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Sunny Liu
Tajender Singh Luthra
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Rhonda Mitchell
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Martheaus Perkins
Kerrigan Reyes
Aditi Sawant
Sharon Scholl
Maya Shojaatalab
Luken Sloan
Benjamin Stewart
Catherine Wang
Izzy Wang
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presents

VOICES

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Editors' Note

We, the editors, are pleased to present to you, the readers, the forty-fourth edition of *Voices*. We would like to thank Dr. John Schulze for his guidance, without which this publication would not have been possible. Additionally, we thank the Department of English, Humanities and Philosophy, the Student Allocations Committee, and the Bryan L. Lawrence Endowment for supporting and funding this publication. Perhaps most importantly, we would like to thank those who trusted us with their submissions.

This edition takes our readers on a journey through the diverse perspectives of the writers, poets, and artists whose work was selected by the editors. Nature is thematic in the opening pieces and is reflected in the cover and interior art. The geese at Midwestern are significant to the student experience—in the fall we are all figuring out how to coexist, and by spring fuzzy goslings remind us of what's important—all alum will recall their omnipresence on campus. With Nature foregrounded, subsequent works transition through love, joy, duty, confusion, regret, family, death, and conclude with a sense of nostalgia, highlighted by the award-winning poem "Family Album." We hope our presentation of these artists and writers brings honor to their work and illustrates how we are more alike than we are different.

If you would like to submit your work for a future edition of *Voices*, you can find us on Submittable.com. For more information about our journal, including access to back issues, please visit our website:

www.voicesjournal.org

Cover Art and Design:

Grace Ainsworth

"Bird Watching"

Mixed Media

MSU Texas Writing Awards

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

The President's Awards for Creative Writing are awarded in two categories: poetry and prose. All submissions from all contributors are eligible for this award. In addition to publication in *Voices*, each winner will receive a cash prize: First Place- \$100, Second Place- \$50, and Third Place- \$25.

Everyone who has work published in *Voices* will receive a contributor's copy in the mail. Additional copies are available for purchase through our website.

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Snowman Guts Taste Great

Jessica Harrison

“Auntie Ris! Auntie Ris!” Maggie screams and runs as fast as her little ladybug rain boots that squish into the soggy grass could carry her. The snow had melted since this morning creating a sad gray sludge that crunched in some places but mainly made a very unpleasant macaroni sound.

Christine was left with the cute little nugget while Maggie’s mom was out of town at a conference. Things had gone well in that she actually made it to pick up on time. Her mom had dropped her off at school with a rainbow sprinkle donut in her belly and a jelly donut for lunch to make up for the fact that she was leaving. It was also yet another obstacle to set Christine up for failure since the bar was already so low. You buy a six-year-old a Frappuccino and suddenly you are ill equipped to watch a child. Christine hoped all that sugar from the donuts rattling around in that tiny body would cause her to crash by the time she had arrived to pick her up. Based on the screams and Olympic-like running, she had retained the sugary fuel and was ready to blast off to the moon.

“What’s up, Bug?” Christine responds, grabbing her glittery unicorn backpack and throwing it over her shoulder.

“Look what I made,” she gleams. She reaches into her pocket to reveal a white Hanes sock snowman who had internal organs of rice. Christine pondered for a moment if any of the famous snowmen had internal organs. Surely if the warmth of Christmas magic ran through them, it would melt their little snowman heart and subsequently cause the snowman to internally combust. That wasn’t the heartwarming ending she had remembered.

“His name is Mr. Ricecicle. Miles McDaniels said he was a bit wonky and that I should redo his nose but with a bean instead of the button that I had. A bean? Snowmen don’t have bean noses. It’s a carrot or a button. Everyone knows it. So, I told him he was wonkier, especially with that Pinocchio nose.” The sound of Maggie sniffing was accompanied by the maraca like sensation of Mr. Ricecicle’s guts sloshing around.

“That wasn’t very nice, Mags. It seems like he was just trying

to help.” She wanted to tell Maggie it was a good comeback, but she knew her sister would get a strongly worded letter a week from now saying Maggie had said something far worse to the boy. Or even worse, made him look wonkier.

“He’s still wonkier. If you’d seen him, you’d agree.”

“Where is he?” Christine scanned the crowd until Maggie outstretched a vicious finger smelling of glue at a small boy in cargo shorts and a Hawaiian shirt sat on the red bench as children with parents in tow fled the school. The kid looked a little off, but it had mainly to do with his wild hair and clothes of many genres.

“Don’t you think what’s on the inside is more important?” Christine attempted but Maggie wasn’t able to meet her halfway.

“Like blood and guts? Bleh. Still yucky!” Maggie groaned.

“I meant their character. Never mind.” Christine didn’t know how to explain to a sugar high and hungry child how personality and morals were more important than looks. Honesty, she didn’t believe it herself. The night before, she saw a man with abs and slept with him. No small talk or anything. She couldn’t tell Maggie that. Instead, she dragged the princess behind her through the drop off zone with cars honking and chatter ablaze.

“Hello. I’m Maggie’s Aunt,” she introduced herself.

“I’m not supposed to talk to strangers,” Miles declared.

“She’s not a stranger. She’s my auntie,” Maggie groaned matter-of-factly.

“Hi. I’m Mark, Miles’ uncle.” The scent of aftershave in the form of an obnoxious cloud fogged her vision as he spoke. It smelled of wood and sage. Pleasant but only in small doses. It was only after it dissipated that she saw who was speaking, a tall, handsome scruffy-faced man with a jaw that could cut a PB&J in half. “Hot,” she blurted against her will.

“Excuse me?”

“Hot Chocolate. I was going to invite Miles over for a play date with hot chocolate and some dinner,” her voice squeaks in defense. Her face begins to sizzle and instantly warms her from the sludgy cold. Since Christine was always the last option to care for Maggie, she felt the need to prove herself. She would use this awkward sock man and equally awkward child as a teaching moment. She would invite the boy over for dinner. That way the two could play and make amends. It would also only be

right to invite his dreamy uncle. That way it was a win-win for everyone involved. Making new friends all around.

“You must really need that hot chocolate to warm you up. Your face is bright red, Auntie Ris,” Maggie felt the urge to point out.

“That would be great. I got the kid sprung on me, so I didn’t have time to think of anything,” he whispers into her ear, his soft warm breath setting her internal temperature through the roof.

“Okay, sounds like a plan,” she declared. Before they begin their venture home, Maggie pulls her aside.

“I want you to have hideous Mr. Ricecicle!” She raised the snowman above her head towards Christine, bestowing it as if it is the highest honor of the first grade. Christine graciously accepted the great honor and hugged the plump sock.

“I will cherish him forever,” she proclaims, squeezing him tight.

The four trekked back to Christine’s apartment. They chat about the drama and gossip that has fueled the lunchroom today. Apparently, children unknowingly loved to gossip more than the catty women in Christine’s office. Though it wasn’t as juicy as Christine would have liked. Mainly stolen toys and the perplexing digestive system of Samuel, the kid who ate an entire tub of glue. Christine suggested Samuel might hit it off with Amanda, the girl who revealed last week that she eats erasers. She preferred the comically oversized ones, or the ones shaped like little foods. She refrained from animal shaped erasers because she was a vegan.

After a seven-minute walk and a discussion about if the erasers she’d eaten erased Amanda’s poop or if Samuel’s made him stick to the toilet, they made it to Christine’s apartment. It was a small loft the best that she could afford. Every room was in the same area. The living room was five feet away from the kitchen which was ten feet away from the bedroom which was two feet away from the bathroom. Surprisingly, this was the ideal location to babysit. She could talk to Mark while also making sure Maggie and Miles didn’t kill each other.

“Okay. What should we have for dinner?” Christine realized she probably should have thought about that beforehand.

“Princesses get fancy dinner!” She squeals before Mike could answer. Her stiff glitter tulle princess dress crunches as

she curtseys.

“Don’t you think our guests should have a say?”

“I’m an explorer, so I scavenge for anything. I can discover a fancy dinner,” Miles said.

“Why is an explorer in my kingdom?” Maggie growled.

“Because I was out looking for more land that you could conquer. You’re really good at that.”

“You think so?” She perked up a bit.

“Yeah, like when we wanted to play on the swings, but they were all full, so you threatened to give Daniel and Rodrigo cooties if they didn’t leave.”

“And we got the whole swing set to ourselves,” she smiled.

While Maggie and Miles were sipping on hot chocolates with extra whip cream and plotting how to take over the school, Christine walked into the kitchen and began racking her brain with what to cook.

“I didn’t make it to the grocery store.” Christine panics. If Maggie didn’t smell the aroma of chicken sizzling soon, she would go into full melt down mode. “No, it’s okay, we’ve got this. We can do this,” she says as she rustles through the barren kitchen.

She thought back to her college days. How she could turn a couple crumbs of bread, some chicken nuggets, and an old container of fries into a surprisingly high brow meal. She settles on a college hack classic of a subpar Chicken piccata, if it can be called that. She grabs some dinosaur chicken nuggets and begins cutting the bread off. As she attempts to perfect the sauce, she spoons some into her mouth. The flavor was far too rich and heavy and yet the flavor was lackluster as it slid on her tongue. Then, finds a loose lemon for Maggie’s failed lemonade stand.

“I could have sworn I had some rice.” She rummages through the cabinets, and peers into the fridge.

“What about that?” Mike nods to the counter next to the fridge.” He looks more like a blob than a snowman and it’s one of a billion art busy projects that her mom would chuck in the garbage.”

The cool breeze that glided across her face woke her up to the harsh reality of what she must do. As she closes the fridge, she sees it. Mr. Riceicle. His chaotic googly eyes stared into Christine’s soul.

“Sorry it has come to this Mr. Riceicle, but it looks like it’s getting hot in here and there’s no Christmas spirit to save you.” She holds him over the boiling pot of water as she grabs the knife. She closes her eyes as she slices his plump tummy open. His rice guts spill into the boiling pot.

“Auntie Ris! He knows how to whistle!” Maggie yelled from the living room. Every part of Christine froze thinking she’d been caught rice handed.

“I can show you if you want,” he chirped like a bird. The living room sounded like a swan song was being played as the snowman was laid to rest.

Christine watched Mr. Riceicle’s hard innards turn to mush in the molten pot, that’s when it hit her like a freight train. Socks come in pairs. Mr. Riceicle had a family. They were probably worried sick. She began sweating. How could she deal with this wool on her hands? She tried to justify what she’d done. Maybe he was a bad person? Absolutely not. At least she saw the good in him even if it was literally in him.

“Madame. Dinner is ready,” Christine announces in her best British accent.

The kids sat down at the table and began digging into the chicken.

“Wait, do royal explorers eat with their hands?” Miles asks the hard-hitting question, his brow shooting up his small forehead.

“Yes, but their pinky is always out,” Maggie said with a nod before fisting some more chicken. He begins shoveling spoonfulls of rice that were too big for her tiny mouth.

Seeing that Maggie and Miles seemed to be safe on their own, Christine brought two plates over to Mike.

“I’m what they call an experimental chef.” She tips her imaginary chef’s hat.

“Are you experimenting beyond food?” He raises an eyebrow.

“What?” She giggles in confusion. She wondered if he was insinuating what she thought he was insinuating. Just the thought of it made her blush.

“There’s a googly eye in my rice.” He laughs, raising a spoon of rice with a wobbly googly eye resting in the middle. The eye looked into Christine’s soul. It knew what she had done.

“Yeah, it’s a new thing. Only the coolest chefs are doing it. Your palette isn’t equipped to handle the complex flavor profile, so I wouldn’t eat it.” She plucks the eyeball out of the squishy spoonful and chucks the goop into her pocket.

“Does the proper palette mean leaving sauce on your face?” Mike smirks, staring at the blood red sauce of the deceased dinosaurs dripping from the corner of Christine’s perked up mouth.

“Yeah, it’s like wine, you have to let it linger for a bit,” she utters as Mike reaches to wipe it away. He leans in closer, and she follows suit. His breath tasted of savory lemon and tobacco.

A cacophony of shrieks and giggles emerge from behind the sofa as Maggie and Miles have their proper fancy dinner, killing the mood between Mike and Christine.

“This sucks,” Mike scoffs.

“At least they’re cute.” She shrugs.

“I have to put my life on pause because Frank wasn’t smart enough to wrap his stuff and somehow, he and his wife both have to work out of town this weekend. I mean take the kid with you or don’t have him in the first place. I’m in my prime. Weekends are my time to shine. You know?” With each word Christine couldn’t help but cringe.

“So, do you want to pop on some cartoons to keep them busy while we go get busy ourselves.” He smirked. Normally, she would take someone up on the offer. But there was something about him that turned his once gorgeous body completely rancid.

“He’s a scoundrel that is trying to steal the crown!” She yells. Popping up like meerkats, the two rugrats leap onto the traitor.

Christine joins the kids as they dog pile on the floor. Their tiny hands gripping and tugging at hair and clothes. After a while, they lay on their backs trying to steady their breath, but their giggles kept creeping in. Maggie was the first to break free.

“I need some choc-y milk as a nice pairing to this meal,” she says in her fanciest voice. She hops on the stool and runs into the kitchen. It was only then that she realized she hadn’t hidden the evidence.

Maggie turns the corner and sees the dismembered and

disemboweled sock discarded on the floor. She drops to her knees like in a telenovela.

“There’s been a murder,” Maggie bellows as she kneels over Mr. Riceicle’s mangled body hidden behind the kitchen island. Christine could see the wheels in Maggie’s mind turning double time as her mind processed the horror she had just witnessed. She sat there in shock before suddenly popping up unbothered.

“You’re right Auntie Ris, it is what’s on the inside that matters.” With a toothy grin she exclaims, “Snowman guts taste great.”

The Majestic Mohican River

Dennis Foley

It all started with a magazine, the cover of a 1996 *Midwest Living Magazine* issue to be exact: canoeing on the Mohican River in Ohio. A lifelong Chicagoan, I had never been on a canoe trip and had never spent any time in Ohio, but my sons were 5 and 7, no doubt game for some outdoor adventure. My bride wasn't exactly keen on the trip idea, but I persuaded her to join us by saying that we could visit her Great Aunt Pauline in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio after our river excursion wrapped up. A bit of bribery never hurts. We settled on a weekend in late July, 1996.

A colorful canoe sat on a sandbar just off the river's edge on the magazine cover that caught my attention, and a family of four, much like ours, smiled as they roasted hot dogs over a fire. That's what I wanted. That being said, I didn't give any thought to renting a canoe or two for my family and our supplies. No way. I thought it would be more prudent to purchase an inflatable Seyvlor rubber raft with tiny black, plastic paddles, so we could use the rubber raft again and again, on future family adventures. I also bought a smaller float, shaped like a car tire inner tube, but with a bottom, to hold our cooler of food for the weekend. Once on the river, I would tie the tube to the back of the rubber raft with a bit of trusty rope.

I did not research where the put ins were along the Mohican, as I didn't even know what a put in was at the time. Instead, I curbed our car along the gravel shoulder of a slender, elevated road and we set off to climb down a steep embankment. My job was to lower our uninflated vessel, additional tube, other assorted supplies, and cooler down the hill. My wife was in charge of making sure our sons did not slip and summersault their way onto a boulder or impale themselves on one of the numerous slender tree stumps. I slipped at one point and sent the cooler cartwheeling down the hill until it stopped in some muck near the river's edge. I watched in horror as a couple of our salami sandwiched floated downstream. The sandwiches twisted a bit to the side

as they bobbed in the water, as if turning back to call for help. I then hurried to the water to keep the ham sandwiches and ground beef and buns from the same fate. Fortunately, I got there in time to save them. Sue and the kids made it down the embankment a few minutes later. She did not look too pleased with me. I unfolded our vessel and blew it up using my battery-operated blower upper. Ah yes, the beauty of the sounds of nature. A few moments later, we set off on our first real family adventure vacation.

Once in the water, I soon noticed that rubber rafts do not track particularly well, especially not when a float carrying a heavy cooler is tied off to the back of the raft. The word drag comes to mind. To complicate matters, the tiny, black, plastic paddles were better suited for elves than humans.

“Look at those guys in the canoe,” Matt barked. I watched as a father and son duo flew past us in their fire engine red canoe with the utmost ease, their show-off strokes with their fine wooden paddles never once falling out of synch.

“That looks fun,” I said to hide my sneer. And then we stirred the current a bit with our paddles, or spoons as the boys took to calling them. We inched forward along the Mohican.

Over the next hour, we passed by two campgrounds set up alongside the river.

“This place looks good,” Sue said as we neared the first campground. We only had about a mile under our river belts at that time and sure it was getting hot, but there was more fun to be had.

“How about we go a bit further,” I said. See I had this notion in my head that I would be able to find the perfect site for us to camp for the night, just like the site shown on the cover of *Midwest Living*, and it was definitely not a campsite with trailers and tents all around. And besides, I was the captain of our vessel and was sure we would spot a family of deer along an upcoming bend in the river, because the *Midwest Living* article noted how populated the river area was with deer. I wanted my sons to experience such wonders of nature. But all the deer in this area of the Mohican River must have been on vacation themselves that weekend as we didn't see a single one.

We paddle-drifted another mile or so downstream. The

temp was now nearing 90 degrees.

“This place looks great,” Sue said when she spotted the second campground.

“Yeah dad,” the boys chimed in. Three versus one. They were all ready to toss in the towel. But I wasn’t. I knew something wonderful, something beautiful awaited us.

“Just a little further,” I said. My wife growled beneath her breath. Just then, believe it or not, we came upon a group of four or five canoes who were struggling in the water far more than we were. The canoers were all Asian folks, and their vessels were essentially spinning in circles. Spitfire chatter came out of many of their mouths. I didn’t understand a word of it, but they definitely were not enjoying their river adventure.

As our rubber raft readied to surge past them, a hose popped up out of the water and sprayed the inhabitants of those canoes. I quickly looked toward the campground. A few middle-aged men sat on camp chairs along the campground shore, cackling like crows. One pressed on some gadget in hand and doused that group again as we passed by, sending those poor paddlers into another round of frenzied spins and chatter.

About another half mile downstream, I saw the perfect place. It was remote and there was a smidge of sand on the shore. It was almost a mirror image of the campsite on the cover of *Midwest Living*. We spooned our way to shore and quickly set up our tent. Darkness wasn’t far off so I had the boys gather some wood for a fire. Upon their return, I grabbed my matches and found that they were sopping wet.

“So no fire then dad?” Matt said.

I blew out a huff and thought, *What sort of camping trip doesn’t have a fire?* Here we were at a picture-perfect setting along this lovely patch of the Mohican River and my wife was actually starting to like me again. I had to find some way to get our fire started.

“Search for some sticks, guys,” I said. “We’ll rub ‘em together caveman style and get a fire going.”

“Cool,” Pat said.

But it wasn’t cool. We must have grabbed that species of stick known as the special non-lighting species stick. We didn’t draw a single spark. But as the old saying goes, *When you least*

expect it, expect it.

It was almost completely dark now and I saw a flick of light across the river, about 50 yards away. Someone was lighting up a fire or a doobie or something.

I waded and swam across the river. The gent over there was good enough to give me his lighter. He told me to keep it, saying he had another. I pulled a soggy five-dollar bill out of my pocket and gave it to him for his troubles.

Once back at our site, we got a nice fire going. It was dark now, though the moon helped light the area. We sat atop a blanket enjoying our fire as we stared up at the numerous stars and ate our ham sandwiches. My wife nuzzled up beside me and gave me a smile. This trip was turning out to be solid after all. And then a lone canoe appeared out of the shadows and stopped a mere 6-7 yards from our campsite. As I watched, my worst fears became reality. The fire and moon lit up this shadowy, bearded, mangy guy as he stepped out of his canoe, dropped trou, and proceeded to take a dump in the majestic Mohican River. This creature was oblivious to us. A mere twenty feet away, I could count most of the freckles on his ass. My sons had a good laugh. I thought about asking the guy if he needed any TP but he zipped up and was on his way before I could take my next breath.

I now realized that we were in uncharted waters. Mangy Ohioans were likely scattered all around us just counting the minutes before raiding our campsite. My wife and sons managed to fall asleep that night but I kept the fire going and sat on the blanket waiting, just waiting, with my trusty axe in hand.

Winter's Grand Entrance

Nadilia Gilbert

Even though she wasn't invited
Winter is here
She plans to crash the party
And boldly walks into the room
Unbothered and confident
She struts like a model
Upright and full of poise

Her arms are filled
They're supporting carefully wrapped objects
She came bearing gifts
In different shapes and sizes
She places them on a nearby table
And begins to unwrap each one

She dresses the trees
In thick, white snow coats
And covers the ground
With pillowy rugs of snow
She decorates many roofs
With see-through icicle necklaces
And replaces nature's thermostat
With one that suits her taste

Then, she sits down
And, she giggles
She has more surprises up her sleeve
More than we could ever believe

Bracelet

Mary Witty

The soft sound of rain
Pour from your window.
The dim outside light
Creating dense shadows.
I watch as you write
With your head low.

Every emotion and experience
Pours from your fingertips.
I can't help but stare at your
Gentle brown eyes and soft lips.

Focused on the page you hold,
You don't catch my stare.
I watch as your fingers
Run through your dark hair.
I try to gaze at my bracelet,
So that my feelings are easier to bare.

Love at Ninety

Sharon Scholl

Mostly sympathy for the suffering
consort who bears the weight of years
on creaking joints, moves at maddening pace
for fear of falling.

Amazement that our lives endure
through loss, wrecked dreams,
the spare joy of small triumphs,
vague hopes and meager time.

Confidence that all these years together
have made us worthy of the struggle,
ripe with friendships, pride of children,
small legacies for those to come.

Gratitude for this companion who reflects
upon a lifespan of lived events
and murmurs, *I remember.*

Humming

Nic Fisk

Tea-candle flickers in time with your strumming and
humming,
casting rhythmic, dancing shadows on the well-worn
porch
teasing the wayward neighborhood cat sauntering by.
The lingering vestiges of the sun
give way to heavy curtains of night
but the stage on which you shine
remains ever so bright.

Who would have thought we'd want this?
An extraordinary, ordinary domestic bliss.
I close my eyes and let your song color my mind
with scenes of blooming and fractal joy
only a fraction of the spell cast on me.
Not only limerence, not only happiness--
these things, lovely as they may be
drown in their own flashiness
there's more to us, you see:

Safety and contentment
in finer days and in diner days
and breathy, tired words uttered
by you in the morning and me at night
as the moon chases the sun chases the moon
all the while skipping to a hummingbird's heartbeat

Love at a Glance

Nic Fisk

love
at a glance;
a ripple
in a pond
caught out of the
c o r
n
e
r
of the mind's
I

noticed too late
to mark the origin
without
careful
deliberate
tracing to the source—
a time reversible model
of the heart and mind
imperfect
stochastic
approximate
but
full of power
and splendor
and soul
all the same.

Still
we want
yearn
to know
the exact
precise moment

when the stone was cast
striking the surface just right
to shake the water
and leap across the
shallows
towards the
depths
and

s
i
n
k

impressing on
basin of earth
barely
but truly
to be hidden
in all but it's influence on the barest layer
of fluid above
irrevocably
yet
impermanent.

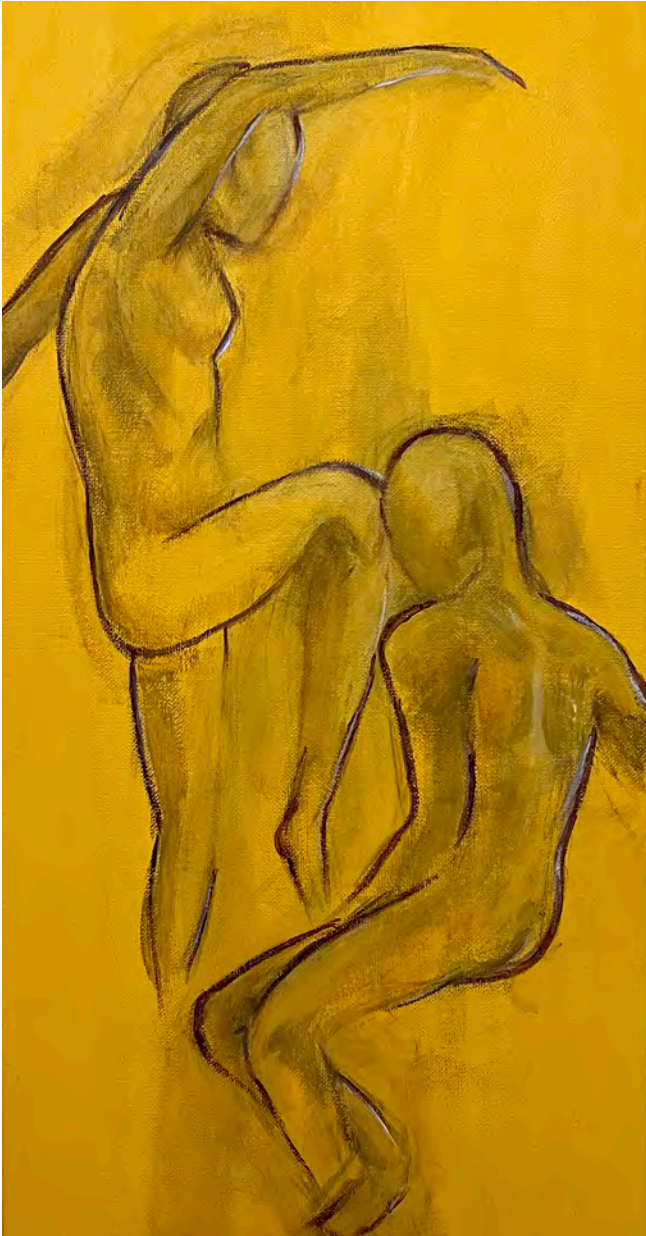
Skip across the hearts of others
leave a veritable dent in their essence
and
love,
lovelove
if only at a glance.

Cena
Maya Shojaatalab



Multicolored pen
(12" x 15")

Lone Figures
Varuni Kumar



Acrylic on canvas
(20" x 10")

Look at me!
Grace Ainsworth



Digital pencil
(13" x 17")

Night at the Disco
Izzy Wang



Digital pencil
(11" x 9")

Blind Obedience will Lead to Death

Kerrigan Reyes



Digital photography
(24" x 36")

The Seeds
Miya Brumley



Satin semi-gloss print
(6" x 9")

Eye Pulling
Varuni Kumar



Multimedia
(5" x 7")

I Grow From You
Grace Ainsworth



Digital pencil
(13" x 13")

Monday

Sharon Scholl

and we all begin again –
the failed suicide
the newly sober drunk
start their lonely quest
for oblivion.

The terminally ill whose first thought
on opening an eye must be
Oh Damn!

the student whose wee hours cram
faces the divulgence of a critical exam

the traveling sales rep whose dream state
erased all clues to where his body landed

the migrant whose first thought must be
translated to some foreign language

the new parent who hears a wailing cry
and suddenly recalls it's not the cat

They and all the rest of us collect
our weary bones, our shattered expectations,
and start the automatic sequence
that puts life back together.

Butterfly Effect

Rae Bynum

Once I killed an innocent butterfly,
Its bright colors splayed upon my windshield.
Do all beautiful things have to die?

Such a pointless end made me want to cry.
It did nothing wrong. This hurt cannot be healed.
Sadly, I killed a blameless butterfly.

No more would it soar and take to the sky.
Born a caterpillar, then flight revealed!
Must all wondrous things only live to die?

No one cares it died; no one said goodbye.
Should it have stayed in a cocoon, concealed?
I'm so sorry I killed this butterfly.

If all life must end this same way, then I
Must question why the living don't just yield.
It seems to me all the good will one day die.

Could death be our resolve to live and try,
Or must we accept our sad fate is sealed?
Once I killed an innocent butterfly.
Do all beautiful things have to die?

Good Parents Get Their Kids a Goldfish

Rae Bynum

Mine didn't come from the local pet store on Main Street.
I never wandered through a wonderland of overstocked
aisles
With the bright neon pinks and oranges and greens of fish
furniture.
Fake coral reefs and rocky hiding places for my finned
friend.
My hands didn't set the lively scene in the glass home of
water,
And my goldfish never flashed a shimmering scaled body
Or swam through a maze of caves and corals and
crevasses.

My sister Jordy had one once.
Its name was Winky.
It used to look rather happy.

The flitting thing would flick its tail and gape its mouth.
But Winky died from the buildup of fuzzy green algae in
its fishy home
And the hungry bubbly sounds didn't remind Jordy to feed
the fishy tenant.
Death flipped the fish upside-down, and its white belly
peeked above the water.
Her small hands carried the bulgy-eyed friend from the
water's grimy surface
To the toilet for a quick flush of a funeral to remember the
week-long life.
I remember her asking God to keep her fish safe for her in
Heaven.
Tears streamed down her flushed cheeks and her nose
dripped with guilt.
She saw death for the first time that day, but all she said
was that it was sad.

My goldfish's name was Keegan Sliger.
He used to look rather happy too.
He invited me over to his house one time.
I stepped over empty Bud-Light cans that had
Shriveled up and died on the cold mud-caked carpet.
Being there felt like wearing socks wet with pond water.
Keegan showed me his hiding place behind their stale
couch
Where he flinched and secretly watched his parents fight
Over the money and love that they didn't have.
Over everything but him.

The innocent thing failed his classes and lashed out.
He died from the build-up of silver beer cans in his home.
His silent suffering made his parents forget to feed their
son.
They found him floating belly-up in the lake on a cold
Thursday.
The small hands of his few friends threw fistfuls of Earth's
soft soil
Into the ground for a ceremony to remember the
twelve-year-old life.
Tears streamed down my flushed cheeks and my nose
dripped with guilt.
I saw death for the first time that day.
It looks lonely and feels like someone stole your lungs.
I asked God to make sure Keegan wasn't lonely in Heaven.

Good parents get their kids a goldfish.

10 Hours of Black Noise to Bring you Peace

Connor Lee

Not being able to fall asleep sucks. For several months I was dealing with this on a nightly basis. I'd go to school every morning on either a few hours of sleep or none. My grades were rapidly falling, my social life was nonexistent. Life was like walking through a thick fog. Half the time I wasn't sure where I was, or what the hell was going on.

I tried everything I could think of. 5 milligrams of melatonin turned to 10, 10 turned to 20. I started going for a short run an hour before bed, even when my legs felt like they were moving in a dream. I tried not using electronics past 7:00, I didn't eat past 8:00. No luck.

No matter how groggy, confused, and tired I felt, when I laid down at night sleep eluded me like a song I couldn't quite remember.

When I was able to fall asleep, the nightmares would wake me up and leave me shaking well through the rest of the night.

My dad had taken to drinking to numb the pain, so he wasn't any help. It felt like he was passed out more often than not. I couldn't blame him. I probably would've done the same thing if I had access to alcohol. He would've killed me if I tried to take any of his.

One Wednesday around 1:00 AM, when I was closing in on 48 hours of no sleep, I was scrolling through Twitter when one of those promoted tweets caught my eye:

Are you having trouble falling asleep at night? Look no further, YourSleepingFriend is here to help!

Jeez, I thought. *Google really is spying on me*. But there was a video attached, and my curiosity was piqued, so I plugged in my headphones and hit play.

The video showed an empty beach. In the background, calm blue waves ran up the shore. There were several moments of silence, and then a man began to speak in a low, slow whisper. At each word, the sound switched from my right ear to my left, and the syllables reverberated over each other.

"I'm YourSleepingFriend and I'm here to help you get to sleep. On my channel, you'll find all kinds of videos dedicated

to relaxing your mind. I have nature sounds, ASMR, white noise, and a plethora of other options. Find what you need, and never spend another night tossing and turning.”

I thought the whole ASMR whisper-talking thing he was doing was kinda creepy, but I was desperate, so I clicked the link to go to his YouTube channel and started to sort through the videos.

There were dozens to choose from, but I started off on “8 Hours of Nature Sounds to Pull You Down.”

There were faint sounds of running water, birds chirping, and leaves rustling in the wind. It made me feel like I was in a different world. I didn't have to worry about school, my dad, or that night. The birds were my friends, the water and the leaves were a gentle song lulling me to sleep. After a few minutes, I turned onto my side and closed my eyes.

But in the darkness the sounds seemed to shift and change. The running water was a growling predator, the birds were a horde of crows waiting to make a meal of me, and the wind and the leaves were a menacing whisper in the distance.

Before long I was sweating and gripping my sheets with white-knuckled hands. I opened my eyes and turned off the video.

I took a deep breath. *Come on, man. Just go to sleep.*

But I couldn't. Twenty minutes of lying down with my eyes closed did nothing. I needed something to drown out the silence.

“10 Hours of White Noise to Help You Drift Away.”

I could see why they called it white noise. It reminded me of T.V. static, yet this sound seemed to take up more room in my head, like there was some sort of smoke attached to it. It was slowly flowing through my ears and into every crevice of my brain.

For a moment there was nothing except the sound. I relaxed a little and closed my eyes. But in the instant I did, for just a fleeting second, I saw white inside of darkness. Like I was inside of an empty word document.

And then for just a split second, there was a whisper. Soft and calling to me, I was sure of it. But I wasn't able to make out the words.

With a sharp gasp, I opened my eyes.

My heartbeat hammered in my chest. I sat still, as if the

slightest movement would set something off. I couldn't shake the feeling that the sound, the smoke, was an invading army. And that the whisper was a warning.

I ripped the headphones from my ear and turned off the video.

The dark does funny things to your mind, I told myself. Especially when you haven't slept in two days.

I checked the time on my phone. 2:00 AM. *If I go to sleep now I can still sleep for four hours.* I closed my eyes once more.

In the dark, eerie silence, the memories came flooding back. The screams. My mom, lying in a puddle of her own blood. Her eyes, open, but void of life.

Wind whispered through the branches outside, and I remembered how slowly the front door had creaked open, how I'd assumed it was my dad. I didn't wanna get in trouble for being awake so I stayed in my room. I'd just woken up, and the fog of sleep temporarily left the fact that he was away on business shrouded.

No more of that, I thought, coming back to reality.

I wanted to get up from bed and flip on the light, but it seemed so far away. I'd have to pass the void of uncertainty that was the shadows under my bed. I couldn't help but feel that there was something under there waiting for me, that there was some sort of sound, but one that I couldn't quite hear. I couldn't get up. I grabbed my phone once more.

I was already on the channel. Figured I'd try another video. One of them had to work for me. After all, the thoughts hadn't come back until I stopped, right?

"10 Hours of Black Noise to Bring You Peace."

This video had no apparent sound, but rather white letters over a black background. It read simply, "Black Noise." The text faded away, and the video began to transition through slides like a PowerPoint.

What is black noise?

It is no noise...

Silence...

But I think you'll enjoy the silence...

The darkness...

Maybe you'll find peace...

If you give it a chance...

I felt my stomach rise in my throat. My breaths came out

rapid, short, and sharp.

10 hours of black noise starting in...

5

4

3

2

1

I closed my eyes, not sure if it was voluntary or not, and saw myself from the eyes of an observer. A different me, floating in a space of infinite darkness. My eyes were closed and there was a smile of pure bliss on my face. My breaths were slow, rhythmic, and relaxed. I was asleep.

This version of me was sinking into the darkness slowly. So slowly that it took me several moments to notice. I smiled. I was happy for him, and my breaths began to match his. My consciousness began to fade as sleep pulled me in.

And suddenly I was falling so fast that I could feel the wind pulling around me.

My feet landed on cool, white tile floor. A kitchen. I looked around at the wooden cabinetry, mahogany dinner table, and the light-blue walls. It wasn't just a kitchen. It was *my* kitchen.

It was some sort of lucid dream, and though I'd never experienced anything like it, the familiar environment made me feel comfortable.

And then there was that whisper again. Coming from the other side of the wall — the living room. This time it was a little louder. Loud enough that I could make out the words.

"Come with me," it said in that low voice, the syllables echoing over each other.

YourSleepingFriend.

I walked into the living room, and was finally met with the source of that mysterious whisper.

He would have been an average looking man — five foot ten or eleven, average frame — but the skin on his face was deathly pale, almost translucent. The closer I got to him the colder I felt.

He wore a tuxedo, and his right hand carried the hook of a beautiful dreamcatcher. The web in the middle was yellow and made to resemble four flowers leaning against each other. At the bottom, four black crow feathers hung vertically. They swung back and forth as he turned and began walking towards

my dad's bedroom.

"Come," he said. And I did.

I followed him through the living room and into the bedroom. The T.V. was on and playing *Criminal Minds*. My mom's favorite show. The one that had been playing the night she was murdered.

My dad never watched that show. It freaked him out.

This isn't my dad's room, I thought. This is my parents' room. My mom AND dad's room. Back before it became just my dad's room.

I screamed, "NO!" But as I did there was a man's voice from the bathroom, forceful, almost angry. I couldn't make out the words, but I knew it wasn't my father.

And then there were the muffled, horrified screams of my mother. My mother whose mouth had been covered with tape, and who I hadn't found until nearly seven hours after her death.

"You're gonna make me watch!" I yelled, backing up toward the doorway.

He was standing just beside the bathroom door. The dream catcher was now hanging from the doorknob. He held his hands behind his back and stared at me patiently as my mother struggled and screamed.

"No!" I screamed again, and this time I turned and ran out the doorway, up the stairs, and into my room.

I jumped on my bed and got under the covers like I was seven again, hiding from the bogeymen and waiting for the sun to come out and save me.

Instead, my alarm was ringing. It was time to go to school.

What a weird-ass dream, I thought. But I felt more well-rested than I had in weeks. The dream had been terrifying, but at least I'd actually slept through the whole night.

I crept downstairs to get breakfast, careful not to let my dad hear me on the off-chance he was awake.

Sure enough, there he was. Passed out on the couch with a dozen empty beer bottles surrounding him. There were pills scattered around too. Those had worried me the first time I'd found him like this, but I'd learned quickly that they were to numb the pain, not to end it. Any spillage was just his drunkenness.

My day went about as normal. Any excess energy the night's sleep had given me wore off by the time I got to school, and I walked around in my typical daze. I didn't talk to anyone, I kept my head down, and I did whatever I had to do to not get written up. When I got home my dad was in his typical spot on the couch drinking beer and watching T.V. We didn't speak to each other, and I went up to my room to play video games.

When it was time to go to bed, as usual, I couldn't sleep. I took my melatonin, counted backwards from 100, but as usual, nothing worked.

Except, I thought to myself. There is one thing that did work.

It did put me to sleep right? And I was sure I'd just imagined all the scary bits: the whispers, the visions, and the dream. The only thing I knew for a fact was that it helped me sleep, if only for a few hours. And I hadn't woken up screaming, shaking, or crying, just a little unsettled.

I threw on my headphones, opened up the channel, and hit play on the video.

There was the intro, the slides, and then the darkness. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

Within a few minutes I was floating. Then, the fall. I was in the kitchen.

Then the whisper. "Come with me."

This time I turned the corner and looked into his fading yellow eyes. "Why?" I asked. "Why do you want to make me watch?"

"Not watch," he said. "I'm here to bring you peace."

He turned and walked to my parents' bedroom. I followed. Again, upon entering the room he hung the dream catcher on the bathroom doorknob, then stared at me until I approached the door.

I heard the man barking his orders, then the muffled screams of my mom. This time I opened the door and ran inside.

"Mom!" I yelled. She was on the floor with duct tape covering her mouth and a tall man with broad shoulders and a long knife standing over her.

I ran toward the man to tackle him and take the knife, but he was a grown man and I was only sixteen. He threw me to the side with one arm, then stepped toward me and slashed

at me with the knife. I dodged backwards and fell crashing against the wall.

My mom took the moment's distraction to stand up and hit him from behind.

Her attempt, however, more or less resembled a penguin attacking a polar bear. He turned, and with one swift motion slit her throat.

I let out tortuous screams with no rhyme, reason, or pattern, and as if he'd forgotten about me, the man jumped and turned, then strode toward me.

I woke up when the blade was about an inch away from my head.

My sheets were drenched in sweat, and I was breathing like I'd just run a marathon. In the back of my mind there was the feeling that I'd been close to death. *Real* death.

I have no doubt that those events were real, what I'd gone through wasn't a dream, but an alternate reality. One in which I had checked on my mother that night. That was what would have happened if I'd tried to save her. We'd both be dead. It's a dark and desolate realization, but it's the truth. I know it is. It wasn't my fault that she died, no matter how many times I tried to tell myself that it was.

After some time I sat up. The first thing I noticed was the object sitting on my night stand. It was the dream catcher, as beautiful as in my dream. Attached to it was a blue sticky note. I picked it up and turned it over.

Not a new reality, but a new memory. Your Peace. Use this when you need it.

- YourSleepingFriend

It might not seem like what he gave me was a gift, the vision of my near death at the hands of an intruder, but what he did was answer all the questions I'd asked myself every single day since my mom died: What if I hadn't stayed in bed? What if I had tried to save her? Was it my fault that she died? It wasn't my fault, and I couldn't have saved her. It was no one's fault except for the man who walked into our house and killed her. Finally, the guilt began to fade away. Not all at once, but it was a start.

I spent a few moments collecting my thoughts, then I picked up the dream catcher and walked it down to the living room where my dad lay passed out on the couch.

I placed the dream catcher in his lap.

I couldn't give him a new reality, but I could give him a chance to make a new memory. I could, perhaps, bring him peace. Answers. Maybe I could even get him back.

The Parade Will Take Place, Rain or Shine

Rob Kershner Jr.

The parade of black umbrellas pours in through the rusted and dilapidated gates. The hole in the ground is welcoming, and each person is eager to take it up on its offer to toss into it what has been troubling them for so long. My mother leads the parade, tears of joy leaving black stains on her cheeks. My father, as always, remains stoic as he walks far enough behind her so as to not cause a scene. So follows the rest of the parade, made up by family members I had hardly ever seen, each one feeling relieved with the weight of life finally off of their shoulders.

The box that inches towards the soothing pit remains closed, for it was never open in the first place. There is something about the scars that decorate my forearms — long, bloodied incisions representative of the culminations of my suffering — that makes the parade uncomfortable, even though they are incredibly happy to know the scars are there.

As the box is slowly lowered, the people with the black umbrellas find it hard not to dance right where they stand. They think ahead to what couldn't be more than thirty minutes away: popping champagne bottles and staining their black dresses with cocktail sauce and store-bought salsa. The procession itches with the desire to toss their bouquets of flowers into the air as if they had just graduated, wishing to watch the lifeless plants bounce off of the casket high enough to symbolize that they had done their part. And that is exactly what they believed was worth celebrating: they had shown up. I can't help but chuckle from within my chamber at the irony of it. Think of fans cheering once their team clutches the win: those fans have no accomplishment to cheer for. They weren't present for the weeks of torturous drills that were responsible for that final score. In reality, though, I know that what those fans really celebrate is the game ending — the chance to finally go home.

So, the parade snakes its way around the box and around the pit. Each member places their bundle of flowers on the ground, letting the relief hit them as if it were the flowers

causing them the stress they so readily shed. And once they feel satisfied with themselves, they return to their cars, shaking off their black umbrellas so as to not ruin their leather interiors, and they head towards the anticipated party where they can all finally stop pretending like they hadn't been celebrating all day long.

As for me, though, I roll over just slightly. Everybody seemed to forget that I hate flowers.

Closing Doors

Andrew Belfry

Beware of the closing doors, please.

The words sound different today. Louder. Clearer. More menacing.

The doors of the 4-Train click shut, and you're suffocating, only you're not. Your fingers twitch, legs shake, mouth goes dry. Your eyes bulge as they scan for an exit, even though you know there is none. You're trapped below Grand Central, headed south to meetings and deadlines, trying not to cry because, for unknown reasons, you're positive you will die on this train.

Your heart races faster than the dimly lit graffiti whizzing by through the dirty windows you can't see because your eyes are shut. You can't tell if the rocking of the train is making you sway or if you're going to pass out. It doesn't matter if you do. The number of bodies will keep you upright if you faint.

But you're not going to collapse. You're just going to die.

After a few minutes of not dying, you're brave enough to open your eyes.

People are staring at their phones. Others pretend to read the *Casper* ads we've all seen a million times. No one is looking at you, but somehow, they know what you know. Despite being in your early 30s with a clean bill of health and absolutely no business dying on this train, you are certain you'll be doing just that.

The train stops in the middle track under 28th Street. The conductor says muffled words over the speaker. Something about a sick passenger. You clench your fists, silently pleading with your legs not to buckle. You want to scream. You want to get out. You want to know why you're having difficulty catching your breath. You want to go back in time and take the local instead. Maybe the conductor will let you out here if you ask nicely. What's one row of tracks? You can avoid the third rail. How many rats can there be?

The train rocks forward, and you shut your eyes again.

The doors open at 14th Street, and some people get off.

You fight the urge to go with them because even though it's not your stop, you are petrified of what will happen when the doors close again. But with the doors open, your breathing returns to normal, and the whole thing seems ridiculous. Of course, you're not going to die on this train. You have work to do. People are counting on you downtown. You're embarrassed, though no one knows. Determined to venture on, you clutch the center pole.

Beware of the closing doors, please.

Click. Shut. You're going to die on this train.

Hidden Beauty

Katherine Kincaid

Oh, the mask I hide behind each day.

While trying to portray beauty, everyone sees fake.

Why must I hide what is underneath?

Because it is too fragile, too broken, too painful for just
any fool to see.

This mask is my protection from the cruel and hurtful
world; the judgmental stones, and mean words that it
hurls.

Very few people have seen behind the mask. Only those
who won't criticize or laugh.

As I stand face to face with the person hidden beneath, I
cry out with a roar, "My God, you have forsaken me!"

In the quiet I waited, then a still small voice came. "I've
been here the whole time, but you have to take off the
mask to see me."

Clown

Tajender Singh Luthra

One day I counted my laughs.

I laughed that day
when my friend cracked a spicy joke.

I laughed again one day
when my old mother gave me advice noble
and I laughed and hugged her.
Mom would do this
when I was very young and innocent.

Another day, I laughed again
when after a long time,
I saw a clown in the mirror;
we hugged and loudly laughed.

To laugh again, I was compelled
when my daughter said
how irrelevant I had become.
I didn't know
all that even young kids could do.

And finally, I laughed courageously
at my fear, helplessness, and buffoonery.
I laughed at everything:
my ego, violence, greed, and malice.
That was the last laugh.
Then nothing remained
to laugh and be laughed at.

Translated from Hindi to English by the poet.

Nightmare

Luken Sloan

You reached out,
your hand holding a black box,
a ring of white gold hidden within.
With passion in those eyes,
you asked to wed, and
I could not hold my tongue – yes!
Our lips meet, sparks flying
while our hearts dance,
and we reach ecstasy.
Time passes
We grow old and grey,
yet our love remains youthful
and as vast as the ocean
until the bittersweet end of a
lifetime of devotion.

When I awake, the bed is empty
and I am alone.
Perhaps one day,
if holding my tongue did not mean goodbye,
our lives would have been entangled.
As you live with someone else,
I wake up to a nightmare.
But, at least, I know
that I will always love you
in a dream.

Broken Arc

Lawrence Bridges

the echo
comes back to the center
in arcs of broken rings
a pool with a lone pebble
times years of footfalls
over a membrane's sphere

each word
returns to the broken arc
and joins with others

ring words
hang in ears
birthing meaning
similar in drift
to tides toward pain

echoes ring
with broken arcs
and words
cannot unsay
the pain of tides
at the center
of one lone pebble

Bad Things Happen to Good People

Jean Marburg

Grief digs into your gut and makes a home.

Mourn for what you have lost,

Mourn for those who left you alone,

Mourn for everything that held too high a cost.

Unfair, life never told you the price.

The stones in your chest that hide behind your rib bones,

And the heat that always builds behind your eyes.

The blood in your mouth as flames lick at your face,

Grief, unfairness, and shame.

You wonder why bad things happen to you if you're not the
one to blame.

New Year's Kiss

Jean Marburg

I do not love you.

I only want to kiss so I'll know that someone wants to,

Because my body hurts my brain.

But if I was fucked, maybe there'd be less pain?

If someone wanted me,

I'd think there was something in me worth it.

But that's not what you should be,

Some self-worth determinant.

Please Tell Me Your Opinion of My Personal Bodily Autonomy, I'm Very Interested

Jean Marburg

My body is not mine, it's used how you see fit.
Supreme Court, what is this bullshit?
It must be my fault, with my body so divine.
You claim ownership of something you tell me is mine.
Point me to where I go for the "sin" I commit.

Is this how you treat those who you deem unworthy to
 befit
of a seat at your table, with our safety you forget?
The patriarchy, bodily autonomy, an abortion, a fine.
My body is not mine.

Tell me, again, how I made a choice that I didn't get.
Say it slowly, for the people in their rooms with bodies
 split.
"Oh, but this is all a part of a plan from His design!"
God's intention must have been to suffocate and confine
to give me a body that the government would rather die
 than acquit.
My body is not mine.

Another Poem About Trayvon Martin

Martheaus Perkins

Forget the skittles, Arizona ice tea, hoodie.
You already know the verdict.
His father's beard is white now;
it's been ten years since "Up to No
Good on Drugs or Something" was followed
by Neighborhood Watch Captain—
Since "He Looks Black" was killed by
Curious Concrete-Smashed George.
"They Absolutely Always Get Away" would have been
27 today. As old as "Not Guilty" when he murdered him.

We've soaked the roots red already,
When will the ground be ours to stand on?
Here's another one where they follow us,
another poem for Emmett, Eric, Michael,
Timir, Philando, Ahmaud,
George, Breonna and —today,
my birthday— Daunte Wright.
His mother's clip is on TV this morning.

It's been a year since Officer "I Grabbed the Wrong
Fucking Gun" forgot which hip her taser was on.
Mrs. Wright says, *I have to be the voice of myself,
my family, my community—but most of all,
I have to be the voice of my son Dante.
They left him on the ground for hours.
As people all over the world watched,
I had to cry from behind a caution tape.*

We've heard calls for action from
the mothers gun violence haunts
who have gathered behind the caution tapes
to speak and cry for their discarded children.

Sybrina Fulton gave Trayvon's flight suit
to the Smithsonian— he wanted to be an astronaut.
She founded “the club no one wants to be a part of.”
A Circle of Mothers who set school photos of their children
next to street signs— who give victim statements to
pronounce
unpronounceable grief— who can never stop being
mothers.

Mamie Till opened Emmett's casket for any article, photo,
poem—
she scraped a voice from the taut throat of a murdering
country.
Here's another poem about the Trayvon Martins
and the graceless way our country unmothers them.

Call Me Shahed

Mark Hammerschick

The drones have flown
razor scraping night
twenty degrees below zero
hissing
python quivering
oozing
fluttering hellbent hummingbird
piercing still silent night
smooth solid carbon fiber fingers
stretching scattered fog
over the Dnipro river
running silent running deep
fathomless
nil
zero imaginary number
like the 96 billion nerve cells
in our brain
wasted
but the drones don't care
they gnaw on tendon and bone
while our brain melts
tiger tiger burning bright again
kill them all
pull out their eyes
don't apologize
all is quiet on this eastern front
over the tops of the Scots pine
steady full speed ahead
descending like confetti
into the birthday party
honeydew flesh scraps
children airborne
then the flames
we know
the world ends
in fire not ice

The Future of Tomorrow Started Yesterday

Kerrigan Reyes

There once was a little person who had so much guts,
They refused to move for a white woman on a bus.
They sat and sat until the police had came,
Then she was arrested and was promptly whisked away.
She got pregnant at sixteen and had not been wed,
So as a public face, they chose Rosa Parks' story instead.
Why must we scream? Why must we fight?
Are we a mistake for not being born white?
There was a little soul who came before,
Who did not believe in differences in 1944.
She challenged the courts, she challenged the people:
Segregation is unconstitutional, it should be illegal!
They thought and they thought and they made a
conclusion
That separate but equal is illegal because we are all
human!
What would people do? What would they say?
If they were put in another person's shoes just for a day?
There was a strong being like no other:
She was a loving wife, but became a grieving mother.
Her son's life was cut short from two white men;
She vowed she would stand and this would not happen
again.
At his viewing she showed his mangled, bloodied corpse.
The men were not guilty, though, decided by the all white
courts.
What did we do wrong? Why are we the target?
Why must we live and die deep inside the closet?
There lived a figure in California ever so happily!
They fought and believed in legal rights for homosexuality!
They believed there should be no work or housing
discrimination.
Unfortunately, their life ended abruptly by a horrible
assassination.
The bill they fought for was passed with one opposing vote,

The same person shot and killed him because he felt so provoked.
Why is it wrong to love someone out of our decision?
Why are we hated by those who preach evangelism?
There was a court that ruled far and wide:
Should LGBT rights at work be granted or denied?
There were men who screamed "This erodes religious freedoms!"
They believed they belonged in the group of elitism.
They were disappointed when the ruling became clear
That the queers lives were secure in the work atmosphere.
These people fought for a better tomorrow for us.
They started a conversation for the people to discuss
In future generations and the people in the now:
What will not be tolerated and what we will allow.
Their lives will not be seen as wasted;
Their achievements will forever be appreciated.

Young and Able-bodied

Benjamin Stewart

At eighteen years old I didn't have much going on. Having just graduated high school by the thinnest of margins¹, I spent the summer of 2004 bouncing between jobs at Hollister and Kroger, folding clothes and retrieving carts with the enthusiasm of a man digging his own grave.

During that summer, *Spiderman 2* was a runaway hit, "Yeah!" by Usher filled the airwaves of every radio station, and the US military was balls-deep in Iraq, our just the tip approach from 1990 had apparently been insufficient². If you were an idle young man in 2004, I'm betting you received a few calls from the local military recruiter.

I sure did.

The military branch most fervently calling me was the US Army and on a hot summer afternoon, I walked in to find a gentleman from the Army sitting at our dining room table with my parents, laughing, and cracking jokes. He wore a wide smile on his wide face as he stood and pulled out a chair, inviting me to have a seat and discuss my future³.

He extolled the virtues of manhood, touted free college tuition, and mentioned a bonus worth thousands of dollars for those recruited to certain jobs; within the hour becoming my best friend, guidance counselor, and personal savior. When our conversation shifted, as they do with recruiters, to making a commitment, I remained non-committal.

"No problem, bud," he said, lowering himself into a silver Chevy Malibu. "Think about it and I'll give you a call."

I haven't answered the phone in nearly twenty years.

While the Army wasn't for me, the conversation with the recruiter had planted a seed and I began thinking about military service as a viable option. I don't remember having

¹ My mother and a saintly counselor named Ms. Dunn dragged me through senior year. Every class and every scrap of homework was monitored to ensure I turned it in on time and, even so, my GPA was abysmal. I'm shocked the state of Indiana let me graduate.

² Yes, I know it's complicated. This is a short story, get over yourself.

³ It seemed like my future was already being discussed with or without me, still I sat.

ambitions outside of leaving Jeffersonville, Indiana, but I don't think one really needs lofty ambitions to join the military. People sign up for all kinds of reasons, one of my friends in the Navy had been given the choice to join or go to jail and that choice pretty much makes itself, I think.

As the weeks and months passed, 2004 turned into 2005, and one afternoon in January I called an Air Force recruiter, saying I'd like to fix airplanes and was ready to enlist today if that was okay with him.

After a few get-to-know you questions, he began a series of medical questions designed to weed out candidates with issues precluding them from military service. You see, military recruiters deal with an extraordinary amount of bullshit just to keep their recruits on the straight-and-narrow, often hand holding a recruit for months for them to change their mind and back out last minute. Thinning the herd of recruits early in the process saves headaches and mountains of paperwork.

"When we spoke on the phone, why didn't you mention being blind and missing both arms?" I imagine the recruiter asking, eyes closed and rubbing their temples.

"You didn't ask," the blind capital 'I' would say, bags packed for bootcamp and tethered to their torso.

The Air Force recruiter, sounding vaguely disinterested, rattled off questions about tattoos and piercings, how many did I have and where were they. He asked about past surgeries and present illness, reassuring me that the tonsillectomy I had when I was six wasn't a problem, but he'd need a copy of those medical records. I answered dozens of questions in a yes or no fashion, providing details when prompted. One question, mid-survey, changed the trajectory of my life.

"Have you ever been diagnosed, and been prescribed medication for, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder?"

"Yes," I said. "But that was a long time ago, and I haven't taken medication since middle school."

"I'm sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all. "You can't join the Air Force if you've ever been diagnosed with, and taken medication for, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder."

"Really?" I asked. "Even though it was years ago?"

Suddenly I was miffed. No longer courting multiple suitors like a prized athlete choosing a college from which to accept a scholarship, I was now rejected for a years-old diagnosis with

no current bearing on my life.

Me!? I thought. *An able-bodied young man turned down for military service. And while there's a war going on? How dare he!*

He said, "Since you *told* me, I can't process you into the Air Force."⁴

I remember not knowing what to say and saying nothing, though my disappointment must have been screaming through the phone because the recruiter added. "If you want to work on airplanes, I'll take your information next door to the Navy recruiter. The Navy actually has more airplanes than the Air Force."

"Huh," I said. "Okay, that sounds good. So, what do I do now?"

"Somebody over there will give you a call. Probably this afternoon if they're not busy," he said.

"Okay, thanks."

"You have a good day." And the line went dead.

My mother, sitting next to me during this conversation and not bothering to hide her eavesdropping, asked, "What did they say?"

"I'm not eligible for the Air Force because I took Ritalin in eighth grade, so he's giving my information to the Navy recruiter."

"Do you want to join the Navy?"

"Maybe." I added, "The Navy actually has more airplanes than the Air Force."

"Huh," she said.

I remember the Navy taking few minutes to call, the receiver on our phone still warm from my call with the Harvard- sorry, the Air Force recruiter.⁵

I answered the phone. "Stewart residence."

"Hi," the voice said, "I'm looking for Benjamin Stewart. Is he available?"

"This is him."

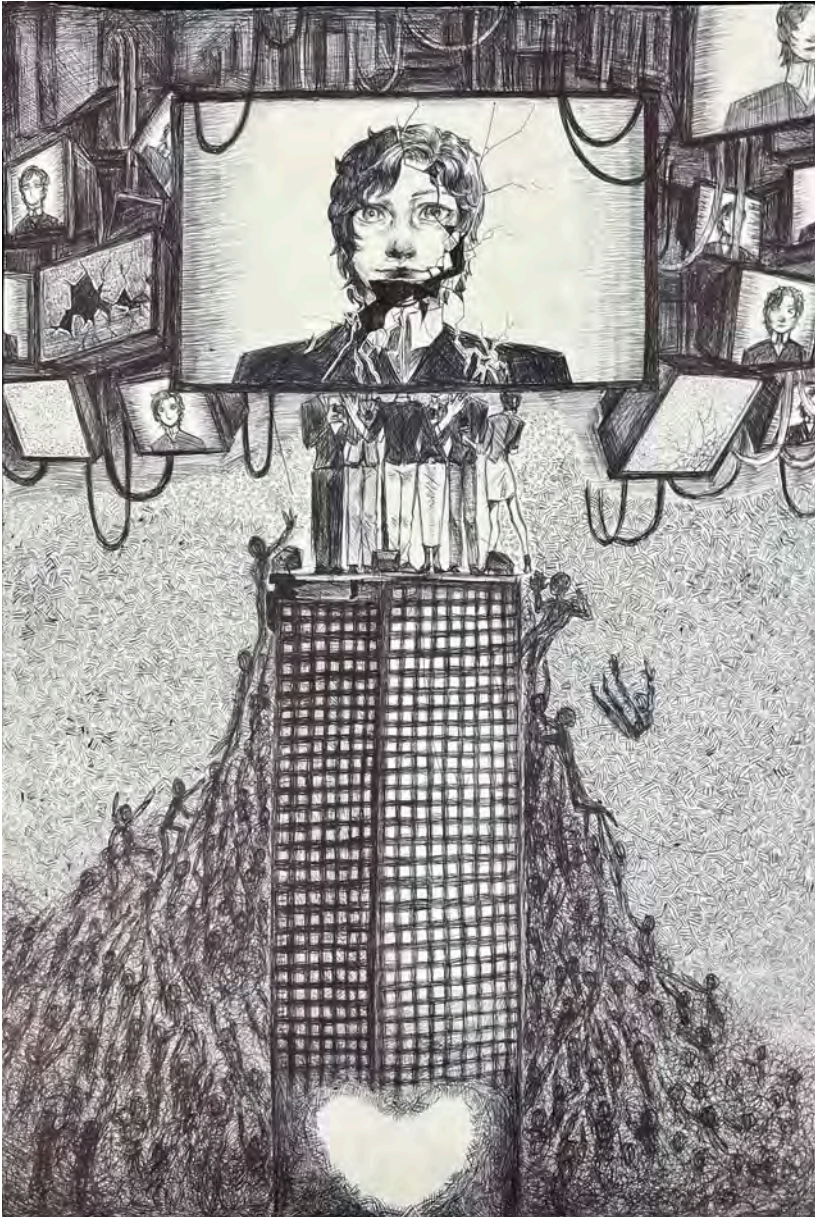
⁴ The lesson here, kids, is that I should have lied. No one would have ever known, and I'd be writing a collection of stories called Air Force Days, which admittedly, isn't as pleasing to my ears as Navy Days. So, cheers to a better title.

⁵ Am I still chafed about it and think the AF recruiter was just being lazy? Of course not. Not. At. All.

“This is AO2 Meyer with the US Navy, and I hear you’d like to fix airplanes.”

That conversation took place, like I said, in January of 2005. Sometime around midnight on July 25th of the same year, I arrived at the Navy’s Recruit Training Command, Great Lakes where a red-faced man in a white uniform boarded our airport shuttle screamed “GET OFF THE FUCKING BUS!”

Throng
Hebe He



Ink on paper
(12" x 16")

Eroded
Catherine Wang



Ink on paper
(33" x 48")

Hypnosis
Shivani Nathan



Ink on paper
(12" x 16")

Caught Between Two Worlds
Alice Cai



Ink on paper
(12" x 18")

Riptide
Cameron Lings



Stained sycamore with steel on driftwood
(20" x 20" x 8")

Trumpet Beetle

Ori Krakowski



Multimedia
(14" x 9.5" x 8.5")

Lavender Haze

Alice Cai



Multimedia
(5" x 3" x 11")

Thoughts
Aditi Sawant



Acrylic on canvas sheet
(10" x 11.5")

Build it Up Burn it Down

Rhonda Mitchell

“When a writer is born into a family, the family is finished.”

– Czeslaw Milosz

“And, I might add, if the family isn’t finished, then the writer is.”

– Gary Shteyngart

If I’m to finish this family, they’re demanding their say. The unborn and the dead are here. The women and men who sacrificed their dignity to survive on the plantation, the sharecroppers, and the people who grind on the Sisyphean wheel of government jobs. The runaways, the men and women who passed to outsmart Jim Crow, show up here. Their voices speak to me in the ether. This is my purpose, and I write without shame, or regret, the same way I want you to live.

Consider this story both fuse and prayer. Consider the fuse lit. Consider this family finished. This story is their pardon. Let us meet joyfully on the other side. Permission granted to begin anew.

2004

The picture sits atop the television cabinet. We’re at Disneyland on her first roller coaster ride. She’s wearing the tank top we tie-dyed during one of our crafty weekends, and I’m wearing a white t-shirt from our last ski trip to Yosemite. It was her first ride on a roller coaster. Her tiny 5-year-old arm is threaded through mine, and her head is pressed against my shoulder. Her face is wide open, and you can tell she is nervous even though a smile is stretched across her face.

I tried to tell her while we stood in line.

“The ride is gonna go real fast,” I picked her up, holding her body away from mine, “and go this way and that,” swaying her from side to side. She giggled.

I put her down. “Then what, then what?”

I cupped my hands and pressed my fingers together until my hands resembled the head of a snake, and I traced the trajectory

of the ride, “It’ll go way up, real slow, and then—with my hands arcing the air—it’ll go down real fast, and you have to hold on. Your tummy is gonna feel wiggly on the way down, and if you squeeze it like you’re trying to hold on to a walnut with your belly button, it won’t feel so squishy and nervous.” I smile and bend down to touch her belly button through her clothes to reaffirm our connection.

The ride attendant opened the gate and we climbed into our car, and before the bar came over our heads, she wriggled close. I was reminded of how she felt inside me, turning her tiny body in preparation for the most important ride of her life, the one where she would spin herself out of me and into this world.

1965

Possibly February 25 or somewhere around that time.

Time is hard to count when you’re in the womb.

When you’re the product of an affair, you come to this world feeling nine months of being wished away, a hoped-for miscarriage, and a Gregorian demand for an abortion. For nine months, you brace for a purposefully clumsy fall. You hold tight to the cord that tethers you to this life.

For thirty-nine weeks, you’re nourished by the crusts of a lusty encounter and the crumbs of revenge and regret, decisions made by a young woman with few choices.

You come into the world quickly. You knew better than to dilly-dally in the in-between, so you slipped into the doctor’s hands just after two hours of labor. And not long after you arrive, all six pounds of you feel like sixty pounds when he places you in her arms. You are a secret.

The voices bandied about after your arrival are whispers with ragged edges, phrases stapled together of things that are supposed to be said to and about a baby, like, “*Oh! Look at those tiny toes!*” “*She looks just like her brother.*” “*Don’t breathe on the baby!*” You are perfunctorily touched.

This unwelcoming welcome makes you a quiet baby. You wait patiently for a bottle or a clean diaper because you don’t want to disturb your father. He has stood firm on his promise not to have anything to do with you. Silence is crucial to your survival. You feel uncomfortable in your skin, sensitive to cold, you itch

after mundane things like peas, bananas, or Ivory soap, which of course, irritates your mother. Now there are special oils she must add to the bath water and lotions and creams she must smooth into your skin to stop the itch. It is the only time her touch feels tender.

Your age was still being counted in weeks when you were pushed, still strapped in your carrier. Your head hit the tile floor between shouting and utterances through tight lips and clenched jaws. There were murmurs. You wouldn't stop crying. Your forehead puffed like bread. You felt her guilty elation, the terrible wish that could correct the past. There was silence. No one took you to the hospital. They watched and waited.

This hostility between you and your mother began one month and eight days after conception when she suspected she was pregnant again. By this time, you had already accepted the softness of her insides, the watery rhythm of her walk. You found comfort in her darkness. Her muffled voice would one day remind you of Santa Ana Winds, warm and nervous at the same time. You felt a squeeze of fear when she threw herself down the stairs. It made you worried about being born again. You shouldn't have held on. You've been here before but had yet to learn the lesson of letting go. The skin fits too tight for this life you've chosen. When you're old enough to understand words, and scratch the itchy places, your mother tells you to sit still and stop digging holes in your skin.

When you turned seven, you followed her around the kitchen, asking, "Who's like me, Mom?" 'Cause, no one else seemed to hear the music in the clip of the shears cutting back the ivy from the fence, the whisk, shush and shake of the rinse cycle, the staccato clinking of silverware sorted and put away. Just you. And your mother hushes you because, "What kind of question is that?" And she says things like, "get from up under me" or "go to your room and read a book." Or maybe all three in a row if you asked while she was watching *General Hospital*. And you go to your room because you found her Harry Belafonte *My Lord What a Mornin'* album and you loved singing, "Were you there when they cruci-fiiiiieed my Lord?"

You put the album on your portable record player and gently place the needle on the space before the grooves. You sing, barely reaching the high notes, but full-throated anyway from

somewhere lower than your chest so that you can come in soft with Mr. Belafonte on the word “tremble.” You sing like you really were there, but that’s impossible, right? Your brother comes and stands in the doorway. Mom told him to tell you to be quiet ‘cause she’s trying to watch *Peyton Place*, and he can’t hear *Speed Racer*. You keep singing and add interpretive dance to the part that says, “Were you there when they nailed him to the cross.” You don’t care that he laughs at you. You know that song and dance are the only things that satisfy the itch.

Your brother finally leaves, and with Harry Belafonte in the background, you dropped to your knees and folded into your bedside. “Dear God,” you begin, “let me have a hard life, so I can be of good character.” You pray this prayer because you read it in a book somewhere that having good character comes from surviving hardships in life. Years later, you’d realize what a goddamn stupid prayer that was. Look who God had given you for a mother. That fucker was one step ahead of you.

1972

Icarus didn’t like to fly and thought airplanes were unnatural to the order of things. He was okay with cars. Cars relied on the earth for that point a to b connection and reminded him of the mules he rode to work the fields. Having a nice car in LA was like having a fancy horse in North Carolina. He enjoyed driving, while listening to the radio, and would whistle the break whenever *Sitting on the Dock of the Bay* came on. Los Angeles was easy to find your way around, as long as you knew where the ocean and mountains were. Riding around between jobs, singing with Otis Redding opened the memory of the never-ending grind of fieldwork, the preparation, planting, and the rush of harvest and everyone he left behind in North Carolina. There was always work to do. He missed his brothers, his mother’s cooking, but he didn’t miss picking cotton, tobacco, or peanuts.

Icarus kept the lights on, and the mortgage paid by cleaning airplanes at Los Angeles International Airport. His supervisors paid him \$1.35 an hour for his speed and thoroughness, and his attention to detail helped him find the occasional Kennedy 50-cent piece or Eisenhower dollar that fell unknowingly from a pocket, larger-than-life coins his children would beg to hold.

The used airplane blankets he brought home became forts and teepees for Carmen and Casey, and Icarus pocketed the unused miniatures of Seagrams 7 or J&B Scotch that were left behind. He worked eight hours a day, five days a week at the airport, and was the after-hours janitor at Golden State Mutual Life Insurance company and on the seventh day he worked the yard for his wife because having a nice yard was important to her. If it was up to him, he'd pour concrete over everything and call it a day.

Icarus pushed and pulled things out of the earth--the strawberries his wife liked, a pecan tree they smuggled back from Louisiana, greens that she would season and boil until they were soft and served with corn bread. He pinched weeds with his fingers and shaped trees and bushes with his shears. He coaxed tart lemons from the tree and blackberries from the bush on the side of the house that Antoinette would make into pies or cobblers, filling the house with the sweet smell of sugar and fruit. The only plant he ever gave up on was the strawberries and left them to Carmen and Casey, who competed with the snails for the fruit.

Antoinette performed the thankless ceremony of sorting, cleaning, shopping, and cooking. There was chauffeuring to piano and dance lessons for Carmen and baseball practice for Casey. There was homework, teacher visits, doctor appointments, and no time for Antoinette. She was twenty-five, and the only moments she could call her own came from romance novels and soap operas.

In 1972 young Black families were just arriving to the avenues off Vernon, where white and Asian families were already rooted. A riot in Watts and white flight by those with the financial wings made housing available for families that looked like Icarus'. The new Black families turned the neighborhood into a feverish American Dream. Everyone fell into line. Lawns were watered daily and cut twice a month. On Saturday mornings, cars were washed in the driveway with soap, water, and Al Green, loud enough to help past the time and low enough to not upset the sensibility of the older white people who chose to remain for whatever reason. The ching-ching of steel-wheeled roller skates sang the afternoon into evening. Children rolled past palm trees and oleander bushes, the young skaters stopping just short of the Carob trees whose long brown seed pods could send the skater's

knees skidding against the sidewalk and crying to their mothers.

On 5th Avenue, the same children would walk part-way to the corner store with the old white ladies who bought fresh liver for their cats and stopped the Black kids just to talk.

“What’s your name?”

“Where do you live?”

“How old are you?”

“You live with both your Mom and Dad?”

Once the interview was completed, sometimes they were called to a doorway when they were seen walking toward Blue Star Market, “Carmen! Are you going to the store? I need a jar of mayonnaise.” Money would be pressed into a hand, and a verbal contract made that the change would be returned.

Icarus and Antoinette’s two-bedroom home was a hacienda in miniature with a fake terra cotta roof and an archway over the front porch. On this particular day, a man climbed the three short steps, took one more step, and leaned forward to tap the gray screen door with the back of his hand.

“Mom, who’s at the door?” Carmen was still in her nightgown and stood in the archway between the living and dining rooms. She steadied herself with a hand on the wall over the grate of the floor heater.

Antoinette stood in front of the record player. She sang slightly over B.B. King as he bemoaned the thrill being gone, “Shit, Carmen, get your hand off the wall unless you wanna wash them later. I know your hands aren’t clean. Where are my cigarettes? Go find my cigarettes.” She leaned away from where the tape deck and turntable were stacked on top of the bar, next to liquor bottles, and glanced through the living room at the screen door.

The white man at the door had small, deep-set eyes, a rectangle for a head, and dark hair that smoothed over the corners. Antoinette’s bare feet made hardly any sound over the plastic runner. She moved towards the door, rubbing her hands over her denim cutoffs, dodging the corner of the coffee table that sat in front of the white velvet couch. She looked down at her white tank top for coffee stains. The gold script read, “itty bitty titty committee,” there were no stains, and she didn’t have on a bra. She was presentable.

Carmen ran to get the cigarettes, so she could break one in

half, hold the broken pieces under each nostril, and inhale. The unlit tobacco smelled like burned cherries and wet dirt.

“Don’t you break up my goddamned cigarettes either, Carmen.” Then Antoinette turned to face the man on the other side of the screen door, quickly glancing at the handle to make sure it was locked. He looked normal, but doesn’t everyone until they start acting crazy?

“How can I help you?”

“My name is Joe Burks, and I’m here to offer you and your family a deeper relationship with the word of God. May I know the name of the lady of the house?”

“I’m Antoinette, and we attend Mount Calvary Lutheran Church right there on Santa Rosalia, off of Stocker. We’re happy with our church home.”

Joe Burks bared his teeth slightly and raised his eyebrows, “I’m glad to hear that. Do you attend every Sunday?”

Antoinette looked away. She taught Carmen to say the Catechism. It was easy because Carmen liked poems, and the Apostles Creed was sort of like a poem. She didn’t bother with Casey, who preferred outside play to reading a book. Icarus’ family made her promise to raise her children Lutheran. They went to church just enough so that both Carmen and Casey had speaking parts on Easter Sunday, Thanksgiving Service, and Christmas, which was enough to keep Icarus’s Aunt quiet.

“May I come in?” Joe Burks leaned toward the screen door. He smiled.

Antoinette smoked her Benson and Hedges menthols the whole time he was there because it was her goddamned house and turned down B.B. King out of respect that it was the Bible they were talking about.

To make up for the lack of regular religious training, Antoinette was convinced by the door-to-door salesman to purchase a complete set of *The Bible Story* by Arthur Maxwell. Maxwell was hell-bent on providing moral guidance to the masses. The books were a soothing shade of cerulean blue with 409 stories in 10 volumes and 1200 color illustrations! Morality, doctrine, and white Jesus all boxed up and ready to be sold.

Antoinette bought the books because she was Catholic and wasn’t practicing, and her husband’s overbearing Aunt insisted the kids be baptized Lutheran even though Icarus was Baptist.

The religious soup was too thick. Arthur Maxwell's boxed morality seemed like an easy solution.

"Creation covered six days and six-thousand years, just like it ought to be."

"Uh-huh." Antoinette took a long drag on her Benson & Hedges Menthol and let her eyelashes flutter as the smoke left her nose.

"With these books in your home Mrs. Forman, you can choose a story and your child's..." He paused when he noticed a pair of huge brown eyes and two puffy ponytails peeking around a doorway. "Is that pretty little girl your only child?"

"No, I have two children."

"Your children's bedtime becomes a time to reinforce those values and beliefs you and Mr. Forman would like them to have." He leaned forward at this point and bobbed his block head up and down.

"My youngest has been reading since she was four. She can read her bedtime stories to herself."

And after just one week of reading Maxwell's *Bible Stories*, Carmen began a litany of sins they were committing as a family. "I don't think Jesus likes it when you smoke, Mom," and "Mom, Daniel, the one from the lion's den, said we should only eat vegetables and drink water." And then, one afternoon, over a bowl of dark gumbo, thick with seafood and sausage, Carmen announced to the family, "God said not to eat crab legs or pork."

"Why not?" Casey wasn't a reader and relied on his sister for information. He chewed the Polska kielbasa sausage with his mouth open while he spoke while Antoinette simultaneously frowned at his manners and tightened her eyes at Carmen. Why did she have to repeat every goddam thing she knew?

"Close your mouth when you chew your food, Casey."

"Because *The Bible Story* says it's forbidden."

"God doesn't like it when we eat crab legs or pork. He gets angry, and the only way to not make him mad is we're gonna have to sacrifice something, like a ram or a bull."

"Why doesn't he like crab?" Casey took a couple of saltine crackers, crushed them into his bowl, and then placed a heaping portion of the dark stew into his mouth.

Antoinette frowned at his manners. "Close your mouth when you chew your food!"

“Because *The Bible Story* says it’s forbidden.” Carmen let the tone of her voice go deep on the word ‘forbidden’. “God gets mad all the time. I read ahead, and Jesus is nicer. He doesn’t ‘smite’ people like God all the time.”

“What does ‘smite’ mean, Mom?” Casey cracked a crab leg and sucked the meat out. “We’re not gonna have gumbo anymore?”

“It means to kill. God gets mad and kills people ‘cause they don’t follow his rules, like exactly, to the point. Even kids!”

“Goddamit, shit Carmen, you need to find something else to read.” Antoinette got up from the table, refilled her bowl with shrimp and sausage, and topped it with the smokey briny pot liquor.

Casey looked concerned as he ate and grabbed another handful of Saltines and crumbled them into his bowl. “Where we gonna find a bull?”

Two weeks later, while Carmen was reading about the hanging of Haman for the third time, Antoinette walked in and handed her a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita*. “Here, read this, but don’t take it seriously.” The cover was smooth, just like *The Bible Story*. On the cover was a person with blue skin and long dark hair who could’ve been Jesus’ younger brother. He was holding reins attached to three horses that looked like they were trying to get away from something.

“Mom, why is the guy playing Jesus blue?”

“Shit, Carmen, I don’t know.” Antoinette dropped the book next to Carmen, padded over to the stereo, and placed a Nancy Wilson album on the turntable. Antoinette loved sad and sexy music, usually because she was either feeling sad or sexy and she couldn’t dance and had no rhythm, so funk wasn’t an option.

Right after the *Bhagavad Gita* appeared, *The World Book Encyclopedia* showed up on the bookshelf above *The Bible Story*.

“Mom, Mom!”

Antoinette was talking to someone, smiling into the phone, and Carmen couldn’t tell who it was. She looked at Carmen, “Can’t you see?!” She mouthed, pointing to the phone.

A phone attached to an ear meant nothing to Carmen. Antoinette had two ears, so surely she could hear and talk at the same time. “Who’s that, Mom?” Carmen pointed to the phone. Antoinette looked up and punched the air with her finger in

the direction of the den where the *World Book Encyclopedia* sat virginally on a shelf.

Carmen pointed to the new books on the shelf, “Can I take those seriously?” Antoinette nodded in Carmen’s direction and went back to her conversation, the tone of her voice low and soft and sweet.

Carmen rubbed the outside of the books first, the bumpy cover, the smooth golden edges of the pages. She pulled the thick book towards her and let it fall into her hands, and the heft made her want to tip over. *The World Book Encyclopedias* were in alphabetical order, and Carmen started with the letter A.

The lesson Carmen learned from *The Bible Story*, *The Bhagavad Gita*, and *World Books* was that the knowing was as heavy as the question. Why carried the same weight as how, and that science and religion sat on opposite sides of the teeter-totter. Carmen sat right in the center and tried to understand it all.

Summer of 1974

**I tell everybody I don't have a mother. They think she died.
I let them believe what they want.**

Antoinette had not been home for five days, and Icarus could only offer an “I don’t know” to any question of when she might come back. She left Carmen and Casey at her mother’s house on Friday and never returned, and their grandmother promptly returned them to Icarus on Sunday.

The rest of the week, they ate pot pies or tuna fish for dinner. Carmen knew how to make biscuits from the can, so she and Casey ate biscuits or cold cereal for breakfast and bologna sandwiches for lunch because they weren’t supposed to fool around with the stove during the day while Icarus was at work. Icarus tried to joke about the watery tuna fish or the bland chicken pot pies they bought four for a dollar at ABC Market as if this was temporary. And hoped his cheeriness would convince the children that everything would be okay.

Carmen went back to *The Bible Stories* for answers. She read the chapters about Ester and Ruth and all the stories that included angels. She was convinced a wandering bright light would appear in her room and turn into something golden-haired and blue-eyed whose voice would fill the room. It would say,

“Don’t be afraid!” Which was really stupid because why wouldn’t you be afraid of a bright light talking to you or, worse yet, turning into something human and bird-like? It would promise they would be like the other families on 5th Avenue. And that Carmen would continue her drama, dance, and piano lessons and be in commercials or on stage, where she never itched. The angel would disappear, and, in the morning, everyone would comment on Carmen’s glow, like Mary or Moses or anyone that encountered beings from heaven. No angel appeared with a message, but Antoinette finally did.

Casey and Carmen were watching a repeat of *The Outer Limits* in the den while Icarus was at work when they heard the click of the lock on the front door and the sound of shoes on the plastic runner moving fast.

Carmen ran toward the sound, and there was Antoinette. Her face was hard and determined, like a woman who had left her children and the thankless chains, her step lighter, of parenting had fallen away. She looked free.

Her eyes blinked fast at her daughter. Her mouth was set in a hard line. Her plan was to pick up clothes and shoes out of the closet and bras and panties out of the dresser drawer.

“Mom, where’ve you been? I was scared you were dead. Why didn’t you pick us up from Madea’s house?”

Antoinette kept moving, grabbing handfuls of underwear, snatching clothes off hangers, and piling them in her free arm. She bent over, trying to hook her fingers into shoes, and stopped to send a quick prayer to Mary, Joseph, and Jesus that Carmen would shut up. She began to make her way toward the front door, her arms full, her eyes drawn flat, wide, and unchanging.

“Mom, where are you going?”

Carmen, in her yellow sundress, the tiny white polka dots, the smudge of purple jelly right on the front of the skirt, ran in front of her mother. Past the white couch. The oversized Princess House crystal brandy decanter that sang if you rubbed a wet finger along the rim.

It was every bad dream come true. Carmen wanted her mother there, even if she didn’t want to comb her hair or said a curse word before she said her name almost every time. She wanted to be like the kids who had both parents at home.

Who would sign the notes for field trips? Who would check her homework, cook, and then say, “Shit, Carmen, let’s get that hair washed.”

Carmen stood between Antoinette and the front door.

“Mom-mmmeee, don’t go. Don’t go, Mommy, please don’t go again. Mom, take me with you, please, take me with you. What about Casey and me?”

And there was the recital of sorrrys for broken cigarettes and being tender-headed, talking back and whining, for being, “the only voice she heard outside,” and not keeping her room clean.

Carmen glanced around. This was the moment. This is when an angel would be helpful.

Antoinette moved closer to the door, stood over Carmen, and tried to reach around her for the door handle. Carmen moved and pressed her whole body in front of the handle. She felt it between her shoulder blades. It made her chest poke out, and she appeared bolder than she really was.

Antoinette looked directly at her and finally spoke. “Why? Why are you acting like this? What are you doing?”

Carmen knew begging and whining were useless. The tear had begun, like the curtain in *The Bible Story* that was ripped apart by unseen hands when Jesus died. Those same hands tore apart whatever connected Antoinette to Carmen, and there was nothing holy about it.

“Shit, Carmen, don’t you want me to be happy?” With her arms full of clothes and shoes, Antoinette pushed Carmen aside. Carmen crumpled to the floor and wailed. Antoinette used her leg to push Carmen away from the door.

“NO! Mommy, don’t leave me here!”

The doorknob clicked, tumblers fell into place, and the old wooden door swung open just enough for Antoinette to squeeze through. The screen door snapped open and wheezed back into place.

Carmen pulled herself up, stood in the living room window, and watched the yellow Datsun back down the driveway and move up the street. And then sat down on the floor.

Imagine being clasped tight in the echoing scream of thunder, the earth crumbling beneath you, and there’s no place to stand. Imagine water rising, soaking, curling around your ankles, knees, your waist, pulling you under and deeper, flooding

your lungs and throat until breath becomes a memory.
That's how it felt when she left.

Antoinette's New Beginning

Antoinette turned the radio off and made her way to 5th Avenue. She didn't want to mark time with any music that would bring back memories of this day. She was about to leave her husband and children, and she didn't need an Earth, Wind and Fire song to come on the radio to remind her of this moment in the future. Icarus wasn't due home from work for four hours, and she hoped the children were still at her mother's house. It would be easy. Go in, get some clothes and get out. Antoinette pulled the car into the driveway, the curtains were closed. She sat in the car and let herself remember everything that walked her to this moment. The lies, the truth she knew Icarus knew, and promises to herself she wanted to keep.

She put the key in the door and turned the lock, and in seconds, Carmen was asking questions. She could hardly turn around without stumbling over her. Casey came in next. He was in the way, too. The room became crowded, Casey was silent against Carmen's wall of sound, and she saw Icarus in his eyes, in the set of his jaw. Casey walked away. His mother wasn't going to answer any questions. For the first time Antoinette's back became a steel rod and withstood the onslaught of Carmen's begging and Casey's indifference.

He had to have known this was coming. Antoinette tried to tell Icarus that she was so lonely it hurt to breathe.

About six months before she bought *The Bible Stories*, she'd gotten a phone call.

"Hello is this Antoinette Forman?"

"Yes, how can I help you?" Antoinette thought this might be a contractor. Icarus was talking about remodeling the kitchen.

"This is Joseph Mack. I work with your husband, Ike, Icarus at the airport."

"Is something wrong?"

"Yeah, yeah, it is. Can you please tell your husband to stop fucking my wife?"

"What? Who is this?"

Joseph Mack repeated himself.

Antoinette hung up the phone.

She focused as she walked down the hallway with Carmen trailing behind her. Antoinette just had to make it across the living room floor.

Carmen ran in front of her and stood in front of the door. Antoinette felt her heart begin to crack, and she pressed her jaw together, hoping the pressure would keep it intact.

She looked around for Casey, and the sound of the television bled through the rooms, but he wasn't there, and she thought about leaving through the back door and glanced towards the kitchen.

Carmen followed her eyes. She looked ready to run.

What part was too much to ask? For someone to understand her, to want to touch only her, to look at her, inside her, to understand this yawning space needed a hand to hold, a body to curl around, lips to honor. Love.

2016

Gumbo and Latkes

I never learned to sew. It's a skill that requires precision, patience, and an eye for detail, none of which are my strong suit. The thought of following a pattern is just unappealing to me. I'm not a stitch witch, I'm sloppy with a needle and thread, and it shows. Asking everyone to come together over the Thanksgiving holiday was my baby-of-the-family attempt to sew a family that had been torn apart back together again. I called my mother first.

"All of us? You mean your father, too?"

"Yes," I hold my breath and wait, and then my mother begins to talk about my father's women, the ones he chose after she left him.

"I don't know why your father just can't find someone his own age. They're all too young. Can't he see they're gold diggers?"

I agreed. They're a parade of make-up that's a rim shot short of cartoonish, lips made sticky and shiny with MAC Lip Glass, and clothes that were usually too tight and too short. They called him 'Ike' in this breezy way and eventually left after my father had 'gifted' them with new breasts, a car, or down payments for houses or condos.

"It's been three years since Ben died," my mother reminded

me. Ben was my mother's second husband. His decline and death set the stage for my mother's final role in life as the Widow Grunbaum. My stepfather died on Thanksgiving Day.

"We'll have latkes in honor of Ben," I offer.

She loved the widow card and played it as if she were playing Spades. He and my mother preferred to spend holidays alone, and children from either side were not invited.

"Has it been three years? Don't you think it's time we did something together? The first holidays after you left, were hard. I just want to have some different memories." She didn't say anything, so I kept going. Thanksgiving was me and Casey watching TV all day until he got home from work."

I heard CNN in the background and my mother let out a long sigh, "That was a long time ago. Why do you have to remember everything?"

"I don't know, I like to have my own bathroom." The Widow Grunbaum then tells me that she no longer drives the freeway, needs a room of her own with an en suite bathroom if she's to stay at anyone's home, and doesn't have the budget for a hotel.

"So, how about Dad's house?" I asked.

"No, I don't want to stay there." There it was. The spade hit the table and overrode the hearts.

With that information, I knew that reunion wouldn't happen in California, where my father and I lived, and we would have to drive to Vegas. I kept this to myself and dialed my brother.

Casey is the reigning king of single-syllable conversation. When I told him what I wanted to do, he asked a series of one-word questions.

"What?"

I repeated what I just asked, that we spend the holiday together as a family.

"Why?"

"I want holidays to be different for Kaiya. And I want you to be more than a voice coming out of the speaker of an iPhone."

And then offered his opinion of my idea.

"Fool."

"I'm not sure where we're going to do it yet. You and Mom can drive out here and stay at my house," I offered, knowing that if my brother suggested it, my mother would say yes.

"Crazy."

“Will you come?”

“Yeah, I’ll try to come after work if you do it on Thanksgiving Day, but I’ll rather do it on my day off, the Tuesday after, and I don’t have time to come to LA.” A classic answer from a Forman man and the work ethic that runs in their veins.

I spoke to my father last because he’s the most malleable. He’s retired but worked every Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, birthday, school play, sports game, award show, recital, and presentation. His mantra about holidays was, “It’s just another day.” He showed up for graduations, baptisms, and weddings but would usually work the morning of.

He asks about Ben first, “How long has he been gone?” I answer and repeat the rider that comes with the Widow Grunbaum’s participation.

He huffs, “I don’t know what’s wrong with your mother,” and finally, says yes. Then asks the most important question, “What are we gonna eat?”

We packed enough clothes for three days and left Los Angeles at 5 in the morning, so we’d arrive in Henderson, Nevada by nine.

On the way up, I sat in the front seat next to my father, the seat my mother used to occupy on the cross-country trips we took during the summers my parents were still together.

The first hour is filled with heat adjustments, praise for the efficiency of leaving early and avoiding LA traffic. As we drive the 210 towards the 15 freeway, we agree that the sun peeling back the darkness from the open road and the orange tinted sunrise on the snow-covered mountains is a gift.

My father drives because he’s seventy-six, and driving is one of the things he still enjoys. I threaten to take the privilege away when the car drifts across the lanes and argues with the Bots Dots, causing our coffee cups to quiver and shake us out of our road trance. My mother told me once never to fall asleep in the car when a man is driving, “You don’t know where you might end up,” she intoned. So, I daydream as we cross the desert, but I never fall asleep. My daughter, Kaiya, the reason why we are making this trip, is in the back seat. She fell asleep before we were out of Pasadena.

The landscape hollowed and the electrical poles lifted their lines over the desert, the abandoned houses, and ghost towns as we passed through Barstow. My Dad’s thoughts would adjust

to the space, and he'd become wistful. "See all this," he'd pause, looking out over the land, "I wish I had somebody to ride cross country with, just one more time. So I could do things and see stuff." He said this often, "Do things." "See stuff."

I tried to put a pin in that phrase, tack it to something that would hold, "What do you want to do? What do you want to see?" His answers melted like cotton candy against the tongue from the weight of the question. He'd meander through the past, listing the places he'd visited as a young man, "The Petrified Forest, the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, I'd like to see that big tree you can drive your car through again."

When he finally made it back to the present, he'd talk about the places he wanted to go, Indonesia, Alaska, "that place with the faces in the mountain, what's the name of that place?" But when pressed about making concrete plans, he'd say, "Look on the computer for me a ticket," and I'd look for packages, quote prices, but he'd never let me buy the ticket, "let me think about it," until the next time.

When we got to Henderson, we all hugged and asked polite questions while we unloaded the car. We carried bags into the house. Kaiya decides she doesn't want to sleep with Nana because she snores. She doesn't want to sleep in the living room because she's scared of the dark. She wants to sleep with me in the guest bedroom. It's determined that there's no room for my father at my mother's house. My brother, who lives five minutes away and has an extra bedroom at his house, doesn't offer it to our father. After settling in, I drive my father to a hotel and keep it moving. I stop speaking to Casey.

I really don't know what to expect out of this family reunion. I can't imagine what we'll talk about. Right now, though, we're like people who have worked in the same department for years but never ate lunch together and have to play nice at the department Christmas party. Like, it would've been cool if we could've done an ice-breaker, something like Get-to-know-you-Bingo or Two-Truths-and-One-Lie to help us catch up on who we had become in the absence of each other.

In the same room for the first time in forty years, we resembled a 7th grade Home-Ec project put together the night before it was due. The sturdy denim of my father hastily attached to the delicate silk of my mother, who unravels at the slightest

provocation. My brother and I are pieces of cotton, thinned in multiple places by the wear and tear of living. My daughter, an edging attached at the last minute, is an intricate lace, the gilding that might hold us together, at least for a little while.

We were all sitting down around the tiny round table. The smell of garlicky Cornish hens, spicy gumbo, and greasy latkes mingled together. We sat in the golden moment of late afternoon sunshine, unsure in this moment.

“You pray.”

She asked me to pray. Me, the baby of the family. The paroxysms of hubris and magic it took to summon these people together to break bread made my hands shake.

“Hold hands.” Everyone looked around the table and then curled their fingers around the palm of the person next to them. We were linked together for the first time with Kaiya. “Mother, Father God, who knew that this could happen?” I let my eyes linger on our hands and glanced over the faces. I slow-motioned the moment. It had been a long time. I began to pray.

“Thank you for my Dad’s health, for letting him come through hip surgery. Thank you to Mom for blessing her with this beautiful home and for her opening her doors to us. Thank you for my brother, who doesn’t know how much joy he brings. And thank you for my wonderfully smart and beautiful daughter, who is my hope. Bless us, bless this food, and thank you.”

I wanted to cry, but I knew my father hated when I cried. So, I looked over at my mother, whose approval was akin to a papal decree.

“Well done,” my mother said with a quick nod.

We ate.

Pieces of a Storm

Sunny Liu

When we sometimes feel lost in our own mind, we lose the ability to see the extraneous capabilities of many other things within humanity.

It was Haiti in 2010 when all hell broke loose. It was around 5 p.m. when the earthquake struck, and around five-thirty p.m. when I realized that I had lost everything. My home was demolished along with all our family remembrances and important necessities that I had failed to redeem. I am now homeless, but it is not just me. During the after-hours of the earthquake, it had added up to nothing but many people walking among the debris of their own homes and slumbering on an elusive uncovered mattress. After saving themselves, civil protection workers eventually went on their way to examine the state of what was now our new land, and assist the wounded. By morning, I woke up to a small voice that I had thought was a simple delusion. “Hey.”

“Hey!” The voice shouted.

I woke up, agitated by the voice, my neck sore from the firm mattress which I had uncovered from the wreckage the night before. As I looked around, I could see nothing but the demolition of the earthquake, nothing in orderly ways. As I was still dismayed, looking at the dismantled construct of my own home, which was now below my feet and halfway risen above the land, the voice walloped the air again.

“Are you deaf?” The voice remarked.

“Excuse Me?” I questioned, flustered.

“Behind you,” the voice cautioned.

I turned to see a small dog, armed with what looked like a Vektor R4, an assault rifle. Portly, unlike most dogs that roamed the streets of Haiti. The dog held the rifle up to my chest, prodding and jabbing at me with the weapon.

“Give me food or give me *Lajan*,” the dog asserted.

“Hey! Hey! I don’t have any, okay? Leave me alone,” I shouted.

Lajan is Haitian Creole for money. The dog had nothing but vexation in its eyes. It stared at me with the same frustration I stared at the floors and ceilings of my home, and the bruises and cuts from when the fragments of rubble cascaded onto me as I sprinted away from my abode.

“Give me your bracelets!” The dog growled.

“Fine. Fine!” I ceased the issue. I had more immense matters than an angry, resentful dog. The beloved bracelet my mother had given me, along with many other bracelets I had crafted on my own, were now in the hands of a seething dog. As I walked the streets later that day, I occasionally stumbled upon more of the homeless. Hotel Le Manguier, was no longer an establishment of where I once worked, but many slabs of concrete dilapidated by one of Earth’s tremors. As I stumbled by a few individuals near a water spout to fill up a grime covered plastic water jug, uncovered in what was left over on Haitian grounds, close to my once before home, I jumped to what sounded like a woman screaming. Nobody near the water spout skipped a beat to see what was occurring. The people seemed displaced and troubled by their own pursuits in obtaining a cup or jug of water. As I stepped forward past the wall in which the water derived from, I saw the dog again.

“*Lejan! Lejan!*” the dog demanded.

The woman tossed what was left of her money to the dog, and off the dog went, to pursue another victim for their possessions. As I contemplated my future alone and with no home, I walked to where the catholic church still stood, which I had once attended each week. The church had large breaches within its structure, it was old in age, but never split a seam. Now the church was ruptured to where its internal parts conveyed the holy spirit. Left over shackles of stained glass which used to structure a face and body of Jesus were still somehow standing, while the rest of the scene lay on the ground next to the damaged walls of the church. As I stumbled over gates to set foot into the place of worship, I heard the small voice of whom I thought I had once heard before. Jesus?

The voice was small, and trembled as it continued onto speak. It whispered something along the lines of hope, and wishes for its family. As I moved closer into the abandoned prayer room, I saw what looked like a small shadow in the dingy

room. The voice stopped, and its shadow twisted to face me. As I looked, I saw the familiar face of the dog who had robbed me of my last belongings. The menace that walked the streets of Les Cayes mugging the poor and distorting the people's idea of safety within their society, looked like nothing but a jittery leaf in this moment. Unarmed and lessened with intensity, the dog stood in silence.

"Invoking the spirits are we?" I uttered, sauntering towards the dog.

I could still feel the bit of loathing I had for the dog. All my senses tingled at the sight of it. It wore the bracelets my mother had gifted me, and the earrings of another woman I had seen it mug.

"Funny," the dog barked.

"Well, what are you doing here?" I questioned, bitterly.

"Praying, for the better health of my mother, and food for my kids," it said. "Why are you here?"

"For...Myself, I guess."

The dog sat on the filthy water-stained concrete slabs of the building and continued to pray. I kneeled down until both knees touched the soggy carpeting. As the dog prayed on one side of the room, I prayed on the other, and as I closed my eyes, I could think of nothing but the poor dog. I knew Haiti was doomed for nothing but complete poverty. As a commune, we share most things, and as a community, we try to help each other. The dog had done nothing but harm since the earthquake and more than half the commune had been affected by its mischief. I opened my eyes to express to the dog my sorrow, but the dog was gone.

It is difficult for me to sleep at night. I occasionally roam the streets when the sun goes down, and when most of the people scurry to less damaged buildings and reach out to the local makeshift camps that have recently been built, I wander, thinking of what's next, and why me. As I walked, kicking pebbles and leftover miniature concrete and brick pieces, I began to mumble. Losing my mind wasn't even the most of it. I hadn't talked to my brother in weeks since the earthquake, let alone ever. I'm hungry and I'm beginning to think that my bones might be visible through the layer of skin on my chest, and I'm anything but tired, even though it's nighttime. I continued thinking out loud until the familiar voice interrupted me again.

“Hard times,” the dog advised, “doesn’t mean everything is over.”

Startled, I turned to where voice seemed to be coming from. Halfway to my knee, the dog stood. When I realized where I was wandering to, I paused in my tracks, and looked around. Dogs from all over gazed at me vacantly. They had large beady eyes and a big noses. All of them had white fur, small in stature and were questionably similar looking. The area was known for being run down, even before the earthquake, and rumor had it that the dogs in this neighborhood, carried rabies. I stood still, petrified enough to not move. The dog peered at me with a skeptical look.

“Relax. They don’t bite,” the dog announced.

“These are my kids and the rest of my *fanmi*.”

Fanmi, something I didn’t have anymore, or that I didn’t care to acknowledge. I had spent my whole life working and painting. Nothing else in the whole world mattered. *Fanmi* means family in haitian creole. The dog sat me down near a ditch where its kids played tug o’ war with what looked like torn-up rags. The dog raised up a long slender metal wire, and held it up to a flame which was ignited by sticks and an old lighter, which was tossed right next to it.

“You see this?” The dog grinned.

“Yeah,” I said.

“A wire is not easily transferred back to its original state. You can try to bend it and twist it, but even this wont change it back to how it was. To do this, you must keep an open mind. Instead of hitting and stomping on the wire, take a pair of tweezers, and melt the metal to its exact degree. This will create new beginnings for the ductile material. When you feel like you are stuck, unable to do anything about a situation, or even yourself, do not abandon the situation or set it all to a halt, instead, pick it up by the core and unleash your feelings towards it. This will allow you to find the solution to your problem, and help dissect the issue one by one, just like this wire.” The dog stuck the wire into the gravel near by. Maybe the dog truly wasnt so bad after all.

The days following our introduction to each other, and to her family, I found out that despite being a once before thief, the dog was a good mother, and only stole to provide to her family. She also enjoyed painting, except she didn’t have the time to enjoy

that segment of her life anymore. We were more the same than different. I spent lots of time gardening with her. Overtime, when we moved large portions of concrete together, there'd be a bald spot in the underlying grass that uncovered a patch of soil, where we'd take our left over fruit seeds and bury into the ground. Each day, we'd come back and water our new plants together. Her name was Snowbal. Spelt with only one l, unlike the english language, which she could also speak. She says she has come from America and that her owner had once brought her here, only to forget her. Lost and abandoned, she began her new life. Deprived of food like most street dogs, she began her journey in Pétion-Ville, where the rich and affluent resided. She assumed that the rich, being wealthy as is, would be more willing to help the impoverished, only they didn't, and instead, left her feeling inferior and helpless.

For the next five years, Snowbal and I did everything together. I did my best to forage for food, for all nine of us, kids, mother and all. As Snowbal taught me her wise ways of self-improvement and hope; I taught her of the value of others. It wasn't until a warm summer afternoon that Snowbal took her last breath. Unable to resuscitate her, I sat next to her cot and wept.

Lost at Sea

Joy Jin

Seven years ago, a ship named the Bonadventure sank in the deep blue waters of the British Isles.

A father had been on that ship. Countless fathers. Including Adriana's.

They said he'd been "lost at sea." That's exactly what was written in the letter sent to her mother. The next day, she went out the front door and never came back.

At the time, Adriana was eight. Old enough to understand a bit, but just not enough. The values of life and death still seemed so... far away.

And yet, the loss was still there. A gaping hole in the life that had once held so much happiness, so much joy. Now, a hole had been torn in the fabric, and all that had leaked out... into the void.

All there was left was emptiness.

And sorrow.

As a way to console the distraught child, Adriana's grandmother told her that her father was simply resting at the bottom of the ocean. She said Adriana could send him a message, just by putting it in a bottle and casting it into the sea. He would be able to read it.

So that's what she did.

Early one morning, she set out to the sandy beach near her home, having written everything she wanted to say to her father.

"What are you doing?" A teenager, tall and lanky, towered above her midget self. Adriana stood there like a small child caught in wrongdoing, holding the crumpled plastic bottle in her tiny hands.

"I'm sending a letter to Dad!"

"Then why's it in a bottle?" The girl sneered. "The post don't take letters with no envelope, do they?"

"My dad's at the bottom of the ocean. So of course I have to send it in a bottle! The postal service doesn't send letters there. I checked, but if I put it in a bottle, he'll get it and read it!"

She snorted. “Dead people can’t read. They’re just lying to you.”

“Not true!”

“Ha. Both my folks drowned, and I haven’t heard a word from them since. Why? ‘Cause they’re dead, just like your daddy.”

Adriana never ended up sending that letter. Still encased within the scrappy plastic bottle, it was hidden underneath her bed. Maybe in shame, maybe in disappointment. It laid there, gradually being hidden away with layers of dust. Forgotten.

Six years after the incident, Adriana was clearing out her room when she came upon the plastic bottle. Old, crumpled, and as scrappy as ever, it was in quite a state.

Out into the trash it went. The dust was too thick to show the piece of paper, folded neatly within the bottle. It was discarded yet again, this time without even realizing it.

The bottle went in a plastic bag, crammed with all other kinds of garbage.

The bag went out to the garbage dump. A landfill, to be exact. Right on the beach.

And there the tide rose.

Angrily, the waves took over the landfill, as if they were enacting vengeance over the trespassers on their domain. They swallowed the intruding pile of garbage, consuming it all.

Pieces of trash floated out to sea.

Along with that bottle.

Out into the blue. The deep. Maybe it even made it all the way to where the Bonadventure sank, thirteen years ago, in the British Isles.

The bottle was swallowed by the ocean, just like the ship. A leak had sprung. The bottle slowly filled with water. The paper, yellowed with age, became soaked in the salty sea.

It sank quietly into the deep, hitting the ocean floor.

Lost at sea.

Whatever Happened to . . .

Sharon Scholl

the people in my address book
that vanished in the trackless waste
of silence?

So vivid in my memory, preserved
exactly as we parted, untouched
by time's disasters.

Not even the obituaries, the police
dockets trace their lost existence,
not my friends' dim recollections.

They must be hidden somewhere
in an electronic thicket, protected
by secret codes and complex passwords.

It troubles me — the way we limp
from life, drift away like fallen leaves
floating helpless in a sullen tide.

It's the Schrodinger's cat dilemma —
are they alive or dead? Except I'm left
without a box to open.

Waterborne

Alan Hill

In the disused quarry, above town
I searched for fossils

Spend the day
found sea creatures in limestone
fossilized maps of death
gills caught mid breath

bent my fingernails
to prize out ammonites, trilobites
shark teeth
brachiopods

to give my body to rock
blood from broken knuckles
stain, marinade

When there were strangers on the
path below
I threw stones, hid

so little did I want to world to know
of my knowledge of the tides
dark, the predatory currents
water in my lungs, the ocean
that I came from.

Duplex: Red Wagon Lemonade

Rae Bynum

So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow,
But we depended on a red wagon.

Depending on our red Radio Flyer,
We made a lemonade stand for our block.

The lemonade stand we made for our block
Was the first time we made money of our own.

All we do now is make money of our own
With nothing to buy and lots of dreams to sell.

No one is buying the dreams we're selling.
Dreams that taste like drops of lemonade.

Dreams that taste like drops of lemonade
Take people back to when they lived freely.

Why can't we go back to when we lived freely?
So much for depending on red wheelbarrows.

Swiss Rolls

Martheaus Perkins

It's been so long since we've seen each other. I see you've moved up a couple shelves, no longer slinking at the bottom with your Nutty Buddies. Can I ask a favor? I need to eat you, here—in this Kroger—with these chill snaps being sent over from the round packages of ground beef and turkey. I mean no harm by it; I've just missed you. Other shoppers are starting to stare at us, so I'll try to make this quick.

When's the last time we were all together? How long ago were my legs crossed between the bars of a shopping cart pushed by my grandmother—her pearls bright under these grocery store lights. We came after church to see you. One time, she let me open your box in the cart. I rolled around like a marble, giggling as she turned corners like a NASCAR driver. You don't understand how much I've missed this: seeing your two chocolate logs sitting in mountain snow as white as your cream swirls. Remember when we ate the strips of chocolate you left on the white cards slid beneath you? We were never wasteful.

Where is she? Well, she can't be here. She's gone—that's why I need your help. I was hoping that you would bring me back to her. Look, I have a cart and it's Sunday, just like old times. You came in pairs, and we'd share you in the living room while watching Vanna White's sequins sparkle from Es to Ls. I was hoping that when I tasted your roulade icing, I could remember more details about her. Maybe, I would even see her hands—her fingers wrapped in church jewelry—gripped on the shopping cart one more time. Age has made me forget the finer details of her hands, her wrinkled cheeks rising when she smiled. You must miss that smile, too; the one she gave after saying, “We can't eat the whole box, sweet tooth.”

It would mean the world to me to taste those memories. Those chocolate sweet moments when she handed me her Swiss Roll because I was finished with mine.

Dominoes

Martheaus Perkins

Is it wrong that I daydream about reviving my grandmother to school her at a game of dominoes? And I mean embarrass her—make her wish our continent never discovered dominos. Before you pearl clutch, you should know that the last time we played, she gave me her final domino and told me to choose how I wanted to go out. Then she said, “We call that an ass whooping, Junior.” All I want is a few more eternities to pay her back, then play again.

The Voice of Antonio Banderas

Martheaus Perkins

I write my poems in the voice of Antonio Banderas, zipping through lines as Zorro, cutting a fire blazing Z in the blouses of outlaws and oil barons.

The guy can read the phonebook.
His timbre is saber-sharp justice
and righteous fire. It's the voice
that got Momma and Granny
in the same room after six years.
Drops of butter kissed by June sun
sizzled on popcorn. Catherine Zeta-
Jones making our living room pant.
The strawberry lace quilt cape they
strapped loose around my daydream.
For an hour, the nitroglycerin tension
was Z-sliced, as we all mouthed along,
So the devil will know who sent you.

I write my poems in the voice of Antonio Banderas, because he's a hero. A
voice that cuts symbols on bad guys and rides away with a black mask.

Family Album

Martheaus Perkins

It's the book hidden under
my grandmother's couch
I'd glance through with
a cherry Twizzler balanced
between my boney fingers
imitating momma's cigarettes.
I peered in, not sure if I'm
intruding on black and white lives
or being invited in to sit with cousins
sopping pancakes in Mrs. Butterworth's
syrup, interrupted by Polaroid ticks.
Or lie on their Fleetwood Cadillacs
with hoods long and boxy like twin beds
we can sleep on as they tell stories
about dance halls, road trips with sunroofs
left at home, and what my mom and her mom
were like when they were my age.

I see them, here:
"Momma" and "Nana."
They've never looked more
like mother and daughter.
They're both too young
to recognize that time
is a burden that smiles
can't make go away.

Contributors



Grace Ainsworth is a sophomore attending Midwestern State University to pursue a degree in English and Art. She works as a freelance writer and artist. Her work is inspired by comics that she enjoyed as a child, as well as classical pieces from history. Digital and graphite pencil are her mediums of choice, though she does dabble in several others.

Andrew Belfry holds an MFA in Writing from the Vermont College of Fine Arts.

Lawrence Bridges is an undergraduate of Stanford University. His poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, and *Tampa Review*. He has also published three volumes of poetry including *Horses on Drums*, *Flips Days*, and *Brownwood*.

Miya Brumley is an undergraduate for Midwestern State University. She will graduate in Spring of 2023 with a Bachelors in Psychology and a minor in Art with a concentration in Photography.

Rae Bynum is an undergraduate of Stephen F. Austin University with a major in Creative Writing. She has been published in the Stephen F. Austin literary journal, *HUMID*, and has also had work displayed in several exhibitions and a chapbook put together by the creative writing club of “Subplots.”

Alice Cai is a sophomore at Jasper High School in Texas. She has been taking art lessons since elementary school and loves experimenting with different mediums.

Nic Fisk is working on his PhD in Computational Biology and Bioinformatics at Yale University. He has previously had both English and Spanish poetry featured in publications such as *Azahares*, *Palimpsest*, and *Chaleur Magazine*.

Dennis Foley earned his MFA in Creative Writing from Columbia College-Chicago and a law degree from The John Marshall Law

School. He has four books and two award-screening screenplays to his name. When he's not writing, he spends his free time keeping his friends out of jail.

Nadilia Gilbert is a student from Dominica. She graduated from Dominica State College in 2013 with her Associates in Business Administration. She is also a graduate of Midwestern State University and is currently working on her Masters in Business Administration.

Mark Hammerschick holds a BA in English from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana as well as a BS and a MBA. His current work will be appearing in: *The Dew Drop*, *Spectra Poets*, *Sisyphus*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Sad Girls Club*, and elsewhere.

Jessica Harrison has a Creative Writing degree from Southern New Hampshire State University. She has an affinity for rom-coms and is a champion of silly stories and quirky happily-ever-afters.

Hebe He is a Sophomore at Jasper High School. They have been studying art since they were five years old and are deeply interested in semi-realism style.

Alan Hill is a graduate of the University of Leeds in England. He is a former Poet Laureate of the City of New Westminster, former President of the Royal City Literary Arts Society, and was the editor and curator of *A Poetry of Place: Journey Across New Westminster*. His writing has been published internationally and his poetry has appeared in *Event*, *CV2*, *Canadian Literature*, *Poetry is Dead*, among others.

Joy Jin is a high school student at Orange County School of the Arts in the Creative Writing Conservatory. This is her first published piece.

Katherine Kincaid is an undergraduate of Midwestern State University.

Ori Krakowski is a Freshman at Jasper High School. They are a trumpet player in the school band. They enjoy the freedom that comes with designing unique creations.

Varuni Kumar is a Sophomore at Jasper High School. They have had an amusement towards painting since a young age.

Connor Lee is a Junior English major at Midwestern State University. He plans to go into Publishing post-graduation.

Cameron Lings is a graduate of MIMA School of Art and Design based in the UK, whose practice consists of generating three-dimensional forms from bodies of data-sets and statistics. Through a systematic and research-based approach, his creations realize themselves as functioning sources of information- despite their initial abstract traits. Lings utilizes variants of scale, shape, and material choice throughout his works, in order to enhance their relevance to both a subject and site.

Sunny Liu attends Jasper High School. As an artist and writer, she strives to write stories that will bring attention to real world affairs and issues. She believes that in life, we can all find new opportunities and gain acceptance of others if we open our mind.

Tajender Singh Luthra is a graduate from the University of Pennsylvania. While examining relationships between self and the world, Tajender Singh Luthra observes and sketches the human quest, pain, and struggle for equality in life. His poems are a lifelong journey of raising questions for self-examination and searching for evidence and acceptance. They unravel the complexities of human existence, destiny, and dignity and find intense thoughts, human feelings, emotions, and psychological tendencies. His first poetry collection *Assi Ghat Ka Bansuri Wala* in the Hindi language was published by Rajkamal Prakashan, India, in 2012. Recently, his poem 'Arabian Horse' has been selected by *Lammergeier Magazine* for publication in its winter edition.

Jean Marburg is a junior English major at Midwestern State University who enjoys writing poetry and literary analysis. When they aren't writing, they spend their free time drawing, mainly wildlife such as frogs. They also enjoy drawing their cat, Flipflop!

Rhonda Mitchell is a PEN Emerging Voices Fellow and a two-time Voices of Our Nation (VONA) Fellow. Rhonda earned a Master's degree in Counseling Psychology from Mount St. Mary's

Contributors

University and is completing an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University. Presently she is the Communications Director for South LA Council member Marqueece Harris-Dawson. Her public service also includes the LA City Department of Cultural Affairs and California State University Los Angeles, where she created innovative programming to increase cultural competency on campus.

Shivani Nathan is a Sophomore at Jasper High School.

Martheaus Perkins is an undergraduate at Stephen F. Austin State University in Texas. He is an African American writer, and his heroes include Maya Angelou, Billy Collins, and Langston Hughes. He has two long-term dreams: seeing a panda in the wild and publishing a full-length collection.

Kerrigan Reyes is a senior at Midwestern State University. She is a photographer, writer, illustrator, and painter. She has been submitted to many art exhibitions between the years of 2015 to 2022. She creates art that deals with mental illness, death, and women's rights. She also specializes in medical illustration.

Aditi Sawant is a sophomore in Jasper High School. They express themselves through art. Apart from art, their hobbies are dancing and listening to music.

Sharon Scholl is a retired college professor (Humanities) who convenes a poetry critique group and maintains a website of original music free to small churches. Her chapbooks *Seasons* and *Remains* are available via Amazon Books. Individual poems are currently in *Third Wednesday* and *Agapanthus Weekly*.

Maya Shojaatalab is a Freshman at Jasper High School. She likes to create art in her free time and dreams to pursue an art career.

Luken Sloan is an aspiring writer and Sophomore at East Central University with multiple poems published in ECU's *Originals*. When he is not actively pursuing working towards his degree in English, he is interested in video games, writing, reading, and spending time with family and friends.

Benjamin Stewart is an undergraduate at Indiana University-Southwest. He has written several short stories, both fiction and nonfiction, and has a publication credit in *Beyond Words Literary Magazine* for a piece called “To Good Health”. This piece won an award for flash fiction and will be published in March of 2023.

Catherine Wang is a sophomore at Jasper High School. She uses her art to create social commentary about real world issues. Her included piece “Eroded” is about substance abuse.

Izzy Wang is a freshman at Jasper High School in Plano, TX under the instruction of Ms. Adriane Anderson.

Mary Witty writes poetry in her free time. She is currently a Sophomore at Abilene Christian University. In her free time, she also enjoys drawing, listening to music, and reading. She started writing poetry back in her junior year of high school in 2020.



