

ABSOLUTE 2022

FICTION | NONFICTION | POETRY | ARTWORK | PHOTOGRAPHY





ABSOLUTE 2022

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Absolute is an educational resource published annually by the Arts, English, and Humanities Division of Oklahoma City Community College. All creative pieces are the original works of college students and community members. The views expressed herein are those of the writers and artists.

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OKLAHOMA CITY
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

ARTS, ENGLISH, AND HUMANITIES

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ABOUT ABSOLUTE

Absolute, OCCC’s journal of art and writing, has been published annually by the Arts, English, and Humanities Division since the college’s early days in 1972. The student editors seek online submissions of original poetry, fiction, nonfiction, artwork, and photography from students and members of the community.

FICTION.
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MY FAIR LADY

by Evie Brewster

Screams of pain and terror echoed through the woods. The lady walked barefoot through the snow, moving like a spirit among the tall trees, following the sounds of death. Her blue dress trailed in the snow, and her long hair flowed behind her in the arctic gusts. The trees groaned softly in protest as they bent to the will of the wind.

The sounds of the battle grew louder. The lady could distinguish the clash of swords from the wails of the dying. She saw a flash of metal in the air as a sword rose and then fell. Whimpering pleas for help created a terrible harmony with the shouts of challenges echoing among the trees. The lady continued silently on.

As she approached the site of the battle, the atmosphere shifted. The screams began to quiet. Swords were no longer swung. The battle drew to a close. All was silent in the wood.

The lady came upon a small clearing, and the horrors of battle were exposed. Bodies were strewn all around. The once white snow was now a bloody mire of mud and body parts. The cold sunlight glinted off the fallen soldiers' armor. Only one knight remained standing.

He stood in the center of the clearing, back to the lady, shoulders slightly heaving and his head bowed. With his blue cloak still hung about him, he held his sword loose, pointed down. Three arrows pierced him. Blood soaked through his cloak and dripped slowly down into snow. He turned his head slightly when the lady entered the clearing and stopped at the edge, but he made no further acknowledgment of her presence.

He waited a moment more and then began the gruesome task of making sure every soldier was dead, including his own. When he had finished and wiped his sword clean on the last one, he approached the lady, who had waited patiently for him to complete his duty. His blood-soaked cloak dragged behind him, leaving a stain of red. He knelt before her and bowed his head. The arrows in his back quivered and he wavered on his knee. He put his sword point-down in the snow and steadied himself. The pale lady benevolently regarded the knight with her hands clasped in front of her.

Her voice was soft, "At times, war is an unfortunate necessary evil."

The knight kept his head bowed, his breathing becoming more labored inside his helmet.

"To keep peace and to keep the evildoers and darkness at bay, the innocent must suffer. Young men are called from their families and forced to fight, and most do not return. They suffer in the name of all that is good."

The lady bent and gently lifted the knight's head. "But you do not have to suffer anymore."

The knight could barely see, his eyes unable to focus. He squinted through the slits in his helmet and was surprised to see the lady smiling softly down at him. A halo of light surrounded her that seemed to melt the cold around them.

"You called for me in the heat of battle. I came for you, brave one. I am here to take you home."

The knight tried to center his thoughts. Yes, he had called for the Fair Lady. In the middle of the battle, he had called for her, crying out in fear and heartbreak. And she had come. She was not a wraith coming to torment him, as he had feared. She was the Fair Lady.

"You do not have to fight anymore, valiant knight. I will take you far away, where you will no longer feel pain and anguish. You will be whole again."

The knight's breath suddenly hitched in his chest. Blood bubbled out of his mouth, splattering the inside of his helmet. He began to feel suffocated as the scent of his dying breath filled the enclosed space, and his breathing slowed even

more. Fear rose and began to overwhelm him. But the lady knelt in front of him and held his head between her hands, steadying him. She looked into his eyes through the darkness of his helmet.

"Don't be afraid, oh courageous one," she said. "Take my hand, and all will be well."

She held out her white hand. He regarded it blurrily, another cough racking his body. He had suffered so much. So much. He had lost everything dear to him. And he was so tired. He had fought countless battles and killed more than he could remember. He wanted it to end. And the fair lady had come. She had come to him.

He lifted a shaking hand. "Lady Fair," he said.

She smiled kindly at him and grasped his mailed hand. She stood gracefully and carefully helped him up. Hand in hand, they walked away, towards the light that had been blooming behind the Fair Lady.



The clearing was silent as snow began to fall, drifting slowly over the carnage from the battle. Not even the carrion crows were braving the frigid temperatures of the incoming arctic storm to feast. Soon, the ground would be completely covered, the white snow blanketing the red of death. Only one particular thing would have brought attention to the scene. A knight's sword sticking out of the ground through the snow, and the body of the knight kneeling behind it, hand clasped around the hilt and three arrows in his back. A monument for him, frozen for all eternity.

THE BLACK CAR, YGGDRASIL, AND THE *BRUJA*

by Tia Carlton

In the Before Life, before *El Incidente*, I didn't have to worry about picking up an old, chipped "**#1 Llama Mama**" mug at Betty's Gone Thriftin' for fear of what I might hear in my head. I didn't have to try to convince Detective Walton Latimer he needed to listen, just listen to me, about the voices of the murdered people for which I had suddenly become a radio station. Nope, I was a normal teenager. Eh, as normal as a fifteen-year-old can be, anyway.

I'm Maru. I live in McAllen, Texas, (which should be renamed McDusty, Texas, by the way) with my mother, my grandmother, and my two little brothers. My *abuela*, Doloréa, is a *bruja*. That's "witch" to you white folks. By the way, I'm an undocumented immigrant. Or whatever the people in Washington, D.C., are calling us these days; I don't bother keeping track. My dad, Feliciano de León, was the first one in our family to cross. My mother, my *abuela*, and I were next. My mom wanted so desperately for me to be born in America, but I chose to be born in Mexico. I was six days old when we three swam across the wide brown river into Texas.

I don't remember it, of course, but I'm fairly certain I wasn't impressed. If I had my way, I wouldn't have left Mexico, but nobody asked me. Anyway, my dad had found us a little blue house on East Camellia Avenue in the metropolis of McAllen. My first memory of East Camellia Avenue is standing at the front door of the little blue house, my fat toddler fingers twined into the aluminum curlicues of the screen door, crying for my dad. Feliciano wasn't around much once we girls crossed.

That's another story.

My little brothers, *mi hermanitos*, have the distinction of being the first de Leóns to be born in America. In my mother's eyes, this makes them rock stars. Demigods. I mean, I get it. It's a big deal for her, being a citizen. Those words on those papers will mean doors kept shut against her (and me, hooray) will always open for David and Joseph. She even gave them Anglo names, for crying out loud. I prefer calling them by their middle names: Lucian and Patrício. They're eight and six years old, respectively. My mother, Isabell, practically sprinkles rose petals for the two of them to walk on. I make sure to keep them grounded in reality in the time-honored and often physical ways of big sisters everywhere. It's my job, and I take it seriously.

Isabell cleans houses for three white families: the Osterhauses, the Fines, and the Wilcoxes. She also cleans house for one Mexican family, the Molínas. If my brothers are demigods for being born American, the Molínas are royalty for being Mexicans rich enough to hire a cleaning lady. I wish I had a nickel for every time I heard my mom begin a sentence with, "*La Señora Molína dice...*" I'd be able to buy the Molínas' house.

Don't get me wrong; I love my family. They're all I've got. I just wish...well, never mind that now. I need to get back on track.

My *abuela*, Doloréa, is the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter. So's my mom. Isabell's sisters are all still in Mexico, in Tlayacapan, the same little village where they were born and where my *abuela* was born. My mom bucked the tradition of having seven daughters, probably because Feliciano only makes it around to East Camellia Avenue when the stars align just so. When I was little, I used to beg Doloréa to make me a seventh daughter of a seventh daughter, too. She'd just chuckle and tell me, "*Harás cosas aún mayores, hija.*"

You will do great things, my daughter. I didn't believe her then. I do now. And it scares me.

Doloréa, as you may remember, is a *bruja*, a witch. I don't mean she's hateful (although Feliciano may disagree with me on that point). I mean, she's a witch: spells and chants and magic. Back in Tlayacapan, old *Doctore* Campaño was who the villagers went to for dentistry to podiatry. Doloréa was the person the villagers went to for everything else. House haunted by angry spirits? Donkey won't eat? Trying to have a baby? Husband sneaking around? Doloréa had a remedy. She uses all kinds of things for her spells: dirt, flowers, bones, blood, chilis, teeth, hair, agave. She uses things I can't name, and she pretends not to hear me when I ask.

Doloréa is ageless. Her face is as smooth as mine. She stands straight as a ruler. Arthritis isn't even in her area code. The lone exception is her hair: it's as silver as the pendant she's worn around her neck for as long as I can remember. Doloréa says her hair turned silver when Isabell was born. My guess is, Doloréa knew her daughter would one day froth over being allowed to clean houses for rich Mexicans, and her hair just gave up trying to be dark out of shame.

I asked my *abuela* once why she left Tlayacapan to come to dusty old McAllen, where nobody knows her, and she isn't the respected *bruja* she was back in Mexico. I say "once" because the one time I asked, Doloréa speared me with a look that pinned me to the wall. "*Era mi destino*," she said quietly. "And nobody questions their destiny, *nieta*." I was too scared to ever ask again.

The de Leóns aren't poor, but we aren't rich, either. We aren't even middle class. We're like every other Mexican family scratching out a living in good old McAllen. Isabell's paychecks keep food in the kitchen and the lights on. Doloréa made all of our clothes until Betty's Gone Thriftin' opened, and we could explore the luxury of castoffs. Once a month, a black car with a "MY CHILD IS AN HONOR STUDENT AT REAGAN HIGH SCHOOL" bumper sticker stops in front of our house, and a skinny man wearing aviator shades, a Grateful Dead jacket, and ancient Levis climbs out. He rings the doorbell, stuffs a manila envelope in the mailbox hanging below the Our Lady of Guadalupe Bless This Home icon, and leaves.

My guess is the guy is Feliciano's runner, and the contents of the manila envelopes pay for the little blue house on East Camellia Avenue and whatever Isabell's hard-earned dollars don't. I'm not allowed to touch the envelopes. Doloréa or Isabell always get to them before the last letter of the black car's bumper sticker clears the corner at the end of the block.

Trust me, I'm not dumb. I have my own theories of what my father does to fill those envelopes.

In my culture, when a girl turns fifteen, her family throws a big bash called a *quinceañera*. It's our passage from girl to woman. Parents save for years for this event. In Tlayacapan, the parties don't involve ballrooms and diamond tiaras and helicopters dropping \$20 bills down on the guests' heads (as Caitlyn Molína's did last month), but Isabell says hers was still super-nice. I was probably the only girl from South America not looking forward to hers. It's just...not my thing, you know? A big

floofy dress and makeup and sweaty guys in shiny shirts trying to kiss me? Ugh, no.

When I asked Isabell if we could just go out for Chinese food (McAllen has a Chinese food restaurant!) instead of having the big shebang, she nearly died. "You're my only daughter! Not have a *quinceañera*? *Mija*, where do you get these ideas you have in your head?" and off she would bustle to the fabric store to moon over sateen and sequins and patterns of ball gowns.

I had no idea how we'd afford a *quinceañera*. We had generic peanut butter, and Isabell was supposed to finance a ballroom and a gown? C'mon.

So, *El Incidente*: two months before The Big Day, *my paso a la feminidad*, I was sitting in the little backyard of the little blue house on East Camellia Avenue in my favorite spot, the branches of an ancient mesquite tree. When I say "ancient" I mean think Yggdrasil, Tree of Life, ancient. I'm betting there have been brooding almost-fifteen-year-old Mexican girls sitting in its branches since the dawn of time. I like the way the mesquite tree smells, and it's apparently the only mesquite in existence to not have thorns. Or maybe it's so old all the thorns have worn out, worn away.

I heard a commotion in the front yard. Shouts and crashes. One big "POP!" had me jumping out of *La Yggdrasil* and running through the skinny side yard to the street side. I stopped short at the corner of the front porch. My eyes beheld a scene I could not have imagined: the black "REAGAN HIGH SCHOOL HONOR STUDENT" car had driven up over the curb into our lot, the skinny man with Ray-Bans was crouched near the front right fender, and he was *shooting* at two men in the back of a red Toyota truck rolling down East Camellia Avenue.

Before my dumb, numb brain could process the bullets whizzing around, I felt a sharp *punch* in my chest. Suddenly, I was looking at the underside of the old porch swing above me. Things seemed to slow down. I heard more pops. The tires of the red Toyota squalled as it fishtailed out of our street. A string of curse words in Spanish, English, and a language I couldn't identify ensued from somewhere above me. Skinny guy? Doloréa was beside me then, her smooth face creased, for the first time in memory, with worry.

She pressed something down on my chest. Hard. I opened my mouth to tell her to cut it out, but instead I guess I fainted.

I floated for I don't know how long in some kind of in-between world. Sometimes I was sitting in the branches of *La Yggdrasila*. Then I was in Mrs. Calle's English class in McCallen High. I floated around in Tlayacapan, in the village of my ancestors I'd never seen. The whole time, a voice was whispering urgently in my ear in that language I couldn't identify.

I woke up. I was not lying in the yard any longer. I was in our living room.

The first face I saw was Isabell's. Her eyes were red and puffy. I knew without looking she was clutching her elderly wooden rosary beads, worn smooth as glass from countless Hail Marys. "*Mija*," she whispered. "*Mija*." I opened my mouth to ask her what had happened, but in that moment, her rosary beads brushed against my left hand as it lay curled on my stomach.

A light flashed behind my eyes. I heard my *abuela*. She was begging some unseen someone: "*Paras, paras!*", I'd never ever heard fear in her voice, and that fear catapulted me into my own terror. I needed to get to her, comfort her, and stop whoever was upsetting her.

Then I was back on the pink-and-green-flowered divan in the living room of the little blue house on East Camellia Avenue with my mother kissing my forehead, crying and calling my name. I didn't know it yet, but her wooden rosary beads had slipped to the floor.

What had happened to me?

I sat up. Or I tried to sit up. Isabell mashed me back down on the divan.

"Be still, *mija*, my mother whispered, her voice still rusty with tears. "You've been...you were...shot."

"Wha?" was the absolute best I could manage. Blearily, I leafed through the fuzzy last few pages of my life. I vaguely remembered the skinny man in the aviators and the Grateful Dead jacket crouched in our front yard, shooting at... uh...The punch to my chest. The falling. The visit to my *abuela*'s village of Tlayacapan, in Mexico. Hearing my *abuela* crying. The language I couldn't identify. Did all of that actually happen?

Wait, I was shot in the chest. I was lying on the pink and green-flowered divan we found on a curb on Lorenz Street. Not on a gurney at Our Lady of Perpetual Hope Hospital? Or on a slab at Spade and Spade Funeral Home? (The Spade family takes their last name seriously.) Reality seemed to have taken a siesta here.

My mother patted my cheek. "It's all fine now, *mija*. It was only a scratch. But you must rest. You must lie still. I'll get some water." Isabell's *chanclas* swished toward the kitchen.

The face of my abuela, Doloréa, now swam into view above mine. "*Nieta*, listen closely. I don't have much time. The bullet from that *pendejo's* gun hit your chest. You died. But it was not yet your time, so you returned. You have a purpose, and now, your *regalo* has been awakened. Don't fear it. I will explain it all to you if I can. Don't tell your *mamá*."

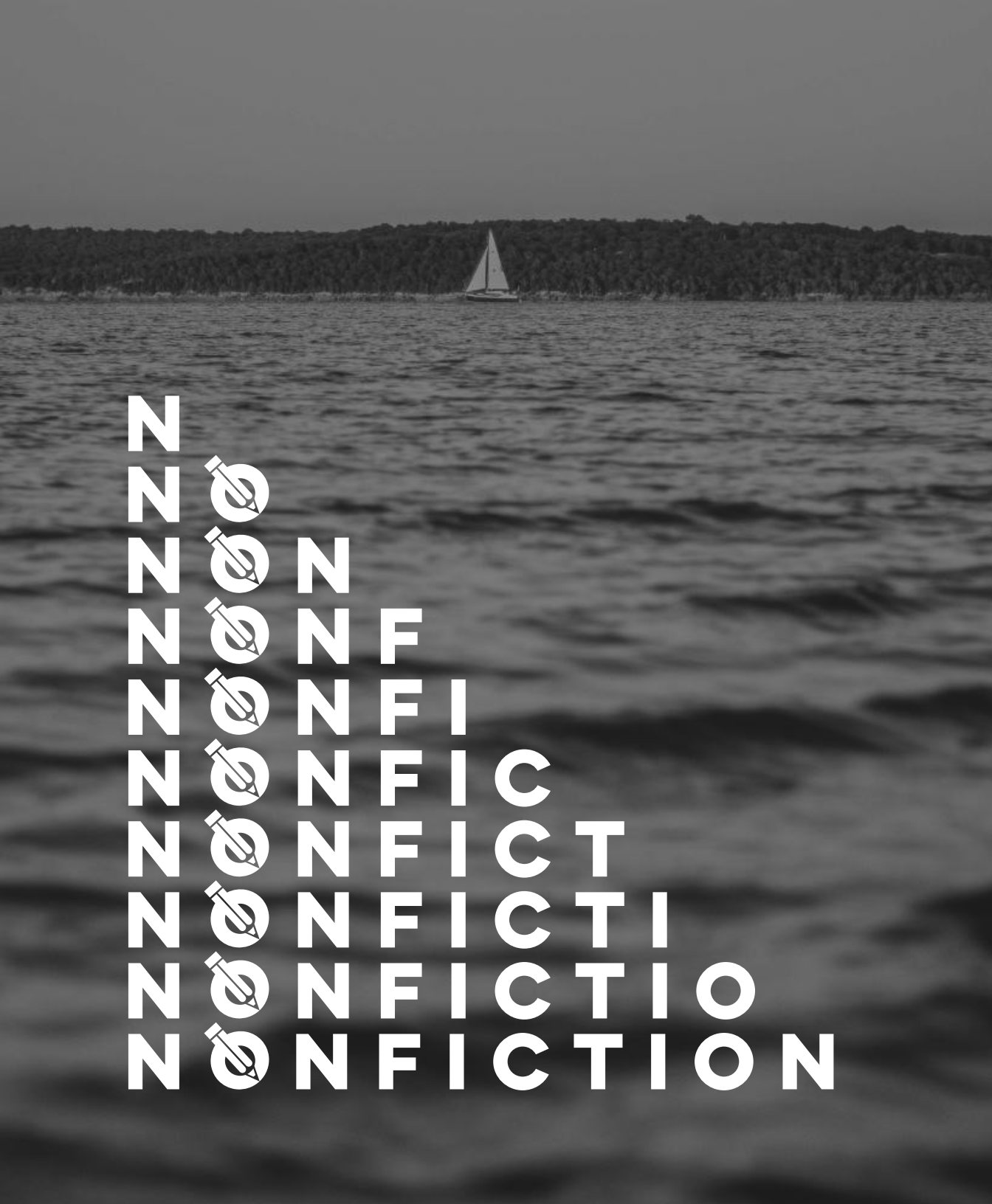
I began to suspect I had suffered a break from reality, most likely due to the stress of trying to avoid having my *quinceañera*. I could not have been shot in the chest, died, and returned with some sort of gift only my abuela understood. Right? Even as I tried valiantly to convince myself of this, however, more details started trickling in. The brush of Isabell's worn rosary beads against my hand had sent me on some sort of journey, where I had encountered people and sounds I'd never before seen or heard. Was this my gift? Sci-fi movies in my head from old rosary beads? Was there any other kind of movie projected into minds from old rosary beads? This sounded like an elaborate morality lesson the nuns at Little Sisters of Piety might have tried to put over on me when I was eight.

"Granddaughter." Doloréa was whispering urgently to me again, this time in English. This caught my attention. Doloréa despises speaking English and only does so under extreme duress or to inform a snooty salesclerk to pay attention. "When you arrived, you came with a gift. A wonderful gift, yes, but one which comes at a terrible price. For the rest of your life, you will speak for the dead, for the lost. Your touch will awaken their voices and their pain. You must avenge them. Be their voices and their hands and their feet. Or you will never know rest."

Stupid *quinceañera*, I thought angrily. Not only has it sent me over the edge of sanity, it's taken my poor *abuela*, too. This is what comes of forcing girls into scratchy dresses and rhinestone tiaras and—OUCH!

Doloréa had slapped me, none too lightly, mind you, on the right cheek. So much for being shot in the chest.

"Maru! You are not crazy!" she snapped (back to Spanish, which meant she was still my *abuela*, and she was super-ticked at me). "You will be able to hear the voices of the dead when you touch things they have owned. You will have to help these people find justice or you will be cursed forever!"



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LEAPING FORWARD AND LETTING GO

by Tia Carlton

"Dear Mom and Dad," I read out loud from the *"It's a Boy!"* greeting card my husband and I received in the late spring of 2018 from our firstborn child, Anna-Claire*, who was living in South Carolina at the time. "I've been wanting to tell you this for some time, but I never knew exactly what to say."

I don't think one has to be a parent for such a statement to cause a little tiny flurry of panic(?) to spring to life in the old abdomen. Anna-Claire's letter continued. "For all of my life, I feel as if I've been listening to a poorly-tuned radio station inside myself. No matter what I seem to do, I can't get the station to come in clearly. Then I realized: I am transgender. I want to begin testosterone therapy."

Anna-Claire's note ended with reassurances of love for us and thanking us for supporting them always. Four years prior, Anna-Claire had come out as gay; three years after that, they'd come out as non-binary, and their pronouns became "they, them, theirs." These first two developments my husband and I took in stride; we celebrated, even. Our love for our firstborn child, the tiny bundle entrusted to us as know-nothing 22-year-old first-time parents, was boundless.

After Anna-Claire returned to Oklahoma, a few months after the card's arrival, they shared with us their desire to change their name from "Anna-Claire" to the gender non-specific "AC."

"Sure!" I said.

"Sure!" my husband said.

Anna-Claire, or AC as we needed to get used to saying, was 21 years old and hardly needed our permission for this change. AC began to research the legal process of changing one's name in the state of Oklahoma.

I congratulated myself, silently, for how well I was handling these revelations. I felt enlightened, inclusive. "Mom of the Year," maybe. My kiddo was thriving.

Then, in the fall of 2019, AC shared their biggest news of all: their desire to undergo top surgery. Top surgery, in transgender parlance, is the removal of breast tissue and the contouring of the chest to give it a more masculine look. AC had been wearing a chest binder for months (think an ACE bandage for the chest), so this seemed a logical next step. AC had worked out the funding (the surgery, not covered by our insurance, would run nearly \$10,000), chosen a well-regarded surgeon, and had even selected a date in early December.

For transgender people undergoing any type of gender-affirming surgery, such a procedure is a huge milestone and is crucial to their mental well-being. For AC, the removal of the breast tissue wasn't some sad "goodbye" to glorious mounds of sexiness; it was a joyful "SEE YA!" to what felt like to them to be tumors, warts, tentacles. Get them *away!*

I knew this. I'd read about it. And yet...and yet.

My self-congratulatory "Mom of the Year" train started to leave the rails.

"What is this?" I would exclaim, as, out of nowhere, I found myself weeping over never again being able to call my child by the name I had spent hours and days choosing in those sweet months they spent swimming in my darkness. "**Dead name*" is the phrase given to a transgender person's assigned-at-birth name, and it is viewed as an epithet once a new name is chosen. Calling a transgender person by their dead name can cause pain, sadness, and dysphoria.

Intellectually, I understood this.

Unfortunately, intellectualism doesn't live and beat in a mom's heart. Even now, typing these words, I feel myself tearing up at the loss of this name, the name I had loved best for two decades. On the heels of this change came the understandable request from AC to take down photos and memorabilia in our house of their previous

life. Baby pictures and awards and...a life. I found myself crying all the time when I was alone, because outwardly I was still "Mom of the Year!" Inwardly, I was grieving the loss of my child.

As I contemplated AC's upcoming (major) surgery, my sadness deepened further. I began to confront a lie I'd been telling myself about AC's transition: that it would only come so far and then stop. Clothes, names, pronouns; sure, those could change. But not their body! That precious body I had once carried within my own, to be cut, to bleed...HELL, NO!

I read about this process of parents of transgender kids coming to terms with their child's identity and how it can feel like a death in many ways. I spoke in therapy about my feelings. I cried more. I held all this back from AC, though; in no way did I want them to feel for one single minute I wasn't behind them all the way. And a part of me was, truly.

Then, one day as I perused the demon Facebook, I read a post from a childhood friend who shared the news of her 22-year-old son's death. Tragic, untimely. Gone. Forever. No more memories to be made, no more photographs taken, no more awards won. My friend was shattered. "How will I go on?" she asked, broken, in her social media text. And in that moment, as I wept with my friend, I also leapt forward with my own child. I leapt forward in understanding, for the first time in years.

I had not lost a child. I had lost a gender. I had lost a name. My beautiful, perfect, precocious child (who wasn't really a child at all anymore) was not gone. They were still here, on this earth, and they were one step away from finally being in the body that matched their mind. Why was I weeping? Just like that, I knew. I understood. I wanted this for them. I wasn't afraid anymore; I was as expectant and as excited as AC was.

On Top Surgery Day, when I peered into the groggy, post-operative face of my baby, barely an hour after their top surgery, I cried again. I cried happy tears, though, because that priceless, drugged-up face, the face I'd kissed and wiped, was beaming back at me. "Mom," they whispered. "I did it!"

Their smile lit the room.

Leaping forward and letting go.

Joyfully.

Joy.

FORGED BY STEEL

by K'Cee Scoggins

I'm a reader. I'm a reader because the only escape I have from our ramshackle farmhouse comes from the books I swipe from Momma's forgotten stash under the coffee table. I bring home books from the school library, too, but they're not the same as Momma's books. I read late at night beneath my shabby Raggedy Ann and Andy quilt with the help of my yellow flashlight. The books are mostly tattered Harlequin romances with outlines of dog-eared bookmarks Momma left behind on the pages, but the Danielle Steel paperbacks are my favorite. On the back of each book is a glamor portrait of Ms. Steel with the quote, "Everybody reads Danielle Steel." I wish I was like everybody else, but I know I'm not.

Plus, Ms. Steel is beautiful. I love her hair, and her clothes mesmerize me. Some nights, I imagine fading into the picture with Ms. Steel. She looks wise and elegant, like the kind of lady Momma preaches about wanting me to be one day. Momma's beautiful too. She just doesn't know it. She has curly, jet-black hair, high cheekbones, and perfect white teeth that peek out when she smiles. Momma doesn't smile much anymore unless it's when she's pretending our life isn't Hell.

At almost twelve years old, I ain't even pretty, much less beautiful. I have a gap between my two front teeth. My hair is damaged from a bad perm, and it's cropped to my ears. Momma swears my hair is stylish. To hell with pretty and stylish anyway: I'm strong. I can toss bales of hay all day long. I bet I can ride a horse better than any kid my age in Murray County. I'll cuss a little, but I've never heard Momma say one bad word.

Momma took down the pictures hanging on the walls today. I understand why she did it. Roger, my stepfather, is due to return home any minute from being out on the road hauling cattle. I call him "Dad" to his face, but that's only because Momma says it makes things easier. I don't know my real father. Roger constantly reminds me my father ran off because Momma was poor, and my father traded us in for a college degree and a paid-off Porsche. When I grow up, I'm going to buy a white Mustang. Galloping my mare, Ruby, through the pasture feels like freedom to me. I figure driving a Mustang will feel the same way.

I stay outside as much as possible and draw circles with my finger in the red dirt near our vegetable garden's entrance. Momma catches me as she beckons me to come in for dinner; I smell the scent of fried okra and hamburger patties drifting through the air.

"What are you doing, baby?" she asks softly.

"Nothin', Momma. I'm comin'."

The red dirt holds all my dreams and secrets.

Momma and I are a team. We work well together on just about anything that needs to be done around here. Tonight, I help Momma by stirring sugar with a big wooden spoon that's beginning to crack at the end into a pitcher of freshly brewed tea. I like watching the battered spoon create a miniature tornado of tea as it swirls through the pitcher.

"Momma, we need a new spoon," I say as I hold it up for her to see.

Momma looks over from setting plates and glasses down on the kitchen table. She shudders a bit and replies, "I'll buy a new one the next time I go to town. That one has seen too much use."

At that moment, I hear the front door slam. I drop the spoon into the sink. Roger's here. Momma forms a tight smile on her face, the one that doesn't show her teeth, and gives me a pleading look that silently says: *Be nice, K'Cee. Just be nice.* I don't like letting Momma down, so I straighten my shoulders and nod slightly as I carefully move the tea pitcher from the counter to the table. Roger struts into the kitchen and plops down into the chair at the head of the table.

When Roger enters a room, it feels like being stuck inside a vacuum cleaner bag I can't escape from. The only thing I appreciate about Roger is I can usually smell him before I see him. He stinks like diesel fuel from working on his semi-truck. His belly hangs over the Wrangler jeans he wears, and he's too big to wear a belt. Instead, he wears navy-blue suspenders to keep his pants from falling down. Sometimes, I daydream about unsnapping one side of his suspenders. I bet he would topple right over and break his thick neck. I figure Jesus disapproves of my daydreams.

Roger coolly asks, "What have you two worthless pieces of shit been doing while I've been gone?"

Momma ain't worthless. I ain't a piece of shit. I say the mantra repeatedly in my head as I sit down across from Momma and directly next to Roger. Momma pours him a glass of tea and hurriedly tells him how we've cleaned the hog pens and the chicken coop today. She also tells him about my progress report. I see Roger's jaw clench.

Dangit, Momma. Why did you mention my grades? Tonight is not the night. I'm a straight-A student; it's a fact that infuriates Roger, yet he still brags to his friends that I am smart. I make good grades just to spite him, and I think he knows that. He doesn't say anything as he stabs the fried okra Momma has placed on his plate with a fork.

Momma makes the best fried okra in Oklahoma. She breads it with cornmeal, a pinch of flour, garlic salt, and black pepper. I hate that he's stabbing the okra and looking at Momma like she's done something terrible. *Why can't he just eat it?*

I quickly ask Roger, "Can I paint my toenails after dinner?"

Roger picks up his mason jar full of sweet tea and throws it toward the sink. I don't flinch as it shatters on the peeled-up linoleum floor. *He can't even throw worth a damn. The other day, I threw a rock clear across our creek.* Momma jumps up to find the broom and dustpan. She's crying a little. Thankfully, he doesn't see her tears. I double-down and ask the question again, this time with a mouthful of fried okra. I know I need to keep him distracted.

He explodes out of his chair and shouts, "No! Only whores paint their toenails!"

"Okay, I was only wonderin'," I reply, shrugging my shoulders as I swallow the okra.

Momma and Roger sit back down, and we finish our dinner in silence. *I don't even know what a whore is exactly. If they wear polish on their toes, then they're alright by me.*

The following morning, I wake up to Roger pulling me out of bed by my hair and dragging me outside. The scarred-up back screen door moans as Roger struggles to pull my tense body through it.

He's still yanking my hair and demands, "Look at the mess you've made!"

After rubbing my eyes, trying to adjust to the morning sun, I look toward the barn where we keep the hogs. *Where's Momma?* The rusted metal drinking trough has water bubbling out all over the pasture.

"I'm sorry. I was readin', and I forgot to turn the faucet off yesterday."

Roger shouts, "You have an excuse for everything! You always got your head in a damn book!"

He releases my hair. Roger's knuckles are white as he squeezes my right arm. He drags me back inside the house and down the hallway. I don't fight back as we stumble through the hallway together. If I do, he will just make it harder on me. We reach my bedroom.

He throws me onto the bed and asks, "Where's the book?"

I need to think fast. I have two choices: I can give Roger the *Sweet Valley High* library book from school or the Steel book hidden underneath it. I decide to grab the Steel book off the nightstand, causing my flashlight to fall to the floor. I know he's going to hurt the book, and I am seething. I don't want to explain to the librarian why I didn't return a book. I'm ashamed of my life, and she wouldn't understand. Nobody understands.

Shit, I'm busted. He's going to find out I've been swipin' Momma's books. Still, it's better than telling the truth to the librarian. I stand up, ignore the flashlight, and hand him the book.

Roger doesn't look down to read the title or the author. He furiously begins tearing the pages out one by one.

I won't cry. I hate him. I won't let him see me cry. I smile up at him as the pages flutter across my bedroom carpet.

In response to my smile, before he throws what's left of the book to the floor, he spits snuff on it. He turns and walks out of my room.

God, he's gross.

The front door violently rattles open and slams shut. I hear Roger's pickup truck fire up outside. Momma quietly enters my bedroom. She smells like Dove soap, and her dark hair is wet. I'm down on my hands and knees, picking up the book pages. Momma bends down and helps me. After we finish, we both sit on my bed. She has a swollen eye; it'll be black tomorrow.

"Momma, did he do that because of me?"

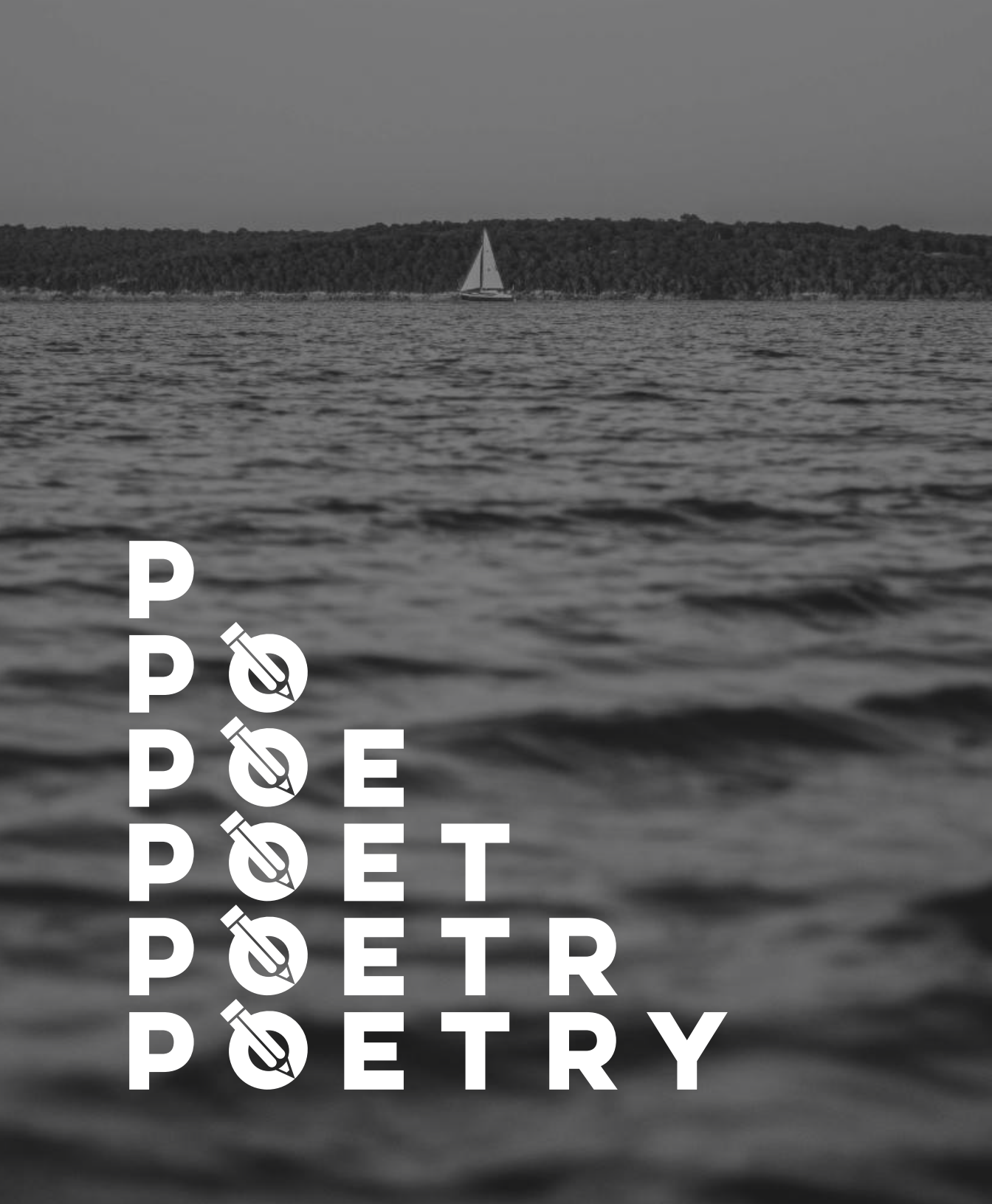
Momma smiles, this time showing me her teeth. "No, baby. God, no." Momma looks down at the pages she's holding; her hands begin to tremble. "You're reading a Danielle Steel book? *Malice*?"

I hold my breath and nod my head. "I've only read a page, Momma. I mainly like lookin' at Ms. Steel's picture."

Momma gathers me up and hugs me tight; I finally allow my tears to fall.

"You listen to me, K'Cee LouAnn. We're going to get the fuck out of here."

It's the first time I've ever heard Momma say a bad word.



THE GHOST OF HER

by Erika Almanza

I often think about what suicide took from me,
I think about the five-foot-one firecracker.
The girl with the long dark hair with hypnotic deep brown eyes.
The girl who laughed so loud at the wrong times.
She was the girl who you wanted on your side.

Over the years, you could see the light in her eyes fade,
Her contagious laugh became less and less.
Suicide took the girl that was by my side;
Now here I stand, with the ghost of her.

SHE'S NOT MUCH OF A SINGER BUT I STILL LOVE WHEN SHE SINGS

by Max Atchley

She says she loves me
Melodies escape her lips
Music to my ears

DIVINE RETRIBUTION

by Tessa Barman-Flannigan

I stayed up all night watching our bridges burn.
I mourned and I cried.
I celebrated and drank til the fire died.
You left your mark on me, sure,
but you're just one of many.

I still feel your hands on my skin
and his loaded gun in my mouth.
Maybe I always will.

I still remember in vivid detail
the way I prayed fervently
to any deity that might be listening to have
mercy and strike me down.

I remember the sudden clarity
in which I realized I'd be reliving
this awful, degrading, godforsaken
nightmare of a moment
for the rest of my life.

I remember how deep it cut
when I realized this was just a rerun.
Nothing rare, nothing new.

Just a familiar horror,
a role I know well,
one I've played a thousand times before.

I know that you will always haunt me.
But I need you to know this:
You are nothing special.
I've outrun and outlived
monsters far worse than you.
There's nothing you can take from me
that I haven't already learned to live without.
There's no part of me you can break
that I can't piece back together.

You should have killed me
And I'm gonna make you regret
that you didn't.

I promise you the divine retribution
you deserve.

FORGOTTEN FIELD

by Tessa Barman-Flannigan

My mother once drove me to a forgotten field
Far outside of the city at twilight
The sun was setting over the horizon
Turning the world navy blue
And painted the sky lilac purple
The knee-high grass was vibrant green
And seemed to stretch out endlessly in all directions
The gentle evening breeze flitted
Through the tall grass
And raised goosebumps on my skin
As the warmth of day slowly melted
Into the chill of night
The wind carried my mother's voice
Over the tranquil landscape
As she said,
"This is where I'm going to bury you.
And they'll never find your body."

DNA

by Yolanda Beatty

Who said you can't be you?

Who said you don't have the right to choose?

Deep down we have this entangled web of strands called DNA

DNA made you

DNA made me

So why such inequality?

From the rib of a man came a woman

From the woman came a man

You and me do not exist, unless we have each other

The energy expelled to define me, really defines you

D-N-A

Do-Not-Attempt, to separate what is whole

Do-Not-Anger, what attempts to be bold

Do-Not-Amplify, the voice that has been given

Do-Not-Abandon

D-N-A

The makeup of who we are

It's what makes us different, yet the same

I will proudly say my name

Yolanda

Man DNA

SAXOPHONE

by Benjamin Biesek

He says it won't hurt
But a little. He says, dream
A bit more than is usual.
In the room for cancer
Patients I took ahold
Of my father and shook him.
Out came a coin. Off
To town, off with
The lot of them.
On a regular basis now
I look to the sky. I'm
Not looking for answers
And no, I don't know why.
I suppose it has to do with
Time, Father Time. I suppose
Life is what you make of it.
Don't ask me why. Don't
Unburden yourself, I haven't
Got the time. I make time
Disappear as a lake might
In this, treasured time.

SIRENS

by Lillie Brewster

Alone in the night out on the sea
A sailor alone in the dark did he flee.
For coming, coming were the sirens deep down,
Coming, coming, their sailor to drown.

He rowed as far as fast as he could
In a boat of sinking, drowning wood,
But a watery death was only his fate
As the sirens began their song as bait.

*Come, my sailor, come with me,
To shores of treasure and happiness be.
Leave your sorrows, release your hold.
Come, my sailor, my sailor bold.*

Poor sailor alone at night at sea
Tried, he tried, he tried to flee.
But gone his heart, gone his soul,
Nothing but siren could make him whole.

Appeared at the side, a hand of white,
Then hair of raven, eyes of bright.
Her skin of pearls and lips of red,
Poor sailor'd not resist what all sailors dread.

*Come, my sailor, come with me,
To seas of stars and moonlit glee,
Leave your love upon the shore,
Come, bold sailor. Worry no more.*

Sirens' fate was death for he,
Death for he who could not flee.
Her hands they reached for his so still,
The fight was gone, he had no will.

Those lips of red he reached to kiss
His heart had gone, had gone amiss.
But siren pulled sailor, down down down.
Down to the depths in which he would drown.

*Here, my sailor, here with me.
You've found your fate, your death to be.
Leave your ship to ocean's floor.
Come, my sailor, who'll sail no more.*

THE GIRL AND HER WOLVES

by Evie Brewster

They danced in the dark, the girl and her wolves.
Beautiful she was, with raven hair and white skin.
She commanded attention and moved with grace.

No one but the wolves were witness to her dance.
Prancing around her flowing form, they danced with her,
Moving with the same elegance as she.

She glowed in the darkness, white skin swirling with stars,
Her feet unhindered by the cold ground as she continued her dance,
The wolves swirling in synchronicity around her.

Her dress billowed around her ankles as she spun, not once stumbling,
Her elegance never abandoned.
The air shimmered around her as the stars on her skin took flight.

Into the air they climbed, the stars,
Leaping around her in time to her dance,
As the wolves preserved their prance around her.

They danced in the dark, the girl and her wolves.
Locked in eternity to dance in the night.

TO MAKE IT

by Shilo Brown

What do you do
when it's all stacked against you?
When all the demons
gang up and hold you down,
when does it stop?
Those moments that seem
to twist around you
and suffocate all that
you had ever been.

What do you do
when it boils over
and hits you hard in the teeth?
That hell of it all
coming down upon you.

What is it going to take
just to make it?

THE DEATH OF ONESELF

by Bailey Davis

I dug and I dug, I wanted answers, I wanted to know me, I have never known me, so I dug, and I dug. I dug to the ache, and I dug to the anger, and I dug to the deepest most honest parts but couldn't stop there. So, I dug to the core, and I dug until there was no more to dig, and when I looked around at my being lying on the ground all I could see was a mess. It was all nothing but a mess. I found exactly what I was searching for in the digging yet when it was all done and over with, I wished I had never done it. I got the answers but received no peace. So, I sat there, empty, nothing inside me left. I gazed again at the mess of what was apparently me, laying where I had dug it out, and as I stared at the mess on the floor knowing I had no idea how to pick it up and no idea how to fit it back inside despite there being nothing there, and I decided to abandon the mess. The person who had made a home inside me didn't belong anymore, she no longer fit. I think that's when I realized that sometimes you can kill yourself and allow your heart to beat on.

HE/HIM THEY/THEM

by Bailey Davis

As they look into the mirror, they don't see the person staring back at them that they are inside.

As they look into the mirror, they see a her.

Are they a her?

They had never questioned this before.

They were given these pronouns at birth, and yet it feels as though they never belonged to them.

As days go on, the more they look into the mirror, the more their appearance changes.

The person who used to look back with long hair and frilly dresses now has short hair and more masculine clothing.

But as they look into the mirror at these differences, still nothing has changed.

The vessel that holds the person inside isn't right. What others perceive isn't right.

So they look into the mirror and say, "Hi, I'm Jackson."

And for the first time in a long time, they look into the mirror and smile.

MY HEART

by Bailey Davis

There's a place I'm still growing familiar with
Deep inside my chest.
Sometimes it feels unbearable,
But I still think it's the best.
The cavity holds love and happiness
And whispers who to be.
I can also be so heavy,
With anger and cruel anxiety.
But with every beat from this thing we call a heart
All I know is my love will never depart.

ODE TO SUSHI

by Carlos Delgado

You are the tastiest fishy treat,
Exploding flavors of umami and rice,
Given the choice, I know what I would eat,
For the Seaweed and Salmon harmony needs no spice.

People say "You can not eat fish raw!"
They think you're only here to infect,
Just because someone once saw
the "raw" potential no one could suspect.

The ways you make my tastebuds explore,
the depths of the ocean one can not see,
Makes me know what to say when people implore,
why Sushi is the best food for me.

OPTIONS

by Carlos Delgado

Every day at five o'clock,
With heavy legs and hanging head,
He peels out of his cozy bed.
He stumbles downstairs, putting on a sock.

He leaves the front door—damn, forgot to lock.
His steps to the car feel like lead,
The coffin on wheels for the living dead.
The daily life weighs on him like a rock.

After work the car broke down...
He finds himself walking through a park.
He opens his eyes and sees Nature thrive.

His ears filled with a lovely sound
The smell of plants leave his nose with a piquant mark.
He truly feels that he's alive.

QUARANTINE

by Carlos Delgado

When I look through my windowpane:
It looks delightful in the free.
I am running out of ways to entertain.

The neighbor is walking her Great Dane.
I am wishing we could talk by the tree,
when I look through my windowpane.

Every board game looks so plain.
No new games to play on the Wii.
I am running out of ways to entertain.

A child is playing with his paper plane.
That it flies is no guarantee,
When I look through my windowpane.

The TV talks about a new virus strain,
or commercials for potpourri,
I am running out of ways to entertain.

The situation is insane,
It's not the place I want to be.
When I look through my windowpane,
I am running out of ways to entertain.

MY CHILDHOOD BACKYARD

by Adara Eby

Each year she reawakens from her frosted slumbering
Our whimsical backyard.
She beckons to that little girl, who was once me
She lures me in with her lovely pink blooms,
The sunflowers stretch their tired arms from the ground,
along with the fruit beginning to grow, not yet ready for picking.
and each spring I ran back there, letting nature be my playground.
She welcomes me, and I welcome my mind to wander.
Our once joyous backyard, and her gifts.
And come the end of summer she offers up her fruits,
keeping us and the creatures that lived there full.
Our loving backyard, as she entertained us.
Listening ever so quietly to her kids frolicking.
Keeping them safe on their tiny adventures.
Our caring and gentle backyard.
Oh how it pained me to leave her behind,
My gorgeous little wonderland,
My Childhood's Backyard.

THE TAPESTRY

by Sarah Emrich

The sum of my weakness, the root of my fear
The smallness and frailty of things I hold dear.
Fleeting they fly, once more out of grasp.
For as they are mortal, they never could last.

If God is omniscient, omnipotent, kind,
How could he allow cruel passage of time?
My fears, they are shared, my grief universal.
Whether for love that is lost, or callous reversal.

The string of my existence laid bare at my feet,
Seems insignificant with no context of the full tapestry.
You see, we are all but part of an intricate web.
Our bonds, love, and effort lend strength to the threads.

So, when you wonder if it is better to have loved and then lost,
Know that love spent adds depth to humanity's cloth.
It strengthens our bonds and draws us all closer,
All love given, unfettered, is worth risk of exposure.

THOUGHTS

by Caleb Foster

If everyone had skin of the same color,
Would we find a reason to judge one
another?
And if everybody had the same mother,
Would we find a reason to kill a brother?

Oh, and I can't help but wonder,

If everyone was given a loaf of bread,
Would they share it or keep it instead?
And if everybody was given a bed,
Would they use it to rest their head?

Oh, and I can't help but wonder,
How we keep ourselves from going
under?

If everyone was given a story to tell,
Would they talk or would they yell?
And if everybody lived equally well,
Would they remain calm or would they
rebel?

Oh, and I can't help but wonder,
How we keep ourselves from going
under?
Will this keep going on forever?

If everyone had to play the game,
Would our outcomes be the same?
And if everybody was the same,
Would we ourselves be the ones to
blame?

Oh, and I can't help but wonder,
How we keep ourselves from going
under?
Will this keep going on forever?
Will time tell or is it just a number?

FRAGMENTS OF THEIR YOUTH

by Araceli Guerrero Rodales

A rusty never-ending railroad,
sits on an infinite terrain
with the goal to reach the sun.
Sometimes surrounded by golden leaves
or by apricot-bearing trees.
Children journey on their bikes
to enjoy her ever-giving gifts.
Seasons come and go,
just like the passage of time and youth.
What seemed to be forever is nothing more.
All that remains is paved concrete for busy city cars
and memories of their time.

REQUIEM OF THE POPPIES

by Araceli Guerrero Rodales

Under the sun he ran and ran,
for he was on the lookout for the most beautiful wildflower.
Although he was frail and had hunger in his eyes
he did not give up on his plan
to obtain the most beautiful wildflower
all for his youngest sister.

Not long after, he had spotted the prickly yet beautiful Mexican poppy
and returned home with his hands full of cuts and his soles full of blisters.
Once reunited with his family, he began to cry
for the pain was too deep.

He wiped his tears and tried not to weep
as he wanted to look brave for his younger siblings.

He presented the wild poppy to his little sister
who was deeply asleep,
hoping that the poppy would bring eternal peace.

IMPULSIVE

by Sergio Ruben Martinez

Irritability and infatuation

My most persistent emotions flourish

Pins and needles course through my veins

Unnerving pressure on my chest demands action

Light perspiration coats cold, calloused hands

Suddenly, I have made my choice

Inevitably

Vehemently

Everything fades

SELF-PORTRAIT

by Sergio Ruben Martinez

Years run down his face in time with the gentle gleaming beads of tears. Ocher and ash painted his visage, dotted by soft, imperfect patches of hair along the finer folds of his joyous face. Leaning closer into the mirror, it became more evident that his bristle-like hair had become unkempt and ill-defined. What was it about the lack of preparation and plan that led to many of these famous and often impulsive ways of presenting himself? Much like his mind—or any aspect of him— there was no consistency. Faded black frames contour across a dry and blemish-stricken nose before striking through the unkempt furls of his mop and winding around hidden ears. Eyes glance across emboldened emerald lettering indicating his morning medicine within reach. Torch in hand and piece at the ready the morning is made. Reflecting at the mirror on his shirt is the emerald lettering again. Glancing down, emerald looks back at him, and he stares into his own reflection. Eyes sunken in, bags showing his irregular sleeping habits, and a cough that brings tears to his eyes. Bursting through the door and into the car, he catches his reflection once more. The years run down his face.

BREATHE

by Kay Owings

It's always what was underneath
Metaphoric claws dragging my skin
I could not breathe

Even brushing my teeth
Blood leaking from them
It's always what was underneath

But don't look beneath
It's not what is meant to be displayed
I could not breathe

Yet just like a wreath
You hung us out for display
It's always what was underneath

I'm left alone with the breeze
It helps dry out the sorrow
I could not breathe

My chest continues to heave
Yearning to be gone
It's always what was underneath
I could not breathe

TWO SIDED

by Kay Owings

The dizziness in her brain never compared to the brutal dullness in her light blue eyes, you know, the eyes that had seen more than many people twice her age. The brown hair that grows from her head, the hair that had been through many breakdowns involving a pair of scissors. The pale skin with a pink undertone, the skin that had seen acne, the acne that caused endless middle school bullying. The small nose, the same nose that bleeds at least once a week, giving her countless headaches. The normal-looking mouth, the mouth that has spouted evil things in the heat of the moment. The light blue eyes, you know, the ones that light up when she talks about the things she loves. The brown hair that grows from her head, the hair that her favorite people have played with to help calm her down on her worst nights. The pale skin, the skin that she displays her talent, expressing herself in her favorite ways. The small nose, the nose that is blessed enough to smell her favorite coffee and her favorite books. The normal looking mouth, the mouth that allows her to sing her heart out to her favorite songs. The mouth that allows her to say, "I love you."

WALLS

by Frank Rawson

Closed in by enormous white walls.
Not finding the will to leave.
Shoving the head inside the television.
The couch feeding on the lazy.
Only getting up to stuff the face.
A constant worry about nothing.

Those who care ask what's wrong? "Nothing."
Keep them out with the walls.
Put on the other face.
Want to do nothing but leave
and return to the lazy.
Mask the lack of authenticity with television.

An ideal date is a night of television.
If not that then nothing.
Can't help but be lazy
when it's pointless, there are too many walls,
might as well leave.
Can't even look her in the face.

Those by blood see both faces,
the way they watch *Breaking Bad* on a television.
With them it's easier, it's like leaves
blowing away to reveal there's more than nothing,
more than just the finite walls.
But they would be disappointed, so it's easier to be lazy.

Won't move forward being lazy.
What's ahead is necessary to face.
At some point, scaling the walls
and abandoning, to rot, the television.
But what if, on the other side, there's nothing?
And it turns out the worst decision is to leave?

I can't leave,
I have to be lazy,
if I try to change, I may be nothing,
I'll be just another faceless face,
wishing I had a reality-escaping television,
craving the familiar safety of the walls.

They keep me confined, keep me lazy.
Keep me down, keep me feeling nothing.
But I am responsible for the power of the walls.

CROSS TOPS

by Billy Rigdon

I'm the protege
That wants to be a prodigy
Maybe then I oughta be
The person that they wanna see

Pill pop in peace
Praying for lobotomies
To make my brain more fond of me
And less of an anomaly

Synthetic dopamine
I'm finding in amphetamines
Another dope fiend
Whose manic thoughts are pestering

So riddle me with Ritalin
And hopefully I'll finish this
Without being vindictive
To chemicals mis-signaling

My attention deficits
Have got me in these restless fits
Taking breathless hits
The future's where I reminisce

Where everything I manifest is evidence of excellence
The reverends will read upon my testament of decadence
I'll haunt you like a revenant, can't stop me with an exorcist
Post-humous success in this post-mortem expressionist

But presently, my brain's on All Day Hyper Drive
Affecting my Dreams to the Hues and the Dyes
Angels and Demons, Harmonies Denied
Attacking, Destroying, Hating 'til I Die

What is God's name's going on in my mind?
Quit trying to tell me everything's alright
Because you don't see the things that I see in the night
While I'm stuck wide awake and the masses sleep tight

I can't bear to see
This sort of clarity.
It's scaring me.
For once this is sincerity.

I need some solidarity.
Somebody to take care of me
And I don't mean like charity
And surely not more therapy

No, more like regularity

I need some consistency
To balance the chaos in me
And help me to see differently
And get rid of these tendencies

And to begin my distancing
Myself from impulsivities
Leftover from conditioning
And doing too much listening

To voices in my head and voices in my wallet
Because money talks and it listens to my problems
It solves them with vodka; dissolves them in solvents
Or attempts to anyway. They're always revolving

Stuck in the same circle; Ouroboros
Still chasing after the same green auras:
Currency printed with the Eye of Horus
For the people, but the people aren't for us

Since nativity, raised in captivity
Don't have a lot of friends, but I've made a lot of enemies
Well-fed because I feed off negativity
Dropping spirit bombs like "Lend me your energy"

There I go again, down another rabbit trail
But the path I walk was uncovered by a rabid hare
Thinking like my brain cells are smothered and they're lacking air
I'm ready for my slumber; gather up my casket nails

I'm in dependence in the sense I'm sitting in my habit's lair
I'm sick of this, and I don't wish to reinvent the addict's tale
But these prescriptions that are written make it not so bad to bear
This life I'm living, intermittent, singing out this spaz's prayer

Grin in fear, my mood swinging from the chandelier
Write it all down because I'm hoping that the pen will heal
I'll overshare until chagrin's the only thing I feel
Or until I finally find a way to bridge these hemispheres

But bridges burn so I'm bound to keep them separated
I'm not really an addict; I'm just being medicated
Aggravated, but I'm not as gloomy as I implicated
I'm just venting to myself, but I hope you found it captivating

ANOTHER NIGHT IN PARADISE

by Cullen Whisenhunt

Walking in twilight
the spiders
creep up
on front lawns saturated
from two days' rain

Surrounded by arachnoid
benches, playsets, trampolines
I am not afraid
am plugged in, pink, at peace

Even after oncoming headlights
hitch slight, then re-correct
I am still
as the ditch water
I would have died in

ARE YOU HAPPY?

by Kennedy Wilcoxson

If I faced you unexpectedly,
Would you stare back collectedly?
If I asked you if you are happy,
Would your heart ache badly?
Would you look towards other folk?
Would you play it off as a joke?
Roll your eyes with a sigh,
Would you lie and say you are fine?
Or do you value honesty?
Pause to choose your words carefully,
Will you allow yourself to truly share?
Or contemplate if I actually care?
And what would you do if I did not?
Would you go back to brick walls that you have always hid in?
Would you let tears well up in your throat?
Or would you say you are just tired as a scapegoat?
Are you afraid I would laugh at your pain?
Do you think that would make me insane?
But what if that wasn't the case?
I look at you with a blank straight face,
Would you deny my concern?
Would you confess despite the burn?
So, answer me this even if it feels crappy,
Are you happy?

SOBER

by Kennedy Wilcoxson

Named "Gifted" still attached to the womb,
"Gifted" a label tattooed on average children,
Whose parents push failures and fears onto them.

My mother is big on upholding appearances,
An addict of control,
Like soldiers following orders,
Stripped of emotions, thoughts, ideals,
Showing humanity was frowned upon,
Emptiness was comfortable, safe, expected.

I am still human underneath,
We all have breaking points.
To prolong inevitable breaking,
I chose to numb the parts of me that ached to feel,
I guess you could say I was a Jack of All Drug-Trades.

There's humor in disappointing my mother,
When she laid the foundation of my broken mind,
"What would people think if you ended up in a ditch,
A front-page story in the news,
Or even worse, prison?"
Another statistic they preached in Narcotics Anonymous.
She considered my addictions worse than hers.
Interesting considering which of us got
Sober.

TIC TOK, TIC TOK...

by Robert "Rondo" Williams

I led off with my heart this time,
never slowing to requisition my mind.
Mesmerized, transfixed, and spellbound too,
by this unique and rare essence... I now call you.

I didn't know my adversary,
your fear,
and my achilles,
that lack thereof.
Could cause us not to flourish,
or what might have turned into love.

I've been without true, unbiased,
and irrational for such a long time.
I hunger, I crave to catch it,
before I am past my prime.
But the clock is no longer our friend,
passing us by unimpeded till the end.

Tic Tok Tic Tok...

I find myself at a crossroad
that I really should not be
given all of your signs so far.
Yet here I am transfixed by the very
things I hold in such high esteem
irrational as they are.

I am bound by a chain that is no more
than a figment created in my mind.
Still for my better judgement,
I do not wish this spell be broken free.
Yet I know I need to break its hold,
even though... it's only upon me.

Rumi says:

"What you seek, is seeking you"

Let us take solace in those words my love,
Interchangeable... yet still apart so far.
Knowing if not indeed they are true,
yet clinging to hope that they are.

I release myself from dreams held high,
and bid to you... my final goodbye.
I pray that it finds us, both you and I,
before time has all but passed us by.

Tic Tok, Tic Tok...

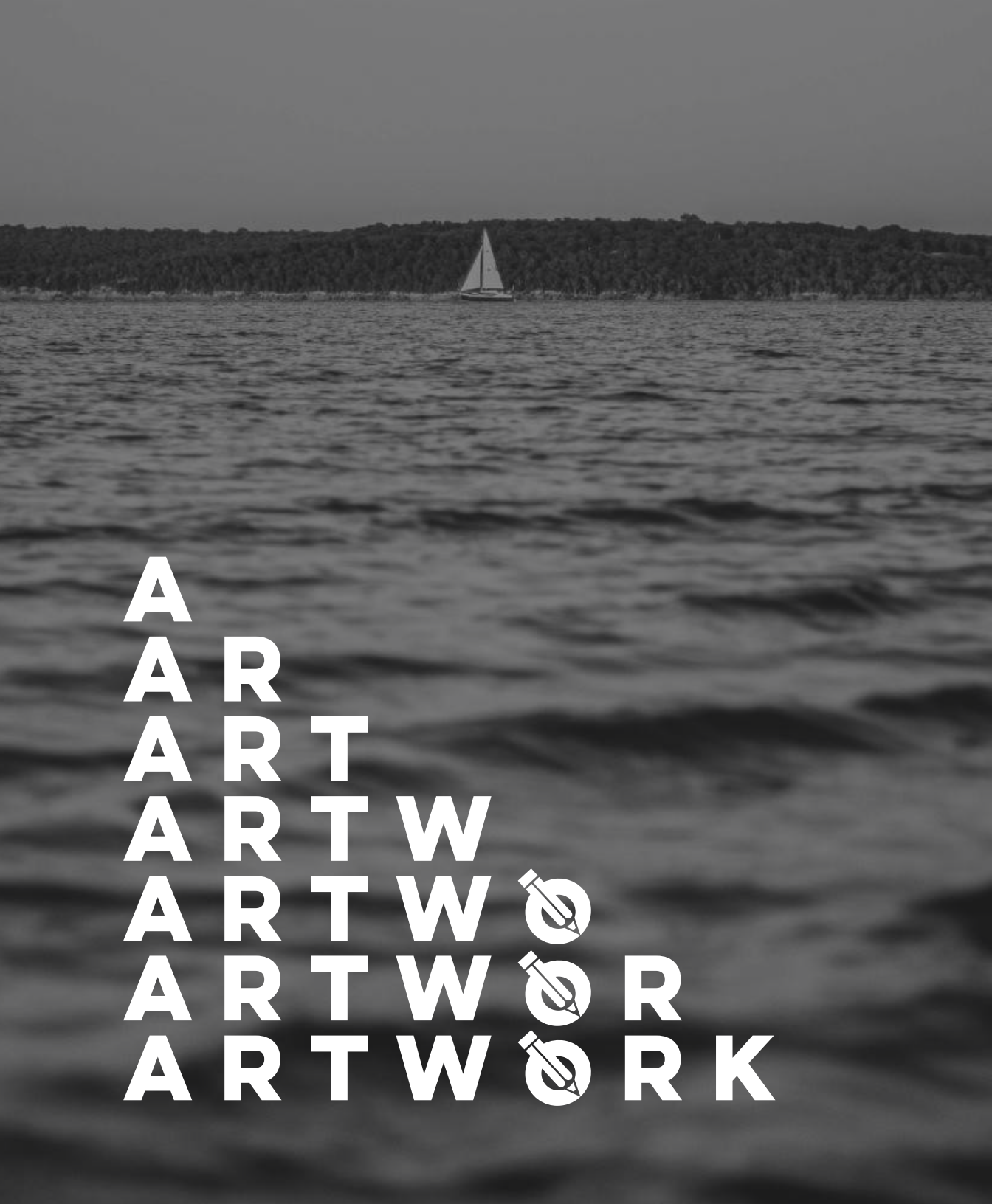
~RONDO~

for Keita

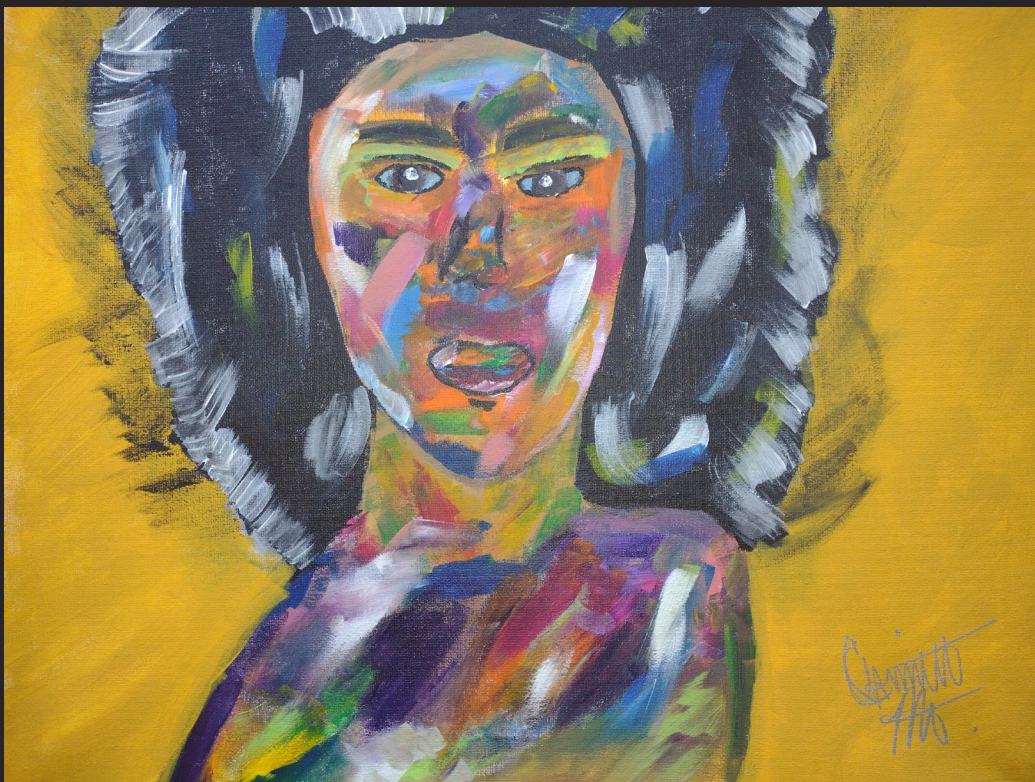
FRUGALITY

by Robert "Rondo" Williams

i often write
with cap on pen
to save my thoughts



A
A R
A R T
A R T W
A R T W 
A R T W  R
A R T W  R K



Camille Madden
The Abstract Woman
Acrylic



Michelle Pletcher
Visual and Performing Arts Center
Woodburning



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Fog, by Paris Fuller



Halloween, by Paris Fuller



Hello, by Paris Fuller



Temple Dubai, by Bethany Hill



Reach, by Bethany Hill



Summer at the Shore, by Bethany Hill



Rotten, by Mina Corpus





**ART IS
NEVER
FINISHED,
ONLY
ABANDONED.**

-LEONARDO DA VINCI

UNTIL
NEXT
TIME.

ABSOLUTE



FICTION.

NONFICTION.

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ARTWORK.

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