

ABSOLUTE 2020

FICTION | NONFICTION | POETRY | ARTWORK | PHOTOGRAPHY





ABSOLUTE

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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.

This year’s edition represents new creative collaborations across campus; and the editors would like to thank the OCCC Administration, especially Dr. Thomas Harrison, Dean of Arts, English, and Humanities; the students developing their creative expression in art and writing courses; and the Black Student Association, and their sponsor Ms. Rochelle Mosby, who promoted their club’s participation in *Absolute 2020* by sharing their pieces at and co-sponsoring *Absolute* open mic events and encouraging their members and other writers and artists to celebrate their voices and talents by submitting their work for review.



BLOOMING BUT TREATED LIKE WINTER

by Hayleigh Carrillo

Standing in the midst of the harsh winds, with roots stuck deep into the ground that the seed blossomed from with life, tiny but full of hope and life, is a Dandelion. Covering itself, watching as the rest of its fellow outcasts are plucked from their homes without warning by the mean wind. It stands, cowering into itself and trying to protect itself from the world around it. It thinks, as the rain pounds down from above, that maybe it shouldn't have been brought into this world. Contemplating, day by day, it thinks about the disadvantages and the hardships that it was born into. Processing that it was born to fail. Acknowledging that there was never a chance at the flower becoming great and known and beautiful.

Across the grassy plain, meters away yet still in sight, the Dandelion watches as the Sun Flowers grow even through the storm. They rise and they reach for the sky. Bright yellow petals that sit atop thick and vibrant green stems. They've been blessed enough to grow healthily; around them, similar to how they are, tower others like them that stand high. Some are taller, some are shorter, but together they grow and look down at those smaller than them. They mock the smaller plants actively. They spit down on them and drop harsh words onto the smaller plants. They watch as those around them shrivel up from the weather and die. With no mercy, no sympathy, and no empathy they continue on. A death doesn't affect them, even if it's one of their own.

They steal from others. They take what they please. During the summers as they grow, they cover the other plants—not to protect them from the heat, not to shield them from the dehydrating rays of the beaming sun that rests in the light, cloudless and blue sky of the August air—but to steal the little rain that will fall one day. They, with their broad petals, lean forward and cover not only short flowers, but the surrounding ground; their vast shadow towers and scares the miniscule

ones. They make the small ones submit into fear, then, once it rains the Sun Flowers quiver and scream in joy as they finally overindulge in the sweet, sweet, richness of the earth.

From the side, the singular Dandelion watches throughout the current storm, remembering all the hard times that Sun Flowers had put it through; she sits, watching them from afar in this hard weather and wonders what her life would be like if she were born with such privileges. She wonders what would have been if her mother had not been taken away evilly by those humans that run around wildly in the Spring season. The Dandelion cries softly as it faces the harsh winds of the world for another time.

This world, she figures, really is the most cruel and unfair place that there is in the universe. She has watched throughout the years as every possible thing has gone wrong. She's watched, and she has grown up, being treated as if she was the dirt below. She's been a victim of the world and now she's unable to do anything as she stands by her lonesome. Her world, since the beginning of time, has moved slower than those around her.

In 2002 she was born with only one parent, her mother—her own personal sun—to look over her. In 2005, before she knew what it was, her mother was assaulted as their house was broken into. In 2009, the bank sued them for their property and evicted them from their home, destroying their comfortable soil. The year 2011 was when her mother was diagnosed with cancer by a physician. In 2015, she realized the difference between her and her peers; in their clothes, their shoes, their backpacks and their pencils—the way they blossomed in the world and she stayed a dud lost in the massive field. 2017 was when she watched her mother succumb to her illness, wilting away and returning to the soil that had given her life. Dandelion was left alone while others had each other. She put her life on pause at that time, but sadly, the world didn't stop around her.

The Sun Flowers argue with each other across the field. They yell and shriek as the rain finally comes to a stop. They fight, accusing each other of stealing one another's rain for their own. They threaten each other and they curse. They have no shame in their words, though, they've never had any shame anyway. The Sun Flowers are gluttonous and only crave more for their own. Never do they think about those around them. Never do they hesitate to take from those smaller than them. Never do they wait to step and to crush those who they think are beneath them.

Dandelion closes her eyes slowly and waits for sleep to overcome her after the storm. Then, when it does, she relishes as she's able to escape the world before her that taunts her cruelly every day.

During the Spring, visitors walk down the field to see the massive Sun Flowers. They look at them with love in their eyes. They take pictures and they talk about the Sun Flowers with such high levels of respect. They adore them and they compliment them. The Dandelion watches, jealousy and envy in her mind for a moment, as this happens. Then when she looks at herself and sees her own tattered and torn clothes, she realizes why no one looks at her. When she looks at her own situation, she can't feel envious, but only disheartened. Never will she be called pretty. She will never compare to a Sun Flower.

But once the visitors get bored, they turn around and walk away. They trample on the grass and their feet bring up the dirt of the earth. They crunch on the smaller flowers, killing them then and there and putting them out of their misery. Dandelion cries for them to do the same to her, but they ignore her and head away from the land. They don't ever give any time to a weed that will wilt away soon enough.

It's in 2019 when the weed finally loses hope. She sits, wondering what comes after in the world. She ponders about what happens after her soul leaves. Will she be reborn in this class or will she be able to shine beautifully like a Sun Flower? Will she be able to captivate people and entertain them? Will she be able to breathe without worrying about someone mocking her? Will her name finally mean something to someone—will it finally mean something to herself? Will she be more than a nuisance to those who see her? One day will she be able to see the sky like those across from her.

Maybe not, she thinks. This life that she lives seems to be the one that will follow her no matter how many times she is reborn.

That summer, as the sun beats down on her and the hot air suffocates her, she begins to wilt. She can feel it deep within her stem as she watches the people take pictures of the Sun Flowers; it's a small family. A pair of parents and a small child with his hair curled happily. He runs around, yelling and screaming in a daze at the Sun Flowers. They attract his attention and hold it, his youthful mind easy to trap.

He doesn't want to leave, not until his mother tells him that it's time to go. He throws a fit and stomps his feet, but after a conversation that Dandelion cannot hear, he walks forward. Dandelion cries out, begging the child to step on her, but it falls silent to his ears. She knows that her cries are useless, but that doesn't stop her.

The child walks past her, and she begins to sob, knowing that her death will be slow and painful. All hope has left her, until she quickly feels herself get plucked from the ground below her. She gasps out in surprise, watching as the blue sky

above her becomes clearer as she's lifted up. The child brings her close to his face and looks at her in awe. He grins widely and jumps around. "Look, look!" he yells at his parents. "I got you a pretty flower!" He raises her higher, proud of himself and his work.

Dandelion slowly watches the world fade around her. She slowly feels her eyes close. But the boy's words and compliments flood her ears. She listens to them closely and she takes them to heart. She cries, tears falling down her closed eyes as her body becomes numb. Her heart beats fully four times before it stops. Her last seconds of life she understands what it means to be cherished by someone.

DEAR RED RIDING HOOD

by Christian Le

Read: Forward to Redriderhood13@fairymail.com

Dear loving granddaughter/ grandson.

I, your grandmother Katerina Joyce Baker, have discovered a grand way to help you out financially in these difficult times. During the annual county pie-off competition, my prize winning Dutch Apple strudel mini-pies caught the interest of none other than Bill Gates who was also at the competition and a real big fan of baking. He wanted to take my recipe to commercial stardom and have me personally bake in his new baked goods empire. Now I do not have the money or resources available for such a feat. That is why I contacted you, my darling snookiepoo. Grannie Katie needs your help and I thought I'd ask my favorite grandchild to bring a total of two thousand dollars to jump start the business and get the pie making going. I promise that your money will quickly be paid back plus more \$\$\$ with the investments you place in. Bill Gates even offered to introduce you to his incredibly rich and gorgeous niece/ nephew if you help out your dear old grandma.

If you get this, please meet me at the cabin at the edge of the woods, 9:00 am sharp. Bring the money, shovel and some BBQ sauce as we will be digging and cooking as well. Do not tell anyone else of this.

Love, Grannie Katie.

...

Read: Reply to GmaKatieLOv3@Fairymail.com

Dear Grandma... Katie.

Strange how formal you are, this must really be a great deal. Say, where did you learn such great computer skills? The last time I visited you, you didn't even know what a mousepad was or how to get on Facebook without my help. I don't recall you being a good cook either; how come I never tasted any of your Dutch apple strudel mini pies? Every time I went out to greet you, I had to bring the basket of food as you practically burn everything once you get near a stove. This business deal sounds very rewarding, I couldn't possibly intrude on your success. I'm sure a bank loan can get you that two thousand you need.

PS: I'm already dating that lumberjack's son, Jackson. He lived a few towns past the river, no need to introduce me to anyone.

Your granddaughter, Red.

...

Read: Reply to Redriderhood13@Fairymail.com

Dear Red,

I insist that you come and help me out. I can't trust the banks or a loan company, only you. This deal can't hold up forever and I'll be heartbroken if you pass up this easy method of making \$\$\$\$. I haven't been able to send you any Dutch apple strudel mini pies as Bill Gates bought them all. My cooking and computer skills improved a lot since I took some classes in community college!

On a completely unrelated note, how much do you weigh and could you fit in an extra large Foreman grill? Just a silly question. By the way, I want extra spicy BBQ sauce. Don't forget the shovel so we can bury the leftovers from our cookout.

Love, Grandma Katie

...

Read: [Reply to GmaKatieLOv3@Fairymail.com](mailto:GmaKatieLOv3@Fairymail.com)

I'm shocked by your generosity and trust, Grandma. A business opportunity and a free BBQ; nothing like the stingy penny pincher I used to know. By the way, I won't be able to fit in a Foreman grill, I'm too fat and juicy for the lid to properly close.

Say, Grandma, could we Skype?

Love, Red.

....

Read: Reply to Redriderhood13@Fairymail.com

No... No.... No! I can't Skype because I have dreadful acne. Please just meet me at the cabin. You don't even have to bring the money, I think I found two thousand dollars in the cupboard. Make sure to bring the BBQ sauce and maybe some mashed potatoes and buttered peas too. I haven't seen you in a long time and I could practically gobble you up.

Love, Grandma

...

Read: To MacdaddyL_Jack28@Fairymail.com

Dear Jack,

I know you're busy with your internship as a cyber security technician, but do you think you can find out what's going on with Grandma Katie? She is giving these weird emails that sound like she wants to eat me. These emails don't sound like my sweet Grannie Katie. I'm going to head to the cabin to see if I can find out who this wolf in sheep's clothing really is.

Love, Red <3 <3 <3

...

Unread: Reply to Redriderhood13@Fairymail.com

URGENT

Red!

I think we should call the authorities. It sounds like she is trying to catfish you. If you can give me her email address. I can probably trace her IP and figure out who this person really is.

Please call me as soon as you see this email!

Agent Jackson Hunter

Cybersecurity Technician

Forest Bureau of Investigation

Phone (████) █████-████

...

Unread: To WolfinaCashmeresweater@Fairymail.com

Dear, Alejandro D. Wolf.

Your IP has been tracked and your activities reported. Keep still in your location as we come to collect you. Crimes committed by your person have been detailed as identity theft, fraud, and conspiracy to devour a minor. You have full rights to an attorney as you are being questioned.

Do not resist arrest.

Sincerely, the Forest Bureau of Investigation.

THE MUTT

by Levi Becker

This is a story about a boy and a dog. Maybe it's about a boy and his dad. It's a story about fear and courage, and a small stretch of water in the Idaho wilderness. It's about a younger me, a reckless dare, and a yellow-haired mutt named Buddy.

The year was 1954, and the summer was dry and hot. It was the kind of heat that melts your ice cream before it can touch your lips, the kind of heat that warps the air. No one in the town of Mountain Home had a pool, and a sprinkler was woefully inadequate when faced with the merciless sun and baked earth of the desert floor. A dozen fans and a swamp-cooler fought without pause to cool the little house that we called home.

I was ten years old and out of school for the summer. My days were spent riding bikes with Jonathan, my best friend, and battling imaginary communists with sticks shaped like guns; we won battles and died heroic deaths many times each day. Some days, though, Jonathan went out with his dad to work on cars, leaving me with my other best friend, Buddy.

Buddy was a mutt we'd found as a puppy, starving and muddy after a heavy desert storm. I was maybe six at the time and had loved him at first sight. He was clumsy and hyper, and he liked to bark, but he was my friend.

"You'll take care of him yourself, Levi," my mom had said, frowning at the sight of the coarse yellow hair and muddy paws. "You'll feed him, you'll pick up after him, and you'll train him." I promised I would, of course. She let me keep him, though his abundant energy often exasperated her.

I grew as Buddy grew, and we loved each other. He'd chase me around the neighborhood for hours, playing catch and barking with me as I laughed and shouted. He hated the leash, running like hell whenever I brought it too close to him. I didn't blame him, though; I wouldn't want a leash on me either.

Buddy suffered with me through that hot summer in 1954. He'd sit next to me in the shade, his tongue lolling to the side of his panting mouth, his eyes half closed as I pressed a cold bottle of Coke to my forehead. Some days were too hot to play, and boredom partnered with heat to rob me of my summer leisure.

It was during one of those miserable summer days that my dad packed a cooler with water and loaded Buddy into the truck.

"We're going fishing, son. Marvin's coming with us, and so are Jonathan and his dad. Bring something you can swim in."

I was excited to cool off and hang out with the grown-ups. Buddy was excited too, and he barked loudly to let us know. I wasn't much for fishing as a boy, but I loved to swim. I remember that drive to the river, watching the desert speed past us and listening to Dad talk about the war and the president. I didn't know much about those sorts of things, but Dad did, and he spoke to me as if I were old enough to understand. I'd listen to his voice, enjoying the way the light shone on his bright red hair and marveling at his knowledge. Mom always said he was the smartest man she'd ever met.

We drove through the deserts of Idaho, past the plateaus and the sagebrush seas. The blue-grey mountains slowly grew as we drove, looming over us in solemn regard. The river was far, and it took a long time to get there, but I didn't care; I liked driving with Dad, and Buddy enjoyed the wind.

The others were waiting when we arrived at the river. They sat on the bank with their feet in the water, their trousers rolled up to their knees. I ran to Jonathan, Buddy on my heels, and left the grown-ups to their fishing. The three of us explored the surrounding woods, climbing rocks and looking for wild animals; our raucous commotion all but guaranteed their absence. The air was alive with the hum of insects and the rustling leaves of the birch trees mimicked the sound of rushing water. It was cooler in the woods, the streams of snowmelt providing the clearest, coldest water that two boys and a dog could ask for.

When we grew tired of the woods, we made our way back to the river. Dad was there with Marvin and Michael, Jonathan's dad. A tin pail contained several large trout, ready to be gutted and cooked. Marvin started a small fire and we feasted on nature's bounty, telling stories and laughing next to the water. The men talked of their jobs, of sports, and of the economy while Jonathan and I listened contentedly. The water rippled gently before us, reflecting the mountains and the reeds and birch groves along the shore.

"This summer has been dry," Marvin commented, "The water line is down."
Michael and Dad agreed.

"Hell, it's less than a mile to the other shores. Wasn't more than two years ago when it was too far to swim."

More agreement.

"Justin, I bet we could swim to the other side before these boys here could clean the rest of these fish." Marvin winked at my dad conspiratorially.

"Marvin, I'd bet you a steak dinner that you're right."

Jonathan and I grinned, willing to partake in the ruse. I pulled out a pocket knife and stood up.

"Dad, I'll bet you a trip to the city and a sack of candy that you're wrong."

Dad laughed and took off his shirt.

"You're on, boy. You two can start as soon as our feet don't touch. Michael, you watch these two and make sure they play fair." Jonathan's dad nodded, smiling.

Marvin and Dad waded into the river while Jonathan and I eagerly waited with the trout, who were not so eager. Buddy ran between us, jumping and barking and wagging his tail. I knew Dad would beat Marvin.

"You two can start now," Michael said.

I grabbed a fish and split it open as Marvin and Dad began to swim. They started out fast, shattering the calm surface of the river into a chaotic mosaic of broken waves and sparkling droplets of water. I tried to focus on the fish in my hand, but my attention was drawn to the two men cutting through the water like knives. Dad was ahead of Marvin, his white teeth bared in a smile that matched mine. Buddy barked happily.

I continued cleaning the fish, cutting off the head like Dad had taught me. Dad was nearly halfway across the river, but Marvin was catching up fast.

"Hurry, Dad!"

Jonathan was already finished with his first trout. I saw Marvin pulling ahead of Dad, who had slowed considerably. In fact, he hadn't moved forward at all. His arms were still moving, but he wasn't smiling anymore. I dropped the fish and stood up, moving towards the bank.

"Dad! He's beating you!" I watched him redouble his efforts, but he didn't move much.

I was starting to feel uneasy, a hard knot forming in my stomach.

"Dad!"

Marvin had reached the other shore. He turned to look back to my dad, smiling triumphantly. The smile dropped when he saw my dad in the middle of the river. I heard him shouting, but the words lost their clarity before they reached us on the shore. Michael stood next to me.

"He's drowning, Michael! Help him!"

I felt sick. My dad's arms were moving slower; the splashes they made were small. I wanted to help. I couldn't. Buddy stopped running and stood next to me, his

head cocked to the side.

"He's panicking," Michael said quietly. "He'd take me down with him."

Dad began to sink below the surface before pushing himself up for gasps of air. I wanted to look away but was transfixed. I was terrified and angry; terrified that I might watch my father drown, and angry at my own helpless fear. We all watched; Marvin, exhausted on the opposite shore, and Michael, his arms around Jonathan.

I started to cry. Hot tears coursed down my cheeks, salty and useless compared to the river swallowing my father. We were frozen in place, watching tragedy unfold.

But Buddy didn't watch. Buddy saw my father's meager attempts to stay above the water and moved without the fear that had paralyzed our human forms. He leapt into the water and began to swim rapidly towards Dad, whose energy was all but spent. He moved like a ray of light, a golden beam of fur coursing through the water. That energy that had exasperated my mother, that energy that had pulled me across gravel roads on my belly, that energy that could not be spent was focused on the middle of the river.

"I don't believe it," Michael murmured.

Buddy had reached Dad. I watched, still crying, as my father latched onto the scruff of Buddy's neck. We watched as Buddy turned and paddled steadily back to us; those minutes stretched wider than the river itself. Buddy did not falter. He swam back to us, pulling my dad with him. As soon as he could touch, my dad stood and walked towards the shore. I ran to him, the tears still wet on my cheeks. His arms wrapped around me and I hugged him back fiercely. We did not speak for a long time, just stood there in the water. After the fear had passed, I grew self-conscious and let go.

"If anyone gets a steak dinner," said Michael, "it should be that dog of yours. I've never seen anything like it."

Buddy, that golden hound, licked the tears from my face. He was happy in the way that he was always happy. He seemed to have forgotten that he was a hero. He was just a dog again; loyal, strong, and selfless. I don't think he knew any other way.

We left the river after that. Dad didn't talk much, and neither did I. I just sat in the truck, gazing at my father and the dog that saved his life. I learned about that death that day. I learned about fear. I also learned about courage. Even now, so many years later, I remember those lessons. I remember a small stretch of water in the Idaho wilderness, a dare that nearly drowned a man, and I remember the yellow mutt that saved his life.

SAVING SHARE-BEAR

by Tessa Barman-Flannigan

The screaming is getting closer. We don't have much time left before she reaches us. My little sister Taylor clings to my waist as I look around frantically, trying to find somewhere to hide her. My gaze settles on the toy box. It's not ideal but it'll have to do. I throw out all the toys as fast as I can and grab a blanket to cover the bottom. I'm trying to create a protective layer between my sister and the cold, hard metal.

"We're going to play a game," I tell her, trying my best to smile. "I'm going to put you in the toy box with all of your favorite stuffed animals and we'll pretend you're a stuffed animal too!"

I'm working hard to seem calm, to make her believe everything's okay but I'm growing more panicked by the second. Taylor looks me in the eyes and I know she feels it too. She knows as well as I do that something is very wrong. She nods anyway though and I lift her into the toy box.

She brings her knees up to her chest, curling up into a ball to fit into what is little more than just an uncomfortable metal box. I start lining the inside of the box with her stuffed animals, trying both to make her more comfortable and hide her away.

"Can I have my Share-Bear?" she asks me in the quietest voice.

Despite the hell outside our door, I smile. Her Share-Bear, the present I got her for her second birthday. She's carried it with her everywhere she goes for the two years since.

"Of course," I tell her as I grab the purple bear with the two lollipops on its stomach from the bed. She wraps her arms around it and hunkers back down into the toy box.

For just a moment, I pause to look at Taylor. She looks so small and fragile.

She is so small and fragile. I know that I can't let anything happen to her. I won't let anything happen to her. I swear to myself right then and there that I will protect her until my dying breath.

I go back to covering her with stuffed animals. We've been trying to pretend that we don't hear the screams of our mother getting ever closer but it's impossible to deny now that she's pounding at our door.

I know we only have minutes left before the door to our bedroom bursts open. I moved all the heavy things I could lift in front of it but it won't hold for more than a few moments. I'm filled with more terror than my eight-year-old body can handle. My hands shake and my heart pounds, but I do my best to put on a brave face.

I look at my little sister one more time, bending down to promise her, "It's all going to be okay kid. I swear, I'll keep you safe. But you have to be quiet now okay? And no matter what happens, you have to stay in here until I come get you out. If I don't come get you, you wait til you don't hear Mom anymore and then you run as fast as you can to the neighbors okay? Promise me."

She nods her head at me, fear welling up in her eyes. I shut the toy box as much as I dare while still leaving her with enough room to breathe.

The door is beginning to creak open. All I can see is one of our mother's eyes and hands. She looks worse than I've ever seen her. Her visible eye is crazed and streaked with red like something from a horror movie. The hand she's squeezed through the door is just grabbing and grabbing, trying to get a hold on something, anything.

"You can't hide from me," she yells, "I'm your mother!"

I take an involuntary step back, knowing that I have only seconds left before she breaks through my poorly constructed barrier.

"I'm not going to hurt you" she tells me. "I'm going to save you. The world out there is too cruel. It's no place for little girls."

All I can do is take another step back.

"If I can't handle it, what chance do you have?" she asks. "I can't protect you from it but I can save you."

And then, in the blink of an eye, she is in the room and upon me. She locks me in an iron grip before I even have the chance to think about escape. I struggle against her but it's no use. There's no getting out of this one I realize with a horrible certainty. All I can do is try to keep her focused on me long enough for Taylor to escape.

She drags me kicking and screaming out of the bedroom, down the hallway, and into the bathroom where the bathtub is already filled with water. A fresh surge of

panic shoots through me and I try even more desperately to escape her grasp. But to no avail.

“Don’t fight me,” she says, “I’m your mother. I’m helping you.”

And with that, she pushes me over the side of the tub and into the water.

I thrash as she holds me under but I know it’s futile. Water fills my airway. I’m gonna die here I realize. My mother gave me life and now she’s taking it away. My lungs are burning and my vision is turning black as I breathe the water in. But it’s okay because she hasn’t mentioned Taylor or even looked around for her once. I bought my sister time to escape and that’s all that matters.

I take what time I have left to pray to every god I can think of, begging them to keep Taylor safe. “You owe me this,” I silently tell them, “please just do this one thing for me; I’ll die but just please, please let her live.” My limbs have become too heavy and too tired to keep fighting anymore. The pain in my lungs is becoming too much to bear. I can feel the life in me begin to slip away. I know it’s time.

Mom must know it too because she looks me in the eye once more and says, “I’m sorry.”

That’s when I see it: little Taylor creeping up behind our mother, holding the vase from the bathroom counter high above her head with both hands. I can’t help myself, I smile. Just as Mom turns to see what I’m looking at, Taylor smashes the vase down on her head as hard as she can. Mom’s grip on me disappears as she falls off the side of the tub and on to the floor.

I shoot straight up, taking turns between coughing up water and gasping for breath. Taylor is by my side in an instant, wrapping her arms around me. I hug her as tight as I can.

“Thank you,” I rasp. “Thank you so much. You saved me.” Still disoriented and in disbelief, I repeat, “You saved my life.”

“You protect me. I protect you,” she says in response.

I look to where our mother, our would-be murderer lies on the floor, a puddle of blood forming around her head. I don’t know if she’s dead or just knocked out but I’m not sticking around to find out. I step out of the bathtub and pick Taylor up, covering her eyes as I carry her over the body and the blood.

“We gotta go now,” I tell her.

Soaking wet and with Taylor still in my arms, I make a break for the front door. But before I can reach it, Taylor cries out, “Wait!”

I freeze, certain that our mom is following after us but when I look, no one’s there.

“I need my Share-Bear! We have to go get her. Please!”

I sigh with relief. I set Taylor down by the door and dutifully retrieve her bear

from the toy box. She beams with happiness when I bring it to her and I can’t help but grin back. Taylor and her Share-Bear are safe now. I take my sister’s hand and lead her out the front door. We never once look back.

Whatever we may face now, we’ll face it together.

SHY

by Jamie Slaton

Charles Choi didn't consider himself one of many lovey-types of people. He didn't like hand holding or the gushy compliments. He was a cool kid: calm and collected. He didn't do romance; it was one of those sappy things his friend Grey was into and tried to pull him in to as well. He always rolled his eyes and did his best to appease her without giving in. The movies, the shows, even the novel that one time. He let her go on and on about them while still keeping his distance from the topic. He didn't daydream about his perfect date. What was the point? He didn't even consider the idea that he could have a perfect date.

Until now.

The pen was gripped loosely in his fingers. His graded homework assignments were mixed with other papers to create a sense of controlled chaos on his desk, though they were all pushed haphazardly to the side to make room for a single piece of paper. He planned to execute his idea by note. Whenever he placed the pen to the paper, he always lifted it again. All he had managed to write in the last hour was a name. "Chris."

He ran his finger along one of the blank lines; sure, he wasn't eloquent by any means. He wasn't used to not knowing what to write, though. He got through school by dragging his way through every assignment with minimal effort; all he ever did was write whatever immediately came to mind. Beyond that, he didn't care. He never put thought into his writing; there was never a point. He made a couple of doodles before letting his pen drop; it made a soft thud before rolling off his desk and landing silently on the carpet. He picked up his phone and glanced over his notifications. There were a couple of old notifications he kept forgetting to clear. The reminder to go to bed from an hour ago was still there, and he had two texts from Grey.

have u done it yet?

boy, i know ur up

Charles rolled his eyes and responded. Did Grey ever sleep? It wasn't like it wasn't late right now.

no not yet

He received a response almost immediately. Before he could press the lock button on his phone; a message notification popped up on his screen. He could almost hear her voice when he read her text.

omg ur too shy!!! That's so cute

That comment made his face heat up. Grey knew him too well; she knew just how to get under his skin. It was awful, and he was glad no one could see his face.

am not

Yes. Completely convincing.

With a still red face, he went to search the contacts in his phone and clicked Chris's name. He wasn't shy. He wasn't cute, either. The blank text box seemed daunting and he found himself staring at it. He typed a message. Then he erased it. He typed another message, and he erased that one too. Finally, he settled on one. It sounded casual enough. Not shy at all.

hey Chris, wanna go see a movie sometime?

He put his phone face down so that he didn't see a response as soon as it came in. His hands were shaking, and it felt like his breath was catching in his throat. Perhaps he was a little nervous.



SLEEPLESS

by Ezekiel Eckart

I’ve lived in many strange, beautiful, and at times, intimidating places. So, the idea of me living in my car was my choice and then again, not my favorite. My family had completely severed ties with me at that point in life, and I was thrown out of the house in a hurry when I was 16. Beginning on my path that would lead me into homelessness. Fortunately for me I was given a parting gift from my dad, the illustrious Chevy I hated so much. The car itself was technically his until he signed it away to me when I left. It was a bright red Chevy Aveo, so it was tiny, but for me, it was the perfect gas saver for my escape to Oklahoma City.

It didn’t take long for reality to come to hit me in the face. The summer ended up being extremely hot, so my smelly clothes filled car would turn into an oven by morning. To try and avoid this, I would find a beautiful park or playground and park my car, find some shade, lay down some clothes for padding, and fall asleep. My living in a car, however, didn’t stop me from taking care of myself. I found out truck stops have public showers that take change to use them. So I had a place to get clean, and while I was there, I would use it as an opportunity to collect loose change around the parking lot to pay for it. As time went on, there became an undeniable problem. The seat wasn’t very accommodating. I would have to curl into a ball to get comfy and make myself believe that it was a bed I was on.

To make matters worse, on my way out of the house, all I managed to grab was clothing. So sleeping now consisted of me with clothing on top of myself, and that was it. I didn’t mind at the time; it was already hot enough. But once again, my youthful ignorance still was keeping me distracted, and then winter came.

I had gotten into an offensive rhythm of waking up shaking, seeing my breath in the middle of the night. Then I would have to decide if I was going to spend the gas in the car on some heat or save it to drive to where I needed to go.

This situation was a common problem I would find myself in—go somewhere or use the heater. Luckily, I became quite diligent when it came to finding change. Some of the time, I would manage to find extra bits of coins by going to the turnpike. I would park then jump out quickly at the toll booth. Then scramble to pick up all of the change I could find on the ground for either gas or food. Believe it or not, people do leave a lot of money around there. One thing that a lot of people would probably find weird or prideful is that I never begged. It didn’t seem right to ask people for money to cover up for my mistakes, so I just never did it.

That was when I began to write. I had nothing else to do with my time, so why not do something constructive? I wrote everything from slam poetry to screenplays. Short stories to beginnings of what I would hope one day to be a novel. It was an excellent way to be distracted from the actual problems I was facing. During that winter, a massive blizzard blew into town. I couldn’t find anywhere I could park my car and go unnoticed, so I decided I should stay in the OnCue parking lot. Some may already know this, but those stores are what’s called a “Safe Place” often used for children or adults who seek refuge or help. I parked the Chevy with the heater running as hot as possible so that the heat would hopefully stay longer in the car. It was during this when I would begin to layer all my clothing on, then pile more on top of me in the back seat. I then reached up front and switched off the ignition of the car, without knowing how the night would end.

I woke up the following morning to a soft blue glow all around me. The car had been encased in what looked like about six inches of snow. I was blown away at how crazy the weather had gotten outside. So I went to sit in the driver’s seat of the car to start it up. Something caught my attention. Underneath all that snow, I saw something that was on the windshield. I gave my windshield wipers the old back and forth, and I stepped out of the car quickly to pull this mystery paper into the now warm vehicle with me. After settling in the driver’s seat, I remember verbal expletives. I realize the person who wrote that ticket most likely could see me sleeping in the car but did not wake me up or even seem to care about my wellbeing. This moment is when I completely broke down. I felt like I had fallen to pieces and decided that there had to be a change. I needed to find a homeless shelter, which I didn’t want to do. However, I knew I had to if I wanted to improve my life and not expire in the backseat of that car.

FALLING

by Bob Chikos

I stood on a tiny platform, attached to a tree, 40 feet in the air. The ropes course instructor had said the cables could hold up to 10,000 pounds. I probably shouldn't have felt so terrified.

I was supposed to jump to a platform on the next tree, about three or four feet away. On the ground, this would be cake. 40 feet in the air, not so much.

See, I had a little voice in my head that was saying, "YOU'RE GOING TO KILL YOURSELF!!!"

I stood, palms sweaty, trying to muster the courage to jump. Eventually, I realized people had lined up behind me and were saying things like, "Bob, you need to just jump already. You're holding the rest of us back."

I jumped.

And landed safely on the other tree.

I'm sorry if you were hoping to read a story about how I fell from a tree.

...

It was my first year at my community college. A year of great growth—and loneliness.

I had never had a girlfriend before.

Or been on a date.

Or asked anyone out.

Ladies have always intimidated me. The Voice in my head liked to say, "Who would want to date you?"

Second semester, I had an English class. Julie sat next to me every day. She had light brown hair, kind of frizzy, freckles around her nose, and brown eyes that just sparkled whenever she smiled—which was constantly because she laughed at everything I said.

I wanted to ask her out, but I didn't know how to go about it. I wasn't close enough with anyone for advice, so I cobbled together a script:

"Julie, I kind of like you and since it's Valentine's Day weekend, would you like to do something with me?"

I practiced over and over. And over.

And over.

And over.

The Voice said, "Don't do that! You're going to make a fool of yourself."

...

The next day, after class, Julie and I walked toward the building exit, past rooms of college professors with comic strips and office hours pasted on their doors. Just before the exit, I blurted, "Hey Julie can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure, what's up?"

My blood pressure—that's what was up! My knees wobbled, but I remembered that tree, how I just needed to jump and I'd be OK.

I looked into her sparkling eyes and said, "WellJulielkindoflikeyouandit's Valentine'sDayweekendandIwaswonderingifyou'dliketodosomethingwithme?" My forced words covered my fragile soul.

She said, "I can't," as she gently shook her head, waving her frizzy locks.

"Next weekend?"

"No, I mean, I can't because I have a boyfriend."

And that's when I fell. Fwoooooo-thump!

As I lay on the ground (figuratively), with my heart somewhere by the coffee vending machine, I thought I heard a distant trombone: Waa-waa-waa-waaaaaa.

Her smile lost its energy. "I am so sorry," she said. "I should have told you."

Apparently, she hadn't been flirting with me in class. She just thought I was really funny.

I guess that's a compliment.

We went our separate ways and as I walked through the cold and grey parking lot, the Voice sneered, "Told you so."

I sat in my car. I looked into my rearview mirror and saw a pathetic boy who had been crying.

I thrust my finger toward the mirror and shouted, "I am so—"

I couldn't think of the right word to scream at myself. I'd endured years of wanting a relationship with someone and not taking the chance because I was so scared of rejection.

The Voice was right—I did make a fool of myself.

I finished my tirade, "I am so—proud of you, man." My eyes sparkled back at myself as I sniffled. "You finally asked someone out."

And I survived the fall.

VENUS IMPERMANENT

by Monica Hernandez

“Goodbye, I love you too!” I say to my mother as I hang up the phone before starting the ignition. My mouth whispers “I love this scene” to my good friend when watching Juno for the 162nd time. When my six-year-old sister erupts in random dance and song, I cannot help but gleam and offer words of encouragement, “I love how you do that!” She throws her arms in unison with the beat.

This expression of pure reverence seems to slip out of my mouth without hesitation or hassle. But when my lover looks down at me with a certain tenderness, so full of affection, he lets out a soft “I love you,” coupled with a kiss on the cheek. I cannot help but feel a strong sense of skepticism within myself when these famous words leave his mouth.

The concept of romantic love is something that my brain and being cannot comprehend. It is a universal feeling, yet unknown to me. Beneath my feet, my mind is grounded to the earth, blinding my retinas from all concepts intangible to the naked eye. From the moment those words tickle the hairs within my ears, and my pupils process light rays of love, my heart stops; feelings devoid. Love is imitated, incredulous, and often indifferent.

My amygdala is held hostage by these cynical thoughts daily. However, despite this aversion to all that is commitment and belief that one can truly love one another, I reside in a relationship in which love is deeply embedded into the routine of my day.

My lover is filled to the brim with love for me. It radiates throughout his body, from the shiny spirals of his thick brown hair to the soles of his size 10 feet in which he is practically levitating from the Earth.

From the moment my heavy lids awake in the early morning to just barely dozing off into a deep sleep after a tedious day, I receive an average number of 32

verbal variations of “I love you.”

It is not to say I do not appreciate these tokens of affection; however, I cannot help but feel a strong sense of skepticism within myself when those specific words leave his mouth. After all, how can you love someone when that “love” can be clicked, cut, copied, and pasted onto someone else just as easily?

This thought occurred to me two Decembers ago; our first month together. The feeling appeared seemingly out of the blue when my hands brushed through the thick curls atop my lover’s head when I suddenly envisioned my former admirer in his place. The coffee colored twists turned into loose blue-black waves within a second.

I discovered time travel through this back and forth motion of my hand. Caress, comfort, kiss. Rinse and repeat.

Two years later, I attempted time travel again by looking into my lover’s past. The perpetual nature of my skepticism had since sprouted from the winter.

Floridian crickets hummed outside our door and the AC blew furiously to keep us cool. When the clock turned three, it was then that I asked my beloved, how he met his previous girlfriend.

It started in middle school, where the code to the combination lock of commonality resided in teen angst. She loved the same screaming noise as he did, and both of them found validation by demonstrating their uniqueness from classmates by dressing in multiple layers of black, indulging in all that is atypical.

It was love. And it lasted for three years. The exact same amount of time that I’ve shared with my lover. I pondered, if love is unique, how is it that one can claim love for another when “love” can occur again with someone else, 3 years in the future?

Now, when my lover tells me in times of turmoil “I could never love anyone else but you,” my mouth tightens and my eyes pin straight inside his pupils. In the crystal ball of my conscious, I can picture him with another girl of similar stature, eyeing the form of her legs. When a romantic relationship dies, the self lives on.

The eventual end of my relationship doesn’t frighten me. I know that my dear lover will ultimately find himself in love once again, regardless how hopeless he might feel when we eventually part. In due time, he will express the exact same sentiment, once intimate to me, to the next person who holds his heart dear.

While it may seem natural for this mindset to cause a sort of depression knowing that no one is unique in terms of companionship, I find love to exist in the form of freedom. A yearning crush develops in my heart when I exercise my autonomy. Like butterflies in my stomach, it flutters within me, evoking a warm flush that danced across my cheeks when I cut my hair to my ears, defying my mother’s perception of perfection.

Like the sweat that slides against the palms of my clasped hands, I choke on my words when my friends invite me out for late-night brain picking discussion. Serotonin shines through my pores, a mix of perspiration and elation in the comfort of those I hold dear.

Dear Sylvia Plath, whose very being could not be subjected to the unrelenting, suffocating life of a wife and mother, I love you.

In love with my sovereignty, I live and love for myself now and forever, both selfishly and not. I'm determined to find that which brings me pure happiness. No lover will be mine for eternity, for they cannot.

I say to my beloved, "When you are anxious about the future, I love you to the extent that I can as your's amor, but only as a companion can I love you completely without my own fear of death." Venus, for all that is beautiful, cannot kill me.

READY OR NOT

by Levi Becker

We lie together in the bed, naked and out of breath. There's a thin sheen of sweat on your brow despite the cool night air that filters through my bedroom window, giving your face an angelic glow. Your hair falls into your eyes and your lids are heavy, but you're smiling at me and I think I'm smiling back. Our skin sticks to one another, but it doesn't matter because I just want to hold you and look into your eyes because I love you, and I can't imagine a future that you aren't in. It's been that way for a while now.

I remember the first time I saw you. I was in the 5:30 meeting at the AA clubhouse, sober but miserable in my black leather jacket and beat up tennis shoes. My glasses were still tinted black from the afternoon sun, my beard disheveled from the westerly wind. You sat across the room, politely attentive and beautiful. Your hair hung loosely around your shoulders, the dark brown of shaded groves or rich designer chocolates. Images of Gypsy dancers and elaborately curved hookahs flashed across my brain, but your bearing was too regal for that. You were an Arabian queen, transforming a meager chair into a throne and a stranger into a supplicant. You flattered me with a glance, and I didn't hear another word for the rest of the hour.

I want to marry you. I'd ask you right now, but I don't have a ring and my job isn't great and I'm trying to get my shit together first, but it's taking too long. This small room, these faux fur blankets, those faded plastic blinds seem so inadequate. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to give you everything I want to give you, but in case you don't know, I'll give you everything I have. My eyes must be saying what my pride won't let me, because you arch one of your perfect eyebrows in a question.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" My face is so transparent.

We used to walk around town after the meetings, waving at strangers because you make everyone want to be your friend. We'd sit on the little wooden bench after everyone else had gone home, sharing a pair of ear buds and our favorite songs.

I wanted to ask you out, but I hadn't been sober for long, and I didn't know how to love someone without a bottle of whiskey next to the bed. We didn't hold hands, but we'd hold each other's gaze a moment longer than was casual, then glance away quickly, before we thought the other had noticed. You're looking at me now just like you used to, but this time you won't look away.

"What, Levi? Tell me."

You can't know what you're asking, because you say it so casually and I can't think of a casual lie, so like a fool I say, "Nothing." I shouldn't have said that because you always manage to get it out of me. So, you pester me in your adorable way, and I try to convince you it isn't important, but you won't let it go and now my heart's beating quicker than it was 10 minutes ago when I didn't have to think with my brain. I convince you to shower with me, hoping you'll forget by the time the water heats up. You don't.

Do you remember when we stood under a December moon? Our friends were inside laughing around the poker table, not noticing that we'd slipped away. I wanted to kiss you so badly that I couldn't think about anything else, but I couldn't because I didn't have a car, and I only worked part-time, and you deserved better than that. I hugged you instead, hating myself for not being ready.

You didn't care, though, because you were ready, and an hour later you called me, insisting that I let you come over. We sat on a worn-out couch with the tv turned off when I leaned in to kiss you. I shook like a scared kid and I know you felt it, but I didn't care because your lips are the softest thing that God's ever made.

Now, two years later, you're expecting an explanation, and the sound of the shower is drowning out the excuses in my head as to why this is the wrong place and time. I can't help it, though, because I love you and I'm betting that I always will, so I take a deep breath and start talking.

"I love you. I'm in love with you. I don't know if there's a difference, but either way it's true." I try to explain all the reasons why I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and you're taken by surprise but you're listening. I tell you that I'm ready to start a life with you. That I want to be there for you, to hold you, to listen to you talk about your day. There's nothing between us now; no make-up, no tv, no place to be. Your eyes, so impossibly big and coffee brown, are fixed on me. I'm afraid I'll start shaking like a kid again if you keep that up.

"It sounds like you're proposing."

I smile sheepishly, realizing I haven't asked a question yet. You're going to make me come right out and say it. That's okay, because I'm committed, so I look into those perfect eyes and ask you to marry me. You're nodding before I finish the question, before the shower rinses the happy tears from your face. Now I'm ready, too, because we're together and in love, and you see past where we're at to where we can be. In that moment we're closer than we've ever been while making love and I regret nothing.

THOUGHTS FROM AN ORDINARY ASIAN AMERICAN

by Angela Hoang

Hi, my name is Angela Hoang. My parents were born in Vietnam. I was born and raised in Oklahoma. That makes me an Asian American. Growing up, I am fortunate to be given so many opportunities, unlike my parents. However, living with the label “Asian American” is like having extra weight on my shoulders.

When people look at me, I feel like many somehow end up leaving out the “American” from “Asian American”. There are always those around me that expect the “Asian” in me to be good at every subject in school, especially math. Having such expectations from others makes me, unconsciously, force myself to meet those expectations. Looking back, I guess these expectations from others have helped me get good grades, which I am thankful for.

I have heard many comment behind my back on the food I would bring from home and eat. It could be a complex meal like rice with beef and broccoli, carrot, and radish with clear soup broth. It could also be as simple as Shin Ramyun noodles from home. The comments would generally be about how Asian it was to eat the strong-smelling food. These comments, yet again, made me self-conscious and I ate the school lunches for some time. In my senior year, I had a sudden thought: why do others comment when Asians eat Asian food, but they don’t ever comment when they see others around them eating their hamburgers? With this and other similar random thoughts, I gradually learn to block out the people that would make unnecessary comments or those that don’t know me for me but just labeled me when they first saw me.

Life as an Asian American has its own conflicts. I constantly feel like I am too American to some people or too Asian. Many times, living as an Asian American, I feel ashamed of myself. Being around my family, I don’t feel “Asian” enough. Throughout the years, I have lost the language that my parents speak. Sure, I still

know many words, since I try my best to talk to my grandparents who live with me. However, it is hard for me to keep a conversation going. I include English words in every sentence I say towards my grandparents. Many times, I don’t even speak Vietnamese to my parents since they know English and I find it more comfortable to speak in English. The other time I feel ashamed with myself is when I can’t read or write the words. Even if I feel ashamed, I always brush that feeling off and go on with my days. Time is ticking and I am hoping I will find that motivation to pick up that notebook and pencil and relearn the language that I have lost.

Personally, there are many times when I feel too Asian. I am a girl who doesn’t watch American TV shows or know the current news. Instead of watching American TV shows, I watch Asian dramas. I try to listen to mainly Asian music, and it’s not just Vietnamese but other Asian languages. I prefer Asian cuisine over American cuisine. I love celebrating and keeping the traditions my family have like Lunar New Year. The young first have to pay respect to the elders by wishing them good health or hoping they will continue to have prosperity. After paying the elders respect, the elders share wise words with the kids about their education or future and health and give the young red envelopes, hoping the kids will have a good future.

I have said living with the label “Asian American” is like carrying extra weight. I realize that that is my weight that I choose to carry with me. Not all Asian Americans will have the same thoughts as me because everyone is different. I am fortunate enough to have slightly strict parents because they will always be there for me, even when they can sometimes compare me to others a bit too much. There will always be expectations or stereotypes for me, but I just have to learn to be happy and more grateful with the people around me. I am still young and maybe my views will continue to change maturely. Until then, these are my thoughts living as an Asian American. So, let me introduce myself to you again. Hi, my name is Angela Hoang. Both of my parents were born and raised in Vietnam, but I was born and raised here in Oklahoma. I am still learning to be the best me and I am a proud Asian American.

POETRY

FIREFLY LIGHT

by Antonio Guardado

Firefly shine your light.
Take pictures of me.
Light my heart tonight
And let it be free.

See the future in my eyes.
All the endless summers.
On a small wooden boat, I
Reach the stars through flutters.

LA NIEBLA

by Antonio Guardado

La niebla no deja.
Se avieja y perpleja.
Refleja, pero no deja.

Esta se aleja
De la triste verja
Y al final, regresa.

Abeja apareja
La cobija añeja
Que la niebla no deja.

THE MIST

Translation

The mist persists.
It grows old and perplexes.
Reflexes, but persists.

It goes away
From the sad gate
And at the end, returns.

Bee prepare
The exhausted blanket
That the mist persists.

MEMORIES OF YOU

by Brianna Vore

It was on the edge of childhood when I met your eyes the color of the sea,
and there I saw the dawn to the cold empty night of my life. You shared a joke with
me and, unknowingly, began to lead me to the sunlight.

Again and again, I go back to that afternoon class where I learned to
breathe, and as I enter that endless dark again, I know it will be worse with
that ache deep in my soul. Stumbling and falling, the only thing keeping me
warm is the memory of short-lived love.

As I descend into that demon-filled terror, I cling to that love
created from meeting someone who awoke something in me like the sea.
And I will never know if you knew how you saved me. And when the ache
for you comes, I lie gasping for air and eyes stinging from the tears at night
the memories come – first love in California heat and a lonely girl gone –
and I breathe.

Dear God, I miss those days I sat beside you, drenched in sunlight.

When it all gets too much to bear, I want to bleed until the blood shines like
rubies in the sunlight, and curse myself into oblivion over ruining what
could've been a budding love story of a boy with a sunlit smile and a girl
learning to breathe.

In the years following my isolation from you, I've found the sea,
with its waves that kiss my feet, is the only thing that relieves me of the
night reminding me of every mistake and regret flooding me with an
unrelenting ache.

With shaking steps, I fill my life with words and music and anything that takes the
ache in my heart away. I will always play my memories of you like a movie when the
sunlight fills my room, and cling to them in vain hope of forgetting whatever terror
the night crushes upon me. Leaving nothing but a shell of the girl you knew. Love
to me is constant but forever out of my reach, and I would have better luck capturing
the sea god and demanding to be taught how to be in his domain and breathe.

If I could go back to our days together, I wouldn't take for granted the easy way I
knew to breathe because of you. Now I find myself a woman who cannot bring in
enough oxygen to stop the ache in her lungs. And now I must escape to the coast
and stand transfixed by the sea taking in its salty air as the prairie air is too stale. Its
sunlight will never come any way close to the warmth I felt when I was in love with
you. There is no more significant reminder of this tragedy than the night.

Memories of you no longer keep the demons at bay when they come crawling at
night. Yet those moments – romanticized and fading – are the only way, in the dark,
I can breathe. I am now a woman stripped to the bones by loneliness until she no
longer remembers love, so in vain, I scream for it to come back with a blinding rage,
with a haunting desperation, with an overwhelming ache; for the day where we,
pressed together and huddled under a blanket in the early morning sunlight,
sat on the beach with my head on your shoulder, and our fingers intertwined,
staring at the shining sea.

That day is what I choose to dream of every empty, lonely night,
and the dawn brings me a budding hope of learning to breathe
easy again, and I wonder if you think of me and wish for what
could've been a warm love.

MAYBE I'M IN THE WRONG STORY

by Patricia Pixler

Desperation is sticky. It's like being twenty at a cardiologist office. Half the room looks at you with pity and the other half is angry because you can't know all the things wrong with you yet. It's as if your life isn't tragic enough unless you're holding your bleeding heart out to someone, ready for them to squeeze.

Eight years is the longest day of your life. It's like looking in your rearview, watching a girl texting at the wheel and wondering how many people she's going to kill over her lifetime. The next time she breaks up with her significant other, she should just walk herself down to the police station and confess.

The wrong story is the one where you wake up and you're ready for the next eight years because they have to be happier than the ones you've been reliving. It's an empty movie theater full of cobwebs and the dusty relics of dreams.

Maybe God is just squeezing my heart too hard.

BURN OUT

by Alexandria Anderson

Cigarette clouds block our eyes from meeting,
Yet the daylight stars become our mirror
Soft chuckles as a secret greeting
But the sounds only draw me nearer
Lost in my head as much as my way
Yet you latch on to me like the smoke on your clothes
You filter your words to not get carried away
But the ache in my chest has other ideas to propose
Young lungs burn worse than your stare
Yet my words spill out nonetheless
Gritted teeth wishing not to care
But your scent still lingers on my dress
I may not be the best choice for you
But neither was the pack you chose to blow through

ONCE, I WAS YOU

by Thomas L. Hedglen

When I enrolled at OCCC
My dream was to read,
Research, and write
United States History.

English grammar was really
Frustrating, like a trip
Wire on the path to destiny.
I felt compelled to take a risk

Attempting to write prose
With liberal rules, I tried
Composing some poetry,
With only modest ability

Having one of my rhymes
Published in the Absolute,
In 1982, was a thrill, making
My decision resolute.

In the years that followed
I continued writing, letters,
Articles, reports, reviews
And stories about our ancestors.

My life was ordinary,
Work, pay bills, raise children.
We had spats and celebrations,
Triumphs and tribulations.

It was sprinkled with
Variety, travel from the Rio
Grande to the Arctic Circle,
And returning by sea.

There were unusual happenings,
Soaring above Albuquerque in hot
Air balloons, and receiving applause
After addressing an audience in New York City.

Unexpected surprises and natural
Wonders spiced my life, such as
Driving down four miles of forest
Road spotting an eagle in every tree.

Witnessing a buffalo stampede
In Kansas, and walking away from
An intense hail storm, which left
My personal vehicle a dimpled hulk.

Through it all I continued
Writing because it was ecstasy
To me, contributing to my
Beyond average longevity.

In 2014 I retired from OCCC
As a professor of history.
Two heart attacks and cancer
Prepared me for my current malady.

Two years ago, I published
A book. Last year I was
Photographed standing next
To the Stanley cup.

Now my legs wobble, I have
Diabetes, and my vision is
Bleary. It is time for a
Passing of the torch gesture.

Once I was you. By similar
Reasoning, you being published in
The Absolute today, could be
The initiation of a new me.

The initial verse remains inspirational
There's still so much more to scribe.
Embrace the forwarding of this
Composition infatuation.

LIFE WILL NOT WAIT FOR YOU

by Tristian Williams

you can try to keep up
with the clouds in the sky
as they float idly by,
but, if you lose your stride
or trip and fall,
the clouds will keep going.

you can ride across the country
on different steam engines,
leaving from different stations,
but, if you miss the train by a minute
or take too long to choose,
it will leave without you.

you will lose your way
and find it yet again.
you will trip and fall,
and get kicked while down.
yet, life will not wait
for you to come back around.

so chase new clouds,
and get on a new train—
no matter the destination.
or you'll just be waiting
for something that has
already passed you by.

TRIP

by Tristian Williams

one for me,
one for you
now we wait
thirty minutes pass

our fingers tingling,
our eyes widening
although still in denial,
an hour passes

why are we laughing at everything?
why are you all I want to look at?
"pull over so we can look at the stars"
two hours pass

it's one in the morning
you are in awe of the sky,
I am in awe of you
three hours pass

you look at me
tell me what bullshit life is
tell me what traumatizes you
five hours pass

no one awake but us
I tell you my past
I tell you what traumatizes me
seven hours pass

the sun is rising
my world is full of color
but not from the painting on the horizon
eight hours pass

the sleepy town is waking up
an adventure in one night,
and no one knows, but me and you
six months pass

trip after trip
night after night
all this time and I just now know
I can't help but love you

SOIL

by Linnae Almgren

Warm,
Soft,
Strong.
There are lots of words that can be used
To describe the old, strong soil
That surrounded her as she grew.
She digs her toes into the ground,
Pretending to be one of the trees surrounding her.
She spreads her arms wide,
Taking in the sun that provided her with food.
She stands.
She waits.
She smiles.

SHE

by Grethel Zeledon

Raging tidal waves
Like the essence of the female physique
The Desert
Too arid but not barren
In her you will find an oasis
Maybe she was created just to drown me
With her natural curves of wind blown sand
I can feel parts of her on my skin
Crashing on my cheeks like tidal waves made from her three mothers
She's a polar desert, that cold woman
When the sun has fallen into sunset
And the orange rays reflect upon the sand
It makes the sand crisp golden yellow
A tan goddess
Deep in the sand she appears

4/8

by Nathaniel Ogungbuyi

I ain't your mate
You're present in my success
Completely absent during my distress
You thought I would fall when I reached the triumphant pinnacle
For those who open their eyes can see there's no peak beyond the horizon

Handwritin' bold, deep, and heavy
Engraving scriptures that spread to many
Just enough to engulf any enemy
That seeks to destroy the Almighty

My power isn't lost, but unbound
Can't be stopped, too profound
Never staying down for any round
Nowhere to hide, but you can look around

Boundaries know nothing can hold
There can't be hesitation
From practice to application
I'm the people's representation
With undying roots as foundation
A beast of no nation

It's your aptitude
Not your attitude
That determines your altitude

When young I didn't have figures like me
Now I am producing them

Don't be complacent, 'cause you're meant for it
Don't matter if late, you gotta avoid that extra weight
No need to hesitate, as well complicate
Be a dream chaser, don't wait for her
You miss 100% of the shots you don't take
Destiny, let her be
Let my story last for eternity

War means fame (Ogungbuyi)
A boy we love, one that we'll never let go (Akomu)
Blessing become plenty (Oladipo)
Gift of God (Nathaniel)

PLASTIC PEOPLE

by Destinee Horton

Poor kids
The time they spend growing
further from the ground
Is time spent under the booming voice
that puts a barrier between them
and nature

Gimme, gimme, gimme
Tweak, drop, push
I want
I need

From earth to one god
From one god to three
It feels like another paradigm shift
Difficult when you stand
between the tides

Sickening really
To watch the appetites of young ones
die before they've even baked their
first mud cake
To hear each time someone's "it's ok"
morphs into "are you serious"

Disbelief and indignation
Because damn it, it's their God-given
right to have the things that
Drive us away from ourselves

Do you think this is the intended way
Or have the children made a mess while
Daddy was gone
Plastic people in a plastic world
Soon we will all melt
An involuntary suicide pact on
Mother's end
But what we fail to nail down in those
boards we call brains
Is that she intends to go on
With or without us
The thing about being plastic is
You simply don't care

REAL

by Savannah Thurston

If seeing is believing
then why isn't touching
knowing for sure
Your eyes wouldn't leave my face as
your fingers visited every crevice of it
I don't know how you feel about me
or if you even do
but your body says that
it wants me too

THIS CLOSET SMELLS OF CITRUS

by Paul Jones

I threw up a can of worms. Wiping the sobriety from my face, I find myself captivated by their peculiar movement and I watch them squirm in a puddle of their own bodies. I'm reminded of my own thoughts. The emotions take hold, beauty is trapped in the tears running down my face. It was felt through the heat of the asphalt as I splashed down and evaporated into orange clouds. For the first time, I felt an excruciating ache for the clouds. I am afraid of heights. I am afraid of Heights. I am afraid of Heights! I need to move. Jogging in circles on a triangular cliff, it's thirty paces away.

I jog thirty paces.

Lost in a sunset at noon, I make my way from the cliff. Dangerous thing the mind, a Beast. Left in the wild it flourishes and lives free, only obeying the laws of nature. Civilization is unnatural and yet, I return. Mistakes were made. I was betrayed by a one-legged piece of shark food. Head deep in water as a sexy barnacle kisses my neck. I'm drowning in affection.

I feel uncomfortable.

I take my leave in a makeshift refuge of awkwardness. The idea of money becomes relevant once again in the worst way. I lost my keys and found my marbles. I needed to be alone. I remember the worms and rebuke my clothes. I terrorize my cave looking for meat. I begin gnawing with no regard. The meat churns a slow saliva coated mess of salt. I spit the vegetables at the demons and wash the worms from my skin. They don't want to leave. I allow the soap to make believe as I watch the waterfall breathe. Everything has a right to dream.

Why must I stay awake?

IN RESPONSE TO AUDRE LORDE'S *USES OF THE EROTIC:* *THE EROTIC AS POWER*

by Brandon Ghoram

Eyes open – the erotic is a spiritual
act of deliverance
The expression of our divinity
The impression of our memory
The confession of our identity
But the erotic must be rectified
We must ameliorate eroticism with the
amalgamation of new testimony
One that exists out of the "I dos" of
matri(moaning).

At the quintessential essence of my
desire isn't you but me,
Isn't me but us,
But can us trust ourselves enough to
move past the shadows of the fire
And into the light of our presence?

I believe that...no, no, no...I know that
the pedagogy of what we offer
Exists outside the superficiality of my
patriarchal altar or the parting
of your waters.

Indeed, my exploration inside of us is
deeper than penetration
I want to know the ocean of our ways
The sunshine of our rays (raise)
And even then, I may only understand
the crest of God's creation.

I wonder to myself if, as the air receives
our voices,
We only receive fragments of the love
we speak
In gratitude of what it has kept, the wind
kisses our cheeks
Affirming the nature that we seek.

Eyes closed – the erotic is a spiritual
act of redemption

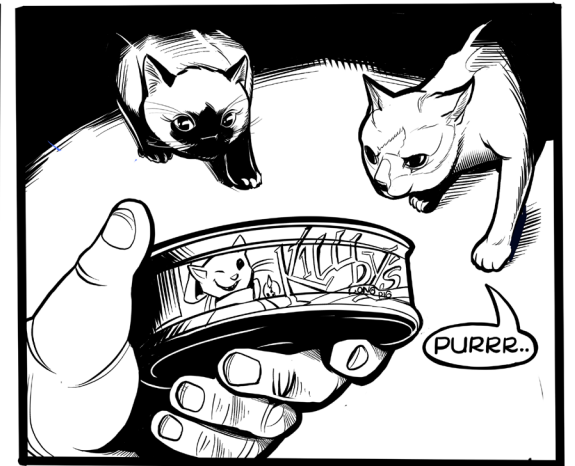
Reimagine a place where we have
forgiven all the lies told
All the cries knowned
All this life shows
We sense past our bodily portals that
something more in each other is meant
to be uncovered
Because Blackness absorbs all light,
& light holds all colors.

An abstract painting with vibrant, diagonal brushstrokes in shades of red, orange, yellow, green, and blue. The texture is visible, suggesting a thick application of paint. In the lower right corner, there is a small, dark, star-like shape.

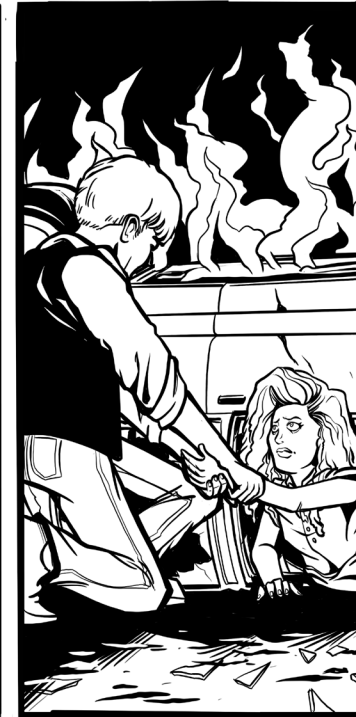
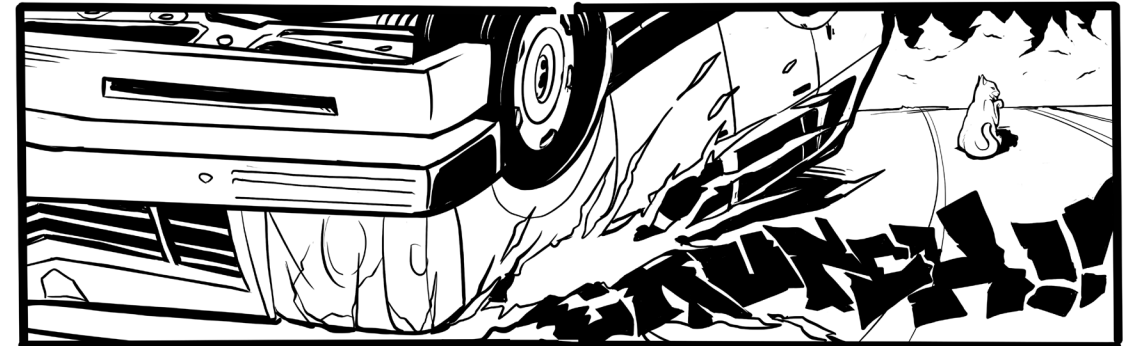
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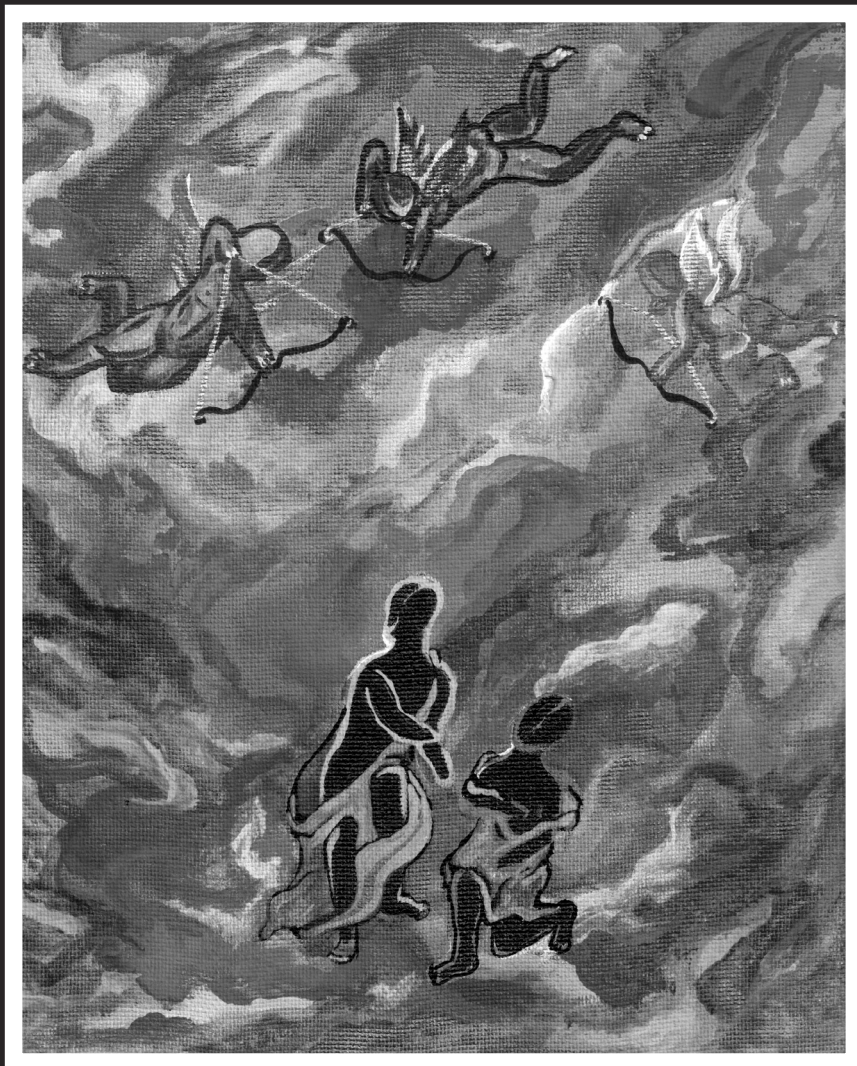


ARTWORK | ABSOLUTE 2020

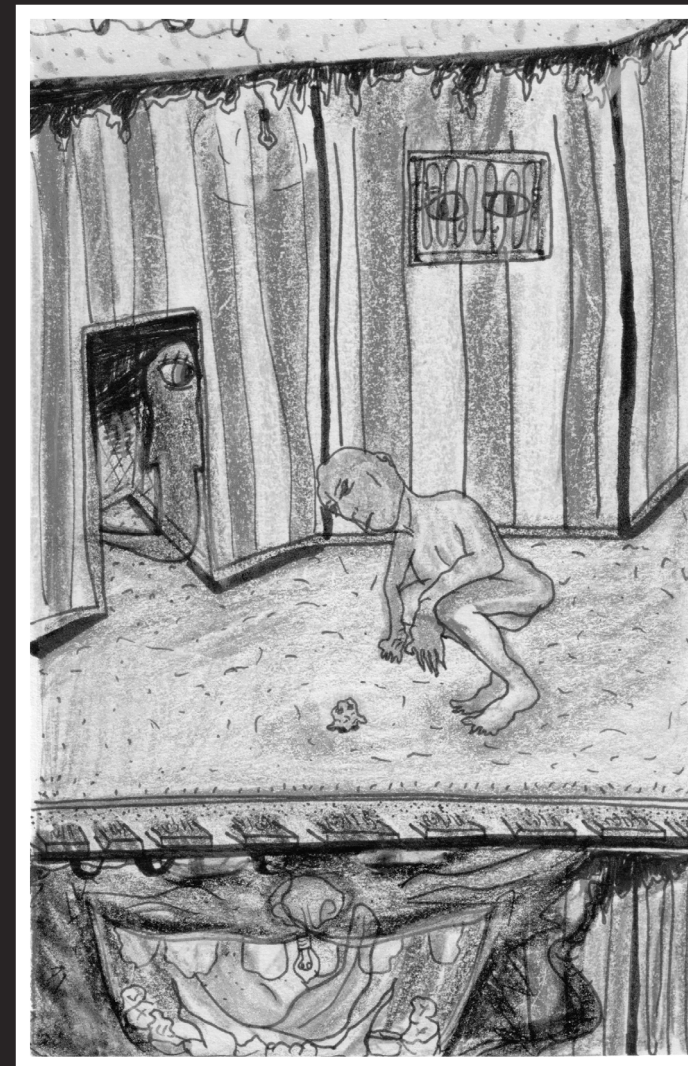


Psycho Kitties
by Raymond Griffith





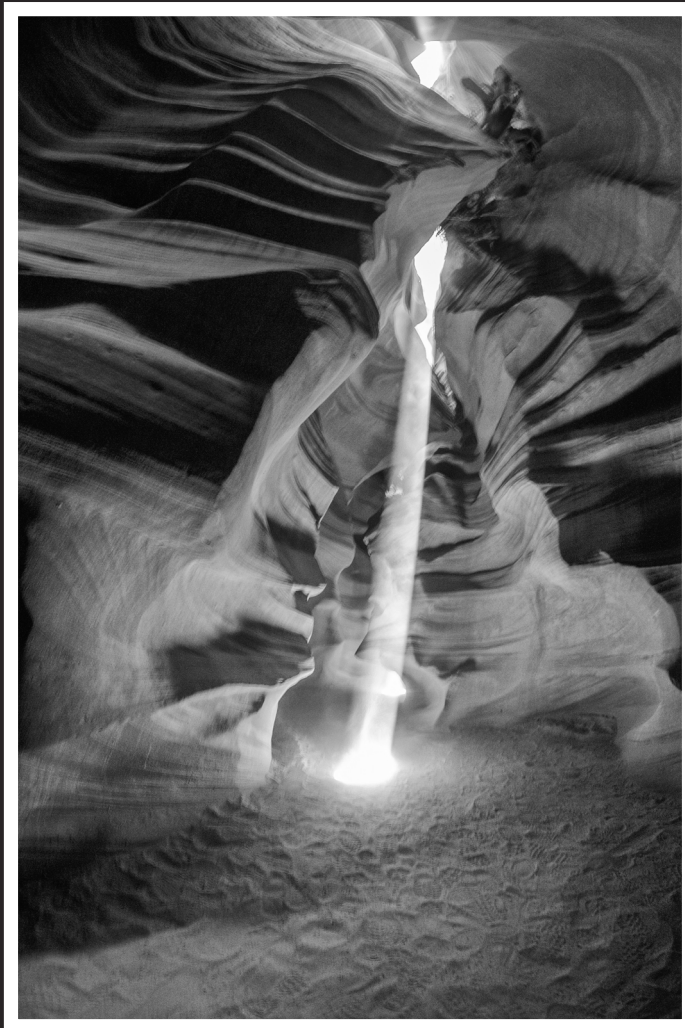
The Angels, They Judge Us
by Alondra Perez



Oblivion
by Alondra Perez



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Antelope Canyon
by Leonardo Villaseca-Cruz



Rams
by Leonardo Villaseca-Cruz



Swirl
by Leonardo Villaseca-Cruz



In God We Trust
by Leonardo Villaseca-Cruz



Lunch Time
by Larissa Whisenhunt

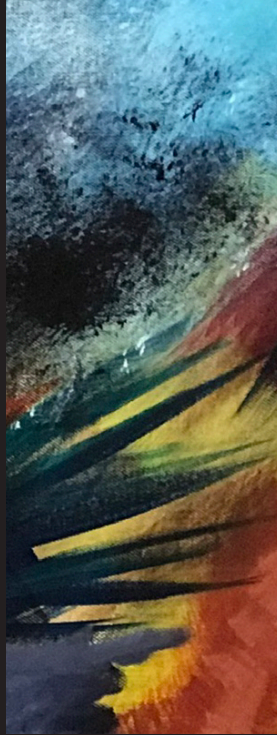


Beautiful as a Rose
by Larissa Whisenhunt

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

—LEONARDO DA VINCI

UNTIL
NEXT
TIME.
ABSOLUTE



FICTION.

NONFICTION.

POETRY.

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