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# ABSOLUTE 2025

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ENGLISH AND HUMANITIES

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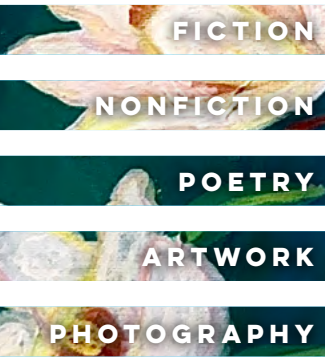
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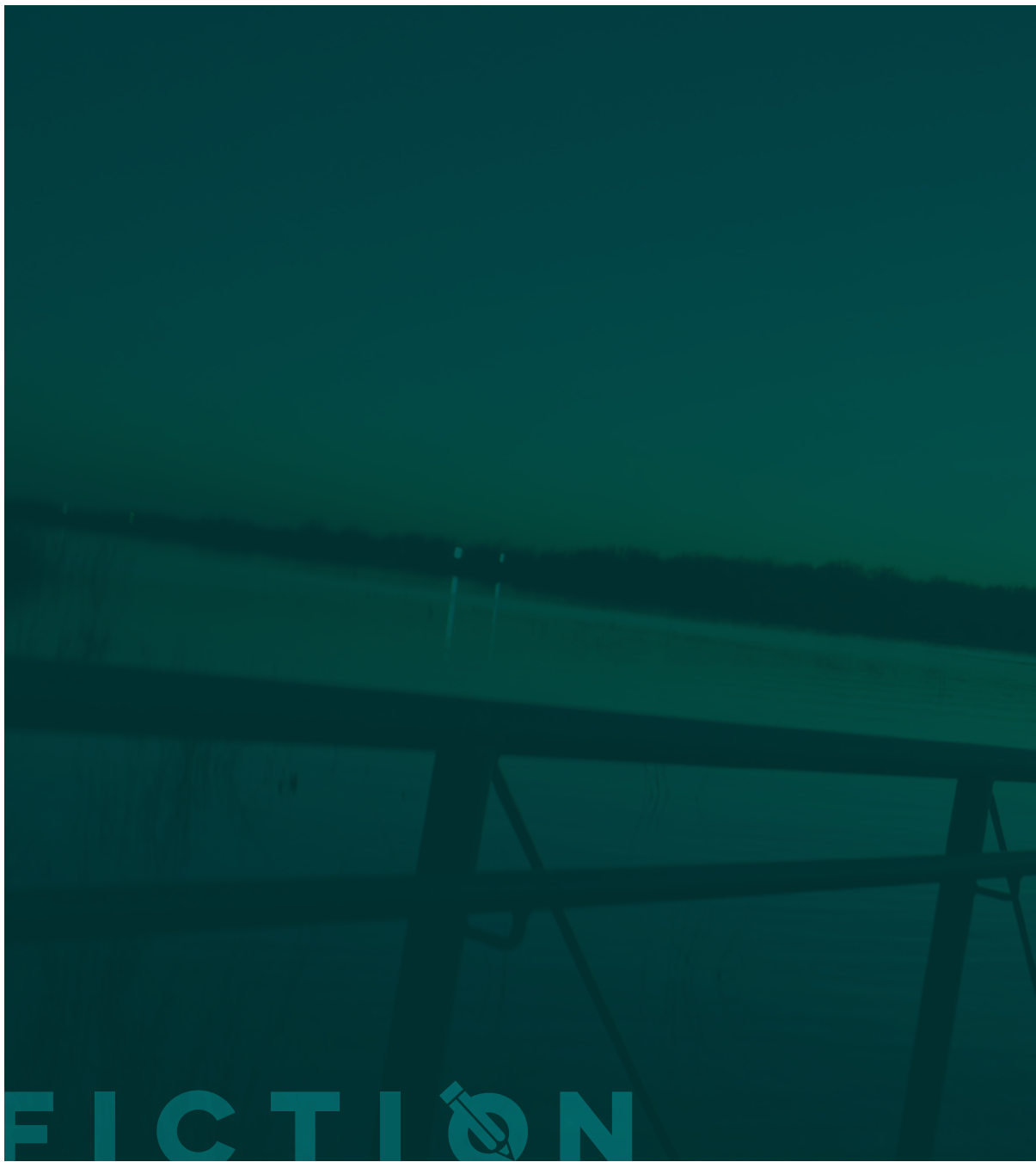
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FICTION



# THE GOLDEN FISH

by Joseph Fontanilla

A vibrant summer sun rose over the small village, bathing the forest in a golden light as the fisherman ambled past the thatch-roofed houses. Smiling to himself, the man reveled in the early morning warmth. He greeted his comrades cheerfully as they joined him on his walk to the pond. The small group strolled down the shaded trail, trading jokes and bait as they went.

Arriving at the pond, the man started to distribute orders with a quiet authority. Throughout the day, he treated the fishermen kindly. His veteran advice and camaraderie with the fishermen strengthened the unspoken bond that they had built. Over the decades, the man had grown from an apprentice to the master angler of the town. Many of the men around the pond remembered seeing his wrinkled face beaming down at them after they had made a catch. It was rumored he could read the clouds in the sky with his sharp sapphire gaze. At the first hint of a storm, he would always call the boats in and put the men's safety first. The village knew to prepare for rain if the fishermen came back early. Although the fishermen's lives were not extravagant, they were content to fish for their families.

As time flew by, dusk's amber glow settled on the rippling pond as the men drew in their lines for the night. The boats drew back to the docks laden with trout and bass. The man called everyone's name, and the ten fishermen started back on the trail through the shadowy oaks, lugging their poles and the fruits of their labor. Soon, the fishmonger's stall was well-stocked. Eight barrels had been filled to the brim instead of the usual five. The men

collected their payment and happily yelled their goodbyes, dispersing with amicable waves and salutes. The man smiled to himself once more and started his walk back home. The man contemplated his life as he walked, taking solace in the plain life as a fisherman that suited him. Getting into bed, he stretched his old bones and smiled to himself, a routine that had not been broken for forty years. Yet, just as the line snaps and the catch is lost, life changes.

The next day, the fisherman went through his daily routine. However, he was surprised when the fishmonger told him the men had gone ahead. Arriving at the pond, he saw the other fishermen gathered around something spectacular. He heard the oddest muttering, very different from the usual cheerful banter of the men. Their huddle shaded something from view, and the fisherman could see the men's bewilderment by the hunch of their backs and their confused gestures. An unfamiliar silence permeated the pond. He noticed that the boats had been docked early. The huddle suddenly seemed more sinister, like the men were hiding a secret amidst their crooked circle. The men's muttering had grown louder and disjointed, causing the fisherman's gaze to fly to the center. His boots sank deeper in the sandy beach as he broke into a run.

Pushing his way into the circle, the man was shocked at what he beheld. A peculiar fish no longer than a forearm wriggled and writhed amid their circle. Its gilded scales shimmered in the early light. Ruby-red eyes darted from one man to the next. Semi-translucent fins flapped and flailed as it tried to escape, dodging hands left and right. The fishermen were mesmerized by the sight of its golden scales.

For a moment, the man froze. He had never seen such a fish in all his years of experience. But as he tried to step forward to the center, he was stopped by a wall of hands. A hard glint of greed transformed the men's faces, reflecting between old friends and heralding the following discontent. All were caught on the lure of riches as the lowly fishermen competed for the catch. Soon, their desire escalated into strife as the others saw the bold move. More hands raised in warning or perhaps in protection of something they now valued above friendship. The old jokes and memories shared as brothers seemed forgotten. The other fishermen were foreign to the man as the circle devolved into a grabbing mob.

The fisherman's heart sank as he saw a man he had taught, Gordon, shoving his way toward the fish with a grim determination. The fisherman hesitated. He had seen Gordon's first catch as a boy of thirteen. He had watched that boy grow up into an honest, married man who was always ready to lend a hand to anybody in the village. But now, his friend's gaze was tinged with an evil that he didn't recognize. He shied back from the obvious malice, unsure what to do as the men started to fight in full force. As faces twisted into grimaces, the fisherman observed his friends bitterly. The situation had escalated to man versus man. All were competitors trying to claim the golden prize.

Although the fisherman decided to join in the fight, he had no desire to claim the fish. He had decided to stop the madness and restrain the men. The fisherman leapt into the fray, holding on to his straw hat while staggering into the center. Tasting blood, the fisherman steeled his resolve and continued onward towards Gordon. All the while, the golden fish had been watching while dodging frantically. A cunning beast, it waited for the climax to disguise its escape.

The noise of flesh connecting with flesh and cries of pain echoing through the air. Kicked up dust filled the air, particles wafting in the wind along with the smell of sweat and splintered cedar. Amidst the chaos, the golden fish desperately flailed, its movements slowing as the fight progressed. Just as Gordon seemed to be in reach of the prize, the fish and the man made their moves. The man tackled Gordon, finally subduing the brawl. Simultaneously, slipping between the men's fingers, the fish seemed to wave goodbye with a fin as it darted into the depths of the pond.

The fishermen froze, their shocked faces now focused on the man. Finally, the man's protests were heard. He berated the men severely for acting like animals over a mere fish, but his scorn was met with unrepentant eyes. The fisherman stood up on the dock, his hands now trembling. Gordon rose as well, seeming to emanate hate for the old master angler. In the man's mind, he noted with cynicism that he had been unable to stop any of the other men. In that moment when the golden fish escaped, he saw the men had changed. The unthinkable had happened. The bonds of brotherhood between the men had broken.

The village changed over the following days. The men no longer greeted one another cheerfully. The golden fish had awakened a newfound hunger. They fished with grim determination, morning to evening, some even forgoing sleep just to be the one to catch the coveted fish. No longer did the men gather in the mornings. Now, many tents could be seen encircling the pond.

The fisherman's sorrowful gaze could sense the changes even at the dock. The once-cozy cedar boards now were splintered from the brawl. A cold and alien atmosphere settled upon the pond, sharply contrasting the laughter and warmth that usually weaved through the men's conversations. Flicking his empty stare around the pond, he realized that the faces of his fellow fishermen no longer comforted him. They were strangers now, their hearts burning with a desire he didn't share. Gordon had become unrecognizable. The boy he still remembered had died, replaced by a grizzled, hunched man gripping his casted rod tightly, knuckles white and eyes locked on the water.

Weeks passed, but nobody caught the golden fish. Nobody even caught a glimpse of gold in the darting shadows of the water. The pond yielded less and less fish, and the silence turned oppressive. No one spoke of the golden fish anymore. No one spoke much at all.

As for the fisherman, he no longer woke up or went to bed with a smile. Plaintively, he would watch the pond and its captives as he fished, the men a sorry circle that had tuned out the world, content to watch for another glimpse of gold.

Nobody ever saw the golden fish again.

# I FOLLOWED HER INTO THE FOREST

by Thomas Scott Vazquez

I saw a girl enter the forest,  
And I followed.  
Naked, with welcoming hips,  
Legs crossing tightly,  
Skin deathly white  
And hair vacuum black.

As she walked, she reached for the green  
Surrounding us.  
As she caressed  
The body of Nature  
A fiery growth was sparked,  
Sealing the entrance behind.

She walked into a clearing.  
I called out  
And resumed to follow.  
When I could smell her floral skin,  
I reached out  
And spun her 'round.

A pronounced scar on her forehead,  
Her lips were supple,  
Her tummy slightly protruded,  
Showing signs of birth,  
And her eyes heralded the sleet and the rain.

She placed a little hand on my chest,  
Coming closer.  
I only opened my eyes  
When, as soon as we kissed,  
Her face cracked open.

The jagged crack on her face spread  
To her sex and opened.  
The girl fell away,  
And another emerged.

I crawled back, eyes on the thing.  
As it began to step towards me,  
It started to change  
Into people I knew yesterday  
Regardless of volume or mass.

She pounced in fury.  
I ran for the edge of the clearing.  
It bounded on me, shrieking  
Closer and closer.

I fell into amorphous black.  
I screamed, and the black screamed with me.  
I landed onto my arm  
And felt the bone break and bend back.  
The sensation of pain spread entirely.

Crying and grunting,  
I looked up, the light cast down.  
Standing up, misery searing  
Throughout the mapped course of my veins,  
I tried to find a solid foot,  
But I struggled concertedly.  
Only when I managed to stand,  
Did I see.

Bodies. What seemed to be thousands  
Stretching into the darkness.  
The ones upon which I stood

Appeared to be children.  
I peered into one of their eyes, solemnly twinkling.  
Blue eyes.  
My eyes.  
Frozen in multiple ages.  
They opened.

I shrieked  
And tried to run,  
But an inhuman grip  
Tripped me.  
The little hands grabbed at me,

They pulled me down.  
Their little hands  
Invaded my mouth.  
Choking,  
I watched the light die.



NONFICTION

# THE POWER OF KINDNESS

by **Adrianna Gonzales Rodriguez**

Kindness inspires people to be kinder to others and themselves. I have seen how acts of compassion and kindness, both grand and subtle, can heal the deepest of wounds that medicine cannot. For the past five years, I have been a witness to how, in the desensitized and detached world of healthcare, kindness and compassion are the foundation of hope and resilience for vulnerable patients. Working in nursing homes, mainly dementia units, I realized how lonely and depressed these patients could get. Not only would they forget why they could not go home, they could not remember why they were there in the first place. With many of my patients' relatives living in another state or simply not having time to visit them and being there for all their good and bad days, it became difficult to avoid developing an emotional attachment. Learning their routines, their dislikes, and their favorite things, I tried to always make at least one person's day better. Thanks to my experiences, both good and bad, I have learned how compassion and kindness enrich not only the lives of others but my own as well.

My first week at the nursing home was very difficult, trying to adjust to everyone's routines while watching everyone frustrated with themselves and each other. One of my patients had cancer that metastasized, meaning it had spread throughout his whole body; according to his doctors he had less than a year left to live. He did not have any family, at least not in Oklahoma, and was always in his room, in bed. He was not known to be very friendly to staff members or other residents at the home, never participating in any activities and complaining about everything. Regardless, knowing he would

rarely eat, I was determined to get him to eat. I would bring him extra snacks and drinks. Usually, he would not touch any of it, but then I brought him a grilled ham and cheese sandwich, and he completely devoured it. After I had found things he was willing to eat, I started to sit with him and tried to have conversations with him while he ate.

It took him a while, but he opened up to me. He started to tell me stories about his childhood, and his life before and after the military and would even give me advice. He used to tell me he would let me cheat off his “cheat sheet” of life lessons. His whole persona had changed from when I had first started working there. He was more friendly with people and willing to participate in our Friday bingo and movie nights. In the mornings he would sit in his doorway, with his coffee in hand, greeting everyone and jokingly teasing me. He even started calling me “Speedy Gonzalez, the fastest mouse in all of Mexico,” a hero mouse in a Looney Tunes cartoon. He became close to another veteran in the home and started coming into the dining room for meals to sit next to his new friend.

The last few days before his passing, we would talk and joke around, and he even told me he wanted to take me to his favorite fishing spot. At this point, he was more asleep than awake. The days before he passed, he started to hallucinate and became delirious to the point where he thought I was his daughter, who had passed years prior. This man went from being known as grumpy and rude, to being sweet, talkative, and grateful. As sad as I was for his passing, I was glad I was able to get him to open up with me and interact with others. He was able to see the good in the bad instead of dwelling on his inevitable future like he was when I met him. As bad as someone's situation can be, having someone to show them a little kindness makes all the difference in the world.

I remember the day he passed. My mom picked me up after my shift; I got in the car and immediately started crying. It was not the first death in my life, but it was the first I had experienced firsthand, the first person I did postmortem care with, first body bag, and first time seeing a funeral home stretcher. Although there was not anything I could have done to help him medically, I wanted to become a nurse so I could help people who still need it. I relearn this lesson every day I clock in and every time I remember the people I have cared for in the past.

Kindness can change anyone and will change you in the process. Regardless of how long, stressful, and chaotic a shift can be, if I can make anyone's life a little better than it was before they met me, I will be happy. Considering how my patients feel, it makes it easier for me to be extra patient and kind because nobody wants to depend on others to do what you have done your whole life — nobody wants to lose control. If it were my family, I would want them treated with respect, patience, and kindness everyone deserves. We meet people every day, from all walks of life and you never know what they are going through every day or went through in the past to make them the person they are today.

# TRAUMA AND MENTAL ILLNESS

by Misty Munson

## 988 SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE

Call. Text. Chat. (988lifeline.org)

*If you or someone you love is struggling or in crisis, dial 988 for 24/7, free and confidential support.*

Through the years I have experienced so much trauma and loss. The day I finally got the courage to seek help, I was sitting in my car in front of the doctor's office. My anxiety was a whirlwind as I thought about talking to a stranger about my past. I started reflecting on a time when I watched my mother struggling. She would have days where she would seem incredibly happy, and others where she was so unbearably sad she couldn't get out of bed. She would carry on conversations with no one. Sometimes they would laugh. Sometimes they would cry. Sometimes they got into shouting matches. Laundry would pile up. Dirty dishes stacked so high they looked like mountains covering the counter tops. The trash would spill like magma. Reflecting on my mother's mental illness helped me to realize I needed to face the facts that I had issues as well.

My sisters and I came home from school one day; my mom was crying. I could hear her muttering to herself saying, "No." Seeing her like that made me and my sisters a little uneasy. My oldest sister Brandi took us to our bedroom. She knelt and said, "Everything is going to be OK," and the evening turned to night. When the sun exorcised the moon, our mom was frantically cleaning the house. My mom would be gone for long periods of time. What I know now is that she was an inpatient in a mental hospital. Luckily for us we had amazing grandparents. From time to time, we would go stay with them when mom was away. One evening I overheard them talking about her. My grandmother said, "The doctor called." She told my grandpa that my mom was bipolar and was diagnosed with schizophrenia as well.

My heart sank to my stomach. I was scared and didn't understand what it meant. Then my mind took me again to a time when I was around five years old. She was in one of her episodes. She was what I know now, hearing voices that were telling her my sisters and I had demons inside us. She was yelling, crying and talking to herself. Sobbing, she went into the kitchen and grabbed a butcher's knife. She began to chase us screaming all around the house. Terrified, we ran outside and across the street to a neighbor's house. We frantically banged on the front door. John and his wife, Sara, answered the door; crying, we told them what was going on. He took us inside, and Sara sat us on the couch, trying to calm us as John called 911.

Years later, after losing twins after a 22-week pregnancy, I remembered something about her, more so, I remembered them — her attempts to kill herself, in front of us. She would get her medications, pour them onto the counter, count them, and take a fist full. I look in the mirror and wipe away the tears that stung my face. The pain of losing planned out lives that never were was indescribable. I felt as though I had been reborn into a world like water dripping from the remains of a trailer after a twister. An umbilical cord of sorrow tied me to my mother. I understood. One night, I got out of bed, went to the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. Staring for what seemed like eternity at the bottles of pills I was given for depression and pain, I opened them and poured the pills out onto the counter. I counted each one before taking a fistful. My husband must have felt something was off. He called but I didn't answer. He came home and found me on the bathroom floor. I woke up in the hospital, realizing what I had done. Groggy, I looked around the room and found my husband leaning against the wall looking out the 3rd story window. I called, and he rushed to me. Crying, I started apologizing to him. Saying, "I didn't want to die, I just wanted this pain to stop." In our 14 years together, I never told him about my childhood and all the horrible things that happened to me nor how my mother was. I was scared he wouldn't look at me in the same light if he knew everything.

That was unavoidable now. I finally let it all out. It was terrifying but necessary. He needed to understand why I had days where I was up and down. How the darkest of days were filled with so much sadness and pain it was physically impossible to get out of bed. I took a deep breath, looked in the mirror one last time wiping away yet more tears. I opened my car door and walked into the clinic to check in for my appointment.

# FEMINISM IN THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE PROLOGUE

by Trinity Morgan

The “Wife of Bath’s Prologue” is a timeless story from *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer that involves the heavy subject of feminism, specifically a woman’s place within society. The inclusion of this piece within *The Canterbury Tales* was meant to challenge the concept of women belonging not to themselves but to men. With the common belief that a woman is to please her respected husband when requested and without fit, the upset of this story would have been evident. Chaucer challenges readers to think critically about the societal rules placed upon women by making Alisoun, the narrator of the Prologue, an unruly spirit that refuses to comply with societal expectations. The “Wife of Bath’s Prologue” utilizes the subject of sex as a means to implement the desire for gender equality, not to highlight the sexual preferences of women.

Throughout the prologue, the Wife of Bath describes the double standard that she has been forced to live through due to the societal rules of marriage and purity. Society’s belief that one should not remarry due to no longer being a virgin weighs heavily against her. However, Alisoun argues with religious reference, stating, “God bade us for to wexe and multiplie” (Chaucer, line 28). In Alisoun’s recognition that God commanded women to be fruitful, she utilizes the argument against those who discourage her from remarrying. Her evidence suggests she would not be fulfilling a commandment from God if she remained unmarried. Alisoun points out that men are encouraged by society to take on prettier, younger wives after the deaths of their spouses. Yet, women are viewed as improper for the same actions. One sign that it is accepted as a societal norm for men to remarry is the belief that women should not remarry due to no longer being virtuous or pure, which are terms

rarely associated with non-virgin men. In a society where men cannot be deemed “impure,” there would be no reason to withhold them from the sex or companionship that comes with a new marriage. Alisoun declares, “I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age / In the actes and in fruit of mariage” in “Wife of Bath’s Prologue” (lines 113-114), meaning that she will continue enjoying the pleasures of marriage. Yet this is not a boastful way of saying she will have as much sex as she wishes. Instead, it is a declaration of her right to remarry in a society that has no issues or complaints when a widowed man takes a new wife. She is claiming power over her decisions to do just as a man is allowed to do, highlighting her unapologetic fight for equality.

Feminism further influences the “Wife of Bath’s Prologue” in challenging the belief that men alone have sexual preferences and that women somehow lack them. The apparent disconnect between the male and female audience during the prologue is humorous. The confusion and horror that the men face, particularly one man who swears off his upcoming marriage, showcases that it was a common belief that women should be meek and virtuous. After Alisoun, in explicit detail, illustrated her dominance over her husbands, the Pardoner states, “What sholde I bye it on my flessch so deere? Yet hadde I levere wedde no wyf to-yeere!” (Chaucer, lines 163-167). Viciously, Alisoun informs the Pardoner that women not only seek sexual interactions for their pleasure, but they might cheat to obtain it as well. Her taunting of the Pardoner’s relationship showcases her intent with this knowledge. The fear that women want sex in the same way that men do is not what troubles the Pardoner. The belief that women hold the same power, if not more, than their husbands, is his true fear. In the belief that women do not long for sex, the belief that women are not human secretly emerges. Alisoun is not arguing for the right to have sex but for the right of choice as a human being.

The portrayal of the dominance of one sex over another is commonly referred to in feminist philosophy. The belief that men dominate women is a leading factor in the feminist movement, where women seek to even the playing field and make both sexes equal. However, Alisoun mocks this type of feminism in her clear agenda to be more powerful than her husbands. In one quote, “I have the power during al my lyf / Upon his propre body, and noght he,” (Chaucer, lines 155-156). The belief and struggle for equality dissolves with this statement, making it seem as if Alisoun is not simply trying to be equal to her husband but more perceived and respected. However, Alisoun

is aware that the crowd she is speaking to is full of men who are seemingly unable to understand her views of the world. In this understanding, it would be pointless to express her desire for equality to a crowd that does not understand or care to listen. As a means to force listeners' attention, she makes claims that would upset the status quo. In doing so, she forces the thought that women hold power within themselves and do not rely solely on their husbands, contrary to the common belief.

Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Prologue" uses the topic of sex as a tool to advocate for gender equality rather than to emphasize women's sexual desires. Societal issues of feminism have existed for centuries, often concerned with the inherently higher position men have in the social hierarchy. A woman's place has historically been represented as being less important than the men who controlled their lives. Feminism is not a new subject and will continue to be refined, with society trying to define what it can and cannot be. The limitations that people place within the term are what limit it, not the beliefs of the women who experience the everyday struggle of inequality. The "Wife of Bath's Prologue" gives insight into the struggles that women face, both in regard to their social status and physical control over their bodies.

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# WHISPERS OF THE GARDEN

by Romeo Everfall

Hidden in the quiet corners of our minds lies a sanctuary, untouched by the noise of the world. This garden, invisible yet deeply felt, waits for anyone willing to explore it. Time doesn't work the same here, each breath feels like a prayer, each heartbeat a quiet promise of discovery.

This isn't just a garden; it's a reflection of everything we carry within us. Its trees grow from moments of love and loss, their leaves murmuring secrets to anyone who listens. The paths are winding and familiar, paved with memories that pull you inward, inviting you to sit with yourself and grow.

When I think of this garden, I remember moments when life felt too heavy. Sitting in silence, I'd feel a strange pull, a need to escape to somewhere no one else could reach. I made a fortress. But the garden made a sanctuary and in time a place where I could invite others to grow, and nurture their own creativity.

It wasn't a physical place, but it felt real. There, love took shape in quiet ways: a breeze that felt like an embrace, the scent of flowers that reminded me of fleeting joy. These weren't just metaphors; they were anchors, grounding me when the world seemed unsteady.

Light filters through this space, moving with rhythm and dancing like thoughts. Shadows fall where doubts linger, but the sunlight always breaks through. It's a place where stories unfold, not all at once, but as you're ready to understand them. For me, the seasons of this garden mirrored my own: moments of springtime hope, summers of contentment, an autumn of forthcoming sadness, and winters of quiet endurance. Each season taught me something new about myself.

The garden isn't always gentle. It challenges you, asking hard questions you might not want to answer. But it's through these trials that you grow. I've felt this, moments where facing fears or regrets felt unbearable, yet afterward, I found clarity and peace I didn't know I needed. The garden's trials aren't just about overcoming; they're about becoming.

This garden isn't mine alone, it resides in all of us. It reflects who we are and who we can be, offering solace when we need it most. Every step we take in life leads us closer to it, and every moment of stillness helps us hear its whispers.

Only during a twilight this perfect does the garden extend its invitation.

### Welcome to the garden.

#### An Essay of Seasons

There's a place I've carried within me for as long as I can remember, though I didn't always recognize it for what it was. If I'm honest, I didn't even know it existed until recently. I call it the garden. It isn't just a name or a place, it's the essence of everything I've felt, feared, fought for, and ultimately found.

But the truth is, I didn't discover it alone.

Frost led me to the gates.

But it was Analayah who unlocked them.

Before her, the garden was just a shadow of an idea — a flicker of calm in the middle of chaos, a sanctuary I couldn't fully reach. At times, I thought it was a myth I told myself to survive. Then she appeared, not as a guide but as a reflection. Through her, the garden revealed itself, not as a physical space, but as a part of me that had always been waiting, silently taking root underneath my feet. Quietly waiting for me to be ready. For the sprout to break through the surface.

She didn't just lead me there; she made me realize something crucial: sometimes the garden uses others to help us find our own. It is my intention to be that catalyst, that seed that you can plant to start your own.

When I first stepped into it, I wasn't prepared for what it would show me. The paths twisted through memories I thought I'd buried. Towering trees carried the weight of my love and my losses; each leaf whispered truths I had avoided for too long. The blooms weren't simply beautiful, they carried the bittersweet scent of growth, of understanding, of healing.

But it wasn't always beautiful.

The garden confronted me with the parts of myself I'd ignored for years: my regrets, my fears, my vulnerability. Its trials were relentless, testing the courage it takes to embrace hope and love after you've been broken. Yet with every step, I began to realize the garden isn't meant to be easy. It's meant to be real.

The seasons of the garden mirrored the seasons of my life, shaping my understanding of love and loss, hope and resilience.

### **Spring: The Promise of Renewal**

Spring in the garden is subtle, a quiet awakening. You can feel it in the soil, softening after the frost, ready for something new to take root. In my life, spring came the day I realized I could change, that I didn't have to stay stuck in the shadows of my past.

It was Analiyah's voice, her steady presence, that reminded me I was more than my mistakes. She didn't tell me what to do, she just listened. Somehow, her silence was louder than any advice I'd ever been given. Her belief in me felt like those first fragile green shoots breaking through the soil, so small and so delicate, but alive with possibility.

### **Summer: The Celebration of Life**

Summer in the garden is its loudest season, vivid colors, warm breezes, everything alive and thriving. For me, summer was the rare moments Analiyah and I shared where the world faded away, leaving only us.

One evening, we sat beneath a perfect sky streaked with orange and gold, sharing stories about where we came from and where we wanted to go. She told me about her dreams, her fears, and for the first time, I wasn't afraid to share mine. Her laughter, her light, it all felt like summer in its purest form: abundant, unguarded, fleeting.

### Autumn: The Art of Letting Go

Autumn in the garden carries a quiet sadness, teaching us the beauty of release. Its colors are vibrant, yet its purpose is to prepare for what comes next.

Autumn came when I had to face the truths the garden whispered to me. I had to let go of my guilt, my hunger to control, and the fear that kept me from moving forward. Analiyah didn't let me run from it, she stood firm, even when I couldn't. Her strength reminded me that, sometimes, letting go is the only way to grow.

### Winter: The Quiet Strength

Winter in the garden is true, its beauty unadorned. The trees stand bare, the ground hard, and the air crisp with clarity. Winter taught me that silence isn't emptiness but more a chance to listen, to reflect, to rest.

There were many cold nights that passed, nights where Analiyah and I didn't speak, yet I could feel her presence like warmth in the cold. She showed me that love doesn't always need words. It's in the quiet moments, the unspoken connections, that the strongest roots are formed.

Over time, I came to understand that the garden is more than a sanctuary, it's a teacher. It taught me that creativity is an act of love. Writing, painting, dreaming, whatever form it takes, it's a way to tend to the parts of ourselves we've forgotten. It's not about being perfect. It's about being vulnerable enough to let something grow.

This was my story. Now, it's our story. It's not a roadmap; it's a journey. The garden you find won't look like mine, and it shouldn't. Its invitation will be uniquely catered and cultivated for you. We all carry the unique seed within. To grow a garden that spreads without. And it's always nurturing, always cultivating, always waiting...

Only during a twilight this perfect does the garden extend its invitation.

***Welcome to the garden.***

# SUNNY DAYZ MURAL FEST: MAKING PUBLIC ART HISTORY IN OKLAHOMA

by Helen Oppen

Being part of Sunny Dayz Mural Fest has been one of the great joys of my life. It has opened my eyes and mind to new ways of seeing and thinking about art, people, and community that will remain with me throughout my life. Being in the Sunny Dayz community has allowed me to form relationships with individuals with whom I have different backgrounds, beliefs, and opinions. Much of my own academic studies, professional work, and community commitments have focused on work by and for women and underrepresented artists, and my involvement with Sunny Dayz is no different. In both my undergraduate and graduate academic careers, I sought after artwork by women and activist artists, often making it the subjects of my papers, presentations, and general research. As I have developed my career as an independent curator, art advisor, appraiser, and educator, I have similarly opted to work with women artists, learn about contemporary female artists, their careers, and art markets, and make opportunities to study women and underrepresented artists bountifully available to my students. My commitment to Sunny Dayz feels like a natural extension of what I have always worked towards — true inclusion and diversity within the arts.

Sunny Dayz Mural Fest is Oklahoma's first and only mural festival dedicated to women and non-binary artists. Oklahoma City-based artist Virginia Sitzes realized the need for such an event and conceptualized Sunny Dayz after years of working as a professional muralist in Oklahoma and beyond. To help narrow the gender gap that's so prevalent in public art, Sitzes put together a team of like-minded local artists and community organizers and formed Sunny Dayz as a venue for women and non-binary artists to showcase their professional talents through the creation of murals. I personally discovered Sunny Dayz when the founding committee was publicly announced in early summer 2021. I thought to myself, "What is this incredible thing? Women and public art, here in Oklahoma City? How do I get

involved? Sign me up!" So, I contacted Virginia late one night and asked how I could help. The committee had already been formed, she told me, but there was room for one more if I was really interested. I was — and now, four years later, I am Vice President of the Board of Directors and have helped steer the organization since its inception.

In addition to several community events in the months leading up to each year's festival, the main event of Sunny Dayz consists of a weeklong period of mural painting by local, national, and international artists that culminates in a free, family-friendly, daylong public festival. Alongside the creation of new murals, the festival features a diverse roster of performers, an extensive vendor market of handmade and local wares, kids' activities, and local food and beverage trucks. The artists and team are on site during the festival, creating exciting opportunities for dialogue between the public, the mural-makers, the performers, and the event organizers. The festival travels to a different community in Oklahoma each year to expand access to public art in both rural and urban areas. We put a primary emphasis on working with artists from the host community and artists from Oklahoma while also bringing in top-quality national and international muralists.



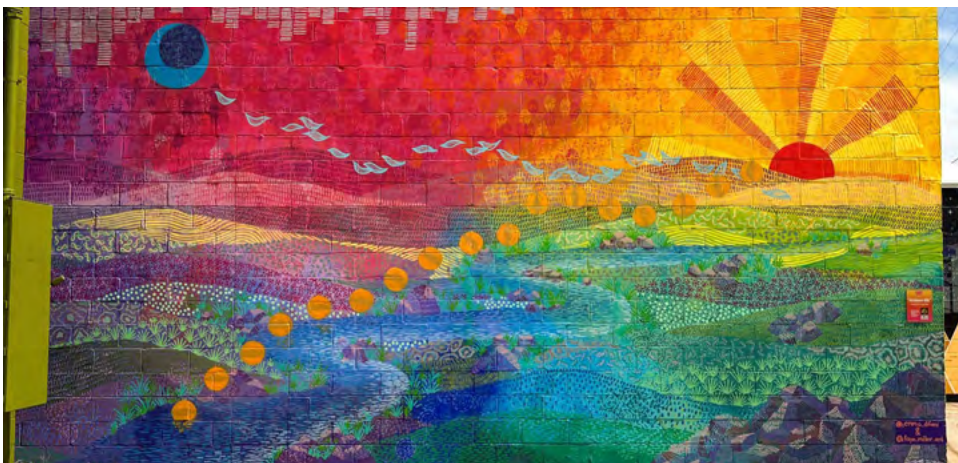
*Tiffany McKnight, A Sunflower for Sunny Dayz, 2021, Oklahoma City, Image Credit: Nathan Poppe.*

The first iteration of Sunny Dayz took place in August 2021 in Oklahoma City's Britton District. It's hard to imagine that we managed to pull off this festival in a very short three months, but we did! One of my favorite murals from that year was *Sunflower* for Sunny Dayz by Oklahoma City-based artist Tiffany McKnight. This mural features Tiffany's trademark organic, symmetrical patterns composed of bright, vivid colors and curvilinear figures and lines. Tiffany incorporated the hardware and physical building apparatus on the side of the building as a style element, allowing the diagonal, X-shaped lines to create compartments of imagery within the overall mural.



Ariana Weir, *What's In My Bag?*, 2022, Edmond, Image Credit: Ariana Weir.

The second year of the festival was in downtown Edmond in August 2022. For this festival, we were able to place murals throughout the downtown area, truly leaving our mark in the neighborhood. In the area near the Edmond Fine Arts Institute, Oklahoma City-based Ariana Weir painted a mural in all pink and red tones that displays in a simple manner the contents of her purse—including lip gloss, a self-defense keychain, a menstrual cup, her cell phone, wallet, tape measure, X-Acto knife, and writing implements. Arranged with each item presented individually, on clear view, and surrounded by space, what might usually be considered personal is made public. Entitled *What's In My Bag?* and created shortly after *Roe v. Wade* was struck down in the summer of 2022, Ariana's mural is an unapologetic display of femininity and strength, while reflecting the dualities and complexity of being a woman.



Emma Difani & Faye Miller, *Oklahoma Hills*, 2023, Tulsa, Image Credit: Virginia Sitzes.

In September 2023, Sunny Dayz traveled to Tulsa's Pearl District for the third iteration of the festival. It was a wonderful experience to work in a community outside of the Oklahoma City metro and to make connections with Tulsa individuals, artists, businesses, and organizations. Every year we have mural collaborations where two or more artists work together to create one mural, and in 2023, one of my favorite murals was a collaboration by Oklahoma City-based Faye Miller and Emma Difani, now based in Chicago. For the festival, Faye and Emma painted *Oklahoma Hills*, a beautiful, ethereal landscape with a sunset, hills, a winding river, and a sunrise. In both her murals and studio work, Faye utilizes a semi-abstracted, almost pointillist approach to figuration, and she primarily creates landscape paintings. Emma's practice of printmaking and fiber art deal with pattern, repetition, and material exploration. The two artists share a focus on the natural world, and together, they created a multicolored, multilayered, idealized yet detailed landscape that all can appreciate.

Most recently, year four took place in Ponca City on June 1, 2024. Ponca City was our most rural location thus far, and the team learned a lot about working with small towns that have major passion and support for the arts. It was interesting and refreshing to witness nationally recognized artists creating murals in a conservative small town in Oklahoma right alongside local artists from the Ponca City community. Juxtapositions like this and the dialogues that ensue are part of what makes Sunny Dayz so unique and welcoming to all. One of the murals that resonated with me the most was



Nico Cathcart & Valerie Rose, *a wider lens...(in which to see the world)*, 2024, Ponca City  
Image Credit: Bethany Young.

a collaboration by two deaf artists — Nico Cathcart, based in Richmond, Virginia, and Valerie Rose, based in Chico, California. Nico and Valerie brought the gift of a new dimension of accessibility to Sunny Dayz. Despite very different backgrounds — Cathcart grew up in a family that used lipreading to communicate, whereas Rose’s first language is American Sign Language — they collaborated to create the beautiful and meaningful *a wider lens...(in which to see the world)*. This mural depicts Valerie signing the words for “open mind” in ASL against a purple and blue background among neon outlines of begonia blossoms. The artists explained that begonias are symbols of good communication — an apt idea when considering the different ways members of the Deaf community and the community at large communicate. Through pre-festival accessibility training with the Sunny Dayz team, sharing basic ASL signs on site, innumerable personal conversations, and ultimately through their mural, Cathcart and Rose enlightened and opened the minds of all who engaged with them and their art. The two artists met for the first time at Sunny Dayz, but they formed a strong bond through their art and plan to work together in the future.

These murals, the friendships formed, and the conversations that are had as a result, have thoroughly enriched my life. As a creative child growing

up in Oklahoma, I never would have imagined that I would be part of such an amazing project — much less here, in my own home state. The work continues: at the time of this writing in January 2025, our team is currently organizing the fifth annual event which will be May 31, 2025, in Oklahoma City's Calle Dos Cinco Historic Capitol Hill. We are thrilled to return to Oklahoma City for our fifth year.

As an organization, narrowing gender-based representation and wage gaps through the creation of public murals is Sunny Dayz' primary focus. Sunny Dayz pays all artists and performers fair wages for their work; historically, mural festivals have underpaid or not paid their participants at all, which contributes to unequal access to mural painting opportunities. In addition to supporting women and nonbinary artists through paid painting opportunities, Sunny Dayz supports emerging, young, and local artists by dedicating a set amount of wall space to “newbie” artists, professional artists, artists from the host community, and collaborative artist groups. Sunny Dayz also features a teen mentorship program that pairs Oklahoma teens who are interested in murals and public art with professional, working muralists. Many of the past mentees have gone on to study art in college and pursue murals as a career, and a few mentees have participated as muralists in later iterations of Sunny Dayz.

Most people would agree that public art plays a crucial role in the overall well-being of a community. Like many institutions, public art has historically been dominated — both in managerial and artistic capacities — by men. With some exceptions, women and gender minorities have been excluded from this space through lack of opportunity and lack of fair compensation within the opportunities that do exist. Simply put, the status quo does not accurately reflect the reality of the diverse world in which we live — in Oklahoma and beyond — nor does it allow for the true flourishing of an equity-based artistic ecosystem. Some artists and arts workers have dedicated their professional practices to advocating for the power of visual art to make way for more equal representation and to effect cultural and political change. Sunny Dayz epitomizes this work, and I am proud of the positive changes in the world Sunny Dayz makes each year. It starts locally, and it grows exponentially.



# AT THE END

by Roycelyn Ankrah

Living in smiles knows no end,  
The path that leads to greatness  
Cannot be seen without turmoil,  
Challenges, and sacrifices.  
Turning back on narrow ways,  
Filled with thorns  
That pierce the flesh,  
But not the spirit,  
Rocks that scratch the feet  
But not the heart.  
Looking past all these trials, life begins  
With the beginning, comes a ray of sunlight  
Smiles that do not end  
Happiness that does not cease  
Victory, overcoming every dark stone  
At the end of the tunnel, there is always light  
So bright to fill up your life  
And shall we dare hope  
For each step we take  
Guided by dreams into radiant streams  
Shall darkness fade.

Thank You.

# BACK HOME

by Freedom Burns

## *I long for the band*

Back home where you can taste the music:  
 Southern fried-chicken drumsticks sizzle up jazz in the fryer;  
 The teapot whistles dixie to grandpa rehashing war hoopla;  
 The mixer dances around in renowned cake batter-filled bowls;  
 Spoons, forks, and knives jive on mismatched hand-me-down plates;  
 And mama's blaring shouts, "Come eat y'all!" blows like a fat man's horn.

## *I long for greener on the other side*

Back home where fertile wisdom grows children like trees;  
 Where penny banks sprout money-green dollars like leaves;  
 If you pick up your socks and do your chores, you earn one.  
 But pinned to your shirt, for birthday occasions, are green singles in multiples.

## *Back home –*

Where mustard, turnip, and collard greens stick together in a simmering pot,  
 Our blended family is like peas in a pod.  
 Inseparable, we grew up in garden bliss –  
 Winter colds and summer hots never did part us.  
 Spring vacations we never got, but year-round love ... we had a lot of.

**Back home –**

Where neighbors are second parents and first aid responders,  
There, I long to be (again).  
Here in the city, there is often division and keeping to oneself,  
And kindness is seasonal – when holidays are dashing with cheer.  
Five years back, I left home to further myself as a musician man  
(Though a university can't give me what mama's kitchen can).  
Before boarding the train to further my education,  
Mama kissed my cheek and whispered closely to my ear,  
"Love your neighbor as yourself; and  
Let college teach you, not rearrange you, country boy.  
Serve your community like a home-cooked meal,  
And enjoy one with a stranger."

Growing relationships and tasteful music are what mama was referring to.  
So, I have no excuse for complaining.  
Family taught me exactly how to do what to do:  
Give love where there is none  
And love will come back to you ...

**Back home.**

# RAIN DOWN FLOWERS

by Freedom Burns

Do me this one thing  
Rain down flowers in the spring on me  
Rain down flowers

I hear children's laughter – honest – without care or concern  
I see the sun's expression of great wonder  
In a spotlight, the moon boasts, "Dance beneath me"  
And through age-old trees  
The wind blows, like fresh breath, strategically  
How majestic and dandy are these

But that's not good enough  
Good enough for me

I see summer cookouts and fancy-dress go-outs,  
Crazy hair grow-outs and clown show-outs  
Yard sales and boat sails  
River rafts and kite tails trailing me too  
And to all things I say, "Whatever you do  
Do it well"

But do me this one thing  
Rain down flowers in the spring  
Rain down flowers on me

Friendly daisies (my favorite)  
Tulips gone crazy  
Roses thorny and wild  
A cushy Azalea bush  
An assortment of lilies with good looks  
Daffodils with short stem and style  
Country living wildflower things  
Showering down  
All of nature smiles

A congregation of monarch butterflies  
Migrating to the Mexico mountainside  
Is peak to see

Who can deny it  
Hummingbirds tzip tzip a sing-along  
Vibrating wings in a hum hum  
But a floral rain down is a spring theme  
I can bloom to  
A budding song I can tune to  
When the cares of the world are too loud  
And there's more than a few to-dos to do  
Do me this one thing  
Bloom it up and rain it down  
And that's good enough  
Good enough for me

To all things I say, "Whatever you do  
Do it well"

# CLOUDS

by Marie Snider

A puff of white smoke  
On the blue canvas  
Laying upon its cloak  
One look took away all sadness

Mist on the surface  
A cold blanket on my skin  
Your mouth becomes wordless  
It gets your brain tipsy with gin

Melt away our bothers  
Roars become silence  
Our focus is ordered  
This love will be timeless

And even though time will take this away  
More clouds will come another day

# JUANITA

by Marie Snider

I visit you in a faraway land  
Driving by the cows to get there  
Your home was a wonderland  
Every part made it magical, even the rusted chair

Hiding behind the corner  
Because I was a surprise for you  
You always wanted to be warmer  
I sat in front of the clock waiting for it to tick to two

I felt like a movie star  
Winning bingo always made my day  
I won a candy bar  
I'll never forget that tea set on display

On the 19th of April I sat beside you and read from my favorite book  
I always remember how beautiful you looked

# PITY

by Althea Butler

A fragile sculpture of a hero stands  
Crying of the evil world within his hands  
Fighting everything he can  
Showing off his loudest roar, his biggest stance

A shallow portrait of power hangs  
Screaming of tragedy and violent things  
Far too long to stop and breathe  
Far too loud to hear them sing

and the mold chips away

and the blue starts to fade



# LITTLE

by Althea Butler

Little green  
Light in your eyes  
Only seen  
Where light can shine  
And when the world goes dark  
So does that spark in your eye

Tell me is it real  
The things on your mind  
Tell me how it feels  
One more time  
When the world goes dark  
And you go blind

Tell me is it real  
The look in your eyes  
When you disappear  
And no one's inside  
When little things go wrong  
There too the spark within your eyes





# FLOCK

by Althea Butler

Blue bird in the wind  
Take me to where you decipher sin  
Will there be a rainbow like the lullaby  
Will they let me in

Stagger in a V  
We'll take turns taking lead  
You can drift into  
The wind below my wings

Blue bird in the wind  
Tell me how do you decipher sin?  
Is it written on her pages  
Or somewhere from within

Having, giving peace  
Living how we breathe  
Doing as we preach  
Testing how we grieve

Blue bird in the wind  
Give a hello to my friend  
She's dancing to the lullaby  
And singing of her end

# MOURNING THE LITTLE ARTIST

by Natalie Wilkins

The little girl enjoyed drawing  
The vibrant colors brought her peace, controlled harmony on the page  
And though she grew, and life got busy  
The little artist remained  
Hidden in the corner of her soul,  
She is alone and scared  
But in the robotic movement of time  
There is no place for her there.  
With bills to pay,  
Meals to cook,  
Dishes to clean,  
And appointments to book  
*There is no place for her there.*

So, she sits hidden in the corner of her soul  
Waiting for the women to acknowledge her existence  
Because something is missing,  
The other sock, the final piece of the puzzle,  
It is distant

The woman is *dead*.

When the little artist inside is ignored, she is dead.  
Her heart longs to put the colors on the page,  
Dive into the corners of her mind, the right side of her brain  
Control the mediums with her fingertips,  
Sculpting her thoughts, feelings, and ideas through clay

She was original  
But now she is not  
For the little artist has been abandoned,  
*Forgot*

When the artist is ignored, so is the soul  
For when part is taken, it can no longer be whole  
Yet, she expects it to be  
Replacing the artist with work and with school,  
Good grades don't fill the cavity

Currently ignored, but never dead, the little artist remains  
Waiting for the moment when the woman acknowledges her  
And realizes her ignorance caused all her pain.

# PIECES OF A MAN

by Khi “KTD” Davis

Divided between reason and purpose  
I'm only a fragment of who you think I am  
Broken on the inside, showing on the surface  
You're now listening to pieces of a man

Factoring other ideologies  
While my thoughts are uneven fractions  
Ignoring my best qualities  
Idolizing my worst as a distraction

Disregard my mental health  
Just to keep up with life  
I barely know myself  
All I know is what I don't like

Materialism and fake smiles  
can only cover so many blemishes  
Until my inner child's  
existence diminishes

My bad angles are ugly enough to horrify  
Which is why  
Pieces of a man is all I want you to glorify



# ONE YEAR LATER

by Khi “KTD” Davis

There's something about seeing you  
that reveals my deepest thoughts  
confesses my sins,  
tell you about the demons I fought,  
confesses to my crimes  
and the scenes that I caught,  
confessing my mind's eye,  
to give my heart a chance to talk

An emotion that I was embraced and raised in  
is what I found in you, my safe haven

It's funny, even after all this time,  
the butterflies still flutter in my system  
I've tried ignoring my heart,  
but I always listen  
A sucker for love,  
I treat it like a mission  
I've failed many times,  
but you kept me driven

I live in a fantasy world  
where you're my girl  
But every time I open my eyes,  
your presence is just a blur  
Where the truth is emerged  
Isolation is preferred  
No matter what I've heard,  
your spot in my heart was still reserved

Why does it seem like the best things aren't noticed until they're gone?  
Why does pride stand in the way of me seeing how I was wrong?  
Why do old feelings have to feel so prolonged?  
And why is your side the only place I belong?

It's weird,  
Nothing about you has really left my mind  
I still feel your lips pressed against mine  
With you, I wanna engage  
but I haven't passed enough time

I've heard you think about someone when they're thinking about you  
Every now and then, I can't help but wonder what life is like from your point  
of view  
What life is like in your shoes  
Everything new  
What you said about me to your crew,  
any ventures you wanna pursue,  
or maybe,  
your outlook on what you've been through

I miss what I threw away  
but it's still hard to see you in the day  
Truthfully, I'm afraid  
to see you find a new bae  
who expresses things I wish I could say  
taking the spot where I used to lay

I'm stuck recycling the thoughts of wishing I stayed

You've always been my trending topic  
It feels like I messed up over simple logic  
Now I question what has made me toxic  
you don't deserve my pain, I gotta stop it

If I accept you in open arms,  
there would be feelings included  
Forever stumped on the past  
from where my love was rooted  
While I think about a future  
that I once alluded,  
I'll be writing mental stories  
that have already concluded

# THE LONG GAME

by Carissa “Cece” Dragg

A world shattered and a perspective changed.  
I don't know how it'll be the same.  
You have everything I once wanted.  
Because you were playing the long game.

Trusted you like a sister.  
Hurt me like a father.  
You say you want to talk.  
I don't know if I want to bother.

You hid in plain sight.  
I've been forgiving, but I cannot forget.  
Manners that wrapped around you like armor.  
I didn't want you to become something I'll regret.

Feeling like a deck of cards  
And it's such a shame  
I must mourn what we once had.  
Because all you were doing was playing a game.

# YOLO

by Carissa “Cece” Dragg

With all the surfaces on the earth to explore,  
Will I ever be content with what I’ve traveled?  
And with countless books in publication,  
Will I ever be satisfied with how much I have read?

Millions of places to discover,  
Hundreds of degrees to pursue,  
Billions of people to meet,  
Yet only seventy more years to see it all through.

With “you only live once”  
As the mantra of youth,  
My time is winding down,  
Until all of it’s up.

I want to be a good friend,  
And wish to live with no regrets.  
So I will strive to spend my time wisely,  
Until I have no time left.

I will write, and I will draw,  
Drive, read, travel, and meet,  
And I still won’t get to do everything.  
And is that okay with me?

# TO MY MOTHER

by Ashley Leopard

To my mother, how do you think?  
Do you see me? Do you know me?  
You say you do, don't get me wrong.  
I love you, even through the hurt.  
But, you don't remember, do you?

To my mother, what do you see?  
I was a child, did you see?  
When your venom cut me swiftly.  
It was not your fault, how could it be?  
It was all you ever knew after all.

To my mother, what did you feel?  
When your father acted so evil.  
He forgets it all, sadly, too.  
You are not so cruel, I wonder,  
Could it be different though?

To my mother, do you taste it?  
My love for you, like sugar or  
perhaps venom too, there is blame.  
Not to you, I wish he loved you.  
Please, understand, it ends with me.  
To my mother, I am not you.

# YOUNG VIOLENCE

by Ashley Leopard

Under the Cypress, lay your head stone  
And, for the morning, chirps a mocking bird  
I sit again, rocking, trying to hold my own.

To die in violence, both beautiful and young  
By hand of a man, whilst words slurred.  
Under the Cypress lay your head stone

And I, nine, on my grandmother's dress I clung.  
To hear your demise, I couldn't understand a word  
I sit again, rocking, trying to hold my own.

Many years go by, still no words to my tongue.  
Now I visit you again, eyes only blurred.  
Under the Cypress lay your head stone

Oh, to once again be so small and high strung.  
But now all I ever feel is your absence stirred  
I sit again, rocking, trying to hold my own.

For now, I'll lay here by you, head hung.  
If I just listened so closely, your voice I heard  
Under the Cypress lay your head stone  
I sit again, rocking, trying to hold my own.

# YOU

by Mariah Sotelo

Remember when we met?  
Cheeks heated from attraction,  
Silenced by timeless nerves.  
You showed me chivalry,  
Something I had never met before.

Our love exploded like the sky.  
Sparks in our eyes ...  
For it was the Fourth of July.  
You drove me home,  
I knew you were the guy.

Said, I was too pretty to stay home.  
You took me out of my comfort zone.  
... Outside of my survival mode

"I love you", was said  
I ended up saying, "Yes!"  
Come to find out ...  
We were having a baby instead!

So excited, we cried.  
"How about Johnny or June?"  
With your mom's middle name?  
Of course, with your last name.  
But your buddies denied,  
How you don't want to be a dad.  
Partying every weekend,  
I was left alone instead.

While I gave you time,  
Denying your kin.  
It felt like abuse ...  
I ended up tired and confused.  
My body felt used.  
I would pray,  
For hope you would change.  
My hormones force-fed by rage.  
In the end ... you never changed.

The baby is here!  
I told you ...  
So, you never had to find out.  
You wanted to see her,  
I agreed.  
It was probably the best thing.

Your eyes glowed like a full moon,  
Smile pinching the tip of your ears.  
I saw you fall in love right in front of me,  
Isn't she dear?

You wanted the family we never had.  
We tried again ... but it didn't last.  
You couldn't be honest with your  
intentions.  
Every unfaithfulness meant I got a new  
dress,  
My wardrobe was full of your skeletons.

Like the devil,  
You have conditions.  
If I'm not with you,  
There won't be an us ...

Another fatherless child.

I don't care if you're with me.  
I just don't want to be alone anymore!  
Please don't leave me ...  
I'll be part of your "happy" family.

No one cares about me.  
The baby keeps screaming.  
I have been hungry since last night.  
Two blinks of sleep,  
Exhausted single parent.

Then there's ... you.  
Who watched me grow life without water,  
Moved without strength,  
And nurtured without nutrition.

Then there's ... you.  
Finding courage at the end of the bottle,  
Spreading lies in open tunnels who pry.

Remember, the day we met?  
Where I thought you were everything...  
Our cheeks were heated from attraction,  
Not inflamed by rage.  
Silenced by timeless nerves,  
Not patience by false hope.  
You gave me your chivalry,  
In exchange for excuse of your absence.  
I thought you were the one.



# WHAT ONCE WAS

by Chloe Willoughby

Once the night befalls the air, you are near  
But don't forget that I'm still here.  
And just as the mother shares tears with her son,  
Without you, there is no world in which I exist.  
From time to time, crystal skies watch and watch.  
They do not fathom what tales we have told.  
Trust, I know the joys of having forgot  
But we are the ones who created this road.  
Flowers do not bloom until they hear of us  
And birds cannot sing without knowing our song.  
We are the legacy of cosmic dust,  
A force so strong, it's a must to belong.  
And when the sun visits by morning,  
**We sit and we speak of what once was.**



ARTWORK



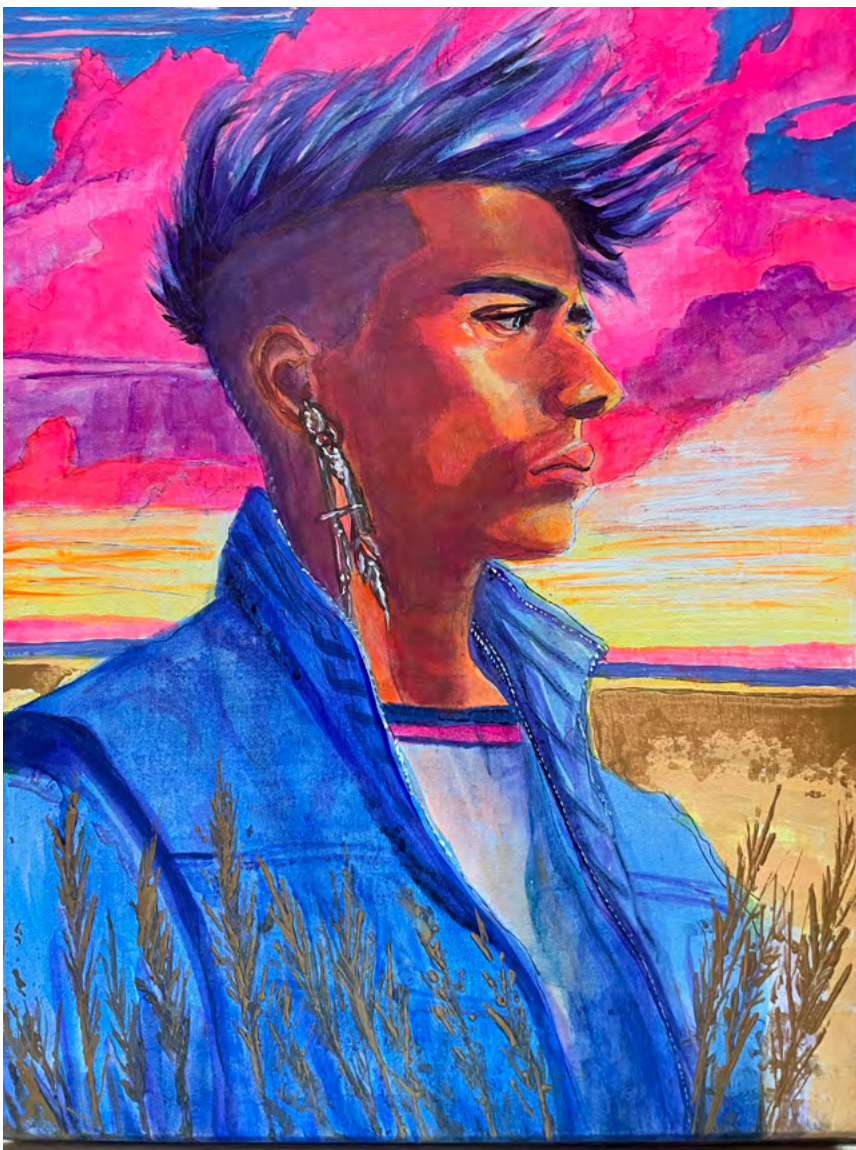
## **ALL SEEING EYE**



Sheree Greider  
***BLUE MOON RISING***



Sheree Greider  
***THE POETRY WITHIN***



Sheree Greider

***HOW LEGENDS ARE MADE***



Sheree Greider  
***BORN OF THE SPIRIT***



Kathryn Van Horn  
**JAY**



Kathryn Van Horn  
***CHICKASAW SPIRIT WARRIOR***



Kathryn Van Horn  
***ROSE AND BUNNY***



Kathryn Van Horn  
***DISORIENTING VICTORY***



Mads Demechko  
***GANDALF SUPPORTS UNIONS***



Mads Demechko  
**LACKING OXYGEN**



Mads Demechko  
***MUSCLE & BONE***



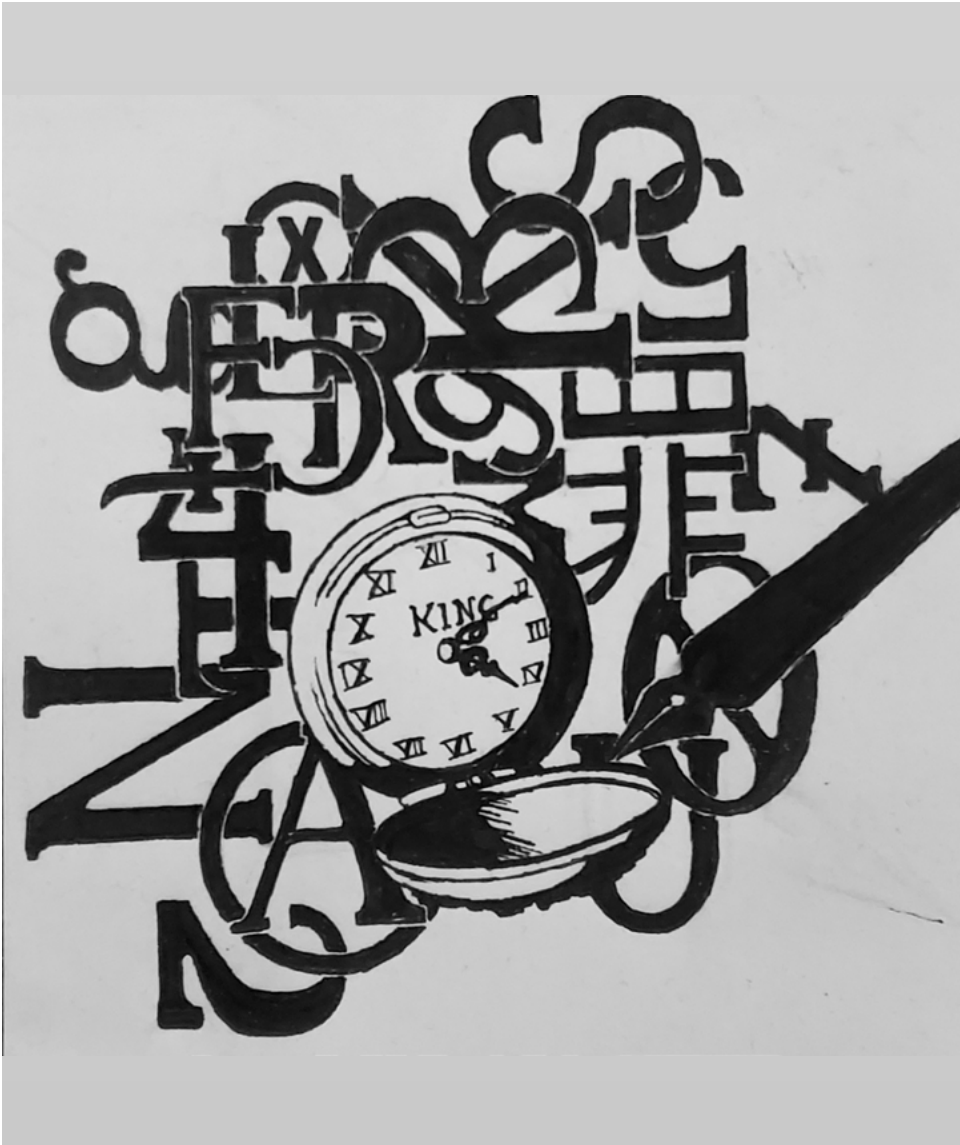
Mads Demechko  
***LOST CITY***



Josh Reeve  
***SPIRAL***



Josh Reeve  
***PARTING***



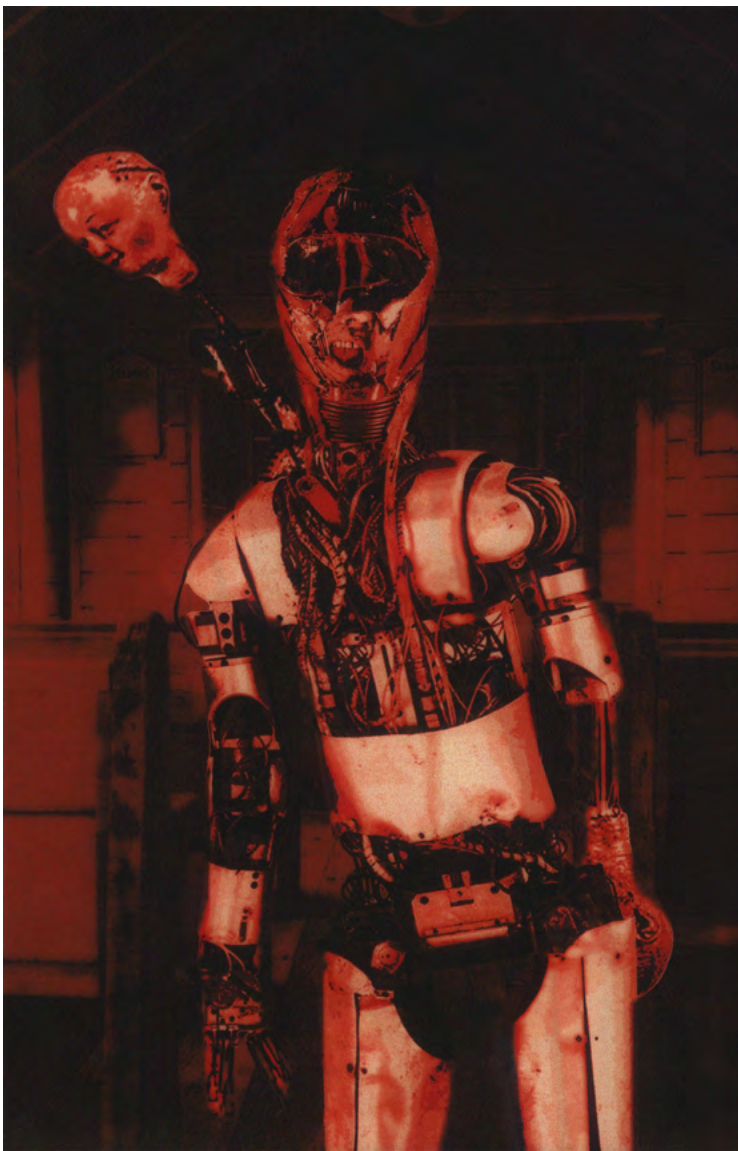
**Josh Reeve**  
***KING***



Josh Reeve  
***REST***



Kylie Orthman  
***THE GREEN RIBBON***



Zoe Hawkins  
***UNDESIRABLE FIGURE***



Zoe Hawkins

***VEILS OF OBSCURITY PARTS I – III***

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ABSOLUTE 2025





Rea Thompson  
***REA'S MILKSHAKE DINER***



Magnolia Fever  
***NIEROUZ ALRASHDAN***

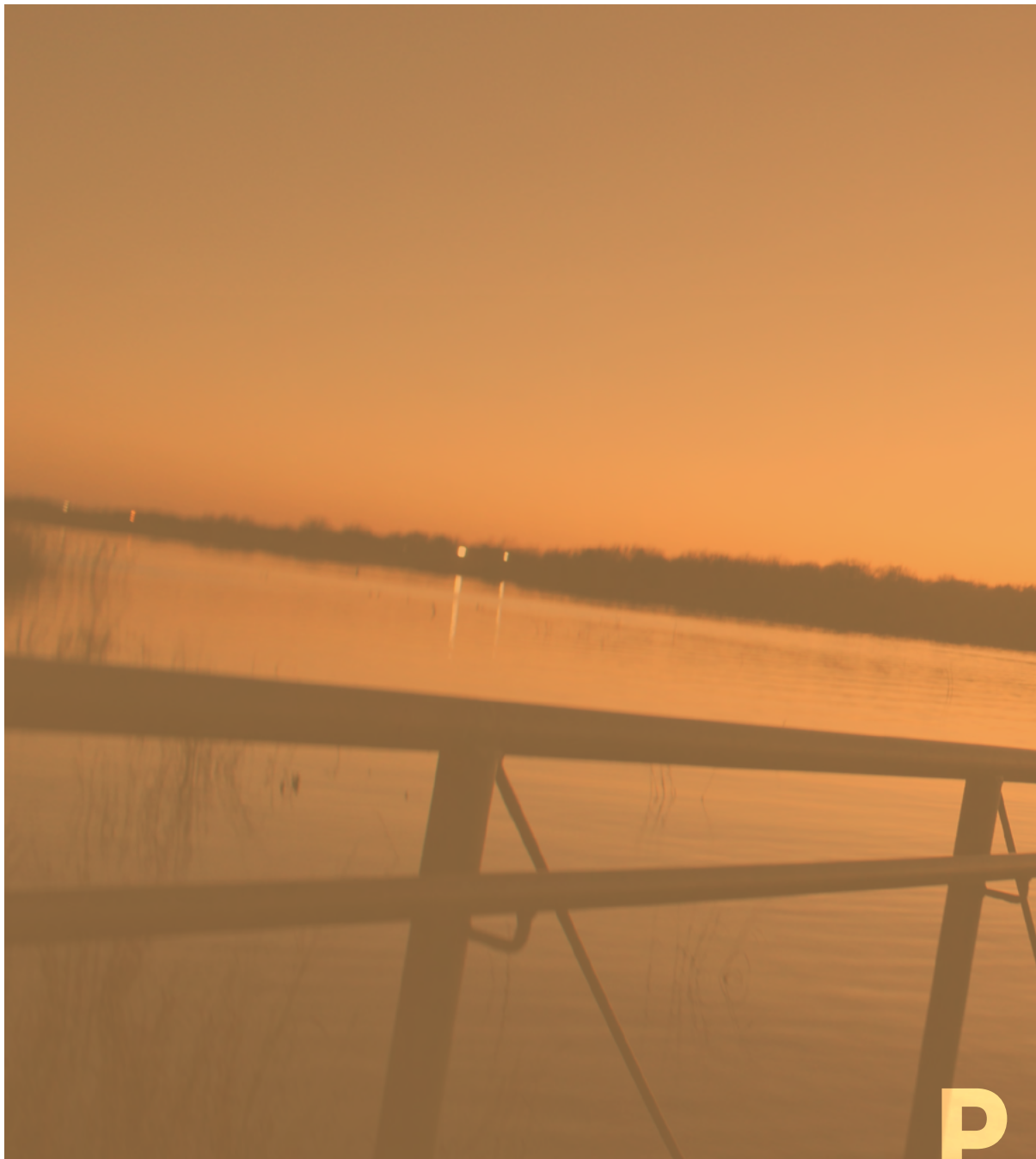


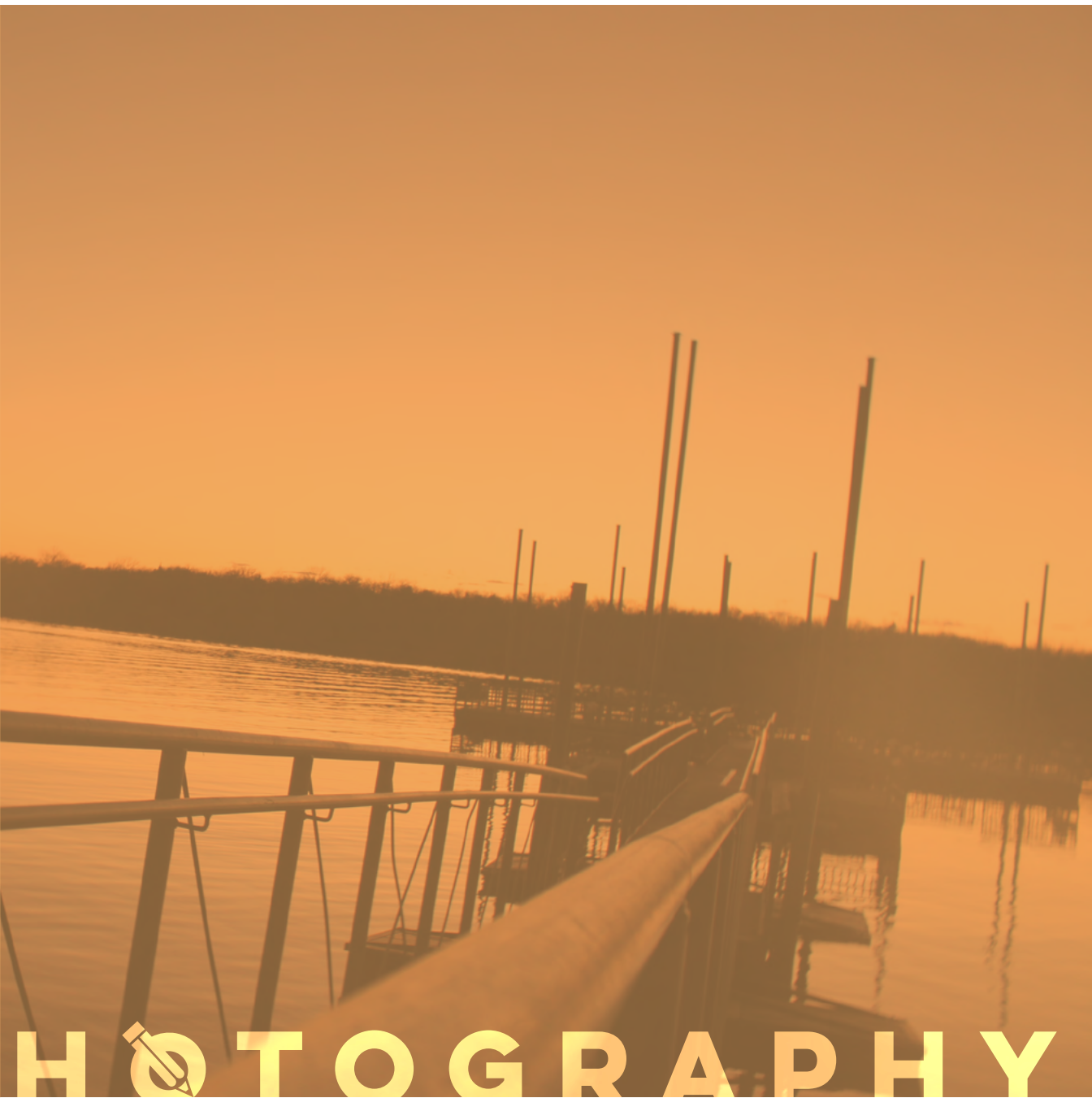
Nierouz Alrashdan  
***TULIP MANIA***



Kysan Rob

**GUAN-YU LION & ZHANG-FEI LION**





***A VIEW OF MY SOUL***

Kaley Kriesel



## ***BEAUTY OF THE WILTING ROSE***

Kaley Kriesel



***AUTUMN DAY***

Darria Hankins



***PEACE***

Darria Hankins



## ***CRAZY LIGHTS***

Patrick Mackay



## ***PUDDLE PONDERING***

Distant Simpson



***DOWNTOWN***  
Distant Simpson



## ***GOLDEN UNION***

Kelly Ngan



## ***HORNETS***

Kelly Ngan



***GROWTH***  
Forrest Swanson



## **HIDDEN CLAW**

Daniel De Loera



**COW**  
Holly Ingraham



## **LIGHTHOUSE**

Janjuan Munhata



## ***LITTLE MISS BETTY WHITE***

Sarah Breshears



***LONE TREE***  
Nierouz Alrashdan



## ***MANIFEST DESTINY***

Trey Brite



***STEPS TOWARD LIGHT, AN INESCAPABLE CAUSE***

Trey Brite



## **MIRRORED GOLDEN HOUR**

Laney Workman



***PURPLE SWEET WILLIAM***

Emily Walker



## ***RAINBOW IN THE SKY***

Carolina Escobar



## ***SHE SAID YES***

Khi “KTD” Davis



***SHE'S A WILD ONE***

LeTrese Neill



***SPEAKING KEYS***

Ariel Wigington



## ***THE BUMBLER***

Johnny Hill



## ***WHAT SHOULD I SAY***

Derek Trammell



## **WHIMSICAL WANDERINGS**

Derek Trammell



## ***THE YELLOW KOI FISH***

**Ms. Deighton**







OCCC  
LIBRARY  
PHOTO  
CONTEST  
WINNERS

# LIBRARY PHOTO CONTEST WINNER

Best in Show

148

***FISHING IN THE DARK***

Mariah Sotelo



# LIBRARY PHOTO CONTEST WINNER

Best in OCCC

150

***CYPRESS TREE***

Emma N. Lauritzen



# LIBRARY PHOTO CONTEST WINNER

Best in OKC Community

152

***IN MOTION***

Izzy Federico



# LIBRARY PHOTO CONTEST WINNER

Best in Nature

154

***VAST BEAUTY***

Haley Williams



LIBRARY PHOTO CONTEST

# HONORABLE MENTION

***EASTERN REDBUD, THE HERALD OF SPRING***

Hiram Ophiohonren



LIBRARY PHOTO CONTEST

# HONORABLE MENTION

***SAME TIME, DIFFERENT DAY***

Colten Barbee

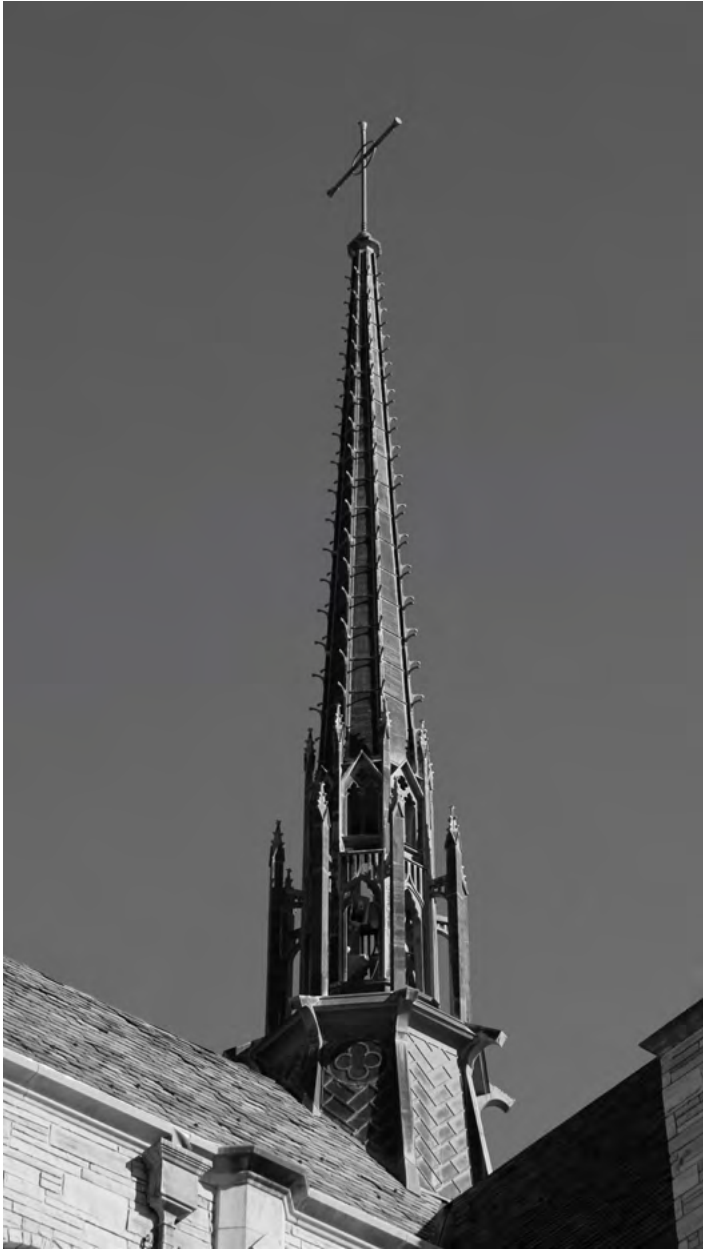


LIBRARY PHOTO CONTEST

# HONORABLE MENTION

## ***THE SPIRE FOR ALL TO SEE***

Aaron Cruse





**WE HAVE ART  
IN ORDER NOT  
TO DIE OF THE  
TRUTH.**

**—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE**

YOU CAN  
SUPPORT  
CREATIVITY  
AT OCCC.



SCAN TO  
GIVE TODAY.

UNTIL  
NEXT  
TIME.

ABSOLUTE



**ABSOLUTE**

**FICTION**

**NONFICTION**

**POETRY**

**ARTWORK**

**PHOTOGRAPHY**



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