

2024

ABSOLUTE

FICTION | NONFICTION | POETRY | ARTWORK | PHOTOGRAPHY

ABSOLUTE 2024

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HENORA DANTA

by Julia Fellows

Preface to the Story

I wrote this short story as part of a series of short stories and poems I plan on using to build the history of a fictional world I am attempting to create for a series of full-length books. This was one of the better stories in the collection, and the most complete (as in I will not be revising it any time soon). Enjoy!

8 | Lying beneath a large oak, I shifted on the moss and interlaced my fingers behind my head. I stared up at the canopy above me, mesmerized by the shifting patterns of shadows and sunlight the leaves made as a breeze I could not feel stirred them.

I sat up and shot a glance at Kíyana, who sat against the oak's trunk, crooning to herself. The light and shadows cast a weird pattern upon her deep gold skin. Her eyes met mine. "What is it, Julia? You have a questioning expression again."

I frowned. "It has not rained in a while. It's as hot here as it is in Oklahoma when July and August roll around. How is the forest still so ... " I trailed off and gestured vaguely at the green expanse above.

"So alive?" Kíyana suggested, eyebrows raised.

I leaned forward, eager. "Yes! In Oklahoma, if the temperatures reach anywhere above eighty- or eighty-five degrees Fahrenheit, it almost seems like everything becomes baked and dead." I grinned wryly. "Myself included."

Kíyana laughed, her head leaning against the bole of the great oak. “The underground rivers nourish the trees and plants that are not near the lakes. And then,” she continued, laying on her back next to me, “there is always Henora Danta.” She pillowed her head on her left arm with her right arm across her chest.

I sensed a story coming, so I lay next to her, mirroring her posture.

“What is Henora Danta?” I queried. I loved stories, and Kíyana never tired of telling me the histories of her people. Kíyana smiled. There was a brief silence as we stared up at the leaves above us. Then she began, her low, melodious voice weaving a spell upon me.

“Long, long ago, when darkness first fell upon Alantarie, the rains stopped. The Three Kindred looked to the sky and begged the Master for rain, but nothing came.

Our crops failed, and the forest died. My people had little sustenance for themselves. And then the Zarlair came begging us for food and water for themselves and their children. We could not refuse them, nor could we turn away the Orèlair when they too came seeking aid.”

“But they live at the edge of the sea. Was there not enough water for their crops?” I wondered.

Kíyana shifted restlessly and thought for a moment. “Saltwater is not the best for crops, nor is it safe to drink,” she replied. “The Orèlair could no longer rely on the rivers, for they dried to mere trickles. Only Cendaraé, which we call the lifeblood of Deriose, keeps flowing because it is fed from deep freshwater springs high in the mountains.” Then she continued.

“The Prophet of the Stars and Sage of the Dawn had a large garden right upon the river’s edge, and it still thrived. They lent their food to us so we could feed those who came to us, those of the Three and humans alike, for all sought the relative cool of the forest.

“All pure life in the forest gathered to the river’s edge, and there was peace, for water had become so precious.

“Days passed. Morning after morning we raised prayers to the Master, begging him to send rain. Still, none came.

“Then what little food we had dwindled. The garden of the Prophet and Sage could not supply all those gathered in the forest for long and still have enough seeds to plant the following year. Human farmers near the river’s edge sent their excess food to us, but it was still not enough. Tempers already tense from heat and lack of food snapped. Even the Lairshka and Orëlair, we who are closest in heart and mind of the Three Kindred, quarreled.

“Then the humans somehow came to believe that food was being withheld from them, and they were being starved on purpose.”

I propped myself up on my left elbow. “What happened then?” I asked in a hushed voice.

Kíyana shot an amused glance at me. “Patience, I will tell you,” she replied. We were silent for a few seconds, and then she resumed her story once again.

“The humans threatened to burn the entire forest down, and they threatened war if we did not give them more food. It was long before we could pacify them, even when we showed them what little food there was.

“Many more days passed. Then one hot, horrible day, the food truly ran out. Even the fish in the river were scarce. Children cried from hunger and went to sleep unsatisfied.

“And then, near dawn, there was a slight shift in the air. The sun rose to reveal distant clouds, dark and heavy with rain. By late morning, the clouds were over us. Then they broke, and large drops of water fell thick and fast. Everyone was soaked, but nobody cared, for their prayers had been answered. They danced and sang like they all had gone mad.

“And the rain that fell was special — magical, they would say in your world. Every tree and plant it fell on revived immediately, stronger and more alive than they had been before the drought. Our crops grew swiftly before our very eyes. Four days the rain lasted, and the clouds reached from Starsheen upon the Silverstrand to the farthest reaches of the forest. Even the desert where the Zarlair dwelled received rain.”

“So Henora Danta ...” I began.

“Henora Danta would be in your tongue ‘Miracle Rain.’” Kíyana finished.

As she spoke, a drop of water fell upon my upturned face. I scrambled to my feet as rain began pelting the ground.

Kíyana stood and smiled. “Henora Danta,” she murmured reverently. Then she took my hands, and we were spinning and laughing, soaked to the skin by the Miracle Rain of the summer.

WHIPPERSNAPPER

by Neil E. Finley

Harold Darnell took the last bite of his grilled cheese sandwich, picked up the last potato chip, and added it to the bite in his mouth, obscurely pleased with the timing. He had always tried to finish his food with that one last chew that included everything; he didn't care to eat several bites of one thing by itself. This small satisfaction was dulled by the growing realization that something might be wrong with him. His sight was blurry, and he felt lightheaded, woozy. He picked up the dishcloth he used for a napkin, and wiped his lips.

He wanted to stand, to go into his living room to watch the early afternoon news program, but the dizziness made him pause. In a way, he was thrilled; in another way he was terrified. He wondered if he was having a small stroke, or maybe the prelude to a massive one. He was ready, if it was time, having outlived his wife, relatives, and even his children.

Babs had passed more than ten years before, succumbing to the breast cancer that had been discovered too late for effective treatment. His son, Harold, Jr., had died in Viet Nam, and his daughter, Melinda, had died in a car wreck the same year.

Harold Darnell was a lonely man.

Everyone, and everything, that he had loved was gone. His life was simply a burden to him, but he believed that suicide was not an option. He had never been convinced that life should be easy, but he had never dreamed it could be so hard. He didn't feel sorry for himself, but he was tormented each day

by a loneliness so severe that it was difficult to handle. He filled his days with the foolishness of television, dragging out each necessary chore as long as possible to prevent himself from having the time to realize how badly he was hurting emotionally.

And now he was experiencing this troublesome dizziness, this discomfiting blurriness of vision. He welcomed it in his way. If it was a stroke, he prayed for a massive, killing blow — one that would finish him, release his spirit from its heavy cell of clay to join those of his lost family and friends. He prayed it wouldn't be a small one, or series of small ones that would merely leave him unable to care for himself, place him at the mercy of nursing homes, and the indignities that were inherent with those places.

Gathering himself, he slowly stood. Swaying slightly, he walked toward his battered green chair, and allowed himself to fall into it, accepting the sudden flash of pain rather than enduring a lengthier struggle with discomfort by lowering himself into the chair bit by agonizing bit. Guided by habit, he reached for the shiny, old fashioned remote, one of the earlier attempts that used radio waves rather than infrared beams; it was bulky and chromed and had only four buttons—a two button volume control that also turned the set off and on, and channel up and channel down buttons.

He pressed the volume up button until the set came on, but was astonished by how blurry the picture was, and how loud it seemed. He turned the sound down a bit, laid the heavy remote down, and then took off his glasses to clean them on his shirttail, thinking they must really be dusty. Absently, he glanced at the TV as he scrubbed at his progressives, and his inattention may be the reason it took him some time to realize that the picture was clear – clear without his glasses. He held judgment in abeyance for some moments and finished cleaning his lenses, holding them to the light to insure the dust was gone.

He could see the frames in sharp relief against the low wattage bulb in the table lamp. When he tilted the glasses this way and that, he could see the tiny scratches in the polymer from polishing them with his polyester shirts and toilet paper. Holding them in his left hand, he looked again at the television, and knew he was seeing better right now than he had seen in many, many

years. He was stunned, surprised, and uneasy. He slowly folded the glasses, and put them in his shirt pocket. He took the remote, turned the sound a little lower, watched the news program, easily enduring the bad news and the bad slants — ignoring the frivolities contained therein, because he didn't even notice them.

I wonder if a stroke could cause my sight to get better—temporarily, anyhow? But wait — I'm not dizzy anymore, not since I took off the glasses ...

He wasn't dizzy.

It had to be the glasses that had made him feel the vertigo of moments before. To test this theory, he took them from his pocket, and replaced them on the bridge of his nose.

The sense of being out of balance returned. The glasses were screwing with his newly refined vision. Very troubled, he turned the TV off, and walked into the bathroom, flipping the switch as he entered the frilly little necessary room, unchanged since Babs' death. He stared into the mirror, wondering what was happening to him, wondering if he was losing his mind. He wanted to call someone, wanted to get another point of view, but he had nobody to talk to. Any stranger he approached with this problem would either say, "Congratulations!" or would call for the guys in white ...

Suddenly stricken anew by his aloneness, he bent his head, gripping the edge of the vanity with his hands. His thumbs were under the edge of the cultivated "marble," and his fingers were splayed across the surface. He watched as the knuckles and the stretched portions of his skin turned white, then relaxed his grasp, and watched the blood flow back into the skin. He straightened quickly, and held his hands in front of his face, looking with sheer disbelief at the skin of those familiar hands.

Surely the skin of his hands and wrists was smoother, and less translucent than it had been only moments earlier! The knuckles were less prominent, he was sure of that. He clenched his fists in front of his face, and was sure the arthritic pain was less. With utter disbelief he stared into the clearly mirrored eyes that only this morning had been rheumy and rimmed with red. He turned the cold water on full blast, and bending, splashed his face.

The motion of stooping to the sink was easier than it had been since he could remember; the aching that normally accompanied the movement was unaccountably absent. He continued to stare at his reflection as he grabbed for the hand towel and dried himself.

Suddenly he noticed his hair.

He had lost most of his hair many, many years before, after a bout with a severe infection that required hospitalization and a strong course of antibiotics. Those same antibiotics that had saved his life, and had taken his hair, had also damaged his hearing. He remembered how loud the television had seemed when he turned it on. He stared in shock at the dark fuzz on his scalp. It seemed to grow longer even as he watched. He rubbed his head with both palms, smoothing the hair, darkly growing with incredible speed. He began to weep, and wiped his eyes with smooth young hands.

He ran from the bath to his bedroom, hating the fluid way his body obeyed the impulse to flee the inexplicable. He fell across his bed, crying and praying — praying he wasn't crazy, but instead was actually dying.

He was lonely ... so painfully, achingly alone in an alien world that he scarcely even understood. He far preferred death to a continuance of his earthly hell of solitude ... yet ...

Yet. Yet his body was singing to him of energy, humming with a resurgence of hormones and drive. He sat up, resting on the edge of the bed for a moment, then stood again, and returned to the bathroom mirror.

He was still wrinkled, but his skin was firmer, his veins less visible, the splotching of sun damage and age less apparent. The shocking smudge of darkness atop his head kept drawing his attention from the frightening clarity of the reflection of his eyes. With a surge of the fear that had come over him the last time he was in this room, he realized that soon he wouldn't even match his identification. He made a decision, a large one, and made it quickly, with no dithering.

He grabbed his straw hat, pulled it down over the embarrassing new growth on his scalp, and went swiftly to the garage. He pushed the up button

on the garage door opener, got in his old Imperial, started it, and drove to his bank. Five minutes later, he drove into the lane furthest from the cashier, and withdrew almost all of his money from the account. Then he drove away without even counting it first, and felt like a felon as he parked the car, and hurried back into his house. With the thick envelope of bills in his hand, he sat for a moment in his chair, and turned the TV on again. Then restlessly he returned to the bath, and checked the revealing glass once more.

He saw a person in the mirror that was very nearly a stranger.

The person in the mirror appeared to be a youthful forty. His skin was pale, but clear, without the marring of age. He removed his hat, and the dark hair fell across his forehead, giving the face a slightly startled, windblown look. The old man's clothes fell baggily from shoulders that no longer slumped to the softness of scarcely used muscles. Instead of rounding to a large waist, his body tapered to a taut middle. As he realized this, he noticed the sliding of his pants, and one hand automatically grabbed at them. Bemused, and with a sigh of resignation, he went to his bedroom to remove his clothes, and went naked back to the bathroom mirror to see what more this waking nightmare had done to his body.

His waist was small, his chest and shoulders were well and strongly developed, as they had been when he was a healthy young adult, from the hard labor of his employment. His legs were well developed as well, and tapered to strong calves and sturdy feet. His arms were bulging with muscle, and his hands looked powerful. He moved and stood with ease that was almost entirely foreign to him ... almost. Almost, but not quite ... No. Not quite foreign. From someplace deep within him, a young man looked out of the deep cave of memory, and said, "Yes. It was like this. Yes. This is how it should be." Then, stirred by hunger, he went to the kitchen to eat, forgetting that he had already eaten supper.

Later, after finishing off a meal, the size of which was matched only by its randomness, he, sated, went back to the chair in his living room, and sat his naked butt on the scratchy green upholstery of his worn easy chair. It wasn't comfortable at all, though he had used it every day for many years beyond its attractiveness and style. His old body had liked it; his new one hated it.

Stricken once more by the strangeness of his situation, he thought of Babs. The last time he had looked like this, Babs was healthy and the kids were still at home, and life had seemed to be perfect. It seemed to be more cruel joke than blessing that he now lived in a youthful body, and his family was still gone — time still rolled forward. The trials of Job in reverse. Though his physical age had regressed, the hours of the day had driven on, just as though nothing unusual were occurring.

Then, thinking of how much he missed his family, he realized that his neighbors wouldn't recognize him, would think that he was an intruder, and he began to become frightened. The fear was well nigh overwhelming, and spread from the thought of his neighbors, to wondering how he would live his life now. He had slipped the thought earlier when it came at him, but now it caught him squarely.

He didn't understand this modern world of easy sex, "hooking up" with near, or total, strangers for an interlude of quasi-intimacy. He didn't even understand the high tech world of gadgetry, of toys and tools, much less the political correctness he heard people talking about. He had no concept at all of what it would take to get and keep a job in this new age. Thinking about getting a job, brought his mind back to the money he'd withdrawn from his account, and he went to the bedroom to count it. It was a lot of cash, and it would probably be enough to live the rest of his life, if he had remained an old man. For the young man he'd seen in the mirror, it was a paltry sum – for a man who would have extreme difficulty even proving who he was now, so that even the fact of staying in this house would be problematic, it was nothing.

Fear swarmed him again, like victorious soldiers overrunning an enemy position. The fear was followed by such a wave of loneliness as he'd seldom experienced, even in his sad and solitary life. He missed Babs so much. He missed his kids. He looked at the faded photos on his old dresser.

There was Barbara as she had been when they married, lovely in her dated hairstyle, and vintage clothing. There was a picture of Babs; standing next to him on the deck of the hunting lodge they had stayed in that year, the children rowdy and small around their feet. The school pictures ... the recital

photos ... the graduation shots, this entire *life*, an entity all of its own, caught in cellulose and emulsion, stared at him in timeless joy, an amber-entrapped being, a time capsule of memory.

Harold Darnell wept as though he had never wept before. He prayed that he would die, die right here, right now, and knew, even as he gasped out the words, that he had never felt better in his life. In a panic of fear of this inexplicable, a rout of reason, a flurry of emotions that were so wild, and so unpredictable ...

He stood, and started to run from the house, but realized he was still unclothed. He nearly put his old clothes back on, but some remote impulse caused him to dig into the very back of the closet, the farthest reaches of his dresser drawers for the clothing he hadn't worn in many years, and put it on, disregarding the mustiness of disuse.

Now attired in clothes so old they were back in style, he grabbed the envelope of money, and went to the garage for his car. He started it and backed from the drive with a scream of the engine and the squall of the tires. He saw some of his neighbors, standing on their porches with their cordless phones in their hands, their nosy eyes staring, their busybody mouths talking. He heard sirens in the distance.



The seventies-model Chrysler swerved off of the road, and up through a yard, striking the large Chinese elm in the middle. The police cars all pulled up surrounding the property, cops, uniformed and plainclothed, got out of the cars, and crouched behind their doors, weapons drawn. The door of the Imperial opened and a slender young boy climbed from the car, his face wet with tears.

"There's something in his hand!"

"Drop it right now! Put your hands up!"

The boy pointed his hand at the officers.



Bud Jakes, a young and inexperienced officer, was closest to the boy. He thought he might be about thirteen years old, and thought he was trying to dress tougher and older than his years. The boy held a shiny, metallic something in his hands, and it seemed to be pointing at ...

There was the sharp report of a weapon being discharged, and Jakes was amazed to feel the Beretta bucking in his hands ... He ran forward, and kicked the object from the dying boy's hands ... Jakes looked into the dulling eyes of the boy, and couldn't believe the depth of misery, the age, the regret ... the gratitude — fading — fading — gone.

Gone.

He looked at the tear-wet, beardless face, at the old-fashioned television remote control near the boy's right hand ...

KILROY WAS HERE

by Andrew W. Griffin

APRIL 1983 – LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS – ST. JOHN’S WOOD

“Domo arigato, Mr. Roboto ... Domo arigato, Mr. Roboto ...”

The Japanese/English refrain from the new Styx song, “Mr. Roboto,” repeated in Whitney’s head as he rode his bike down the hill on Taylor Street. Soon over the bridge spanning Cammack Creek and back up again to the dirt-road entrance toward the open area that was said to be a community soccer field. Whitney doubted this, however.

Puffing as he pushed the pedals on his banana-yellow, TG&Y-bought bike, he glanced up at the gray, spring sky above and felt the wind picking up.

“The problem’s plain to see ... too much technology ... machines to save our lives ... machines dehumanize ...” Whitney sang to himself, referencing the bridge from “Mr. Roboto,” a song he felt was pretty pertinent in a time where technology was rising rapidly in lives of many, while nuclear annihilation seemed almost inevitable. For an 11-year old boy, it was all a bit too much to consider, which is why he pedaled down the dirt path to the fort he and his friends had built in a copse of trees located between Taylor Street and the open, overgrown field that likely would never host the promised soccer games.

Whitney wasn’t sure why he had come here today. Usually he and Jason and Stephen would meet here, or over in another area of this property owned by St. John’s Catholic Seminary. For the kids in his Heights neighborhood,

St. John's Wood bordered on the magical. The other kids felt that certain buildings on the property were haunted.

Today felt different. He was brimming with strange emotions. He was excited about an upcoming Boy's Choir trip to Topeka, Kansas, to sing in the Kansas State Capitol building.

Approaching the pine tree where Whitney and his friends had built their makeshift treehouse out of discarded two-by-fours and construction-site castoffs, he got off his bike and walked to the base of the pine and gripped the wooden slats nailed to the tree, where pine sap was leaking down the bark, creating a sticky experience that Whitney didn't mind too much. He loved pine trees. And after all, getting to the rickety, wooden platform seven feet off the ground was the goal.

Once there, Whitney gripped the faded, olive-green canteen pouch that had once belonged to his father when he was a Boy Scout in the mid-1950's. It still had the two small holes where a bear had bitten into the canteen when his dad was asleep in a tent at a Boy Scout camp in North Carolina.

The canteen holder was now a pouch-n-strap that held four golf balls – the better to defend himself and fend off intruders and whomever might be lurking in the woods on the far side of the open field, towards the seminary proper.

While sitting in his solitary treehouse, the southwesterly winds blowing through the pine trees, creating a sound that Whitney imagined heaven sounded like, he caught the appearance of a figure in the distance, on the far end of the field.

“What the heck?” Whitney murmured to himself.

He tried to get a better view by standing up on the platform, the plywood squeaking perilously under his weight, and placed his right hand over his forehead to get a better look.

Sure enough, someone was out there. In fact ... three someones. They were looking in his direction and they appeared to be teenagers, just a little older than himself. Two boys and a girl.

Having spent a lot of time in this field and surrounding woods, Whitney wasn't sure who they were. The two boys had blonde hair and the girl was a brunette. The wind seemed to pick up. The air was humid, which was not uncommon in April in Arkansas. Already obsessed with the fledgling Weather Channel on TV, he would have to run home later and see what the latest forecast was. After all, he was working on his Weather Merit Badge.

The strange trio stood there for a few more minutes as Whitney watched. Could they see him? He thought he was pretty well hidden in this treehouse.

He decided to climb down the ladder and into a bed of pine needles at the base of the tree. On ground level he could only see the tops of the heads of the three figures in the field.

Whitney felt as though he had to approach the figures. He felt drawn to them, but seemed to feel oddly threatened. Whitney placed his hand in canteen holder slung over his shoulder. The golf balls clicking together. He gripped one in his hand and slowly walked toward the young people. But why was he doing this? It wasn't in his nature to be aggressive, and yet he felt compelled to throw a golf ball at them, just to scare them.

They had not moved. They were dressed in clothes that appeared to be from another time. As he got closer Whitney yelled, "Hey! Who are you?"

While they looked at him, it was as if they were looking through him. It was unnerving. And without thinking, Whitney took the golf ball out of his bag and threw it at them. They moved a little and the golf ball fell short of them. The three looked down at it and turned. Then they began running away from Whitney in the direction of the tree line.

He had gone this far, so he had to see it through and see where they were going.

"Hey wait!" Whitney yelled. "Come back!"

He saw them go into the trees and down the ravine towards the creek and out of sight.

When Whitney walked down the ravine and toward the creek, he came upon a statue of the Virgin Mary, which had been placed there by the monks who lived on the seminary property. Her plaster eyes seemed to be watching him as he looked around.

A voice whispered behind the frightened boy. "Whitney. Come down the creek. You will find us there."

It was a girl's voice. The hairs stood up on his neck.

Whitney felt a mix of emotions from terror to excitement. He felt he needed to continue.

Walking along the creek bank, he saw a chunk of rock and some graffiti was spraypainted on it reading, "Kilroy was here." He vaguely remembered that it was a message left by American soldiers in Europe during World War II.

"Keep coming, Whitney. We're waiting for you."

Whitney looked for the source of the voice. No one was there.

Walking a bit further, Whitney walked past the graffiti-tagged stone and suddenly, a portion of the path gave way and he fell in the creek, striking his head on a rock in the water. This portion of his journey was over.

"Whitney. You're here. Whitney Kilroy, you are home."

BULLET DREAM

by Jon Inglett

From the window, I watched the rain flooding the front yard, as water dominated the overworked gutter. Lights from neighborhood houses cascaded the shadows on the dark concrete streets. For a moment, I thought about running away from my shelter and skipping through the puddles like a naïve child, who might dance circles around the neighborhood water. As soon as those thoughts from childhood comforted me, the wind began to howl, and the patterned rain began to force itself from the sky in random motion. Soon, my naïve thoughts disappeared when ice balls pounded from the sky and covered the dark streets with white ice. Still looking at this magical scene through the window, I watched a speeding car — a black sedan of sorts — skidding into the driveway of a neighbor's house.

“It’s probably Jane,” I spoke to myself and looked to see if Jane, the beautiful teenager across the street, was returning from a concert or a hot date. As thunder drumrolled through the sky and as the hailstorm continued shooting golf balls into the yards, I turned my attention to the rest of the neighborhood and sensed serenity and tranquility in the midst of angry weather. In the corner of my eye, I watched the black sedan once again race and skid its way down the icy streets. I looked at Jane’s house again and realized she never opened the front door, or at least I did not hear it. Perhaps I missed the sound from the loud roar and energy of thunder, lightning, and raining ice. But then, I looked more intently at Jane’s house, her sidewalk, and finally the driveway, and literally choked on my last breath of oxygen. My eyes saw Jane lying coldly on the driveway while hail, rain, and wind trounced upon her still frame.

“What the hell?” I screamed as I regained my breath and composure. For at least thirty seconds, I stood by the window dumbfounded with disbelief. I could not move, could not breathe, could not look away from the reality placed before me. Was she dead? What did I miss? A thousand thoughts of fear, anxiety, and impending dread consumed me. Before I could react, I replayed the scene a thousand times in my head and replayed the scene a thousand more times with different endings every time.

Hail pounded harder against the roof, and the ceiling seemed to shake and mock my confusing thoughts and memories. Did I hear the ceiling move or see it move? I don’t know, for I still locked my thoughts, dreams, and eyes against the body lying on the driveway.

Suddenly, I found myself barefooted outside my house and racing toward the body. Was I really outside or was I dreaming that I was outside? I don’t know, but then I raced toward Jane and screamed louder than the hail, “Jane, are you okay?” Leaning toward her body and feeling ice ricocheting off my back, I heard her whisper, “Leave me now or forever hold your peace.” I leaned closely to her wondering what she had said or what she meant by her whisper, and then, looking specifically at her right shoulder, I noticed blood pouring from her arm and mixing with the pounding hailstorm.

“Oh my God! You’re bleeding! What happened? What the hell happened to you!”

I reached my hand toward her wound and touched it; soon, when my hand mixed with her blood, I pulled it away as if I had been shocked by an electrical current. “Is this real,” I thought to myself as I stared at my bloody hand in disbelief, “or am I still in my house looking out the window?” With the amount of terror available by this scene, I couldn’t decide, but the sound of Jane’s voice again returned me to reality.

“Leave me,” she whispered again. Her eyes then rolled into the back of her head. The mascara from her eyes trickled down her cheeks as hail continued dropping over her lifeless body.

“Jane! Jane!” I screamed. She died with her blood on my hands ... from a stabbing ... or possibly a gunshot. I don’t know. How could I know? I only saw

a car. Was there a car at all? As I finally regained my composure, I, hoping that Jane's parents were still awake, ran to Jane's door and pounded my fists on the door. To my surprise, a man with a gun opened the door and pointed the gun directly to my forehead.

"Don't shoot! Please, don't shoot!" I backed away from the door, retraced my steps from the front door to the sidewalk, continued walking backwards close to Jane's body. A car — maybe the black sedan — skidded toward the house once again and this time stopped in the street. As the man with the gun motioned me to continue walking, I tripped over Jane's leg and fell to the ground. Should I run? Should I somehow escape into the devilish night? Would the hail somehow limit his aim?

"If you move, I will kill you," the voice muttered.

So, I didn't move, didn't react, didn't play superhero. I felt trapped once again, trapped in my own indecision, caught inside the misfiring neurons inside my brain.

"Get up slowly and get into the car," he ordered.

I followed the directions concisely and felt amazed by my ability to focus on each step, to open the back door, to slide into the black leather seats. I followed those orders perfectly, and as I looked toward the driver in the black sedan, a thud knocked me out. It was either golf ball hail pounding against my head or the butt of the gun sent me to eternal sleep.

Days later, maybe weeks, maybe hours, I don't know. I found myself chained to a bed in darkness. The bed would squeak when I tried to move, but every time I tried to break free, the motion from my strength would send a sharp pain to my brain, and only stillness invited peace, only peace maintained my sanity. In the basement, I could hear voices stirring above me. Two voices perhaps, or maybe one voice portraying two roles. I don't know. An hour or so later, a door opened from above, which clarified that I was locked in this basement, for I saw a light behind the door and a shadowy figure descending the stairs toward me. Was he the killer, I wondered.

"It's time to go," he said to me, as he reached the corner of my bed. He

pulled a towel or rag from his pocket and held it over my nose and face.

I refused to breathe for the longest time; I even shook the bed with all my strength, but the pain was too sharp, was too complicated for me to continue, so I blacked out.

Again, I found myself lying in the back seat of the vehicle, yet I couldn't move a muscle, couldn't even scratch the itch on the tip of my nose. Was I drugged ... again? Where were we going? Was I going to die?

The thought of death stopped my questions, and soon, the rain once again poured against the car and the pavement. The windshield wipers squeaked back and forth like a pendulum on a clock. Tornado sirens sounded in the distance, and then though I couldn't move a muscle, I took a deep breath of fear and smelled a feminine perfume in the car. From the smell, I realized a woman was driving the car. The car skidded left, then right, made more quick turns and finally arrived at a driveway, for I could feel the presence of a sharp incline, though I could not move a muscle. Where were we? Why couldn't I move? The rain poured, and the sirens continue to sound. The wind paced and shook the black sedan, while thunder roared through the streets. Suddenly, the driver left the car, but it was not a woman at all. A man? But the perfume? Who was wearing the perfume? Was the scent I smelled Jane's scent before her body was mutilated in her driveway? Was I smelling my own scent of death? I had to leave, had to escape, but my body would not react, would not allow itself to move from the car. My door soon opened, and the driver pulled my body from the backseat, dragged me by my flaccid arms, and left me on the driveway alone with only the rain and the sound of hail about to fall from the sky.

Before he returned to the car, I heard his voice say, "Goodbye, Jane." Thunder from the sky ripped through me. His gun raised its barrel toward my body and shot. I closed my eyes and flinched and opened them again.

The car sped away, until I could only hear and feel rain, thunder, and hail pounding my body to death. I felt nothing — no pain, no blood, no tears. Instead, as the bullet poisoned my right shoulder and as blood oozed from my body, I forgot about trying to move, forgot about death for a minute, and began to react and decipher the riddle for the first time. The driver said

something to me. What did he say? Focus! Focus! “Goodbye Jane,” he said. He called me Jane. But I am not Jane! I am the neighbor who tried to save Jane from dying.

Suddenly, the pain returned to me for the first time, and I could feel my body again. I moved my head to the left and opened my eyes as wide as possible. Hail pounded the streets, and I thought about getting up, but I felt weak, limp, dying, almost gone from this world. Where was my life? Where were all the images that were supposed to pass me by before my final breath. As my eyes widened, I noticed the neighbor’s window. A man stared directly at me. A man stared but did not move, did not react, could not race from his patterned position at the window and help. As I stared at the man and as the pain continued to explode inside of me, I heard barefeet skipping off the wet pavement and racing toward me.

“Jane, are you okay?”

The voice (was it me?) leaned toward my body as ice ricocheted off his back. I whispered, “Leave me now or forever hold your peace.” He leaned closely to me and perhaps wondering what I had said or what I meant by my whisper.

He turned his head slightly and looked in terror at my right shoulder.

“Oh my God! You’re bleeding! What happened? What the hell happened to you!”

He reached his hand toward my wound and touched it, though I felt nothing; soon, when his hand mixed with my blood, he pulled it away as if he had been shocked by an electrical current.

“Is this real,” I thought to myself as he stared at his bloody hand in disbelief, “or am I the man hovering above me staring in disbelief over this decaying body?”

“Leave me,” I whispered to the man. I felt the heaviness of my eyes beginning to roll into the back of my head. The mascara from my eyes trickled down my cheeks as hail continued dropping over my lifeless body.

HE NEEDS ME

by Miguel Montelongo

This story may be upsetting to some readers due to the inherent themes of stalking and abusive behaviors.

One sentence, that's all he said. One phrase and I was all his. We met at the park, just south of 113th Street near the JP Morgan law firm. He was falling, coffee in hand, phone in the other. I would have walked right past him, he would have been okay if he fell. I mean really, people fall all the time. But as I was walking past him, he grabbed hold of me stopping his fall. At first, I was shocked. 'Who is this man?' I asked myself. But then he said it, that one sentence that changed my life. He said, "Thanks, I really needed you there!" and ever since I've been in love.

He works at a local bank as a teller, so I think he must be really smart. Sometimes he's too smart for his own good, so I try to help him. When he's running late, I make sure to buy his Americano triple shot espresso and leave it with the barista since I know he's due to arrive soon. After work, he likes to go for a beer or two, and I make sure no one would ever even try to put anything into his drinks. Even at night, when he forgets to turn off the A/C, I do it for him. He's always complaining about how high the electricity bill is to his mother. I love doing these little things for him. He really needs me, you know?

Except when his girlfriend shows up. That's when that thief takes him away from me. I know he doesn't truly love her because every time he's with her, I make sure and call his cell phone every three and a half hours. I am always on his mind, no matter what time of the day or night.

Besides, he said he needed me. Together, we will live a life happily ever after. He better not deny my love. It would be altogether his fault for not ever noticing my love for him. He needs me, just as much as I need him. I cannot eat without eating with him. His favorite breakfast is now my favorite, and we share our meals every morning. I might be a little far away, but I know for a fact he feels me. I shower when he showers and think of how good it feels to be in the shower together. We even have the same sleeping habits.

I have been good to him, just as he's been good to me. I still have the thank you note that he left for me on a paper napkin the first time I bought him a coffee. He specifically told the barista to hold it until she saw me again. I couldn't even wait! As soon as he left, I went and snatched it from her. How dare she take what's mine!

Soon, our lives will cross once again, and he will recognize me as the woman who saved his life. He'll remember how much he needed me and will realize how much he needs me NOW more than ever. So, tonight at exactly 8 o'clock, when he is headed home, I will suddenly have tripped and fallen into his arms, where he'll catch me and our love will be forever. If he were to turn me down, I really wouldn't know what to do with myself. I mean really, who would take care of him if I'm gone? This is exactly why he would never turn me down. He has to know how much pain and suffering I have saved his life from.

◇

"Hey, honey? Come take a look at this," says a man, idly watching the news. The scent of food wafting from the kitchen does little to distract him now.

"What is it, Javier?" His wife shuffles out from the kitchen holding a spoon, a sample from tonight's dinner.

Javier shakes his head, then turns to her and accepts the morsel. "This woman killed a man claiming that they were in love! She even cut up his body!"

His wife recoils, waving him off. "That's awful! I don't wanna hear about that!"

“That’s fair,” he agrees, “but just listen to this! She’s been following him around for months, apparently. She said that she saved his life and they’ve been a couple ever since.”

“How do you know so much?” she asks, eyeing him suspiciously as she takes the spoon back to bring with her into the kitchen.

Javier shrugs. “That’s what she told the police while they were arresting her, and all kinds of other stuff.”

“That poor man ... Did he even know she was stalking him?”

“Not at all!” he says. “That’s the scary part! She killed his girlfriend, too. It’s such a tragedy, really.”

His wife nods solemnly. “Yeah, really ... Ready for dinner?”

Javier smiles softly at her, kissing her knuckles. “Yeah, in a minute.”

DOG AND RABBIT

by Jude Privett

On a cold and blustery night in Trench, several Banditos were huddled around a campfire exchanging stories.

“Have you heard the one about the Rabbit and the Dog?” one of them asked.

Most shook their heads. A couple of them smiled.

“It goes like this,” he started.



One day Rabbit was feasting on clover, not a care in the world when he noticed a shadow darken the lush meal in front of him. He looked up and saw the sure sign of Death. Dog. Without thinking, Rabbit sprang into action, quickly vacating the scene. Fierce panic carried him far, but he wasn't paying attention to where he was running or what he was doing for he was too afraid. He kept looking back for Dog, who wasn't even on his tail yet, but Rabbit wasn't taking any chances. He ignored the nauseating fear in his stomach and kept on. It was during one of these frequent checks over the shoulder that he missed sight of a hunter's trap and ran straight into it. He didn't even realize he was caught until he slammed into the bars and heard a metallic bang ring out. Surely this was the end for Rabbit.

Rabbit waited so long that the blood on his forehead began to dry into a crust and the sun began to sink down behind the trees. During his wait,

Rabbit fretted over all his mistakes. He admittedly hadn't been living his life to the fullest. He had no family or friends to share stories with, or any stories of his own, for that matter. He spent all his time hiding from living for the sake of staying safe. He was a very fearful fella that Rabbit was. And now he had nothing to show for the life he worked so hard to curate.

Finally, Dog appeared out of the shadows and approached Rabbit, who was sobbing quietly in the cage.

"You've come for me," Rabbit stated drearily, his ears drooping.

"What took you so long?"

"I had an appointment to finish up," Dog replied, matter of factly.

"You were there for someone else?" Rabbit sniffed.

"Yes."

"You weren't even chasing me?" So that's why it took so long Rabbit thought.

"I was not," Dog said politely. "I was there for another."

This changed everything for Rabbit. His fear led him to flee, which was natural, but his blind panic and lack of attention caused him to run not from his death, but to it.

"I see." Rabbit sighed. "I did this to myself." Regret filled him from his feet to the tip of his twitchy ears. "I wish I had lived it differently." He began to weep again.

Dog admired that Rabbit did not blame him for his fate like most of the others. He was used to regretful crying, but this is not what swayed him to do what he was about to do. He knew it was not Rabbit's time and that Rabbit seemed to truly have a change of heart while he was waiting.

"Okay." Rabbit began to dry up his tears. "I know it's time." He winced.

"Not today." Dog gave a sharp toothy smile and pawed open the hunter's trap. "Go."

Rabbit was startled but took no chances. He darted from the trap, ran forward, then stopped and turned around.

“Thank you,” he said, standing on his hind legs. “I won’t ever make you regret this.” He then hopped into the bushes. Leaving Dog by the empty hunter’s trap.

Rabbit kept his word and ended up living a fulfilling and happy life. He still ran from Dog when their paths crossed. He was no fool of course, but he did his best and most creative thinking on the run. These sparks of inspiration led to a family, friends, and plenty of stories to share.

One day when Rabbit was old and slow he saw Dog. He hopped into a run as usual. He didn’t look back over his shoulder anymore, but his weak eyesight did not stop him from running into a well-hidden hunter’s trap. This time Dog was there in moments. Rabbit happily greeted his old friend. They spent the whole night talking, and Dog was pleased to learn that Rabbit had kept his word. At sunrise, Rabbit let out a sigh. “Okay.” His eyes grew misty. “I know it’s time.”

“It is, I’m afraid.” Dog said solemnly.



“And that is how a cycle was broken, a second chance was given, and purpose was found,” he storyteller concluded.

The Banditos spent the rest of the night huddled around the fire like little rabbits exchanging tales. When the sun rose, they packed up and were on the run again.

OPENING NIGHT

by Adrienne Proctor

“I can do this. I can do this,” she repeats to herself. Out loud this time, instead of in her head for the past eight hours. “I know my lines ... don’t I? Maybe I should read over them one more time.”

Jessica pauses from wearing her floor down to nothing, pacing in her bedroom in between her bed and mirror. She picks up her familiar script and starts to re-read the lines she knows she memorized weeks ago. Not a lot of fun for a Friday night. This is not just any Friday night, though. For the past six weeks, she’s been in rehearsals. Now, it’s the night. It’s opening night.

Jessica’s friends and family did as they’d promised. They’d all bought tickets, planned where they would meet up for dinner, which they should be doing right about now. Then they’d head over to the theatre to see Jessica’s acting debut. Okay, not exactly a debut. More like a resurgence. A reawakening? A rebirth! Whatever it was, it was too late to back out now.

Suddenly, she remembers why she’d quit after high school. The nerves and anxiety leading up to it was somehow worse after a ten-year break from the stage.

Shaking her hands and taking another deep breath, she turns to the mirror, sets down her script, now damp and soft due to her sweaty grip. Staring at the already flushed, slightly frazzled reflection, she forces another rejuvenating inhale-exhale. Then another. “I know my lines! I know this show! Back to front, front to back. I’ve dreamed about this. It always goes well. It will

go well. I'm an actress!" She laughs at the girl in the mirror, not quite believing her either.

"Okay, time to go." She turns back to the bed, pats her audience of one on his furry head once for love and twice for luck. "Wish me luck, Boots. No, wait. Tell me to break a leg!"

Boots says nothing. Blinks.

"I agree" Jessica concedes.

Boots lets out a distinguished yawn, showing his vampiric fangs, and proving how little concern he has for his human's plight.

"Okay, mister. I'll see you. After the show." Jessica turns with a dramatic flourish. This is the home of a professional actor and her unbothered cat after all. She grabs her keys off the hook by the door, locks that door behind her, and heads to the theatre.

Two hours until curtain.

Now in the dressing room, the pacing continues. The script survived the drive over, and so did the nerves.

Jessica stops the floor routine to strap into her costume shoes. Heels, black and new. This theatre has the budget and the audience to make them the most enviable community house in town. The pressure's on. She must do well. Or what? She'll never act again. Make or break, right here and now. She can feel it.

The reverie is interrupted by a three-fingered tap on her dressing room door. "Enter if you dare!" she attempts to lighten the mood in her head.

"Are you excited!?"

In storms Mavis, Jessica's co-lead in this two-woman production.

"Um. Yes?" Jessica lies.

Mavis shuts the door behind her, crossing her arms in front of Jessica's

anxiety mirror and creating a statuesque scene.

“You can do this. We’ve rehearsed this. Are you having anxiety again?”

“How could you tell.”

“I think I know you by now. We’ve been through it these past few weeks. Hungry?”

Mavis produces a cellphone, unapproved of course by the Stage Manager, but she’ll toss it in her bag when the SM calls, “Five minutes to places!”

“Hungry!? Mavis. I’m too anxious to be hungry.” Jessica sighs, slumping farther down in her vanity seat.

“Don’t slouch, you’ll wrinkle that dress,” Mavis scolds. “You need something on your stomach, trust me. I’m ordering you a cheeseburger.”

“And what if I get ketchup all over this dress? Isn’t that worse than wrinkles?”

“One ketchup-less cheeseburger. Fries?”

“Ugh.”

“Large fries. And an unsweet tea.”

“I hate you.”

“I love you too. It’ll be here in thirty minutes. Need help with your makeup?”

“I think I’ve got it. I practiced.”

“Winged eyeliner and cheeseburgers or bust.” Mavis laughs at her own joke and leaves Jessica to her thoughts, which are lifting quite a bit now. It’s starting to feel real. Plus, she won’t be alone out there.

Thank goodness for scene partners.

One hour until curtain.

Eyeliner is on, and the burger is downed. The iced tea sits sweating on the counter, a consumable example of how Jessica feels.

“Ten minutes to places!”

“Thank you ten!”

Jessica fans herself. Takes a final glance in the mirror. A final reassurance. A final chance to back out.

Sitting back down in the dressing room, she can hear the bustle of the audience filtering in. It’s got to be a full house tonight. It sounds like it, anyway.

She checks her phone. 7:53. A text from James. “Break a leg!” She smiles. He always makes her smile right when she needs it.

She swipes the phone screen, types a reply. “You here?”

A quick ping.

“Yes of course. I’ve already found your mom. She says hi.”

“lol. Tell her to silence her phone!”

“On it. You got this, kid. I’m proud of you.”

“James, I’m older than you.”

“Psh, barely.”

“I’m FIVE years older than you.”

“Like I said.”

“I’ve gotta go. See you at the stage door.”

“Five minutes to places!”

Phew. Okay, I guess this is it.

Jessica sets the phone down and leaves the dressing room, pretending the

confidence she wears is real as she walks down the bright hallway backstage. Her heels echo on the tile. The audience murmur gets closer. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she hears the final call.

“Places! Final call for places!”

Deep breath.

She steps on her mark, a taped X on the floor just outside the curtain on Stage Left. Mavis is probably on her mark by now, too, another X just across from her at Stage Right.

The lights come down, now she’s in the dark with her breathing and thoughts. She can smell her hairspray; taste the mint she finished in an anxious chomp.

Breathe.

Lights are up this time, but they’re just on the other side of the curtain.

The audience has grown quiet. Waiting. Anticipating. What will they think?

No time to wonder now.

“I can do this.” She whispers.

It’s time. There’s the entrance cue.

Go.



NONFICTION

ISSUES OF THE AMERICAN LAWN

by Nina Davis

“What do you picture when you read the words, ‘A perfect lawn’?” (Levig). Such a quote prompts the exact same question. The American lawn is usually a picturesque low cut bright green patch of grass that’s in front of a suburban home. For generations Americans have been led to believe this patch of grass is the peak of landscaping beauty and social status. However, the standard American lawn is a horrible choice in landscaping.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “lawn” as “ground (as around a house or in a garden or park) that is covered with grass and is kept mowed.” The history of the American lawn is a long one, expanding as far back as the 1700s in Europe. However, the American lawn as we know it did not rise to popularity until post-World War 2. Steinberg states, “A pivotal factor in the spread of the lawn in America was the passage of legislation in 1938 of the 40-hour work week.” This allowed the average person more time to focus on lawn care on the weekend. Steinberg continues, “With this legislation and the housing boom following the Second World War, managed grass spaces became more commonplace.”

The American Lawn causes many environmental concerns. Polycarpou writes in his article “The Problem with Lawns,” “Each year more than 17 million gallons of fuel are spilled during the refilling of lawn and garden equipment.” He continues to write, “Homeowners spend billions of dollars and typically use 10 times the amount of pesticide and fertilizers per acre on their lawns as farmers do on crops; the majority of these chemicals are wasted due to inappropriate timing and application.” All of this chemical pollution causes harm to local wildlife, killing off many pollinators in the

process, and runs off into local streets and waterways. Not only do American lawns produce so much chemical harm, they also are mass consumers of water. The United States Environmental Protection Agency states in an article, “Nationwide, landscape irrigation is estimated to account for nearly one-third of all residential water use, totaling nearly 9 billion gallons per day.” So much water can fill up 13,636 Olympic sized swimming pools a day. The article continues on, “In addition, some experts estimate that as much as 50 percent of water used for irrigation is wasted due to evaporation, wind, or runoff caused by inefficient irrigation methods and systems.” Not only are American Lawns huge polluters but they also are a huge waste to the limited fresh water that we have.

Pollinators play a huge part in our lives. Dr. Ramaswamy writes, “More than 90 species of U.S. specialty crops require pollination, and various animals, including bees, butterflies, moths, bats, and birds are a critical part of the pollinator-plant ecosystem.” With so many specialty crops being dependent on pollinators, the decline of their population is detrimental. “During the past 30-plus years, our nation’s pollinator populations have suffered serious losses due to invasive pests and diseases, such as mites and viral and fungal pathogens, exposure to pesticides and other chemicals, loss of habitat, loss of species and genetic diversity, and changing climate.” Because of things like “American lawns,” pollinators struggle to survive.

There are many alternatives to the traditional “American lawn,” ones that do not take up nearly as many resources and can help benefit local pollinator populations. Even if completely replacing the “American lawn” is not achievable, there are events such as “No Mow May” that encourage homeowners to grow out their grass to help local pollinator populations. Alyson Levig suggests in her article, “Select a portion of your lawn, and instead of mowing, install pollinator-beneficial elements such as bee-friendly lawn strips, a rain garden, or a pollinator pocket/patch—all of which provide necessary food and habitat—while you mow the rest of your lawn.” There are also alternative grasses such as clover, that make much better lawns and don’t take up as many resources.

The American lawn has had a long-standing history here in America and there is no doubt there will continue to be. However, the “traditional”

American lawn is one that is outdated and causes more harm than benefit. It causes major water waste and chemical pollution that's resulting in decline in pollinators. There are many alternatives to the "American Lawn" as well as changes that can be made to have less of an impact on the environment. This is why the standard American lawn is a horrible choice in landscaping.

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FACING MEMORIES: FACING FEARS

by Kathryn Earl

Hunger. I am hungry. I worry constantly about warmth, food, and safety. I worry for my little brother; he is three and I am five, and we are hungry. Mama is asleep again from endless phone calls to visit with friends, as she sits and drinks and talks. Passed out again. I understand now that the alcohol makes her sleepy, but she forgot to fix dinner again. I pull a can of soup and figure out how to open it. I really cannot tell what kind it is because I cannot read yet ... so I shake the can to see if I can decide what kind to eat. I cannot heat it up on the stove because I am not allowed to use the stove. But if I add hot water to the soup, we can eat it warm. Daddy is in Morocco on TDY. It is not as bad when he is at home; she does not drink as much when he is at home.

The above is one of the earliest memories of my mother's alcoholism that I remember. I recall taking the role of caregiver at five. I worried constantly every time Daddy would leave for six to eight months at a time. I learned to use an alarm at an early age so that we would not miss the bus for school. I did not realize until many years later the extent of her illness, nor the fact that other kids did not have to endure such painful worrying. A book we were assigned to read by James Frey (2003), "A Million Little Pieces," caused me to flashback to several of the worst of the issues with my mom. I remember at 10 having to clean up blood and bile, and the stench of iron from the blood. I recall endless dry heaves and tirades throughout the night. I did not want my little brother to see how sick she was, nor how badly it was progressing. The blood scared me, and I learned to mask the scent with bleach. The bleach not only cleaned up the blood but overpowered the iron smell.

Violence eventually became commonplace. As the alcoholism took hold, eventually my brother and I refrained from having any friends over to the house. Mom and Dad divorced when I was twelve, and that is when the disease took its worst turn. A trail of men through the house from which I would learn to avoid. Some saw my thirteen-year-old body as eighteen and bait. I learned to crawl out my window and escape to my best friend's house for safety. I learned to fix her drinks for her and taste them to be sure they were right lest they be thrown at me. I cringe at the time I accidentally crashed her last drink on the floor and suffered for it with a black eye. I never dropped another drink. My understanding was that the alcohol was eroding the inside of her stomach. She eventually ended up losing half her stomach in a surgery that almost cost her life ... the only thing that stopped her from drinking.

My mother is a survivor. I am a survivor. My brother is a survivor. We are both productive, successful, college educated individuals, or as some would label us: children of alcoholics. We suffer ourselves ... we both fight depression and avoid alcohol as a mask. My mother has been sober thirty years now, and does not remember most of my first twenty years of taking care of her. She is a survivor also. Watching her successfully work the 12-step AA program, I became angry at the author, James Frey. How dare he discount the program. How dare he profess to have experienced such ordeals. I shared my mother's illness upfront and personal and can attest to facts, not fiction. I can also say that success is attained on a day-to-day basis with the help of a higher power, not by sheer will-power alone.

STAGNANCY

by Shyla Norton

Waking up early to a call has become something I have dreaded. It is never good news. My dog got out. My granddad had a stroke. I'm late for work. My best friend is dead ... My best friend is dead. I could not move or think. I was floating through space, roots exposed from where I had been ripped from the ground. Ten years of laughter and love rang hazily around my auditory cortex. I was petrified in place. That was the series of events on the worst morning of my life when I learned that my dearest friend, Mikal, had passed away. His mother was on the other end of my phone, explaining and wrapping me tightly in her words. I remember screaming and falling to the floor. I remember the poignance of the word, "No." Then, the excruciating pang of the response, "Yes." The ideal scenario would have been waking up moments later. A hateful nightmare. Though if that were the case, if I had awoken and let the relief wash over me with a regular day on the horizon, I would be horrifically unchanged in a way that I know now would be an injustice. When my best friend died, I thought I would never experience joy again, but it was that loss that educated me on how to truly live.

The days after folded together in cacophonous silence and waves of mourning. It was helping plan the service, attending the service, and exchanging grief with friends like cigarettes in the back of Mikal's Ford Taurus. Most of my time was spent being steadfastly integrated into Mikal's family. They clung to me as if drops of him were seeping from my pores. I had the vast wealth of knowledge that encompassed the last decade of his life. I was a storybook filled with his memories, and we made ready trades in

circles as we sat in his mother's backyard. His family taught me all about his childhood and past. It was during this time that I truly began to lose myself to the sorrow. I was swallowed whole by the reminiscence and dragged even deeper by the future that would never be. There was such a finality in his cremation. We split his ashes between his family and myself, saving two tubes to spread in his favorite places. We took one to South Padre Island where he had always wanted to go on Spring Break and we scattered it into the ocean as Spanish dancers skirted just beneath the surface of the water. The other went to the pond on his Nanny's land so that she could have a place to go and talk to him every day.

As the months passed, I allowed myself to entangle my limbs with grief like one would a new lover. Grief and I spoke in hushed whispers in the confines of my bed for months. Grief, it turns out, is exceptional at holding you so tightly that no one else can get close. I watched as the world sailed by me; friends moved on with their lives while mine was cemented firmly in the darkness of my lamentation. I did not go to events that didn't involve Mikal's family. I anguished over the medical examiner's report. He detailed that if Mikal had consumed one less pill, one less of the fatal mixture of opioids and benzodiazepines, Mikal would still be with us. I wept for an entire day. That process continued, and I dug deeper into the realization that my person wasn't returning. The only solace I could find was held by Mikal's brother and mom. We spent endless hours together, seeking enjoyment in the moments we shared together that reminded us of him.

On the one-year anniversary of his passing, Mikal's family and I returned to South Padre Island where we had scattered some of his ashes. I was able to appreciate the ocean with new eyes, less flooded with tears than they had been a year before. One revolution around the sun and I had stayed stagnant. I had become motionless in my pain. As the tide crashed over my knees and swept back out into the boundlessness of the water, I was reminded of how Mikal had lived; much like that same tide. Though his time was fleeting, and he had retreated quickly into the vastness of the unknown, his presence was enormous. He lived every day boisterously and with abandon. His loving nature and jubilation swept over everything near him and left remnants of his beauty in their wake. I watched his two younger brothers playing in the waves and new tears began to fall. But these weren't the same

tears that had been choking me for 365 days. They were full of gratitude and change, acceptance and renewal. We all felt it and acknowledged it that evening. It was time to live. Mikal couldn't, but we could carry on his memory with honor and triumph.

When I returned home, I felt as though the tide had washed away my despair and reinvigorated a passion for life that I was acutely aware I had lost. I started taking notice of the wonder and beauty that surrounded me in the people who were still here, and I began to reach out to them again. I decided to find the gleam in all things and no longer would I continue my toxic fraternization with grief. It would become like an old friend that I would see from time to time, but it had no permanent residence beside me.

As time rolls ravenously on, I continue to make the moves it takes to wholly commit to a life worth living. Mikal wasn't addicted to any one thing, just the thrills he could seek and luxuriate in. I endeavor to tell his story to those who will listen; to anyone grappling with something similar; a loss so exponentially unfathomable and monumentally consuming. I spent a long time wasting away, not living. Now, with grand appreciation, I will be a more open, loving and generous person for the remainder of my time here. I never end a call without saying, "I love you." I hug and give grace freely. I spend time enraptured with my loved ones, hanging on to every beautiful moment we share. And above all, I continue to seek joy in all things, the same way that Mikal did. I learned that time is fleeting, and life and death will come in waves like the ocean. But I do not allow myself to be swept away by the sadness anymore. I am no longer stagnant.



CATALYSTS FOR TRANSFORMATION

by Stephanie Pitcher

How would I define the word “normal” as it relates to upbringing and lifestyle? Due to my own history of family dynamics, I’ve been forced to consider the effects that childhood has on the trajectory of a person’s life. For me, growing up, my life was this: Dad worked 80 hours a week, and an eight-year-old me was responsible for the laundry, getting myself and my two younger siblings ready and off to school. I developed issues with mental health from a young age due to what scientists now would call Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Though there were days when it was (literally) a fight, I survived in total chaos with little to no adult supervision. When I moved in with my mother, the problems with neglect only accelerated and morphed into full-on traumatic events. This all deeply impacted who I was at my core and my personality as an adult. Despite this, I have learned that it is the pain we endure in life that has the capability of bringing about the most powerful transformation and strength. The experiences of trauma and hardships while extraordinarily excruciating, have taught me that I will not allow the impacts of this to control my life and my future.

On a late September morning in 2018, I baked a cake for my little girl. I scraped the white icing into the piping bag, and despite my shaky hands, I wrote “Happy 1st Birthday, Bailey!” onto the top of the small, double-layered chocolate cake I had already covered in pink frosting. I decorated the house in bright pink-Minnie-Mouse-everything. Her birthday fell on Labor Day that year, so I was grateful to have most of the Saturday and Sunday before to prepare. I finished the cake, and as I stood there proudly, I snapped a photo. After placing my phone down, a text message lit up the screen. My aunt, whom I didn’t hear from regularly, informed me the nurses at the hospice

facility that cared for my mom said my mother was nearing the end. My heart sank. I was faced with a dilemma ... Throw a wrench in my plans and risk not celebrating my daughter's very first birthday to say goodbye, again? Or should I continue as normal and make the day the best I could for my little girl? After my last visit, many months before, when my mother didn't even recognize who I was, this was unquestionable. I had to put my daughter first, always.

A few days later, on September 5th — as my daughter was unsteadily taking her first steps, my mother took her final breaths. The moment I received the call from my aunt halfway across the country, it was like I was ejected from this world into something resembling a proper depiction of hell. I pictured how she lay there alone, clenching the shiny button wired directly to the bag of morphine, just as she did in my previous visits. The grief was like concrete, and I was buried under a massive slab. It was an ocean, and I was gasping, thrashing, choking, sinking into its dark depths. I physically could not breathe. I remember it felt like I was cycling through four of the five stages of grief at rapid speed and on repeat. Bargaining, denial, depression, anger, bargaining again, back to depression and anger. In my mind, I was transported back to those moments in that grayish room, seated awkwardly in front of the window as she gazed at me, struggling to smile. She referred to me as my late cousin, Becky, who was murdered two decades earlier. Those months ago, I told her I'd forgiven her. Did she even hear me? I pictured her in that bed alone, her soul leaving her body and no one there to witness it. I tried to envision the release of 42 years of pain and suffering, but it was no match for the guilt or my broken heart. The nights were long and the days, well they were even longer. My most important job as a mother was to protect my daughter, so I wanted to shield her from my pain. So, I sobbed in secret. I cried in the shower, I cried at 5 a.m. on my way to work, again at work when I walked in and my mom's favorite song was playing on the radio. I cried on the way home. I cried some more when I put my baby to bed at night.

Not long after, my aunt arrived from Oklahoma, and we met with my grandmother to begin preparations for my mom's funeral service. I retrieved what remained of family photos I'd recovered from that stranger's basement a year earlier. My aunt and grandma sifted through them to pick out photos of

my mom. They taped them up to a poster board like a child would a collage. My aunt used them to make a slideshow that played my mom's favorite songs. The day of her funeral quickly came, and it was a day I'm thankful that I never have to relive. As the eldest daughter and the only one who seemed to care, I wrote a speech. My first and only time speaking in front of an audience. Right as I uttered the last words, my grandmother snatched the microphone from my hand and exclaimed "I'm going to sing a song!" My mother's funeral turned into a concert starring my grandma, the woman who abandoned her first — consistently and repeatedly throughout her life. For me, it was as if I was peering through a window at the way she likely treated my mother throughout her childhood. This added to the incidents I already knew and made my heart ache even more for my mom.

Later that month, I nearly imploded with anxiety as I boarded a plane for the first time. We had to transfer in Denver, and I was afraid I would miss it and end up having to spend the night in the airport with my one-year-old. The two-hour delay to board in Seattle would make for a stressful transfer, and there would no longer be a layover. When we landed, those with connecting flights were ushered to deplane first. Oh, this mama and her one-year-old were running. Strangers helped guide me in which direction to go. When I finally made it to my gate, wheezing and sweating, the flight attendants, two women with sympathetic expressions welcomed me with genuine compassion as I hurried aboard. We were the last passengers. I informed an attendant of the human remains I was carrying, and she documented the overhead bin she'd placed my bag in. The attendant with the short hair offered to hold my daughter so my arms could rest. I politely declined and thanked her, and I sat cradling my sleepy baby. I contemplated the way these ladies treated me. This had never happened before. I was simply treated as human. Suddenly, it was a fact — others did indeed have empathy. That night, my eyes were opened to a version of the world I always tried to find but had only ever experienced on a television screen or in stories. When I arrived, a brand-new feeling started to come over me ... It was different than any emotion I ever felt. It was like I'd found a place where I belonged. It felt like peace. There was a moment when I was driving my aunt's truck through a neighborhood, I drove down a street where there were cars parked on both sides. There was an oncoming car that pulled over and

stopped so that I could easily drive by. Then they waved. They didn't honk or flip me off or scream at me, they waved. It may sound small to anyone else, but I was in shock. There continued to be instances of peace and displays of human decency throughout the rest of my visit.

When it came time to go back, I cried. When I returned to Washington, I found myself trying to figure out a way to move. Suddenly it was clear to me that it wasn't my home. The problems in my life became impossible to ignore, my pathetic attempts at solutions proved to be a Band-Aid for a bigger problem: total misery. I dreamed of life in Oklahoma. I wanted freedom, I wanted to be in awe of the expanse of the Oklahoma plains, and the watercolor sunsets. It was time for me to take control of the wheel and start steering this thing where I wanted to go. All these years of searching for the meaning of life so desperately, I finally started to see. There could be more than pain. After a couple of years as a single mom in Oklahoma, I stumbled across a Miranda Lambert song, and it goes ... "A missing piece was found; I was finally alive. Meet me underneath the Oklahoma Sky." Before she got sick and was hospitalized, my mom made plans to move to Oklahoma so that my aunt could help her get sober and start getting healthy. She never made it. I like to think she led me there, instead.

The fragmented relationship with my mother has only given me a guide: what not to do as a mom. Due to the suffering she caused, I've pushed myself to grow. I continue to fight tooth and nail to be a good mother to my little girl today. Despite enduring a wide range of Adverse Childhood Experiences: abuse, suicidal attempts and mental health struggles, homelessness, neglect, poverty, loss ... I stand today to teach my child, instead of subject her to the traumas I endured. Because of all I that have suffered, I am tough, empathetic, compassionate, kind. I am a warrior with a heart full of love that has no end. With my life, I choose to use generations of trauma and pain to be a force for good.

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SOMETHING IN THE WAY

by Eric Thomas

Even though I know they existed, it is difficult to remember the good times. Despite the work I have put into improving my mental health, it would be a wild exaggeration to say that I have been cured — something I do not believe will ever happen. However, two people have encouraged me to change my thoughts concerning life: one kept me corporeally chained and another made me fantasize about a better tomorrow. Their presence in my life has convinced me to believe that I deserve to give myself a good life.

At the age of 16, I had what could only be described as a psychotic break from reality. I began hearing voices telling me to do horrific things and that my soul belonged to the Devil. After enduring this torment for an entire summer, I was eventually placed in a mental institution for two weeks. Even though this silenced the voices, the damage was done and I still felt plagued by their ghosts following my release.

When I was 18 years old, I sat outside my mother's house in Mississippi and thought about everything that had happened in my life. My parents had recently divorced. The school administration told me that I wouldn't be able to attend my senior year because they were not able to track down most of my transcripts after so many moves. My 14-year-old sister became pregnant, and I blamed myself for it because I felt like I had failed as an older brother. I had grown to not only hate myself, but the whole world as well. It was then that I made a promise to myself: I would have my revenge against the world. This mindset kept me alive and motivated me to work. I was not only going to get through this, but I was also going to rise above everything wrong in my

life. With my newfound determination, I got to work on getting my GED and earned a small scholarship to go to a local community college.

Shortly before I started school, my niece was born. Beth was an incredibly small thing and fit as smoothly as water in my cupped hands, yet she was the heaviest thing I had ever carried in my life. I remember shaking because I was so scared of dropping her. Even though she was not my child, I hope that I will feel something similar to what I felt when I looked upon her sleeping face for the first time. Beth needed someone to look up to in this awful life and see that she could overcome any challenge. Even though my resentment for the world had not changed, it was now paired with a positive goal. I thought of the people I had looked up to who failed me in the past, like my uncle. He was like an older brother to me, but his demons had consumed him entirely. I knew at that very moment that I would never make her feel as lost as I had. Her mother was still a kid herself and her biological father chose to walk away from his responsibility as a parent. No matter what, I could not fail her.

While I was trying to go to school, we were evicted from our house and had to take my dad's offer to live with him. I managed to continue my education for a year. However, I realized how tired I was of never having enough money to move out on my own; I felt like my own life wasn't my own. Consequently, I enlisted in the Army. My first year in service was especially rough, so I was more than ready to take leave for Christmas. Little did I know how it would change my life.

Beatrice was a single mother that I met through a girl who worked at a corner store I frequented. I never bought into the idea of love at first sight; I was a pessimist and suspicious. However, everything suddenly made sense when I met her. For the first time in a long time, I felt safe. I could truly be the version of me that was buried beneath the scar tissue. To my disbelief, she felt the exact same way and we became inseparable. Despite Elvis Presley's warning that "only fools rush in," I asked her to marry me a month after meeting her. We endeavored to know everything we could possibly know about one another. Our knowledge deepened our obsession. I wanted to do right by her and her son, Oliver. He reminded me of my younger self: a boy whose mother was doing her best. I wanted to adopt him and to be the best possible father figure I could be for him, and Beatrice likewise wanted

to enmesh Beth into their lives — something Beth and my sister eagerly welcomed. He was a sweet boy and she needed friends. I can't remember ever being happier than during the time I got to spend with them. Everything in my life was going in the right direction, but I was about to relearn a very important lesson the hard way.

How I had been trying to handle my problems was not only unhelpful in the Army, but it was also about to destroy my relationship with Beatrice. I honestly can't say why or how I concluded that she could not be trusted anymore. I started asking her where she had been and who she had been with. To her credit, she always answered my questions and tried to help me when we discovered that I was having a prolonged anxiety attack. It felt like the world was out to get me, and she was part of the world. Things spiraled out of control until she had to do what was best for her and her son.

After she left, I fell apart and became totally apathetic. I stopped talking to my family, to Beth, and I stopped caring about my career. I ended up in another hospital and had to be discharged from the Army. In the aftermath, my idea about who I was had been shattered completely. I realized that I had tried to force the wrong key into the right door for 9 years and I only noticed what was wrong when the key broke off in the lock. When I was released, I moved to Oklahoma City. I spent a year alone in an apartment just thinking. How did I get here? What did I do wrong? Not only had I lost the love of a good woman, but I also thought of Beth. How would my worldview affect her — how has it? I was surviving because of her, but it was not enough. I wanted her to live a life, not just eke one out. My anger had also helped me survive, but it would not help me live. It was then that I came to see that every effort I had made to better myself was done for the wrong reasons.

All I wanted to do was hurt a world that had hurt me. I finally realized that revenge would not change my past, and it certainly would not heal me. But perhaps my love for Beth and Beatrice could help me. Through loving them, I realized that I had to learn to love myself. I had to believe that I was worth fighting for. If I want to change my life for the better, I have to believe that I deserve a good life. Through failure, I realized that my hatred was destroying me. It has been and will always be hard, but survival alone is no longer an option. I must live.



P E T R Y

RAINING DAYS

by Javier Aguilar

Rain is such a dreary thing many people say.
Each droplet is like a tear from the sky,
Mourning for the sun behind gray clouds.
I used to think this was true until one day.

Where I seen a kid in a yellow raincoat,
They were dancing in every puddle they can find,
Such joy in their eyes while droplets falling around them.

I remember looking out to all the lawns,
Once yellow from endless summer days,
All now vibrant green with flowers soon to come.

Just sitting there looking around at everything,
Reminiscing about a precious moment in my life,
Sitting next to my mother watching the sky,
A multitude of colors splitting it in two.

Really rain isn't such a dreary thing.

TRAGEDY

by Javier Aguilar

11:55 am Tuesday November 7, 2014

Sun shining without a single cloud in sight

A boy name Danny just got out of school

Across town, Ava got into her car with her phone not on silence mode ...

12:01 pm

Jenny wakes up late after studying all night

In a panic rushes into the car

Driving much faster than she usually does...

12:05

Danny looking around for his sister's car

His teacher asks him sit with her in the office

Across town, an ambulance stops at an accident...

12:16

Danny jumps into his mother's car

She is furious with his sister

Jenny died in the urgent care ...

12:26

A mother learns of her daughter's fate

Tears flowing down her face

Danny lost his sister ...

1:58

Ava wakes up seeing her family all around her

Tears of joy fill that room

Feeling so lucky to be alive ...

AEMTU (GRANDMA)

by Daisy Barrett

When I a gaze upon the mirror,
I see myself — but also you,
your strength, your resilience,
holds this family together like glue

Although it is true
that everything must come to an end
I will always hold your memory,
that I do intend

And when I listen to my mother,
I hear her voice — and I hear you,
your words are the cement
that we are grounded to

Your skin — pale as a canvas,
painted with the gift of time
every wrinkle tells your story
the story that is also mine

And when I hold a map of Southeast Asia
I feel myself — but also you
your goal of a better life
the glaze that clay clings to

Down the Mekong River
my aunt, my uncle, and my mom
you brought my family here by boat
and for that we will live long

THE MOTEL ROOM

by Daisy Barrett

We found this place at the perfect time,
I think we arrived when we needed to most,
The road we had been traveling down
has twists and turns
and too much construction,
It had begun to make you tired,
and I became more motion-sick with every turn of the wheel,
and when we settled down in this motel room,
it felt comfy and new to us.

The walls were a different color than I was used to,
not that bright shade of white, but more gray,
with some texture in the paint,
and you could stare at it for hours and let your imagination run wild
as you dreamed up different meanings — and I could do it all day,

You made yourself right at home on the sofa,
and I heated up our leftovers from the American restaurant,
the one that makes you think of the old days — the good days,
and I sat down beside you and gave you a kiss,
and made myself right at home.

But the more we settled into this room,
the more we noticed the cracks in the walls,
and the cobwebs that settled in the corners,
the pipes were leaky and made a strange noise,
and the people upstairs walk a little too loudly.

And suddenly, the room felt unknown,
and I noticed that the leftovers were soggy and cold in the middle,
and didn't taste the same,
and I don't think we were supposed to be here this long,
Are we even in the right room?

We found this place somehow,
but now it's time to go,
the seasons have changed,
and it's time to pack our things,
for there are other guests who are waiting to stay here.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, LOST LOVE

by Bee

Happiest twenty-first to you, my lost lover.
Of all the candles you left me with,
There very well may be twenty-one wicks to light
I suppose I should celebrate your existence today
Rather than mope about as I had done these last few years.
Time passes me by,
Still I grieve with the loss of Eternity.
Happiest twenty-first to you, my lost lover.

MAD TWIRLING SHOW

by Daniel Blackwell

Why does it feel like a knife in my chest
When I see a boy alone on the floor,
Lost in thought with no joy to be expressed?
It's a picture that I cannot ignore.

Solitude is a heavy load to bear.
We crave someone to hold or to be near.
When we are lonely, it's like a nightmare,
Leaving us empty, and feeling so cold.

We watch others dance with their hearts aglow,
And we crave their joy, that feeling so bright.
Yet our fear grips us tight, won't let us go,
So we watch from afar, consumed by this

Mad twirling show.

He lived inside of my mirror, you see.
That boy always knew when I was looking
Because he would always look back at me
Until, at last, I outgrew him last year.

MENTORS

by Patrick Carlock

To Mr. and Mrs. Kolm
Thank you for all that you did
Such as giving me a home
When for years no one else did

You built a place to belong
You grew a new family
Like a tree grows wide and strong
And you took things gamily

You were there in dark hours
You were there in the sunshine
The tree you grew now towers
Like the tallest of the pines

Though some branches have been cut
With leaves scattered to the wind
Know the door has not been shut
Someday your tree may be twinned

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THE YOUNG WOMAN

by Mekale Chapple

Encouragement for the young woman, whew! what a weighted phrase,

Should she be encouraged to “chase the bag” and keep her bills paid?

Should she be encouraged to be the best, an icon, the greatest to ever do it,

Or be encouraged to find her way, only to get distracted and lose it?

Should she be encouraged to be her best self and spend a lifetime trying to reach perfection,

Or should she be encouraged to love herself unconditionally and smile at her own reflection?

Should she be encouraged to be like the strong women before her, or encouraged to be better,

Encouraged to know her worth despite seeing most as more and her as lesser.

Lesser than him, lesser than her, lesser than that big monster she calls doubt,

The monster that festers in her spirit and tells her to feel anxiety and not confidence in crowds.

That pitiful monster that tells her to shrink and be stagnant instead of grow,

That monster called doubt that says to be uneasy, unsure, and never know.

Young woman I say to you that the monster called doubt has no business in your heart,

Because you, ma'am, are unstoppable, if only you choose to start.

Yes ...

She is encouraged to START.

RADIO TOWERS

by Kodi Clifford

Along the horizon line,
Vertical rows of glowing red dots
Reach out of a silhouetted skyline,
Blinking serenely, asynchronous and strange.
They send messages I cannot hear
In a language I cannot read.
As I sit on the soft grass hill,
The crimson dirt foreign beneath my feet
And a great dark blanket over my head,
I think that I understand what they mean.

THE ROOF OF MY HOUSE

by Kodi Clifford

I learned very young how to take apart the windows in my childhood
bedroom.

Just a simple shift of a latch,

Then the heavy glass would descend towards me.

The bare edge of the screen would be revealed, the last line of defense,
Which could be shimmied out of place.

The first time I did it,

I felt so free.

My socked foot gripping the rough roof panels

And my hands still grasping the window sill,

The air outside was fresh and cool in my lungs.

I was a rule-follower by nature, a goody-two-shoes,

But I spent my nights on the roof of my house

Nestled into the crook between angles.

Reading or drawing, secretly being myself.

This was my one act of defiance.

AN ODE TO NEW BEGINNINGS

by **Montserrat Contreras**

Trouble not, dolorous soul,
Find comfort in new beginnings.
For the day breathes new life
With the rising of the sun.
And as surely as the sun ascends
And morning rays dance
Upon glistening blades of green,
So too will your soul plunge,
Into deepest chasms.
But when the clouds dampen your spirits,
And light does not reach your eyes,
Look to the end of each exhalation,
And, with the rise of your chest,
The promise of new perspective
Is your freedom.

FAVORITE MEMORY

by **Monsserrat Contreras**

I fell in love on a hot summer day.
You had sleek black hair and rose-tinted cheeks,
Dimpled beaming smile always on display.
All summer in the grass, we danced for weeks.
Side by side, our two red brick houses sat.
Then, at the park, all the trees we would climb.
Bright brown eyes looking back at me begat,
The fluttering of butterflies each time
But we said our goodbyes holding back tears
When all that you owned went into boxes.
The sound of your voice remains in my ears,
Giggles echo and never obnoxious.
The secret kiss we shared so tenderly,
Forever my favorite memory.

THE CHORUS

by Monserrat Contreras

And when night falls and sleep beckons,
Lying there in my wake,
the chorus begins.
Why, what, and how?
What is it I am meant to do?
The angst of wasted time and potential, penetrating.
Searching, grasping, for deeper meaning.
I pray for answers.
I pray for signs.
I pray for anything at all.
And why am I like this?
So unsure and indecisive.
That voice inside that guides my heart,
tight-lipped and distant.
Why can't I hear it anymore?
Could it be that I've shunned it excessively?
My stubbornness and my pride have lied.
And I go against myself.
Resistance at its finest and most dangerous.
And I lay my own traps, in awareness,
I still fall.
Lessons unabsorbed.
How it irks me.

DREAD

by Kaitlyn Custer

A thousand thoughts pound in my head.
Streams of blood rush in my ears.
My stomach sinks, filled with dread.

Fine, tiny scars that once had bled
Are a reminder of those many years.
A thousand thoughts pound in my head.

With him gone, her vision red
Despite my pleas, my cries she hears
My stomach sinking, filled with dread

Her footsteps strong, I look ahead.
The tiny scars are my souvenirs.
A thousand thoughts pound in my head.

From my sleeves, I pull the thread.
She looks down, her gaze like spears.
A thousand thoughts pound in my head.

In my arms, her nails embed.
This moment fulfills my fears.
A thousand thoughts pound in my head.

My stomach sinks, filled with dread.

NIGHTMARES

by Kaitlyn Custer

When I go to bed at night,
I see figures in my dreams.

Their faces never are quite right.
Imposters in their place, it seems.

They resemble figures of my past,
Haunting me in a time of peace.

My silent screams and face aghast,
Their dream presence will never cease.

I wake, drenched with sweat,
Tugging on my hair and crying.

From the wall, a silhouette watches.
All I can say is “Why?”

The shadow belongs to none other than me,
The architect of my own bad dream.

WINTER'S RUSH

by **Tiffany Davis**

It is the dawn of winter's rush.
Snow clouds swallow the sky.
Frosted air soars with haste.
And crystals swirl in the wind.
All is coated in a blissful white.
The silence is comforting.

BROKE HAIKU TALK

by Khi Davis

To keep it a buck
and that extra fifty cents,
short money problems.

Prices like to rise
like inflatable tube men.
Something in the air.

Paycheck to paycheck,
plus lack of motivation.
Unsettled mindset.

If the struggle pays,
I would earn more than a raise.
Sacrificial wage.

Input, short output.
Sinatra once said, "That's Life."
Get back in the race.

No time for myself.
I bet the payroll enjoys
being recognized.

I need more than just
seventeen syllables to
afford today's rent.

HOME

by Logan Davis

The purple velvet sofa
Adorned with silver and buttons.
White, grey, and black faux fur
Sowed into a blanket draped over.
Early morning sun
Casts rays across the room.
The century-old wooden floor
Reflects light, spills, and cracks.
There you sit,
Yellow eyes looking back at me.
You send love through slow blinks;
Your fur drifting in the stale air.
You speak in meows
But the only language you know
Is love.

FLY FREELY, MY FRIEND

by Mia DeBruyne

The dying patient's family begs Father Time for one more happy, joy-filled day.
The people of the world beg Mother Nature to survive the destructive forces of
climate change.

The prophets beg those in power to listen to the wisdom of ages past.

Those in power clamber upon each other's backs straining, striving for illusive
admiration from an unseen, unknown, faceless crowd, which vanishes like the
morning dew on a scorching summer day.

Do not be torn into the trance of despair, My Friend.

Fly freely, like the Firefly, carrying your light of goodness into a world filled with
great need of your kindness.

CHILDHOOD FORGOTTEN

by Alice Eads

Not a moment that goes by that I don't blame you.

I went to your house today.

You've been begging me to visit you.

The first thing you pointed out was my nose ring,

"We used to do that to hogs."

Somehow you notice that.

But when I cut my bangs you didn't notice for months.

I'm finally starting to feel comfortable in my own skin

As I decorate it in a way you never would have allowed.

"My friends all like it."

"Your friends all call you 'Alice,' too."

You never got over the fact that I don't like the name you gave me.

God forbid I ever tell you the truth about that.

You almost died last year.

I sat vigil by your bedside for a week.

Cassie and I both fighting with you

Every step of the way to please just eat something.

When you finally let us take you to the hospital,

Cassie credited it as something she did.

I never told her what I said to you.

I don't think you even remember.

"If you're trying to kill yourself, there are faster ways."

Somehow that got through to you when nothing else did.

I helped them get you into the ambulance.

You were in the hospital for a month that time.

I remember you crying when we visited you

And how happy you were when you got to come home.

That was only the beginning, though.

One hospital visit after another followed.

You don't remember the words you said,

But I can't forget the way you spoke to me.

You were there for every moment that my little brother wanted you,

Yet never around when I needed you.

I was "mommy's little angel",

Leaving me to fend for myself when I was just a child.

I wonder if that makes me

Just another thing you forgot.

I WAS JUST A CHILD

by Alice Eads

You taught me how to doubt myself
And see lies in every sentence.
You taught me how to hate myself
And pinch away the excess.

I was just a child.

There're things that a parent should be:
A protector guarding from harm,
A teacher of right and wrong,
A guide on handling big emotions.

I was just a child.

You never gave me any of that.
You left me stranded to the wolves,
Made me guess the correct way to think,
Made me doubt the way to love.

I was just a child.

Some people talk about their childhoods:
The long drives with family,
The dinners around the table,
The personal growth that they went through.

I was just a child.

When I look back all I see is a poor lost duckling
Searching for someone to follow,
Imprinting on the first bit of love,
Giving everything to the predators.

I was just a child.

You tell a different tale than mine,
Remembering it differently,
Convincing me I don't know the truth.
After all ...

I was only a child.

LIFE IN WORDS

by Alice Eads

We painted the room blue
In the vain hope that it would remind me of the sky,
But my mind isn't always that cheery.
The ceiling is covered in stars,
Each one placed with care.
They lit up the dark room when I couldn't be bothered to turn on the lamp.
I used to write on the walls in chalk,
Messages to myself mostly.
You were never supposed to see them.
Four walls covered in art and words,
A snapshot would show how empty it was,
But there was life in those pages,
More than anyone ever cared to know.

MELTING

by Kathryn Earl

The words you don't speak fracture and cut
The selfishness and one-sided arguments weary
Sitting on your side of your fence benefits no one but yourself

Living up to the expectations I think you need to make you feel proud escapes me now
Pleasing you is impossible, so why do I care
Why do I continue to cover my feelings with the soft blanket you have failed to provide

Choosing to let you go has brought the only comfort
Letting you go has brought the needed peace and comfort previously envied
Living life without you brings nurture and rapture

Do you ever wonder why
The child, the woman, the person you never knew
Enjoys the solitude you built around yourself and does not mourn the love you lost

MORNING LIGHT

by Julia Fellows

Bright stars that lit the night begin to fade
As the sun lifts her golden head above
Mountains lofty. Her journey by them stayed,
She pauses to shed her light on a white dove
Sleeping in a crack hidden from the night.
Looking up, the sun rises, climbing high,
Spreading her rays on the land. Larks take flight,
Soaring high, golden notes filling the sky.
Upon a deep blue pool, the bright light falls,
Turning the water silver, pink, and gold,
And to the gold wings of the finch that calls.
Her warm light banishing the dark night cold,
The sun smiles upon the green, fertile earth,
Where dwell all living beings from their birth.

THUNDERSTORM

by Julia Fellows

A quiet hush falls across the land,
As if all the world is holding its breath,
Waiting.
Not a leaf stirs in the forest,
Not a blade of grass wavers upon the plains.
Silence.
The air grows heavy, oppressive,
Brooding clouds gather upon the horizon,
Foreboding.
The wind dies. The world is frozen.
I watch the clouds scudding closer,
Waiting.
The first crash reaches my ears
Like drums in the heavens thundering their song,
Valiant.
Lightning flickers. The Heavenly ones are dancing,
Making ready to renew the world,
Joyous.
Then comes the rain. Now soft,
Now harder, drumming upon the ground.
Washing away all pain and care.
And when it all stops,
Peace.
Renewal.
The world shines bright and clean, washed by the rain of heaven.

WATERFALL

by Julia Fellows

Winter on the mountains;
The snow lies thick on the peaks.
Spring comes. Budding blossoms
Herald the warm southern wind.
The snow melts. It races
Swiftly down, leaping, plunging
Joyously down the slope,
Laughing, chattering as it
Gathers speed to go fall
Down the sheer face of a cliff
With a thunderous roar
Of mad, gleeful abandon.
Down, down, down it plunges,
The wind catching the water
And creating a fine mist
In which the sun finds rainbow
Shards of silver and pearl.
Beauty and strength incarnate.

BASEBALL GLOVE

by Julian Hernandez

A piece of leather sitting on a shelf.
Was once a child's best friend but now just a memory.
The stale and damp smell building in the garage.
The padding once used to protect a hand,
Now unable to protect from anything,
The material slowly rotting away.
The memories stored in the leather, fading along with it.
What it would do to get the sense of excitement again
and smell the scent of fresh grass,
Hear the sound of the bat,
but no, it still lies alone.
Rotting away with the lost memories of fun.

KING JAMES THICK

by Jon Inglett

She cusses like a sailor
When she dances in the bar
And orders a shot of whiskey
While the guitar plays its chords.

She talks to the bartender
About love, and God, and war.
She could be your lovely mother
Making jokes about life's gore.
She goes deep in conversations,
Lays it all along the line.

Her words are King James thick.
She scratches the surface fine.

He overhears her stories
At the other end of the bar.

He orders another round
And listens to the guitar.

He lost his wife to cancer
Two years ago this month.
She could be his new laughter

If she would listen once.

He shakes his glass of beer
To the cheers of her response
And lays it all along the line.

His words are King James thick.
He scratches the surface fine.

They sit together in unison
And cross their legs in style.

He orders another beer
As she laughs at his wry smile.

"You seem to like the music,"
She says with a happy glance.

“You’re the music that I hope for
Near a warm and sunny fence.”
“I once lost my will to live,”
He says in a sad, blank stare.
“And could use a little hope
That’s more than three inches thick.”
He reaches her with a voice that lingers
And lays it all along the line.
He scratches her surface fine,
But she reaches out her hand
To show the ring upon her finger.
He laughs out loud
At the wedding finger gesture,
But they still have this moment
Of two grown humans at the bar
Consuming drinks and whiskey
And hearing the flowing guitar.
They laugh together again;
They order another round;
They talk of their teenage children
And all the love they have not found.
He pays for her drinks
And wipes his mouth quite clean.
“I must be heading off.
I have work in the early morning.”
She shakes his hand quite heavily
Then whispers in his ear.
“We all find hope in this moment.
In these solemn and rowdy cheers.
Stay true to your open heart
And always remember the tears.”
He gives her a slick and deep hug,
Lays it all along the line.
Her words are King James thick.
He’ll remember them every time.

ACROSS THE RIVER

by Oliver Jackson

I once saw myself kneeling across a river.
We both stayed there for a second
As I gazed at the living reflection
Of the person who I will become.

After a moment, I jumped into the river.
Not me, but the reflection that smiled.
As I, me, rushed towards the riverbed,
I looked into that rushing water

And I saw myself, or rather my corpse,
Staring back at me
Through eyes that closed long ago
And eyes more open than they had ever been.

A moment later, I appeared,
Standing across the river.
Not who I am, but who I used to be
Long ago, before I drowned.

Suddenly, it all made sense.
This strange cycle that will never break
And it should never break.
I smiled at the gentle confusion of myself.

My legs began to move,
And I jumped into the river,
But this time I did not jump,
I began to fly.

THE OLD PLAYGROUND

by Oliver Jackson

I am dragged back to my childhood
Every time I cross the old playground.
The metal structures have rusted for years,
But the chipped paint holds memories
From children long since grown.
The new woodchips still give the same scraped knees
That the old chips gave to me so long ago.

It's strange how I remember this place,
So much pain is still held in my chest
Both from being forced to stay here
And from being forced to leave.
Do I wish I was a child again?
No, but I don't want to be grown either.

I feel as if we have aged together,
This old playground and I.
We are both a bit rusted and chipped,
Holding memories of people
Who didn't care for us as they should have.
Have we changed for better or for worse?
I don't know.

QUESTIONS

by **Oliver Jackson**

Do you always feel so tired?
Your eyes always drift,
And you never quite seem in focus.
I can tell that you haven't slept
In a very long time.

Do you always want to leave this place?
You never seem quite comfortable
In this place of other people.
I know it isn't full of good people,
But at least it's warm here.

Do you ever feel safe?
Your head keeps turning at every little noise,
And your leg hasn't stopped shaking.
They haven't been there for you
Like they should have.

Did they do that to you?
You have tear tracks on your face,
But you keep pretending they aren't there.
I remember that feeling, little one,
Like there are dragons nearby, waiting.

Will you ever be better?
You don't seem hopeful
For the next step to come.
I know it is hard right now,
But we will get there eventually.

THE HUSH

by Kaley Kriesel

I'm waiting for a poem
Or maybe it's a book
Or maybe it's a sentence
Just something that grows
Something beautiful
Something that makes a difference.

But right now it's quiet.
It has been for a while
I'm sick of this silence
And waiting here all night
For a golden word to come,
My quotable moment.

Maybe I've been waiting
In the wrong place
Or maybe this hush
Is just a test of patience
Or maybe I'm actually
Not meant to be a writer.

Maybe this hush is a message
Maybe this hush is a lie
Maybe this hush is my stillness
If I move will the world come alive?
Should I just start speaking
And wait for it to come?

But the dawn rises slowly
The flower blossoms silently
A child grows gradually
Maybe if I stay here and watch
All of this will be worth
The hush.

AGING THROUGH THE LENS OF NATURE

by Lindsey LaFon

When I was young, I found garter snakes rustling through the dry summer grass
The bees were alive and ever buzzing as they gathered pollen from the honeysuckles,
every day filled with life and discovery
I picked all of them up with curiosity and fearless wonder, the creatures of the earth my
very first friends
Never bit or stung, I grew up in synchrony with the network of tiny beings who lived in
my backyard
The ecosystems were in a state of abundant life
I was still young

Construction was visible and unavoidable my whole life, the expansion of cities rapidly
developed
I was thirteen when my parents moved from the city to the country
The earth was surprisingly lush and vibrant; I witnessed the notes of green, orange,
white, and grey throughout her rotation of seasons
The outdoors were still wild, untouched by human machinery
I was a little older

The cities continued their slow creep into the countryside
Slowly green grass was filled with notes of litter, we humans didn't listen to the sound
of our mother
Plastic used to a point that the ecosystems could never maintain, her energy was
drained
I am now an adult

I stopped seeing the garter snakes a long time ago, and the bees are in fewer numbers;
the lands are now sprayed, so they all passed away
My hands are now empty; life feels scarce and my heart beats slower
Our growth was too rapid, without foresight of the price
The ecosystems gasp for air and I can hear them, her surface tainted by the toxic touch
of humanity
I don't look forward to the future, as our planet is already depleted
The color of all things, gray, and dirty, and rotting

MY SOUL'S DESIRE

by Lindsey LaFon

Going back to a couple of years ago
When the Indian Ocean was beneath my feet
There was an overwhelming blue and lull
I could almost hear the oceans heartbeat
I lowered my ears beneath the surface, I felt her pull
My own heartstrings were suddenly at peace
Here among both beasts and beauty,
I found that at last, I could finally release
Among the corals and sunlit waves
The silence of it all, meditative in the best of ways
My lips and hair were filled with salt,
And to this day I pray
I never forget what it felt like that day
Should I return? Only the future can say

DUALITY

by Andrea Lakins

How do I paint myself with colors I do not yet have?
I am not yet an outline of what I wish to become.
From the time I arrived, cried, and gasped for air, I knew that I
would never be a final product
I am seasonal, changing, dying, and budding
I am all storms and calm weather
I am a sponge dripping with knowledge, trying to soak up more
I want to be all things and nothing
I want to live painfully and die peacefully just to experience it all
I have learned to hate myself so that I can learn to love myself
I have bled by my own hand just to feel my infliction
I will be right just to be proven wrong
I am the coldest night in winter and summer's hottest day
I am both the darkness at the bottom of the ocean and the light in the sky
I am the gentle tide and the crashing waves
I will hold you tightly, and I will let you fall
Honest, I am, but also, I am not
My feelings are so deep there is no end and so shallow there is no depth
I am grateful for what I have, but, like a needle in a vein, I want more
I enjoy being lonely but wish to be loved
I want to be heard while staying silent
I want to be seen while staying hidden
I am vulnerable but never naked
I am closed but never shut
I may never be definite, but I will always be something

MY CONNECTION TO NATURE

by **Andrea Lakins**

My connection to nature, a special gift
While it brings great joy, it brings sadness too
Like the winds, my feelings can be quite swift
and like the sky, I am often blue

I shimmer with joy when the sunlight hits
When I feel the earth underneath my feet
And get to observe the way the river splits
And stand where the shore and water meet

I am filled with sadness when the ice caps melt
When I see the forests burn at a rapid rate
when an animal is killed for its pelt
And when I know the saplings' fate

While my connection to nature is greatly treasured
The sadness it brings cannot be measured

ROAD TRIPPIN'

by Savannah Lane

I sit in the passenger seat while he sits next to me, driving.
His right hand holds mine while his left one brings us home.
I can't help thinking on days like these,
"The military may hold his free will, but I hold his hand,
And that is enough for now."
I get him for two weeks every six months.
Out of our three years together, we've only been together for three months,
But it is enough for now.
He drove all night, and we still had 13 hours to go.
"You need to sleep," I look over and tell him.
"I haven't driven yet, and even I am exhausted."
Driving through Tennessee, we watch the sunrise over the hills.
"Climb in the back and set up the seats," he tells me.
Quickly, I climb into the backseat.
Elation flows through me as I now know our tired eyes can rest.
I push the back of the seats as far down as they go.
I shove our luggage and clothes into every empty crevice,
And turn his back seat into a makeshift bed for us.
He pulls into a rest stop.
He climbs back with me, which is no easy fit for a man over six foot.
With the car off and the heat no longer blowing, a chill starts to roll through the car.
Under a blanket with him wrapped around me, I no longer worry
I pull down my defenses.
Sleep comes easier here in the back seat,
Because at home, there's no him surrounding me.

A NEW ADVENTURE

by Gwynivere Langer

She awakes bright-eyed and bushy-tailed,
Eager to relish in what the day has to offer.

The warmth of the sun kisses her cheeks
As she cracks open the door to the outside world.

She takes in a big, long breath of fresh air
And opens her heart to the world.

All the sights, sounds, and tastes,
Every little detail is a new discovery for her.

She appreciates the simple things,
Like the singing of a cardinal or the vividness of its red wings.

To us, this is just a normal morning.
To her, this is the start of a new adventure.

ODE TO CAIN'S BALLROOM

by Gwynivere Langer

How many memories have been shared in this place?
History has been made here for 100 years.
Once known as the "Home of Bob Wills,"
Now this is a world-renowned music venue.
The red neon sign reflects off the black pavement road as I wait in line outside.
Anticipation and excitement fill the air around me.
My ticket is punched, then I am greeted by the country legends who once performed here.
The crowd swells, ready to have the experience of a lifetime.
The lights fade out, and the beat of the drums reverberates through my body.
The music flows through the crowd, connecting us.
The floor bounces like it once did for western swing dancers.
I am reminded of the millions of memories that have been shared here.
As I dance to the music,
I am connected to the history of this place
And the people who danced and sang here before me.

A TRIP TO THE STORE

by Julie Mueller

Father's trips to the store for bread
were food for conversation
almost from the moment he'd left.
Predictions began about the final outcome:
Beer, three hours, jovial
Jack Daniels, four, stay out of his way
And vodka, six, make sure to lock your door.
And don't forget
To forget expecting mom to help.
The desire for intervention was as heady
as the alcohol fumes on my father's
hardened breath
and just as dangerous.
But that day,
that day, we thought the end had come
with the news that would bend our mother's prized Gingher scissors
to cut a different pattern than the same old one we'd been living
with our entire lives.
He'd left for bread — that's right, the bar — six hours ago
now seven, then eight.
Worry settled over our game
Unpredictable unpredictability was something different
outcome uncertain
no odds
no way to stay safe and nowhere to hide
So mother sent us to the store — yes,
I mean the bar, but she said "the store" to our faces.
Music and sadness spilled across the room.
I didn't know then about Langston Hughes' and his raisin in the sun,
But if I had, I could have told him this
was where he would find his dreams deferred

My father had a drink in one hand and a dream
deferred then made flesh in the other.
This dream was young
probably didn't have any children
and maybe enjoyed a good smack on the backside.
"Yes, my girlfriend," he shouted, "and get the fuck out."
("Vodka," we agreed beneath our breaths, shallow with fear.)
The swinging door swung us quickly home both
a bit nauseous and, truth be told, a bit excited.
We laid the story out for our mother like a Vogue pattern,
tissue paper fine and pinned to a stiff cloth that would stand up to the trauma
six children and little money could manufacture.
Her scissors poised to cut,
she stood
and she stood.
Later, we laid in bed testing out rhymes
beneath the extra blankets we'd stolen from our mother's bedroom closet:
"Daddy, Daddy, you're a drunk;
Daddy, Daddy, pack your trunk!"
That night our mother didn't call us down for a spanking
because we'd been laughing past our bedtime.
The morning brought a chastening winter sun and our father,
bread in hand
and breath as heavy as broad wale corduroy in summer.
My mother put her scissors away for the day.
We packed the blankets back into her closet.
And father soon left for the store

SITTING IN A SMALL-TOWN BAR

by Erin Orozco

I sit at this tabletop bar with a neon moon shining on a blue moon with a side of orange. The bubbles sit at the top; I can hear them slightly crack and pop as I look around me. There are people dancing around, drinks in hand, with a mix of sweat and booze. People are chatting about their normal lives with strangers like they are old friends. The small-town band play their music, guitars and drums beating that ring in my ears. I watch people sway on the dance floor, two-stepping to the beat with their partners. Skirts flowing while boots are stomping away to the beat of the music. Groups of people linger around me waiting on another round; they chat loudly in my ears. The bartender clanks and clacks as she fools with glass and ice, and she makes drinks. Other groups of people linger at the end of the bar waiting on their beverages to be made. I look around at all these individuals wondering about their lives. But for tonight all of that is pushed to the side, and it's their time to let loose from the week. For the first time this week, a lot of these people are smiling instead of frowning. People use this place to escape, recuperate from the week, and take time to enjoy themselves. Small town dreams in a small-town bar, that's all I have tonight.

MISSION

by Daniel Ozbirn

Food is what we have been praying for, killing for
books are what they give us, speaks of Jesus
water is what we have been praying for, dying for
books are what they give us, speaks of Jesus
security is what we have been praying for, crying for
books are what they give us, speaks of Jesus
He seems incredible, where is he?
I see famine, I see suffrage
I see no Jesus
but I speak to him anyway
I was taught to pray
I hear pain, I hear anger
I hear no Jesus
but I speak to him anyway
I was taught to pray
but I can't fathom why
this God they try
to convince me is love
would them ride away
on plush and leather seats
while we starve and pray
they speak of a savior
but their God is paper

DIVORCE

by Helen Payne

Divorce, been through three
It has still left scars with me
Fighting, drinking, and leaving
Slamming doors and tears falling
People saying, "You just have to keep believing"
She wants him out but keeps stalling
Same thing over and over again
Dreaming of what could have been
I sit in my room listening to the screams and broken dreams
Divorce ruined my happy picture
Empty bottles of liquor
He finally left, but he still comes back
Constantly feeling like we are under attack
Trying to move on
Feeling like the way we are heading is wrong
Living life scared and fear for what might be
Scared for what I might see
Lying in bed, hearing the yelling
Many lonely nights left crying myself to sleep
Hearing my dad weep
Stories I should never be telling
Late nights praying
Hoping things are changing
Teaching me that fighting leads to divorce and walking out
All you can do is blame it on the pain
When all you want to do is shout
Ignore it all and box it away
One place, one family is my will
That will never be ...

THE ROAD

by Jude Privett

Asphalt in my teeth
You're composed in the driver's seat
We've been down this road before
Seat belt holding my tongue
The songs on the radio go unsung

It wasn't always like this
We used to sing
And you didn't see through me
you weren't so angry
And we'd fly down the road
Smiles plastered on our face
Drunk on each other's voices
Our own pocket of reality

Now you won't talk to me
I'm haunting you
You're mourning me
I didn't turn out
How you wanted me to be

Your dreams for me lie in the trunk
All tied up and bound
They gave you a reason to hold on
They gave me a reason to come undone
Shovels in the backseat ready to splinter
our hands

ESCAPE

by Rachel Reagan

Darkness covers him like a thick blanket,
though the chills still reach his bones
As he hurries down the concrete avenue
in search of a familiar face.

Passing souls in the night, close enough
to reach out and touch,
yet farther apart than ships lost at sea.

Rounding the corner, the alleyway feels more like an abyss.
The depravity of his needs pulls him in,
though his heart thumps though his throat.

As he approaches another,
exchanging no words, eyes pierce the night.
Terrifying, like rigid blades threatening
his very existence.

Relinquishing his last dollar, he is slipped
the escape so desperately craved.
He stumbles into solitude,
the weight of his purchase heavy in his breast pocket.

Finally able to feel some relief
from the pressures of a life
he was thrown into without choice,

In this dark damp corner of a lonely world
He is lifted higher than he has ever been.
But like Icarus flying too close to the sun,
some things take more than they give.

There his body lies still on the concrete,
not to be found until the garbage man
comes to collect the morning rounds
Long after his soul has departed
Into the black, open, starless sky.

DYSTHYMIA

by Dharma Reid

Your stale-water-scented clothes

The déjà vu of unknown experience.

Carpet stained with cigarette burns
and the past tenants' blood
when they got into a fist fight
over another broken window.

Charm bracelets worn like
an oath to the generation
of hollow emotions
and your mother's old sweater.

"I'll be gone in the morning."
Your old late-night memories
whisper to you, aching to be retold.
the nostalgia bursting, gushing
out of your head like a water spout
of off-brand orange juice.

Or was it the fading nightmare that you were back home?

Always retired, nonetheless

FICKLE

by K'Cee Scoggins

I stood in silence with nothing left to say.
The ghost of forgiveness is fickle.
She visits but rarely stays.

THE STING OF DEATH

by Linda Smith

The sting of death, like venom from the adder, Injects the heart of those left behind.
You hold their hand, clinging to what still remains, But know it is fleeting and soon will be gone.
Each labored breath, slowing, declining,
In rhythm like a metronome.
So little time ...
Memories cherished from love everlasting,
Forever in my heart and mind,
Are all I have left now
To reflect on what mattered and the things that did not.
I walk slowly and softly,
One day at a time.
Until we meet again my love.
For now, I must say good-bye.

A TATTERED STUFFED RABBIT

by Audrey Staggs

A tattered stuffed rabbit sits staring
One eye shining in the light, the other in my childhood bedroom 10 years ago
Rolled behind a dresser and forgotten.
Its fur is tinged with the dirt of adolescence
Its stuffing, some poking out, tangled with old memories.
Skinny and tired, you'd think it was starving
But rather, it is full of dreams
And love, and hope, and wonder
And all the good things little girls squeeze into their tattered stuffed rabbits.

SLEEP PARALYSIS

by Kendra Summers

Lying still in the pitch-black room
Body paralyzed, only the eyes can move
Panicking wishing this would end.
Wishing this familiar feeling would forever be gone.
Black figures surround me, whispering things I cannot translate
Anxiously waiting for them to go back into the darkness.
Not a sound made, just tears creeping down my face
Dark circles surrounding my eyes. Redness in my face.
I pray to sleep peacefully in the bed I once used to enjoy

DECEMBER

by Emerson Taylor

You sit on a bench in December. It's cold, and the winter air makes your joints ache. He sits beside you. You can feel his thigh pressed against yours. *God, he's so warm.*

As you look at the forest green gloves covering his hands, some part of you wishes they weren't there so you could see how the cold makes his knuckles pink.

What would it be like if you could lace your fingers through his? Would he hold tight and share his warmth with a smile? No, of course not. It would be wrong. *Boys don't think of boys like that.* You crush those thoughts down and kick them under the rug.

His leg bounces against yours, and you realize he's been speaking to you when he stops talking. Frantically, you try to catch up with the sentence, fumbling to process the words, but it's too late. You've been caught.

You need to explain yourself. Say something. *Say something!* But you can't because his eyes are the same color as his mitten, and you want to tell him that he's beautiful. The silence stretches on. You stare at him. He stares at you.

It was only a few seconds, but you could swear this was an eternity. Visions flicker through your mind. News stories you'd heard a million times of people just like you being killed in a 'gay panic.' You can imagine it. You, as a statistic. You can't. You mustn't.

He's saying your name, and his voice is so, *so soft.*

You wonder if he thinks you'll break if he speaks louder. You aren't sure, yourself. Your pulse is thundering in your ears. You can't hear him anymore, but you can see him and he's leaning closer. The green of his eyes swallows you up like an emerald sea, and his lips are as soft as his voice.

You are sitting on a bench in December. The cold still makes your joints hurt, but you have never been so warm.

PREDATORY LAMB

by Emerson Taylor

The lamb was a tender thing; young, frail, and knobby-kneed.

He lacked knowledge of the world, facing it with bright-eyed wonder.

But the world was not kind to the young; bitter, cold, and unforgiving of ignorance.

It placed a wolf in the lamb's pasture, and the wolf was a hungry beast.

Not knowing the danger, the lamb approached him, a perfect feast ripe for picking.

The wolf danced for the lamb, singing songs of the moon and the forest,

leading the youngling far away from the safety of his pasture and herd.

Outside the pasture, the wolf changed its tune; sharp teeth, snarls, and claws. The lamb fled from certain death as fast as his knobby knees would go, tearing up great clods of earth with his sharp little hooves. The wolf followed hot on his wooly tail, snapping its jaws; a vicious lesson from the world, cruel and unfair.

But the lamb is not ready to be eaten.

He leaps and bounds until he finally squeezes somewhere that the foul wolf cannot follow.

It tries and tries, paws scrabbling, wedging itself deeper until trapped, he finds he has become the prey.

With his sharp hooves, the lamb rears and kicks, fighting back until the wolf moves no more, unable to hurt him.

The lamb quivers, and this victory is one left uncelebrated; full of fear, shock, and the loss of innocence.

When the lamb recovers, it finds itself draped in the skin of the wolf, marked as a survivor for the lesson hard learned.

And when he returns to his pasture, a sheep in wolf's clothing, youth lost, eyes dull and empty, the sheep ask why he killed the wolf.

THE RIDE

by Eric Thomas

I've been riding this road
That hasn't yet ended
No matter my prayers.
I can't much remember
The ride beforehand.

Was I going somewhere
Or just coming back?
I guess it doesn't matter;
I'm on this road now
And cannot turn back.
It's been nighttime for days.
Maybe weeks? Maybe months?
The gas is on F,
I no longer need food,
and no longer need water.

What's outside of the car
Is why I won't stop
And now detest light.
The creatures that spark
Sporadically give chase
With one step behind
And the eyes of people
I knew but forgot.
With teeth made of fingers
And nails like addiction
Shaped into claws.

As they approach,
My eyes start to blister,
Like handfuls of needles
Were placed in each eye.
My vision is fading
With every encounter.
Another chase surely
Will end this futile race.
And they'll tear me apart.
I don't want to die
But can never live.
I've oftentimes wondered
If that's the point.

I DON'T HAVE THE TIME

by Cassidy Trail

i'm rushing out the door a crucial thirteen minutes late
for five years, the alarm woke my dog, and my dog woke me
my middleman died two weeks ago, and my brain still hasn't adjusted
i want to stay in bed; i miss her, mourn her, dream of saving her
but i hurry through traffic because i don't have time to think about that

i want to smoke in my car in the hospital parking lot a few minutes longer
simmering in my anger at the summer fling who fled a month early to avoid my grief
and take too long prepping for this morning's new admit
thinking about calling my estranged best friend to spill the tea
but i head inside and finish up the prep because i don't have time to think about that

at dinner with my parents, i feel like i am unable to make conversation
— just like when my mind stalled as i was assisting with wound care rounds
because my heart was breaking for the grieving family next door —
the only words in my mouth are about the gore i saw in my unit today
but i do my best at small talk and forced laughter, because i don't have time to think about that

i should enjoy late night movies with my girls, but i leave before the film ends
i feel guilty for ditching to see my casual lover i've been killing my loneliness with for the last
three years
especially because i thought his lips on my neck would clear my mind
but as he maneuvers on top all i can picture is the man i actually love instead
i close my eyes and go through the motions because i don't have time to think about that

he earnestly asks me to stay the night, craving our half-hearted intimacy
but i politely decline because i can't pretend he's the one i want tonight
as i drive home on empty roads, i absentmindedly miss my exit
daydreaming of the day when the one i really love backtracks to a time when we were more
than just friends
but i turn around and get on the right path because i don't have time to think about that

i wake in the morning, not to an alarm but a call
i answer and hear "good morning, honey" from the voice i've needed
we talk for hours about everything and nothing, he has me all giggly and smitten
finally i don't think about the things that usually occupy my mind
because right now i don't have time to think about that

THE SHELTER

by Shelly Turner

There once was a boy in his own little world,
With dragons, demons, and hearts made of swords.
He ran to the tree seeking refuge, to be saved,
Only to discover there is nowhere unscathed.
So, from darkness to light his journey began,
Fighting dragons and demons and the hearts of man.
In the war of great peril was his mind asunder,
Until the pearl of love roared with thunder,
“Still your mind, boy, they can see it go around.
Steel your heart, boy, or they will tear it down.
Steal your time, boy, make it last forever.
For only in light will you find love,
The shelter.”

MY FATHER

by Sean Tuschmann

My protective father is always on the watch,
Akin the likes of an eagle, unwavering in his observance.
His primary goal is the safety of his loved ones,
Knowing all too well what horrors lie in the world.

A strong figure, the embodiment of bravery,
Like a lion, he will face danger head-on.
Yet within this tough persona lies another man,
One who is soft and cares for his family.

A man dedicated to protecting the public.
He works on the frontlines of the home front.
Selfless, his body and mind wane from service.
He is the first to respond to a cry for help.

On occasion, we come into conflict,
No different than any father and son.
At the end of the day, we are like friends,
We love each other and nothing will change that.

A ROMANTIC NIGHT

by Gisel Uribe

He is the fire that lights my candle, a flame that spread to the very ends of the world.
He is mine as I am his. Together, we are a whole.
A yellow and orange glow dances in his hazel eyes.
So, too, do we dance in grace.
This fire is eternal, no wind can blow us out.
Oh, to feel so warm in this cold, dull world.
His embrace leads me throughout the grass field.
With my twin flame guiding me, step by step.
One foot over the other, correlating every step with the movement of the fire.
Arms wrapped around me — love wrapped around my heart.
“Look up at the stars,” he says. “They are watching us dance.”
I am engulfed by the blazing red heat, becoming one with it.
With every step, we set the whole grass field aflame.
What a night of passion! What a night of love!
Our aroma fills the air with warm vanilla and cinnamon.
The seemingly endless spinning of the world slowly stops around us,
As our own spinning suddenly stops.
A beautiful night with beautiful, bright lights that surround us.

I FORGIVE, BUT I SHALL NOT FORGET

by Gisel Uribe

I forgive, but I shall not forget
All that has been said and done with lips and eyes.
I forgive you because the Lord forgave you with no regrets.

You poisoned me with trusting words
And stabbed me in the back with your twisted lies.
I forgive, but I shall not forget.

He who shall judge thy soul, my Lord,
Does not resent you for what you have done in surprise.
I forgive you because the Lord forgave you with no regrets.

I shall not forget because scars are never fully cured.
They stay on one's body to remind them of the dangers that arise.
I forgive, but I shall not forget.

Where the safeness you once brought was, now there is fear.
My love for you, my friend, reaches the tops of the very skies
I forgive you because the Lord forgave you with no regrets.

The Lord has taught me to love and forgive actions and word.
We are all sinners in a world where trust can be our demise
I forgive you because the Lord forgave you with no regrets.
I forgive, but I shall not forget.

CIANNA

by Luzwig Villagran

You lighten my world,
The way you're so precious when you blossom.
As you laugh gracefully,
You make my heart beat harder than a drum.
You lighten my world,
With your music taste and how no one can compare.
My favorite moments,
When you come home with songs to share.
You lighten my world,
With all of your wise and incredible advice,
So young, so brilliant.
No matter what you do, you'll always suffice.
You lighten my world,
When everything is scary and dark.
I'm excited to start my life with you,
I am ready for this journey we will embark.

APARTMENT 208

by Hali Wenglarz

A sticky day in the middle of May
with my guitar in hand,
with walls of white plaster and floors of wood
it seemed to embrace me more than two arms ever could.
Devoid of furniture, other than two beds,
yet full of the chords and lyrics
exiting my brain through my hands.
A bare apartment, where every sound echoed,
may have been empty but never felt more like home.
Who knew a place so empty could make me so whole?

SALLY MCGEE

by Madelyn Whittington

This is Sally McGee
She'll smile and say "I want you to know
about silly li'l me"

She loves to make jokes
Make others laugh
But she also tries to listen
And stand up on others' behalf

But she is a villain
She is a liar
And to never anger others
Is her villainous desire

Her heart isn't gone
Just misplaced
But the Sally most once knew
Present Sally can never face

Once shined so bright like the sun
Proud and happy to try and follow
But the person Sally is now is
Mostly just too hollow

Keep people a safe distance
For Sally might up and blow
It's safer this way
If you let her go

The voices scratch and gnaw
As if she is lost
"too much for them" and "too much for me"
"you are not worth the cost"

These voices ring, and they howl
As they claw and scratch her chest

But she will never admit
She'll only smile and say "I'm trying my best"

No right to feel this pain
No right to feel alone
No right to feel so hurt
No right to ache and groan

Sally is silly
Sally is wrong
Sally feels left alone
And she doesn't belong

But with each passing day
It will hurt less and less
Unsure if it's healthy
But will never focus on that stress

She doesn't know how to ask
She doesn't know the right way to cry
She will simply break down
And always want to say goodbye

Sally will heal
Sally does know
But the infected wounds
Never let her go

But don't feel sad
For li'l Miss McGee
Because while life comes with aches
She knows soon she'll be happy

She feels the pain
As full as she can
Because she understands that
Like or not, she is only human

SORTING

by Bertha Wise

I sort clothes for the washer
into piles of coloreds and whites
just as my mother taught me, early.

I've sorted clothes for the washer
all of my life into varied piles
just as my family needed.

I sorted through them
to remove bits of paper, tissues,
and forgotten rocks, coins, hopes.

I sort the basket's contents
ready to go to the washer
and I find your current favorite shirt — pink checked.

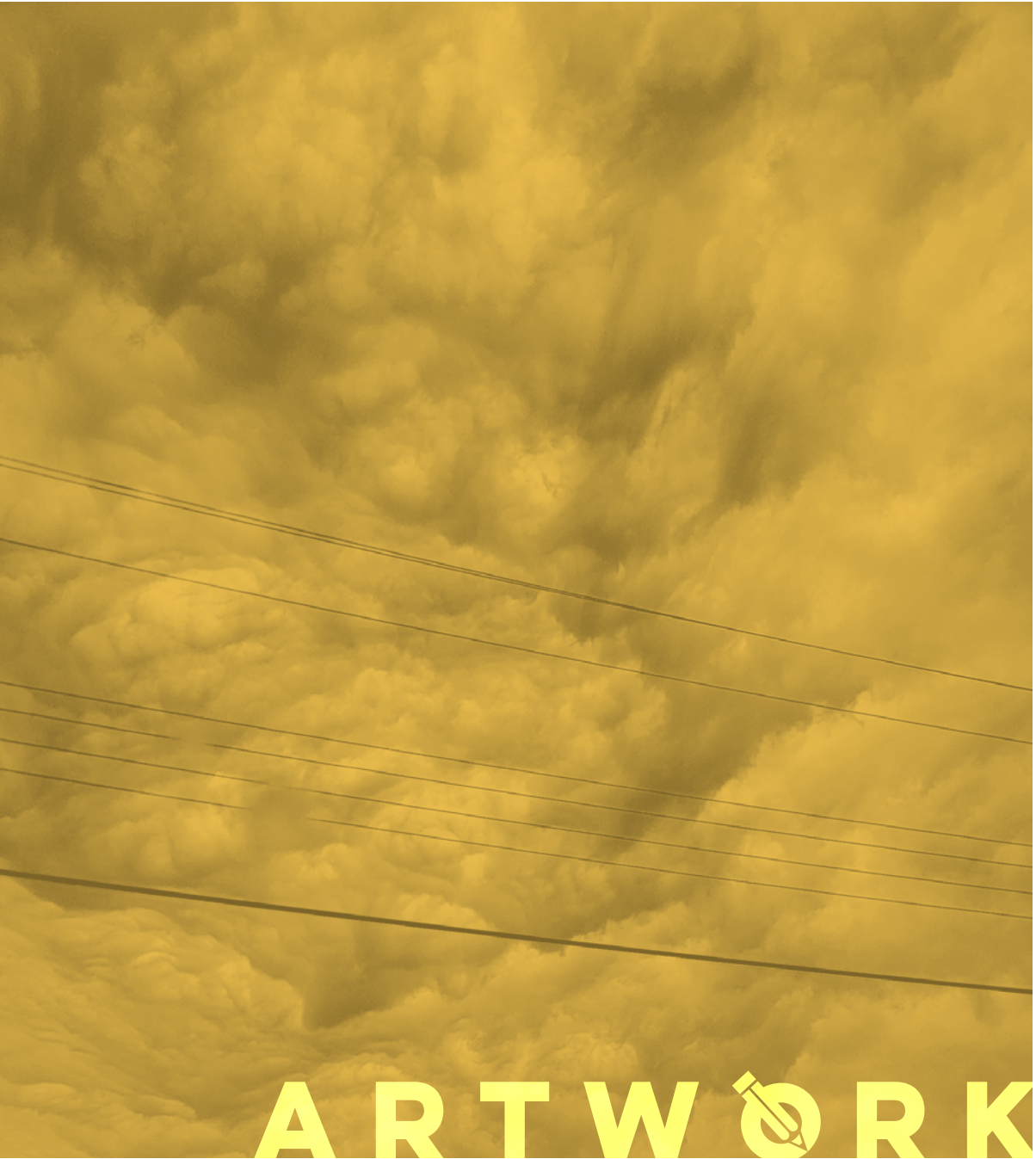
I sort it into the appropriate pile
but I almost hate to because
it holds the sweat and smell of you.

I must keep sorting through things
that remind me of you
into piles of memory.

AN ODE TO MY BEDROOM

by Molly Young

Once an office, turned baby's bedroom
Your uncolored surface finally met its doom
Painted purple, decorated in childish posters and things
You heard my laughter, my snoring, my one-person plays
You saw me grow, kept me warm and safe
Over the years, like me you've changed
Now painted a light brown and decorated slightly less
Your guts, my possessions, inside of you are still making a mess
I've poked countless holes in you with nails and tacks
So, after 19 years, I'd like to apologize for that
But thank you for keeping my secrets, my whole life intact
I have the best bedroom walls a person could ever have



ARTWORK



Kylie Anderson
COWGIRLS



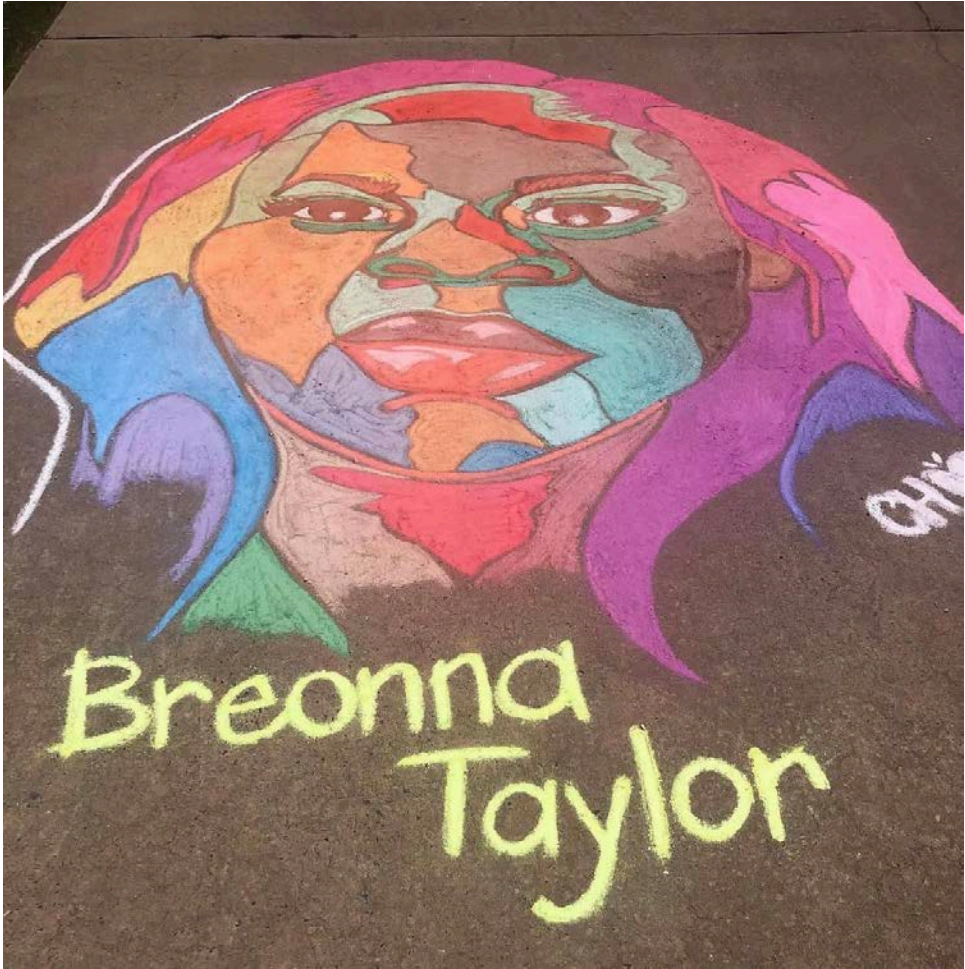
Nadja Bullis
CINDERELLA NIGHT



Nadja Bullis
FAIRYTALE TWIST



Mekale Chapple
BE LADYLIKE



Mekale Chapple
NEVER FORGET



Jordan Davis
BLISS



Mia DeBruyne
POINTING AT THE MOON

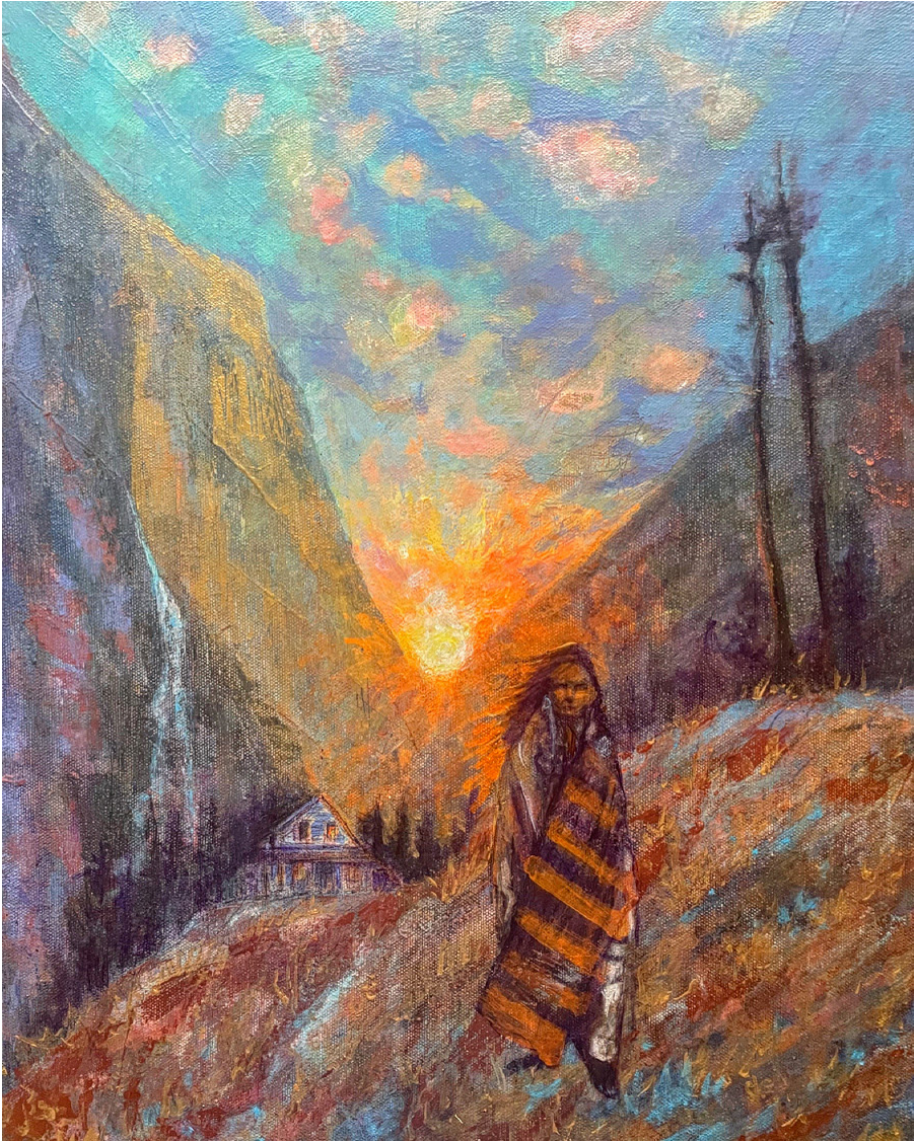


Brandon Graham

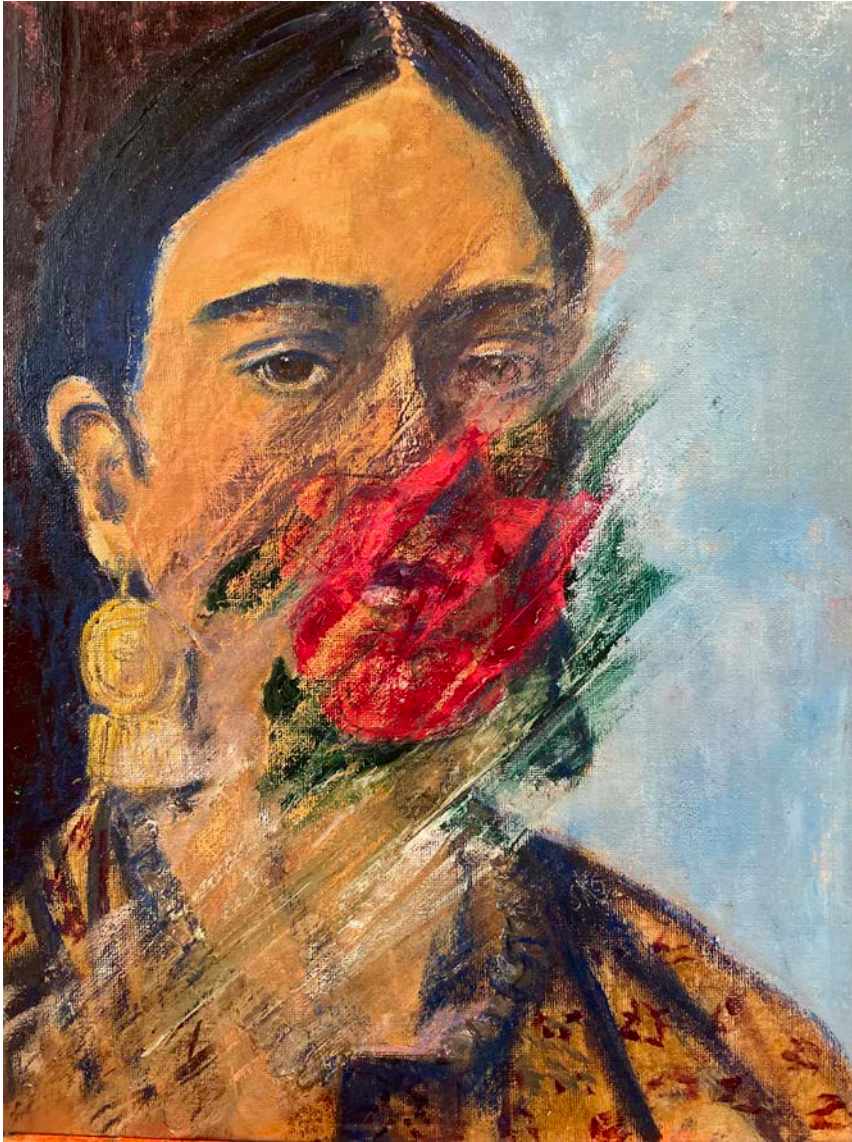
XP DREAMCORE SAFE HOUSE



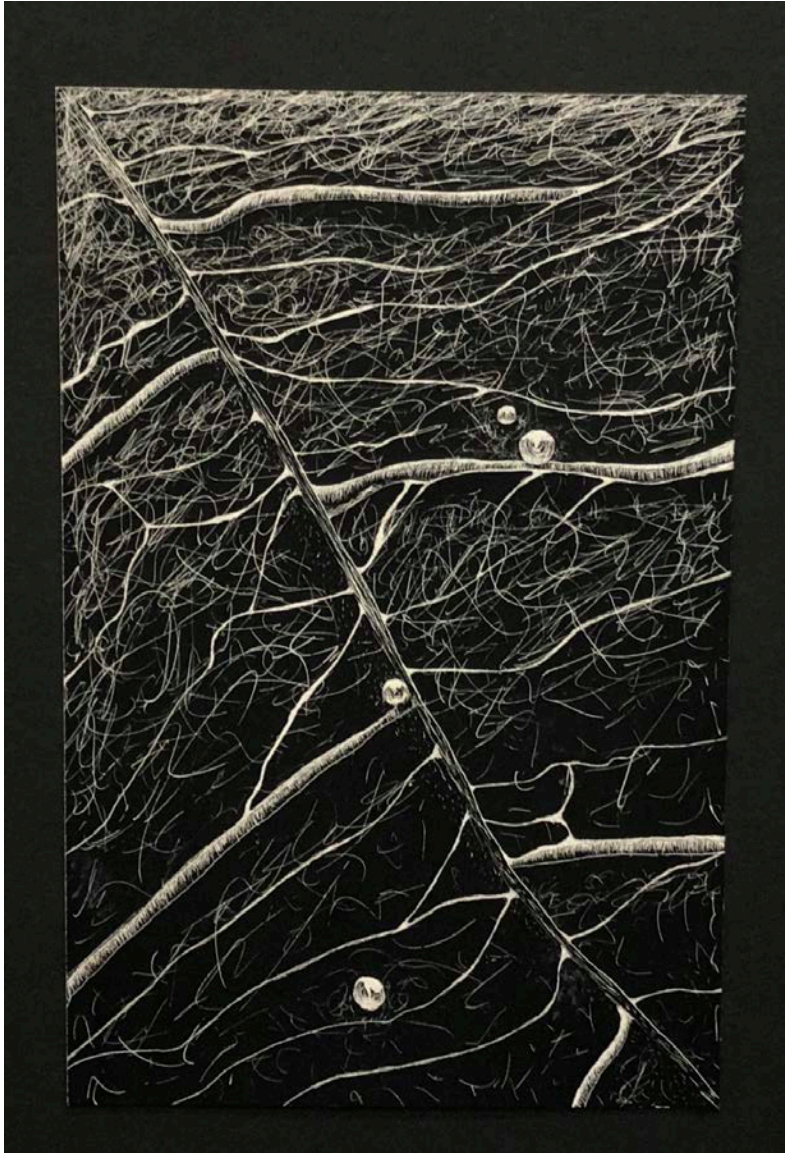
Sheree Greider
MAJESTY OF WIDE OPEN SPACES



Sheree Greider
NEW DAY DAWNS



Sheree Greider
YOUTH IS IN THE MIND



Emily Heagler

SCRATCHBOARD LEAF



Kay Owings
DARK DAYS



Kinsley Parks
METALHEAD FURRY



Kinsley Parks
WORK OF FICTION



Charlotte Parman-Flores
POST-MORTEM BLOOM



Laurel Payne

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD



Laurel Payne
UNJUST HOPE



Allison Tolly
EYE OF THE STORM



Allison Tolly
THE PUMPKIN BASH



Alejandra Vazquez
KATRINA



Alejandra Vazquez
MI VIDA DE COLORES





PHOTOGRAPHY

REFLECTIONS OF A TREE

Yoseph Ahmad



REMINISCENCE

Yoseph Ahmad



THE NIGHT MARKET

Yoseph Ahmad



NIGHTMARE DRIVE

Abel Barrios



R.E.M.
Abel Barrios



UNDER THE CITY

Trey Brite



MORNING BLOSSOMS: A REDBUD WELCOME

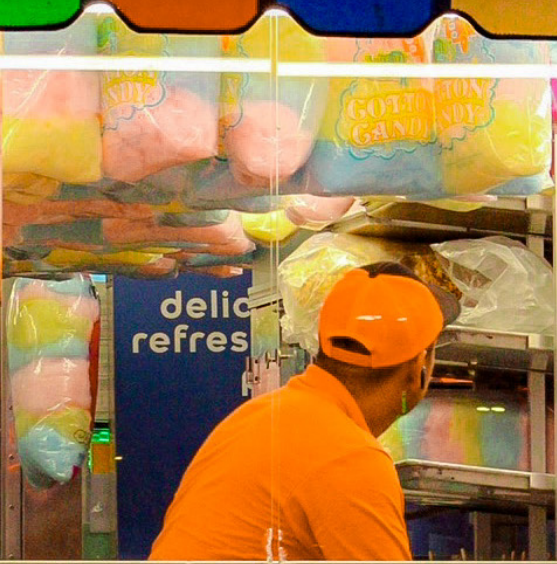
Travis Draud



OKC STATE FAIR

Paris Fuller

COTTON CANDY



delic
refres

ICE GOLD
BOTTLED
WATER

NETTERFIELD'S

SINCE 1926



LOVE IS NOT ALWAYS ROMANTIC

DARRIA HANKINS



MUNDANE IS BEAUTIFUL ENOUGH

DARRIA HANKINS



BESIDE THE STILL WATERS

Johnny Hill



PEACEFUL SERENITY

Johnny Hill



405 SUNSET

Chris Knight



FLOWER NIGHTS

Chris Knight



PETALS ARE PRETTIER IN PINK

Faith Nash



POLANISIA
Hiram Ophionhonren



REMAINING STILL

Hiram Ophionhonren



ARIZONA SUNSET

Michelle Pletcher



OKLAHOMA STORM

Michelle Pletcher



THIRSTY BUTTERFLY

Michelle Pletcher



BLESSED ARE THE RAINS IN AFRICA

Nicholas Rhineberger



EVIL LIVES NEXT DOOR

Nicholas Rhineberger



INTO MY EYES
Nicholas Rhineberger



HEFNER CLOUDS VER. I
Benjamin Rodriguez



AQUARIUM JELLYFISH

Fernando Rojas



PRAYING MANTIS

Fernando Rojas



LUCKY PEACHES

Katherine Roy



BRILLIANT BEE

Anisa Sewell



FALL REFLECTIONS

Distant Simpson



FLY
Distant Simpson



BUBBLES
William Smith



SPARKLES OF JOY

William Smith



COLD WATER ON A HOT DAY

Kiersten Stewart



GLACIAL GLASS
Kiersten Stewart



WICHITA'S GREEN DESERT

Kiersten Stewart



SUNFLOWER

Ted Streuli



DAM SUNSET

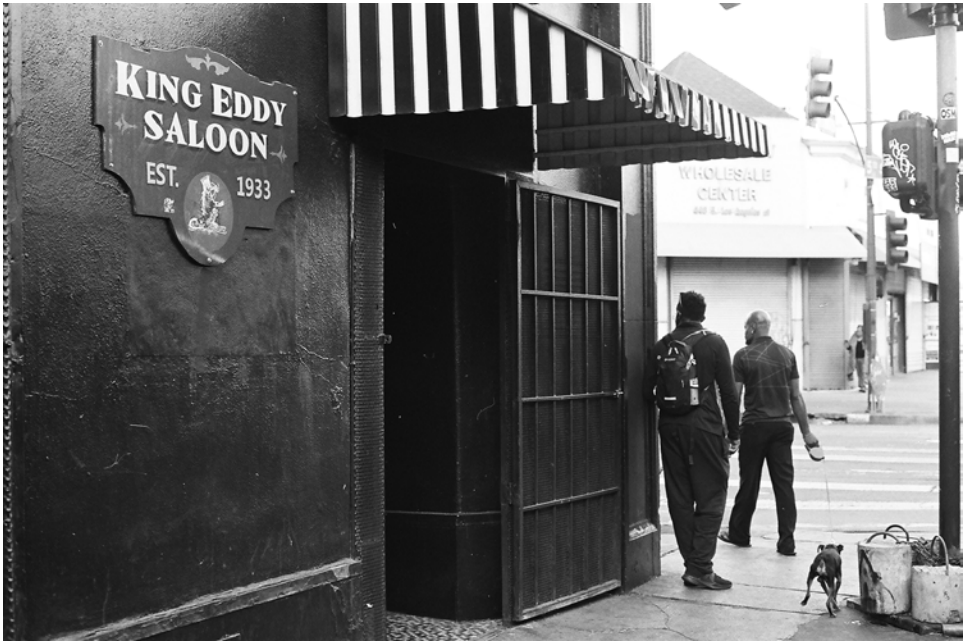
Alice Trejo



SKYLINE
Justin Van Nest



I NEVER WENT IN
Chandler Watson



CHICKASAW NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

Ariel Wigington



RUSTIC TENTS

Sara Zemp





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

-LEONARDO DA VINCI

**UNTIL
NEXT
TIME.**

ABSOLUTE



ABSOLUTE

FICTION

NONFICTION

POETRY

ARTWORK

PHOTOGRAPHY



OKLAHOMA CITY
COMMUNITY COLLEGE
ARTS, ENGLISH, AND HUMANITIES