

ABSOLUTE 2023

FICTION | NONFICTION | POETRY | ARTWORK | PHOTOGRAPHY





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OKLAHOMA CITY
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

ARTS, ENGLISH, AND HUMANITIES

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FICTION

THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

by Kennadie Campbell

Candice stowed away in the back of her closet and savored every memory as she slowly flipped through her beloved scrapbook. Each page, so carefully curated with its own theme of mementos, were filled with pressed and dried sprigs of lavender and perennials she and Janelle picked during a hike. She pulled out a photo from beneath the vinyl sheet and held it lovingly. As she stared at the picture, she recalled the day she stood on Huckleberry Hill with her new neighbor, smiling and striking silly poses. Janelle had just moved in next door, and after Candice casually mentioned her desire to spend more time outdoors, Janelle planned an all-day excursion for the two of them. It was the first time that Candice had belly-laughed in years and the beginning of a heartfelt friendship.

Candice replaced the photo and flipped the page. She beamed as she lifted the book closer to inspect the dozens of handwritten notes that Janelle had sent her over the years. A few were postcards from her vacations, in which she detailed all the things she thought Candice would enjoy and expressed how she wished she could've tagged along. Some were post-it notes that had been attached to a pot of soup when Candice had been sick or taped to some mysterious goodie bag she'd left on her doorstep. Others were letters Janelle had written to her, just because she'd mentioned to Janelle that she'd always wanted to have a pen pal growing up but never got the chance. Candice chuckled at Janelle's trademark witty expressions and admired her beautiful, bold cursive. Even in simple writing, Janelle's lovely personality still shined through.

Candice removed her favorite note from beneath the plastic cover to read it once more. A hot pink slip of parchment decorated with red hearts that read, "Candy, I hope you know how much you mean to me! You've brought so much sunshine into my life, and I'm so happy that I've had the privilege to call you my friend. You're more than just a neighbor. You're a confidante, a bad influence (in the best way), and someone that I couldn't imagine not being in my life. I wish everyone else saw in you the beautiful, hilarious, intelligent person that I see. Happy Valentine's

Day! Love, Jan.”

Candice held the parchment to her heart, looking back at how that small gesture had been a beacon of light on such a terrible day. She’d planned a nice evening for her and Daniel weeks in advance—a reservation at a fancy restaurant and a frilly new dress she’d secretly bought to surprise him in hopes of capturing his attention. She’d waited for hours at the restaurant, yet Daniel never showed. Though the memory still stung, she couldn’t help but smile when she thought of it. Her husband didn’t come home that night, but there was Janelle, with her favorite cheap wine and a box of chocolates, consoling her—and later that evening, holding her hair back for her.

Candice had been desperately clinging onto the tatters of her marriage for years, even though Daniel had made it painfully clear he wasn’t interested in being her husband. He left and came home when it was dark, gave his attention to six packs and the television, and simply never engaged with her unless he wanted something. Candice had intentionally blinded herself to that harsh reality and tried to live contentedly in her unhappy marriage. Where had it led her? Hiding away in her closet in an attempt to soak up meager moments of fulfillment from a scrapbook and ignoring how she truly felt.

While at first, she didn’t understand her feelings, they became crystal clear as Janelle gradually stepped more into her life. Over the course of their friendship, she’d learned what it meant for someone to genuinely care about her. Janelle came over to check on her when she was sick. She surprised Candice with what she called “friend dates” when she needed a pick-me-up. She bought things at the store that she knew Candice needed. She always baked extra when making treats so she could send some over. She went out of her way to make Candice feel seen and special in whatever way she could. Nobody had ever openly cared about Candice like Janelle.

In fact, Candice was beginning to wonder if it was possible for anyone else to make her feel the way that Janelle did. Where Candice used to hope all day for a crumb of attention from her husband—a peck on the cheek or even a few words

exchanged, his touch and voice had become grating to her. She could hardly stand to look at Daniel, let alone be in the same room as him. Janelle, however, Candice couldn't get enough of. From the sweet, floral perfume she would catch a whiff of when they hugged, to the scatterbrained way that Janelle predictably went on tangents when she told stories, there was nothing about Janelle that did not enchant Candice. Yet, she had always feared confessing this to her for fear of scaring her and losing the rapport they'd built.

She studied the note one last time before placing it back underneath the vinyl sheet and closing the scrapbook. The words ran through her mind over and over, "Love, Jan". Candice's chest tightened as she glanced around at her cramped hiding place. While the routine of looking through her precious scrapbook brought her comfort and hope, it also brought her undeniable reality crashing down a little more each day—one that she was terrified to admit to herself.

Candice hauled herself up off the ground and into her bedroom—her least favorite room in the house. She allowed herself to fully take in what surrounded her for the first time in years; a seemingly cozy, perhaps overly decorated space that should've felt comforting but was overcast with a cold, dreary aura. She'd spent years adding to the room in an attempt to make it feel warmer and more inviting—lavish, expensive throw blankets, a large dresser, a floor-to-ceiling mirror, colorful paintings hung on the walls, plush bedding—yet when she looked around, she felt only the heartache that she experienced when she laid alone in bed each night. All of the color, cozy luxury, the visual interest were for naught—it just felt phony. Candice felt as though she was standing in the middle of a set for a play, and a bud of shame bloomed in her gut.

A sense of restlessness swallowed Candice whole. She burst from her bedroom and strode through the hallway, stopping to yank photos of her and Daniel from the wall before tossing them carelessly onto the armchair and storming out the front door. She marched across the pedicured lawn until she stood at Janelle's doorstep. Candice's heart pounded as her shaky hand outstretched to ring the bell.

"Just a sec!" Janelle hollered.

Janelle's tone became shaded with concern as she held the door open and nudged her friend. "Why don't you come inside?"

Janelle rested a gentle hand on Candice's shoulder and guided her to the sofa before sitting beside her. Candice could barely find the courage to look at Janelle, who only stared at her silently and expectantly, waiting for her to reveal the reason behind her visit and unusual behavior.

Janelle inquired once more. "What's going on, Candice?"

Candice took a steadying breath and forced herself to spit it out. "I'm going to divorce Dan."

Janelle leaned back in shock and amusement before asking her to explain. Candice blushed as she sighed.

"I have this scrapbook I made that's dedicated to memories from our friendship. It has pictures we took together and mementos, like some of the wildflowers we picked on our first hike... I look through that scrapbook a lot because I feel so lonely living with Daniel. It just...makes me happy. It makes me feel less alone sometimes."

Candice paused to evaluate Janelle's soft expression before continuing. "It also has all of the notes that you've written me... I kept a note that you wrote to me that one Valentine's Day when Daniel didn't come home. It's my favorite one, and I read it all the time. When I read that note today, I finally realized that I've tricked myself into staying in a marriage with someone who doesn't even love me, all because I was scared."

Janelle nodded in acknowledgment of her friend's vulnerability and prompted, "Scared of what?"

Candice's throat bobbed as she waffled back and forth between whether or not to confess. Janelle reached out and grabbed her hand, a small gesture of reassurance.

Candice fixed her gaze on their intertwined hands as she meekly mumbled, "I

was scared to go through a divorce, and I was scared that I'd have to confront you. I didn't want to risk losing you."

"What could you possibly confront me about that would make you lose me?" Janelle queried.

Candice's voice quivered as she blurted out, "I... love you. I love spending time with you. I love your voice, I love your jokes, and your face, and your personality. I think that you're the most wonderful person I've ever met, and I know that I've told you that before, but I really, really mean it."

Janelle grinned as she pulled Candice close and hugged her tightly, one hand rubbing her back.

"I love you too." Janelle calmly stated, holding firm her embrace.

Candice melted in relief and nuzzled her face into the crook of Janelle's neck. The pair sat in silence and savored the hug for a little while until, at last, the gravity of the moment dissipated.

Janelle gave Candice a firm squeeze before she leaned back and smirked, "Can I see this scrapbook?"



NONFICTION

FROG SMUGGLING

by Tessa Barman-Flannigan

"Do you hear croaking?" my sister asks, interrupting the movie we're watching.

Papa pauses the TV, and I pause to listen. Yep, I definitely hear croaking.

I sigh. "Ah shit. Fred snuck a frog into the house again. Alright, everybody fan out."

My grandmother jumps off the couch and takes off down the hallway. She loves frogs, in theory. The whole house is adorned in frog décor. But in practice, she's absolutely terrified of them. It's a contradiction that has confounded my family for three generations now. While she seeks refuge in the back bedroom, my sister Taylor, Papa, and I begin searching the rest of the house for the stray frog.

Fred, the one responsible for this whole debacle, lounges on the couch. He sits watching us with, at best, mild disinterest. Fred is a fat-ass basset hound with a heart of pure gold and a tendency to smuggle frogs into the house. In the summer, we get quite a few frogs just looking for love in our backyard. While it's not the kind of love they're looking for, Fred has plenty of love to give. Fred has never met an animal he didn't instantly try to befriend, and the frogs are no exception. So, without fail, every time he finds one in the yard, he gently puts it in his mouth and holds it there until he's safely in the house and out of sight. Then, equally as gently, he sets the frog loose and shows off his life of luxury to the unharmed but undoubtedly confused and terrified frog.

"Found it!" my sister declares from the living room. She's lying flat on the floor with her arm stretched out under the coffee table.

"I just can't. Reach. Him," she pants.

I lay down on the opposite side of the coffee table, hoping to close off any possible routes of escape for the poor creature.

I can hear my grandmother screaming from her bedroom. "Have you found it

yet? Is it gone?!"

"I'm trying to grab him, but he keeps hopping out of reach!" my sister shouts back.

This proves too much for Papa and me. We can't help but burst out laughing at the absurdity of the situation. Taylor joins in. The frog makes a break for it. And all the while, Fred watches us proudly from his half of the couch.

WHY CAN'T I WALK

by Madison Bleau

The responses will vary when a person is questioned about their experience learning to drive. Some people have no problems; it's as simple as driving the required hours and passing the test, and they're able to get on the road the next day. Others might say it was one of the hardest things for them. For me, driving has been the latter experience, and I have had to overcome difficulty after difficulty. This fact has led me to value public transportation and accessibility to travel by means other than a car. Making these accommodations accessible is crucial because it would help people who may not be able to provide themselves with personal transportation and can even better the environment.

It was early August, and the air conditioning was not keeping my room cool from the summer heat. I felt my clothes sticking to my body, damp with sweat, and my head was pounding as I opened my eyes after a horrible night's rest. I picked up my phone and read the time, 8:54 am. I rolled out of my bed, groaning due to the pain shooting up my stiff joints, to grab a cup of water and shower. I said a tired "good morning" to my dad and listened to him laugh knowingly as I tried convincing myself that staying up until 4 in the morning was worth it in the name of summer vacation. The rest of my afternoon consisted of lying on the couch, watching TV with my dad, some brief gaming with friends, and snacking on whatever I could find hidden within the pantry shelves. It was not until around 5 pm that my dad suggested we practice driving.

The words quickly left my mouth "I don't know about that."

I struggled; it was difficult for me. That fact was no secret to my dad, so when I saw him roll his eyes and grab the keys, I began to panic. While walking out to the car, I tried to calm my brain down by telling myself it wouldn't go as poorly as some drives had because my dad wouldn't distract me from the passenger seat like my mom. This ended up being true... for most of the drive.

At first, I was doing great driving with my dad. I may have taken some turns

too wide or fast and forgot my blinker more than I would like to admit, but I did an adequate job. However, things took a turn for the worse as I turned into the neighborhood to go home. Two FedEx trucks were parked on either side of the road, and they were way too close to each other for my liking. I knew the car could have passed between them, yet I chose to pull over and park a decent distance away to wait for them to move. Comments teasing me for doing that began to flow from my father's mouth.

I knew he was trying to get me to do it out of spite, but to spite him, I stayed put. Though truthfully, I did that because I had worked myself up throughout the drive and couldn't handle the thought of messing up and scraping the side of one of the trucks. It took about three minutes for one of the trucks to finally move. My eyes widened as the trucks lined up to exchange packages.

"OF COURSE, THEY HAVE TO DO THIS RIGHT NOW!" my voice raised in frustration, which only humored my dad.

I shifted into gear and drove around them as carefully as I could. Why would I not be careful? I began to worry that a car would turn the corner that was blocked from view by the trucks ahead of me. Throughout those short thirty seconds, I managed to work myself up so much that I took the whole way back on autopilot, completely zoned out. This caused problems. It would have been fine had I had any experience pulling into the driveway from that side of the road, but I did not. I returned to reality as I pulled into the driveway a bit too fast. I needed to break. Instead, I hit the gas pedal, sending my father, the car, and me straight into the garage door. As soon as I looked ahead, I was quickly reminded of my lack of skill in spatial reasoning. As I feared, the lack of that skill led me to hit not just the garage door but also the wall. Static immediately filled my ears, drowning out my dad and stepmom's worried voices while I tried to figure out what I had just done. As soon as I realized what had happened, I shut down and ran to my bathroom to hide.

I spent a good two hours in that room, and all I could think about was how I did not like driving. I wished for more public transportation or at least more paths for walking to make places like grocery stores and shopping districts more accessible.

This experience led me to hold an interest in civil engineering and architecture, a class I would then take the semester after my wreck. Now, whenever I'm visiting new places, I start to think about how the structure of the area could be altered to make it more accessible. This summer, I took a trip to Norway. On this trip, I saw how much cleaner the environment was and how easy it was to travel to places without a car. I could buy a one-day bus pass and travel to just about anywhere. This method was faster and cheaper than cars due to special bus lanes. Ferry routes allowed easy access across fjords to prevent unnecessary driving through underwater tunnels or over bridges. Trains also span the entire country; I took an early morning trip from Oslo to Bergen and then got on an overnight train back the same day.

I believe no one should need to force themselves to drive when public transportation can reduce a person's financial or mental strain while also helping the environment. While driving can be practical for many as it allows a person to control their time better, a country exclusively reliant on car transportation is inefficient. I have been working to drive since my accident, and I struggle more than I did before. It is a skill I do not think I will ever be able to master due to how I process things. It is also a skill I will be forced to use forever due to the lack of alternative transportation methods available in the United States. This event has determined my career path because I think accessibility is crucial in the formation of civil structures.

FREEDOM BUS

by William C. Crawford

I had passed the decaying bus on Northwest Boulevard more than a few times. Its rusting carcass with badly fractured glazing held a funky allure for a wandering photographer like me. I shoot stuff no other lensman would likely touch; my goal is to elevate the mundane into pleasing eye candy. I whipped my little car into the side street by the overflowing junkyard. It was just before dawn, and the natural light was scarce and flat. The bus was mostly gutted, and its damaged, clouded windows presented its own abstract art. I had a strange sense of perusing an outdoor museum.

I soon heard a slight scrape in the loose gravel behind me. Up came an old bent-over black man dressed in a well-used straw fedora and a brightly colored checkered shirt with baggy pants. He had a cigarette fired up, and I found myself dodging his sweet thick smoke.

"Name's Cleveland," he mumbled. "Want to know the history of this here bus?"

Having nothing better to do than wait for golden hour to crest over the city street, I figured a little backstory, real or imagined, would be just fine.

"She took us to Meridian in '64," he said. "I was just a freshman at Winston-Salem State then."

In an electric instant, I knew this was a Freedom Bus, and Cleveland might well be an aging civil rights hero. My suspicions were quickly reinforced. He pulled off his straw fedora to dab away some perspiration on this humid North Carolina morning. I saw his balding head for a quick moment. It held a thick, ugly scar from one ear over to the other. I knew at once that somebody had probably beaten the living hell out of Cleveland back in 1964.

In a slow but steady voice, he told me his sordid tale of being recruited to register Mississippi voters by the fledgling Congress for Racial Equality. He had

been working the rural counties around Meridian when three of his colleagues were kidnapped and murdered, their mangled bodies buried in an earthen dam.

Cleveland opined, "I was lucky to make it out of Neshoba County. They caught us buying gas at a little place, and they beat us with their clubs for fifteen minutes straight! We had to go all the way to Jackson just to find a hospital that would help us."

Cleveland was never really the same, he lamented. He dropped out of college and eventually found steady employment on a city garbage truck for 29 years.

"As bad as I had it down there, at least I lived to raise a family," he told me.

After his story, it seemed as though Cleveland had said all he wanted. He was restless, and the memory of trauma was heavy on his face. We exchanged respectful goodbyes, and he lumbered away. The sun was higher in the sky, and I was trying to shake off my astonishment enough to start shooting the bus. I felt newfound motivation because I knew I was photographing a small piece of American history.

Traffic was picking up on the boulevard, and I busied myself shooting the battered hulk from a variety of angles. Suddenly, the sky darkened a bit, and an eerie calm descended. It was kind of like being in the eye of a hurricane. I looked around quizzically before noticing a vintage black town car moving slowly past me on the boulevard. The back window was down just over halfway, and a young man with a distinct Jewish countenance and a scrubby goatee stared blankly at me as the car rolled past. There was something about that guy, but I just couldn't put my finger on it. Traffic picked back up, and the sun peeked out again. I shot for another quarter-hour and left satisfied that I had an exceptional morning. That kid in the back seat just stuck in my subconscious, however.

A few weeks later, I was glued to my iPad reading about renewed efforts in Mississippi to indict someone for the long-past murder of Emmett Till. Out of nowhere, my bright screen shifted on its own to a Wikipedia entry about the three slain civil rights workers near Meridian. Their photographs were there, and my heart skipped a beat when I saw that third picture. A man named Michael Schwerner

stared back at me. The same young, goateed face that gazed stoically at me from the back seat of the passing town car just a few weeks before. The Wiki entry said that the KKK had referred to the brave civil rights organizer as "Goatee" when they put a bounty on his head back in 1964.

I was momentarily dumbfounded, but this wasn't the first time for me to be engulfed in this wild otherworldly shit. Over the years, while shooting, I had supernatural encounters with Rod Serling in San Francisco and Poncho Villa in an obscure West Texas cemetery. This rendezvous was closer to home, but it offered me further insight into why I am still shooting as I near my 80th year of life. The giants of combat photojournalism who got me started in Vietnam, now mostly gone, are still sending me bizarre opportunities from the other side.

HUNGRY PINK PIGGY

by Alexis Poyser

My mom got a pink princess piggy bank for my birthday one year. I was supposed to use it to keep my tooth fairy money in. I loved that piggy bank, but it always stayed hungry. It became special to me one night when I overheard my mom on the phone talking to a friend.

"I don't know how I will pay off her hospital bills," she whispered in the living room.

I heard this often; bills, food, clothes, school were too much. That night, I got out my fluffy journal to write. This journal wasn't just any journal, it was my life. I used it to write down my crushes, to-do lists, a totally awesome bucket list, every idea my brain could think of, and details of my daily life. This time, however, I wrote about a plan to help my mom.

Brrrrrm, the sound of the vacuum cleaner overpowered the cartoons playing in the living room of my dad's house. During the summers, I would go over there from Friday to Sunday afternoon. While there, I would be promised a whole five dollars if I cleaned the house. This included vacuuming both upstairs and downstairs, mopping the kitchen, cleaning the cat litter box, taking the trash out, and putting away all the toys my two-year-old half-brother threw across the living room. My dad's house was drastically different from my mom's small two-bedroom apartment. At my dad's house, I had, well, a house. I had my own room and the promise of money for doing chores. While at my mom's apartment, I shared a room with my two younger brothers and the worry about paying all the bills. At the time, I didn't know the feelings were worry, but I did know that I wanted it to stop.

After I cleaned the house on that Sunday afternoon in Indiana, I felt like Cinderella before she met her prince charming. However, it was all worth it as my dad drove me to my mom's and handed me the gorgeous five-dollar bill. I was bouncing with such excitement that I almost tripped going up the stairs to the apartment. Beaming with pride, I immediately shoved the bill into my brothers' faces. I was rich, and they had to know. After successfully making them jealous, I quickly ran

to our room, putting it in my pink piggy bank before they had a chance to steal it. That night, as I snuggled my favorite stuffed animal, I felt happy.

Sometime in the middle of the night, most likely around midnight, which is late for an eight-year-old, I got up to go to the bathroom. Walking on my tiptoes, I crept into the bathroom, making sure not to hit the squeaky parts of the floor. I had just made it to the bathroom when I overheard my mom talking on the phone.

"I don't know how I will pay off her hospital bills."

Guilt washed over me. Was I the reason we only had cheap food? Was I the one who made us poor? It felt like an elephant sat on my shoulders, and I now had a responsibility to pay my mom back for having me. I don't think I ever actually went to the bathroom, I just remember getting back in bed. The blanket was over me while my journal was in my lap, a pen in one hand and a flashlight in the other. Using my big brain, I came up with an idea that only took three pages to write down. I decided that I would give my mom all my money in secret, as I knew she wouldn't take it if she knew why.

After creating this most genius plan, I turned off my flashlight and put my journal under my pillow. Falling asleep seemed impossible, so I waited until I was sure that my mom was asleep before grabbing my piggy bank. I took out all of its contents, adding up to \$7.26. I snuck to the living room, where my mom put her purse in the same spot on the end table every day. Trying to be the quietest I could, I put seven dollars in her wallet and the coins at the bottom of her purse. I followed the same trail back to my room and into my bed. I fell asleep, trying to convince myself that everything would be okay.

Week after week, I did the same routine. I would do as many chores as possible and give my mom all the money I earned. The guilt never lifted, no matter how much I gave her, though. It's been almost ten years since then, and despite being financially stable, I still have that guilty feeling. Due to my experience with money growing up, I have a hard time accepting things from other people. Money is my priority; I would rather skip buying myself a book I wanted than possibly be low

on funds afterward. With every decision I make, money is the first thing I consider. Sometimes when I think back to my childhood, I think of that piggy bank and how it must have been hungry like me.

JORGE

by Paul Rousseau

Central America, 1976. I am a medical student working in a rural clinic in Central America. Jorge is a fifteen-year-old teenager from Guatemala. He is short and muscular, his arms adorned with tattooed symbols of a local gang. Jorge is a notorious member of the gang. He is in the clinic for a machete wound to his right thigh that he contends was accidental. He is accompanied by his grandmother. She suspects the wound was caused by a rival gang; she points to a blackened eye and bruised torso.

"Machetes don't do that."

She laments that Jorge sleeps all day and sniffs glue, and roams the streets at night. He denies her allegations. She glares.

"Jorge, don't lie," They argue; I appeal for calm.

She positions her cane, stands, and shuffles to the door.

"Please speak with him, doctor."

Jorge chortles. "She's just a worried old woman," He flicks his hand in dismissal.

As I suture his wound, he discloses his mother disappeared when he was three; he believes she migrated to the United States. He never recovered from her loss. His grandmother raised him. They live in a squalid shanty on the outskirts of town. There is no electricity; a trench in a nearby clump of trees is their toilet. Water is carried from a water station a quarter mile distant. His grandmother sells tortillas and fruit in a small outdoor market. Jorge refuses to help; it embarrasses him.

I counsel Jorge to change his life; however, there is little he can do. He has no money. He has no skills. He is trapped in the sphere of gangs. The socioeconomic constraints are overwhelming. I feel helpless, my words just lip service. I glance at his eyes. He is not listening, his mind elsewhere.

I finish suturing and ask him to wait. I speak with the clinic's attending physician to seek advice on Jorge's situation. We return to the room; Jorge has left. His grandmother is not in the waiting room.

.....

Jorge's grandmother sits in the clinic chair, her head bowed, her shoulders slumped. She wrings her hands over and over. Soft sobs rise from her belly. Jorge disappeared; he never came home one night. She notified the police. She posted photos on electric poles. She visited the morgue. She walked the fields. No one had seen him. She wondered if he had attempted to travel to the United States. Then, yesterday, the police advised her Jorge's body had been found two months prior. He had been shot three times. He was buried nameless in a city cemetery. There are so many missing, only now were they able to identify him.

She shudders. I cradle her shoulders. There are no words to speak.



POETRY

AN ODE TO MEDUSA

by Tessa Barman-Flannigan

Athena's most faithful daughter
High priestess of the ruined temple
Patron goddess of women defiled

Medusa, who would not be gentle and forgiving
In the hungry mouth of trauma

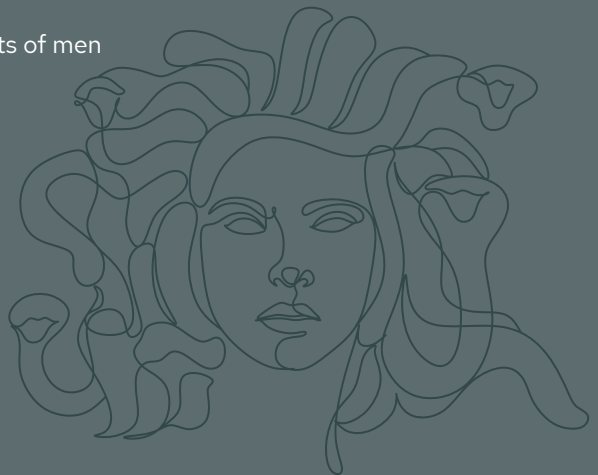
Medusa, who refused to submit to the violent churning
Waves of Poseidon's lust and greed
Who bit the hand that held her beneath the brutal sea

Medusa, who from between the sharp teeth of beasts
Grew bloodthirsty fangs of her own

Medusa, who learned it is better to be venomous than beautiful
Whose blood still stains Poseidon
Whose very name strikes fear into the hearts of men

Medusa, who taught us that
When men become monsters
We can too

And we do it better



EVERGREEN

by Aryon Bruins

The soft, gentle glow of tea lights.

Scent of pine fills the house
While scattered pine needles lay.
Lightly lined frosted windows
Cold to the touch
Still fog from the warmth of the fire.
Stark white frames the
Evergreen tree
Mementos of the past hanging on limbs.
The place where laughter and
Gifts are shared
In merriment with one another.

CLOUDY SKIES

by Martin Castillo



In the light blue skies
You can see puffy, soft-looking cotton balls
Coming together to cover the world

Some are heroes that block the sun while you're driving to work
And create shade in the blazing sun
But some show that they're evil
With their grayed color
And drop cold water on your head
Shoot iced bullets onto your windshield
Strike bolts of light onto the mantle of the earth

These puffballs cause the melancholic damp air to swoop in
When you're running errands
Or when it's your birthday

After they've exhausted their energy
They create these stunning refractions
An arch of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet
Appears to signal the end of the tantrum

Without this gloomy rainfall
Wonders wouldn't be as wonderful

CURSE YOU

by Martin Castillo

I have a reason for my disdain
I only need to say, traitor.
Because I am now a pool of blood, your saber
pierced me. I am a fool. You feigned
many promises of the future. The rain
falls on my world of wonder.
Everything fallen apart; there is no mender
powerful enough to fix my mundane
self. My thoughts come in shocks like electricity
Of different ways to curse you.
The blade was my fate,
But towards the end, it's your acidity
I was attracted to.
It appears I ate the bait.

ODE TO PUNCTUATION

by Martin Castillo

Every tale needs a stopping point,
and you're every thought's end.
I speak, and you appear, making
my tongue remember your taste
while you bend clauses to your liking.

I'm at wit's end trying to understand
your sharpness
as you give haughty
souls fuel to their ego when they point
out the misuse of your essence.
You bring order to the chaos embedded in a sentence,
but everyone overlooks the weight on your joints.

To neglect your balance is a fool's choice
for you relay your keenness onto your descendants.

A FEW MINUTES WITH MY MOTHER

by Philip Douglas

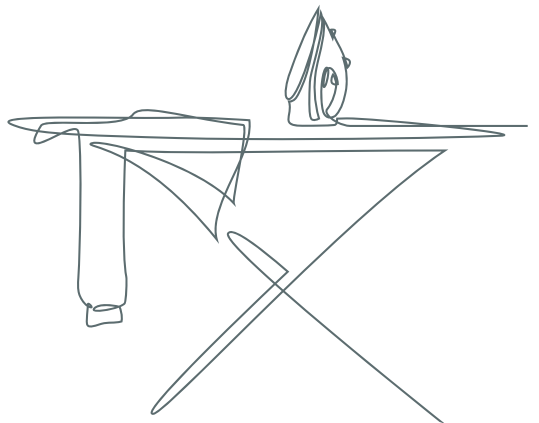
It's important to look your best at church:
This was never explained, but understood
as given, axiomatic, never
questioned because never stated, beyond
examination as the air we breathed.

Ironing my Sunday shirt is a yoga
gently instructed by my guru Mom.
"Here's how to test the iron's temp," she'd say,
licking her index finger and touching it
so briefly, staccato, to the surface,
the gesture answered by a pleasing hiss.

"The trick to a well-pressed shirt is the seams
because they hold the garment together."
And so she taught me to iron my own shirt:
Collar, first, then body, yoke, placket, sleeves,
mindful of each buttonhole. Last, collar
for a final touch, hanging clean and white,
displayed in the Sunday morning sunlight.

Mom was in nursing school in the '40s
and she had two uniforms, one she wore
and the other, stained, soaked; she could clean
anything,

I swear. Good prep for a Sunday morning,
a garment freshly prepared as new velum,
fit, ready to receive God's holy word.



MARCH 1968, EAST CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL FLAGPOLE PARKING LOT

by Philip Douglas

A chill spring morning, glowing and crisp:
fog distilled into a mist, settled on asphalt
and froze, pristine as a Zambonied rink.

Jamie Ryburn and I stood by the flag
surveying the glassy lot. We watched our
classmates,
car by car, approach our post, but too late
find that too fast on that glazed parking lot
ceded to elemental physics all
sense of control—brakes, steering, everything.

“Hey, here comes another one,” Jamie said,
and with a mixture of glee and horror
we watched driver after panicked driver
brake and spin and WHAM WHAM, careen sideways
to the sidewalk. We couldn’t look away.

January of ‘68 was Tet;
February saw Clean Gene McCarthy
soundly trounce LBJ in New Hampshire;
in March, Johnson dropped out and in April,
Martin Luther King was killed in Memphis.
In May, we graduated from high school.

We awakened on a warm June morning
to news that Robert Kennedy had been
assassinated
and that all rules are now arbitrary
and all learning subject to question
and all controls counterintuitive.

WE WERE SMOKERS

by Philip Douglas

We smoked in hallways
We smoked in stairwells
We smoked in elevators
We smoked in class

Our Shakespeare prof asked us to stop
We laughed.

We smoked in theaters
We smoked in airplanes
We smoked in nurseries
We smoked in hospital rooms

A couple of times, we smoked in church.

Oh, the dense haze of my grandfather's pipe
in that little shotgun house
filled with half a dozen couples
smoking
telling stories about the depression
and us kids on the floor, listening

laughing
and coughing.



ON GRACE HARTIGAN'S THE KING IS DEAD (1950)

by Evan Dutmer

This is a black painting
 accented
with color
deep black and blue
white touches white eyes
 black and burnt orange
like the wings of monarchs
 shimmering before the deep blue
autumn sky
 before frothy gray-white pillow clouds

A SENSE OF PLACE

by Evan Dutmer

'A sense of place,
A beginning, a middle, and an end,
One thought at a time put well.'

My English teacher
Taught lessons in the summer
When I was fifteen,
When I began to write,
And when I still bought Starburst
From the vending machine.
My first essay from that summer
still is sweet,
still has a place
at the beginning.

LUNCHTIME AT THE RED HERRING CAFE, URBANA, ILLINOIS

by Evan Dutmer

A double bass
opens the room,
 peeling the wrapper
by the edges.
Lunch-goers in T-formation
 bear down
on those that work the cash registers.
This little Urbana three-piece
 sings folksongs
in the basement café of a Unitarian chapel
across from campus.
We dine on beans, bread, cold lettuce,
oil, pepper, and warm water—
 We talk between talks. Professors,
 grad students, anxious for the next—
We finish with sweet cinnamon cookies,
pumpkin pie, chocolate cake, and
cold black tea with lavender.
A finger runs along the muted bass string
 holds
and waits to pluck.

RIDDLE HAIKU

by Tanner Greening

Increase in vexation

Chokmâh

wisdom

SOTER

by Tanner Greening

Weight on shoulders

death to death

feathers come to rest

TRADITIONAL HAIKU

by Tanner Greening

To live for the world

is to die. To live for Him

deathless elation

ODE TO CHICKEN FRIED STEAK

by Korbyn Hanan

Many people love nuggets
or chicken in strips.
I prefer my fried meat
from the cow's hips.

Round steak, cube steak, I don't care
As long as there are leftovers to spare.
Take that steak and beat it 'til battered.
Butcher knife, cleave it, or tear it so it's tattered.

Soak it in milk, any kind it doesn't matter.
Salt, pepper, and flour to make the batter.
Heat a pan of Crisco and make sure that it's hot
Then deep fry that beef, I like that smell a lot.

That heavenly finger of wrinkles
Its texture hard to explain
But once I had a taste of it,
I've never been the same.

Just the very thought
causes me to salivate.
Call me anything you want
except to dinner late.

THE NARCISSIST

by Hannah Helton

Deceit and manipulation
From the very start.
He knew how to get inside
Her mind and her heart.

She was hypnotized
By his lies and his games.
As time passed by,
She would never be the same.

He was nothing but a ruse.
Mental and emotional,
She was abused.
Broken trust, nonnegotiable.

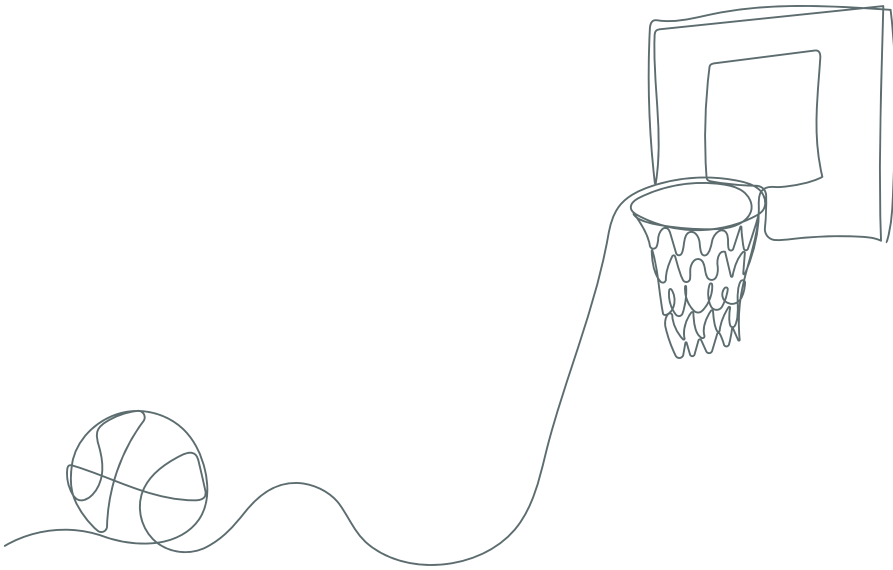


THE BASKETBALL COURT

by Jomarie Hubble

There's a basketball court right outside my house
I've only ever been on it once.
It was pitch-black outside
I couldn't see more than ten feet away,
Good thing he was right next to me.

The cold concrete made my back shiver
As I lay there staring at the stars.
His attention wasn't on the sky.
I didn't learn much about stars that night
But I did learn a lot about him.



TWIN FLAME

by Jomarie Hubble

Everyone is uniquely made
Yet you and I are both the same
Out of this whole wide world
You are my twin flame

We think the same thoughts
We speak the same name
We know each other's favorite spots
You are my twin flame

You always know just what to say
To always take away my shame
Any time of the longest day
You are my twin flame

You've made my life better
I'm glad you came into the frame
This is my thoughtful love-letter
You are forever my twin flame



STARS ABOVE ME

by Olivia King

It is nice to see you again, my dear sweet
Though the sun is bright, the days without you are dark
I stand still amongst blazing coals awaiting your return
Numb to the pain as my excitement ever outweighs it

I see paralyzing beauty in your ever-changing face
The distance between our bodies is insurmountable
But I feel our souls collide in the night
In an embrace so bright it blinds the sun and suffocates the stars

If I could trade places with Atlas to take the punishment of the sky
For just a moment of embrace between you and I
Oh, how I would run to where the Sky and the Earth fight to meet
I would strain against the gods
And as sweat drips from my brow, I would only ask a tale of your life
since we last spoke

I sit in empty fields watching as you rise
It feels blessing from beings beyond my comprehension
A blessing that I sit in your misty light as you gaze down at me
I have done little to earn such favor

I refuse to waste such a gift
I require no pretty words from your lips
So please save your grace for one in more need
I require no romantic gaze from your eyes
So please focus on any beast or burden that dare approach

I require no eternity to worship you
My fleeting time only makes nights in your company that much sweeter
My time with you shall one day end

I bare enough wisdom to know this is true
I ask that you do not cry to mourn me
For the heavens would not be able to bare such a woeful beauty

Remember my devotion to you
How I would adore each motion and mumble
And how you made me stronger
How I, in turn, tried so hard to do the same
Turn away any who would love you less than I
Because I love you with my everything
Do not give your time to one unworthy
Never accept less

You, my sweet
Are worth burning coals
Blinding suns
Suffocating stars
Colliding planes
And with each passing moment

My dear sweet
I pray to you
Long for me as I do you

My dear sweet
'Til we meet again

A PIRATE'S CURSE

by Oliver Kramp

They fare the sea with Davy Jones.
A pirate's fate will lie
in soulless tombs of flesh and bones.

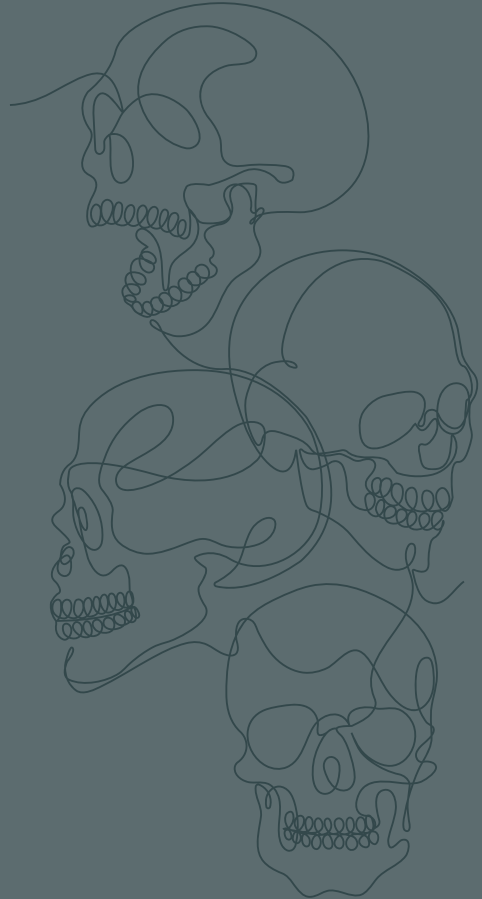
In search of treasured golden stones,
the weakest crew shall die.
They fare the sea with Davy Jones.

While toothless mouths make horrid groans,
can you hear their mothers cry
in soulless tombs of flesh and bones?

They will not sleep on heaven's thrones,
for there's no safety in the sky.
They fare the sea with Davy Jones.

Aboard the ships old England owns,
the seamen gaze with single eyes
in soulless tombs of flesh and bones.

And ye shall join them in their moans,
no matter just how smart or sly.
You'll fare the sea with Davy Jones,
in soulless tombs of flesh and bones.



IN WINTER

by Oliver Kramp

What solemn touch of death has come in eve,
with final wills and shutters drawn so tight?
In sadness, I have sought out such reprieve
from grief of whom I seek out in the night.

As sunning groups of blue jays sung aloud,
we counted petals, rose, in morning dew
'til down struck lightning from its sullen cloud,
with frozen wind that stretched its hand to you.

In coffins tombed beneath the frosted soil,
has winter stilled my love's once beating heart?
Thus now my days are filled with endless toil
and counting nights that we remain apart.

So soon shall I pursue my wingless dove,
for I am lost without my dearest love.

THE TOAST PROBLEM

by Oliver Kramp

Why does toast always fall butter side down?
A urologist once explained to me that
it is gravity which pulls the heavier half to the ground,
flipping midway through the air to make
the slimy, greasy, butter-stained smear
on my kitchen floor.

Well, I say it makes sense, in a way
that these modern jesters,
like buttered bread or toe-stubbing sofas,
play little games with us.
Just a goofball way to start their days
of staring at the walls or the lining of my stomach
because they know I will eat them regardless.

Why do cats always land on their feet?
One might ask in a rush to make the last train car
before they are left in Istanbul overnight.
Although lost on me at first, I deduce
that cats have no sense of humor,
and thus, try to avoid the embarrassment of
landing on their sides.

And why do we play games like hooky
and insurance fraud
when tax records last forever,
but karma only lasts a day?

PROTECTOR

by Faith Lynn

People don't understand there are
Reasons why I don't trust.
Over time you learn that people can't keep
True to their words.
Everyone says I'm too
Cold when, really, I'm realistic.
Too much rejection can lead to heartbreak
Or what I would personally choose
Revenge.

WITHOUT YOU

by Faith Lynn

The rain is pouring with a strong breeze
The night is young but close to an end
I only feel the warmth of the cigarette
From my lips to the tips of my toes
It wraps around me like the hugs you used to give
The bitter taste and the whistle of the wind
Going through the tall trees brings me to reality
The rain becomes stronger
Burning out the cigarette
But I don't move
Scared the warmth will burn out
Like you did
So I light another
But this time I'm cold

SMOKE

by Tiffany Moon

Coming home from a long day, feet set in pain.
Only thing left to do is ponder on a smoke,
light it up, blow it out.
Smoke absconding through a
cracked garage flap, sun welcoming the
shimmering shine of movement.
Smoke dancing with every exhale,
its beauty in the off-white rings of grey.

THE STAGE

by Mariah Pineda

The dimmed white lights
mute the monochromatic walls,
and colorless faded concrete floors
to shove them into the spotlight.

The piano sings along
as the scarlet chairs creak.
Twenty-five new faces
associate them
with attention.

Fast-paced walking,
their hands tangled
in auburn curtains.
They descend rapidly
with the help of a rusty
staircase.

On the last note,
the curtains close
in a swift motion.
The last two people standing,
collapse.

Calluses in both their hands,
they owned the stage.

BROWN EYES

by Mariah Pineda

Looking into your eyes
is like greeting a stranger.
Void in the face of affection,
you have forgotten to hang on.

Do you no longer remember
the vibrant red vow of eternity?

In your word's every breath,
a pause of nervousness
to show how much you cared.

I did not know
a moment of spring,
a fragile orchid's violet
meant we were doomed.

It had been only late June,
when an unfixable dent
turned violet
into a worn-out blue.

The only color that remains
unchanged
is the one in your eyes,
your brown eyes.

I LOVE YOU

by Dylan Pitner

The cool wind brushes by
Hair covering my face
A familiar scent brushes by

Bringing my eyes up
The sky skews God's rainbow
Pinks, oranges, yellows
The sky a painted on canvas

Each twilight new
Colors blend across the canvas
But when I spot the beautifully lit pink skies
I think of you

God is the artist of the skies
But I believe some days
You help paint them
As I look up, I say it again

"I love you."

MEANT TO BE

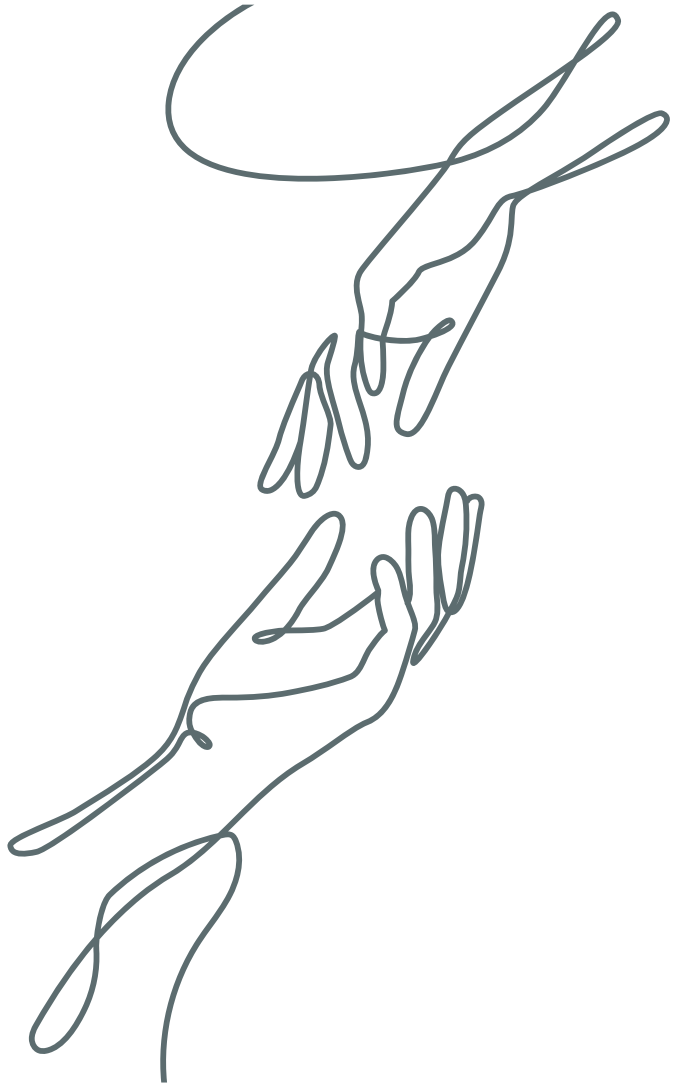
by Abby Smith

For some, it is as clear
As the sky on a cloudless day.
They are like the atmosphere,
Functioning in a harmonious way.

Being together is delightful,
Their union never a chore.
This kind of love is final,
On cloud nine, their hearts soar.

The feeling is indescribable,
A mutual and eternal bond.
Something undeniable,
Something established by God.

Some people are meant to be,
As is the case with you and me.



AUTUMN MISCHIEF

by Holly Smith

The wooden logs cackle as they burn in the pit
Gathered around the fire, familiar faces sit
They pass around marshmallows and place them on sticks
When suddenly a rock is thrown against the fence

"Odd," Hannah comments and her cousin nods to agree
Her brother swears he heard another hit a tree
They turn their heads left and right to look around
But the elusive rock thrower is nowhere to be found

Her brother grabs the graham crackers, and her cousin hits the tunes
While Hannah tells them a story of hot air balloons
The figure peaks over the fence and chucks another stone
Then Hannah bolts up, her lamp brightly shone

"Could it be an animal?" her cousin asks in surprise
"One with such range?" her brother replies
Hannah, fed up, walks the perimeter like a guard
But she finds nothing suspicious around the empty yard

Peering over the fence, she finally finds the source
The figure shouts that her brother was in on it, of course
With eyes full of shock and hair risen from their skin
They marvel at the trickery, and all begin to grin

LIGHT IN THE DARK

by Holly Smith

The road she walks is perilous; she's lost and all alone
With no bridges to connect her to the place she once called home
A trash bag serving as her suitcase, her possessions kept inside
She walks in mud-covered boots, using the stars as her guide

Soon she feels cool raindrops begin to fall across her cheek
The muscles in her legs ache, and she's beginning to feel weak
She can no longer distinguish the darkness from the light
They look like one another, and neither feels quite right

The storm brings heavy clouds that spread across the sky
In a bottle, she sends a message, but no one replies
Under a bent weeping willow, seeking shelter from the storm
It is here that hope resides

She may be safe, but she is not warm

SAFE HAVEN

by Holly Smith

I have long known a space that changes like the season
It exists everywhere and defies all reason
Sometimes the walls are made of wood, sometimes of stone
You can enjoy it with other people, but more often you're alone

In the forest, the cushions were mostly made of leaves
When I went to the ocean, I could smell it in the breeze
I've seen it in a nook and the vast expanse of a field
Underneath the stars and with a home-cooked meal

The door is always open, but you decide who may enter
If you visit when you're troubled, there is love at its center
When we need a moment of reflection, this is where we go
To the familiar secret hideaway we've all grown to know

SEASONS

by Alexis Tate

All too quickly the seasons change
For many find it fades too soon
And some could say it's rather strange
A summer heat, then autumn moon

Snow now falling on Christmas Eve
A bitter wind endlessly swept
All the children hope and believe
But an anxious night cannot be slept

A New Year turns a leaf for all
Long awaited must wait again
For holiday's gone until next fall
The yearly cycle will begin

SEED OF HOPE

by Robert (Rondo) Williams

Is it possible for a seed to flourish in what once was fertile ground,
where former crops have left it barren, reticent, and beaten down?

If a field's left untended where many crops have failed to thrive,
was it the soil or type of seeds that caused them not to survive?

What happens to a seed when it's sewn into disillusioned space,
where it hopes that it may flourish against the odds that it may face?

And if that seed were not quite suited for the soil in which it lay,
would the odds against these two cause them both to wither away



OVERTHINKER

by Hadlee Zwirtz

Overanalyzing the simple things.
Varying every day with new worries.
Eventually, I am dissolving into someone I am not.
Running into problems each day.
Thinking of new ways to get out of my mind.
Hard to stay consistent with how things actually are.
Is there a way to simplify these thoughts?
Noticing every minor detail that turns into a new clue.
Killing the reality of the situation.
Eventually, the feeling fades, and I move on to the next stage.
Rest comes soon, I hope.





Flying Steepkes, by William C. Crawford



Golden Stallion, by Willaim C. Crawford



Truncated Jesus, by William C. Crawford



Arcadia, by Paris Fuller



Parisfuller

Downtown, by Paris Fuller



Parisfuller

Bricktown, by Paris Fuller



Coeur d'Alene, by K'Cee Scoggins



Deception Pass, by K'Cee Scoggins



Fort Pickens, by K'Cee Scoggins



Top Withens, by K'Cee Scoggins





THE LOST PORTRAIT

by Professor of English, Lori Farr

A Tribute to my Life Realized at OCCC (formerly South Oklahoma City Junior College – SOCJC)





I look at her in awe. I recognize her but for a second. Well, maybe not! Is this the same person? How did she find me? Is this a sign from God? She found me at the same place where we parted all those 30 years ago. She has the same yearning of deep spiritual hunger in her eyes, thirst! Or maybe the wondering about a future that speaks deep in her spirit by God? She holds onto a vision swimming in the depths of her sea green eyes, a vision not yet realized all those years ago. She hangs historically and forever formidable in the hallway at Oklahoma City Community College next to my office in 1E1D Arts, English, Humanities Center. As I stare at her, I remember always holding on to a belief that everyone is born with plan and purpose just as God promised in Jeremiah 29:11. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" ("Bible Gateway Passage: Jeremiah 29:11 - New International Version."). After all, didn't the creator of the universe call into existence all of creation with a word before He even saw it? This college helped to transform a girl who was without a plan into a woman of vision and purpose. As I persevered through the college days set before me with endurance, I had a supernatural and comforting belief that God planned a life of favor, purpose, and accomplishment for me.

It all started when I stepped on what I call favor ground at South Oklahoma City Junior College (now lovingly OCCC). I did not realize it was favor ground at the time, but I knew somewhere I was favored even after I had committed "that terrible mistake" in high school. I was with child, so I thought my future was forever altered. I put my head down in shame, to try and preserve some kind of future for myself and my child. Deep inside, I still held on to a belief that if I endured through to the destiny of the plan and purpose for my life, I would still end up a winner. I knew I was to be a teacher, but I never really believed I would recover until I walked onto this campus. In fact, after I arrived, I secretly thought this campus was built just for me. It looked like a stately castle built for a princess teacher. That's what I would have said years before, believe it or not, playing as a small child. I played teacher all the time. Dolls sat in rows across my bed as attentive students to instruction, love, and activities designed to propel them through to their dreams, whatever that might look like for a stuffed animal or a lifeless doll. I played secretly long after all my contemporaries stopped, I am sure. My parents laugh now when they

remember hearing the loud voice of a child-teacher declaring, "Students, please be quiet and listen to me!"

Within a few semesters, I had become that student who had purpose. I had taken every class that looked even remotely interesting. In fact, I had to be booted out, told that financial aid would no longer pay for classes at the community college. Before I left, I landed a job as a Work Study Student in the Portrait Painting Class of Dr. Lawson Thomas. He painted a portrait of me. It was the most beautiful piece of art I had ever seen. She looked just like me, everyone said. The girl was inspiration to all who looked at her. She was beautiful. She looked like I wanted to look. She was too expensive to own even though my family wanted to purchase her. That portrait was anointed. We parted ways, but my mother never forgot her. In fact, my mother always asked about her. She wanted to know if we might ever see her again. I tried to put her out of my mind but could not.

I left the college but never forgot the lessons of favor and purpose I learned there. I finished my education at the University of Oklahoma and went out into the world to serve. I made a way, made my mistakes, watch for signs along the road I traveled, and wondered if I ever veered too far off the path. Somehow, I always received revelations along the way that I was going to be right where I was created to be: just like Jonah finally understood as the whale spat him out of his belly that Nineveh was his next stop as it had always been; just like Moses knew he was to deliver the children of Israel from Egypt even though he stuttered and felt afraid to speak and lead; and just like David, a mere shepherd boy knew he was the one to slay a giant for his people and become a king. I never forgot the portrait, or should I say, my mother never forgot her. My mother is the persistent one. The portrait became an analogy for my life and beacon of light that called to me in my spirit when I felt lost or alone. In those eyes, I saw eternity: a promise that I was walking right and would never be alone. I did not know if I would ever see her with my natural eyes again.

After twenty-five years of teaching, I had begun to notice various robes of accomplishment in my journey at this point in my mission. It was then that I had an opportunity to return to, now OCCC, to serve as a Professor of English. I felt

like I had come home. Of course, my mother started asking about the portrait again. After all this time, she still wanted to see that portrait. Truth be told, she probably wanted it more than I did. About 5 years after I started teaching at OCCC, some portraits started going up in the hallway next to my office. I gave it no thought since I had really given up on seeing the portrait again. I knew the portraits resembled those Lawson Thomas had done because I recognized his style, but he was very old when he painted the portrait of me all those years ago. One day, I was leaving my office to go and teach a class and hanging right there next to my office door was the portrait with a certain glow, those eyes, and a solemn smile. She had found her way back to me, 30 years later! I could not believe my eyes. I barely recognized her even though I still see her exactly that way in my mind. It is like looking at an old friend I haven't seen in years. Talk about a beacon of light shouting, "Here you are! Right where you are supposed to be!"

It started long ago, but it feels like today and every day now. OCCC is a dwelling of favor, purpose, and accomplishment in life. This abode was built for me: a young girl with a dream who came boldly through the door without hope and found the mercy and grace to help in her time of need. Here she found people who care for the hopeless. This place is built for us. In 1978, SOCJC saw me, welcomed me, and helped me build my dream into my reality. To the outside, it looks like an interesting, architectural structure, just a building. On the inside, it is a place where dreams come true. And a portrait will find you. There is a plan and a purpose for us, and I found mine here in this place. When we find ourselves hopeless and bold enough to approach favor ground, trust in a purpose, build our dream, walk it out until we find accomplishment in our lives, guess what? Supernatural meets our natural! Now I take the fruit of a labor of love to all my places. OCCC goes everywhere with me.



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

-LEONARDO DA VINCI

UNTIL
NEXT
TIME.

ABSOLUTE



FICTION.

NONFICTION.

POETRY.

ARTWORK.

PHOTOGRAPHY.

ABSOLUTE



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