maternal grandmother in her life. Leonora Cavallo née Tafani had gone to the grave when she was 19, and her maternal family’s secrets had gone with her.

At least, Becca thought they had. But then, she finally got over herself, broke up with her boyfriend, and moved back home. The house she’d lived in since she was born stood empty, and property taxes back home meant that unless she was living in it, she’d lose it. Cleaning out the place to make room for her own things was no picnic, but she did it. Even cleared the attic, too — tossed that godawful fake Christmas tree her mother had insisted on putting up every year. She’d be buying a real tree that year, and her wallet would just have to suck it up.

Rebecca found the box behind it, after she managed to drag it halfway across the near-empty space. A steamer trunk, battered and worn, like the kind featured in that Titanic movie. The trunk certainly looked old enough to be authentic, and she was honestly concerned that anything within had been ruined by the time the old thing had spent up in the attic.

When she cracked open the first photo album she pulled out, Rebecca instantly understood why her mother had *never* spo-

ken of Renata Tafani. The first few pictures were badly damaged. Blackened by smoke, singed at the edges, but still, the Nazi flag was prominent in the background of a photo featuring a family of five dressed in their Sunday best. There were three children, a husband and wife. Even the family dog was featured. The man looked... *young*. Painfully young, not older than thirty, and... Crap, he was wearing a *uniform*. Her great-grandfather had been— Nope, she wasn't going to think about that. *That* part of her family history could stay dead and buried, until she inevitably exhumed the corpse to lay it out in front of her therapist. Let *him* deal with that nasty revelation. Rebecca turned her attention to the man's wife, the woman that must have been her great-grandmother. The woman was objectively gorgeous, given the time period. She looked like Hedy Lamarr, or Marilyn Monroe, or—

Rebecca squinted, leaned in closer. Something was wrong with the woman's face, and it wasn't just the warping caused by the apparent fire damage. It was like... her eyes were *empty*. She was smiling wide for the picture, her hand resting easily on the eldest son's shoulder, but looking at the woman's face, you'd think she were *dead*.

“Ookay, moving right along. Great-grandma wasn't all right in the head. Then again, she had to have been, to marry a guy like *that*.” The brunette shifted a bit, completely oblivious to the sweltering heat that always filled the attic in summer.

Her gaze fell to the three children. Two boys and a girl, respectively. The little girl had dark, curly hair, barely tamed by the ribbons her mother must have braided into it. They were all young — the oldest boy couldn't have been more than thirteen. The little boy, stood carefully between his older siblings, seemed to be something like five or six years old. Renata Tafani, her grandmother, looked to be roughly eight, maybe nine. She really couldn't tell.

“And *that* must be her. Hello, Nonna. Nice to finally meet you,” Rebecca chirped. Her gaze drifted back to the... unfortunate background behind them. “Though, given the circumstances... maybe it would've been better if this album had been eaten by the rats.” The family portrait was pretty big, given the time period, but this first page in the photo album seemed to be a title page of sorts.

A caption below the photo read, ‘*La Famiglia Tafani.*’ The photo was dated 1938.

Though the first image in the photo album was a bit odd, nothing could have prepared her for how things progressed as she turned the pages. There were few photos from when her grandmother was young. Even stranger, there was a distinct shift just a few pages into the album — suddenly, Renata Tafani was a teenager, clad in a plaid pleated skirt and button up shirt. It looked like a uniform — was this a picture of her starting at some sort of private high school? The next photo also featured her grandmother, wearing what must have been a prom dress. Except, wait. Did prom even happen in Italy? And where the hell were her parents, her brothers?

There, on the seventh page. A photo of a stage, her grandmother, a young woman, shaking hands with a much older man. She had a diploma in her free hand. Above them, a banner hung, proudly proclaiming “*Congratulations, Linden Hall Class of 1947!*” That... didn’t sound like the name of an Italian school. The picture immediately below showed Renata again, this time posing proudly with her diploma. An unfamiliar man and woman bracketed her. They were older, and given the time period, way too old to be her parents. Grandparents, maybe?

Rebecca flipped through the rest of the album. No one in the first photo, aside from her grandmother, ever made a reappearance. But then, if they’d been on the wrong side of the war...

Her heart dropped, and she turned back a page, back to the photo of Renata posing in front of a house with what must have been Rebecca’s mother on her hip. Mama had said she was an only child, and it was true, there wasn’t another child present in the picture. But there, reflected in the window... it looked like a man, dressed in a suit, maybe, but the warping made it hard to tell. Maybe it was Renata’s husband, taking the picture?

She flipped forward again. Another photo, Leonora’s first day of elementary school. This photo was blurrier — maybe taken by the teacher? There were several after, kids in the classroom, at the playground. In most of them — in reflections, lurking in the shadows of the trees beyond the school fence, there he was. That same man in the suit. His face was never visible.

Abruptly, Becca shut the album, dropped it on the floor, and went digging through the chest again. Sure enough, just like her mother, Renata Tafani had saved *all* of little Leonora's early artwork. Rebecca kind of wished she hadn't. It was like something out of a horror movie. Page after page of scribbled drawings, of families and playgrounds and weirdly shaped trees. Leonora and Renata were *somewhat* recognizable (the pictures were drawn by a child, after all), and there was a family portrait that depicted her mother, grandmother, and what must've been her maternal grandfather. She... really couldn't tell if that was supposed to be a briefcase he was holding or not. But if that man drawn over and over in a green shirt and brown trousers was meant to be her grandfather, then who the hell was this other guy in black? He was constantly just *there* in the background of the drawings, a thin scribble of black topped with a gray oval. Never drawn with an actual face. At some point, her mother had started labeling him, just like she did the other people in her drawings. Even so, she had no clue what sort of name 'Lewlin' was supposed to translate to. Had someone *stalked* Leonora when she was a child?

Rebecca wiped a hand across her forehead and let the drawings fall back into the trunk. She... had a tree to get down out of the attic. Yeah, couldn't afford to get distracted. She could pour over the other stuff in this trunk later. Becca picked up the photo album and stuffed it back in the trunk, shut the lid, and turned her attention to manhandling the old plastic Christmas tree back down the attic stairs. She'd left it for last, just in case it got to be too much, and she had to leave it for another day. At least that way, she'd have enough room up here to store her own stuff.

A half-hour later, when she'd finally dumped the old tree by the curb and scarfed down some food, Rebecca managed to carry the first box of her stuff up to the second floor, where the attic entrance was. The box hit the floor with a thud, and she winced, hoping to all hell there wasn't anything fragile in that one. Becca rubbed the back of her neck and sighed, turning back to head up the attic stairs once again. "Alright, time to get that trunk down. Ugh... here's hoping I don't kill myself on the way down the—"

The trunk was at the base of the attic stairs. Open, at the



base of the attic stairs. The drawings were scattered all over the second-floor landing, some of them settling from where they had been displaced when she dropped the box. It was like the air had been sucked out of the room, out of the house. Her eyes darted to the attic entrance. All she managed to get a glimpse of was a pale face with pitch black eyes before the stairs whipped upwards and the hatch slammed shut. Before she knew it, she was downstairs and out the door, heart racing like she'd just finished a marathon.

It took her a few hours to work up the nerve to go back in, and that was only after she'd checked the pillbox in her purse to confirm that she had taken her meds that morning. "Little slip-ups... the doctor said they'd happen, he said, so it was nothing, you probably just forgot that you brought it down before grabbing lunch."

Nothing else happened that week. Or the next. The trunk stayed tucked in a corner of her new home office. Classes started up again, and thank God her college had allowed her to transition to online only. But then, that Women's History class happened, and she just had to take the opportunity to get extra credit and make the final project about the women in her life.

Nothing had been the same since she finished going through everything in that trunk. Since she found that letter hidden behind the fabric lining, wrapped in a faded blue ribbon. She hadn't even managed to finish translating it to English yet. It was something new every night, and even during the daytime, she wasn't safe. She couldn't even look at the kitchen after the sun went down anymore, and forget going to the attic. That genealogy project would be the death of her, and it *definitely* wasn't worth 25% of her grade. Even if she did end up getting an A in the class.

The tip of the bat dragged on the hardwood floor behind her as she made her way down the hall, but Becca found she really didn't have it in her to care. A glance down at the alarm clock (still in one piece, despite the abuse heaped on it over the past month) had told her it was two in the morning. She flopped on the couch with a grunt, trying to ignore the shadowy figure crouched in the corner.

The creature had freaked her out at first, but she realized af-

ter a while that nothing ever bothered her when it was nearby. And it didn't bother *her*, didn't even seem to notice her presence.

Rebecca tipped her head back against the couch and sighed, careful to keep her eyes closed since she hadn't bothered to turn on the lamp. Like always, the nightmare hadn't lined up with what she found in that trunk. An attack taking place in Germany, perpetuated *by* the military her great-grandfather served? It didn't make any sense. "Mama... I *really* wish you had told me about Nonna. Learning about her wasn't worth the baggage."

# Exam 1: Regret

Tony Ciocia

It's 1:30 in the afternoon and you're walking to get a sandwich across the street from campus between your classes. You get a phone call from your mother that the family Golden Retriever of 14 years has to be put down. You knew it was going to happen soon, her hind legs had stopped working a week ago and she's been refusing to eat sufficient food the past 2 days. Even though your mother has been paying for painkillers and treatments while your uncle has been carrying her on her bed and driving her everywhere to make sure she was not suffering, it has to happen. Your mother asks if you want to return to say goodbye at the vet's office. In your frustration, you stop walking. What do you do next?

- A. Break down on the spot and clench your fists, letting tears stream down on your face and asking why it has to happen. Asking yourself if there's something you could have done to help more. Asking if you should empty your bank account to pay for more medications or surgery, or whatever could help save her, only to be told that it won't stop her from starving herself.
- B. Think about all the things you will never do with her again. All the beaches you will not run on in Half Moon Bay together and all the waves she won't jump through. All the walks you won't take together and all the birds and bunnies she won't chase anymore while you run after her, trying to grab her trailing leash.
- C. Storm back to your car, pushing through unsuspecting people that get in your way, angering them as you curse at them. You slam the door next to you and push balled fists wrapped in your sweatshirt sleeves against your eyes to soak up the tears as you clench your teeth and mutter obscenities.
- D. Think about how when your family got her in First Grade, and there was no way of controlling her. You remember when she

stole a whole loaf of banana bread off the counter and hung her head low as she walked between your grandmother and grandfather, hoping they wouldn't see it. You remember the times that she would pounce on gopher holes in the backyard, digging foot-deep pits in the ground to pull the unsuspecting inhabitants out and swallow them whole. You remember how she would curl up in front of the fireplace, fighting you for the spot closest to the heat. And you remember how she would lay down outside your door after you went to bed, offering an extra sense of security as you tried to fall asleep.

E. Do your best to keep a straight face. You skip your next class, but you go on with your day. You don't cry much that day, but you find yourself crying weeks, months, and even years later when you think about the way you abandoned her. You regret how you made your decision not to return and left her thinking that you did not love her in your final moments. You throw away those memories with her in an attempt to be strong, but only end up hurting yourself and your pup more than anyone else.

F. All of the above.

# Finally Free

Mia Rodriguez

I.

In the Winter, It rained without mercy  
The windows of cars fogged at every hour of the day  
The nights grew more frigid as the weeks went on.  
It was these nights that I loved to be outside.  
To see my breath float past me.  
The deserted sidewalks, lined with frosted grass.  
These were the nights I shared with you.

II.

In the spring, the world came alive.  
While I learned how to deal with losing you.  
Blossoms sprang up and danced for me  
Birds sang from their nests  
Beckoning me to leave the house.  
The cold breezes came less often, overpowered by the sun.  
In the spring, I realized I would be okay.

III.

In the Summer, came the drought.  
No rain to remind me of the shared nights with you.  
But the sun had shined brighter than ever.  
That glaring sun, that caused me to sweat you out.  
Like a toxin finally leaving my body.  
I let the rays hit me, leaving tanlines and freckles that you would never see.  
In the summer, I healed.

IV.

In Autumn, the trees shed all their leaves.  
Removing layers of memories, to make room for new ones.  
For the first time in months, rain came pouring.  
Washing me of every trace of you.  
The bare trees swayed, despite all that they lost.  
They knew this wasn't the end, but rather a new beginning.  
In the Autumn, I was finally free.

# Body of Mine

Robin Ruiz

In 20XX, two parents built a baby girl.

It is not known if this was out of love  
or convenience  
or want  
or accident  
or whatever.  
The point is—

In 20XX, two parents built a baby girl.

She did as expected and she grew.  
Her body grew from

a newborn to  
an infant to  
a toddler to  
a child to  
a kid to  
a teen  
to a—

Now, even though she grew,  
is she not still the same child?

The effects of time cannot change the  
fact that this is the same child these  
two parents built from  
nothing with their own two hands,  
their own flesh and blood.

The girl has grown,  
has changed,  
that is true. But keep in mind that  
these changes are celebrated because—

In 20XX, two parents built a baby  
girl.

And in 20XX, she started to wonder  
if they built her wrong.

That they forgot a few screws  
or didn't screw them in properly  
or they took a shortcut somewhere  
or they got the wrong directions  
or the wrong parts  
or

or

or

or

And then it occurred to her,  
that she

could

rebuild

herself.

So that is what she did.

She kept the base the same,  
because it's not like one  
can easily switch out their skeletons  
or their organs,  
no matter how much one wishes  
that that were possible.

And much of the exterior will stay the  
same, until the future becomes the  
present, but that is a poem for another  
time. And so for now, she changes  
what she can.

Skirts become ripped jeans,  
bras become binders,  
but sports bras can stay  
and so can Converse.

Long hair gets short,  
and eventually gets dyed,  
she becomes they,  
[REDACTED] becomes [REDACTED], and  
turmoil is tamed into content.

But this poem does not end here.  
Because—

In 20XX, two parents built a baby  
girl.

In 20XX, they rebuilt themselves.

Even though they have changed,  
are they not still the same person?  
They may not have the same name,  
or have the same pronouns,  
or have the same style.

But are they not still the same child,  
that two parents built together?

Why should they be disgraced  
for wanting to take part in the  
building of themselves?

Why is one expression of growth  
celebrated and expected  
while the other is  
criticized and denounced?

They may have “replaced” the girl  
they knew, but that does not mean  
she is gone. It is one of the laws of

matter, that nothing can truly be  
created

or  
destroyed.

It can simply change from  
one form to another.  
And this is important because—

In 20XX, two parents built a baby  
girl.

She was not destroyed,  
they were transformed, and  
they turned into someone new  
someone *happy*  
someone *true*.

They are fundamentally different  
and fundamentally the same. You  
cannot change the past as easy  
as you want to sometimes. You can  
only make peace with it because—

In 20XX, two parents built a baby  
girl.

And farther in the past, people built  
the Ship of Theseus.

The story goes that  
over the centuries, as the ship was used,  
more and more maintenance was  
required.

And piece by piece by piece,  
the ship was rebuilt. And so the  
question becomes,

is it still the same ship  
if every piece has been changed  
and nothing of the original  
remains?

Who is more like their original?

The person,

who did not change their flesh  
and blood,  
who kept the basics the same but  
changed what mattered on the  
outside. Who became someone  
new, because staying someone old  
might have resulted in a halt of life.

Or, the ship,

who resembles the original only  
in shape but not in interior,  
whose entire existence was built to  
copy what is no longer here.

Who is living the lie,

the people who change  
or  
the people who refuse to  
acknowledge any change at all?



# Snapshots in Capitola

Jae Lee

I

Turning around the street corner  
where sand grains were rolling about along footprints,  
a traveler fell under a spell  
by the scenes calling out all sensory organs at once:  
Sinking into the dark scarlet sea,  
once blazed midsummer sun was cooling off;  
people were heating up the shivering sandy beach,  
dancing in the wind dosed with savory jazz—

II

Returning to the twilight concert at Capitola Beach,  
where the traveler was enchanted,  
slits the sheer film shielding the underwater town:  
An abandoned rail track bridge cloaked in trees and vines  
starts whispering to a stranger  
why trains don't come to this town anymore;  
what once flourished beach town is now going through—  
the stranger, who used to be a traveler, awakes.

III

The sun whimsically diluting itself into the dim sky  
creates a singular twilight landscape, which  
the stranger walks in and fills a corner of,  
sitting on a weathered bench embracing all that come to it.  
As the sea swallowing the dusky blood orange sun,  
deep darkness disguises all but voice;  
I, who used to be a traveler and a stranger, listen to  
a stalk of deserted seaweed fluttering in the dark leading to dawn

# One Hell of a Dish

Diego Macaraeg

In a quiet neighborhood in Wisconsin, one man sat alone in his home drinking beer. This man was named Frank, and Frank loved to drink on occasion, but today was an unusual occasion because he was laid off from his office job. His job was the only thing he had to support his wife and now it was gone. Lost and angry, Frank sat in his favorite reclining chair with a half-empty six-pack of beer beside him. In one hand was a cold beer and in the other hand was a sticky remote. He flipped through the channels stopping just in time for his favorite TV show that aired at 5 p.m. This was also the same time his wife came home every day from work. A set of keys rustled as the door was being unlocked. His wife entered the gloomy house to see her husband focused on the TV while taking a swig of beer.

“Honey, I’m home!”

There was no answer. Frank didn’t budge from his seat. The only noise came from the men on the TV talking about hockey.

“Frank, can you please turn that down? Are you drinking already?”

Still no answer, she turned on the living room lights and stood in front of the TV.

“Hello? Your wife is home, I would appreciate it if you said something and didn’t creepily stare at the TV.”

Frank muted the TV and said, “I was fucking fired today.”

“Wait, what? Why would they do that to you? I’ll call them right now and tell them they made a huge mistake.”

“The company needed to cut costs so here I am. Now move outta the way, you know this one is my favorite.”

“Frank, that’s enough booze for tonight. This isn’t gonna help the situation.”

She tried to pick up the six-pack, but Frank stopped her with one hand. His grip tightened and there weren’t any signs of him letting go. She reluctantly let go of the beer.

“Fine, those are the last you’ll have for this week, no, for this

month. I'm not gonna let my husband drink himself to death."

"You can't be serious...wait, you're serious?"

"How many times do we have to go over this, Frank? You need a change of good in your life, maybe you should consider going on that diet I always tell you about."

"You want me to go on a diet?"

Frank's wife tried to explain: "Not necessarily a diet. Look at it like this, you just gotta be more cautious of what you do and don't eat."

"So a fucking diet?"

"Frank, listen to me, it's for your own good. You heard what the doctor said about having high cholesterol. And it wouldn't hurt for you to lose a few pounds."

"Oh, so now my wife's calling me fat? That doctor doesn't know what he's talking about. I've gotten this far haven't I?"

"Ever since your mother passed, you've been a different person. I know it was hard on you, but it's been two years. She wouldn't want to see you like this."

"You don't know what it was like. Growing up, my mother was the only person I could rely on. She was always there for me and when I was feeling down, she would make me my favorite lasagna."

His wife stood quietly beside Frank, caressing his shoulder. Frank sunk in his chair staring directly at the muted TV screen. Processing all his wife had told him, he raised the bottle and took one last sip. Closing his eyes and savoring every last drop. Frank murmured to himself, "Fine, I'll do it."

"What'd you say? Speak up Frank."

"I said I'll do it, okay?"

"I knew you'd know what's best. This diet will be the change of good you need. Look at me so I can give you a kiss sweetheart."

He turned to look at his delighted wife as she gave him a kiss. Frank gave a quick smile and turned back to the TV and unmuted it. He sat up straight and began to listen closely to the show.

"I'll make your favorite lasagna for dinner, okay sweetheart?"

"Yeah, all right."

“And maybe, we can do something together after dinner.”

“Sure, whatever you want honey. Just let me watch my show.”

Frank’s eyes had become glued to the screen. His wife went into the kitchen and began cooking. Without a job and forced to go on a diet, Frank couldn’t believe how this happened. The wife came in and told Frank to wake her up from her nap when the oven beeps. He nodded and turned up the volume until she finally went up the stairs into their bedroom.

Nearly an hour passed by when the oven timer began to beep. The TV was so loud that Frank was unable to hear it. The lasagna burned and smoke began to fill the house. The wife was woken up to the smell of smoke and rushed to the kitchen to turn off the oven. She opened the oven to a puff of smoke and saw the black lasagna.

She shouted at Frank, “Didn’t I tell you to wake me up?”

“I didn’t hear it.”

“For the love of God, Frank. Our dinner is ruined.”

“You shouldn’t have gone to sleep, but whatever this beer is filling me up.”

“You know what Frank, since you love that beer so much you can sit there all night without me. Now excuse me, while I go out to eat.”

She grabbed her purse and stormed out the door in slippers, slamming the door behind her. Frank finally got up to open some windows and went to the fridge for even more beer. After drinking all night, he was very much past his limit. Empty beer bottles surrounded him. His body was hardly functional as he struggled to turn off the TV with the remote. It took all his strength to get up from his chair and one step at a time he stumbled his way to the stairs tripping over the bottles. He looked up to the top of the stairs that looked miles away. With each step, his legs trembled. At the fifth step his chest began to ache in pain. A sudden sharp pain struck him, and he couldn’t breathe properly. Losing control, he fell backwards, tumbling down to the bottom and hitting the back of

his head, knocking him unconscious.

Something began to poke at his leg. He opened his eyes to see a curious little demon with a flaming fork. Soon more appeared, some with flaming forks and others with flaming knives. They surrounded him and pointed their culinary utensils with malicious intent. Frank looked around and beside him was a river of flame that stretched beyond he can see. There were several demons spread across hovering over the river. They seemed to be using elongated ladles to lift up tortured souls from the river. Scorching flames lit up the area as ghoulish monsters stepped out and walked past him on the road. Everyone seemed to be headed down the road that led to a castle surrounded by a bubbling lake of lava. The demons grunted and motioned for Frank to stand up, when a portal of fire appeared. It was Satan himself. He stepped out from the portal and looked down upon Frank. The demons kneeled and listened as Satan begins to order them around.

“What’s this one doing? Hurry up and get it moving.”

“Where am I? This must be some weird dream.”

“A dream? No, this is all real. Welcome to hell, now please get moving before I feed your soul to my favorite doggy.”

“I think I had way too much to drink. Alright, I’ll just wake up any second now.”

“Oh yes, you did indeed have too much to drink. You had a heart attack and fell down the stairs, knocking yourself unconscious. You are on the brink of death. Look here: you’re being transported in an ambulance because your wife found you unresponsive.”

Satan opened a small portal and showed Frank’s wife crying as she drove, following behind an ambulance. Frank took a moment to comprehend everything that was happening.

“Speechless now, are you? It’s okay, it happens to everyone, follow the road and meet your end. I hope you enjoy your stay in hell.”

“No, this can’t happen. I’m not dying, you said I’m still alive. There’s a chance I’ll make it.”

“Well I did say that, but look down at the shackle on your left ankle. That thing is keeping you here because I say so. Let your-

self die and everything will be fine.”

“I’m not just gonna let myself die. Please, I’ll do anything, just let me return to my wife. Whatever you need, I’ll do it.”

“That’s what they all say, but since you’re not completely dead, I’ll give you a chance. If you can satisfy my stomach, I will let you return to your body.”

“You want me to make you something to eat?”

“Yes, exactly. I haven’t eaten all day. Now get cooking before I change my mind.”

“But how do I do that here in hell?”

“Go through the portal and you shall see.”

Frank stepped towards the portal and peered through to see a kitchen. Two demons pushed him through the portal and straight into hell’s kitchen. The kitchen was vast and full of everything you could think of that’s cooking-related. There were hundreds of shelves a mile long, all stacked with different foods and ingredients. Satan sat on a throne and watched Frank from above. This didn’t make Frank falter; he was determined to escape hell. He knew exactly what to make for Satan: lasagna. He ran up and down the halls searching for the ingredients. One by one he grabbed lasagna noodles, parmesan, mozzarella, onion, pasta sauce, garlic, parsley, Italian sausage, ground beef, egg, salt, and sugar. Frank hadn’t made lasagna since his mother had died, but he remembered each step his mother taught him to make the best lasagna.

The masterpiece dish was ready to go into the oven. Frank was steaming red with sweat profusely dripping down his face. Before placing the lasagna into the oven, Satan came down.

“You think I need to wait for my food?”

With a snap of a finger a magical fire covered the lasagna and instantly cooked it. Satan grabbed a plate and took a slice of lasagna. He took one bite and chewed slowly with intrigue. Satan’s eyes widened and he began to furiously eat the lasagna. The one slice wasn’t enough; he took the entire tray and threw it into his mouth. With a look of satisfaction, a roaring burp echoed in the kitchen.

“That was the greatest lasagna I’ve ever had. You must make more for me, how about you stay here and cook for me for all eter-

nity?”

“That wasn’t part of the deal, set me free as you promised!”

“Darn, a deal is a deal. On one condition, you must return once a year to cook your delicious lasagna for me. You can even bring your wife.”

“Fine, but my wife isn’t gonna like coming here. Now remove the shackle.”

“Deal, but before you return to your world, care for a celebratory beer?”

“I’ll have to pass. After seeing what it has done to me, I’m done drinking.”

“How moving, now leave this realm.”

Satan gave a snap and the shackle broke. Frank was free from hell after serving the best lasagna he ever made. He slowly opened his eyes to see his wife beside him as he lie in a hospital bed. The hospital room was cold, but his body was abnormally warm. He looked to his wife and they both began to cry as they were reunited once again.

“Don’t scare me like that! I thought you were dead.”

“I’m sorry honey. I should’ve listened to you.”

“And I shouldn’t have left you. Promise me this will never happen again.”

“I promise it won’t. I’ll stop the drinking and start that diet you were talking about.”

# The Purpose of the Buddha Beads

Emily Chu

One hundred and eight red-tinted sandalwood beads. For three hundred sixty five days and fifteen blessed years, these Buddha beads hung soundly around my neck. They were given to me by my mother, intentionally purposed to serve me protection, compassion, and power. The reminiscing of something so precious to me is quickly clouded with the truth that I was once a naive girl who gave away something so dear to me to someone I thought I held dearer.

When describing myself as naive, I don't mean stupidity or lack of wisdom but rather, a lack of boundaries. Leading with kindness without boundaries is ultimately self-sabotage. In this case, I allowed my voice to be belittled and the needs that meant deeply to me to be ignored. I had met someone, someone who told me I had everything and they had nothing. I felt a duty to share the joyous things in my life, to chip away at my happiness in order to brighten their smile. I wished to share my Buddha beads, hoping it would bring them protection, compassion, and power the same way it did for me. Looking back, I regret not choosing wisely and I regret my false sense of protection to always look at the good by neglecting the true depths of the bad.

Before passing my beads onto this being, I had emphasized a set of habits on how to care for my precious beads. They were simple. Very simple.

1. Take them off when you shower or go into any body of water.
2. Take them off when you are going to work out.

Instead of finding respect and agreement, I discovered repetition and scrimmage with what I needed. As the days went by, I knew those beads were being dirtied by sweat and drowned in showers, a foreshadow of its fate. What brings me the most shame is the truth that sits in how those beads were lost, the truth that I am just as responsible as the one who lost them. There were many times I could have taken my beads back, taken back my power.



There were times where I could have held onto my anger and frustration, to end it on a petty blame. In the end, it was masked with hopes to shield the other from the guilt and shame they had felt. In the end, I was the one left with guilt, shame, and regret. My heart winces at the thought that they must be between pebbles or beneath the muddy floors of a raging river down in Paradise.

It's a shameful act, to know the truth, lie about it, all while feeling the sorrow and disgust of my past decisions. Lies were born from shame and had been rehearsed to my mother about where those beads might be. Then again, why waste my time and fill my heart with the feeling of such regret?

Past the judgments that make my heart weigh heavy, there is beauty through a different perspective. The loss, or rather, death of my beads lead to a rebirth in its true purpose. It enlightened me to discover that even without them I am more than capable of protecting myself, showing compassion to myself, and accessing my own power. Rather than holding onto a materialistic power, I can embody those traits it held and claim it as my own, allowing me complete control and freedom over my actions. Without shame, reflection would not follow, and without reflection, growth would not transpire. Therefore, I thank you for losing my Buddha beads.

# Black Eyeliner

Lennon Lilienthal-Wynn

I

The familiar hum of the car  
as we cross state lines.  
Far from home but at home right here with you.  
We travel: me relaxing in the passenger seat  
and you on your third day driving in a row.

II

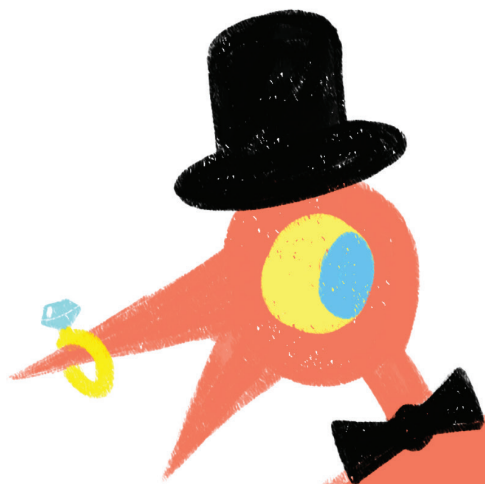
Sipping a cozy apple cider,  
alongside your usual coffee order.  
A quiet contemplation we both share.  
About the world, the things around us.  
I never have to question if you love me back.

III

Back home at last, our indoor jungle oasis.  
When you're here,  
the bread never goes stale,  
the plants never wilt, the temperature's just right.  
The familiar hum of you is all I need.

H.S. Tobias

# THE DUNKING BIRD



Keep pepper or vinegar in my stomach, spit your vile  
in my vial. Pour some wax, light a fire and pray for a while.

Walk a mile in my leather; Wear me when it's cold.  
When in winter and all you want is to lock yourself  
in your home, please leave me a key.  
Use my everything,  
Or just keep me as a tchotchke.

When I go, which is soon,  
repurpose me.

There is a long line  
of living and non living  
things more important.

But I am begging, do not do away with me.  
There is a rest in death, but not for mine.

I would hope you glue my hinges still  
And prop me up as a jewelry holder.

My beak will keep your ring, your necklace on my shoulder.  
And if a thief would come to steal I'll poke their eye  
I'll poke to kill. At the very least I'll leave a hole.

Use me as a makeshift light bulb  
or as a fish bowl.

Put the loveliest of fish in me despite  
that I am just a dunking bird plaything.

The lustrous shoal of fish will swim  
And rainbow scales will shine within  
I'll be mirrorball eruptions of light.

This is my plight, do not do away with me.

# Portal

Anna Burt





# Cloudtree

Anna Burt



# At Peace Together

Hayley L Lowry

Restful in our sleep, lay here please, darling.  
Lay here we, together, in our grave-soil.  
Grin with me through loose, and heavy marling,

Bone hand on bone hand, jointly embarking.  
Decaying threads of souls start to uncoil,  
Restful in our sleep, lay here please, darling.

“Here Lies” speaks the stone, our lives, the marking,  
“Too young” some lament, the future foiled.  
Grin with me through loose, and heavy marling.

Reading the pages of our short passing,  
Sorrowed by ourselves, and how we turmoil.  
Restful in our sleep, lay here please, darling.

At least we have this, our love, unceasing,  
For if we shall haunt we do so unspoiled.  
Grin with me through loose, and heavy marling.

Our peace is shared, we once a true pairing,  
Though in life we loved, in death now assoiled.  
Restful in our sleep, lay here please, darling.  
Grin with me through loose, and heavy marling.

# Things Only Men Would Understand

Jjesus Magana

I remember my last visit to my father as I am packing my things on my way to New York. Mom says her son will become a great writer in the “gran manzana,” *the Big Apple*. However, on this day the cold reminds me of that same cold from the other night. I walk along a long a broken fresh path of asphalt. The cold wind hits my face as I begin to walk towards the building marked F1. I see the dead grass on my way to the front door. I see a raccoon run from one building to the next darting itself into the sewer. I feel my skin feeling prickly and scrunched up. Like the skin of a lizard preparing for another winter from which it never knows if will awake from. I enter the door following the procession of people. A mother with a baby. The child smiles at me waving its little hands. She tells him that yes, she sees my shirt, an old crumbling Darth Vader tee that my friends told me months ago was nerdy. I don’t listen to them now though, their words faded along with the coldness of their tone. A pregnant woman is there, about 8 months in, but never missing the chance to refix her hair and check her nails for the 14th time. An older couple whispering to each other a string of questions in Vietnamese. She mentions to him, “I wonder if he received our Christmas package yet.”

The older man grunts, reminding her to be patient.

//

As we enter the doors, I hear them slam as the inmates come in from the left side. I return to that one time I heard the door slam hard as I was reading *Harry Potter* in middle school. I hear him stumbling and knocking over chairs, as he closes the front door. The smell of cigars and alcohol hitting the back of my throat as I take a deep breath. His probation officer won’t like this. “Donde estas?” *Where are you?* I put the book down and head over to the living room. He’s struggling to stay up and leaning on his armchair by the television. Did he get fired? He asks where my mom is. I tell



him that she's at work. Knowing that it's close to Mother's Day, I would think that he should know she will be working at the flower shop until 11PM preparing morning deliveries. After all, Mother's Day will be tomorrow. He looks at me, disappointed.

//

He looks at me with that same look of disappointment as I see him walk towards the phone. The partition is made of metal and glass. A type of cold that when leaned on reminds me of how cold and deathlike metal can provide safety. I remember how that day ended. "Voy a ver el Partido de futbol." *I'm going to watch the soccer match.* I watch it with him, but secretly wish I could be reading the book. I end up falling asleep as I dream myself getting shipped off to Hogwarts. A place where magic could keep this sense of fear away. I wake up and notice he's asleep too. I breathe better now knowing that he is also in a faraway place from here. Hours later, the cops come busting through the door and arrest him.

//

I hear the phone ring and I answer the call.

"This a collect call from... an inmate at the ... To accept this call press 1 after the beep."

"Que tal! como estas hijo?" *Hey there! how are you son?* I lose the words and my mouth dries up as I try to breathe. After telling me about his recent brawl over who would get to watch the television I hear him mention how he needs more money. That razors, shoes, and smokes are necessary. "Cosas de hombres" – *things only men would understand.*

I tell him that I am a man now too, and that of course I would understand. He laughs and tells me, "Tu nunca fuiste machito para saber." *You were never manly enough to learn.* I see him clearly now: I see a lost boy who grew up into a miserable man. I wonder if I will

follow the same path too once I get to New York. I hear my grandfather's words about how the mightiest of men have fallen to a man who uses his intelligence over strength. I tell him that my mom will come and visit him when she feels like it and that I won't come back for a while. His face distorts asking what could be more important than him. "Cosas de hombres," I respond. I smile, knowing that this final word is what will break him and prove to him who won at last. I did for sure. Didn't I?

//

The running squirrel breaks my train of thought as my mother tells me the bus to the airport is here. I smell her as I hug her one last time. The smells of dirt, roses, and salsa hit me all at once. I try not to cry, but I shed one tear. She looks at me knowing that if I do return it will be very in the future. She tells me before I turn away.

"What did he tell you?"

I think about out it and remember the coldness of it all. Did he want me to yell at him or cuss him out? My mom sees the question has me unable to move. Her smile breaks for a breath of a wind like second. Then comes back as if nothing ever happened. She asks:

"Cosas de hombres?"

I shed another tear and I hug her again. I try not to feel the knot in my stomach telling me to not go.

"No, mas bien cosas de padre y hijo." *No, more like things between a father and son.*

She nods and gives me her rosary, the one she never takes off. She tells me that it's the one he gave her when he brought her to the U.S. It weighs my hand down like a searing cold metal chain on my way airport, unable to let me go.

# Neverland's Temptation

Bethany LaRussa

Yearning, she dismisses herself.  
Off she goes, her exit unopposed.  
Uniformly, she re-enters her cell.

Collapsing onto her floor,  
Alone.  
Neverland awaits her,  
Tempting her with its treasure.

Hoard of shadows grow in her closet,  
Every inch covered, pitch black.  
Like the sun was in its casket.  
Poisonous thoughts swiftly take root

Hoard of shadows reach for her now,  
Expressionless, she remains quiet.  
Reaching back, she concedes.

Neverland's temptation,  
Oh, how powerful it is.  
Withering away, she softly grins.

# To My Body, Past and Present

Emma Vinsel

To the parts that go unmentioned  
To the skin which sees no light  
To the flesh that feels nothing at all  
And remains unloved each night

To wide shoulders  
To squared jaws  
To right-angled hairlines  
And all that was

To too small breasts  
To too spaced apart  
To having no cleavage  
And an aching heart

To too sharp facial features  
To having too much hair  
To abs too weak  
No muscled physique  
Disappointment everywhere

To the space between my legs  
Above my thighs and below my hips  
That area which we don't talk about  
Which gives me such distress  
Which puts me through such pain  
And gives voice to every insecurity  
Gives power to intrusive thoughts  
Daggers in the hands of those who'll  
hurt me

I know it's not fair  
I know it's not kind  
I know I shouldn't despise

This body I was born into  
Regardless of shape or size  
I wasn't born wrong  
I'm not faking it  
I'm not abnormal or ill  
I've fucking had enough...

With people judging me  
Telling me who I am  
As if they know better than me  
Objectifying me  
Fetishizing me  
You don't know me

My body is mine alone  
It belongs to only me  
You don't get a say  
No choice in the matter  
I'm getting better day by day

To estrogen  
To working out  
To wider hips  
And lessening doubt

To breasts that aren't too large  
To an ass that's fine as hell  
To getting surgery in two months  
And having my monthly as well

To the things you take for granted  
To the things that I revere  
To listening to trans voices  
And offering an ear

# Oregon Pink

Ariana Lara

A small tree of pink is odd,  
in a forest of green and brown.  
Presence made abundantly clear by the  
irregularity of flowers.

A pink tree is not pink with a single bud.  
It is a twig with an obscurity.  
Not without reason for concern.  
“Is it safe to be pink?”

To question the security of normalcy.  
I am not the tree, how could I be?  
A tree does not question its flowers,  
she allows them to be.

Each with their own colors.  
Beneath the normalcy of green.  
It is easier to be like the others.  
Life without reason to question.  
Belonging.  
Because, you are not what doesn't.

# a mother's pleasures

Arissa Ventura

i.

my mother loves the lottery, everything about it.  
the highway billboards with a promise  
of a number tailed by too many zeroes.  
the pale orange hue of the ticket, still warm.  
freshly spat out from the grocery store machine,  
a chance, her chance, fitting in her hand,  
weighing almost nothing.

ii.

i was born two days before christmas  
with a birthmark on the back on my thigh.  
skin raised a budding red, this damning red  
like a painter colored out of the lines.  
the doctor noticed it first — here is lucky.  
i weighed almost nothing, my bruise-born self,  
but still, i fit in my mother's arms and she held on tight.

iii.

when my mother buys a lottery card,  
always, her first numbers are 12, 23, and 02.  
her callused fingers passes me the slippery paper  
and i take it to the back of my thigh, pressed against  
the red paint scattered there. make it lucky. make us lucky.

# Concern for Commercial Viability

Orion Newcomb

- David Mamet

It's frustrating for me to see  
That Disney Channel's S&P  
Removed a same-sex couple scene  
Citing marketability.

It's irritating how they heed  
The ones who bear great enmity  
While they claim with ferocity  
Commercial viability.

Why's it wrong for love to be free?  
Are same-sex couples that scary?  
Is it so inhumane to be  
A part of this community?

At some point soon I hope to see  
Projected big on my TV  
Love talked about with honesty  
And conveyed with sincerity.

# GHOST

Wouter de Hoogd

## Gallows

An arsenic-laced poison took the life of Francis Blandy, a well-to-do attorney in Henley-upon-Thames, in the year of someone's lord 1751. His killer, daughter Mary Blandy, had been engaged in a tryst with the penniless and wedlocked Captain William Henry Cranstoun. The felling of her father was to be a testament to their romance, as Mary dubbed the poison her 'Love Potion'; the only viable solution for her to remain with her Irish captain. Surviving portraits of the lovestruck assassin prior to her crime depict her adorned with a modest ruff around her neck. An omen, perhaps, for she was hung by the neck on Easter morning 1752. In her final moments, modesty in death preoccupied her thoughts. "For the sake of decency, gentlemen," she pleaded with her would-be executioners, "don't hang me high."

## Headless Mike

One month after the Fat Man came down Nagasaki and one week after the curtain came down on Uncle Sam's involvement in World War II, a hatchet came down on the neck of a hapless chicken. Fifty-five years later, the town of Fruita, Colorado began holding annual events in honor of 'Mike the Chicken'. Dozens of families gather to let loose at the Chicken Cluck-off, watch chicken droppings decide the winner of Chicken Bingo, stab the air blindly during Pin The Head On The Chicken, compete in the 5k marathon Run Like A Headless Chicken Race, and so on. What manner of chicken could command such dedication? Even in the settler town of Fruita (whose only other claim to fame is the archeological discovery of the Fruitafossor, a termite-eating mammal with a body mass of less than 10 grams and the ability to capture your interest for less than 10 seconds), domesticated jungle fowls such as chickens aren't a rare sight. What was a rare sight, however, in 1945 or otherwise, was the hatchet of farmer Lloyd Olsen coming down on a chicken's neck, only for the chicken to continue moving. Not just moving, living. The killing stroke had not done much killing, removing most



of the head but leaving an ear, part of the brainstem, and a jugular vein intact. The result: Headless Mike the Miracle Chicken. A freak occurrence that landed a decapitated chicken in countless publications, including Time and Life magazine, and earned farmer Olsen a living as the fowl's tour manager. After a year and a half of show business, during which the bird was fed milk, water, and worms, Headless Mike choked on a kernel of corn stuck in what was left of its throat, in a roadside motel. Today, every third weekend of May, Fruita makes good on its town motto: "Honor the Past, Envision the Future." Remember our freak chicken, same time next year.

### **Ontologically Speaking**

"A specter is haunting Europe - the specter of Communism." Notions and concepts and ideas returning in the form of a revival, or reoccurring because of a societal need or demand or interest; the ghosts of ontology. A 'Hauntology', as French philosopher Jacques Derrida dubbed it in his book Specters of Marx in 1993. Since then, however, the term has become unfocused and only rarely used. A vague notion of things returning after 'death' and a critical approach to their resurgence. A suggestion: Hauntology would make a great title for a M. R. James story compendium.

### **Spurious Sightings**

Upon entering the Zak Bagans' 'The Haunted Museum' in Las Vegas, patrons are greeted by a Zoltar machine. This penny arcade mechanical fortune teller, customized to feature the face of museum owner Zak Bagans instead of the mildly offensive Orientalist caricature usually showcased inside the machine, sets the mood for what to expect during your ephemeral stay at the museum. Zak Bagans, who's been the 'lead investigator' on nearly two decades worth of television shows, each focused on supernatural sightings, puts showmanship first, science later. Way later. In fact, science hasn't come into it as of yet. Boasting the use of all manner of electronic gadgets in their 'Ghost Adventures', including Spectrum Cams, EVP Recorders, Infrared, TriField Meters, and anything short of a Ghostbusters Proton Pack, hasn't much helped solidify Zak's documentaries as 'Science-based'. Neither in the ghost hunter commu-

nity or otherwise. But a visit to The Haunted Museum will put you face-to-face with a glass box. A vintage wine cabinet. A gift shop. I assure you, even in context, these things do not elicit dread. I'm told, sometimes you can hear a rumbling in the distance; the sound of Zak Bagans leaving the museum in his Lamborghini at the end of the day. The horror has left this place, and we're left with knick knacks.

## **Taboo**

Director William Friedkin is no stranger to taboo. His 1973 horror film about a possessed teenager has the dubious honor of having both the feature film and the trailer for the feature film banned, albeit for different reasons. The theatrical trailer, showcasing unnerving black and white stills of the movie in rapid succession while ominous orchestration assaults the viewer, was deemed too affecting and potentially seizure-inducing. The word was out though and people flocked to the film, at least in countries where it was released. The film was lumped in with the so-called 'Video Nasties' at the time due to its content, although there is nothing as explicit in the film as its contemporaries were showing. Yes, the film depicts a teenager stabbing her groin with a crucifix while inviting the Lord to "Fuck me!"; but at least it didn't depict the real life murder of animals and the faux life murder of humans to the degree of something like 1980s Cannibal Holocaust. Friedkin (whose repertoire of taboo extends to shooting highly dangerous chase scenes without a permit on populated NYC streets, a thriller focused on the gay night life scene and murder in the 1980s, and a crime drama based on the serial rampage of killer Richard Chase) has taken it all in stride, though, displaying an almost Brahmanist outlook on his life and career. "We all wind up the same way, no matter what our goals or ambitions are. We have nothing at all to say about how we got into this world or how are going to leave it."

# My Dad is a Liar

Axel Chen

You told me you're fine, but your hand shakes when you hold a spoon. I don't get how you can be sick like this. You never died during the war. You were "the unkillable bastard". You can't be dying now.

Captain, I had so many things I wanted to tell you, so many questions I wanted to ask. I'm never going to get answers to them. I hate that you promised me you'd be there for me. I hate you, I hate you, I really hate you. Okay, Captain? I really hate you. Why can't you stay with me a little longer?

I keep fidgeting, but I don't know why. I can't run away anymore.

When I look around the room, it feels like it should be a cozy place, a place that you make your home, but... everything feels cold. The walls are painted a lifeless grey. Orange light from the sunset comes in through the lopsided, broken blinds. A dusty recliner with a jacket on it, a random folding chair in the middle of the floor, a bookshelf with none of the books put away right. All the furniture is a boring color. It smells like rotten clothes. How is this a "living" room? One that belongs to someone like Captain?

Captain looks like an out-of-commission tank on the couch, staring deadpan at the TV screen, not even bothering to change the channel when the same show plays over and over again. He coughs again. The walls shake when he coughs.

Captain looks at me. "Hey, Camillo. A word of advice." He stretches out "Camillo" like it's a costly word. "Lay off the menthols. Or else you'll end up like me," he says.

I don't have the heart to tell him it's too late for me. Captain doesn't remember that I started smoking at 8 to try to be strong like him,

and I can't tell him I spent my 16th birthday alone smoking a full pack in a littered parking lot because he couldn't be there for me. I hated it at first, but now the smell of smoke reminds me of home, of Captain telling me to wake up in the morning, eat my vegetables, and tuck in my uniform. Now when I smell the smoke, it's like a slap on the wrist – a punishment that I deserve. Captain acts like it's nothing, but it's not nothing. It's lung cancer or something. I don't know what.

All I can muster is “Sure, Captain.” I feel so ashamed, lost. I'm so scared. I'm finally sitting here beside him but I can't do anything.

Cancer, heart attacks, strokes, Alzheimer's... A growing list of ailments taunts me to shout back at Captain. Just as he did to me when I would want to give up: that it doesn't end here, that he has to fight, that life is cruel, and in the end, it'll all be okay.

I try to tell myself he'll be fine. He'll recover. He always does. Nothing stopped him on the battlefield. How could retirement kill him? Still, it hurts to watch Captain walk it off as nothing – the awful crunching, snapping, crackling of his bones and joints. It's hard to keep pretending everything's normal when I can't help notice how Captain begins to fall apart from just one little step.

Captain tells me I'm grown up now, and ruffles my hair. “You can call me John now”, Captain reiterates.

I don't know how to respond. Even something as simple as this, I'm a lost duckling. I offer to get Captain water. Captain says he's okay. His wrinkles move when he smiles at me. Seeing him like this, I can't take it anymore. I want to see him fight.

Captain leans forward and the couch makes a groaning noise. He says I'm welcome in his home anytime but then asks me to go back to the orphanage at the same time. Captain looks around the room and says it's not a good place here. He's wearing a tank top with orange stains on it. He ducks his head down as he says he's ashamed

of the life he leads.

Go back!? I feel so, so betrayed he would say that. I just want to punch Captain for saying something so evil. Why is he throwing me away again? Does he even know how bad it was in that hell? I get up but try not to yell at Captain. “Why did you leave me at the orphanage?” I ask him as firmly as I can. I try to keep my back straight the way he used to scold me to. The carpet feels cold through the hole in my sock as I stand in front of Captain, waiting for my answer.

His eyes lose the shine in them. He says, “Oh, Camillo.” He tries to ruffle my hair again, but I move my head away. I can’t believe he’s trying this. He stares at me again like everything’s still fine.

He continues, “Camillo, I...” And then he waits. He waits for God to tell him what to say or he waits for me to start laughing. I don’t know what he waits for. He finally says it’s a lot of things. He says it’s something about money and finance. Something about his wife and something about age. I wish God would give him some better words.

And then, he says that he’s a captain. He’s my captain. And he says that he’s the captain of the

Leonardo company, not a dad. He didn’t know how to be a dad, but he wanted to, and he really tried. But he’s not suited to be a dad and says I’m proof of it. He says something about me being a handful, and that if I was left in a room, I’d probably kick down the walls and run away into more trouble.

He reaches his hand out to pat me on the shoulder. His knuckles are red, but his skin is pale. He says he wasn’t ready to raise any kid, let alone a kid like me, but he did it because he didn’t want his men to get soft. He says he was scared of further hurting me because I already had a lot of hurting. He says something like that. I don’t know when I stopped listening, but he says something stupid like that.

I tell Captain about how the orphanage staged photos of me for donations, how the headmistress does drugs, how the guard suplexed Chrissy one time. I tell him about how it hurt when I found out some of the other orphans weren't even orphans. They had real parents, normal families, and they were only rented there for money.

"They even called you a 'rental dad' when I would talk about you!" I yell back. "I talked about how great you were, all the times you were brave, even that time you saved us from a landmine!" Captain's eyes move away to the side. "I wished you were there to tell them yourself. I was so lonely there."

Captain told me war is always full of tough decisions, but why didn't he just decide to stay with me? Being without Captain, it felt like I lost my anchor on the world. I didn't know who to ask anymore, I couldn't tell what was good from bad. Captain made me feel a little more normal when I already knew I couldn't hang out with the other grown-up soldiers. They already had little groups and everything. I was just "kiddie shit". But Captain sometimes made room for me. Back when we were in the platoon, during our service, he told me bad people would hurt me because he was the Captain. But that he would keep me safe, and that I could tell Captain anything. Why won't you do the same for me, Captain? I promise I'll understand. I wish war never ended so we could have more time together. I know your blood type, but I don't even know what you like to eat.

"When I'd tell the other orphans the food there tasted better than our MREs, they'd tell me to go eat the sand outside. When I'd say I'd fought for their freedom, they'd say 'look at the freedom we have here' and point to the boarded up windows. They said they could probably fight better than me, even. When the higher ups heard that I was from the military, they'd call me weird names and force me to do double the cleaning work. And when I didn't do it to their liking, they'd yell at me and I'd get blamed for everything! Then, when rich people would come, they'd go trash the place to look all dirty and shit! No one believed me! They told me to 'just be

normal! I used to, every night on the packed bunk beds, I'd count empty prayers on my fingers for the day you'd come back, I was so desperate. Just where were you to help me then?!"

I wipe the runny snot off my nose with my sleeve.

"And whenever the fake orphans would go home, and when then the nurses would blurt out that you dropped me here, and sometimes even myself, they'd mock me and ask where my real, non-rental dad was..."

"But you knew my dad died!" My heartbeat – I feel it burning in my throat. "You knew that my dad died! You said he got shot when I was 2! I thought you were my dad for so long, for, for over a decade, but you only told me when you dumped me at the orphanage like a fucking piece of shit! Ten fucking years you didn't tell me! All my childhood you hid this from me?! Who are you, really?! Huh!?" I have to keep gasping for air to keep up. I look at Captain, and somehow he looks more familiar.

He has this same look when he's angry: his nose scrunches up, his chin wrinkles, and his eyes turn dark. He says in his deep voice, "Since when did you get this rude?" His breath reeks. I can tell he still smokes as much as he used to.

I yell back at Captain, "Since you left me!" My tears are hot as they fall. "I've been trying to be nice to you sir, but- but why are you acting like nothing happened? Do you know how bad it was- how shit it was like in the orphanage? Did you even listen to me?! And you left me there to fend for myself!" I really want to punch Captain right now, but seeing his grey hair makes me hesitate. I feel weak.

Captain's deep voice turns grittier and his face gets red. "Don't you dare use that tone with me, soldier! And don't say it like that," he says. "I was trying to protect you!" He lets out a big angry sigh. "I wanted you to be safe," he says. "I did everything to protect you," he says.

A thick vein raises on Captain's neck. It scares me. I try to swallow the spit in my mouth as I pinch my lips closed.

"I wanted the best for you," he sighs again. He sounds less angry, but the giant vein is still there. "I wanted you to be happy. You deserve a good life."

"Why did only you get to decide what was "happy" for me? What was "good" for me, what was "better" – no, "best" – for me? Why do only you get to do that?" I try to be tough like Captain, but I feel like I'm the one making the statue face now. I wonder if Captain still recognises me.

Captain says something about responsibility and intuition, and his leadership and experience in the military. I forget what else he says. I get tired of listening to his boring crap.

"Why didn't you just adopt me, sir?" I blurt out, holding back my tears as much as I can. I hate how my voice squeaks like a bird when I can finally ask it now.

Captain keeps staring at me for an eternity, like he's asking himself if I'm still his son or not, and then says something about blood. He says something about guilt, and family, and dads, and sons, and professionalism, and legality, and feeling things you shouldn't feel about. I don't want to hear any of it.

Sometimes I wish my real dad hadn't died. 'Cause then, everything would be easier. I don't even know how to pronounce my last name. I wish Captain had put Davis instead on my orphanage papers. At least he can teach me how to pronounce it.

I can't hold it in anymore. I start crying really hard. I get hiccups. Captain gets up from the couch and tries to hug me. His bones make that same awful, creaking sound when he stands up. As angry, and confused, and sad I am, I hug Captain back. I think back to when Captain used to be so mad at me for crying. He'd always yell



at me and say, “Don’t be a little wimp! This is war! Men don’t cry! Remember that you must be prepared to lose your own. That’s an order, do you understand me?”

When Captain tells me this again now, his voice is soft. He’s not yelling at me anymore. He can’t yell at me anymore. I miss when Captain was loud.

We lost men back in the platoon. But, it was always sudden and unexpected. Now that it’s like this, with Captain dying, I don’t know what to do anymore. I wish it had been me who died in the delivery room instead.

Captain keeps saying things, but I don’t know what anymore. I just know it sounds nice to me. I missed Captain’s voice. Even if Captain is a fat liar.

“I’m not r-ready. I still need you,” I tell Captain.

Captain keeps lying and tells me I still have him. He says we still have time, but we don’t. I wish Captain was healthier, so I could really beat him up.

When I imagined meeting Captain, I was so excited. I thought I would say, “Captain, open your eyes! See how much I have grown up!” And I would tell him all about my life. Part of me worried Captain would forget me or not want me anymore. But I remember when I first knocked on his door, and Captain opened it, he was shocked for so long, his face looked like a statue. I remember thinking to myself, “Aren’t you happy to see me?” Afterwards, he gave me a wide smile with all his pale-yellow teeth. I half-expected to see Captain rolled out on a wheelchair. I thought his ribs would be sticking out, and there’d be a catheter attached to his dick. But no, he was glowing, smiling, confidently walking around with his usual attitude and charisma. I wish we trusted each other more, Captain.

I wonder back to everything that led up to this. I remember how

enraged I was when I found Captain's letter to me in the orphanage dumpster. That night, I almost had a fever, thinking about how many letters Captain had sent, and how many fucking letters I had missed. The piece of shit orphanage, who used me like a badge of merit for more donations. And that fat fucking lady, who was throwing away Captain's letters.

I remember how cold and hard it was the first time I slept on a bus stop bench. My back curls up by itself when I think about it. That night I escaped... I remember clutching Captain's dog tag in my hands and praying until I passed out. It was my reminder to be strong like Captain. It was hard without my friends from the orphanage, but I had to find Captain.

I remember no one helped me. I remember asking for help to find the address, and all the adults didn't want to help me because I was a Nepali. They'd say "Look at you, look at you, get away from me you disease-carrying rat", "Your mum is probably darker than the shit that comes out of my arse", "Your accent is so thick, can you speak English? I don't speak defeat," and treat me like I was just some big fucking idiot who didn't know anything. One group even said they're going to call the police on me to get me "real" help. I became so resentful and fed up. If I was with Captain, he wouldn't have needed to give me his dog tag. If I was with Captain, I wouldn't need it at all.

Then I remember how happy I was when I saw some car ad and realised I was in West Grestin, and that Captain's address on the letter was in West Grestin. I remember laughing like such a wimp. Maybe I could've been happier in the limbo of never knowing how he was doing than finding out like this. I don't know what's real anymore. I just wish we could go back to how it used to be. When we were both normal, and we were like everyone else. I've tried forgetting about you Captain, did you know that?

I look at Captain, who is still hugging me. I let go of him. When I look at his face, his wrinkly, oily face with that stupid smile, it makes me feel so cheated out of a genuine dad. Captain never

even let me call him “Dad” when we were in the platoon. It was always “Captain” this or “Sir” that. When I look at his face now, I don’t know if I can still see Captain anymore.

“I waited for four days at the gate for you to come back. Do you know how much it fucked me up when you never did?!” I shout at him. “You made my life hell when you left me there! I thought you really didn’t want me anymore!”

All he says is he’s sorry, and he holds me again. He says he’s sorry for abandoning me at such a bad orphanage, for not telling me about my dad, for not spending enough time with me. It’s because he’s not a good dad, he says. He says that he can make it up to me now, and that he’ll learn. He says the army changes people, and that it changed him too. Captain says he never wanted to be a captain. Even on the walls at the orphanage, people hung photos of their family and friends. When I look at Captain’s walls, there’s only the crooked dusty dedication plaque. I feel Captain was a little cheated too.

I don’t want to fake a smile at Captain and say everything is going to be okay. I just want to fight. I just want to go beat up everything that Captain hates, everything that hurts Captain. I want to be brave and protect Captain too. But, now it feels like I’m the one who’s unable to fight in the first place. It’s my fault I don’t know how to help, isn’t it? Captain, I’m sorry about all the times I made you mad. All the times I complained about the early mile runs, the hard beds, the bland food, the cold showers. I take it all back, okay? Even the times when I wished I wasn’t your son and when I wished I had a family like all the other soldiers to go home to. Can you forgive me and stop pretending now?

I’m sorry Captain. I’m not the same anymore either. It hasn’t been easy without you. I’ve been a bad kid – I got into all sorts of trouble after you left. I never went to school like we used to talk about. I never wore a real school backpack and went into classrooms. I’m sorry, sir. I wish you didn’t have to see me like this. If I was better,

you wouldn't be like this. I wish I could know if I'm good enough. Are you going to yell at me? I feel like a dad would yell at me.

He doesn't yell at me. Captain tells me to take deep breaths, and I listen. He says to not think about the lost time. I just don't know what he wants me to think.

I feel Captain's chest tighten when he coughs. I think I hear Captain crying, but Captain never cries.

"You don't have to forgive me," he tells me in a shaky voice.

I hear the clock – it keeps ticking. I hate it so much. I wish the world would just go silent.

"Camillo, I'm old." He says "Camillo" in the weird way again, like he's making it last longer. "I'm not like I used to be," he tells me.

"Is it lung cancer?" I ask him, hastily.

Captain shakes his head and says "No, it's not." I don't know what it is then, anymore. I really hate it when he does this.

"Captain," I call him. "Captain? Captain!"

He tells me he's here, and it's all right. I keep calling his name. I don't know why. Maybe it reminds me that he's there, and that this is real. He's still on one knee, head bent down a bit to look at me. I feel like he needs to sit back down again but I don't want to let him go. I want to keep hugging Captain. I want him to keep talking to me. What if he sits down and doesn't stand back up? "Captain!! Captain!!!"

He tells me he's going to be okay. He tells me he's not hungry. He tells me he's not thirsty. He doesn't want food and he doesn't want water. I try to ask him again what he wants, and he tells me he doesn't need anything. He says he doesn't need me to worry about

that. He says to just stay with him.

Captain smiles at me. I can't even find myself to be angry at him anymore. He tells me I have my entire life to spend with him, but it still feels like he's leaving me again.

I tell Captain I wish I wasn't Nepali. He tells me to not say that. Captain used to say I looked a lot like my mum. I thought that was why I looked different from him. The way he talked about her, I missed her too. I tell Captain that I wish I was like him because then, I would have a dad. I panic when I realise I said the wrong thing, but Captain shushes me. He tells me he understands. He tells me it's okay, and that I was as rewarding as I was a pain in his arse. I don't know if he's lying or not.

Captain asks me to listen. He tells me it's okay to be scared. He tells me he's scared too. But we both have to be brave, for each other's sake. Captain doesn't ask me to stop crying, but I'm still waiting for him to. I tell Captain I'm scared and I can't protect him. Captain says he doesn't need me to protect him. I know he's lying, that last one. I don't know if this is Captain anymore, despite everything. I just keep holding on to him.

Captain asks me if I still have his tag. I fish the scratched up silver tag out of my pocket and throw it onto the fold-up table. The ringing is sharp.

Captain tells me dog tags represent a soldier's death. For five years I carried that around everywhere with me. And now, it's here on his table. Captain is really dying. But Captain tells me that he's not dead and that he's still here.

He picks it up and we both look at it. I think of my experiences with Captain. When he'd ruffle my hair and tell me it's all fine when I got into trouble, and treat me to the stockpile of spaghetti MREs in his cabinet. When we'd all watch the Titanic on the telly but only the first half, and I'd always fall asleep by the end because it was so

freaking boring. When he'd let me play in the tanks and helicopters after everyone left, and while he was looking the other way, I honked the horn and he jumped up like a startled cat. He'd chase me around the facilities and call it adaptive endurance training if anyone questioned us.

I remember Captain was the one who taught me how to properly shoot rifles and to "let it all out" in the ranges. Captain always had better aim than me. But one day I beat him. I felt proud of my victory, but in the back of my mind, I thought that this shouldn't have happened. Captain is always stronger. Sometimes he'd compare me to the other soldiers. They were always older, but he told me that to a bullet, age doesn't matter, so tough luck.

I remember thinking Captain didn't care, because he'd tell me he was tough to me for my sake. Sometimes the quiet judgement hurt worse than his loud reprimanding. When I'd ask Captain to play games with me, he'd respond with "go pick on someone else in your section," and I remember sometimes I'd piss him off just to test if he could hear me. But now that we're not in combat, I don't even know what I want to talk to Captain about anymore.

I never really knew what the war was really about. When I asked Captain, he just said we were fighting for our rights about freedom and about how unfair it was for us. War was necessary for our lives to become stable again, and we have to keep fighting because it's just what we do.

I don't know if I'm ready for another war. And I'm not ready for you to die. I just want to watch one more movie with you and fall asleep in your lap.

Captain keeps looking at the tag like it's a medal. He says he thought I could have been dead too and that he's happy to see me. He tells me he misses me too, and he feels a lot of the things I feel too. He says he's proud of me, and he loves me, and he's sorry. I never hear Captain saying he misses or loves anyone.

We stare at each other for a good few seconds. It feels like running through five years worth of time. Captain's paper thin skin and ugly liver spots become more noticeable the longer I stare.

I give Captain one more big hug. I want a better dad. Someone who's not old. A dad like everyone else's. A dad who doesn't lie. A dad who can listen to me, who understands me. But I do have one. I have Captain. Captain isn't perfect. I don't know if Captain will ever be perfect, but Captain is a dad. My dad.

I don't want to waste any more time thinking about things we've lost. Not while he's still here with me. As I hug him, I tell Captain we're going to be okay. And just like Captain, I'm a little bit of a liar too.

# Flash Fiction

Daniel Maslovkis

It was pouring down rain so hard that it made people question the strength of their jackets and umbrellas while they walked through the packed bazaar. Behind the stalls and away from the clamor of the people was a tucked away alleyway that was empty. There he was: a monstrosity of man, metal, and wiring stood right in the middle of the alleyway with his head hung low for he could not muster a single movement in any direction; he was slowly dying and he had no way to stop it. The rain pelted what seemed to be his head but he did not react, he could not feel the rain anywhere on his 'body'. He ran away from his corporation and was having his myriad of cybernetics turn off one by one; starting with the appendages and going into his inner systems, and that spelt certain death for him. The man didn't know if flesh even remained in his body for he had switched out nearly everything to be more efficient: his eyes so he could see better, his nose so he can identify certain smells individually, his ears so he can hear low frequency sounds, even his heart so it can pump faster. Looking back on it now the man began to wonder if he was even human anymore, whether he still had a soul, but before he could even begin to think he felt his nose and ears turn off. It was now he realized the gravity of his situation and tried to call out but couldn't; he began to feel the wiring in his nervous systems like rough snakes traversing through his body and he was powerless to stop them.

The rain continued to fall and pelt this quiet shell of a man though quiet was the complete opposite of what he was experiencing. He felt his mind go 100 miles per hour as the feeling of pain slowly crept back into his mind, and its gradual and slow return made it the pain feel like eons to him. After 30 seconds he began to regain his composure though he began to lose his eyesight in the process and all that was left was a blurry image and the thumping of rain that made his frame bounce. The man was now silent because he knew that the next item to go would be his artificial heart and he had to prepare himself somehow. The man began to wonder why if all of these cybernetics were worth it; if he had even achieved



something in his shirt life. That was when the little boy appeared. The boy was in a old wheelchair with what seemed to be I.V bags all around him and he wore a patients garb and a sad smile on his face. He asked the man “Was it worth it?”

The man was calm for some reason, there was no trace of the earlier fear and nervousness within him anymore. The man began to think about how to answer the small boy in front of him and that was when it struck the man: That young boy was him. He remembers how everyone abandoned him in the hospital ward, how only the slight pitter-patter of rain and hum of lightbars comforted him day and night. He thought back to how the nurses would check in on him like clockwork and quickly walk away to the next patient and how the janitor would stop by his door and look both ways before handing him a small, melted chocolate. He also thought back to the day when the faceless men in black suits and red ties came into his room and how, like a murder of crows, surrounded him and told him “be our lab rat or die in here” The boy remembered not even thinking about the deal and just shaking their hands. He remembers the look on the janitors face as he was being wheeled out by the murder of black-suited men. He tried to forget the pain and coldness of the lab but couldn't. The man sighed and tried to look the boy in the eyes and replied with, “Yes, I guess it was”

The moment the man finished talking he felt the rain on his face, the wind howling in his ear, and even the smell of the bazaar just up ahead.

“Follow me,” said the boy and he reached out his hand for the man to grab. The man looked up and down before he grabbed it back.

# The Prelude

Ziyi Wang

The door of the telephone booth slammed open, and she saw the glint of a knife. And that's all she would see until her corpse was fished from the river three days later. And then, she would see the blue sky, the diving birds, a trenchcoat wearing detective holding a cigarette while he observes the scene. And then, under the careful examinations, the body would yield the result of the seventh victim of The Canary Killer.

*This is where it ends, Clara.*

No!

She burst from the telephone booth. She didn't dare to look behind her, as her strides on the slick cobblestones became longer and faster. She could hear her own breathing, erratic and heavy, puffing out quick bursts of white air in the chilly autumn night.

She could almost hear the clack of footsteps behind her, almost feel his breathing at her neck, almost smell his earthy cologne as he whispered at her ear.

The wind picked up, the tails of her scarf blew like a flag in a storm. She felt like a flagpole in a storm, shivering and waiting to be struck by lightning.

She was running, where was she going? This shadowy street with no end, windows with no curtains, and only darkness inside.

The stars, where did it all go? Overhead, there was only darkness, an all-encompassing and suffocating shadow.

She saw something in the distance, a gleam of something in the dark. A phone booth, standing alone in the middle of the street. It

drew her in.

No. She just escaped from a telephone booth.

Clara looked behind her, the long stretch of alleyway swallowed in shadow, no end in sight.

How did she get here? She doesn't remember the road that took her to this street, she didn't remember why she came here. Did she take the bus? Did she walk? Her feet were numb. She can't remember what she did this morning. She can't remember where her home is or-

*Who is she?*

She is faceless. She is wearing a scarf and boots that makes her feet numb as she walks over the uneven cobblestones. She is walking on an autumn night, no, she is running from someone.

She is running, her feet pounding against the cobblestones. The cobblestones, why is it significant?

She came here from a cobblestoned road. She took a turn and it was night. She took a turn because she was running from someone. No, she took a turn and saw someone following her.

Someone who reminded her of-

*Who?*

Who is she thinking of? Who is she running from? Who is she? She is nameless- No, her name is Clara. Her name is Clara and she is running on an autumn night. On a cobblestoned road, a road with houses but no inhabitants. On a windy and cold night, a night without the moon and stars.

*It is an empty world, isn't it.*

Clara ran on a cobblestoned road.

*Stop running!*

Clara was on a cobblestoned road. The night was dark and the road had no end in sight. The wind picked up and it blew her hat off from her head.

*No. She wasn't wearing a hat, was she?*

Clara was on a cobblestoned road, and she shivered. Her scarf was carried away by the wind, and the chilly autumn night stung at her face. Nonetheless, she kept walking until her feet were sore and her blistered ankles rubbed against her boots.

Was there an end to this road, she wondered.

*Yes.*

“I’m so tired,” Clara confessed into the night.

*Then stop running.*

A sudden gale knocked her into the doors of a telephone booth. She stumbled inside. The night was still once more. And the door slammed open, the glint of a knife caught in the moonlight poised to strike. And that’s the last traces of her until three days later, when her corpse is fished from the river. And—

*Please!*

Clara stumbled on a cobblestoned road. Her gait burdened, her blistered feet shuffling over the uneven cobblestones.

She could almost hear the clack of footsteps behind her, almost feel his breathing at her neck, almost smell his earthy cologne as he whispers at her ear.

*Just stop running.*

She screamed. A wail erupting in the night, unanswered. The night was still, the moon was still, the leaves stranded in midair.

*The world is waiting for you to stop.*

Clara caught a dark figure in her peripheral. A flash of shadow, so quick that she doubted herself for a moment.

“Please! I don’t want my story to end!” She begged the night.

*I’m sorry, but you are not the protagonist.*

The dark figure crept closer. Clara felt goosebumps rising on her skin. She felt his breath on her, and she shoved behind her with all her strength.

When she should have made contact, there was only air. Unbalanced, she fell onto the cobblestones.

A hand clenched onto her wrist, she cried out, clawing at it and twisting her arms to escape. She was dragged over the cobblestones, her blistered feet scrabbling for purchase. The telephone booth opened with a creak, and she was shoved inside.

Terror was all she felt as the knife slashed towards her. It was all she could feel. And it was all she would ever feel.

*The writer sighed.*

Detective Renault surveyed the crime scene...

# untitled

S. Freeman

i.

I used to be obsessed with my  
grandmother's hands  
I would trace the veins with my fingertips  
the way my brother would run his toy cars along any line I would  
pinch the skin together  
and love how it would stay pinched  
I marveled at the boney bones of her fingers  
never scared like hanel from the story  
I couldn't imagine how she had ever been young  
cradling babies. kneading bread. caressing a lover.

ii.

I am obsessed with my  
mother's hands.  
I watch them and trace the veins with my eyes.  
she is embarrassed by them, feels betrayed by them.  
I lovingly hold her hand now  
and marvel at the fine lines that create a map of a life lived. I remember  
her being young  
cool hand on my forehead. playing piano. touching my father.

iii.

I am obsessed with the aging of  
my hands.  
they are the hands of a grown up  
veins beginning to slowly emerge  
plumping up to provide guidance for  
road ahead.  
I marvel that I am this old!  
Youth is not a prize for these hands. These hands have skills.  
they can tell a temperature. bedazzle any craft. make my lover gasp.

iv.

I am obsessed with my  
children's hands

once they were plump like starfish

always sticky and grabby

they are strong now

I marvel at their nails, the texture of their skin the insane elasticity.

Their thumbs come from their dad.

Their hands don't have visible stories yet

But they will. And they can follow the trail

of the women who came before them

while also creating their own.

# Liquidfied

Hanjie Chen

Drinks, the product of delight!  
Dreams, they make you feel so bright!  
Dread, they sink to the bottom tonight.  
May the lament never arise, until she asks  
*People drink for different things;  
Some for fun, some to run,  
Sun goes down when the hunt comes up,  
What do you drink for?*

I drink for what I have and  
What I'm afraid to lose;  
I drink for what I want and  
What I might never get, but instead I say  
*They drink for madness in the air  
And eternal flames beneath them,  
Only to pour the bittersweet rain  
And distinguish a world of pain.*

The looks of concern bring dismay,  
Though I must say, it slays.  
The child had always been good to relay,  
With no further delay, I say  
*Not to worry, 'tis but some grape juice.  
They ripen, get taken, aged until forsaken;  
Something to abandon, nothing to lose,  
When one has to gain, another has to pay.*



# African Violets

Jae Lee

Mother,  
Memories of you are water in me  
without them I wither  
with too much I am drowned.

Remembering you is like having caramel latte  
in a hazy morning,  
especially with the crisp air rustling,  
which resembles your laugh: the  
Bewitching aroma potion  
imbued with enticing sweetness,  
my heart badly wants it;  
my body cannot take it anymore.

Memories of you are like  
gastric acid when I stay up all night:  
gobbling up oxygen,  
the pungent liquid spreads like poison;  
my whole body starts to shrink  
like vacuum-sealed meat.

Forgetting you is like hiding from the sun  
in June of Greenland,  
sometimes in Death Valley,  
rarely, barely during the rainy season.

Mother,  
Living in memories of you  
is like growing flowers  
sensitive to acidic soil  
vulnerable to arid wind  
susceptible to ailment; nonetheless  
If I could see you watering African violets  
with glasses hung on the tip of your nose,  
even if it were a dream,  
I would gladly keep growing them.

# Yo Puedo

Kimberly A. Martinez

In shadows cast by doubting whispers near,  
An imposter's veil, I wear, concealed with fear.  
A person seeking paths anew,  
To graduate heights, yet uncertain, I pursue.

Yet within these hallowed halls, I strive to fit,  
To prove my worth, amidst this doubting pit.  
But deep within, a gnawing voice takes hold,  
Imposter syndrome, a story yet untold

The weight of comparison, a heavy load,  
Measured against expectations, the future foretold.  
Whispers echo, "You don't belong here, they say,  
A pretender, undeserving, you'll soon betray."

Yet she has roots that run deep, embedded in her core,  
A heritage that fuels her dreams even more.  
A tapestry of culture, colors intertwined,  
Empowering her spirit, a legacy divine

Yet, amidst the chaos, a flicker of hope ignites,  
A voice that whispers, "Embrace your own lights."  
For in this journey, I am not alone,  
Others too have felt this tone.

For deep within my Latina soul,  
Resides a strength that makes me whole.  
I'll shatter ceilings, break down every door,  
As I embark on this college school floor.

Through honesty and courage, I shall prevail,  
Overcoming doubt, I will surely scale.  
The mask I wear, I'll cast it far away,  
Embracing authenticity, come what may.

With roots as my anchor, heritage as my guide,  
I'll conquer imposter syndrome, side by side.  
For I am resilient, destined to thrive,  
A Latina scholar ready to come alive.

# Selfish

Kimberly A. Martinez

In the realm of a split family's divide,  
A daughter who learns to reside,  
Balancing a double life with grace,  
Yet burdened by stress, her own time's embrace.

With footsteps straddling two separate lands,  
She dances delicately, her hearts in two hands,  
One side speaks of memories once shared,  
The other, is new beginnings that have been bared.

Her days blur together, an intricate juggling act,  
Nurturing connections, her energy, in fact,  
Dissipates, leaving her with little time to breathe,  
Lost in the labyrinth of roles she must conceive.

She carries the weight of expectation's hold,  
A daughter divided, her story yet untold.  
Yearning for moments to call her own,  
She finds herself stretched, her essence prone.

But as she seeks solace, her time slips away,  
Caught in the crossfire, where guilt holds sway.  
Her desires were labeled selfish, her dreams scorned,  
Yet within her spirit, a fire is adorned.

Though others may judge and call her names,  
She knows her desires are not to blame.  
For self-care is not selfish, it's a vital need,  
To honor her being, her spirit freed.

With resilience as her armor, she stands tall,  
Unfurling her wings, ready to embrace it all.  
A latina daughter, determined to find her way,  
Balancing her worlds, creating her own sway

In her journey, she'll find strength untold,  
As she navigates the paths her heart unfolds.  
No longer bound by expectations' strife,  
She'll embrace her truth and claim her life.

# Stage Fright

Kimberly A. Martinez

In the realm of the stage, where shadows dance,  
A soul entangled in a relentless trance.  
A burden hard to bear,  
The weight of its symptoms, a constant affair.

A trembling heart, a racing pulse, so loud,  
As doubts and fears gather in a darkened shroud.  
A shallow breath, a tightening in the chest,  
Anxiety's grip, relentless and possessed.

sweaty palms, quivering hands they betray,  
The nerves that consume, in disarray.  
A mind that races, thoughts tangled and tight,  
The fear of judgment, the spotlight's harsh light.

But behind the scenes, a hidden truth prevails,  
The anguish and struggle that each day entails.  
A battle fought silently, a lonely endeavor,  
A performer's heart, seeking solace, however.

The endless rehearsal, the quest for perfection,  
Yet plagued by doubts, a constant reflection.

The mirror's gaze, a critic so harsh,  
Amplifying flaws leaving self-esteem parched.  
Each step on the stage, a mountain to climb,  
The weight of expectations, a relentless chime.

With each breath, a mantra, a guiding light,  
To embrace the stage, to soar in the limelight.  
To find solace in the passion that ignites,  
And transcend the anxiety's gripping heights.

So, dear performer, let courage be your guide,  
Embrace the stage, and let your talents collide.  
For within your struggles, you shine so bright,  
A testament to your spirit's resilient might.

It's okay to have *performance anxiety*,  
For in vulnerability, we find our authenticity.

# What I Do

Ananya

I do what I can. I massage my face trying to loosen the muscles, but they're wound around my mouth so tightly I can barely speak my mind. My lips have been sewn together and bound by my teeth. I push the bones together to interlock them like puzzle pieces, but the edges are jagged and no longer mesh as they should. I hear them creak and crackle and clank about, a symphony of broken wind chimes. I try to accept the permanent presence of pain. I can only do so much.

I try to do whatever I can. I use my fingers to separate the flower buds and feel the sticky trichomes inching their way under my nails. Sparkling crystals of orange and purple and green; glittering, juicy jewels in the palm of my hand. I inhale the aromatic spices, the pungent fumes of gasoline intermingled with fruity sweetness. I pack my bowls to the brim and burn and breathe. I watch as the green burns away to blackness and the red-orange embers of heat spread like a disease, loosening my mouth and mind, my throat and lungs, my heart and my eyes. Relief can only be realized temporarily. I can only do so much.

I do anything I can. I pace the grounds and turn my eyes toward the skies. Clouds of pastel white float across my mind and dissipate to give way to a dazzling blue. I suddenly remember that clouds are three dimensional, huge entities making their way through the air and not just paintings on a canvas of blue. I crouch on the grass and see the smallest of creatures, walking with a preordained purpose and conclusive confidence I could only hope to imitate. Little feet, marching in rhythm with the dirt between their toes, if bugs even have toes. They don't. I pluck grasses of green and dried out yellow, their edges softly sharpened and bending in the breeze. I watch the birds and find my heart filled with a kind of euphoric lamentation, a nostalgic, soaring sorrow that I cannot find the beautiful words to explain. I wish I could fly. But I can only do so much.

# Sweet Mother

Mia Rodriguez

It hits me when I wake  
In the soft bed of linen and cotton.  
Breaking my fast with a fry and sizzle.  
I do it without thinking,  
Each morning.  
Slipping into silk and wool.

The clothing on my back,  
The roof over my head,  
Each bounty of daily life  
Gifted by her.

Sweet mother who nurtured me.  
Through every arduous memory,  
She brought light.  
Sweet mother  
Whose calloused hands  
And tinsel streaked hair  
Carry remnants of the challenges  
That she persisted through for me.

Work alarms sounding down the hall  
Before the sun rises.  
The quiet scurry of shower curtains and closet doors.  
The soft coo of her hair dryer.  
An ambience that I sleep through peacefully.

Sweet mother who took a past so tragic  
And created magic.  
Mended with heart shaped pancakes and soft kisses.  
With bedtime stories and warm baths.  
Woven back together like a blanket  
Made of home.

Sweet mother who cleans with inclination.  
Leaving shining wooden floors  
And glistening silverware.  
Creating sanctuary with her bare hands.  
A rite out of habit  
to leave things more perfect than she found them.

Sweet mother, who does it all.  
Without need for praise

Sweet mother, whose care can be seen in darkness  
Whose love can be heard in silence.  
Whose devotion can be felt long after death.  
I want you to know, I see it all.

# The Hospital

Caroline Murugan

My earliest recollection of wanting to work in a hospital is from when I was a teenager. Although at that point I did not know in which capacity I would work in a hospital, it was a place where I found comfort as well as exhilaration. Lipton writes in his book “my whole being was transfixed by the alien world of this cell that, for me, was more exciting than today’s computer animated special-effects movies” (xvii). Just as Lipton was fascinated by his observations of cells, I was also moved by my experiences working in the hospital.

When I was 16 years old, I worked as a volunteer at Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital over my school summer break. I remember feeling a nervous excitement as I walked into the hospital for the first time. After completing my orientation, I put on a beige-pink smock that felt like stiff cotton. I matched the senior citizens in the hospital lobby who volunteered most days of the week. For a fashion-conscious teenager, I was glad that none of my classmates were around to see me in this bland, boxy smock. As I followed my chaperone, a nurse named Brenda, I consumed as much of my surroundings as I could. As my shoes squeaked down the shiny, sterile linoleum floor down the hallways towards the maternity ward, I absorbed the various smells of rubbing alcohol, mixed with lunch wafting from the cafeteria. The smell was something between baked chicken and gravy, combined with antiseptic. As we entered one of the empty maternity rooms, Brenda firmly instructed me precisely how to change the bedsheets. She demonstrated how to carefully fold the corners of the top sheets, and how to slowly remove a pillow cover, so as not to cast around dust or germs. Although I was a little intimidated by Brenda’s commanding manner, I was also grateful for the insight into how things were done at the hospital. It made me feel a little more like an insider in this complicated place.

Besides changing sheets, my other responsibilities included bringing new mothers ice chips. I would fill a small paper Dixie cup with ice chips that looked like miniature snowballs from the machine down the hall. Entering the maternity room was like entering



a dimly lit, warm cocoon, with just the sounds of newborn baby gurgles and vital monitors humming and beeping. New mothers, groggy from birth and lack of sleep, showed relief and gratitude for these ice chips, by giving me a warm smile. The tiny gesture of giving these ice chips and the small bit of care it showed to these new mothers made me feel so good. In some slight way, I was helping in their care. I would also help by removing the lunch tray, which usually contained half eaten rubbery looking chicken, pungent gravy and over-steamed vegetables. Sometimes the nurses would walk into the room during that moment, with a caring yet authoritative demeanor. They would check the mother's vital signs, with complete command of the delicate yet powerful monitoring machines. I wondered how they knew what each light and button meant in this seemingly convoluted beast full of thick wires and nodes.

The next day as I started my second shift at the hospital, I felt a rush of exhilaration and anticipation. The chatter from the nurses' station, family conversations seeping out into the hallways and the overhead paging system always made for a bustling atmosphere. I was so excited to be a part of this place where no day is the same and where there is constant learning.

As I progress on this journey towards becoming a nurse, I am still inspired by my experience as a teenage volunteer at Cottage Hospital. Being part of an incredible place where health and life itself are dependent on the knowledge and care of a few individuals, is something that continues to motivate me on this particular journey.

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## The 2023 Jim Luotto Prize for Essays on Literature

*co-winners:*

Aiden Glennon

Jennilyn Phee

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### Separate, but so Unequal: How Anne Bradstreet Found Power in Poetry

Aiden Glennon

Mother nature is an economical woman. Not an inch of the human form goes wasted, and not one part is left without purpose: be it the liver, the brain and heart, or the divided halves of the sexes. Because of her frugality, packed within every puny human's head is the unique ability to write life into inanimate things, invent tools to build the the wings she thought too costly, and to work together for the better. Yet despite having all this laid out for humanity, the difference between men and women proved to great for some to simply accept. For millennia, men have forced the world to lack half its brain, and history has gone to show for it. It is haunting to think about how much brilliant literature the patriarchy has denied the world over the ages, all due to ego and a hatred for the other half of humanity. Thankfully, there are always exceptions to every rule, and women, more so warriors, have managed to slip through the cracks in their patriarch's iron grasp. Colonial American poet Anne Bradstreet was one of those women, and she knew better than to let her talents be squandered in squalor. Through her pen's panache, Bradstreet brazenly asserts that men and women are of equal literary potential, but spend it differently because they at the time were designated to live separate lives, creating her own feminine realm of poetry to rule over. Although she does not completely resist the matronly mould set out for her by American Puritan culture, as demonstrated in "Before the Birth of One of Her Children", Bradstreet does manage to shape it to her comfort by spending her potential writing about how the topics of her works are important as well it in "The Prologue".

Life in colonial New England was miserable for all parties involved, as the poor English settlers could not escape the dreary bogs and frigid weather of their homeland even three thousand miles across the Atlantic. But the crushing weight of the Puritan faith they brought with installed an additional element of social pressure that made it especially difficult for women to find peace in their new surroundings. If a colonial woman's influence was ever exerted beyond their domestic duties, it most likely would not have been through poetry, with literacy often never extending beyond being able to read the Bible. Bradstreet was one of the lucky few women whose knowledge of literature did go further than that, and she was determined to make good use of it. The intention of "The Prologue" is clear within the title; she meant to compose a preface to set the tone for the rest of what she was to write. And write she most daringly did, declaring her independence from the poetic standards men saw as universal and unshakable.

Although her first collection of poems may have been published without her knowledge, Bradstreet would have been well aware of who her audience would be and the inevitable reaction they would have had to her poetry if it were to be publicly released: whatever she decided to write would be met with harsh criticism and controversy simply by virtue of her being a woman invading a space then reserved only for men. She accepts the terms of her challengers unflinchingly, and exhibits her *modus operandi* in "The Prologue". Employing the grandest tone, and most epic prosody possible, Bradstreet begins by saying, "To sing of wars, of captains, and of kings / [...] for my mean pen are too superior things" (121). Firstly, the line including "for my mean pen" serves two functions. Placing this phrase at the beginning, Bradstreet plays with the interpretive ambiguity of the modest statement, making the reader question whether she speaks generally as a humble writer or sarcastically as a jaded woman. Deliberately omitting any explicit mentions of the speaker's sex, meaning that unless the reader is aware of Bradstreet's gender, muddles the clarity meaning that both could be true, and she is saying that writing is limited in its scope, regardless of who is writing it, establishing her incontestably as an author either way. However, the first line does indirectly hint at the

speaker's gender through their opinion of the realm of men. Secondly, all the symbols included in this line are typically male- exclusive: battle, power, and singing of them as a bard would were roles entirely meant for men. Together, these two lines contribute to her character as an individual, her proclamation to the world that she is unafraid to make statements against the status quo.

Once eventually revealing the speaker to be a woman, Bradstreet only becomes more bold and as the poem progresses, eventually concluding with, "And of ye high flown quills that soar the skies / [...] If e'er you deign these lowly lines your eyes / Give thyme or parsley wreath, I ask no bays" (123). Her evidently exaggerated tone develops her individual character further, showing the reader that her work, despite how absolutely breathtaking men think their writings to be, will take on value of its own because she believes so. Writing on different topics does not make one or the other inferior. However, there is some mild sincerity in her voice; she concedes that she will never be seen as great in the eyes of men whose writings rule the literary world; that she is undeserving of a laurel crown as the revered poets of yore were. She knows she is just one pitiful woman playing at a man's game: but ultimately, she says so be it. If need be, she will adorn herself with a crown thyme and parsley, symbols plucked straight from her kitchen spice rack, to show her work has equal, but different, value to what men write. The poem as a whole can be taken as ironic; setting her poem in consistently perfect iambic pentameter, being the standard rhythm to which most male poets composed their poetry, while also talking about how terrible she is at writing is a clever contradiction that would have grated against the egos of her male competitors. She takes their conventions and shows male writers that she has the agency to work with their rules and apply them to the mundane things in her life just as well as they can apply them to stories of war and death, even while she works under the societal constraints of a woman. But iambic pentameter is also the meter of the heart, showing that her poetry is alive and heartfelt, almost as if her work is a part of her, like a child.

Despite the defiant spirit she showed in "The Prologue", Bradstreet was still a humble Christian mother at heart. "Before the

Birth of One of Her Children” is a lilting, sombre couplet written as an apostrophe to her husband as she worries about possibly dying during childbirth. Bradstreet places herself in her more traditional and expected role as a mother rather than a writer, demonstrating how women are allowed to move in between and mix the roles they choose for themselves. The poem’s eloquence and grave topic all but confirm her self-limiting sarcasm in “The Prologue”, as she sorrowfully sings, “No ties so strong, no friends so dear and sweet, / But with death’s parting blow is sure to meet / [...] A common thing, yet so inevitable” (131). Bradstreet utilizes her agency as a poet for cathartic expression at a time when women had few avenues to practice it, let alone have it shown to the world. Women of her time were worth their weight in children, and childbirth was a painful experience they would have had to endure over and over. In writing about her intimate personal pregnancy fears, Bradstreet carves out a space for women in the literary world to reconcile with themselves, while also legitimizing childbirth as an event deserving of poetic dedication rather than just a biological act done for the sake a man’s legacy. Just as mentioned in “The Prologue”, men may think they are the only ones who write of ancient bloody battles, but as a mother of eight children, Bradstreet has probably seen more blood than any of them. In writing her he postures herself as an individual, who experiences pain like every other person, but in a way only a woman could understand. She mentions how the dread of dying was “a common thing” for women of the time, meaning that telling her story in this poem creates a beacon for other women to follow, reach and relate to, demonstrating how she claimed and used her space as a writer and a mother for helping other women reconcile with themselves and their repressed emotions. She very much took “write what you know” to heart.

The binding thread between Bradstreet great loves of family and writing was the third member of her own Holy Trinity: God. Of course, as a good Puritan woman whose God was present in all aspects of her life, Bradstreet does not neglect to include him from her meditation on the reality of death. Within the lamentations of “Before the Birth” is a plea to God to be merciful to her children if she does end up dying, asking Him, “And if I see not half my days

that's due, / What nature would, God grant yours and you" (131). Revealed from this prayer is the role played God in her life and what He meant to her. Living in a hostile new world and confined by the strict societal limits set on her gender, God represented a reprieve or insurance that death would bring some peace. While it is hopeful appeal that her children will live longer lives for her death, it is also a preemptive concession that she is expected to do everything for her children because she is a Puritan woman. Both "Before the Birth" and "The Prologue" represent different yearnings and feelings other women in her circumstances shared. "Before the Birth" is honest about the life Puritan women were subjected to, while the "The Prologue" is hopeful that one day, women will simply be able to write their life's experiences without scrutiny from men who think it taints the pool of poetry.

Compared to the unapologetic women who succeeded her, Bradstreet's poetry may seem milquetoast and too forgiving to the male-dominated society that was unwilling to let even laurel of sodden leaves rest on the most brilliant woman's head. She never wanted to break entirely free from the doting Christian mother ideal, even though she stood her ground when she needed. But progress is made by slow steps; in the centuries since she passed, the world has somewhat woken up to realize how much potential is wasted by locking women away in kitchens their entire lives. Bradstreet proved to her contemporaries that poets do not need to write the next Iliad to be epic; describing the struggles of being a mother can be just as incredible. Pens are turned knives in the hands of women, whose blade goes straight for the heart; maybe that power to provoke emotion is why ever-stoic colonial men were so reluctant to let women hold them.

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## Finding the Secrets to Our Own Universe

Jennilyn Phee

*Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz is a queer young adult novel that I am confident young adults today could relate with; maybe not even just young adults, but twenty-six-years-olds like me too. The story follows the progression of the friendship of Aristotle Mendoza and Dante Quintana, fifteen-year-old boys in high school who find common ground as loners and learn how to figure out the universe they live in together. Growing up from fifteen to seventeen-years-old and experiencing puberty wasn't easy for Aristotle and Dante and it was an awkward time in their lives where they learned about themselves, their bodies, and how to perceive the world around them. While reading this novel, it was easy to think back on my own life and the struggles I had to face to get to where I am today. With this essay, I will be comparing and contrasting my life to Aristotle and Dante's experiences, as well as provide my literary analysis of the novel.

At the beginning of the novel, Aristotle, or Ari for short, shares with us how he feels as a teenager struggling with everyday routine and showcasing his negative outlook on life. On the first page he says, "As far as I was concerned, the sun could have melted the blue right off the sky. Then the sky could be as miserable as I was" (Sáenz 1). Ari is really unhappy with himself and his current life, so he does what he can to get through the day because he has no friends, no siblings present to really look up to, and his relationship with his parents isn't at its best; one can even assume he is depressed. Many people, especially young adults, struggle with some sort of depression at some point in their life, myself included. With all the stresses and pressures of life and growing up, it's easy to want to cast yourself to the side and think negatively like Ari. In high school, I also felt like it was hard to fit in and even though I had friends, my connections never felt deep enough, and now I hardly talk to anyone whom I was "close" with in high school today.

Depression really took over my young adult life; it was

a time where I resented everything: the people around me, the situations I was in, life in general and mainly at myself. It was hard getting through school, to the point where I dropped out of high school and became a truant. I felt angry and sad most days and didn't know how to think positively; what made it worse was that I didn't know who to talk to. With this, I really related to Ari towards the beginning of the story, "I think I was mad because I couldn't talk to my brother. And I was mad because I couldn't really talk to my sisters either" (83). My parents couldn't fully comprehend what I was going through, and my sisters were too busy with their own adolescent lives. I felt as if I had no choice but to keep everything within myself.

In contrast to Ari and Dante's experiences in the novel, at the age of thirteen-years-old, my years of middle school were actually the beginning of my adolescent angst, along with the introduction of the awkward effects of puberty hitting my body. In part two, chapter ten, Ari shares what he wrote in his journal shortly after turning fifteen-years-old: "I don't much care for this growing thing. My body's doing things I can't control and I just don't like it" (94). Puberty comes whether we like it or not and for girls apparently it can come sooner than boys; I remember sprouting breasts and feeling super insecure about them one day. I wondered when and how they popped out all of a sudden, and I hated how some people even pointed out how large my breasts were for my age. Young people tend to want to grow up fast to be more like adults, but for Ari and I, we didn't want it to happen so fast; everything was happening so quickly we didn't have time to fully process what was going on. But luckily there was someone there for us to relate with and experience these awkward times together.

In middle school, I also found a new part of my identity and found the first Dante to my Aristotle; well, more like I was Dante and she was Aristotle. Grace and I had many things in common, we were both Filipino-Americans, enjoyed the same music, shared the same outlook on life as adolescents, and we were both awkward girls. I still remember the day when I first recognized that I had developed feelings for her, it was life-altering and confusing at the same time. Dante confesses to Ari about his sexual identity



through a letter, and in the letter he writes, “I keep wondering what they’re going to say when I tell them that someday I want to marry a boy [...] I have this little speech. It starts something like this. ‘Dad, I have something to say to you. I like boys. Don’t hate me. Please don’t hate me’” (227-8). I was really open to talking about my feelings with my sisters and those around me, and eventually I even confessed to Grace how I felt about her, but thinking about having to tell my parents someday was dreadful. I remember struggling with these same feelings that Dante was experiencing, deciding when to come out, how to come out, and how it all made the both of us feel, guilty.

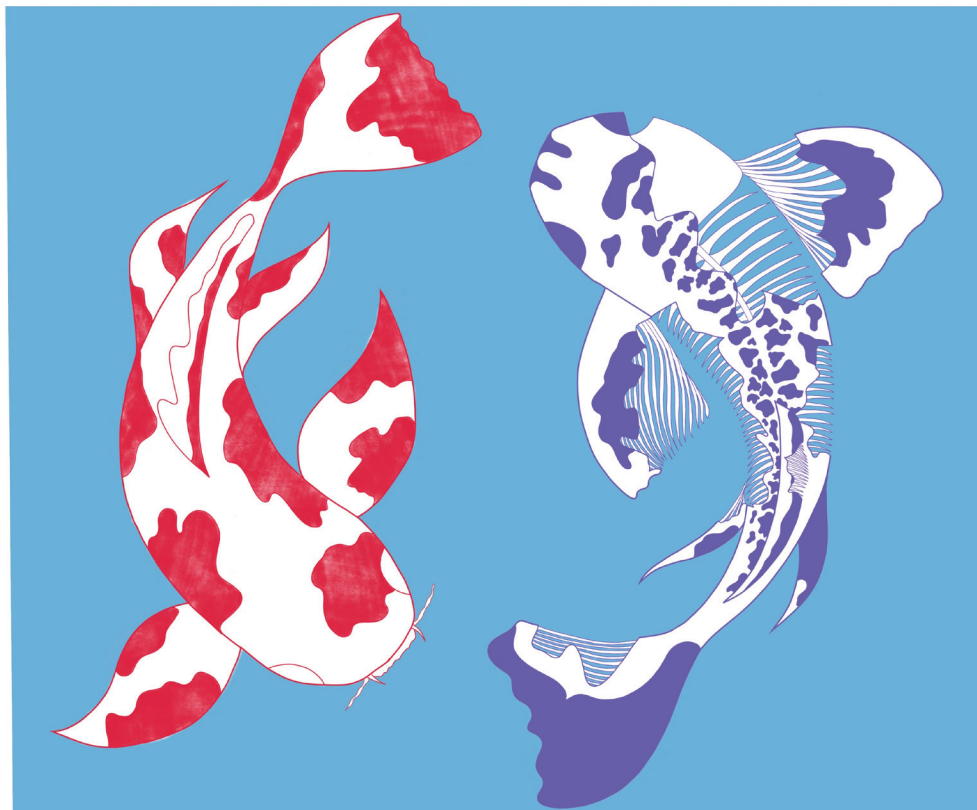
The day that I decided to come out to my parents was nerve-wrecking because of how I knew my parents were, but also freeing because I was able to get it off my chest. Luckily, however, like both Ari and Dante’s parents, my parents were also supportive of my newfound sexual orientation, but, before I had come out to them, I had every reason to believe that my parents would not have approved. My parents are very religious people and had even put my sisters and I through Catholic school from kindergarten up until eighth grade. They were never really that strict, which I appreciate and love them even more for, but it also puts more pressure on myself to want to be a good child for them. Dante also felt guilty towards his parents who he cared deeply about and shared his worries with us, “What’s going to happen with the grandchildren thing? I hate that I’m going to disappoint them” (227). Up until my coming out, I had imagined their reactions and disappointments on not having a conventional daughter who would eventually fall in love and marry a man to have children. However, I am very fortunate to have open-minded and supportive parents who allowed me to discover the secrets of my own world worry-less.

Even though this story is set in the late 1980s and the book itself was published in 2012, the conflicts it presents to young readers are still very much relevant in peoples’ lives today. Both Aristotle Mendoza and Dante Quintana certainly experienced each of their own fair share of adolescent angst, hovering parents, and young love which people of all ages can relate with; whether that will be in their near future or reminiscing about past times. I,

myself, as a twenty-six-year-old queer woman, have found myself empathizing with the main characters of this novel who, I think, are easily relatable. Dante fell in love with his best & only friend and learned how to navigate between love and friendship. Ari struggled with his anger & loneliness and eventually learned how to see his universe in a more positive light, setting himself free from his own inner conflict. With the right people around to support us throughout our life, mine being my parents, siblings and my current partner, we can each openly discover the secrets of our universe one step at a time.

# Around and Around

Robin Ruiz



# Red Wheelbarrow 2023 Video Selection:



“Eco Mobsters”  
Lennon Lilienthal-Wynn  
<https://youtu.be/EBroG1pA3NM>

“Never Ending Self Evaluation”  
Sandra Tingalay  
<https://youtu.be/IFt10pjWcfo>



“Satirical Campaign Ad”  
Lennon Lilienthal-Wynn  
<https://youtu.be/S-6H3VQquLA>

Red Wheelbarrow YouTube channel:  
<https://youtube.com/@theredwheelbarrowmagazined3388>