

Voices

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MIDWESTERN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESENTS

VOICES

VOL. XXXIX

Editors:

Whitney Atkinson

Kristy Henderson

Mallory Evangelista

Lane Riggs

Ashlee Fandrich

Kalli Root

Technical Editor: Jonathan Henderson

Faculty advisor: Dr. John Schulze



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Editors' Notes

The Editors are proud to introduce this year's issue of *Voices*, the thirty-nineth in its history. We would like to thank our advisor, Dr. John Schulze, for his expertise throughout the process of putting this journal together. The Editors would also like to thank the English Department, Student Allocations Fund, the Vinson Award, the Bryan L. Lawrence Endowment, and, most of all, the many contributors for providing *Voices* with the very best material. None of this would be possible without them.

This year's issue of *Voices* has been very special as three of the editors are graduating seniors. To them, this issue acts as their baby, the last big project in their college career. Long hours have been spent reading through submissions, deciding on the layout and design, and proofreading endlessly. However, through all the work, we have found much enjoyment. We hope the readers can find just as much joy in reading our contributors' works as we have had in making this journal.

If you are interested in submitting to our journal for a future issue, please check out our website at www.mwsu.info/voices.

Cover Art: *TJ Eckleburg* by Whitney Atkinson

Cover Design: Dr. John Schulze

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MSU WRITING AWARDS

The Vinson Award is given annually to a current, full-time undergraduate MSU student who is in good academic standing. Students may submit work in poetry, short fiction, or creative nonfiction. The award is presented at the Honors Banquet during the spring term. In addition to publication in *Voices*, the prize includes a cash award of \$1,000.

The Bryan L. Lawrence Creative Writing Award is given annually to the best submission(s) to *Voices*. Poetry, short fiction, and creative nonfiction pieces are all eligible. In addition to a certificate and publication in *Voices*, the prize includes a cash award of \$200.

2017-2018 VINSON AWARD WINNER

Empty Sky, Empty Stomach

Whitney Atkinson

She arose when the seventh breath in the room at last plummeted through plump, parted lips like air from a deflating balloon. After the last four nights she slept in the cabin, she had grown accustomed to sleeping on top of her sheets, unable to evade the dampness of perspiration that ailed the backs of her chubby knees and beneath her voluptuous breasts. Although she propped open the window above her pillow to aid this discomfort, she found exploring easier to quell the insomnia that laced fingers with the heat. The noise of the insects humming together in a monotonous, electric rhythm disguised the noise of her bare legs sliding over her sheets, her bare feet hitting the wooden plank floor. Clad in an XXXXL T-shirt and a swath of sweat on her brow, she tiptoed her way to the door in the fashion of an elephant careening across a tightrope.

She glanced back at her bunkmates, the bloated masses blistering underneath thin sheets with blubbery calves and forearms protruding from blankets like zombie limbs from a grave. Her gaze remained affixed to them as she swung the screen door open. Nobody stirred. Barefoot, she descended the trail leading away from the cabin, her feet etching mighty craters in the dirt. Above the trees, the sky was devoid of a moon; a dark and empty night for a dark and empty girl. Her appetite was the only thing bigger than her, and it threatened to consume her. With renewed desperation for a cure to these new and unexplored feelings of emptiness, she began to run.

She was a tidal wave. Her magnificent thighs shook and trembled as her feet hit the ground, slapping and chaffing together vigorously. Her chest filled with something that momentarily distracted her from the emptiness. Her beating heart, her heaving lungs. She was for once full of something that wasn't self-loathing or food: air and rushing blood. Each breath quaked in her chest, seeming too shallow, and her calves quivered in protest of bearing her grandeur weight at this velocity. She longed to sink to the dirt, but soon, the smooth knob of the dining hall's door met her palm and she collapsed into the room with renewed fervor.

Six hours earlier, the campers had stood from their chairs and deposited their empty plates, licked clean of salad dressing and grease, in the sink just inside the kitchen. No camper ever left feeling satisfied from a meal, but a particularly unsatisfied girl feigned an appreciative embrace with the chef—the gatekeeper to her world of gluttony. The slacks hung from the chef's hips so loose, so opposite of the shorts that carved into and threatened to dissect the girl's midsection. The key she transferred from his back pocket to her bra felt cold against her breast but soon warmed as if it were becoming a part of her.

For the past three nights, she had stood outside this kitchen for hours, her cheek pressed against the concrete floor and her nose shoved inside the half inch of space between the door and the ground, trying to detect even the faintest scent of what luxuries might lurk inside. Her heart constricted momentarily as she stood before the door now, sweaty palms clenching. She finally extracted the key from her shirt, inserted it into the lock, and gave the door an enthusiastic push right at its center. It burst open unimpeded. She rushed forward into the forbidden palace of stainless steel, a triumphant roar escaping her ravenous jaws.

She felt her way along the dimensions of the kitchen, her fat fingers skimming the surface of the sink, the cool stove top, and finally, the handle to the refrigerator. She jerked the door open and basked in the glow and rush of cool air that greeted her now-generously sweating face. Her fingers collected the first item they skimmed: a plastic bottle of sugar-free grape jelly. With one flick of her thumb, she uncapped it and raised the bottle to her mouth, squeezing a thick stream of the jam into it. She swallowed without tasting and discarded it, reached immediately for the next item her hands could procure. Shelf by shelf, her hands dismantled the stock of ingredients that had been kept from her like firearms in a safe. Her fingers clawed into a tub of butter, chunks lodging beneath her fingernails, and she slathered it over her tongue. She guzzled almond milk, face craned toward the ceiling as she held the carton to her lips. Her thumb gouged into cups of yogurt, draining an entire half-dozen in slurps that left trails of fruit chunks running down her chin and shirt. She choked down half a jar of peanut butter into her mouth with her fingers swollen with layers of food, her own ladle made of flesh and bone. She next discovered a block of cheese and bit into it savagely, downing it with a glob of mayonnaise. She tried an apple from one of the many produce drawers, but

with only half a bite missing, it joined the floor like the rest of the cacophony splattered around her feet.

She craved a tube of cookie dough or a bottle of chocolate syrup, but even after ripping an entire shelf of the fridge from its hinges and discarding of the bland ingredients on the floor, nothing of the sort revealed itself. Disgruntled, she slipped across the floor, egg yolks and hummus collecting between her toes, until her hands clambered for the pantry cabinets. The first cabinet was stacked with spices, but in the dim lighting, her eyes found the clear jar on the top shelf containing granulated sugar.

With one well-aimed leap, she swiped the jar from its shelf and sent it crashing to the floor, coating the sticky concrete with a new layer of grit. She immediately sank to her knees and submerged her hands in the remaining well of sugar at the bottom of the container. It stuck to her hands but she took a handful anyway and brought it to her mouth. When the first grains melted on her tongue, she nearly groaned. All at once she began to feel warm, a familiar fullness that tugged a grin onto her lips and made her mind fuzzy. She slid further onto the floor, lying on her side with the tub of sugar hugged to her breast. The concrete floor and the open freezer door chilled her skin, but she radiated warmth. Her teeth ground together, savoring the way that the shards of sugar crunched and dissolved between her molars. Hair matted with applesauce and cottage cheese, she sighed in contentment, feeling the metal door to the great cavern within her click shut once more.

2017-2018 BRYAN L. LAWRENCE AWARD WINNER

Tiny White Roses

A.F Fandrich

His throat is dry and aching after just waking up alone. The first sensation he wants to feel this morning is cool water soothing the barrenness of his mouth. He goes to the kitchen and grabs a cup from the cabinet, and fills it with water from the dispenser on the fridge. Just as he lifts the cup to his mouth to drink, he realizes there is one single, brown speck floating around on top of the water. He stares at it for a second, contemplating what the speck might be and if it might endanger his health. *Is it really that big of a deal?* he wonders. *You've probably ingested plenty of questionable objects without realizing it, and you're still here to tell the tale. What could one tiny speck do?*

Though, to be safe, he pours the water out and dispenses more. However, just as he's about to drink again, another speck is found. He decides to put the cup into the sink, thinking it must be dirt that the dishwasher didn't get. He grabs another one from the cabinet, but again, finds a speck floating in the water. He opens the dishwasher, inspecting it for any visible dirt. Nothing. He goes over to the fridge and bends down, looking up into the water dispenser the best he can to see if there is anything visible there. Unfortunately, the dispenser looks clean. He checks the screen on the door to see if the filter needs changing, but again no luck. He even goes as far as to check the hose that connects the water to the fridge, but it looks brand new.

With the appliances offering no solutions, he places the second cup alongside the other in the sink and grabs a different cup. Yet another speck. He places that cup in the sink, and grabs one more. Once again, a speck. He goes through all his plastic cups, each one of them harboring an unwanted brown speck. He moves to his wine glasses, and when the wine glasses fail him as well, he moves to the coffee mugs. He continues this until he's placed almost every cup, glass, and mug that he owns in the sink or on the counter top, half-filled with water and a speck floating on top. He comes to his last mug, but stops when he realizes it's hers.

A creamy yellow with tiny white roses scattered amongst it, a mug she saw at a coffee shop on their first date and had to have. His thumbs

rub the raised figures the same way she would while she was drinking coffee and reading her bible in the mornings. He remembers having a deep sense of admiration for her, being able to keep her faith after those long years of declining health. It was hard for him to have faith in anything when the doctors' best efforts couldn't help her and the bills kept piling up. Even though the odds did not support her, she still read every day. He never expressed these thoughts to her, though, especially while she was reading. Because watching her in a still moment, when she wasn't thinking of the drugs they were pumping into her body or whether she could go out that day without getting sick, was a moment that he wouldn't interrupt. Her mind was never at peace except for in those moments with God.

He takes the coffee mug over to the fridge, praying that another speck won't find its way into it. The water pours into the mug, and he lifts it to his eyes so he can carefully inspect the contents. No speck in sight.

Instead of drinking it right there on the spot, he takes it over by the window in the breakfast nook. She told him this was her favorite spot to read because when she looked up after finishing a chapter, she could see how the slow, rising sun danced through the limbs of the sycamore trees. "How beautiful it is to witness God's glory," she would say. He sits down, and pulls her bible towards him to pick up where she left off. After every few verses, he looks up and tries to see her in the sunrise.

2017-2018 BRYAN L. LAWRENCE AWARD WINNER

Yesterday

Kristy Henderson

Yesterday calls from a bigger city
You answer not knowing how much of your bone mass
Will ache at the sound of her voice on the other end of the phone line

She sounds like time oughta sound
Tick tock tick tock tick talking low and slow
A tiptoe whisper

She says she misses the way your smile curves
That the echo in her chest was never there when you were hers
She can't get the sound of your laughter out of the air
Like wind chimes, she tells you

But there's not a cold breeze living your chest anymore and she just wouldn't feel at home there.

Yesterday texts you at 2 a.m. from a phone that's not hers in a bar full of strangers and loneliness. She asks if you remember the time you realized your own mortality. She says she held you when you cried but you're no longer afraid of dying.

Yesterday says hello in a grocery store aisle. It's been 6 years since you called her by her maiden name — Today. She says you haven't changed a bit and you laugh because she doesn't even know you. You can't remember the person you were when you were hers and you don't feel an ache anywhere on your body when she says it's been too long.

Truth be told you combed the strands of Yesterday from your hair a long time ago and she's the kind of unraveling you don't need anymore.

College

Ashlynd Elizabeth Huffman

Staying up all night

Cramming, typing, and highlighting

Color coding and organizing

Energy drinks and lots of coffee

All for one thing

I wear exhaustion like it's a style

Saying no to parties and social events

Knowing what I must do, I don't give up

Sleep keeps calling, I reject it

All for one thing

Finally, the day comes

I read over notes

Preparing for the exam

Taking a deep breath, opening the test

The disappointment arrives as I realize

I know nothing

The Troll

Cassie Rutledge

I'm already exhausted by the time I pull down the gravel driveway leading to my parents' house. The two and a half hour drive had been nothing but a battle between me and *it*. Driving east on highway 82, with the extent of the sights being wind turbines and desolate plains, there wasn't much else to do but think. But thinking wasn't an option tonight, at least not if I wanted to keep my sanity. So I had turned up the music and tried to drown it out. If it started to whisper, I would just sing louder. When it demanded that I look at it, I would count the cows in the fields passing by to distract myself. But at around the two hour mark, I felt my willpower begin to chip away and added just a bit of pressure to the gas pedal. When I finally saw the faint lights of my parents' house shining through the trees, I swear I heard the angels harmonizing.

Stepping out of my Elantra onto the gravel driveway, I smile at my small victory. *You're not invited this weekend*, I tell it smugly, and it hisses in return as I slam the door shut. Moving to my trunk, I unload the cardboard box full of picture frames from the house I'll soon say goodbye to. But I push that thought away too, and instead go inside to greet my waiting parents. "Just think," my dad says as he pushes aside miscellaneous junk from the kitchen table, "soon you'll be graduated and you won't have to make this drive anymore." I smile as I set down the box in the space he's cleared, though the smile doesn't quite stick, because the thought is as exciting as it is terrifying. He's right. I will be graduated soon.

And just like that, I'm squinting against a sudden light. It comes from the oversized marquee sign, flashing "Your Future" over and over. *But I didn't turn it on!*

But I did. I'm the only one that can turn it on. The neon bulbs cast their light into the dark corner, where a satisfying hiss rings out from the shadows. I can see it now. The troll snarls and gnashes its teeth as a slow grin creeps across its face, and it starts to burrow its way under my heaviest strongholds. That nasty troll, illuminated in the shadows by the light I've turned on it, quietly whispering the words that it knows will most derail me.

What if your temporary stay with your parents becomes permanent?

No, that won't happen.

What if you never get hired anywhere?

That's a little dramatic.

When did you even become an adult?

I'm not entirely convinced it's actually happened yet.

Everyone around you is getting married and you'll probably die a spinster.

I'm only 21, let's not get too carried away.

You'll never be anything but mediocre.

I may not change the world, but I think I'll be significant.

You'll never have all the answers!

I guess that's okay.

Are you really ready for all this responsibility?

Well we're about to find out, aren't we?

Everything is going to change.

I can't stop it, so I guess I'll just have to go with it.

You better turn back.

It's too late now.

You're scared.

Well, yeah. But I think I would be more worried if I wasn't.

The troll keeps whispering, but I've heard enough for tonight. I reach for the chain hanging from the marquee sign and the last thing I see is the troll's gleaming grin before it's swallowed again by the dark.

University Boulevard

Cullen Whisenhunt

Drive by and look at
big, self-important windows,
sterile symmetry,
and stratified, red-brick walls.

Watch as it exhales
people from within, leaving
leafy (leafy) sidewalks, lawns
sloping to and from,
with waxy green tree and grass
blades and maybe blooms
blossom over-underneath
red-peeling benches.

Brilliant, illuminating,
orbs where needed to
light ways to outside,
find spaces out and way out,
diasporic
in daylight, at night become,
penultimate penumbra
parking lots and lots
of long walk, loneliness cars
on the outer curb.

Keep going, outside, outside,
now (be serious)
now, look left, to Spanish church
where children circle
and dance and sing in costume
and workers, prostrate,
rest like the dead from rooftop
maintenance above
blue-stained glass images of
your god (is their god
also, but a different tint).

i can hear your sneezes through the wall

Whitney Atkinson

nothing else.

just the gentle, interrupting wheeze
punctuates the silence between our
thin, plaster, dorm walls

and i know last year i woke my neighbor up
arguing with my roommate about *twilight* at midnight,
so i can't help but wonder
what other parts of me
have inadvertently bled through the walls.

how much of my hopes and fears have you
witnessed like a priest to his confessionals?

as i cry for the fourth time this week
about my loneliness
do you listen with ear pressed
patiently to the wall
like i did the night i told our RA
that i thought i heard
you crying at 3 AM?

(you were laughing, i was told
later. months later, i still wonder why
my mind translated the wails of laughter to
“she might be getting raped.”)

Wormholes

Whitney Atkinson

Aaron had never considered the conspiracy theory before. The Titanic, illustrious and unsinkable, could have sunk beneath the weight of the time travelers who cascaded back in time in order to assist in preventing it from sinking. In the fourth desk to the left of the window, he considered this with his eleven-year-old brain, effectively shutting down the rest of the class discussion occurring around him as he became utterly fixated on this idea of time travel. Beneath his desk, his fingers clutched at the hem of his shorts as if time were a balloon that had just expanded into something new and greater, or something that he could measure in his hand, to assess the value and strength of.

If time travelers could try to prevent the Titanic from sinking, what other tragedies would they prevent? he incessantly wondered. Packing his grammar books into his backpack at the end of the day, he thought of all the books he'd checked out of the library that discussed the Amazon rainforest and its cannibals, plane crashes, expeditions, massive bombs that darkened the skies for days at a time like a volcano. As he loaded the #19 school bus and slid into his empty seat with his graphic novel open, he became increasingly convinced that a secret squad of time-navigating superheroes existed, who, delivering splendor to his childish wonder, spent their weekdays catapulting throughout the history of Earth, undoing the undoable.

The worn soles of faded blue tennis shoes crunched against gravel as Aaron stepped off the stairs of the bus at his house. He ran the entire, tree-lined length of the driveway as if being delivered there had manifested him in a world of dinosaurs. A meteor was coming, and it was his responsibility to protect the creatures. He became a self-designated Noah constructing an ark around his imaginary friends, lungs wheezing and backpack smacking his spine as he ran. He imagined leaping over geysers, looking over his shoulder as Stegosauruses and Diplodocuses quaked the earth. They followed loyally behind him on their way to be sheltered from their once-inevitable tragedy.

The driveway itself was nearly half a mile long, and by the time he reached the house, sweat beaded on his brow bone. His father's rusted truck was absent from its place beneath the tree in their front yard, but Aaron went

around to the back door of the house anyway, shaking the pebbles that had slipped in the small holes of his shoes out and then sliding inside his room through the window. It remained propped open with a book he'd left that morning before running for the bus. Shedding his backpack like scales that his masterful body had outgrown, he verified that the room's door handle was solemnly locked before sprawling on the floor in front of his bookshelf and tearing an encyclopedia from its lowermost shelf. It had once belonged to the school library before the librarian received a box full of newer, glossier copies and offered the outdated ones to Aaron. Its corners were worn away, the gloss giving way to cardboard edges that splintered beneath the wear of the many fingertips that had clutched such a seemingly unquantifiable amount of knowledge between their palms. On his stomach, his breaths still coming in noisy gasps from his run, he began flipping through pages.

O, P, Q, R, S—

T.

He still could not fathom the Titanic's destructibility while navigating those yellowed pages in search for some detailed log of the Arctic Ocean tragedy. He almost imagined himself atop the uppermost level, bundled against an unfathomable cold unlike East Texas's perpetual warmth. A pair of binoculars in one hand and a donut in the other (*Did they have donuts in 1912?* Aaron wondered), he would recognize the iceberg that the ship's captain hadn't. He would personally steer the wheel aside if it meant a safe passage for the 1,503 bodies that would otherwise pollinate the ocean floor.

That night, Aaron waited until the house was silent, tiptoed into the kitchen to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for dinner, then crawled into bed to dream about heroism and escaping.

In class the next day, he pretended to need to go to the bathroom, but then entered the library instead. Mrs. Trudelle was perched on her bony knees, shelving a handful of books, when she looked up to see him in the doorway.

“Aaron,” she greeted him, blinking in surprise as her eyebrows raised and deepened the gentle lines in her forehead. She nestled a plastic-bound picture book onto the shelf in its designated pocket and then stood, adjusting the pencil skirt she wore and brushing her palms against her thighs. “I do believe Mrs. Adams is missing you right now.”

Aaron stopped in front of her, feeling slight but brave in her presence.

He had always regarded her as this gatekeeper to the books; upset her, and lose access to the well of knowledge before him. Thinking of protecting a library immediately reminded him of the Library of Alexandria, and his heart panged with the dull ache of remembering how he yearned for that lost knowledge. Had someone tried to save the library, too?

With no preamble, Aaron blurted, “What do you know about time travelers?”

She cocked her head, contemplating as she looked at him meaningfully. Aaron found that he liked her more than most adults, because rather than answering his questions in the always-logical format like, *You don't need to worry about that, it's not real*, or, *Why do you care?*, Mrs. Trudelle always deliberated over real answers. Aaron wished he could see the inside of her head, as if it was a library in itself. Adults' minds always seemed so vast to him, but Mrs. Trudelle's especially so.

“I suppose there's a lot to say about time travelers. Does Mrs. Adams know you're here?” said Mrs. Trudelle finally.

“Yes,” he lied. “I need books about how to do it. Time travel, I mean.”

“Well,” responded Mrs. Trudelle promptly, reaching for the cart from which she had been shelving books and steering it creakily back behind her desk. “The sources right now are limited. Scientists are talking about how it's *possible*—wormholes and all, which I'm sure we have a book about here somewhere—” Here she began walking across the library, toward the vast nonfiction shelves that bore more dust on their pages than stamps on their check-out cards. Aaron paused with her in front of a shelf on physics, a word then too complicated for him to consider but knew it would help him experience a lifetime other than his own.

“Ah, yes,” Mrs. Trudelle exclaimed, snatching a book from the shelf as if she had caught it skipping class. Its cover was bright with the detailing of brain synapses that, at a second glance, doubled for nebulas dotting the universe's horizon. It was titled, *Defying Time: Man's Quest into the Past*, and Aaron immediately reached for it.

“Will this tell me how to time travel?” he exclaimed, flipping through brightly illustrated pictures and diagrams of space.

“Not exactly,” Mrs. Trudelle sighed, propping her hands on her hips. “I'm afraid there's a lot more research to be done.”

“Do you think I could do it myself, then? Could I learn about it and build my own time machine?”

“I think you can do anything, Aaron,” Mrs. Trudelle said quietly, her hand raising as if to touch Aaron while his attention was focused on the book’s cover, to maneuver his long and unruly hair out of his face or pat his shoulder. Aaron suddenly looked up, and her hand paused in mid-air before it fluttered back to her side like a forlorn, fallen leaf resigning its lifetime to a cycle of growing and falling amongst other dead things.

Aaron looked up at her with round eyes, half wishing she had and half glad she hadn’t touched him. Speechless, he clutched the oversized hardback to his chest like a shield between them.

“I’ll bring this back tomorrow.”

And he ran to the door, not looking back.

“Wait, Aaron, stay a minute. Are you doing okay? Is everything at home—”

The door behind Aaron slammed as he jogged back to class, hiding the book beneath his shirt as to slip back into his classroom with it unnoticed.

That afternoon on the bus, Aaron huddled over the book in his lap, writing down words he didn’t know on his hand like *theoretical, quantum mechanics, and general relativity*. Albert Einstein was a recurring figure mentioned, and Aaron craved to meet him so passionately that he grew frustrated with his permanence in this lifetime. He wished he could just time travel to personally ask Einstein *how* to time travel. It was a predicament.

Half way through the second chapter, Aaron’s bus driver called his name and snapped him out of his reverie, snipping the tether between him and the idea of a remarkable world where he could exist in times predating humanity itself. He jumped up from his seat, backpack gaping open and book clutched to his chest, and jumped down the stairs, walking up the driveway so that the pages weren’t jostled as he walked and read simultaneously.

Through the bedroom window he soon tumbled, and then he spent the rest of the afternoon sunlight devouring the rest of the book. He still only half-comprehended the concept of wormholes and the amount of energy it would take to input into a time traveling event, but he remembered the lost libraries and planes careening out of control and vulnerable Austrian archdukes and

mindless assassinations and slavery. A world lay contingent upon his shoulders, a world hanging between salvation and disorder if only a thread of the universe could be tugged and each tragedy smoothed over like a wrinkle in a sheet.

It felt as if all his organs drained from his body, his heart dropping in the newly empty space. Rather than sitting and wishing to be randomly metabolized into another timeline, he set to work. With the one threadbare blanket and lumpy pillow on his bed, Aaron constructed a makeshift fort using his desk chair and the door handle to his closet. He had hardly enough room to sit up inside, but he needed a space of his own, alone and dark, to concentrate and pray. He had ceased believing in God when for the seventh year in a row, the mythical creatures that appeared on the days of Jesus's birthday and death failed to leave him presents—which was weird, because he seemed to visit everyone, except him. Aaron forgave Jesus and blamed the lack of gifts on his rural location, or maybe that Jesus was afraid of coming through any of the doors like Aaron was. Still, Aaron wouldn't have minded something behind slid through his window. Maybe next year, he decided, he'll prop open his window on December 25th just a little wider, even if it was freezing.

But now he decided to trust, his hands clasped together in prayer so tightly that his knuckles screamed with tension. Aaron sat, thinking of wormholes, thinking of meteorites, thinking of Dodo birds, thinking of dead babies frozen in the Atlantic, and waited.

He waited too long, and the door to his room opened, colliding with his makeshift fort and tearing the blanket from its place, leaving him face-to-face with his mother. Aaron resigned himself to being made of stone.

His mother's robe was crooked enough to see that she clearly wore nothing beneath it. In the time Aaron had spent in his makeshift fort, the sun must have set, and so the only light illuminating the new figure in the doorway was from the lamp on his bedside table. Her hair was hanging around her face in such a dilapidated fashion that it almost seemed matted. She smacked her lips in a combination of disgust and exasperation.

"What are you doing?" She asked, dangling a beer bottle by its neck, a gesture of strangulation that made Aaron's throat ache. The hollows of her eyes were deepened in hue by bruise-colored flesh.

Ashamed with being caught but eager to explain himself when his mother so rarely showed interest, he answered, "Time traveling."

She blinked at him a few more times, her silhouette seeming to sway in the doorway. Finally, “Why?”

He explained Mrs. Adams’ theory, gesturing to his dome of fabric to indicate his hope to restore life and order to lost worlds. The longer he spoke, the more his mother’s eyelids drooped until she looked entirely incredulous, as if he were explaining to her how he wanted to learn how to photosynthesize energy instead of consume food (which, admittedly, did seem to him like a cool but much more inaccessible goal).

“I think that’s useless,” she mumbled, taking a swig of her drink. It took her a second longer than usual to continue, “You’re just as likely to fuck everything up than fix it.”

Aaron paused. He hadn’t considered that before.

“Your dad will be home soon. Fix this mess before he sees it and beats you for it.” She turned and deliberately slammed the door, causing the room to shudder. Aaron knew he should get up, should click the lock behind her, should remake his bed and put the time travel book lying across his knees back into his bag to return to Mrs. Trudelle tomorrow, because he knew that “he will beat you” was synonymous with “I will tell him to beat you.”

Regardless, he closed his eyes, returned to a world of darkness beneath his tattered blanket, a private wormhole of his own here on Earth, and imagined himself saving every scroll from the Library of Alexandria one by one until he fell asleep.

Mom

Whitney Atkinson

you make me want to read the bible.
my soul has abandoned adhering to religion
but when you ask me, at twenty years old,
if i've brushed my teeth today,
sometimes it feels like being in that gold van
on the way to sunday school again.

As Child

Sydney Elizabeth Chandler

Feed me, my mouth yawned, so Father fed me his eyes.

Feed me, my eyes begged, so Father fed me his teeth.

Feed me, my teeth gnashed, so Father ripped out his tongue.

Feed me, my tongue lolled, so Father scraped off all his skin.

Feed me, my skin sagged, so Father siphoned out his blood.

Feed me, my blood brayed, so Father fed me eight bent ribs.

Feed me, my chest echoed, empty and inviting. Father
took in one last breath, Father ripped out his one heart.

And I, as child, devoured it

– hungry.

In the Family

Haven Gomez

1.

It was then, too, that I learned
miscarriages ran in our family.
Seven, my grandma told me.
She undid her shirt's bottom button.
But this is your mom's first.

“First,” she told me, like preparation,
like a fortune, like there’d be more.

My mother held me, a child’s
creature comfort because she
was a child, barely of age to drink
and I was already six.

2.

Fun Fact: My mom found out I existed with the help of a dream book: “Your baby will be prosperous,” it read. “Your baby will be healthy.”

3.

They told me once, while I was
coloring outside the lines,
that my mom was almost
my sister, my grandma my mother.
They asked if I was okay knowing.

4.

My mom kept things of mine:
colored paper I’d only written “Ham” on,
the closest I ever got to my name at four,

my baby teeth in a little plastic
treasure chest, my Christmas Eve
ornaments, my umbilical cord.

She couldn't keep anything
of her next. You can't keep
a thing not three months formed.

5.

She told me that before she found out she was pregnant with me, I made her throw-up at the smell of cigarettes. Don't remind her about when she even smelled alcohol. *God*, she held her cheek to my stomach, *you made me hate everything bad. You made me better.* She whispered into my shirt, *I didn't even take the pain meds when I had you.*

Ten Candles

Kalli Root

She sat on the porch listening to the dopplering effect of cars on the highway along the perimeter of the neighborhood. A lighter twirled between the fingers of one hand as she removed a Marlboro red from its pack with the other. Flick, flick. Muscle memory. She hated the dry burn that crept into her lungs with each inhale. She disliked the smell and detested the way it clung to her fingertips, curled up beneath the blanket of chipped polish, burrowing stubbornly. She thought about Tommy, now tucked in and sleeping in his twin bed. The frame was shaped like a red racecar, black wooden wheels and a flame job on the side, a gift for his seventh birthday. Someone had ordered it custom-made, but she had purchased it from a garage sale, perfect for his racecar-themed celebration. The gift was a success. He said that sleeping in a racecar would get him used to being in one so that someday when he was all grown up he could be a real racecar driver. He could practice racing in his dreams, she'd said, and then he'd really be ready someday. She knew it wouldn't be long before he outgrew the bed. He would be ten years old tomorrow.

She tapped the butt of the cigarette twice on the step, watching the tiny Everest of ash collapse into a black smudge against the concrete, and took another breath. Last week she had asked Tommy what he wanted for his birthday. His eyes grew distant and sad and for a moment she wondered how a child of nine could have such eyes. He answered that he didn't know yet. He would have to think about it. Later that night, after she had tucked him in upstairs, she lay in bed watching the nine o'clock news. A folded piece of paper slid under her bedroom door. "Tommy's birthday list:" was handwritten in mechanical pencil. "1. The third book in the Harry Potter series. 2. Mom to quit smoking. 3. A red bike with no training wheels." She sat down on the edge of her bed with the note in her hands, folding it until it was too small to fold any more. Tommy's classmate had lost a father to lung cancer a few months earlier. Not even ten years old, the boy understood the connection. She bought the book the next day, and got the bike from her brother whose son had outgrown it. It was blue. She painted and polished it and pumped up the

wheels until it looked like new.

Another inhale, and she felt the nicotine calm begin to wash over her. She loved the proximity of the slowly smouldering embers only an inch or so away from her knuckles, and secretly hoped that a rogue breeze might carry a scalding particle onto her skin. In shock, she'd drop the cigarette and light herself on fire. She'd survive, but the trauma of the burns would force her to give up her vice forever. But that would be too easy. She focused on the embers in an attempt to distract herself from the thought of her son who would only receive two thirds of his wish list tomorrow. She thought of the chocolate ice cream cake in the freezer, closed her eyes, and took a drag. Warmth began to spread through the tips of her fingers. Another drag. Now a burning sensation pried her eyes open. There were embers where her nails had been. She struck her fingertips against the concrete and they flaked away, leaving a black smear on the sidewalk. The cinders crept up toward her knuckles as panic consumed her. She searched frantically for liquid and ran into the street, where the remnants of her neighbor's morning car wash gathered into a puddle against the sidewalk in which she shoved her whole hands, extinguishing the sparks. The pain immediately subsided. She soaked her hands for a moment, closing her eyes in the hope that when she opened them, she'd be in bed with her fingers intact and only the breathless memory of a nightmare. Instead, she was abhorred by the sight of ten seared nubs.

In her periphery, she noticed a light on in an upstairs window. Her son stood peering through an open curtain. When he saw her looking up, he turned around, and climbed into bed, leaving the light on. She stared at her fingers in disbelief, and her eyes were drawn by the faint light from her watch. 12:01 a.m. Midnight. He was ten years old today.

I Envy the Spider's Ability to Swallow Its Home Whole

Sydney Elizabeth Chandler

I dream of taking to my childhood home with a fork and a knife.
I dream of carving at the windows that never opened,
of lapping at the grout which stained the borders of kitchen sink, of devouring
old photo albums with a glass of milk in hand –
I wonder if the photographs would stick to my teeth like gum.

broken plates
crosses in closets
wild parakeets from Northern Australia –
whiskey glasses
spinning chairs
chained armoires
filled with Father's
Father's things
I would

chew on the dildos in Mother's closet, 'toys' my little sister called them one day,
Lonely Barbies in the night. I would swallow the memories of Lonely Mother,
with Loving Husband, the man existing always in different time zones across
the sea. I remember my ear to her door, my Lovely Mother crying with her
Lonely Barbie Dolls, crying to the song of the crickets outside.

I would swallow
it all.

Know this:
a web without its spider is not an abandoned piece of property,
but instead a ghostly graveyard for the arachnid who once spun it. For the
spider will never

abandon its home once its web is woven. Even if the threads are damaged,
the arachnid will not leave until the web has been

devoured,
digested,
recycled within hard shell.

I envy the spider for its ability
to eat at its memories –
to swallow houses, histories,
on silver silken thread.

Cold Feet

A.F. Fandrich

3 years of dating, 9 months of engagement, 30 minutes 'til she walks down the aisle, and I am a complete mess. Sweaty hands, shaking knees, a tight feeling in my chest. I feel like my heart is going to explode and I'm almost certain my ears are bleeding, although each time I check I feel nothing but a thin layer of sweat and oil. My mind is my enemy today, filled with thoughts of doubt, wondering if I'm truly what Caroline wants, what she needs. I've been sitting in this overtly large, leather chair for the past thirty minutes trying to go over my vows, but my hands have been shaking so bad that I can hardly read the paper. This tie is too tight, my shoes are uncomfortable, and I wish I wasn't sweating so much. I just want this to be perfect for her, for us.

I hear a knock and then the opening of a door. "Logan...?" says my Uncle Lou.

"Yep, what's up?" I say, trying not to let my voice give away my state of anxiety. I see him peering at me from behind the door, giving me a warm glance. He comes and sits next to me on the couch adjacent to me; it too shares the same massiveness of my chair. For being large men, we look small on this furniture. His hands, large and greased stained from twenty years working under big rigs, are placed lightly on his knees. He seems uncomfortable.

"How ya feeling?" he asks.

"Like west Texas in August," I say, giving him a crooked grin.

He laughs and pulls his hands together. "Yeah, I felt the same way when I married your Aunt Michelle. I could fill a large kiddy pool with my sweat."

"I guess it runs in the family."

We're silent for a moment. My leg begins to shake, up and down, as I try to read the first line of my vows again. "You ain't thinking about runnin', are ya?" He asks.

"Nah, Uncle Lou, just a bit of pre-wedding nerves." I look away at a painting on the wall. A large magnolia tree with a swing hanging from a branch, a couple sitting underneath it on a blanket with their backs to the audience, bluebonnets surrounding them all. It's so serene, and it reminds me

of something, but my worrisome thoughts block the words I'm trying to find.

"You wrote your own vows?" Uncle Lou asks, looking at my damp vows. I flush in embarrassment.

"Yeah, I'm not sure they're good enough, though."

"Let me see 'em." I hand over the paper, hoping that he doesn't find a soggy spot in the paper. The last thing I need is for Uncle Lou to punch a hole through the middle of my vows. He reads slowly, taking in every word I have written. A grin forms half way through, probably from the part where I talk about accepting Caroline's five dogs, couch hair included. I see his face soften near the end, glancing at me every few moments. His eyes didn't fill with tears, but I detected a glaze.

"Those are pretty good, bud. Couldn't have said it better." He hands the paper back, and I fold it up and place it in my shirt pocket. He seems to be here for a reason, and I don't want to delay him any longer.

"What's up, Lou?" I ask.

"Listen. I just figured I'd stop by, you know, since..." He doesn't finish his thought, but we both know what he means to say. *Since neither of your parents are here.* It's been eleven years since Mom died, and about ten since my father took off. Lou took me in without hesitation and raised me alongside my cousins. He made me understand that my father's leaving wasn't my fault, even though I still think it was.

"Thank you," I say. We both rise and hug for a few moments.

"I get that you're nervous," Uncle Lou starts, "but in the end, there's nothing to be anxious about. She told you yes once already."

"I know," I say into his shoulder. "I just want to be enough for her."

Lou leans back to look at me. "You are more than enough for anyone, Logan."

He releasing me from his embrace, putting his hands in his pockets and looking around the room. He glances at the field painting, and smiles. "Looks like something you only see in your dreams, huh?"

"It sure does."

We stand a little while longer in our comfortable silence. The last silence of the night until my dreams take me away to the magnolia tree with Caroline. I know I should say something else, say something to thank him for everything he's done for me, helping me to become the man I am today. If there were

ever a time for heartfelt moments, I would assume it to be now at my wedding. But I just can't ruin this perfect silence.

Uncle Lou breaks it for me. "Well I better get out there with your Aunt Michelle. She'll be ringing my neck later if I let one of your cousins embarrass her tonight."

"Sure, tell the groomsmen I need another minute alone on your way out. I want to go over my vows one last time," I say.

"Not a problem." He starts for the door, turning to look at me one last time as a single man. "Congrats, Logan. You're both very lucky to have each other."

He opens the door, and as he leaves, a bridesmaid enters with a dark blue bag in hand. "Hey, it's your gift for the exchange. Where's hers so I can take it to her?"

"It's right there," I say, pointing to the table with a cream gift bag on top.

"Alright, thanks Lo." She swaps the bags and leaves. I go and grab mine, returning to my chair and placing the gift on the coffee table in front of me. Before I remove the tissue paper, I look at the painting one last time. It may resemble something I could only dream up, but it gives me a feeling that I've only ever felt with Caroline. I can't wait to see her.

I pull her gift from the bottom of the bag: a pair of white socks and a note.

In case of...

Almost

Kristy Henderson

There are children in the backseat of my car that have your eyes.
We stop for ice cream on the way home from school.
They tell me tales of finger turkeys and color charts over vanilla mustaches
And I can hear the sound of their laughter a little louder every time you look at
me.

There are children in the backseat of my heart that have your smile.
They remind me that love and life are unconditional.
We leave a house key under the flowerpot and plant fresh basil in the sill of our
kitchen window.
Daisies grow through the walls and neither of us can remember the last time
we didn't feel alive.

There are children in the backseat of my heart that have your eyes.
Everytime we kiss, they ask me if we're there yet
And I say,
“Almost.”

Untitled

Kathryn Miser

Picture us a year from now;
we're sitting in the park
during your favorite time of year.
It can be during the heat of
the summer or spring when
all the flowers have blossomed.
It can be fall when the leaves
of the trees make the skyline golden
or winter all bundled up.
And we're just sitting there.
I'm holding your hand
and you can just breathe in
look at me
and smile.
Because everything is right
in the world.
I promise, it may not be today
or tomorrow or even next month
but things will get better
and your heart will mend.
I promise.

Memoirs of a Headstone

Kristy Henderson

He stands,

Shoulders sunken almost to the depths of her grave, but not quite. Somewhere just above the surface. The “he can still smell her chamomile tea brewing in his sleep” kind of close.

He brings 8 ounces of something stronger. One cream, two sugars, the paper she read every morning, and he sits with her. Close enough to know she’s there but too far away to touch - her laughter pours down his spine and there are lifetimes of happiness puddled in each vertebrae. She teaches him the difference between a ghost and a spirit over coffee.

Whoever said ’til death do us part never really loved a person.

Genesis 4:8

David C. Milks

In the medieval age, the process to kill a man was a conscious and purposeful act: if one wanted to end the life of another, it required power and conviction. The swing of the sword, the stab of a knife, the drawing of a bow; each of these are deliberate acts. In today's time, the killing of a man is achieved by the simple twitch of the index finger.

These are my thoughts as I stand in this alleyway, having realized what I have done. Even though the shot was fired only moments ago, my memory is blurry. The blood splatter, the body, and the ringing in my ears! The debilitating and horrid ringing! It stays in my head, blocking out the sounds around me. I look at the body once again and feel my breath shorten. But this is not my fault! No, the blame is not on me but that damn mugger! He took not only my valuables, but my ability to leave home and to walk the street at night! It was him that drove me to go into that gun shop, to buy this cursed instrument of death. He is the creator of this set of events, and I, merely a pawn! Oh God, please forgive me. The blood from his body spreads upon the ground underneath him, like an inkwell fallen upon a blank sheet of paper. It is as if I am a painter, and this fresh corpse in front of me is my masterpiece. My paintbrush lays next to me where I dropped it, when my muscles refused to abide me any longer. There it sits, gleaming in the light of the street lamp at the end of the alley, still pointing towards the body. As I stand here frozen, I cannot help but gaze into his eyes. Unmoving, forever open, never to shed another tear, or open in the morning, or close at night. The more I look in his eyes, the sicker I feel, and yet I cannot look away.

Those eyes! Curse them for staring at me! How dare they remind me of my childhood growing up, how dare they remind me that my niece will grow up fatherless! Oh Jeremy, why did you scare me so! Fear has gripped me tightly and yet you grab my shoulder from behind. Without a sound, you assume that I will recognize you, but how could I! As I turned and fired all I could see was that robber, and now look at what you have made me! A murderer, a monster! Not only have I become afraid, but now I have become alone.

Please forgive me, Father in Heaven, as well as my father here on Earth.

I cannot survive this night with the life I have taken. I refuse to! Forgive me mother, for just as in your favorite book, brother has slain brother! It is not from envy, but from fear! That fear has taken me, and I cannot bear it any longer. Forgive me, sweet parents, for you lose not just one son on this night but both.

“You promise this will work?”

“Without a doubt. This baby holds six .44 magnum rounds guaranteed to knock anybody you point it at on their ass.”

“As long as it protects me, that’s all that matters. Now can we hurry. I’m meeting my brother for dinner.”

Death and Life

Robin Bissett

His cool, steady fingers swept softly across the silken nape of the young boy's neck. The boy shivered and paled, his face became a little blue, but his eyes stayed closed. Quietly, Death tried again, reaching out for the boy's wrist, when it hit him. A feeling of warmth, of completeness, of boundless energy and restless atoms and everything positive all at once slammed into his chest. Death gasped, his arm fell to his side, and he saw her. The force that lay behind his failure was unfortunately familiar. The two had met before, but her drastic effect on him had never lessened. Where he was cloaked in edges and shadows, she shone with curves and bright stars.

"He is mine," Death whispered.

Life shook her head, "No, I am afraid you cannot have this one. It is not his time yet."

Death wanted to argue, but he was exhausted. He was always exhausted when she was around. He merely murmured to himself and peeled away from the side of the boy. He floated off to search for another soul toeing the edge between the two borders, between the line of staying or going.

However, at the last second, and against his better judgment, he turned to see her one more time in this passing. She shamelessly met his gaze and something brief, but powerful, passed between them. In some ways, they understood each other, as the two forces did have some things in common. Both were extraordinarily powerful, but confined to isolation, and both could bring peace of mind and a sense relief to families, depending on whether the subject's soul was old or youthful, ready to go or needing to stay.

However, Death tended to shoulder the heavier side of things. Life was more likely to bring joy, and he more misery. Her goodness and promises of hope were everything that he could never seem to expel, and everything that he inevitably ended up stripping away. Her luminescence sliced into his murkiness. It just about destroyed him to watch her like this, but it hurt even worse when he broke her gaze to turn away.



The Encounter by Ethan F. Parker



Tita and Eva Marie by Lauren Compean



Nighttime Stroll in Tokyo by Mallory Evangelista



“Kente” Woodcut by Kevin Appiah-Kubi



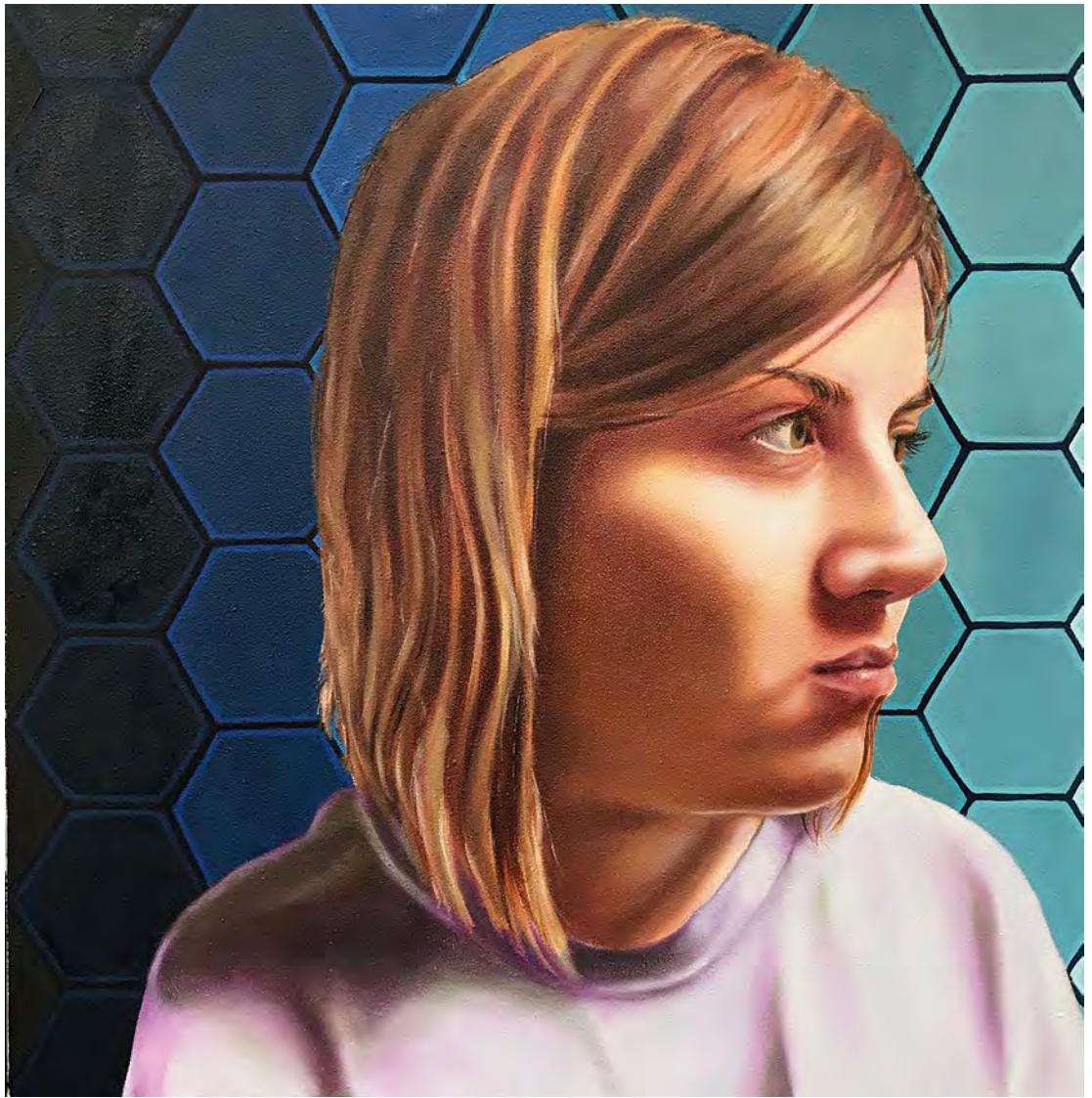
"Kente" Screen-print by Kevin Appiah-Kubi



Great Escape by Mallory Evangelista



Lost by Leo Gonzalez



Serotonin by Selena Mize

The Portrait

Andrea Mikail

I catch myself looking in the mirror at my hair and my eyes, searching for my mother. I want to find her there, smiling, because still, after twenty-two years, she has no idea what to do with me. I'm the question mark God placed inside her belly saying, "Here, solve this." I was sown into her flesh like the thorn in Paul's side. For decades, I could not strip her from me, not even when I shaved my head in the fall of 2014, when I had embittered myself toward her for wanting a daughter very unlike the one she received, one a little simpler. But now, three years later, I lean into the bathroom vanity and will into my eyes an independence I've only ever seen in hers.

I found it first in the portrait of her in the Marine Corps dress uniform. Her hair pulled back into a bun and tucked underneath her white cap. She is nineteen, her skin soft and absent of the lines I've become so fond of. It hangs in her study, in this house, and in every house we have lived in. Four houses, three streets. The neighborhoods have changed, the color of the brick has changed, how far we have to walk to the mailbox, and even our zip code has changed, but on and on the portrait remains; hung on the wall by a wire, sometimes a different frame, but always her, always nineteen, always in her white cap.

I don't know why the portrait ends up in that room, but I know that it couldn't possibly go anywhere else. The family room couldn't accommodate something so incredibly singular. It would be out of place in the den beside the video games and the treadmill. And it would be inappropriate to put it on the walls of my parents' bedroom. Yes, the only place it could go is the inlet behind her desk, opposite the most gaudy and golden mirror she found at a garage sale. That way, I can look at myself and see her, perfectly offset to the left, smiling soft, proud to serve her country, proud of me. I know I am proud of her.

Even though Tyler left home when he was seventeen, she still spends her evenings on her knees praying that boy becomes a man. That may be why she has such a hard time staying asleep, or maybe it's due to how many nights as an MP she worked flight line security. It was only ten years before she enlisted, in

1975, that women were first accepted into the Military Police Corps. With an M16 on her shoulder and a 45 Colt on her belt, she would walk the perimeter of the airfield from sundown to sun up, eating sunflower seeds like a banshee to stay awake.

Sometimes, at four in the morning, when I haven't gone to sleep and she can't go back to sleep, I catch her shuffling into the study, eyes puffy, squinted. She pulls her desk chair out and sits, while that portrait hangs on the wall behind her. That nineteen-year-old girl, fifteen when she left home, twenty-two when she left the military, twenty-nine when she gave birth to me. These days, I find myself waking up early in the morning too, shuffling into that study when I am unable to sleep and sitting down across from her on the settee. I rub at my eyes and looking at her portrait, at her strength, I am searching for some semblance of my own. For if I am not my mother, who am I?

A Stitch

Haven Gomez

Northern drummers sing at a higher
pitch than those of the south.

A shriek like a bird nesting
in their throats, like
the feel of beadwork on leather.

I watched the powwow,
my auntie whispering
about the cost of traditional
dress, the small number
of available trainers,
how if a single bead or feather
falls they are disqualified.

My mother asked me for cut
beads, for scraps of leather. She's
made one beaded key chain
with pearl and turquoise and yellow.
Dancers walk from the ring,
their bells shifting, singing,
the ghosts of their footprints
on the grass, years
of needle-prick sweat on their arms,
their breasts, their shoulders,
their headdresses, the fringe,
the way we dwindle.

Clay Work

Haven Gomez

An open-mouther murmur.

Whisper to me the intricacies
of a ceramic shard,
dark red knuckles, forceps,
tweezers, my fingers.

Use what you call a tongue,
a cord. Lowly, slowly
teach me to frown,
to bend at the waist.

Teach me my form, a crash
of runny clay, cupped need,
fast palms. I'm clumsy.

Brush my hair back,
shake the dried mud
from my shoulders.

Another bowl collapsed,
we both watch
the centrifugal force pull
the clay over the head.

We in the Dirt

Sydney Elizabeth Chandler

In the ground, tree roots smell of sex,
of salt, of neither male nor female, but
that of becoming, of unbecoming, one
and every other their roots entangle,

suck, sing, slide,
into one another, a mapping of cross—

roads, a tangling and disentangling of
nerve endings, beginnings, locks of
rooted hair locked under wet,

smooth soil.

In the ground, we, as one length of

flesh, of egg, of stomach, wriggle and
writhe amongst the tree's finger tips.
Without eyes, we see only with our
mouths, wide open. Drinking the
perfumes of fellow Fungi and Littered
Leaf, we take no pause at the meaning

of above,
or below.

To those who wallow atop Land, and
roast under Sun's misunderstood gaze, we
in the dirt do not envy your feet on which you
move, or your eyes with which you blindly deliver

the "truth" your species
says to have seen.

We, under the trees, amongst the roots,
in the dark of dreams and growth and brine, have
not the power to lie through our blind,
mute mouths.

The Longhorn

Cullen Whisenhunt

The longhorn snuffs at the earth
under the lean-to
barn whose tin roof grazes her
horns and whose wall slats
look ready to use her as
a new center post.

What's she digging for?

A piece of roof tin, perhaps?

Some sheet metal or paint can
she can sell for scrap and cash?

A shoe to throw at the dog
yapping at her through the gate?

A long-buried tool or toy
played with and forgotten by
some son or father before?

A family heirloom
she can pick up, clean
off, and call her own?
Grass?

I don't know or ask.

What she finds is some
shade, and dirt to kick
at the cloud of flies
that makes her body
one big nervous tick.

She ducks her head and
leaves a fresh patty as she
rambles through the door.

Fideo

Faith Muñoz

Ingredients:

- 1 lb of ground beef
- 1 bag of La Moderna vermicelli
- 1 cube of Knorr chicken flavor bouillon
- 3 cloves of garlic, salt and pepper

Additional ingredients:

Corn, peas, potatoes, refried beans, etc. Tortillas and avocado optional, yet recommended.

Directions:

1. Brown the ground beef, drain half of the fat.
2. Brown noodles until golden brown, then boil.
3. Add cube of bouillon to water.
4. Bring to a simmer. Add cilantro to soup for extra flavor.
5. Add garlic and other vegetables to beef, season to taste.
6. Serve noodles with desired amount of broth. Mix in ground beef.
7. Enjoy.

The kitchen in my new apartment is much smaller than the one I was used to. At home I didn't even have to look when I opened the cabinets. My hands reached for where I knew something would be and it was there. As I fumble through the cabinets looking for pots, pans, and various cooking utensils, I grow nervous thinking about making the meal I've been craving for weeks - picadillo with fideo, refried beans, and a warm corn tortilla.

My mom began making this simple dish for us during the Great Recession, a time when my father's cafeteria business in a factory called Brenamex had failed due to ill timing. The Recession affected our English school, too, since most of our students worked in the factories. Although I didn't know it at the time, we struggled financially, but God always managed to provide. On the weekends, we woke up early to sell clothes, toys, and shoes

at the local flea market. With the money we earned there and in our family business, my parents paid the bills and had just enough left over to buy beef and potatoes for our lunch. I still remember Momma teaching me how to make fideo, and I run through the simple process as I stumble about the kitchen. But since her divorce, she didn't cook much anymore.

I managed to find the same noodle brand at Walmart, but I was worried that the other American ingredients would make my meal taste different from the fresh Mexican ingredients we used at home. Would cook time differ on an electric stove to a gas stove?

When the food is ready, I spoon some fideo with just a little bit of the broth into a bowl. Then, I scoop in some refried beans. Lastly, I dump the picadillo on top. I wrap the least burnt corn tortillas in a cloth. (By the way, just in case you didn't know, tortillas cannot be directly placed on the stove top of an electric stove like they can on a gas stove). I sit the bowl in front of me on the dining table and pray over the meal. If you knew me, you'd know there are very few things I fear, and food is definitely not on that list. But in this moment, I fear fideo.

The moment the food touches my taste buds, I burst into tears.

It tastes...like home. It tastes like the always too hot or too cold kitchen in our rented house on X----- #1---, Cd. Acuña, Coahuila, Mexico. It tastes like the reward after a hard day's work. It tastes like a united family of four living in a concrete house in Mexico. Now we are three. The tears flow so easily from my eyes and sobs beat my body.

The taste doesn't belong here.

My roommate sits in the living room directly behind me. I know she can hear me since she sits only a few feet away. The one time I do want her to comfort me is the one time she doesn't. Usually I push her away and I suppose she figures I like to deal with things by myself, but, while that's *somewhat* true, I could not feel more alone in this moment. I want to cry out that the food I made tastes like home, a home I can never go back to. I want to tell her how much I've craved this food, but now that I'm eating it, all I have is the taste of memories.

It isn't until after I eat that I begin to think of all of the ingredients that could have made it better. Cilantro from Frutería Perez. Ripe lime green avocado. A different brand of beans...preferably frijoles bayos La Sierra from

Farmacia Guadalajara. Freshly ground beef from the carnicería around the corner. It isn't until now that I understood that food gives more than nourishment. Food is marinated in experiences and memories.

But why does it feel so wrong to eat this here? This fideo doesn't taste like Acuña. It tastes like the memory of Acuña, a city I'm no longer certain I belong to. My nostalgia is seasoned with guilt. If I ever return to Mexico, will she still claim me as her child? Will she allow me to eat from her basket? Will I ever again be Mexican enough?

In the movie *Selena*, her father, Abe Quintanilla, says, "We have to be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans, both at the same time! It's exhausting!"

It really is.

As I stare at my bowl, I feel like a tree planted in the middle of The River with Two Names. On that side, they call it El Rio Bravo. On this side, they call it the Rio Grande. My exposed roots absorb nutrients from both banks and each side beckons my roots towards them.

I am a confused tongue rapidly rushing over the harsh syllables of the English language, trying to soften it for the sensual syllables of Spanish.

I am this fideo soup missing all the authenticity of Mexican ingredients served in a bowl with a sticker that reads MADE IN THE USA.

Organic Layer

Jackson Martin

“Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.”

—Wendell Berry

A lone, brown leaf flickers
through twenty feet of stale air
before accepting its new task
to be trampled humus fertilizing
next year’s Bermuda blades,
resting quietly with red ants,
earth worms, and pill bugs,
welcoming its grassy grave
and fungal decomposition
as its crisp anatomy flakes
into the wind like birthday
confetti and smoking candles.

Chopin

Jackson Martin

A bass clef, G-sharp octave wafts from the window
as the speed of sound slows the speed of time
and a family of finches quit their chirping.
Cascade of eighth notes in the left
followed by sixteenth in the right.
Anyone would stop
to listen.

Tragedy has tainted these soulful Polish melodies
since the loss of his little sister.

Soon, he too will
prematurely pass
leaving our lives lulled in common time,
but four-four never seemed so slow.

We pass the window
recalling our own shadowy
bereavements.

His music exists outside the dimension of time
so we can visit our dead
while we listen.

Perhaps,
an unwritten Ballade
in an unbuilt hall
in an unexplored key
on an untouched piano
is still what we need,
but God's loves die too young
and perhaps God wanted His turn
to listen.

Pennies for Pecans

Jackson Martin

I hear the crunch as cars
roll in the driveway.

Pop
the pecan shells explode
and mourning doves gather
to delight in the feast.

I see three young girls
with buckets plucking tree nuts
from tangled grassy refuge,
tossing away the rotten
and worm-filled stones.
They know their mother
trades pennies for pecans.

Sometimes the girls sprawl
upon the cool, earthy
St. Augustine blades,
gazing at the silhouettes
of ancient canopy against the sky's
bland backdrop,
the sun breaching through,
painting their faces until they shine.

To the Newly Divorced Woman at Table 31 Who Ordered the Sun Dried Tomato Pasta with a Caprese Salad

Jackson Martin

Shadows grow outside
your desirable window seat,
while I watch you in a divine
white dress cock your glass,
studying the tears inside
that mingle with cherry-red drops
of Chateauneuf du Pape,
all your secrets hidden behind
sighing eyes paired with a slight smile
as your lost gaze scrutinizes
this most civilized glass of wine.

My Wonderland

C.J. Shaleesh

cigarette fumes smuggled in weak walls
seeping out from 30 years ago when they were new

the rank stench of Budweiser
subdues the alcoholic's and diabetic's hunger
for the day

a stubby-legged, cross-eyed, long-tongued Rascal
jumps at birds

some luxuriating

some playing

in the 3 tiered cement fountain

but only ends up being whipped by vicious tendrils of the willow's hair

legendary potato salad, chicken liver dressing, and sweetened brisket
get slopped onto paper and styrofoam plates
cracking and snapping if suspended
for more than 45 seconds at a time

crushed ice and coke
put in any random mug or cup
gets slurped
crunched
in a mouth gripping yellow-brown rotted teeth

frog figurines are stalkers
at least 7 are always in sight
in the kitchen, living room, office, bedroom, pink bathroom, even outside

gold frames are barriers
preventing imaginative scenes

from melding into one
goats playing the piano down the hall, Romeo and Juliet dancing in the small
indented wall,
and a girl questioning her vine crown, staring at me on the couch

my wonderland may have been a real place
home to the happiest memories of my childhood
but it
and the people who lived there
are gone

forevermore

Fall From the Mulberry Tree

Sydney Elizabeth Chandler

The boy with no eyes once climbed a tree
against a mother's scolding:

*Trees are dangerous. They are for birds.
They are not for boys without eyes.*

But what of the birds without any eyes?

Child, birds with no eyes die young in their nests.

The boy wished to find a sightless bird,
to warm it in his pocket.

The boy wished to taste the roughness of bark,
and so the boy climbed a tree.

The boy first circled the Mulberry Tree,
his hand tasting blindly the salt of its bark.

He felt pulled towards the birds above his head, he could
hear them, for even in the womb, he had listened.

The boy with no eyes climbed with ear, heart, lung,
higher, higher, until his sneakered foot – slipped.

And as the boy with no eyes fell from the tree,
he understood why birds spread their wings to fly.

And as the boy split his knee on the surfaced roots below,
he understood what release truly felt like.

He decided that blood
tasted better than juice in a box,
without its straw,

*for without eyes, a straw could be dangerous.
And you, my child, are without.*

He decided that blood felt softer
than the padded corners
about his room,

for without eyes, corners could be ugly.
And you, my child, are without.

As the boy with no eyes, on the ground, felt the blood
beat faster about his wounds,

his sightless bird flew down from its nest, and pocketed
itself in the hollow of his heart, singing:

*Boy, now you see, with no eyes, still you see,
ever more than the woman who birthed you.*

Spiders and Webs

Jessica Odom

Back when I sang about
itsy, bitsy spiders,
and dial-up tied up
the phone, holding it
captive by a cable
spooling from the wall,
I would go outside
to experience life.

In an overgrown ditch
at the edge of my world,
I once found a spider.
Her kaleidoscope bones
poised in the center of
a zigzag labyrinth.
Mortally beautiful,
she inspired fear and awe.

Now I stay inside screens
and numbly thumb through threads.
I see a spider: dull,
brown, cropped, and photoshopped.
“Burn it!” with emoji
I read through flat eyes.
Did I ever feel fear
of being caught in the web?

Mouse Ears and Malice

Chad Marqui

It is the “Most Magical Place on Earth,” or that’s what I had been promised. Some memory, allegedly fond, remains distant in my addled brain. After walking across the park in circuitous routes, searching for respectable lines as rogue children careened into thighs, my level of disdain is palpable. I lash out, a seething remark intended to detonate. As my wife and grandkids recoil and venture back out into the heat and throng, I sheepishly flee the scene.

I find a diet soda priced reasonably at a mere eight dollars and search for a quiet nook to check the news. Next to a partially constructed food court, I flop down on a bench in the shade, craving silence. My biting words still careen around my head when a lumbering narcolepsy hits hard; its myoclonic jerks pull my head around like a buoy. Just as the wet drool loosens from my lip and attaches to my cardiganed shoulder, I hear a man’s voice.

He bellows, “Maybe try running!”

Skittering to his knees, he corrals a child who has escaped the confines of his stroller. The boy’s shirt is stained thick with mustard and snot. His shoes, worn thin at the soles, carry the story of gum expelled from tired jaws.

Several feet away, a woman turns around in response, flesh hanging in loose folds. A tired old blouse rises up, revealing marks on her stomach, fading lines as if an ant colony had traveled her skin. Harnessed to her back, a newborn clutches her hair like an amulet.

“What’d you say?”

“You heard me. You’ve never been one to move.”

He pushes the empty stroller in her direction, which she manages to avoid. The speed of the toddler death missile carries it over a soft rise in the concrete before picking up pace down the handicapped ramp. It barrels unimpeded until it drifts slightly right at the flat below and flips end over end, propelling baby wipes and apple slices onto the pavement.

Her stark, fixed eyes meet his like a duel. The only perceptible motion is the subtle quiver of her arms and the cooing baby.

But I also conjure another scene. I envision a history, a long lineage of assholes. Men who expected things: dress shirts pressed and categorized by

color and fabric; robust martinis poured with minuscule flecks of ice and a whisper of Vermouth; the ubiquitous roast pulled from the oven as he enters the front door. These women, *their* objects, ever dutiful, smiling, full-breasted and thin-waisted—the perfectly malleable partner.

And I feel her hard-won defiance as she scoops up her other child and heads towards Main Street, USA, over its cobblestones and trite diorama of American life, some antiquated nonsense that proclaims a man should always be the strong one.

Lost Girl Doesn't Know Love

C. J. Shaleesh

the world knew love.
spread it across its surface in the lightness that is life.
but when the lost girl was young, she never knew life for love or
love for life or what love was and how it fit into life.
she knew that love was for the everyday princes and princesses
who would outgrow their titles as their imagination faded.
it was the magic of hugs and kisses. sparks and tingles that marked home.
it was a parting gesture. a way to tell family members goodbye.
in her teenage years, she still didn't know love,
confused it with lust. thought its meaning was sex.
she saw it in everything.
flower petal breasts holding powdered sperm in their cleavage.
the sun and moon, in a sensual dance of self-discovery
figured out who was the top and who was the bottom.
even in pencils drilling into paper, then
pleasurably tickling their marks away as they erase.
as an adult, her perception of love
became a combination of comfort and pain.
comfort from settling for plain and ordinary.
no longer lingering in ideals of fantasy.
pain from losing those who were deported to the dark, dead.
her attachment to them meant something was lost in her head.
lost woman. lost girl. lost without knowing love.
just wanting to find meaning
her way.

Over a Crush

Ginger Johnson

It wasn't just what you said
Or even the way to said it
Cause I don't know you
And really I don't care

But it was bad that I wanted to impress you
Worst that you could let me down
I shouldn't let myself get that way
Upset over "potential"

And really it wasn't you
It was just all in my head
Because in my world full of Maybes
You just became another No.

Then and Now

Cassie Rutledge

Five years ago, driving west on FM 121, I would have flipped the turn signal on as I neared Sunshine Trail. Turning onto the gravel road, I would have smiled at the sight of my best friend's sweeping yellow colonial house. Man, I loved that house. I would have jumped out of my car and immediately been greeted by June-Bug, the scruffy pit bull with half a tail that showed up one day and never left. The house was typically either empty or busting with hoard of people, and rarely anything between. If empty, I would simply have gone to the back door of the garage which was always open, and patted the dusty top shelf until my fingers found the extra key that was always hidden there. I think I would still be able to recognize the familiar creak of the old hardwood kitchen floors if I heard them today. I would have waited for my friend to burst through the door, and we would have talked for hours from the comfort of the old booth style kitchen seats. I would have left and said I'd be back the next day.

Then, I believed that nothing would ever change. An illogical belief really, seeing as how I was already imagining the grand plan for my life, which didn't quite take place in that town. But I think what I really believed was that no matter how far I went, that place would always be there for me to come back to. Even when my friend told me that her mom was putting the house up for sale, I still didn't quite believe that either. *That house can't be sold. Who would love it as much as we do?* No monetary sum could sum up the worth that we felt it possessed. Selling this house would be a crime against nature itself. *Even if I leave this place, it isn't fair that the house won't be here for me to come back to.* Looking back now, these were the thoughts of a child. I'm almost ashamed to admit that I believed this, but not quite because I know almost everyone has had those secret, selfish thoughts. What is your youth for, after all, if not to be naïve?

Now when I pass the yellow colonial house, my foot doesn't let up on the brake and my hand doesn't flip the turn signal. My silver Elantra doesn't turn on to Sunshine Trail. Instead, I just drive on. I see strangers walking across the front porch and wonder what memories they have made in the house and if they can sometimes feel the ghost of the memories that existed

there before them. Did they ever paint over the porch wall where we pushed the porch swing back a little too far again and again? Wait, no. I don't see the porch swing. They must have taken it out. I wonder if the hardwood floors ever suffered in the end from the impromptu indoor water fight of '08. I heard from someone in town that the family who lives there now has young children. I hope this is true, because it's a house that deserves to have kids running throughout it.

I wonder, too, if the house was a person, would it recognize me today? I know that the house isn't quite the same as the one I grew up playing in, just like I am not quite the same girl as the one who was playing there. My hair is shorter, and my shoes are sometimes taller, but only when I'm feeling particularly cheeky and wish to add more height to my already 5' 9" frame. My face has lost some of its baby fat and has filled out into a more womanly shape, though still too round for my liking. I don't wear nearly as much eyeliner these days, but that's mostly because it doesn't often beat out five more minutes of sleep in the battle of my priorities. Thinking back to those days of *then*, I wonder what I would have had to worry about. A one-page book report? A spat with my brother? An unrequited crush? It seems silly now to think about it.

I think back to how gut-wrenchingly disappointed I was upon finding out the yellow house would be sold, but now my predominant thought is, *I'm sure they got a decent return on it*. At the risk of sounding cynical, adulthood really has a way of taking the whimsy out of life. Though I think most of the realism comes from the knowledge that I'll have to buy a house of my own in the near future. Suddenly the predominant concern becomes less "Where is the house of my dreams that will hold all of my fondest memories?" and more, "Which magical dream home won't leave me in crippling debt?" But still, a sort of hope remains, when you realize with your adult eyes that even when a house is gone, at least the memories you made there can never be taken from you.

But sometimes I want the memories to be taken from me, because some of them are so perfect they leave an ache in my heart when they lie beside memories that followed. Then I realize that I don't really want them to go away, but rather I want to wake up one day and feel like the memories haven't left me with the feeling of something lost.

I'm not quite there yet, but I'm close.

Overcoming

Rebecca Burns

At times, it seems hope is just a word
Life events bury us without the crown,
Where we scrape the rocky mud and break down
Some constantly fight and push to be heard
We are a desert where nothing has stirred.
Although there's much barren, we still drown,
Yet our minds go on running 'round and 'round
How can one person thrive within this herd?

We fight drowning until we rise above,
And use strength as water runs through our veins.
People are here to help relieve the sore
They hold the pieces and we feel their love
Each of us beats demons and grabs the reins
We fight to overcome internal war.

The Thinning Rose

Katie Parsons

The sounds of church bells and the pleas of pastors saying “do not fear, for God is near” echoes in my ears as I watch my father leave his temple to walk with the almighty. The warmth of his hands began to fade into cold, and lifeless limbs I did not recognize. Lingering sounds of a flat line accompanied by your voice of despair to let my father go. That was when the first few petals fell.

Your vivacious smile accompanied by your long midnight hair was buried within the garden under the dead apple tree.

The whispers of silence were defining to your ears as you wet your pillows with the taste of brandy on your lips and the black streaks ran down your cheeks. The once so full flower was beginning to thin. My hands turned cold as yours pulled away into those of another who was not my father. A rose petal fell.

Time ceases to stop or slow down except when we are feeling melancholy. But time with you was like taking roses off of a thorny bush with your bare hands; delicate and painful.

Just like you and I.

A child was left for the elders, but little did they know, she was an old soul. I saw the sadness projecting through your eyes as you were trampled by this concept we call life.

I attempted to be of aid to you mother, but the demons wouldn’t let go. Little did I know your demons could wither a flower.

White oleander ran through your veins as you put those little white pills into your mouth.

A rose petal fell.

Then the day came where you were flying high. The sounds of white noise and
tear drops hitting my skin

haunt my dreams as I learned of the rose being taken away from me.

But did you know, mother?

Did you foresee the quick end to a great future?

I did not; however, I knew there was not going to be much of a story to tell if
you did not stop playing
with the thorns.

But like a flower, you were delicate.

I guess that is where I get it from.

With every beautiful flower comes a root.

The last rose petal fell.

All that is left is a seed and thorns.

But to make a new flower, you only need the seeds.

A rose is like a Phoenix; the flower dies, but the seeds are reborn.

You left me with a seed of your life that I can use to continue to blossom into a
beautiful rose like you.

And one day, my petals too will fall and wither.

But my flower won't be made weak with thorns, but strong with them.

The thorns I have will be my story even as my thorns watch my petals fall to
the cold damp soil that is
my pillow.

Every petal falling is a different ending to a story.

Your rose died with you.

Just like my father's died with him.

But my petals won't fall.

My petals will one day wither to only be replanted again.

Shower Thoughts

Samantha Smith

Standing there, I watch the water veins run
The flood berates my soul, for I'm alone
The water never stops for anyone

My head, tortured from thoughts that weigh a ton
There are many things I wish I had known
Standing there, I watch the water veins run

The colder it gets, the more I'm undone
Abandoned, I search for what I atone
The water never stops for anyone

At its barest state, life isn't fun
While everyone avoids their mental drone
Standing there, I watch the water veins run

Thoughts diverge and weave a pattern well-spun
Retreating alone to our hidden throne
The water never stops for anyone

At the end of the day, we have no one
Here we stay, harboring wry hearts of stone
Standing there, I watch the water veins run
The water never stops for anyone

I Am the Light in the Darkness

Alexis B. Mendez

I was a shouting storm in the distance,
crashing currents against rocks,
a tumbling tower in the dark,

but now I'm a shimmering sun rising up,
a calm creek flowing upstream,
a firm fortress in the sunlight.

Thyme & Dough

Sydney Elizabeth Chandler

I'm driving down I-95. It's late. The stars out here, Denna. Their light isn't real, you know. Their fires burned out millions of years ago. But we still see them. Anyone who says they don't believe in ghosts has never taken the time to look up. We see the ghosts, their eyes on fire. We look up and we see the stars. The stars look up – what do they see?

I see the ghosts, like I see the ghost of you in the young cashier at Seven Eleven. You, in the girl driving the jeep with no doors, her red hair trailing behind her like a comet, a cigarette clinging to the edge of her lips. You, in the stars. The ghost stars. I wonder now, as I look through Old Sam's window, if the ghosts of light we see today are more beautiful than the actual stars had been. Ghosts are more beautiful than flesh and blood, I think. Because memories, they can be altered.

Nothing exists on this stretch of road. I think even if a coyote, or one of those infamous desert tumbleweeds, strode out across the road this very second, I wouldn't see it. I've gotten used to the nothingness: the blank emptiness of the road, the dark stitch of the horizon beyond. I've grown fond of it. I've grown fond of the stars.

I'm tired. My eyes feel so heavy, so half-driven. They work so hard, our eyes. Taking in everything around us, siphoning through billions of particles of light before settling on a mere ten percent for us to focus on. Our eyes decide what's important for us to see.

I see a light. A light, growing as I drive closer. A light, stretching outwards across this wasteland, as if to meet me, as if to greet me, to envelop me in a yellow embrace. The neon sign reads Thyme & Dough, and underneath it, an OPEN sign flashes red, blinking on and off, like breath.

I pull off the side of the road into the empty parking lot. The willowy coffee house before me, lit up by its yellow neon sign, looks not built of saw and hammer, but rather, *grown*. Grown out of the very dirt, an impressive array of potted plants and trees gathered at the base of the building. The plants engulf its entirety. Tall stalks of ivy seem to hold the walls in place; thick ropes of leafy braids. A rectangular garden, sanctioned off by an aged picket fence,

brims with lush plant life – lemon trees and purple orchids, rows of herbs and strawberry bushels. The coffee house looks to me, alive. Looks the way a building would if our people were taken off this earth, and the Mother was allowed to reign freely again. Something green, something growing – a curious ornament on this desolate stretch of road.

I step out of my truck. I bend down, stretching my legs. I do not know how long I've been on this length of road, Denna. I feel even the days have passed in night, the ghost stars ever constant. I am tired. I am hungry. And a fresh brewed cup of coffee sounds nice. A fresh brewed cup of coffee sounds, magnificent.

The girl opens the door for me. The girl, swathed in a pink cotton apron, some form of green frosting swirling across its center, greets me with a broad smile.

“Come in now, come, come,” the girl ushers, as if she has been impatiently awaiting my arrival. I step out from under the stars, and into the small interior of the coffee house. I am immediately greeted with the smell of warm honey and freshly baked bread. A hint of peppermint wafts its way above the scent of baked goods. The smell of peppermint – it reminds me of you, Denna. It reminds me of Mom.

A sumptuous collection of potted plants lines the yolk yellow windowsills of the coffee house. Lavender and roses, thyme and bushels of basil, all stand perkily in their pastel ceramic pots. A fully grown peach tree, its limbs weighted with its fuzzy, bulbous fruits, leans at a precarious angle in the corner of the shop, its tall limbs bowing forward, brushing fingertips with the slanted ceiling. A thick carpet of ivy obscures the back wall, and threaded between the ropey stalks are blooming rows of daffodils, their fanning buds perfectly formed for one to blow away, to make a wish.

The bell above the door jingles as the girl pulls it shut behind us. The sound, so fragile, like the flicked end of a diamond earring. The girl skips around the counter, splaying her small hands out over the wood.

“Welcome Mister, I’m Georgia,” the girl practically sings, her voice carrying itself around the room as if her very words bear wings. “Welcome to Thyme & Dough. What can I get for you?”

I step up to the counter. The girl, Georgia, looks to be no more than fifteen years of age. Tight pigtails pull the skin around her eyes taught. Her

smile is painted a chalky, petal pink. I stare at her, searching for you. But all I find are freckles, of which you have none, and cherry round cheeks shelving a pair of bright green eyes. Your eyes are dark, are brown, like mine. Still, I can't help but search. I finally look away.

That is when I notice the heap of fur on the ground by my feet. A slinky coil of orange cat lies dangerously still on the wooden floor, its paws splayed out before it, its eyes half-lidded, glassy.

"Don't mind Shanks," Georgia coos, waving a hand dismissively. "He'd sleep all day if he could!" *He's been asleep longer than a day*, I think, taking care not to notice the lack of movement in the old cat's chest cavity, where breath should have been ballooning out, in, and out again.

"What can I get for you?"

I look to the menu, a bright wooden board hanging above Georgia's head. I order a veggie wrap, two berry scones, and large coffee, black, to go. Although Georgia is clearly not yet eighteen, there seems to be no one else here. Besides Shanks, that is, who may or may not be sleeping. The plants and fruit trees are also present. And as I wait for Georgia to get my wrap, I get the feeling that the foliage surrounding me, the vivid green limbs and magazine ripe fruits, are more alive than just – alive. Sentient, in a way. Listening, with their leaves.

I take two large gulps of my heavily caffeinated coffee.

"Here you are!" Georgia smiles, having wrapped my food up into a paper bag. I reach into my pocket, fishing for my wallet, but Georgia waves me off, her tongue clicking disapprovingly against the roof of her mouth. "My Grandma GG kept this place going until she plopped over dead. And Grandma GG, she always said to me: *Georgia, meet kindness with kindness.*" Georgia reaches across the counter and takes my free hand in both of her own. She stares up at me, her eyes searching my own, her eyes driving *through* my own, as if the girl has caught a glimpse of something nestled deep inside me, something I may or may not know exists. "You have kind eyes," Georgia finishes, as if the four words are the proper answer to all the mysteries in the world.

At half past noon the following day, I come across a green billboard on the side of this ever-elongating road. ENTERING BISBY IN TEN MILES, the sign reads in block white lettering. POPULATION: 274.

Two. Seven. Four. Could you imagine, Denna, growing up in a town so small? Not even a dot on the map, but imagine instead a particle of sand, a tip of a hangnail, something a cartographer would weigh over in his hands, deciding on whether to include such an insignificant location on his precious piece of design.

In this country, two-seven-four might as well equal zero. Two-seven-four might as well equal ghost town. Equal dead zone. Equal secrets locked in boxes shaped like cookie cutter houses: *okay, Andy's father is really his Uncle Jimmy, yes, Rob cross dresses, but only when the moon's full, no, I didn't cut myself Mom, I walked into a razor blade, come on, Jilly's not pregnant, she's just got wide around the midsection, no, no secrets are kept here in Bisby, a town this size is too small to house secrets, SHHH, Cleveland tried to put a bullet in his head, but he missed, but he was a lost cause to begin with.* He was an insignificant number four on the end of twenty-seven.

WELCOME TO BISBY, the second sign reads. JUST ANOTHER SLICE OF THE PIE.

This town has been abandoned, I think. The main street is rutted and pock marked with potholes. I guide Old Sam slowly down the broken asphalt. The road is lined on both sides with small boxy shops, their roofs all flat and made of stucco, the stuff the color of putty. Although it is a clear, Sunday afternoon, I see no one walking up or down the streets, no one busying themselves in the shops, no one maneuvering around the pot holes in their cars. No one, Denna, at all. I notice most of the shops are boarded up with wood or black swathes of tarp. I do not know why this place has been abandoned. I try not to wonder why.

I try not to think back on our childhood home as I drive through the ruins of Bisby – the home I dream of every now and again. I dream of eating it, Denna, did you know? Eating at the shut windows and the grout around the kitchen sink. Eating it all up with a fork and knife in hand. I want to digest it, I think. I want to shove it down, to swallow it whole, to absorb it in the lining of my gut, somehow.

Mom, you, me: we abandoned that place, Denna. Like these shops, this road, out here in two-seven-four Bisby. I wonder if a part of Dad still lives in that old house. I wonder if his ghost sunk into the walls.

I pass an old church, its mahogany doors leaning open, like a slack jaw mouth. And next to the church, decorated with rich, lively green foliage,

is none other than the coffee shop. The coffee shop, Thyme & Dough. I pull to a stop in front of its familiar neon yellow sign. I know it's not plausible for this shop to be the shop I stopped at the night before. But Denna, this shop is exactly the same. The garden, the ivy – a woman opens the front door.

Garbed in a pink cotton apron stands a woman in her later years. Her back is hunched over like a sliver of moon, her hair a salty white.

“Come in now, come, come,” the old woman croaks, ushering me inside with a wave of her hand. I pull the keys out of Old Sam’s ignition, and follow the woman inside.

The coffee house looks exactly as it had miles down the road. The peach tree in the corner is in full bloom – its fruits glistening with moisture.

“Welcome son, I’m Georgia. Welcome to Thyme & Dough.”

I stare at the old woman, trying to obscure my puzzlement. The woman cocks her head to the side like that of a bird’s. She smiles a broad, genuine smile, revealing a set of nubby teeth.

“Didn’t expect to find anything open here in two-seven-four Bisby, now did you?”

I cannot answer. I just nod my head foolishly. The woman’s green flecked eyes are sunken deep into her brow, but they still hold the shine of a young girl at heart, perhaps a girl of fifteen years of age.

“What can I get for you?”

A dash of orange fur and tail careens its way across my dusty sneakers. The cat leaps up onto the counter top, rubbing its small head against the woman’s arm.

“Don’t mind Shanks,” Georgia coos, her hands playing through the kitten’s fine fur. “He’d run around all day if he could!” I stare at the kitten. The kitten stares back at me. It purrs, the sound like a honey bee buzzing beside my ear.

“What can I get for you?”

I do what is left for me to do. I order a veggie wrap, two berry scones, and a large coffee, black, to go. I feel the plants in their pastel ceramic pots watching me, listening to my breath, as I wait for Georgia to gather my meal.

I take a hesitant sip of my heavily caffeinated coffee. It tastes just the same: a bitter, uneventful swallow, tinged with the hint of honey pecan.

“Here you are!” Georgia smiles. She hands me my paper bag. I reach

into my pocket, fishing for my wallet. The kitten mews from his place on the counter top. The old woman looks at me, shaking her head. “My Grandmother GG kept this place going until, bless her heart, she plopped over dead. Right there, right there where you’re standing.” Georgia signs the cross against her pink cotton apron, its fabric coated in a swirl of green frosting. She reaches across the counter, taking my free hand in both of her own. I look down at her hands. They are calloused and warm, a map of watery veins winding their way under the thin surface of her skin. “My Grandmother GG, she always said to me: *Georgia, meet kindness with kindness.*” She pats my hand then, caressing it with her pastel pink painted nails. “No need to pay today, son. For you, you have kind eyes.”

It does not surprise me when, the following day, I happen across Thyme & Dough. I have rerouted myself from the I-95 onto the I-10. The sun is heating up, Old Sam’s air conditioning doing no more than blowing hot air into my face. The only station Old Sam seems to enjoy is 91.5, an old country station wracked with static and old men’s drawling hymns. I’ve stopped only once today, to relieve myself, and to watch a red hawk pin its wings to its back, dive down into the scrubby earth, and engulf a field mouse in its talons. The bird took no notice of me. The field mouse squealed, then went silent.

I’ve parked below the neon yellow sign of Thyme & Dough. I expect Georgia to open the coffee house door, to usher me inside. But the porch door stays closed. The cicadas sing around me. I step out of Old Sam. I bend down, stretching my legs. Denna, I wish you were here with me. I would order you a small coffee with soy milk – I know lactose does not sit well in your stomach. I would order you your coffee and I would stare into your eyes. I would try to apologize. Somehow. I would hope that you would give me some explanation for your leaving, but I know you. You would not say a word. You would instead play with a strand of your long dark hair. You would let the silence grow. You would sip your soy coffee slowly, deliberately – you would comment on the honey pecan aftertaste.

I walk up to the door of the coffee shop. I let myself inside. The peach tree greets me with its fanning of leaves, its limbs no longer weighted with fruit. It is bare, like the back wall of the shop is bare, the ivy no longer threaded through with blooms of daffodils. The smell of warm honey and baked

goods and peppermint overwhelms my senses. And underneath it all, like a cobwebbed box forgotten under the basement stairs, is the smell of something sour, the smell of something pungent.

I take slow steps up towards the counter. I lean over the counter top, pressing up on my toes. Behind the counter, splayed out like a modern piece of art on the wooden floor, is a set of human bones. The skeleton is arranged as if it were sleeping, its fibulas and tibias, its fine, pointed digits, laying crossed against its chest. A pink cotton apron, some form of muted green frosting swirling across its center, lies over the ivory bones like a shroud.

I make my way behind the counter. The bones are clean, they look as if they have been polished, void of any sign of hair or tissue or skin. I do not know why I bend down. I do not know why I reach for the hem of the pink cotton apron, and lift it, an eddy of dust floating up from its surface, whirling around in small particles before my eyes.

I do not know why I expect exactly what I find, nestled inside the ribcage of the skeleton, curled up where a beating heart should rest. A small animal fetus, its delicate limbs half-formed and pulled into its stomach. It's red gummy exterior swathed in a translucent, rubbery sack. I watch, as if from very far away, as one of the fetus's limbs kicks out, and then, as if in acceptance of its situation, the limb goes still. Georgia and Shanks, one long lived, the other not yet born, lie still and placid on Thyme & Dough's giving floor. I, someone, a wanderer, a stranger, lean hunched over their remains.

Again, I do what is left for me to do. I wrap the bones and the filmy residue of the cat into the folds of the pink cotton apron. I carry them outside, careful not to disrupt them, and bury them in the garden, beside the roots of the lemon tree. Then I re-enter the coffee house. I fill a paper bag with a veggie wrap and two raspberry scones. I make myself a fresh brewed cup of coffee, black, to go. I fill a cup of coffee up for you, too, Denna. I leave it on the counter, a carton of soy milk beside it.

I place a ten-dollar bill on the counter top, and decide to water the various array of plants in the coffee house. I touch the leaves of each plant as I do so, the furry ligaments of the lavender stalks, the fanning limbs of the bushels of basil. Grandma GG, she always said, *meet kindness with kindness*. I guess that's what I'm working to do.

I leave Thyme & Dough as dusk gathers its billowing skirt across the sky.

The stars, the ghost stars, are out again, Denna. I don't know if they know I exist, but I'm happy to be under their brilliance. I know they're there, and that's what's important. I know you're out there, somewhere, and that, Denna, is more important than anything.

A few days have passed.

I have the urge every now and again to drive back the way I came, to re-visit the coffee shop. But I somehow know, and I do not know how I know, that if I turned backwards, Thyme & Dough would no longer be there to meet me, to greet me with its yellow neon sign. Maybe a lone peach tree would stand where a building once stood, a building grown out of the ground by way of dirt and vine. Maybe an orange cat would stride across the road, but I wouldn't see it. I've gotten used to the nothingness, Denna. The blank emptiness of the road, the dark stitch of the horizon beyond. I've grown fond of it. I've grown fond of the stars. The ghost stars, Denna. They remind me of you. It seems everything does these days.

And as I drive onward, Old Sam's rubber wheels carrying me kindly across this wasteland, I think, Denna, of a fresh brewed cup of coffee, black, to go. I am tired. I am hungry. And a fresh brewed cup of coffee sounds nice. A fresh brewed cup of coffee sounds, magnificent.

Exorcise Me

Whitney Atkinson

The difference is, I don't want to die.
I don't want to stop being a person.
There's just too much inside of me
that I can't stop thinking
it must have been an accident.

I have enough what-ifs to occupy several brains
and situations that are out of my control
(everything)
circulate in front of my eyes
in the time it takes mom to call me back.

I have enough heartbeats to fuel a marathon
As I sit alone in my bed.
Still.

I have enough of me for several me's.
Like all of the me's from all the other universes
accidentally got stuck here.

Their thoughts are superimposed on mine,
desires and worries and dreams
accumulating
until doing what I want feels like
only a tenth of me deserves it.

I need to exorcize the versions of me
that don't need to be here right now.

But getting rid of one me
is still getting rid of all of me.

I Will Not Wallow in Sorrow Any Longer

Alexis B. Mendez

I waited for a day to be lifted away from my unsightly mind.
I wanted to have my heart full of beauty.
I wanted to have my heart overflow with adulation.
In the morning I hoped to spring up from my bed and meet the sunlight with loving eyes,
and at night I hoped for sightly days.
“Tomorrow will be the day,” I told myself,
“Tomorrow I will have more love in my heart than sorrow.”
I repeated this until that day came.
Today is my day and tomorrow will be my day.
Today, and all days, I will have more love in my heart than sorrow.

Second Chances

Yolanda Torrez

The stillness of the air allows for the blood in my veins to take over my senses. The heavy *thump thump* of my heart with the incessant buzz coming from the kitchen's fluorescent lights creates a slow moving haze. "I Love Lucy" plays silently on the TV, Lucy carefully nursing her black eye and insisting it's just an accident.

Funny.

It's always "just an accident."

My cousin, Haley, had been staying with us for a while. Rumor had it that no one else wanted to deal with her and Haley insisted that she'd rather live on the streets than move back in with her father and the rest of her family. She did for a while, but being homeless didn't last long. Our grandmother was her saving grace.

I heard my mother and grandmother argue through the walls at night: "I don't want her around my daughter. She's only here to cause trouble."

Our grandmother won, claiming that I was either at school or asleep anyway and my mother could make Haley do the leftover chores that aren't on my to-do list.

When my mom picked me up at school a few weeks ago, she told me that Haley was taken to a special hospital – the counselors at school found out she was hurting herself. When she got out, she was going to be sleeping on our couch. I was instructed to act as if she didn't exist, absolutely no interaction.

That car ride was the longest of my life.

Haley was the "problem child" in the family. My mother said that having three siblings and a momma whose elevator didn't make it up to the top floor meant that Haley had to fight for attention. I remember hearing my grandmother cry to my mom about Roger, my uncle and Haley's father, being in the emergency room. His wife stabbed him in the chest and barely missed his heart. Haley had argued he didn't have one to start with.

Not long after that, my mother ran screaming from the house. Roger's wife was holding the kids hostage in the bathroom. If someone tried to open

the door, guns were rigged to fire in hopes of hitting one of their children. That was the first night I was grateful to be living with my own mother, malicious as she was towards me. After nearly killing him, Roger ran his wife out of the state, west to California, and no one had heard from her since. Both of Haley's parents were crazy. She seemed to be the only normal one in the bunch.

Perhaps I'm not the best judge of "normal."

"I never want to catch you doing that stupid shit," my mother warned me on our way home.

It made me acutely aware of the scars on my ankles, the fresh cuts on my hips that burned; my mother's words reverberated in my mind.

It was never enough.

Haley is in the kitchen taking her medicine. She does that a lot now. Everyone is afraid to be around her. I'm not supposed to be awake, but she seems so lonely. I don't want her to feel the paralyzing sorrow that has become my best friend. I can't see the scars that everyone talks about, but I'm sure they're there. They're always there.

Pain never leaves.

As she makes her way back to the living room, she holds onto the table chairs for leverage and bumps into the hutch. She leans on the wall of the entryway. My heart could rival a hummingbird's. I have the sudden urge to cry that I can't quite explain.

I cry a lot these days.

I smile when she makes it to the couch. Her returning smile is awkward, but she tries. She's trying. She lays down, turning her back to me, the end credits of "I Love Lucy" rolling.

"You're my favorite, you know? I'll always love you," Haley mumbles, a cry into the night.

I'll always love you.

She's out within seconds. Her steady breathing allows me to finally let the tears I was keeping at bay overflow.

I'll always love you.

The TV switches to infomercials, a new sweeper that works great on pet hair. The ability to wipe something clean was too depressing, too unattainable for someone like me.

Clicking the TV off, I head for my room. I slip on my winter gloves to keep my hands safe during the night, never mind that it's May. The gloves sustain the urge to hurt myself for another few hours. Sitting on the bed to change the bandages on my hips, the razor blades I have hidden call out to me. Blood stained cotton is the only home I know.

Ignoring the compulsion, I turn the lights off and cover up.

At night, the ghost of rough hands manipulating my body haunts my dreams, making me toss and turn. Sometimes I feel like I'm suffocating. Nothing is safe anymore. These calloused demons come in the night to steal innocence. Traces of their voices play on repeat in my head, taunting. There's no escaping, only the ability to admonish them with the sting of a blade. My demons live thousands of miles away, a tiny city with an ocean separating us, but I can always feel their presence, waiting for me to let my guard down.

Tonight, I bargain with the impression they've abandoned within me for sleep, pray that they'll spare me their ghosts and allow for rest.

Suddenly, there's movement outside my door.

My heart rate picks up speed again and the immediate panic that they've returned fills my body. Slipping my gloves off, I stand at my locked door to listen. My grandmother appears to also be desperately praying and my mother is giving someone a piece of her mind.

"What made you think this was okay? It's 2 o'clock in the morning! I don't have time to be taking you to the hospital for this kind of stupid shit!"

I flick my overhead light on and get dressed, relief not setting in quite yet.

It's going to be a long night.

"You're going to your father; this is his problem. You can keep your corrupting ideas away from my kid. You spend your time running away and look where it's got you, right back in your father's hands. If you'd stop making up stories about him, then maybe you could stay out of trouble for more than an hour!" seething, my mother howls into the void.

Instead of going to the hospital closest to our house, she decides the one that is two towns over is best. Haley's father works nights at a printing company there. My mother steadily reminds me to keep my eyes forward and to not look at or acknowledge Haley in any way. Our grandmother is trying to get Haley to

talk about what she's done but Haley's eyes are glazed over, unresponsive.

I wonder if my mother knows that if these feelings are contagious then Haley caught them from me, not the other way around.

Pulling up in front of the hospital sends everyone into a flurry. My mother jumps out of the driver's seat to catch my uncle's attention. He's waiting with a wheelchair and a nurse. My grandmother cries, telling Haley to hang in there, God's watching over her. I stay put until my mother tells me what to do. The last thing I want is for her to turn her anger on me. Once Haley is out of the car and rushed into the emergency room, I'm left in silence, the air crackling with energy. My mother is still stewing and I hold my breath as she returns to park, scared that even the slightest noise will turn her attention towards me. I must become a wallflower in order to survive the night. I left the only thing that could bring me comfort back at the house, tucked away in the front pocket of my backpack. Bringing razor blades to a hospital seemed too risky but now I don't know how I'm going to make it till morning without them. When my mother turns off the car, I slip out and wait for her to walk first. She's still grumbling and her aura makes me nervous. She's going to erupt soon and I can't handle being caught in the explosion. Following silently behind her allows for me to keep a low profile. The inside of the emergency room is lively, nurses and doctors running around and asking for information. I make my way to the corner, undetected. The words *suicide*, *pills*, *overdose*, *mental*, and *pump* are being thrown around by doctors and family alike.

That's when it clicks.

The waiting room starts swirling in my vision and my mind is screaming "Suicide!" at me like a mantra. I'm suddenly thankful to be sitting down with no one paying attention to me. The world around me turns black for a while. These moments are precious – stuck in limbo between existing and not existing.

Coming-to is less than pleasant. My grandmother is holding my hand and still silently crying. My mother and uncle are outside. I can hear them screaming from here but can't make out the words. Sitting up is painful from being slumped against the wall. My grandmother looks at me and asks if I'm still tired. I don't know how to tell her that I blacked out so I give her the answer she wants to hear.

She fills me in on what I've missed. The waiting room has quieted down a bit and I've learned that I had been "asleep" for nearly half an hour.

Haley is in critical condition and having her stomach pumped. Apparently, she took her full prescription of antidepressants while she had been in the kitchen earlier in the night. While I was trying to sleep, she had gotten up and told our grandmother that what she had done was an accident and her heart was feeling funny.

Part of me is jealous that she had the courage to do what I never can and angry that she wasn't successful. She wasted her chance.

My grandmother stops talking when my mother makes her way back into the hospital. Her eyes catch mine and something tells me that her "talk" with my uncle outside didn't end the way she wanted it to. She sits on the other side of the waiting room and snaps her fingers for me to come to her. I hurry to her side, a prisoner in my own mind. She's talking to me, or rather at me, but I can't seem to care. My hands are itching for something to do and my skin is crawling with the need for release. She makes me uneasy, nervous, scared to make the wrong move. I deeply regret not bringing my little tin of comfort with me.

"She's just doing this for attention. She's always been jealous of you. I never want to catch you doing stupid shit like this. I'd kill you first," my mother threatens loudly.

My mind starts racing. Sometimes my thoughts happen so quickly that I'm unable to focus on any of them, instead I just catch phrases, their essence. But I can feel the emotions that her words evoke and settle in my bones. The world gets heavy on my shoulders. The need to slice into myself is tangible and thick. My mind's an arrow, my body the bow, I'm frantic to release the tension in my skin.

My mother is still viciously speaking at me, trying to handle the situation in her own way with no concern for how others are reacting, completely unaware of my frenzied mind that must show through my eyes. My uncle continues to pace outside of the hospital. We lock eyes through the window and my demons make another appearance. Rough hands grip my neck while the other pair rips at my clothes. His gaze triggers them within me. A part of me wonders if he is one of Haley's demons the way that my own father is one of mine. I suddenly understand why she chose to be homeless for a couple weeks. The reminder that Roger's presence brings cements my decision and I try to get my mother's attention, "Momma?"

“What now?” she growls.

“May I use the bathroom?”

“You’re eleven years old, Yolanda. You don’t need my permission to use the bathroom. Just get out of my face.”

Hurrying to the bathroom, I can’t rip my pants off quick enough. The bandages on my hips from earlier in the night come off in my panic. I send a silent thank you to God for having long nails and begin scratching at the poorly healed cuts from this morning. It seems like a lifetime since I got to see the blood bead on the thin skin of my hips. My mind keeps telling me that once I see blood again, everything will be okay and I’ll make it through the night.

I just need to see the blood.

Haley’s earlier comment resurfaces, a murmur in the dripping crimson that spatters the tiled floor.

I’ll always love you.

Tears form in my eyes but can’t find the will to spill over. All I ever seem to do anymore is fight, fight to survive, fight with my mother. Being alive is a hardship and I realize that it’s true what they say. Life is hard.

I don’t see the point in it anymore.

Using the harsh, damp paper towels, I pat my hips dry of blood in hopes that none will seep through my jeans and be visible. The sharp smell of antiseptic reminds me that without Neosporin, my cuts will become angry and itchy. I welcome the infection that’s sure to come. With all of the trouble my mother insists I’ve caused in life, I’m certain I deserve it.

Leaving the bathroom, I find my mother waiting by the emergency room doors, tapping her foot in time with my beating heart.

“We’re leaving. I don’t want you getting any ideas.”

I doze during the car ride home, the early morning sunrise making promises I don’t want to hear.

Sleep is the closest I can get to death.

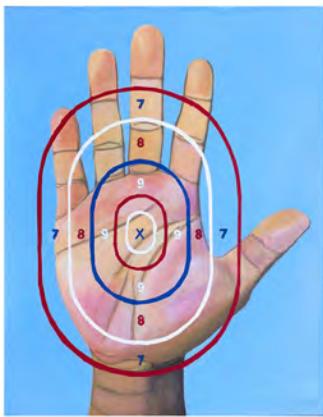
The Seven Ages of Women

Dallas Wabington

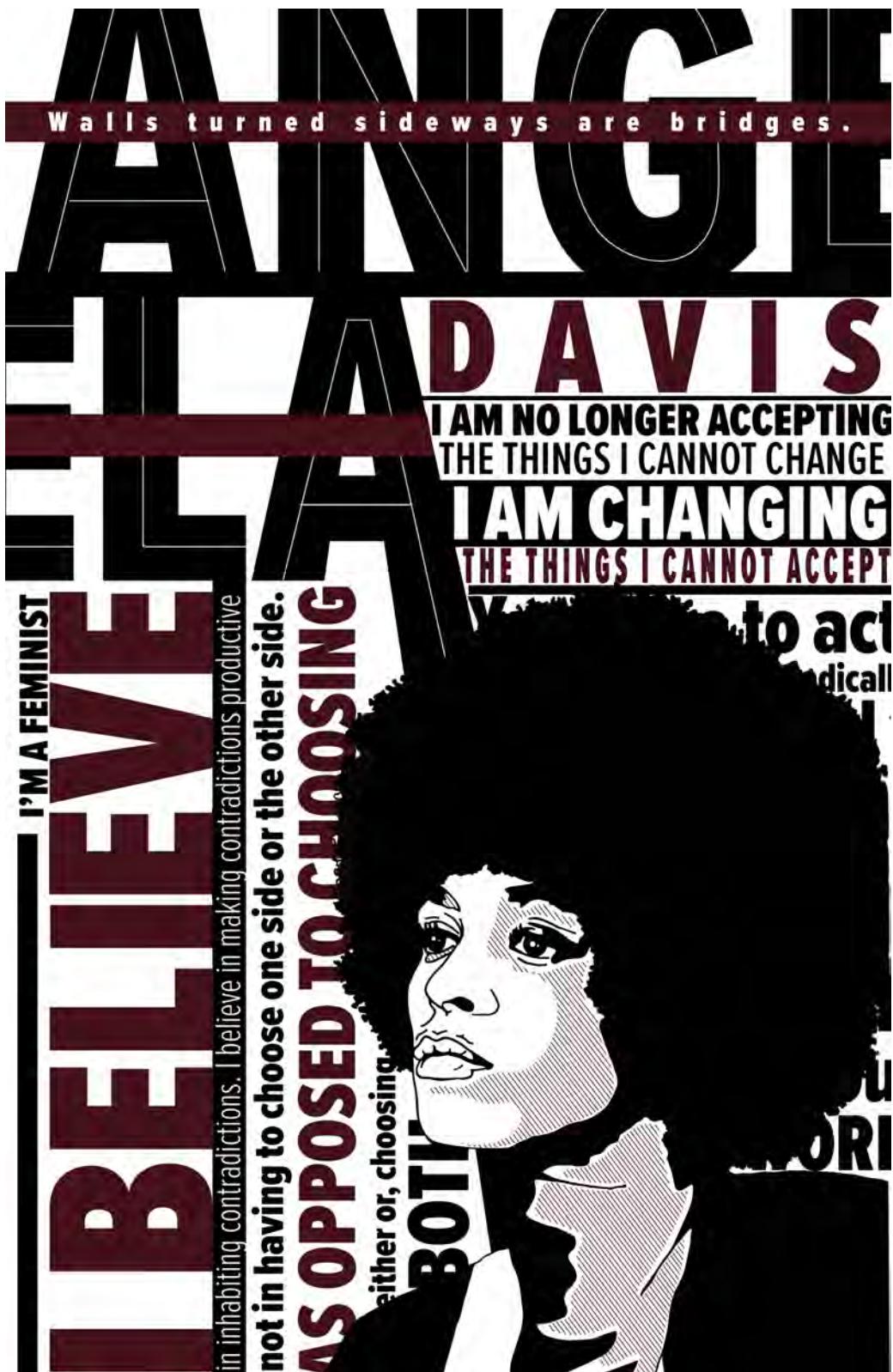
All the world's a stage,
And all the women are merely dolls;
They have their good days and rough days
Though it's seemingly not so in the role she plays.
Her acts being seven ages.
She is in the beginning a beautiful baby girl
Adored by all, cheeks pinched, clothes matched.
Then there is the shining bright star,
Seeing the world as her playground, and yet
Being pulled back as her mother shakes her head
At the mud on her new blouse.
And then comes the scared girl in a young woman's body
Frail, confused by what the world wants of her.
The love she feels for another
Crashes and smears across an unwashed floor.
Then a wanderer in the world,
Full of excitement and creativity,
Wondering if her dreams will come true.
And then the mother,
Gentleness in one eye, concern in the other.
She thinks of what her child's future will be like
And what will happen if the father leaves.
The sixth shifts into the independent old woman;
Her husband passes before her and
Remains spiteful and shows no pain or sorrow.
Last scene of all
That brings the woman to the end of the crescendo
Is forgiving and forgetting.
Now that her life's problems
Are close to not being her burdens,
She rests for eternity as a doll,
No longer on display.



Brunhilda by Autumn Brook



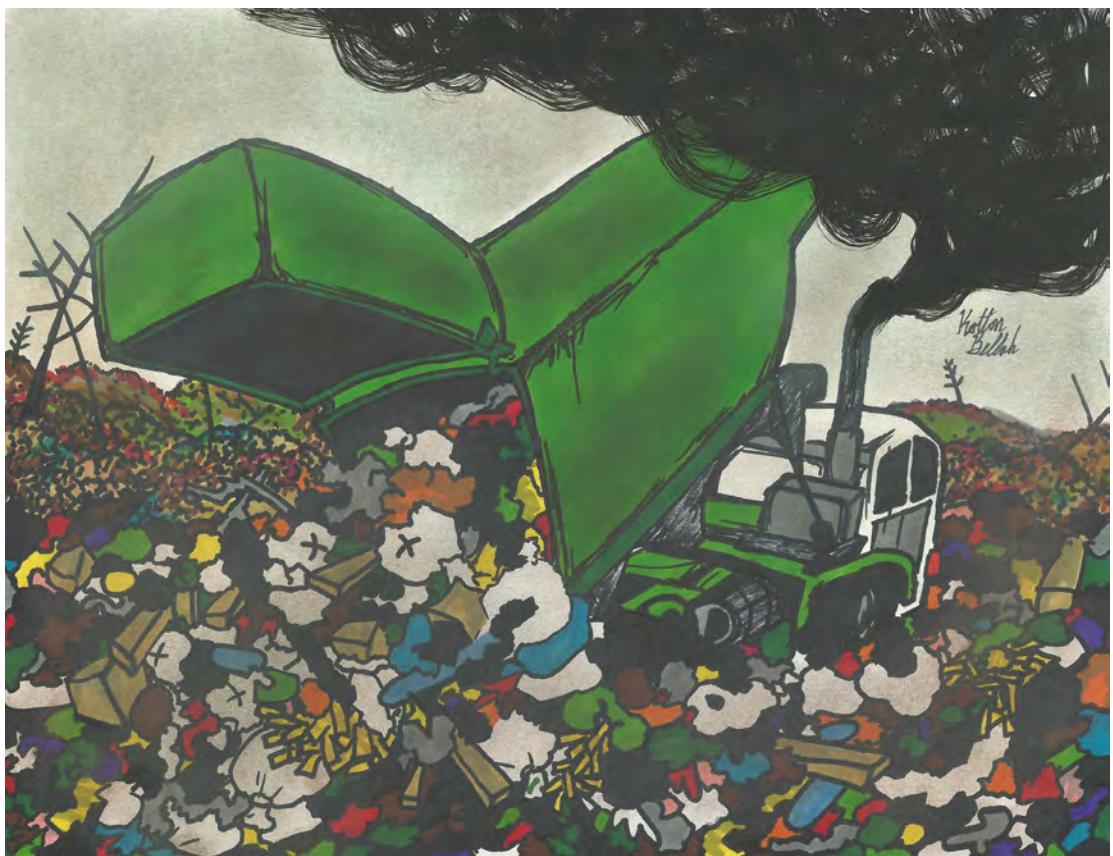
Open Season by Kevin Appiah-Kubi



Angela Davis by Krysten Farrier



Overlooking by Mallory Evangelista



Untitled by Kolton Blue Bellah



Balance in a World of Chaos by Marisol Reyes



Untitled by Kolton Blue Bellah



Fake News by Krysten Farrier

Eyes Straight Ahead

Kalli Root

January 21, 2017. The day after an uncouth orangutan (with lips reminiscent in appearance and function of an angry rectum) is sworn into office, the roar of four million defiant footsteps marching in unison reverberates across an empire. The echo of roughly another million footsteps harmonize with them from a handful of countries across the world. It's the largest single day demonstration in the history of the self-proclaimed "greatest country in the world," and I am part of it.

The state capitol stands rigid against the horizon; a fortress barricading the greying white men within from the steady stampede of sixty thousand of their discontented constituents. From her perch atop the building, the Goddess of Liberty presides over us, her eyes pointed unwaveringly ahead. The sign she holds up boasts no block letter words in permanent marker. Instead, her outstretched left arm grasps a bronze star, illuminating the concrete path. It's the middle of January, but our goosebumps are not because of the weather. There's an electricity searing through my veins, the crowd seems to crackle with it as we prod one another unintentionally with the corners of the posters held steadfast above our heads as we walk, nevertheless persisting despite the ache in our forearms. A mobile gallery hovers over the mass, showcasing everything from stock prints of the late Carrie Fisher declaring that "A Woman's Place Is In The Resistance," to minimalist scribbles of "FUCK TRUMP" on flimsy cardstock canvases, to a detailed rendering of greasy blonde hair protruding from an old-fashioned pipe, above the words "CECI N'EST PAS UN PRÉSIDENT."

Puns and statistics and satire bob overhead, but as the human current pulls me away from the center of the road and nearer to the sidewalk, my eyes drift downward toward a ragged man in worn clothing sitting cross-legged on the concrete, leaning against the wall of a pub at the end of the street. He reads from a tattered paperback, seemingly unfazed by the thousands of protesters mulling around him. The front cover has been torn off. Aside from the mumbled apologies of passersby who barely notice his existence in time to narrowly avoid trampling him underfoot, he and his contemporaries are not

acknowledged by the thousands who parade through the streets, eyes focused directly ahead, drunk on the pursuit of our own liberation.

Weaving in and out alongside the crowd on the sidewalk are many more ragged people in torn clothes, on the verge of invisibility. Most of them seem to be headed toward the enormous Salvation Army building down the street. The march veers off to the right before we would get close to the building, but I can see it from where I am. There are a few dozen people crowded outside around the door, and I wonder if the building is closed until nighttime or if it is open but already filled to capacity. I don't see any children, and there are only a handful of women. Perhaps the women have joined the march, or perhaps homeless shelters are like the Titanic, women and children take priority, and the rest are left to sink or starve or sleep on the pavement. I can pick out a few small groups huddled together, but most seem to stick to themselves. They, too, carry signs, though they lack the fervor of the pink-eared mob alongside them. Their signs are not the crisp, store-bought poster boards upon which is written the language of the resistance. Their signs are the scavenged lids of old pizza boxes with phrases like "Please Give" or "Will Rap For Money" or "Retired War Veteran," scribbled onto the brown, grease-stained cardboard.

The next turn of the route expels a river of activists onto the legendary Sixth Street. It's early afternoon, so the plethora of bars that line the street are not busy, but music of various genres can be heard blaring from a multitude of speakers as we walk. I've been here once before, at night, and observed the swarms of brightly colored people in dark makeup and expensive shoes stumble toward a night of excess and liver poisoning. One block away from the Salvation Army. I think of the people on the steps of the shelter, with their grumbling stomachs and frayed jackets and greasy pizza box signs. I wonder if they dance to the music or simply tune it out.

A low voice, gravel and smoke, stops me from the left. Instinctively, I turn around. The owner of the voice is a short, slim man, most likely in his mid to late thirties, though he is balding and the lines around the corners of his mouth suggest that he might be older. The tear in the thigh of his jeans is nearly covered by the baggy black shirt that is many sizes too large for his slight frame, and there is a hole in his sneaker. I had been approached by a man in

similar garb a couple of blocks ago. He had asked for cash, which I didn't have. I expect that this will be a repeat of the same scenario and I will once again have to admit that I don't have any bills on me, card is more convenient. I will have to confront once again the fact that although my involvement here feels like I'm on a mission to help save the world, restore democracy, ensure freedom and all that bullshit, in reality I'm incapable of even providing this man, or the hundreds of others in similar situations, with the means to acquire a hamburger. The excessively bright Starbucks Coffee sign under which he stands casts a slight green tint across his face, drawing out the hollowness beneath his eyes; the adverse effects of capitalism. Even if the movement succeeds and the world is saved and democracy is restored and freedom is ensured, when night comes he will sleep under a harsh lamp on the cold, unyielding pavement.

He doesn't ask for cash. Instead he asks for coffee.

Day 7

Whitney Atkinson

January 21st, 2017.

A dog in the window beside the door.

“I’ll be back in a week. Nina will take good care of you!”

Fingerprints against the glass. Heels on concrete. Wheels on asphalt. Music from the speaker. Thumb on phone screen. Eyes on road signs. Car in parking garage. Feet on tile. Chair in terminal.

(Eyes on her back. Murmurs in the air. Men shuffling feet. Adjusting red hats bearing campaign slogans.)

Window seat on the plane. Wheels on runway. “Why is that on your head?” A child beside her. A mother’s gasp.

“I am going to visit my mother for the first time in twelve years.”

(The child is pulled onto a lap. An empty middle seat.)

Muffled noise in unadjusted ears. Wavering flight. Crossword puzzles by overhead light.

(Glances over shoulders. The pilot locking the cockpit. Stewardesses offering coffee with artificially sweetened smiles.)

An abrupt landing, yanked from a dream. A layover. Another takeoff.

January 22nd, 2017.

“Welcome to Tehran.”

Legs numb, stumbling down stairs. Purse straps heavy on thin shoulders. Smile bright on drowsy lips. An embrace. Folds of silky hijab pressed to her cheek. Inhaling nutmeg, saffron, and home. Tears bleeding into collars, down the aged jowls of a mother unacquainted with her daughter for over a decade. A whisper. A welcome home.

Sun and sweaters melting into moon and foggy breath. Hips touching in the back seat of cars, body heat circulating warmth. Hands held. *Familiarity*. A house on the corner of the street, shaded by junipers. Dishes poured, feet tucked under cushions. Prayers whispered in gentle, flowing tones. A thank you for every hour on the clock, every cheek kissed, every walk down dirt roads. Homes bathed in warmth like an oven. Perspiration around smiling mouths.

January 27th, 2017.

An old friend. An older café. Tea stirred in ceramic mugs, napkins dabbing crumbs. A TV above the register, muted, red banner lacerating the screen.

EXECUTIVE ORDER BARS US ENTRY FROM 7 MUSLIM COUNTRIES.

A blink. A gesture. Ears straining above the hiss of coffee machines, seeking volume like a prayer.

(Heads turn. Drinks lower. Murmuring.)

Silence.

January 28th, 2017

Phone calls. Fabric crammed between the jaws of a zipper. A pair of underwear, forgotten beneath the bed. Heels on gravel. Tears on cheeks. Hugs, yanked from home like dreams from children. The lingering touch of a mother's aging fingers around her wrist. A cuff too brittle to keep her anchored to her country.

She does not cry until the wheels leave the runway. She thinks she spots her happiness outside the window, nestled in the sand and brush. It becomes imperceptibly smaller as she is whisked away.

Perhaps I will never retrieve it.

January 28th, 2017.

Eyes, red-rimmed. Utterly sleepless, butterflies evicted from her stomach and strangling her. The back of her tongue tastes like black tea and nausea.

"Is this your first time to America?" A voice beside her. Words dipped in honey, elementary slow.

Wheels on runway. Seatbelts unclicked. Eye contact with the one other women adorned in a headscarf. Bag collected. Hope so tangible it stings the inside of her nostrils as she inhales the New York air.

A TV. A headline. A pause. A breath.

(Heads turned. Shoulders jostling her. Exasperated mutters. Toes trodden on.)

A line. Held breath. Clasped hands. Prayer. (*Always to oneself, Nazanin. These Americans fear what they do not know.*)

A headshake. A gesture. Fear, passed down like DNA.

“But I have papers!”

(Shifted eyes. Shuffling papers. A sigh.)

Hard plastic. Shaking bones. Vision blurring, shoulders slumping, lips chanting.

When for the first time in five hours her vision clears, across from her sits a boy no older than five. He returns her stare with the equal gravity of helplessness. She looks away first.

Her last dream was 6,000 miles away. Her current dream is 600 steps away.

The child begins to weep.

Interviews. Papers relinquished, photocopied, scrutinized.

“Is this your first time to America?”

A tremble. Fingers gripping armrests. Stomach panging, reminding of missed meals lost in a world of hurt. Lips so chewed they bleed when she speaks.

“Ma’am, please don’t yell.”

Waiting becomes more comforting than talking. Being ignored means still being in America.

Sunsets. Food court dinners. The child is asleep, curled in a chair. (The woman beside him stroking his hair two generations too old to be his mom.)

(Where is his mom? Who is this boy’s mother?)

Seas of red hats transform into the sea of blood that makes her realize she has fallen asleep.

She has been woken up. Fingers around her elbow.

The waiting area is now empty. Have the others been executed by now? What century is it?

She doesn’t remember yelling. Her throat will begin to hurt in 6,000 miles.

Dragging footsteps. Two more men join to take her arms. Outside, the chants. Censored outrage. She cannot hear those who plead for her. The lawyers were too late.

Her phone dead. Her charger in her luggage. Her heart in her throat. Her car still in the parking garage. Her dog in the window beside the door.

Be Quiet Colorful Boy

Taylor Johnson

White, completely and utterly white
Red, blue, green, no not a color in sight

A dismal and dull classroom no doubt
But the colorless children learned not to pout

The students lacked color, even in their eyes
Like inanimate statues, a colorless guise

Each one the same, white, as they should be
Each one, but the boy who had eyes that could see.

The boy with the colorful words

From the tip of his pencil, as he wrote, the color strew
Off the desk, onto the floor, to the students, it flew.

The boy with the colorful words.

The teacher caught sight of the color's swift spreading
Stunned and angry, to the boy he was heading

He snatched the boy's paper, color seeping onto his finger
Dear teacher shook it off, and read, oh how the words linger

"Be abnormal, be adventurous, be different," they read
These Forbidden thoughts filled the teacher with dread.

"Where did such colorful ideas come?" the teacher inquired
A book, the boy presented, from which he was inspired

The teacher stole the book, from the child's loving grip
The teacher said to himself "How did I let this one slip?"

The teacher faced the students, each merely a clone
"No books of this nature! To the fire 'twill be thrown."

The colorful boy cried, blue tears on white wood.
"Now for you," said the teacher "write as you should."

The boy painfully erased his colorful writing
His skin turned white, color loss he was fighting

He then wrote what he had been forced to claim
"Be normal, be safe, be exactly the same"

The color then vanished, from his desk and his page
"Very good," the teacher said to the boy who was filled with rage

That was close! Now the boy is as he should be
There is nothing more dangerous than eyes that can see

But to our pleasure, the teacher fixed it of course!
He stopped the spread of color from its source.

The obedient teacher protected him, didn't he?
Or, perhaps he invoked more rage than the sea

Be quiet colorful boy, it might spread through the earth
Dastardly dangerous color, a dreaded rebirth.

Sand and Rust

Kolton Blue Bellah

Jude stared at the concession stand's selection of potato chips, peering through his thick black-rimmed glasses at the countless different flavors. He was unable to decide what he wanted, and so Jude nudged at the shoulder of his twelve-year-old son, Jacob. Jacob, had no difficulty in deciding which flavor he preferred. He chose a Big-Grab of sour cream and onion chips. But Jude's stomach turned at the thought of eating something so pungent inside the stadium. To a fault, Jude had a sensitive nose, and by coincidence, it was his most prominent feature. It seemed to Jude that the primary function of all smells was to sicken and disgust. Though it wasn't often that solitary odors deterred Jude from eating as freely as his son, but rather it was the combination of wholly incompatible aromas.

Each bag promised a different mixture of smells. There was cheddar and sour cream, honey barbecue, and salt and vinegar. Of course, though not explicitly advertised, every flavor—even those as simple as jalapeño or nacho cheese—also boasted the distinct odor of potatoes, as all of them were made using the same base ingredient. From Jacob's bag, Jude could smell onions and chemicals. From behind the counter, he could smell hotdogs, tomatoes, and grease. He could smell his own perspiration pooling in his armpits and down his back. And from somewhere on the outside—in the stadium of sand and rust—he could smell blood. For this reason, Jude only requested two perfectly scentless bottles of water before paying out.

Jude took Jacob by the hand and followed the flow of the crowd into the stadium. The sun was unadorned by clouds or cover of any kind and it radiated angry rays onto the masses below. The intense heat had persuaded the audience to retreat into the shade offered by the outer walls of the stadium, which were a mish-mash of iron and concrete rising only a few meters above the very back seats.

The seats themselves were very much like the seats Jude had seen in old textbooks from back when stadiums were for baseball and field games. They were proof that the past had happened, and they were some of the few artifacts of a time lost long ago. They overlooked the field, which was a pit of red sand. At the north and south ends of the pit were openings filled with darkness, and

an eerie wind seemed to whisk from them, carrying a mutiny of human voices. But these voices were unintelligible and drowned out by the low humming of the humongous jumbotron television hung on the west side of the stadium, just below the press box. It played commercials for products like Pepsi-Cola and Ford cars.

In the sea of faces and dingy plastic seats, Jude searched for D34 and D35, the seat numbers on his and Jacob's tickets. He spied the seats at the far east of the stadium, directly across from the jumbotron. Jude hurried Jacob toward the seats in a hazy trance, as if in the third-person. If not for the large signs placed above each row, he would have passed up the seats, as their aluminum placards were eroded into vague smears of scratched metal, and the row was horribly mismatched, with some chairs painted a bright sickly green and others an iridescent orange. The row was mostly populated by fattened men and makeup-faced women, whose lips smelled like cherry Dr. Pepper and amphetamines. The father and son sat down like invading pigeons in a flock of crows.

Beside the pair was a triple-chinned man in a well-ironed yellow button-down shirt. His hair was arranged in thin golden strands along the shining peak of his scalp. He took a sidelong glance across Jacob to Jude, and his great big eyes twinkled brightly. He greeted the duo with the enthusiasm of a long-time friend and giggled shrilly after every sentence he uttered, as if conversation were a hilarious joke. His demeanor was unsettling to Jude, who was generally uncomfortable with strangers and public spaces. After some obligatory small talk, the fat man's eyes narrowed and he leaned in toward Jude.

"Would you," the fat man began coyly, "have any interest in making a wager today?"

Jude scratched the tip of his nose in nervous thought, "I can't say I'm much of a gambler."

"What a shame," his eyes narrowed, "I have five hundred and twenty down on the Jew myself—you know—the one that carries the shield."

Jude stared down at his lap and swallowed hard. He didn't want to talk anymore. He wanted the fat man to be quiet. Jacob opened his bag of chips and Jude shivered.

"You know, this field was used for what the Old Americans called Football before the Post-Modern Crusades," his mouth curled, showing the full

repertoire of his teeth, “I hear it was a wonderful sport. A clash of strength and manpower—skulls bashing into each other at full force in horned helmets and Viking armor.” He smiled and smashed a meaty fist into his lap, “How very fitting,” he added gleefully.

The jumbotron lit up to a new shade of reddish-orange, and Jude’s attention was torn away from his neighbor’s account of the stadium’s history. On the screen was a slim man in a sparkling white suit, the kind you only ever see television personalities wear, with sequins and a bright red tie. He smiled through his veneers and held a silver microphone up to his mouth. He began to speak. Jude recognized this man as Bryan Best, the famous ex-host of the hit reality television series, *Christians Caught on Camera*, where he made a living popping out of closet doors and bathroom stalls to inform some unlucky person that they’d been “Caught on camera!” Then he’d have a man in dark clothes with big arms drag them away kicking and screaming behind the credits. Today he looked just as glamorous in the dusty arena sand pit as he did on TV, with his light brown hair in an inspired pompadour.

Bryan shouted and dazzled the crowd with flowery prose about how glad he was that everyone could make it to such a time-honored and respectable event. Then he thanked donors and special guests and repeated himself quite often, as he very much enjoyed the sound of his own voice. But after some time, he waved his hands and from somewhere deep inside the walls of the arena—from where Jude heard so many human voices—came the clattering of metal. Out of the darkness came a parade of giant men in mail armor, each dragging a cage by a chain. The cages were rusted and decrepit, and from inside them came the cries of men and women in agony. Jude thought there must have been close to twenty-five cages pulled into separate ends of the pit like the hour marks on an old-fashioned clock.

A metallic buzzer echoed through the air and the cages fell open. The muscled men prodded ragged figures into the sunlight. Out walked the Jew in his stapled-on Yarmulke, protected only by the hair on his chest and his wooden shield cut in the shape of the Star of David. Out walked the Catholic, who carried the weight of iron rosary beads, and the Hindu, whose arms and legs were constrained by a kurta too small for his body. Out walked the Muslim, and on his back was a gruesome scar of the word *Allah* in his native language; his fingers gripped a rusty scimitar. Out walked the Sikh, his head bowed low

under the weight of a concrete turban. Out walked the Shintoist with a rubber monk staff. And out walked the other men and women who all believed in something—be it the harvest god, the spirits of life and death, or the universal being—that they held onto in faith until that very moment. They wore cast iron collars, and from the napes of their necks they were bound to their prisons by short chain leashes. Like wounded animals, they pawed at the dry sand beneath them. Their arms and legs were wiry facsimiles of actual human limbs and their ribs poked through their weathered skins. Jude wrinkled his brow and struggled to swallow the hot stench of urine and human excrement that permeated his nostrils.

Yet there was still one combatant to be seen, and Jude searched the pit for a face he knew. His eyes were caught by her frame—the frame of the Christian, whose hair was a nostalgic blonde. From her neck hung an oversized cross, and Jude could feel its weight in the four chambers of his heart. In her trembling hands she carried an old blade bedazzled with worthless glass jewels the color of fresh blood. Jude looked beside him to see his son sitting silent as a shadow in the seat beside him. Sweat trickled down Jude's back, but he saw that Jacob was not as affected by the sight of the Christian woman. He only stared, and Jude was envious of his son's collectedness.

From somewhere behind Jude came a hissing cry. A woman was standing up in her seat shouting with her hands forming a funnel around her mouth. Beside Jacob the triple-chinned man started stomping his feet against the ground. The rhythm of his massive heels pounding against the metal beneath him created jarring reverberations that rattled the plastic seats. Like an infectious disease, the vibrations spurred the crowd to life. Every foot rose and fell in unison—BOOM-BAM-CRASH—BOOM-BAM-CRASH!

“Are you READY!” sounded Bryan’s crystal voice over the loudspeakers.
“Yes!”

“Let them kill each other!” yelled the fat man.

“Kill them all!”

“Break those chains!” the woman screeched.

“Burn in your own hells!”

Something then possessed Jude to scream, “Let the bastards die!”

On the jumbotron, red numbers began to count down from ten. Each time the clock ticked down the crowd would shout the number aloud.

“TEN! NINE! EIGHT!”

The wardens lifted their hulking axes.

“SEVEN! SIX! FIVE!”

The prisoners said the last words of their final prayers.

“FOUR! THREE! TWO! ONE!”

“FI—GHT!” Bryan yelled, and with a flourish of showmanship and pride, the wardens let their axes fall on the chains. The combatants were freed from their leashes. They began a death march to the center of the field on wobbly legs as the crowd burst into a hysterical war chant.

“Blood, blood, we want blood! Blood, blood, we want blood!”

Not wanting to be the odd one out, Jude followed suit. He then nudged Jacob with his elbow and Jacob joined in, though his voice seemed lost and small in the crowd. Jude felt his own voice sink into the ocean of noise. His mouth and legs worked as if independent of his brain, chanting along and stamping the ground.

In the center of the coliseum, there was a clatter of swords, shields, and naked bodies. The Shintoist was the first to die. His rubber staff was sliced in two equal pieces and his skull was hewn by the Christian’s jeweled blade. Brain matter and blood muddied the sand around them, and the Christian’s left leg slid out from underneath her. Her frail body smashed into the muck. Her knees appeared mangled by her tumultuous descent, and unable to straighten her legs out again, she laid vulnerable beside her victim. Close by the Jew was cowering by the scene, visibly shaken. He did not look used to fighting. This was likely his debut to the battlefield.

“Finish her!” yelled the fat man, and Jude flinched. The Jew, as if in direct response to the fat man’s cries, dropped his wooden shield and wrestled the bedazzled sword from the woman. Her feeble hands fell from the grip. Jude could see her lips move silently from his seat, but he could not see what they were saying. Perhaps instinctively, he copied what he thought they might say with his own, and he did not regret the risk this posed. Her eyes stared in his direction, but he was unsure if they were looking at him. His vision focused and unfocused like a broken camera lens. The Jewish man pierced her abdomen. Jude bit his lower lip. Jacob only watched.

“Forgive me!” he cried as he pulled the blade free. A river of blood poured from the wound. Jude saw the woman’s eyes darken and her head fell

limp under the weight of her beautiful mane.

“Good show! Good show!” the fat man hollered. He flashed his boyish eyes toward Jude again and a smirk spread across his face, “My odds are looking good! Wouldn’t you say?”

Jude just nodded his head. There was a catch in his throat and he was unsure what would happen to his voice if he tried replying audibly. Meanwhile, the Jewish man had fallen onto his knees, gulping air in throaty cries and hugging the sword to his chest like a newborn baby. He mouthed the words again, *forgive me*, but he was cut short as a warden approached him from behind. The brute lashed him across the back with his silver whip.

“Fight!” yelled the warden, “Fight or be killed!”

All the Jewish man could do was sulk in the burgundy mud, crying to his god and angels for forgiveness as wounds spread like feathers on his back. His voice became hoarse, and then he fell silent and unmoving onto the ground. The warden tossed the unconscious man over his shoulder like a shepherd carries a lamb. Blood trailed behind them as he took the Jew away. The fat man’s face contorted into a grimace and his cheeks turned cherry red.

“Damn coward,” he pouted.

On the field, the fighting was finally coming to a close. While Jude was focusing on the fighting between the Christian and the Jew, most of the other combatants had already slain each other. All that remained was the Muslim, who Jude then noticed was very young, perhaps in his early twenties. His arms were muscular and his face held the fullness indicative of good health. In his hands he held a slender blade which he had won in combat. But he did not celebrate his victory as the crowd did. He hung his head in shame, and a warden led him back into his cage and dragged him deep into the darkness of the inner walls to fight another day.

Bryan thanked the crowd for watching, and then everyone delighted in the closing ceremonies. The jumbotron opened like a pair of automatic doors and from behind the screen a giant golden idol was revealed. It was borne in the likeness of a headless man of nondescript features, like a mannequin in a store window. In his left hand he held a pristine diamond and his right was a silver scepter. The scepter’s tip pierced through a platinum ‘S’ so that the end of the staff was likened to a dollar sign—the highest symbol of all.

The people in the crowd cried out to the figure with declarations of love and loyalty. They wept tears of joy and asked for deliverance and stadium

employees ran up and down the aisles selling refreshments, t-shirts, and souvenirs.

From the neck of the headless statue spewed clouds of colored gasses and the air filled with dizzying perfumes. Jude smelled apricot, apple cinnamon, and a hint of fresh baked bread. He felt needles prick at his arms and legs—in and out like intoxicating mosquito bites. His head filled with beautiful images and the voices of otherworldly forces. Jude swallowed pellets like raw oxygen, and they slid down his trachea and into his stomach to be broken down and utilized by his central nervous system. The air around him seemed to shiver and sweat an electric energy and his arms and legs quaked. His son, Jacob disappeared into a colorful mass of moving smokes. The fat man became an angel and the makeup faced women were like cherubim. Jude's nerves left him, the sweat running down his back began to evaporate. His mouth filled with the taste of sour cream and onion potato chips. Then everything went white.

Jude could smell shampoo in Jacob's hair as he tucked him into bed. Jude could see the grey hue of experience in his son's eyes as they slowly closed. Jude wondered when his son's eyes had become so distant and dark. The scent of a lavender candle mixed with the alien taste of wood cleaner. Jude blew out the flame and remembered cleaning the bedside tables that morning—where he kept his book. He opened a drawer in the front of the nightstand and fished out an old text. It was a book of history and lore from a time much like the present, but ultimately different. He opened up to a page that he had marked some time before he could remember and the corners of the brittle aged paper cracked slightly at his touch. Jude's lips moved but he dared not read aloud. He remembered the Christian as she died in battle. And he closed the book, depositing it somewhere deep between the mattress and the bedspring.

Jude retreated to his own room, his private sanctuary. He sighed heavily and relaxed his head onto his pillow. He removed his glasses and closed his eyes. All that remained was the smell of his sheets. They ached with the memory of fabric softener and a female presence. The scent of beautiful blonde hair. He closed his eyes and counted the seconds between consciousness and sleep.

One. Two. Three.

The numbers faded into blackness. He did not dream.

Jude awoke to the smell of sand and rust.

Keep It 100

E.N. Bourland

Which one do you like more?
she asks as we sit in her truck under the street light.
A half hour earlier I had texted her
“Are you still on campus?”

Because I was so high on adrenaline and hope.

And so we met in the Bolin parking lot,
and I slid beside her
and looked into my best friend’s eyes
and I stuttered, “There’s something I want to tell you.”

I licked my lips.
This was going to be hard.

“Have you ever known a gay person?”
“Was Daniel gay?”

“He was.”

“Okay, then one.”

And then I told her.
“I’m bisexual.”
“Okay,” she said
as they do.

Before they even process what you’ve said, they say okay
and then the realization hits their face and you see the true reaction.

And then I rambled for a solid half hour about
“not a choice”

“still a Christian”

“it’s a blessing”

And then she said, “Which one do you like more?”

I stared out the windshield and tried to think how to answer.

If I say guys, she’ll assume I’m really just bi-curious
and dismiss me.

If I say girls, she’ll assume I’m really just gay,
and dismiss me.

Because they want to pin you down

Ask, well, what percentage?

50/50?

No.

I don’t give half myself to a man

or half myself to a woman

I give my whole self to whoever I’m with
because that’s what being bi is about

It’s the possibility to fall in love with someone
that might be my gender or another

No.

Not 50/50

100/100.

a wave

Haven Gomez

our curtains, browned satin,
cloud of stained nicotine.
ashes blown in my eyes,
my grandmother smoked.

we listened to Fats Domino on record,
danced with a vacuum
between us.
we sang.

I had a nightmare once:
left to preserve in formaldehyde,
I threw up the brown
of my hair,

a feather was laid in front
of my jar, dull speckled brown.
it whispered recipes of fractions
and flight and slingshots.

my grandma took me
to church Sunday, Wednesday,
every holiday, and everything,
but me, was white.

Vignette of a Writer

Kalli Root

She lit a candle, wondering if she had done so because she wanted a candle lit, or because she wanted to put off the writing process for those few extra moments. Don't get me wrong, she loved to write. Once she sat down and allowed her mind to wander about, the words flowed through her fingertips and onto the page, like music onto paper. Nothing felt more honest or more empowering. It was the embarking--the act of sitting down and opening the laptop and creating a document wherein to preserve one's thoughts--that she found incredibly daunting. In addition to lighting the candles, she had found the time to fold and store several miscellaneous articles of clothing in their proper locations, procure a cool bottle of water from the refrigerator and throw away last night's empty bottle which had been abandoned on the window sill, pour the last of the sparkling grape juice into a freshly cleaned glass (which now sits forgotten on the window sill), and water the succulent. In the middle of the night, mentally warding off the pressure of impending obligations, she managed to accomplish all of these things when mid-day she hadn't even remembered to feed herself.

When at last she ran out of menial tasks with which to distract herself, she sat with her laptop on the elevated bed, facing out toward the window. The flickering of the candle, the only light from within the room besides the dim screen of the laptop, seemed to dance with the barren tree outside the window; fire and wind in alignment. She had a thousand words to describe the world she saw, glorious words and hideous words and words that meant nothing at all but did so in a slightly novel or amusing way, and thus might have been worthy of recording if they'd had a plot to boast of. She typed this nothing without censorship and prayed to every god she didn't believe in that tonight might be the night her writing was informed once more by the electricity of inspiration. The light from the candle seemed to emanate and swallow the whole room in the peripheral, but when she glanced up she noticed the three wicks still flickering softly, unrelated to the headlight which had showered the room. Noticing the decals on the side of the vehicle, she wondered if they'd seen the thing, which despite being against the building's policies, remained lit on the

window sill. The authorities have better things to look for than contraband candles in third floor windows at 2am, she had to presume. Her rogue and petulant hands had taken a break from their manic typing, as though the mind had needed their aid in contemplating the probability of being arrested for ownership of a candle. She tried to focus back in on what she'd been typing, seeing the words for the first time. They made sense to a mind half delusional from lack of sleep, though only time would reveal whether the rising of the sun would render them transparent.

Old Book

Dominique Wagoner

This is a message to you
Like the old book on the shelf
You have been through many things
And although you may have some rips and tears
You are still here
So tell me your story
Entice me with a twist at every turn
Your life is an adventure
And I want to see what happens next
And just like that old book on the shelf
There will be others that would love to hear your story

THANK YOU TO OUR CONTRIBUTORS!

Kevin Appiah-Kubi attends Midwestern State University and is part of the Juanita & Ralph Harvey School of Visual Arts. Currently in his senior year, Kevin's major emphasis is in photography and his minor emphasis is in drawing. He also enjoys painting and screen-printing.

Whitney Atkinson is a full-time English major at Midwestern State University and a part-time enthusiast of all things literature. She enjoys peeling dried glue off the top of the bottle, being sassy, reading until three A.M. on school nights, raspberry sweet tea from Sonic, man buns, and that one breed of guinea pig that's really fluffy. She hopes to one day move to New York City and work in publishing among all of her favorite authors (which is quite a hefty list).

Kolton Blue Bellah is an English major at Midwestern State University. He grew up in Woodson, TX, a small town with population of about 300, where he graduated high school from a class of four. Kolton is interested in video games, science fiction, literature, and art.

Robin Bissett is a sophomore studying English. She loves to read and hike. She spent last summer in Jackson, Wyoming.

E. N. Bourland is a graduate student at Midwestern State University. They are interested in writing center studies, composition pedagogies, American literature, and queer studies. Besides the obvious reading and writing, they enjoy camping with family, playing board games with friends, and spending too much time complaining about politics on Twitter.

Autumn Brook is a full time student at Midwestern State University. She's majoring in Fine Art, with an emphasis in drawing and sculpture. Her artwork utilizes bright, loud colors, and she focuses on psychedelic visuals and tapping into the subconscious.

Rebecca Burns has lived her whole life in areas surrounding Wichita Falls and is still currently there. She grew up with her loving family, which includes her Mom, Dad, two sisters, and of course the dogs. Most of her time is spent studying and working on assignments for school. In her free time, she enjoys

hanging out and talking to family and friends.

Sydney Elizabeth Chandler is currently a senior at Saint Edwards University, studying Creative Writing with a focus in Children's Literature. She reads to escape into as many worlds as possible. She writes to try and create her own.

Lauren Compean is a junior art major with an emphasis in graphic design.

Mallory Evangelista is a pianist, fitness enthusiast, writer, photographer and world traveler from Aurora, Colorado. She has lived in five countries and four states and has visited nineteen states and over fifteen countries, from which she gets her writing inspiration. She has been featured in the Stars and Stripes, the U.S. Military's independent news source and has attended journalism conferences in Tokyo, Japan. She is studying English at Midwestern State University and lives by Jeremiah 29:11.

A. F. Fandrich is a simple soul. She enjoys gardening, playing with her many dogs, and mooing at her cows from time to time. A. F. gives all glory to God, and thanks Him every day for allowing her to write. She aspires to be a Christian fiction writer. Follow her blog at affandrich.wordpress.com.

Krysten Farrier is a senior at Midwestern State University with an emphasis in Graphic Design and minor in Printmaking.

Haven Gomez is a graduate student at Sam Houston State University. She is currently working toward her MFA in Creative Writing, Editing, & Publishing with an emphasis in poetry. She works as the Editor of the Beacon, and the Assistant Editor of the Texas Review. She currently lives in Huntsville, Texas.

Leo Gonzalez is a photographer and content creator on instagram at @LeoGPhotography.

Kristy Henderson is a senior at MSU pursuing a Bachelors of Arts degree.

Ashlynd Elizabeth Huffman is a sophomore at East Central University.

Ginger Johnson is a twenty year old girl from Tulsa, OK. She is a junior at East Central University with a double major in mathematics and English. She has been attempting to write since she was eight years old. She has no idea what she wants to do with her life, but she knows she will keep writing.

Taylor Johnson is a freshman at East Central University and lives in Ada, Oklahoma. Her major is English and she plans on becoming a novelist and illustrator. She enjoys drawing, collecting record albums, and most of all, writing.

Chad Marqui grew up in Zion, Illinois, but spent most of his adult life in Chicago. He has studied English, creative writing, and philosophy at Trinity and Lake Forest College before returning to school at Midwestern State University. Chad is now completing his degree in English with ELAR Certification. He hopes to teach prescriptive grammar to high school students while eventually completing an MFA in Creative Writing. His first play, These Four Walls, was a Playwrights in Progress selection and enjoyed an extremely brief run at Victory Gardens Theatre in Chicago. His flash fiction piece, “The Sorcerer of Summit Street,” won the 2016 Vinson Award for Writing at MWSU.

Jackson Martin attends Abilene Christian University and is studying biology with a Pre-Med concentration. Many of his poems revolve around the subtleties within life that often go unnoticed, and he would list Wendell Berry and Walt Whitman as influences.

Alexis B Mendez is a senior psychology major attending Midwestern State University. Writing and photography have always been passions for her ever since she was young. She loves the creative ability that they both bring. She self-published a poetry book titled “Sometimes Sad Things are Beautiful” in the summer of 2017 and it is currently available on Amazon. She is also working on a second poetry book, which she hopes to publish very soon.

Andrea Mikail is a writer and a literature undergrad at UHCL.

David C. Milks is a man with passions and history in both soccer and the written word, putting his experiences in both to use in writing and the pursuit of a career as a high school English teacher.

Kathryn Miser is a senior in the dental hygiene program at MSU and is also an Alpha Phi alumni.

Selena Mize is a senior art major from Burkburnett, TX.

Faith Muñoz is a senior English major at Midwestern State University who graduated December 2017. She is from Wichita Falls, Texas. She is the winner of the 2016-17 Bryan L. Lawrence Award. Aside from writing, she enjoys editing, teaching, reading, going to church, spending time with family, and learning languages. She is fluent in Spanish and French and is learning Korean.

Jessica Odom is a junior attending Midwestern State University. After taking Introduction to Creative Writing as an elective, she was inspired to continue writing poetry and prose. Being a lifelong book lover, she is excited to be on the other side of the page. She hopes to create and share more of her work in the future.

Ethan F. Parker is a senior art major with a primary emphasis in Sculpture and a secondary emphasis in Printmaking. He will graduate in Spring 2018 with a BFA.

Katie Parsons is a sophomore nursing major from Haltom City, Texas.

Marisol Reyes is a criminal justice major at Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls, Texas. She had never taken a proper photography class until the past fall semester. She has always loved the arts but never had the opportunity to embrace this hidden passion. Her world is very chaotic, but photography gives her a sense of sanity. She has found a new way to see the world and is able to transform it into something entirely different.

Kalli Root is an English major at Midwestern State University with a minor in theatre.

Cassie Rutledge is currently a senior at Midwestern State University, receiving her bachelors in English Language Arts and her teaching certification for grades 7-12. After graduation, she intends to teach high school English, and she hopes to share her love of reading and writing with all of her students. Authors who have inspired her to write include Jane Austen, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Edgar Allan Poe.

C.J. Shaleesh is currently attending St. Edward's University, where she is pursuing bachelor degrees in marketing and English writing and rhetoric with a concentration in Creative Writing. At the moment, she is working as the editor-in-chief of Sorin Oak Review, as well as the poetry section editor and a staff writer for New Literati. After she graduates, C.J. hopes to continue following her dream of working in publishing as an editor.

Samantha Smith is an average 17 year old girl in high school who just so happens to like poetry.

Yolanda Torres is a senior humanities major at Midwestern State University. She writes to spread awareness about mental health and to speak out about trauma and abuse. She found her voice when she stumbled into a creative writing class at MSU and continues to write in hopes that messages of hope and inspiration will spread to those who need it most.

Dallas Wabbington's piece is a twist she created which was inspired by William Shakespeare's "Seven Ages of Man." One of her past English teachers told her to make it into her own, so here it is.

Dominique Wagoner is a senior at Midwestern State University. She is currently working on her English BA with a minor in Spanish. She is a part of Sigma Tau Delta (English Honor Society) and hopes to get works published in the future. One of the many goals is to become a teacher and inspire children to write creatively. She believes writing is an important aspect to self-exploration and self-expression. When she is not attending MSU or working

many hours at her job, she enjoys writing poetry, painting, cooking, watching funny cat videos, and sleeping.

Cullen Whisenhunt is a graduate student in the Red Earth MFA Program at Oklahoma City University and a full-time English instructor with Murray State College in Tishomingo, Oklahoma.

