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Mikey Maddox
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William Rieppe Moore
Lauren Mullins
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VOICES

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Skate day
Grace Ainsworth

Editors' Note

The Editors are proud to share with you the forty-third edition of *Voices*. We would like to thank Dr. John Schulze for his incredible leadership and expertise throughout the creation of this journal. We would also like to extend our gratitude to the Department of English, Humanities and Philosophy, the Student Allocations Committee, and the Bryan L. Lawrence Endowment for making this edition of *Voices* possible. Finally, we would like to thank the contributors to this year's journal for trusting us with the work they've spent countless hours creating. Over the past several months we've done our best to do right by you, and we hope that our effort can be felt as you work your way through the forthcoming pages.

The Editors hope that reading this journal will be an enjoyable and enlightening experience. We've gathered bits and pieces of the happiest, saddest, and darkest parts of the minds of thirty-one different writers and artists from all over the country. We are happy to share their work with you, and we encourage you to take your time and enjoy their words and artistic visions.

If you are interested in submitting your work for a future edition of *Voices*, you can search for us on Submittable.com or visit our website:

www.voicesjournal.org

Cover Art:

Kerrigan Reyes

"This is How Small I Feel Right Now"

(*photograph, 11"x17"*)

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Dr. John Schulze

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.



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Rust Hollow, Virginia

William Rieppe Moore

Late-summer light is laughter
repossessed—a lisp of mass at rest.

The maters have been skinned
and are still as waxworks behind

glass after a water bath—vermillion
flesh from a bush-vine hybridized.

One of these nights that
doesn't mean a thing, I reckon

a coon'll come along hungrier than
when it told that possum to

Shake them 'simmons down! Its
horary hide will gather dark

of eye and snuff out my meat birds
by digging out their gizzards

first. The fatty tubes of viscera
that pock the pasture will

be like the sunrise as it passes
from mornin' into laughter.

Love Songs

Kristen Dunn

I used to look both ways before crossing the street
Now I don't have to
It's not because I'm 25
It's a rule I have never outgrown
It's because I am living during a pandemic
The roads are empty
That is why I no longer have to look both ways before crossing the street
There is more chance of an invisible virus hitting me
Than a car
I walk home with my groceries while listening to love songs
I used to think echoes were most prominent in caves
But that's what Chicago is turning into
A dark and empty cave
When walking in a cave
You don't get worried about getting hit by a car
You are afraid of the unknown
They say downtown is deserted
I saw pictures of where I grew up
There used to be people
But now it's empty
Some will return
My mom won't
Normal is forever a memory
I walk home with my groceries while listening to love songs

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Mars

Can someone tell me why these clouds are so low?
Or why these broken leaves don't belong to the tree I'm sitting under?
Everything around me is changing
And it has me starting to wonder
I've been looking up at Mars
We have been seeing each other for months
But surrounding him are stars
Whispering "she's starting to drive us nuts"
The moon is almost full
In the moonlight there is a flower
The waves push it close to me
But will soon take it in an hour
Cut me open
Let the water in
I need something to ease the pain
There was a time I was happy
And I actually enjoyed the rain
But the rain foretold my tears
So I retreated from the clouds and their twisted predictions
But it was the story of this year
And how it made me stop and listen
The water glows in the moonlight
The clouds are moving higher
I always end up watching the sky
And I always end up feeling tired

Not of Muscle

Weighted bronze
Heavy stone
I was found by Auguste Rodin
Or maybe even Michelangelo
I was
Sculpted
Chiseled
Measured
Assigned a persona
Attributed a soul
Crafted into detail
To become a piece for others to know
Chips in the alloy that I am
Present to the world a face
Revealing fragments of a story
Possibly of being stuck someplace
I am
Sitting
Crouching
Thinking
Observers view me in admiration
Sometimes people go a distance
Just to see me in this location
Crowds get to know me well
I'm defined as a piece of art
But tell me
What about me is so endearing?
Do they forget that metal has no heart?
The hands of a creator transformed me
Into a shape easily recognized
But is this shape artistic?
Or is it a disguise?
Weighted bronze
Heavy stone
You see no personal interactions
I was crafted to be alone

The Gates of Paradise

Mikey Maddox

Sinners,
Wait at the gates,
Angels keep watch, guarding,
Barring those who do not belong,
Kneeling,

They pray,
For God's mercy,
Asking for forgiveness,
From one with boundless compassion,
"Hear me!"

Hands clasped,
Head bowed lowly,
"Hail Mary full of grace,
Blessed are thee among women",
Begging,

Heat pools,
Burning their feet,
Angels watch as clouds part,
The weight of one's sins pulls them down,
"My lord!"

Falling,
Beneath the clouds,
Away from heavens gates,
Their souls crying out in remorse,
"My God!"

Soul for a Soul

Connor Lee

“**Isaac**, did you mean it when you said that?” Katie asked, loudly. She’d just pushed me on the back to wake me up.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath.

I sighed, grabbed my phone off the nightstand, and checked the time before responding. **3:15 AM**. “When I said what, Katie? You know I have to get up soon.”

“When we were at The Domain in Austin. Like a year ago? Did you mean it when you said you’d love me forever?”

“Yes, I did. I meant it.”

“What if one of us dies?” She asked, hugging her pillow and looking at me with tear-streaked eyes.

This is ridiculous, I thought. *I just wanna fucking sleep.*

“Would you still love me?” She finished.

“I would still love you.”

“Can we pick a place to meet up? You know, like, in case one of us dies, or if there’s a zombie outbreak or alien invasion and we lose each other. Can we, please?”

“Sure. If something happens we can meet up here, but if one of us dies I don’t think we’re gonna be able to meet up anywhere.”

“It has to be somewhere else! What if we can’t get back to the house because of a forest fire or nuclear explosion or terrorists? If I die I promise I’ll try and meet up with you somehow.”

“Fine,” I said. “If something happens we’ll meet at the park. Under the tree where we had our first kiss. If I die I’ll come back as a ghost and drop an acorn on you or something.”

“Okay,” she said. “And if we can’t meet at the park we’ll meet outside the art museum, on the corner next to the bus station. It’s on the other side of town. If we can’t get to the park, maybe we can get there.”

“Deal,” I said, not bothering to hide how annoyed I was. “Can you be quiet now? I have to get up soon and you’re not letting me sleep. Sometimes I feel like you forget that I don’t get to just lay around all day.”

“Sorry,” she said, then turned to face away from me. She quietly began to cry, but I was just happy that she was finally leaving me alone.

She was still asleep when I left for work a few hours later. Around ten she texted me good morning, and at noon she called me to ask if I needed anything from the store. I didn’t. I told her that my boss needed me (a lie) and that I had to go. I loved her more than anything, but after being woken up in the middle of the night for the third time that week, I was getting tired of hearing her voice.

I hung up and got lost in my work for a while until I heard my office door swing open. I turned to see my boss, Richard, walking into the room.

“The printer is out of ink,” he said pointedly.

I waited for him to elaborate, but he just stared at me. I already knew where this was going, but I couldn’t bring myself to play diligent employee. “That... sucks,” I said.

“I expect that it won’t be out of ink by the time I leave the office tonight. And for your sake I hope that this won’t happen again,” he left without waiting for a reply.

Richard was the most asshole of a boss I’d ever had. I’d been working overtime with no extra pay every single week since I started, and I was the fastest and most

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efficient worker in the company. None of that was ever good enough for him. He was always looking for an excuse to get onto me for one thing or another, and half the time it was something I had no control over or responsibility for. The worst part about him, though, was that I couldn't take his job until he retired, which most likely wouldn't be anytime soon. He'd just turned 60, but was in perfect health and had mentioned to me on multiple occasions that he planned to continue working until the day he died. Maybe I would've fought back a little harder if I didn't need the job so bad. I couldn't risk getting fired ever since Katie lost her job.

A quiet knock on my door brought me back from my thoughts.

I assumed it was a co-worker, "Come in!" I yelled.

Instead, in walked in a police officer. Buff and tall, the type that should have been striding with confidence. But he didn't seem confident that day. He softly closed the door behind him, walked into the middle of the room with his head down, and took a deep breath. Only then did he look me in the eyes. Before he even opened his mouth I knew exactly what kind of news he was there to deliver.

"I'm sorry to inform you," he said as tears started to form in my eyes. "That there has been a terrible car accident. Katie Miller was pronounced dead at 12:45 today. I'm sorry."

My body went numb as a fast-paced beating built up to my throat. I tried to catch my breath as my own heart threatened to choke me.

"That can't be true," I said, pleading. All my frustrations with her finally washed away. At that moment I would've given anything to go back to the sleepless nights of her anxiety and panic attacks. Anything just to hear her voice. How could she be gone when the story of our lives was so far from complete? Surely there was some mistake.

"I don't believe it," I said between gasps of air. "It's not true."

"It is," the cop said, hanging his head. "A drunk driver was going the wrong way and hit her head on. She probably didn't feel anything. I'm sorry."

I knew with a deep certainty that he was wrong. *A drunk driver at 12:45 on a Thursday? No way.*

I walked past him and outside, then into my car. I sped all the way and was calling Katie's name as I entered the house. Of course, there was no response.

I spent the next hours crying, screaming, and calling and texting her over and over.

This just couldn't be real. Who would be the mother to my children if not her? Who would I finally move out of the country with? Who would I lay in bed with and vent to after a long day of work? Why wasn't she there to hold me and tell me that everything would be okay?

Why did this have to happen to me? I asked myself.

Eventually, I fell asleep on our bedroom floor, and it wasn't until I woke up a few minutes past midnight that I remembered our conversation from the night before.

"If something happens we'll meet at the park. Under the tree where we had our first kiss." I'd said that, and whether she could meet me there or not, I had to at least try.

I ran out to my car and fifteen minutes later I was pulling into the parking lot.

I stepped out of my vehicle and closed the door as gently as possible behind me. It was completely dark out, not a soul in sight. Directly in front of me was a large field of grass.

About twenty yards out was a small playground, just large enough for two swings and a slide. Katie and I used to go there all the time, back when we were younger, before we lived together, before there were bills to pay.

During the day it was a romantic spot to kiss, plan our future, talk about life and the philosophies we shared, deep conversations we couldn't have with anyone else. During

the night it looked more like something out of a horror movie: the slide was silver, rusty, a little too tall, and the swings were gently moving back and forth, though I couldn't feel any wind.

About ten feet behind the playground, of course, was the tree that I'd gently pushed her against before I kissed her for the very first time.

I walked past the playground and to the tree. Out in the middle of the open field, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was on display, like an animal in a zoo. Again, I scanned the area. Nothing. I touched the tree with one hand and still, the world was completely silent. No grasshoppers, no birds, no leaves blowing in the wind.

This is stupid, I told myself. *She's not gonna be here*. But I had to try. I looked left and right, up and down, nothing.

I sat down with my back against the tree. "Katie, I love you," I said. "Please come back to me. Come back to me!"

There were several minutes of silence as I waited for something, anything, to happen, but when nothing did I started to get angry. "Katie, where the fuck are you?" I screamed. You were supposed to fucking be here! I need you!" I threw my hands into the ground and came up with two fists full of grass. I tossed them away and started punching at the ground, sobbing.

"Coming here was stupid," I whispered to myself as I buried my head into the ground. "She's gone."

I took a deep breath to scream, but then, like a voice in the wind traveling past my ear, I heard my name. "Isaac." It was her voice, as unmistakable as if I'd been looking her in the eyes.

I felt the wind and the sound moving past me. I turned to follow it, hunt it down and bring it back with me. Instead, I turned and was instantly face to chest with a man.

He was old, probably in his seventies, but towered over me at least seven feet tall and stood with perfect posture. He wore a full black suit topped with a black fedora, and his sinister smile was wide but lopsided, his lips only extending to his right nostril on one side, but stretching almost to his left ear on the other. An ear that was black and bloody, and that twitched in tandem with his mouth. His sharp teeth crunched together as he spoke.

"She tried everything to get back here, you know." His voice was soft, but forceful and confident, a powerful energy surrounded him. He could squash me like a bug if he had the slightest desire.

"Wh- what?" I stammered, stepping backward away from him. "Who are you?"

He reached out and touched my shoulder. Suddenly I was frozen, not with fear, but actually frozen in place, like I had sleep paralysis. All I could do was stare into his black, lifeless eyes as he continued to speak.

"I'm the only one who can give you what you want. The only one who can bring her back to you." For just a second he disappeared, replaced by Katie, standing in front of me, eyes shining and smiling that beautiful toothy grin. "That's what you want, right?" He asked. Illusion shattered, Katie nothing but a memory.

"Are... are you the devil?"

He laughed harshly. "As close to it as there is. You can call me Lucifer, just for fun."

"Can you bring her back? Please?"

"Why do you want her back?"

"Because I miss her," I said. "Because I need her!"

"Interesting," he said with a chuckle. "You miss her and you need her, okay. What a Christian thing to say. A man wants his woman back because he needs her. Well, listen, I

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can bring her back, but only if you're willing to make a trade"

"What do you want?"

"It's very simple," he said. "Trade with me one life for another. One soul for a soul. Kill someone, anyone you want, and I'll give her back to you."

"I don't know if I can."

"Word of advice, make it someone you hate. Someone you believe deserves to die. That usually makes it easier. Do that and I'll give you a chance to talk with her for a while. At the end of the conversation I can bring her back. If you so choose."

"What do you mean IF I choose? Of course I'll bring her back."

"Just a formality," he said. "You have 24 hours."

"Wait," I said. "What about the police? What if I get caught?"

"Don't worry about that. You'll be safe during this whole process. Your only worry should be if you're willing to kill for what you want."

"I'd kill for her," I said, steeling myself. "In a heartbeat."

"Sure," he laughed. "For her."

And then he was gone. The spell was broken and I was once again able to move around freely. Able to do whatever I wanted. Kill if I wanted. Was he actually gonna make me do it?

I walked away from the tree and to the playground, then sat on the swing closest to the slide, always leaving the other open for Katie. Could I kill for her? I asked myself. My entire philosophy about life told me that, if she was dead, then it was meant to be that way. But I had just been given a chance to change things. A chance to play God if only in a very limited sense. Surely that wouldn't happen either if it wasn't meant to be. I thought about my future. Every single bullet point had her included: I'd be a famous writer with a smart, beautiful, psychologist wife. Our kids would be raised by two geniuses, and they'd go on to make me proud. Sure, Katie hadn't been doing so great recently, but once we got her mental health sorted she could certainly make a good wife and an even better mother.

I can't let all those possibilities die with her, I told myself. And the words of Lucifer echoed in my head. *"Make it someone you hate. Someone you believe deserves to die."*

I knew exactly who that was, and less than an hour after that strange, terrifying conversation, I was parking my car in front of his house.

To say that I hated my boss was an understatement. That selfish fuck had been making my life hell for years. I can't say that the thought of sending him there wasn't at least somewhat appealing to me. As far as I was concerned, he'd already lived a long fulfilling life. It was time for him to pass the torch and move on. Besides, I happened to know that his wife was out of town for the week. He'd be completely alone.

I almost didn't feel bad as I walked around his driveway and to the backyard. I told myself that it was the right thing to do. Trading a 60-year-old man's life for a woman of 26? Who wouldn't? It would be wrong not to make the trade.

I reached the back door and found it was unlocked. The thought crossed my mind that Lucifer was looking out for me, and somehow I started to get incredibly happy, almost giddy. After this was done, not only would I get Katie back, but I'd also finally become the Editor-In-Chief of the paper, a job that I'd deserved for years. Maybe Katie's "death" was a good thing.

I closed the door behind me, walked through the kitchen, and into the living room. Against the wall, right outside of the hallway that I guessed led to Richard's bedroom, was a bookshelf fully loaded with pictures of who I recognized as his grand-children. They were young, hyper, and always smiling. In many of the pictures, they could be seen playing with Richard or sitting on his lap. A voice in my head told me to turn

around, to leave him alone and go back to my life, to try and make things work without Katie, but I fought against it. I was there to get her back, and I didn't care what it took.

I walked down the hallway until I was outside the open door of the master bedroom. Richard laid alone in his bed, the ceiling fan directly above him running at full speed, the blanket pulled down to his legs. He was curled up on his side and snoring loudly.

I walked over and pulled the knife out of my pocket. *You shouldn't do this*, the voice said as I stood over him. But again, I didn't listen. Killing someone wasn't so hard when you knew you couldn't get in trouble, and when you knew you were doing it for the right reasons.

I held the knife with two hands over his head and thrust it as hard I could into his forehead. There was no struggle, no scream, and barely any blood. Just one last twitch, the flickering of his eyes, and then, nothing.

I looked up to see Lucifer standing on the other side of the bed.

"Wow," he said. "That was easy. Now go talk to that girl. Then you can choose."

As he finished speaking, the room melted away to a world of infinite, absolute darkness. I turned every which way, looking for some sort of light, a sense of direction, but I could only see myself. The world was a big black globe, like I was standing on air.

I stood still for a while, not sure what to do until I heard Lucifer's voice, booming as if from a hundred overhead speakers. "Walk," he said. And I did.

It only took a minute or so before I reached Katie. She was sitting with her arms wrapped around her legs, waiting.

"Katie!" I screamed as I ran towards her. "Katie, I'm here! I'm bringing you back! I'm here to save you!" I held my arms out wide, ready for her to jump into them.

"Why did you make me go here?" She asked as I reached her. She was angry but calm, like I simply wasn't worth the energy it took to yell.

"What do you mean, baby?" I asked. "I didn't take you here, I came here to get you back. Things were so hard, I went through so much for you, I—"

"Is that really how you think it was?" She asked. "Things were so hard for you? You went through so much for me?"

"Yeah," I said. "I was a wreck when you died. I went to the spot where we were supposed to meet and this guy gave me a—"

"I know everything, Isaac. Do you know how much of a selfish asshole you were when I was alive? Everything was always about you. I made you dinner, cleaned your clothes, kept the apartment clean, I took care of you like you were a fucking child, and yet the second I needed something it was too much to handle. I needed help, and you made me feel worthless and used. You manipulated me. You made me think that I was hurting you. I didn't even realize you were the reason I felt like shit until I was gone."

"You're really gonna argue with me right now?" I shouted, balling my hands into fists. "After everything I've done for you?"

"Everything you've done for ME, Isaac? Are you ever gonna get it? Everything you did was for you. You could never sympathize with me, you never had the time or energy to be there for me, and for what? All so you could have a few extra minutes to play video games or watch movies or read a book? Even when I died, you cried for you, not for me. Even when all my dreams were crushed, thrown away like they never existed, you cried for everything YOU lost. Did you ever once think about me? About how shitty dying was for ME? About how much I lost? And did you ever once think that I might not WANT to come back? That maybe I'm happier here? Even when I'm dead I don't matter to you."

"You're happier here?" I asked, motioning all around me. "In this pit of darkness? Bored, alone, and scared?"

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“It’s not like this, Isaac.” She paused, hesitated, then, “Can I show you something?”

She reached her hand out to me, and the second we touched I felt a burning sensation begin to run through my entire body, starting at my head. It was like hot water running through my veins, cleansing every ounce of my being, healing every pain I didn’t know I had. As it reached my thighs and worked its way down my calves and to my feet, the dark landscape started to transition into something light and beautiful. We were standing on a white cloud in the middle of a blue sky.

“Do you feel that?” She asked.

I did. Joy, fulfillment, and the uttermost peace. I didn’t have the need or desire to do *anything*. I didn’t need food or water, I didn’t feel the need to express myself or look for a purpose. I was simply happy to exist. In the few moments I spent there, I was happier than I’ve ever been or ever will be.

But then we were back in the darkness.

“Do you understand now?” Katie asked.

“I do,” I said, crying and falling to my knees, mourning what I’d just lost. “Please, can I stay there?”

“No. Not now, maybe not ever. You don’t get to choose. But I get to stay there, and I will.”

“Or I can bring you back with me. It’s my choice, right?”

“It is,” she said. “But don’t you think it’s about time you stop being so selfish? Can’t you worry about someone besides yourself for once?”

“Can’t you come back with me now, and then come here later?”

“I can’t go back to something that doesn’t make me happy. Not again, I was stuck with you for way too long and I’m finally free.”

“But don’t I make you happy?” I was pleading, begging for some sort of reassurance, begging for her to make me feel better.

“You did, Isaac. Back when we were younger. But in the past 6 months? No. You were ruining my life. You destroyed my self-worth, killed my perception of love, and were slowly draining my will to live. If I hadn’t died in that accident, I would have killed myself two months and a week later. Overdose after you got mad at me and left the house while I was having a panic attack. I’ve seen it, Isaac. I’ve seen a lot. Things were never going to get better.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” I said, holding back tears.

“But you were going to,” she said. “And you have, multiple times.”

She was, of course, right.

“But I can change,” I argued. “I promise I can change.”

“You never do. Can I show you something else?”

I nodded and she took my hand. And then I was watching as Richard’s wife came back home in the morning and found her husband dead in their room. She was screaming and crying, retching sobs as she held her husband’s head in her hands screaming to the sky, “WHY?! WHY?! WHY?!”

And then all at once, I saw her future, a depression that consumed every ounce of her being. She would become an alcoholic, lose her job, and eventually die in a car accident she caused while driving drunk. She could have dealt with a natural death, but not this.

“You can’t keep thinking that everyone is just a pawn in your game, Isaac. We aren’t just toys, we are fully fleshed out people with dreams and wants and needs, just like you. And guess what? I’m happy now. Happier than you could ever make me. And I don’t owe you any words to make you feel better.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and for once, after all the fake apologies, I meant it.

“Prove it. Go on and do better. I owe you nothing else.” She kissed me on the forehead, and then she was gone, and the world slowly turned back into the bedroom, one flash of light at a time.

I stood over Lucifer, who was sitting on the bed next to Richard’s body.

“Have you made your choice?” He asked.

“I don’t want to bring her back,” I said. “She’s happier without me.”

“Very true,” he nodded down at Richard’s body. “All that for nothing. At least you’re sure to get the promotion, right?”

I thought about Richard’s wife, the depression I knew I’d be sending her into, the way I’d be affecting not only her life, but the lives of her kids and her grandkids. I thought about what I did to Katie, about what I was going to do had she not died in that accident. I felt like I was gonna throw up. I had to do something. How could I have been so selfish?

“Is there any way we can bring him back to life?” I asked. “I’ll do anything, I swear. I’m so sorry.”

“Sure,” he said. “I can bring him back. But only if you’re willing to make a trade.”

Work of Art

Rebecca L. Monroe

He plopped the clay down on the wheel and then sat frowning at it. What to do next? A glance over at his master plan showed him what was missing. So much work to do, so many gaps yet.

He kicked the wheel. Sometimes if he just started, inspiration would come.

She pulled over to the side of the road, no longer able to see, aware she was a danger because of it. She put her emergency flashers on and covered her face with her hands, sobbing.

It was over. She'd tried so hard but he really didn't care. He hadn't even bother to pretend this morning.

'If you don't like it, get out.'

Ann wiped at her face, makeup on her fingers. What a mess. And it wasn't only her face. She was overweight, her brown hair wild because she hadn't had it cut in months. Her standard dress these days was an old sweatshirt and jeans. No wonder he'd lost interest.

"Oh, please," she said aloud, shaking her head. "At least don't go there. He quit caring a long time ago. You wouldn't face it. You look how you do now because of it, not the cause of it."

Outside cars whooshed past. The dusk was one of those sparkling spring ones, the end of winter though not yet green. It seemed at odds with what was going on inside her.

Pete had left her years ago in his mind. It had started with the guy trips he'd begun taking after they had had their yearly vacation. Then one year there hadn't been time or money for her after the guy trip. It happened again the following year. Then the late nights and weekend with friends. When he was home, he wasn't home. He was in his shop or watching television. She'd tried everything; crying, anger, cajoling, going along with it. Nothing had worked. Now there was Cathy, the wife of his best friend.

Ann blew her nose and wiped her eyes, using the rearview mirror to clean up the damage. She pulled out her phone and texted Mandy 'Marriage over.'

'If you don't like it, get out.'

So she had. That, too, was stupid. He was wrong and she was leaving? What right did he have to stay in their house? Ann started the car, intending to go home. Then she sighed. She couldn't. She was better off waiting so she wouldn't suddenly decide all of this was okay.

The wheel spun and the figure slowly began to emerge. It was vague; wobbling uncertainly on the platform. However the image was there. His hands worked large adjustments at first that became more careful and fine as the features clarified.

Ann went to a motel and hauled her bags into the room. It smelled warm from the day, scented with commercial freshener. Pete would be at work tomorrow. She'd go back and get more of her things. She would have to find a place to live, something small and cheap, a place to put her stuff.

Cathy. Slim, attractive and adventurous, all she was not. Ann knew her forty-five years showed. She felt like an old suitcase – safe and worn with the edges frayed.

She sat on the bed. Now what? No home. Just a job. No marriage. Just, her. Now what?

The face became clear from the top down- high brown and wide intelligent eyes. High cheekbones, a fine, slightly turned up nose and firm jaw.

Strength. The face radiated strength

Now what?

Ann took a deep breath. Face it, dear. What hurts is not only the loss of Pete, because you knew long ago he'd quit trying. What hurts is the loss of pride, self-esteem, life direction.

So. What's good? What could she do?

Leave gracefully, for one thing. Let him have his new relationship. It won't be new for long.

"Pursue my dreams," it came out a whisper. The life she'd set aside twenty years ago to be a good wife. She was older, yes, not all were attainable, however some still were.

Her cellphone chimed with an incoming text. Mandy, her best friend.

'Come. The guest room is ready and yours for as long as you need it. See you soon?'

Ann rose. She'd held the job that had kept them secure, ignoring the artistic call because it didn't provide a regular paycheck. Pete bored easily and so changed jobs frequently. She'd saved and waited for him to grow up, settle down. Dumb. She'd worked, he'd played. It was pretty obvious, now.

What did she want to do?

Excitement rippled in her chest.

She texted Mandy back 'I have a room for the night. I will take you up on your offer tomorrow? Thank you and hugs!'

'Look forward to it.'

Cathy. They'd gotten along all right when they'd all gotten together – dinner out, dinner in, though Cathy had an edge to her. Ann had tried to ignore the sharp, barbed remarks, dismissing them as part of Cathy's blunt personality. Cathy, the whizz at mechanics, working alongside the men at the shop she and her husband owned, doing things Ann couldn't imagine doing. Nor wanted to. She didn't like grease, oil and the smell of exhaust. And, of course, Cathy could cook and was funny.

Cathy's husband, Doug, what was he thinking? Was he going to pound Pete into the dirt? What were Pete and Cathy going to do? The shop was Doug's.

Ann stared at her hands. So many years invested in the marriage and it was over?

The wheel spun and the neck formed, slim, not too elegant. Then the shoulders,

Voices

broad able to carry a heavy load with grace and calmness.

The next morning, Ann packed more things into the car and drove to Mandy's house. When she knocked, the door popped open.

Mandy, a big, bulky woman full of energy and softness stepped out and hugged her. "Come in. The guest room is ready, complete with Oscar purring in the center of your bed."

"I can't thank you,"

"Really? You'd do the same for me,"

Ann let herself be led inside. The house was an older, ranch style with comfortable furniture, pictures of family everywhere and worn, wall to wall carpeting. Once she had deposited her things in the room, she went to the kitchen where Mandy had coffee and doughnuts waiting.

"Comfort food. Sit and spew,"

Ann dropped into a chair. "He left me for Cathy. Doug's wife. Or rather I left him. I found out about the affair from an email she accidentally sent to me instead of him."

One of Mandy's heavy eyebrows went up.

Ann nodded. "Yeah, I know. It took me a while to figure out it wasn't an accident."

"So when is he getting out of the house so you can go home?" Mandy picked out a maple bar and bit into it.

"I left him,"

"He cheated on you. Plus you've mostly been paying for the house while he bought toys."

"He did repairs, paid for vacations,"

"The last time either of those happened was?"

Ann picked up a cream-filled doughnut, thinking. "Wow, I hadn't realized. I mean, I knew about the vacations, that's been five years. Repairs? At least as long, I guess. The last thing he did was the furnace and that was, yeah, four and a half years ago."

"I've tried to keep my mouth shut but it's been hard. Dear old Pete has been getting more selfish every year. I about lost it last year when he went to Alaska and left you home. He'd only been working three months and was 'so tired'? While you'd been working for over two years without a break? I could have killed him."

"I haven't exactly been pleasant company the last few years." Menopause, she was pretty sure, plus work stress.

The shoulders flowed into a matronly chest and stomach which were plump but not obese. The hips were wide yet in proportion to the rest of the torso. Dependable, stable, not beauty by earthly standards but beauty by the standards of spirit.

Mandy tilted her head. "Let's see, no vacation, work, no support, no help. Why, yes, you got a bit testy. Poor Pete!"

"I have to be honest, Mandy. I never said anything to him. I would get mad without explaining why."

"Really? You never said anything?"

"Okay, well, maybe I did. Cathy doesn't have baggage. I guess I gathered a lot of

baggage over the years. Especially from work.”

“Oh, Cathy has baggage. As does Pete. It’s just different baggage. Honestly, Ann, you should have kicked his butt out years ago. I don’t get why you didn’t. All I can think of is with so much of your energy being sucked up by work, you quit caring about home,”

“I didn’t quit caring.”

“You know what I mean.”

Yes, she did. “I couldn’t fight both fronts,”

“So, now you don’t have to. Wait until Pete tries some of his stuff on Cathy. She’ll haul him up short.”

The words hurt though Ann knew Mandy hadn’t meant for them to. He did need to be hauled up, would probably respect Cathy for it. Yet she’d tried and had been met with a different reaction. Rather than discuss things, he’d developed defense mechanisms; nodding and ignoring, taking it worldwide ‘everyone is having these problems’, or focusing on an example she gave as if it were the only time something had ever happened. Sheer frustration usually had her screaming. They’d quit truly communicating a long time ago. She’d waited too long to address the problems; become bitter and combative instead of flexible and open. If only she’d listened better, tried to join him again in his interests instead of deciding she was tired of doing what he wanted to do...

Mandy tapped her hand. “Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“The ‘*how Ann could have saved the day*’. Listen, these last few years, you’ve been trying to keep a relationship together all alone. I’ve been watching, remember? Name one thing he’s done that cost him some effort in the last year. One thing.”

She couldn’t.

Strong legs to hold her up, feet a little larger for a good foundation. The outside was complete. Inside was not. Inside was a turmoil of pain, callouses and anger. It was time to remove the source.

“So now what do I do?” Ann asked, tears close. “All those years...down the tubes.”

“Nothing learned?” Mandy poured them more coffee.

“Of course I learned things. I wasn’t in it for the learning though. I wanted to grow old together.”

“Not an option, I’m afraid. Your life is open now. You can do as you please.”

“You make it sound, nice.”

“It can be, eventually. You did learn a lot, Ann. I’ve watched you grow over the years. The lessons were painful but Pete taught you how to be strong, self-sufficient and patient. Now you need to use it. Get him out of your house and know you deserve some respect.” Mandy nudged Ann’s cell phone that was laying on the table. “Call him.”

Palms sweating, Ann speed dialed Pete’s number and got his voice mail. “You need to move out. I didn’t do...I want you out. Go live with Cathy. By tomorrow.” She disconnected. “What if he won’t leave?”

Mandy shrugged. “One thing at a time. Now we are going to go do something fun.”

“Don’t you have to work?”

Voices

“I took the day off.”

Tears flooded Ann’s eyes.

“Get used to it. People can, and will, do things for you because they care. You deserve it. You’re a good person. Not everyone just takes.”

A crack in the wall of protection appeared. It was a start. There was still much to fix to get through her barriers but the process was in motion. It looked to the future, to where this one would end up and gleamed with pleasure. Once torn down, the walls would not be rebuilt; the knowledge would be used to help others tear down their own.

It would be a long haul yet. It knew that too. However all great art took time. Every form was another potential Masterpiece. Every acceptance, another stroke of what was to come.

“Can I at least pay our way today?” Ann asked as they got in Mandy’s explorer.

“At least,” Mandy put her key in the ignition. “You have such a selective memory. At least? Hour after hour of listening while I lived through the trauma of my ungrateful mother, the horror of closing out her affairs.”

“But I didn’t do anything,” Ann remembered. Mandy had refused to let her help sort through things, do paperwork or make phone calls.

“You listened. You didn’t have to DO anything.”

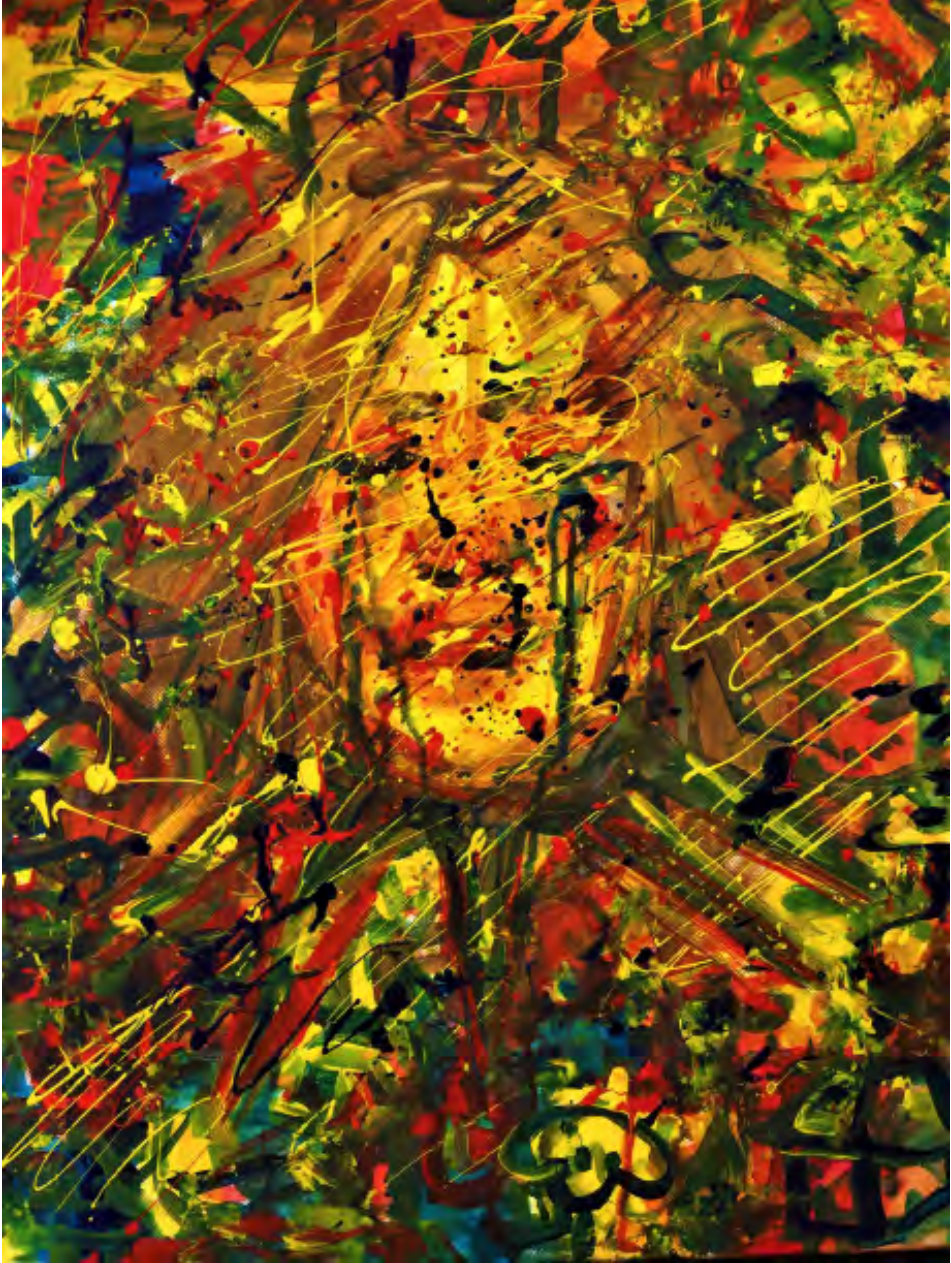
Ann stared at her friend.

“That’s such a gift, Ann and you never understood it. You were there for me, never asking for anything while I cried and raged and repeated myself. You didn’t talk, tell me your stories or what I should do. You listened while I worked my way out of the hole. So, for the moment, relax. Accept.” Mandy backed the car out of the driveway as Ann looked away, vision blurring again.

Another crack.

He lifted the statue from its place and set it among the others.

Where?
Markella Lousidis



Acrylic on canvas
19.5" x 27.5"

Infatuated

Eesha Gundam



Charcoal
12" x 18"

Amorph
Markella Lousidis



*Watercolor and acrylic on canvas
19.5" x 19.5" x 1"*

Bitter
Ashley Guo



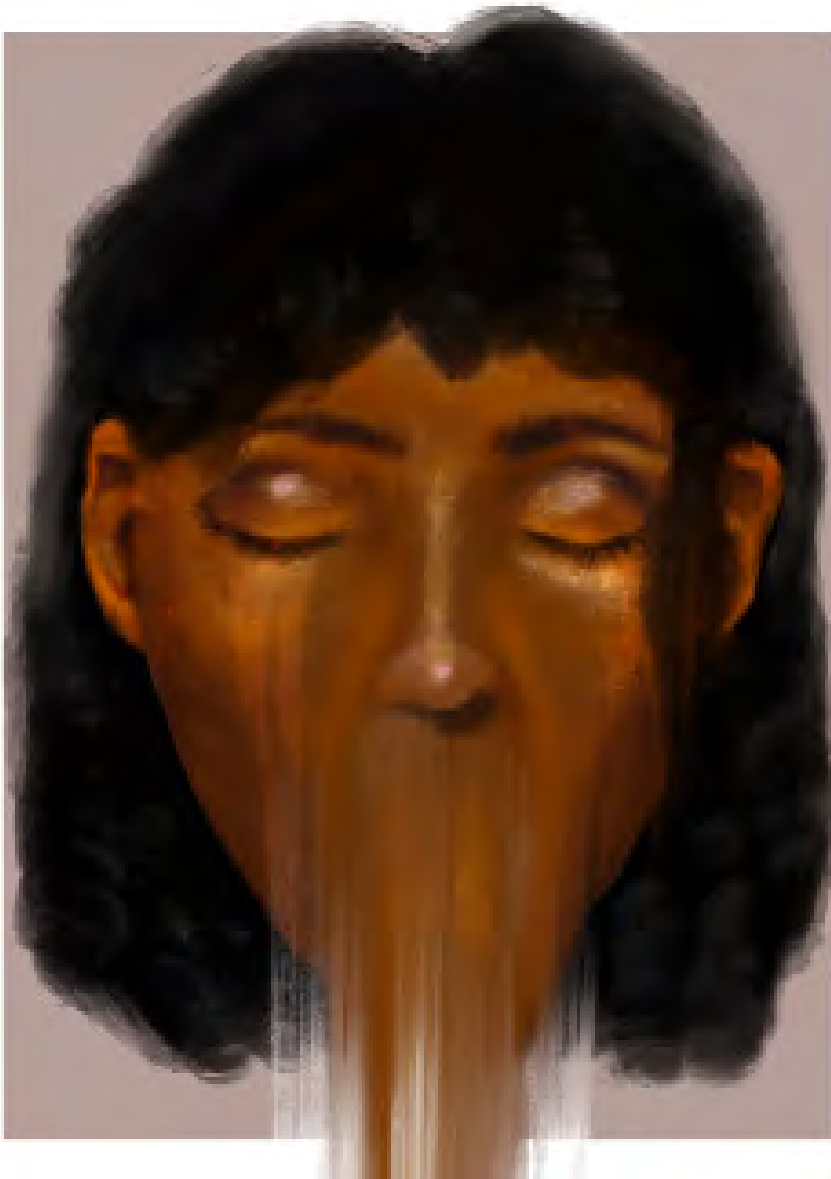
Charcoal
12" x 18"

Telugu Spice Royalty
Eesha Gundam



Oil paint
24" x 32"

Unspoken
Grace Ainsworth



Digital pencil
11.25" x 14.06"

Knocking on Heaven's Door

Andi Newberry



Screenprint and Cyanotype on Fabric
37" x 39"

Timed

Kallie Gooch



Graphite and Conte on paper
12" x 19"

Silent Night Bright with Elemental Particles

Mark Hammerschick

Where do we go from here
when there's no here or there anymore
only the Euclidean descent
of elementary particles
coalescing into quark world
I am the original muon
a fixed elemental particle
which simply is
what it is
it cannot be sub-divided
not like those trashy boys
those neutrinos are not refined
clubbing up with them bosons
fundamental force boys
the only dudes who can
handle strong and weak nuclear force
magnetism
and that ancient sciatic pain
in my back
gravity defies the standard model
something there is that doesn't
love the wall of general relativity
yet at the end of the day
and at the edge of the event horizon
I hold you in my arms
and hug you
and in that small isolated moment
when the rancid breath races
and the terror in your eyes
explodes
our universe has moved
quintillions of miles
out
into the black hole
beyond light
silent night bright

All's Fair in Love and...

Stephen Cooper

A **dilapidated** church rests on the edge of a barren field. Dust covers the stone blocks of the ancient ruins. Its windows are boarded up with planks of wood protecting historic stained-glass artwork. A partially collapsed archway leaves a trail of jagged boulders that litter the landscape.

Encompassing the estate are toppled bricks, piles of rubble, and mounds of splintered boards. But, embedded within its soil are the glories, heartbreaks, revelries, and losses of war. Life's lessons are captured through hardship from the ultimate competition. For those who dare to confront the risks, there is no recess from the triumphs and tragedies that have bled into this sacred land.

The high afternoon sun highlights pale tendrils of smoke as they pass over the dirt field like a specter. The ghostly apparition snakes through the patches of scrub grass, shallow mud puddles, and discarded debris. In the center of the field, the smoke settles over a rusted child's wagon. A Radio Flyer classic red wagon rests overturned against a mound of rocks. Dirt plasters much of the broken toy. A breath of wind disperses the smoke cloud.

Two parallel trenches bookend the battlefield. They extend out from either side of the church, reach past the muddy landscape, and lead to a thick tree line at the edge of the forest. The church, trenches, and the woods form the outer parameters that box in the open field. In the center of the exposed battleground rests the overturned wagon.

Loud popping sounds of gunfire echo in the distance. The blasts are followed by men shouting inaudible commands. These sounds are drowned out by the mechanical din of a tank's motorized track drive train. Next to the church, a small explosion launches a plume of smoke into the air. A cloud of dust washes over the church and blankets the field.

Throughout the tree line, dark outlines of soldiers race back and forth seeking cover. The beings scurry from tree to tree in a crouching position. Hiding behind the thick trunks, the soldiers take turns peering out past the bark to assess the churchyard.

Two figures scamper along the eastern trench from opposite directions. They duck their heads to remain below the ground level as they gather. Their olive-drab helmets poke above the ground as they peek out of the trench. Viewing the battleground, the soldiers raise their binoculars. Their faces are hidden behind the specs.

A rapid blast of gunfire reverberates through the air. The ruckus sends the helmets ducking below the ground. They crouch together for cover. The Major whispers to his partner, "Captain, I need a status report."

Adjusting his helmet, the Captain says, "Yes, Major. The target is in sight. But we're pinned down. The enemy's in the woods and along the western trench."

"Where's the target, Captain?"

"Sir, in the middle of the field. Under that wagon. What are our orders, Sir?"

The two helmets rise from the bunker and scan the battlefield. They focus their attention on the Radio Flyer wagon.

Shaking his head in frustration, the Major says, "Captain, we have eight minutes to retrieve the package before the Old Man blows the whistle on this whole mission."

"What? But Sir, we just got out here and I have a squad attempting to flank the enemy to the south."

"I'm with you, Captain. The enemy took their position before us. We should've picked a better team for this mission."

The sound of tank treads grows louder. Several more gun blasts send the pair crouching into the bunker. Huddling in the shadow of the trench wall, the soldiers whisper to each other with urgency.

“Captain, we have to hurry. Where’s Renee?”

Taking a breath, the Captain says, “Sorry, Major. But it turns out, she’s a double agent. I sent her to scout the perimeter and she alerted the enemy to our position. That’s why we’re boxed in, Sir.”

“What? No! That can’t be, Captain. She’s... I thought we... that’s not fair. Why would she do that?”

“Renee has always followed her own way.”

The Major furrows his brow and says, “Yes, but to go as far as join the enemy.”

“You love her, don’t you, Major?”

“She’s with Robert. Well, that was before...”

“...yesterday’s debacle? Before he was taken, captive?”

The Captain experiences a shiver and continues, “Do you think Robert is being tortured?”

“Of course, he is. Look where he ended up. Can’t imagine how bad he is suffering. His own damn fault, he knew the risks. He got too cocky. Maybe that’s why Renee switched sides, to help Robert.”

“No, Sir, she’s upset at him for not promoting her.”

The major’s head raises with hope. He says, “I thought she loved him? Do you think...”

A loud crack of gunfire echoed off the church and the two soldiers drop to their knees. Several men argue in the distance. The Captain panics.

“What do we do, Sir? We’re outnumbered, cornered, and only have four minutes before the whistle gets blown. Should I alert the squad and have them prepare for attack?”

The Major grasps his subordinate’s arm and scolds, “Control yourself, Captain. The squad is still too far away. We’re much closer here. I have a plan.”

The two helmets carefully peer over the bunker wall. The Major points a stick toward the wagon. He lowers the branch to the floor and draws a rectangle map in the dirt at their feet. The stick points to features on the gritty diagram as the Major narrates.

“Here’s the church. The two bunkers and the woods. The enemy is entrenched in here and here. Captain, you hustle down this stretch and meet the squad by the tree line. On my signal, cover me while I run to capture the target.”

The Captain objects, “But Major, that’s suicide, Sir. We should go around.”

“No time for that. We’ve got to take this head-on. Sometimes, Captain, you’ve got to take the risk and just go for it.”

The Captain drops two thick red sticks to the ground and says, “Want me to cover you with the dynamite?”

“What? No, Captain, that’s why Robert isn’t with us today. No sticks, what-so-ever.”

The two helmets rise above the dirt wall. They scan the battlefield. The Major adjusts his binoculars to focus on the enemy gathering on the opposite side of the field. Figures scamper back and forth across the far trench as they prepare for the attack. He watches as the helmets bob up and down throughout the opposing position.

His gaze rests on his adversary. A pair of binoculars suddenly appear above the enemy’s bunker. The specs were directed straight at him. The two foes stare at one another. Their faces are hidden behind the binoculars. The Major then notices long strands of dark hair waving in the wind from underneath the olive-drab helmet of his

Voices

opponent.

“That’s Renee.” The Major says, “Can’t believe she’s a double agent. Can’t believe she’s with them. Can’t believe she is with him. It’s not fair.”

“You don’t know that, Sir.”

“Damn it, Captain. She’s gonna capture the target for their team.”

The Captain says, “Stop beating around the bush. Just ask her.”

“Ask her which side she’s on?”

“No, ask her about Robert. Ask her if she likes him.”

Lowering his binoculars, the Major says, “We have less than two minutes before the Old Man blows the whistle on...”

“Sir, why didn’t you tell Renee how you felt about her before lunch? Maybe she likes you more.”

The Major pauses, “It wasn’t the right time. It was too risky.”

Placing a hand on his supervisor’s shoulder, the Captain says, “Sometimes, Major, you’ve got to take the risk and just go for it.”

A blast of gunfire sparks the soldier’s attention. They peek over the wall of the trench. The Captain points and says, “Sir, we’re out of time. Look. In the church. Someone’s coming out.”

A large wooden door of the church opens. An elderly priest dressed in black steps out. His face is contorted in a bitter expression of anger. At the end of his long grasp, he pulls a ten-year-old boy by the ear behind him. The priest hauls the tearful boy into the daylight and stands at the edge of the field.

“He’s got, Robert.” The Captain says.

The boy in tow wears a catholic school uniform. He cranes his neck to relieve the pressure from the grip of his ear. The irritated priest grasps a whistle from the lanyard around his neck. Raising the whistle to his mouth, he prepares to blow.

The Captain shouts, “Major, time’s up! The Old Man is gonna blow the whistle.”

The Major drops his binoculars and jumps out of the bunker. He rises above the trench and stands out in the open at the eastern edge of the field. He is a ten-year-old boy and also wears a catholic school uniform, except for a drab-green salad bowl on his head. The binoculars are a plastic toy.

From the opposite end of the field, Renee springs from her trench. She is a ten-year-old girl with long hair, a school jumper, and the same olive drab-colored salad bowl on her head. Toy binoculars hang from a string around her neck.

The pair stands frozen and glares at each other from across the battlefield. The toppled wagon rests in between as the divide separating their positions. Their eyes lock. The Major squints and growls. Renee raises an eyebrow and smirks.

A band of fellow catholic school students appear, with green salad bowls on their heads, from the woods and form a line along the forest’s edge. All eyes are focused on the red wagon overturned in the center of the field.

Renee digs her penny-loafers into the dirt and launches into a sprint. The Major hurls himself forward toward the target. The adversarial couple hurtles over debris and mounds of dirt as they approach the midfield from opposite ends. Renee strides past several boulders. The Major jumps over a pile of broken pallets.

Both trenches empty as additional students, with green salad bowls on their heads, enter the battleground. The squad from the woods explodes onto the field and races toward the target. The girls and boys scream with delight as the entire class approaches the final destination.

Reaching the wagon first, the Major lifts the overturned carriage to reveal the prized artifact. Hidden under the bed of the cart is a bright yellow flag. The Major’s eyes widen

as he witnesses Renee slide past and snatch the flag from his clutches.

The Major says, "Hey, that's not fair."

Raising the flag in victory, Renee turns to her troops on the western trench. Her team cheers and celebrates with their victorious achievement.

An ear-splitting whistle blast, from the old priest, pierces the afternoon's event. Robert cringes from the shrill sound. The old man drops the whistle from his mouth and chastises the students.

He says, "Recess is over. Back to class."

The students moan in disappointment, remove their make-shift helmets, and migrate toward the church. Eyeing the bowls being used as protective military equipment, the priest says, "Those better not be the dishes from the cafeteria, on your heads. I told all of you not to play capture the flag on this side of the building. There's too much construction going on."

The pretend soldiers grumble as they gather by the trench. Within the growing mass of tiny bodies, a voice says, "Recess is over? That's so not fair. We just got out here."

"What's the big deal? My Dad said that he and his brothers used to play capture the flag out here when he was our age." Another student points out.

A girl from the front of the pack can be heard saying, "Those teams weren't even fair anyway. I thought Renee was on our team."

The old man priest steps around to the side of the church. He stands in front of a sign which reads, "ST. MARY'S FUTURE EXPANSION SITE." Behind the sign, laborers work on the roof of a new building. The carpenter's nail-guns sound like rifle fire. Bulldozers rumble across the parking lot sounding similar to tank tracks. Construction workers shout over the din of the machines. A smoky haze emanates from the heavy equipment and blows across the field.

A young nun exits the church, walks across the lot, and stands next to the priest. She winks at the boy in tow being held captive by the priest.

With a compassionate grin, she says to the boy, "Hi Robert. How are you today? Father hasn't been torturing you, has he?"

The priest tightens his grip on the boy's ear and sneers at the young nun. She says, "Come now Father; don't be so hard on them. They're just playing."

The students remove their helmets and sulk as they form a tight line. Their heads drop with sheepish glares. The Captain approaches with a fist full of the red sticks of pretend dynamite.

Eyeing the sticks, the priest says, "Michael, you put those sticks down or you'll have detention next recess. Like Robert did today. Rest assured, it was not a pleasant experience for him. I don't want another stick-throwing debacle like we had yesterday. Remember what I said?"

The Captain responds, "Yes, Sir. No sticks, what-so-ever."

He removes his helmet and drops the red sticks to the ground. Students mope past the priest and file into the church. The old man tightens his grip on Robert's ear, as a warning. Robert grimaces.

Renee raises the colored flag and looks into the Major's eyes. With clenched fists, the Major stands, out of breath. His angry eyes squint with resentment.

A second whistle blast draws their attention to the church. They turn and tromp, side by side, toward the priest. The Major grits his teeth and Renee smiles as they approach the door. The pair stands in front of the priest and Robert.

Robert says, "Hi, Renee, be on my team tomorrow?"

Renee sticks her tongue out at the boy. The Captain calls out from the line of students.

Voices

He says, "Renee, the Major likes you... a lot."

The Major snaps back and says, "Captain, that's enough."

Renee hands the flag to the Major with a loving smile. He reaches for the flag and their hands' touch. The Major's eyes soften. Robert's shoulders drop. The priest rolls his eyes.

Clutching the Major's hand, Renee speaks with a devilish smirk. "Be on the same team with me tomorrow? But, next time, I get to be the Major. Got it?"

"Yes Sir. I mean, yes Ma'am. I understand. The promotion is all yours." The Major says with a salute.

The young nun laughs and directs everyone into the building. Robert is dazed with shock at the transaction between his classmates.

The nun pats Robert on the shoulder and says, "Sorry son, all's fair in love and... recess."

The line of children enters the church as the large wooden door closes shut. Emanating from the construction site, a smoky haze passes over the dilapidated church. Nail gun blasts echo through the air. Several carpenters shout over the din of bulldozer rumblings. The sailing tendril of smoke glides across the battlefield and drifts past the overturned red wagon.

Words

Sabrina Herrmann

I didn't like animals
until I started naming them.
The intimate knowledge
of a word,
a string of syllables,
made everything safe.

When I was 10
I wrote a dictionary of words
I thought we needed -
words that didn't exist.
Huggle. Hattitude. Scrittle.

What do you write about
when you know nothing?
What do you call the feeling
when you're on the rollercoaster
and your stomach drops?
Ruvious.
And getting ice cream at the carnival?
Fantabulous.

Last week I learned that
the Hawaiian alphabet
only has 12 letters,
and the ancient Greeks
had no word for the color blue.

Are 12 letters enough?
And how did the Greeks describe the sky?

We should have words for everything
so we don't feel alone.
We need specific words
for the kinds of sad,
and even more for the kinds
of happy.

I want to tell you how I feel
and I want to be precise.

Because "good" isn't enough,
and few understand what I mean
when I say,
I feel like *lightning*.

Voices

How old would you be if you didn't know how old you are?

Some days I am 17.
The world an eruption of possibility.
The radio says, *Dance. In public!*
I love and am in love.

Some days I am 6.
An orphan.
Black and blue.
And I sit by the window.

Some days 33.
I am a mother to all.
Scabs on kid knees,
proof of my existence.

And some days I am 4.
Drawing as if for the first time.
Colors everywhere. Neon pink. Magenta.
The simplest stories captivate me.

When I'm 46,
the world is full of ash
and I hold the match.
Angels are real. I know their stories by heart.

The days I am 68
may be heavy with life.
Joints ache like thunder,
the day's last gift.
And the world is so beautiful
it hurts.

Stupid Heart

I wake up and it breaks my heart.
I open the blinds and the sound of rain
breaks my heart. I go outside.
I walk to work, among the buildings, men in
black suits. The congregation of pigeons, the camp
of homeless beneath the underpass, nanny's pushing
strollers, and children, every one of them
break my heart. There is a dream I have
in which, I love the world. I run from end to end
like fingers through her hair. There are no borders
only space. Like you, I was born.
Like you, I was raised in an institution of dreaming.
Hand on my heart. Hand on my stupid heart.

Stairway to Heaven

Mikey Maddox

“I hate stairs. Why did we do this again?”

“Because you wanted to.”

“I didn’t want to. Why would I want to climb a hike called the stairway to heaven if I hated stairs?”

“I don’t know. You’re the one that’s been talking about it all week.”

“Well I regret my decision.”

“You won’t be saying that when we get to the top.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Sure.”

“Twenty bucks says I’ll still be complaining when we get to the top.”

“Twenty bucks and you pay for lunch.”

“Deal.”

I climb step after step on the slick metal stairs. It was a terrible day. My friends and I had woken up to rain at three in the morning. We packed our travel bag and loaded the car in the cool morning air. Piling in, we drove all the way across the island taking H3 through the Tetsuo Harano Tunnel. We parked in a neighborhood walking the rest of the way. My friends kept telling me to shut up as I complained about not eating breakfast.

“That was your own damn fault.” Kamen told me.

Really they should have expected it. I held the highest ranking position in the secret society of elite pessimists. It should have been a no brainer that I was going to complain about everything and anything. So of course I then proceeded to complain the whole way up the hike. *The stairs are too slick, you know I could break my neck if I slipped. What was the point of doing this hike, I can’t see anything through this fog. What if I have to use the bathroom, what then?*

“Would you just shut up and enjoy yourself a little?” Honokaa grumbles from the front.

“No, people need to know my opinions.”

“What people? It’s literally just us here, and we already know your opinions.”

“Fine, I’ll just complain to God. We are on the stairway to heaven, maybe he’ll hear me for once.”

“You are absolutely ridiculous.”

“You love me.”

“Sometimes it takes a while to figure out why.”

The grin on my face is sly as I see a little one pop up on Honokaa’s. Four years of friendship wouldn’t be damaged by me complaining like I always do. They knew what they were getting into. I wipe my face and take a drink of water from my camelback as we continue up the impossibly long stairs. Our head lamps illuminating the early morning. Stair after stair we make it closer to the top. My legs burn and my back hurts from leaning forward. I make them aware of this fact.

“You’re just out of shape.”

“I’m in shape.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” Honokaa laughs.

“Maybe don’t skip leg day at practice.” Kamen snickers.

“You’re one to talk, Popeye!”

The sun starts to rise. The water in the air clearing as it settles into the lower level

trees. I stare out across the island. Mentally I make a list of all the places I can see that I've been. The mountain ridge stretches out disappearing into the clouds. The cars below on the highway scurrying back through the tunnel as if they were ants returning home to their hills. Looking out to the ocean I count the little pontoon boats floating out on the sand bar in the middle of Kāne'ōhe Bay. I imagine all the people diving down to the reefs snorkeling in the early mornings. I hated snorkeling. Couldn't stand having the snorkel in my mouth. Being a competitive swimmer it felt unnatural to have something in my mouth while swimming. I could hold my breath for ages so it really was unnecessary.

I try not to focus on how high up we are but its hard when the cliff falls away not even two feet on either side of the stairs. My stomach twists as I peek over the edge and stair down at the trees far below. My natural human instincts telling me this may not have been the best idea. But I figured I had just as much of a chance dying by falling off the cliff as I had by doing any of the other stupid shit we got our selves into.

"You're awfully quiet back there." Kamen says.

"What, no I'm not."

"I haven't heard you say anything in at least ten minutes. I swear you've broken a record or something."

"Pshhh, you're just not listening hard enough. Maybe you should get your ears checked."

"Says you."

"Hey I still have fifty percent of my hearing."

When we reach the top, Kamen and Honokaa hurry over to the railing to get pictures together. I muscle up onto the platform at the center, not wanting to abuse my power as third wheel. I stand next to the twin World War 2 radar dishes on top of the platform and stare out across the island.

I wonder what God was thinking when he made this view. Did he know we would name it the stairway to heaven? Was this a hint at what I was to expect when my time on this beautiful earth comes to a close?

The rain from the night provided the mountains with streams that ran down eroded creases on the steep slopes. The water finding its way off the lush green cliffs in hundreds of little water falls. Birds fly from the trees, taking to the sky to dance with each other. Their vivid colors drawing my gaze. I imagine the Garden of Eden looked similar to this.

Why did Eve fall for the serpents tricks when she could have lived here in all its ineffable beauty forever. But I already knew that answer because I had made the decision to leave it as well. I had yet to tell Honokaa and Kamen that I would be moving four thousand miles away to a city that was inconsequential compared to the beauty before my eyes.

My phone never left my pocket as my mind wandered. I knew I might regret it later but somethings were best left to be cherished as memories. I sit down letting my legs hang off the sides of the platform as the wind blows through my hair. I bask in the sunlight raising my face to its rays as I imprint the view into my mind. I don't really know how long I sat there enjoying the peaceful quiet that hangs over the highest points of the island. It really didn't matter, however the silence is broken when I hear the shuffling of feet and grunts as Kamen and Honokaa join me. A head rests itself on my shoulder a hand interlocking itself with my own. I peek one eye open as I feel Kamen's curly hair brush against the side of my neck. I give a squeeze to his hand.

"You're quiet again. It's kinda weird."

"Hmm."

Voices

“You okay?”

“I’m moving to Texas in August.” He sits up looking at me, eyes searching mine as Honokaa leans forward to get a better view of me.

“That’s two months away.”

“I know.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I thought you would get mad. We had a plan. Stay here, go to UH Manoa. I would get my degree in marine biology while you aimed for med school and Honokaa would pursue her music. My parents didn’t give me much of a choice. They told me I had to go to the school my dad graduated from or I wasn’t going to get the GI bill.”

Kamen sighs as he looks across the ocean to whatever lays beyond.

“I am mad at you, but not for choosing to leave. I just wish you would have told us. We would have had more time that way.”

“I’ll be back over Christmas break and summer breaks.”

“What if your parents move?”

“You know I’ll stay in touch. I can’t go a day without calling you guys to gossip about work or home. I’ll try to come visit if I can afford it.”

“You better. It would have been a waste of time to become best friends with someone as annoying as you if you didn’t ever come back.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Go for it.” His head falls back onto my shoulder as Honokaa reaches around to rub her hand over my back easing my tense spine. We stay like that for a while just enjoying each other’s company as we take in the beauty of the island. I try to memorize the feeling of the wind as it carries the salty scent of the ocean to me. I paint every curve and dip of the land into my mind as if their were birthmarks on my own body. When it’s time to make our way back down Kamen smirks back at me from a few steps ahead.

“What you smiling like that for, you could traumatize a child.”

“You owe me twenty bucks and lunch.” I stare at him running over what little details we had made the bet over. I find no loop hole and curse as he starts to laugh.

“You know what, just for that, I’m going to complain the whole way back down!”

“Complain all you want, I’m twenty bucks richer and will be going home with a full stomach.” Kamen laughs pumping his fist towards the sky as he lets a “cheehoo!” rip loose from his chest into the heavens. “Today is a good day!”

Arrival Time Was 5:04

Johnathan Potter

Touch down, Hobby Airport. Arrived Monday
thirty after: mother, brother, father.

One place, one time.

There is so much luggage
to unpack but no words will be uttered

until we leave the loop, up Boulevard
onto the 45. "Check your mirrors,"

Mama, shotgun, her first ride in my car.

"So, how does Houston compare to Denver?"

Traffic on the I-10 slows the way home
the whirring A/C, the one voice constant
before Junior snores and adds to the drone.

Senior speaks those impersonal topics:

"Weather. Directions. The Time Change."

Of course,

no one speaks in length. We all still hurt.

Branta leucopsis

The first days of spring, its wet bill through the cream-colored shell, small enough to lounge in one's palm, two webbed feet sprout from a puff of white and gray, the honk of its mother, her body slender and matured, smooth black plumes travel down the length of her neck, give way to an oblong of beige and silver, father arrives honking with mother goose, they dance atop the Swedish cliffs, beams of golden sunlight, warm honey cascading over the pasture, the nest four-hundred feet above the ground, stomach sounds, faint not lost, chirps and tweets echo through the gorge, hunger beckons from the foot of the mountain, the hatchling has yet to fly, Papa jumps, his body shrinks, vanishes, Mama flaps her wings, dives, the sun paints her shadow, the hatchling is left, steps forward, flaps its wings like Mama like Papa, takes the leap, the cool rush of air thud. mute.

A Showing at The Grief

The curtains open for the first act. There is
but one performer, muttering
to himself in the middle of the stage,
the one he loved, pictured and framed,
enfolded in his arms.
The pit swells as he begins to dance. A waltz.
There are murmurs in the mezzanine.
Some smoke. Some drink.
The curtains close on act one.

Out of the pit comes fire. The conductor
demands more. Forte. Fortissimo. Louder
and louder still. A march. The curtains
rip open. He is stomping. First to the left.
Then to the right. The picture frame is
shattered at his feet.
There is mayhem in the mezzanine.
They yell. They cuss. They fight.
The curtains close on act two.

The ushers plead with guests
as the curtains open for the third act. Stragglers
remain in the aisles. The man on stage
falls to his knees, trying
to piece together the broken frame. The pit
plays so not to disturb him. Piano. He
cuts his hand. He shouts. They
fall mute in the mezzanine.
The curtains close on act three.

The curtain opens for the final act. The man
is still in the center of the stage. He
sobs. The last note lingers. A fermata.
The pit shrinks to nothingness. No one
says a word. There is
mourning in the mezzanine.

The curtains close. There is
no applause. There are no jeers.
The conductor steps down. The orchestra
vanishes row by row.

Hope

Jenifer Moreno Ortega

The bus light turns on
People scramble for their papers
That February night, some are forced to leave
My mother prays for the children who are left behind
While my father prays for our own futures
I don't know the importance of crossing a border
But dad says we can have hope again

Classroom lights reflect my mistakes back at me
I learn that some borders aren't physical
My accent becomes an inside joke for the class
And blending in feels like the solution
I begin to speak like them and insist that I belong
But instead, they strip me down to my grammatical errors
I was hoping life would be fair

But then I notice this foundation I've built
Of my people who continue to believe in this American dream
And of those who've chosen to get to know me
My bridge connecting borders continues to stand
As I aspire for my past and present to soon understand one another
I hope to one day see the good in all people

I want to reach that light at the end of the tunnel
Because sunlight helps hope grow
I want self-acceptance and love
So I'll deny them my papers
They can't document my dreams
They took my accent, but I'll hold onto my heritage
And answer the prayers to a future I know I'll have

Kurnool Farmers Market

Eesha Gundam



*Watercolors
6" x 9"*

Tranquility

Sarah Campbell



Oil on canvas
18" x 24"

The Neighborhood

Hannah Xu



*Watercolor and ink
12" x 18"*

Peering Out of the Chaos

Marci Crawley



*Photograph printed
13" x 19"*

The Depths of Space

Selena Reyes



Photograph
8" x 10"

Moving Parts

Emily Bayliss



Sculpture
3' x 5' x 4'

Dragon Fruit

Farah Kamal



*Colored Pencils
12" x 12"*

Royal Asshole

Bailey Dold



*Ink jet print
22.5" x 15"*

How to Count

Ryan Rivera

2021 (42 years old)

My cursor blinks over the get started button and my shoulders climb towards my ears in a flash of anxiety while I contemplate yet another form to fill. I scroll back to the top, check my browser tabs, searching for an idea of how I'm supposed to be counted; under what category should I register my existence? And I do know I exist. The pain in my lower back reminds me of that, but even at this age I don't know how to be counted.

I'm Puerto Rican and Puerto Ricans don't neatly fit into the race boxes on the numerous forms I have to fill out. And ever since COVID hit, there are a lot of forms to fill out and all those forms feel grave, like counting correctly is life or death. City, County, State, Country, Walgreens—they all ask me to identify myself so that I can be counted. I'm asked to check a box to claim White, Black, Native American, Asian or Pacific Islander, None of the Above, All of the Above (well, mixed or multiple), or I'd rather not say. I'd really rather not, but then I'm not counted, and being counted matters.

I stare off at the overcast sky and breathe in the damp, cool Chicago air blowing into my window from off the lake. The gray looms high and I think about the boxes I've been told to check and the people who've told me what I'm allowed to claim. I think about the cloud above stretching in all directions, boundless.

1990 (12 years old)

I pick at the edges of green cloth tape they use to patch pencil tears in the seat-backs of old school buses. I contemplate green up close, my head pressed up against the seat. The air on the bus is sticky and hot and ripe with adolescent funk, but I have a yellow hoodie pulled tight around my head to conceal my face, hoping *they* won't notice me. I always sit in the third or fourth seat, any further back and the Cubans will eat me for an after-school snack.

The kids on my bus talk in loud voices, mixing Spanish and English with accents changing to match the words. I poke my head up when I hear Jorge Diaz drop his Spanish accent and call out to Brie Hanson sitting in the seat across from mine. She laughs and spits a reply back to Jorge in a tone that only Latinas learn from their mothers. Jorge sees me and asks what I'm looking at, firing a rubber band from his index finger and thumb directly at my eye.

My Spanish sucks and it has made me a target. I live in Florida and the Cuban kids, and Mexican kids, the other Puerto Ricans, and Flora—the Guatemalan girl on my bus—all hate me. Florida is new to me and I miss my old life back Naperville where the bullying wasn't this relentless. "Gringo, pato, punk-ass"—my white-boy mannerisms are unwelcomed in the swampy Florida climate.

2015 (37 years old)

"Really? I don't think you're who they're talking about when they say Latino," Debbie says to me in a big puff of cigarette smoke. "I think about the people in the communities I work in and I don't think of you that way. You grew up in *Naperville*." She says and laughs a phlegmy laugh. Her round white face is squinty in the sun. The exhaled smoke blows back against her face.

I light a cigarette for myself and use the long first drag to process her assertion. "I'm not Latino because Latinos don't grow up in Naperville."

Voices

“That’s bullshit, Debbie,” Toby says, there are small droplets of sweat forming on his black skin, “have you ever been called a spic? Have you ever been profiled, or accused, or been passed up because you’re brown?” Toby’s eyes are wide and he’s cocking his jaw forward.

“Yes, I have.” I hesitate. “But I have degrees, I’m educated, I feel like I’m cheating...” Blood is rushing into my face as I hear the words coming out of my mouth.

“So, to identify yourself as Latino you have to be disadvantaged, uneducated or some sort of cholo, vato? Is that what you’re saying? That’s some shit.”

1985 (7 years old)

I make a sticky, melted popsicle handprint on the rear window of my father’s Trans Am. When he pulls the seat up to let me out, the smell of cut grass and charcoal and sizzling pork leads us to a picnic where my aunts, sitting under a party tent, greet me with a loud “prietito.” The sun blinds off our number twenty-one Pittsburgh Pirates jerseys. Roberto Clemente is my dad’s hero, a Puerto Rican ball player and why my father was a lifelong Pirates fan.

My skin darkens in the July sun and I start to learn that not all the leaves on my family tree are the same shade of green. I’m browner than most of my cousins in skin but whiter to them in all the other ways. For my cousins, who are all from the island or whose parents were born there, it doesn’t matter that I’m darker. But I don’t know their games, I didn’t know their jokes, and that means I’m other.

To them, I’m an intrusion. I’m those white kids on the playground making fun of their accents. I’m more jet than shark.

1986 (8 years old)

I let the tears streak my face and let the snot pool under my cold nose, but I trap the actual sobs in my chest. The red ball rolls off the foursquare court over decaying brown and orange leaves after hitting me in the face, hard. I stand wide-eyed in the misty, cool, October air, mouth slack from the direct hit, but it’s the venom in the word *spic* and the way Billy, my best friend, said it to me that brings the tears. All eight-year-olds squabble on the playground, but this feels different.

I don’t understand words like spic or beaner and what they actually mean. But I don’t need to know the Webster’s definition to know that it is intended to hurt me. Billy’s face after, I can see that the word has left a foul taste in his mouth, like taking a sip from your father’s beer because adults do it but recoiling from its bitter foamy taste.

Billy and I are back to normal within the hour, but I understand something in my heart that I could never understand to say. Later, when I’m in the car with my mother, a pebble hits the windshield and leaves a small pock on the glass. After months of thaws and freezes, a crack starts to branch out from where that pebble struck until it becomes dangerous and needs to be replaced.

1992 (14 years old)

Bernard, my mother’s new friend, opens another bottle of wine and pours a glass for my mother. He hands me a glass full of ice and a can of Dr. Pepper. My mother’s voice is getting a little higher with her second glass of wine.

“I get Italian a lot, but we’re actually Puerto Rican,” my mother sloshes her glass a little bit as she talks with her hands. The motion seems exaggerated, like she’s almost trying to be more Italian. Bernard’s boat matches her gestures and the pink white zin see-saws in the open bottle. The wind is blowing and there’s warm rain pelting the vinyl awning.

“How about you Ry-Guy?” Bernard says.

“Uh, I always just tell people I’m Puerto Rican,” I say. I have adopted the nonchalance and apathetic demeanor of many Gen-X teens.

“Oh don’t do that,” Bernard says. “Puerto Rican isn’t really a thing. It has some bad connotations here. You should say that you’re European. You know, Spanish and French and Portuguese. You’re not lying, just going back a bit. For me, I’m German and English even though my family is from New Hampshire.”

I nod and take a long gulp letting the Dr. Pepper tickle my throat.

2020 (41 years old)

The wine buzz settles into my warm cheeks. I angle my iPad so the folks on my zoom book club happy hour cam see yet another BLM protest march through Uptown on Broadway Street. It hasn’t been too hot, so the protests draw throngs of masked crowds. We’ve read *Washington Black* and *The Underground Railroad* because somehow when you feel unable to help, you do things, anything, to hunt for insight and feel less helpless.

It is sunny and we’re each outside on our own balconies with our devices, on the screen I see a mosaic of white male faces with my olive little thumbnail image in the bottom right corner. I tell them how I wear a lot of sunscreen so that I don’t get too dark.

“I can feel people treat me different the darker my skin gets,” I tell them.

“I don’t—Ryan, that seems kind of offensive. Like, you’re not black.”

“I’m not saying that I’m black or that I know what it feels like 100%, but I can tell you that when I get really dark, I’m more afraid to go for a run. I’m a little more afraid something will happen to me,” I say.

“I don’t know...”

“I’m not white— you realize that right?” I’m frustrated because people often tell me that they forget that I’m not white.

“I just never think of you that way.”

“That seems kind of offensive...” I say. “Shall we move onto *The Underground Railroad*?”

2000 (21 years old)

The rain feels sharp and stings on my face. I run into the theater building before dark clouds stop holding back and let loose their torrent. I check the cast list again. I’m passed up for the Main Stage production of *Marat/Sade* even though I’d make a perfect asylum inmate. I scan the list for the smaller productions and see that I have been cast in a show called *Trouble In Mind*. It is written by Alice Childress and I’m cast as John Nevins, a fiery young African American actor.

After weeks of rehearsal, I think I’m able to inhabit John’s skin. I stare at the more mahogany tone my face absorbs with every stroke of the makeup sponge. I’ve been told there aren’t enough black actors at my small liberal arts college to fill all the black parts but apparently with a little foundation I can pass. I love the play but my part in it makes me tired.

2019 (40 years old)

My Ancestry Ethnicity Estimate: Spain 24%, Indigenous Puerto Rico 19%, Portugal 15%, Scotland 7%, Ireland 6%, England & Northwestern Europe 5%, Mali 4%, Cameroon, Congo & Western Bantu Peoples 4%, Northern Africa 4%, Senegal 3%, European Jewish 3%, Nigeria 2%, Khoisan, Aka, & Mbuti Peoples 1%, Basque 1%, Indigenous Americas-Central 1%, Indigenous Americas-Mexico, 1%.

Voices

2021 (42 years old)

I try to whittle down the options and debate if I should select white or mixed. I have almost always selected white, because I'm not black. I'm not black; I'm not indigenous; I'm not Asian; I also am not *other*. I'm exhausted by the prospect of only counting by subtraction. How is it I can only count by understanding what I'm not? I'm exhausted, so, I default and check white for race and Hispanic/Latinx for ethnicity, but it doesn't feel right, and I wonder if I will count.

Half of Two Forests

Ciana Rucker

Am I
Of either place?
Two glorious
And one me
Too glorious
And then me
Not enough
So it seems.

Too much there
And lacking here
Changing as I spring from toadstool
To pinecone and to different lands;
Am I a prodigy of adaptation?
Could I be
the epitome
of survival of the fittest?
In my one-ness,
Outside two luscious forests,
I can only step one foot into.

Am I the anomaly
Of the century?
I've always wanted magical powers.
To shape and shift
And wave my hand-
Delicate sparkles above accepted hands.
But I am the same;
Changes remain
locked in those creatures' eyes;
Light-
Or is it dark-
Glaring out through the keyhole.

I wonder if I have the key,
But my neck is empty
And the creatures
Don't seem to want to help me.
But it's not help me,
Not only me,
As I am no divergent, and
I am no stray born for this fray.

Because I believe this torturing and narrow,
Drought-stricken,
Lonely land between

Voices

Must imprison many

Right?

Must hide mix-matched souls behind bars of dirt--

Souls hoping to understand

The forests around us.

Contradicting Grief

Adriana Otto

You were in my dream last night,
For the first time in a really long time.
I hated that you were there,
Because that meant I missed you,
And I'm trying to do everything but that.
And I hate to say it,
But I was so relieved when I woke up,
Because hating you is all I know.
The trauma you caused me,
The emotionless front I *had* to build,
You did this to me.
I *would* ask "how could you?",
But it's too late,
You're already gone.
I was too late.
Father's Day has passed,
My worst day of the year,
That's when we found you.
I didn't even cry.
What kind of daughter doesn't cry?
How could I?
They said it gets better,
But when will my nightmares end?
How long do I have to pretend I'm okay?
I didn't even get to say goodbye.
It's not like I wanted you at my wedding,
Or to see my kids,
The future I build for myself,
But now that I know you'll never have the chance to see those things,
I wish you were still here.
And I hate myself for it.
How stupid of me,
Missing someone so selfish.
With time I'll come to realize just how damaged you made me,
Maybe then I'll find some peace.
Losing an absent father at sixteen,
A type of grief nobody can tell me how to handle.

As my Dad

Kylee Crain

As my dad you were supposed to touch my heart
Not your eighth bottle at 6p.m
As my dad you were supposed to be there when I cried
Not go out of town for a month at a time

As my dad you were supposed to put me first
Not your vile wife
As my dad you were supposed to be brave
Not cower at your mistakes

As my dad you are supposed to be jealous of the step dad
Not praise him when he is better than you
Not push your duties off on him
Because in the end you were better than he was

He was the shiny new step dad who did no wrong
But only when people were watching
He was the ideal Christian man
But only when he talked to my mom

As my step dad you were supposed to tell the truth
Not lie to my whole family
As my step dad you were supposed to be brave
Not make excuses for your words and actions

As my step dad you were to touch my heart
Not my body when vulnerable
As my step dad you were supposed to be my second chance
Not another dad gone

The Sour Sweetness of Life

Kaylen Kirkhart

Before you go
will you wonder what happens
to the things that you will leave behind
and to the relationships that you'll have cut short
When you go
your favorite clothes won't be able to recollect your smell
and your shoes won't ever go on their everyday walks again
Your house would not feel your calm strut or your warm touch
and your bed wouldn't be able to morph the shape of your body
When you go
will you remember the names of people you met along your way
and what about the pets you've loved that've loved you so great
What will you be thinking flying up above listening to the cries
and seeing Grief tread on his heels following the way home
When you go
please remember the infinite love that you have
and do not let the hefty memories drift
Your smile won't be forgotten
after you go

The sound of your monitor flatlining
had made all our hearts drop far
The coldness in your hands
was like ice to the touch
Your warmth drained
just like your time
You left too soon
Forever and
always
I love
u

What We Don't Say

Lauren Mullins

My first encounter with Death was in a church,
Where a man in the same pew seized and died as the fellowship watched.
They prayed for him. Death stole him, anyway.
It's all right. We'll rejoin him one day.

A childhood filled with horrors. i was told to call upon God.
i asked Him why He felt i should be treated this way.
It's all a part of his plan. Let's move on.
But i don't understand. Please don't move on.

The girl that raised her hands in praise while others watched had disappeared
While still trying to hold onto the facade.
She's such a good girl. A good Christian girl.
i filled the car with smoke on the way there.

When my blind faith opened its eyes and stopped feeling,
i panicked. Did He leave me? Why can't i feel Him?
i hid under my blanket with a flashlight, looking for answers.
They eluded me. The same thing over and over. *It's His plan. It's all in His plan.*

Sitting in the pew, i told myself, "i don't belong here.
Though they all believe i do."
i begged Him for a sign. and the preacher said,
"whoever does not try to find the answer is too comfortable in their sin."

Existence and purpose are the main questions in my brain.
i refuse to believe that it's all a coincidence. There has to be a reason.
But it all feels so absurd. There are so many paths; isn't one right?
Which one?

Staring out of the window, seeing the other cars.
They all go to different places. They all have a different purpose;
But, our miles are the same. *What are you doing back there?*
i'm praying. *Oh... You really are such a good girl.*

i look around me at smiling faces and wonder:
Why isn't everybody as worried as i am? It feels like nobody is scared enough.
Is no one else constantly being swallowed up by the depth?
Am i the only one that can see past these temporary fixations?

i'm in a constant battle against time.
There has to be a purpose to the spinning clock i call my home
And i'm afraid that if i don't find it quick enough,
i won't lose comfortably to the inevitable darkness.

Where are we going? How am i meant to alter my path if the true answer is never

revealed?

i'm afraid to say i feel betrayed. But i do. i do feel betrayed.

Everyone experiences doubt. This isn't just doubt.

This is me saying that I'm confused and I'm angry.

But through all of my doubts,

There is still a respect that will always be there.

I exist. I'm not sure if it's because of Him, but I do.

That has to count for something.

Remington Moore

Mikey Maddox

I stand across the room from you as you ugly cry on our couch. It makes me feel uncomfortable. You never cry. Not when your father died of liver failure. Not when we put our dog down within a week of finding out he had a tumor in his chest. I didn't know how to react. My feet shuffle on our old shag carpet that you wouldn't let me replace. My arms cross over my chest defensively as I avert my eyes.

"Why," you say, tears clogging your throat like a broken drain.

"I'm sorry."

"Why," your voice gets louder as the tears run faster. You get up from the couch swaying on your feet under the influence of your second glass of whisky. You were never a drinker, I feel guilty that I was the cause.

I don't anticipate the glass flying past my head and shattering against our living room wall until the whisky inside splashes onto the floor. Slowly I look behind me as tremors move down my spine.

You take a few steps toward the kitchen before you fall to your knees. Sobs wrenching themselves from your chest in painful gasps. I can almost see the anguish in your heart. I didn't know how to fix it.

Stepping forward I kneel down, draping myself against your back, holding you to my chest. I thought for sure you would pull away. I deserved it for what I was putting you through. Yet nothing happened. You kept crying on the floor as if you were numb to my touch.

Standing up I walk to the kitchen grabbing a glass to fill with water. I bring it to you, place it on the floor in front of you, and walk away to our bedroom. I couldn't stand to see you in this state.

You don't go to work anymore. Our friends come by bringing us food. Will tries to get you to go out with him.

"How about a hike? Fresh air would do you some good," he says. Your silence carves a hole in my chest. I attempt to break the tension.

"Will, he just needs some time." He ignores me. I watch his heart break inside his eyes as he looks at the shell you've become. A heavy sigh escapes him as he turns away from you. Grabbing his keys he walks to the door.

"Please call me, okay? We worry about you." The door shuts behind him clicking into place. You don't move from your seat in the corner by the window. As you watch the clouds shift in the sky, Will's car starts and pulls away.

"I wish you would listen to him. He's only trying to help you. He's your best friend, don't shut him out." Still, I am ignored.

Your sister and mother stop by. They talk *to* you, never *with* you. It's starting to irritate me. I wish you would see that people care about you. How they want to help you, yet every time you refuse, choosing to wallow inside your own mind. I wonder if you know it hurts me too.

I sit in the windowsill, watching as your sister pets Francis. He rumbles in her lap happy to finally receive attention. It makes me smile. I wanted a cat, not you. You had always been a dog person, yet Francis grew on you. He preferred you over me, even

though he was mine. Animals are funny that way.

Francis hops down walking over to me. I open my arms and pat my lap. He jumps, but not towards me. Instead, he curls up on the opposite side in the comfort of the sun beams coming through our windows. I try not to let it bother me. He hasn't wanted to be near me lately, I can't figure out why.

I watch as your sister rests her hand on your shoulder. You don't react as you stare at the sky past my window. She turns nodding to your mother. Getting up they head out. I watch as the tears slip from your mother's eyes. I can't seem to find the words to comfort her.

Every night you sleep next to me. I stare at your back waiting for you to turn over and hold me in your arms like you used to. Cautiously, I reach out resting my palm between your shoulder blades. You shift in your sleep mumbling about being cold as goosebumps rise on your bare skin. You pull the covers up hunkering down like a child hiding underneath their sheets.

Getting up, I walk the halls of our home as sleep avoids me. The walls covered in memories. I run my hands over every single one. Each frame bringing a smile to my face as I reminisce. You always had your camera with you. The moments you captured told our story. Half way down the hall the frames become scarce.

My hand rests on a bare patch. I imagine all the memories we could put here on this empty space. Maybe if we go out you would feel like taking your camera out of its bag hidden under the bed.

You went out today. Of course, not on your own accord. Will came to get you. You both were dressed in all black, I found it quite morbid. You looked worse than usual. As if the weight of life was more than you could handle.

I didn't like it. I chose not to go. I didn't want to see you like that. You were like a black hole, sucking all the life from the room. I couldn't stand to be near you in fear of being lost in your abyss. Will didn't seem to notice the way I did.

I thought some time away from the house would do you some good. Later, when the door swings open, Will walks inside. You trail behind him looking hollow, yet different than before.

Will heads to the kitchen starting our electric kettle. You take a seat on our couch pulling off your suit jacket. Francis comes over nudging at your leg. Reaching down you scratch at the scruff on the back of his head.

"Hey, Francis," your voice hangs in the air like a melancholy tune.

A chill runs up my spine as my mind narrows. Those were the first words I had heard from you in a long time, and they were directed at that stupid cat, not me. I step forward aggravated with you, opening my mouth to speak.

"Do you want peppermint or chamomile?" Will cuts me off. My mouth closes as my shoulders sag. Everything's quiet as you raise your head.

"Remy used to love peppermint tea." I stare at you confused.

"I still love peppermint tea," I say.

"He did, didn't he. Always had a cup, even when we used to pull all nighters in college. Said coffee was disgusting," Will shifts on his feet in the kitchen.

"I'll have peppermint," You say. A small smile crests Will's face as he fills and brings you a mug. He sits next to you, in my spot, on the couch.

"Hey," Will says. "You okay?"

Voices

“I think so,” You say as you take a deep breath, breathing in the aroma drifting up from you steaming mug.

“Good. We were worried for a while there.”

“Me too.”

I don’t know why but I can’t be here right now. Something tells me that I need to let the two of you be alone. Without saying anything I slip out the door to take a walk through the park down the street. The world seems to slow as snow starts to fall from the sky. I forgot my jacket at the house, but I was never one to get cold easily, that was always you.

You start to go to work again. Every morning you get up with a solemn face. After a shower, you head to the closet to dress.

“What should I wear?” You mumble to yourself.

“What about your gray slacks? Those always looked good on you.” I brush my hand against them. You turn staring, head tilted to the left as they swing a little on their hanger. Gingerly you grab them. I turn to your shirts. “I think your green polo would go well with them.”

You stare at the shirts before reaching out for the one I suggested. When you’re all dressed, you stand in front of the mirror hanging on our wall. With a heavy sigh you turn away heading into the living room.

I stand at the kitchen window waving goodbye as you pull away. You don’t wave back. I don’t mind though; you have things to work through. Everyone heals differently.

Once again, I’m drawn out of the house. I follow the paths through the park, staring at the ground, the lush grass freshly cut. I could have sworn we had a good half foot of snow the other day.

Every day you seem to be closer to getting back to normal. I don’t know how much time has passed. It doesn’t feel like that long to me, but every other day you seem to have a full beard, then it’s gone the next. Life seems to have come back into you face. I tell you about my day as you scroll through your phone. When a knock comes at the door you get up to open it. Will stands on our stoop waiting.

“You ready to go?” He asks.

“All set.” Grabbing your keys, you look at a picture of me hanging on the wall. Your fingers come to your lips. Kissing them, you place them over mine with a soft smile. Will’s face is serious until you turn to him. He corrects it, lighting up as he grabs your shoulder and urges you out the door.

I sit down on the couch to watch a documentary playing on the TV you left on. It’s good to see you go out with the guys again. I forgot to ask you where you were headed. Maybe I will when you come back. I stare at the screen and let time pass me by.

When you come home, your propped up between Will and some girl I don’t recognize. They haul you into the bedroom as I follow behind anxiously.

“Is he okay?” The girl and I say.

“Yeah, he’ll be fine. He’s just dealing with a lot of stuff right now.”

“I heard about what happened. I can’t even imagine what he’s going through.” Will sighs as he guides the girl towards the door. I want to hug him and tell him that you’re going to be okay, but I stay where I’m at. The girl pauses at the doorway looking at the same photograph of me you kissed this morning.

“He’s very handsome,” she says. Will smiles as he stares at the picture. It wasn’t

taken that long ago, at least I don't think it was.

"Remy was always a looker. Liam won't admit it, but he had a crush on him long before he let on," Will points towards a picture of the three of us graduating. "We met Remy in college. I had classes with him, we became good friends. I introduced them to each other. It took Liam a good year before he made his move. Thankfully Remy liked him right from the start."

"His heart must be broken."

"It is. Liam and Remy were inseparable," Will says as he ushers the girl out and shuts the door locking it behind him.

I head into the bedroom laying down next to you. Unintentionally, you face me for the first time in ages. Memories pass through my mind as I embed every line and curve of your face. I find myself falling asleep as I watch your steady breathing wondering why Francis hasn't jumped on the foot of the bed recently.

When I wake everything's different. I can't quite figure out why. As I get up from the bed, I realize you're not there. I stare out the windows. I could have sworn Will had come by the other day to rake the leaves in our back yard. Now as I look out, I find the flowers in my garden blooming in the morning mist.

I head out to the kitchen. I find you drinking peppermint tea at the table as you eat. I grab a cup for myself. I still can't quite pinpoint why our home feels different. Your phone pings. You stare down at it, smiling at whoever messaged you. I look over to the living room as I sip my tea.

Resting on the arm of my side of the couch is a hoodie. I know it's not yours because you were never into hockey. I set my mug down on the counter. Your head whips up staring into the kitchen as I head over to the couch. My fingers brush against the sleeves as you slowly reach out to the mug I left behind.

For a moment your face is sullen as you stare at my mug. Gingerly you place it down into the sink. I frown as I stare back at you.

"I wasn't finished with that." Your phone pings again. Looking over at the clock your eyes go wide before you hurry to finish your tea and head out the door. I'm left to ponder whose hoodie sits on my side of the couch.

On a Saturday, I can't say exactly which one, I wake up to find you whistling as you dress.

"Where are you going," I say as I rub the sleep out of my eyes. I've been sleeping a lot lately. I'll fall asleep on a beautiful autumn day just to wake up to the garden in bloom again. I don't understand it, maybe I need to go to the doctor. I sigh when I notice the headphones in your ears. You couldn't hear me.

Your phone keeps going off on the dresser. You hurry over to it responding with a smile. I wish you would pay attention to me not whoever's making you smile like that.

I shouldn't say that. I'm happy to see you smile, I really am. It's been so long since a smile stuck to your face. Yet I find myself jealous.

The doorbell rings as you grab your camera bag from under the bed. I get up grabbing your robe. I walk into the living room as you open the door. A man stands on the other side, his smile is bright, face handsome as he looks at you.

I know that look in his eyes. I used to look at you that way. Will would nudge me with a snicker. I'd slap him upside the head. You'd look up from your notes curious asking what happened. We both said, nothing, as we got back to studying.

Voices

You head out the door getting into the passenger seat of the handsome man's truck. I watch out the window as you leave. You feel farther away than usual. Like you're drifting out to sea and I can't quite reach you.

I don't like seeing you with someone that isn't me. But he made you smile, the smile that I have always loved.

Our house feels colder, or maybe it's just me. It makes me nervous, I never get cold. I shiver grabbing a blanket as I sit down on my side of our couch. My body feels heavy and I find my mind spacing out more often than before.

Things have started to change. The handsome man, whose name I have come to understand is Kensy, has started coming over for dinner quite often. During those times I tend to go on long walks through the park.

The blank space I wanted to fill is less empty, but the memories are not ours. The pictures are lovely. I can't hate them, they're something you put your love into after all.

You changed the bed spread. The pale green I loved so much replaced with a light gray comforter. I don't mind it; it matches well with the new curtains you put up. You've been cleaning the house a lot more lately too.

Two tooth brushes sit in the cup next to the sink in our bathroom neither of them mine. I turn away walking through the rest of the house. It doesn't feel like our home anymore. It hurts to look around and see everything changing.

Kensy's here this morning. He looks handsome as he sits on my side of the couch. I want to throw things at him. Tell him to get out. That the spot he's in is mine. I grab the mug he used for coffee this morning. It's my favorite mug, I should have told him he couldn't use it. I lift it in the air as my eyes burn. Just as I'm about to throw it you walk around the corner.

The look in your eyes as you talk to Kensy gives me pause. The mug slips from my hand falling to the floor. You both turn to look at it. Hurrying over you pick it up. There's a chip in the rim now, but it didn't break.

"I'm sorry, I must have set it to close to the edge," Kensy says. You set it back on the counter.

"It's okay. Just don't use this one again, it's Remy's." Kensy smiles at you. It's a soft smile, one that knows the pain you've gone through. I take a few steps back hurrying to the guest bedroom. I didn't want you to see me cry.

I'm happy for you, I really am. You deserve the best, but I can't stay here. This morning was particularly hard. Kensy stayed the night again. Our bedroom is no longer our bedroom. There are two cars in the drive way and neither are mine. The house is unrecognizable to me. I see all the pieces we created together but they just don't fit into the puzzle like they used to.

There's a bouquet of flowers laying on the counter. They're beautiful, just like the ones you used to give me. A ring sits next to them. Your ring. The one I gave you when we said our vows to each other.

It hurts watching you flip through the photo albums telling Kensy our story. The last one unfinished, a newspaper clipping of a car crash on the final page. A short article about a memorial service next to it. The tears flow from my eyes as I look at you.

Just as I decide to head to the park for a walk, Francis bumps against my leg. I look

down at him.

“Where have you been? Did you go on an adventure? Catch any mice?” Francis meows at me before walking out the front door. I get up following him.

“Where are we going?” He grumbles as he guides me through the streets. I take in the city. All the memories of my time spent here flash before my eyes as we pass each place. We walk past the college where I met you. Then the coffee shop we had our first date. The botanical garden you proposed to me in. Each pulls at my heart bringing a smile to my face.

Finally, Francis stops in front of a tall rod iron arch. He sits while I catch up before walking down a gravel road. I don’t understand why we’re here until he stops in front of a grave stone. My names on it. With the date of my birth and a date after it. I stare at it a long time. My lip quivers as I cry.

“I’m not ready Francis. I don’t want to leave Liam. He needs me here. I can’t go with you,” I wipe the tears from my face as I try to breathe. “I can’t.”

Francis just stares off towards the entrance tail swishing playfully behind him. I hear it then, the crunch of gravel under foot. I turn and watch as you approach me. Kensy waits a few steps behind. You rest the bouquet in front of my gravestone. The ring I gave you hangs from a chain around your neck.

“Hey, Remy.” Sadness soaks your eyes as you look down. “I’m sorry it took me so long to visit you. It’s been hard since you left, but I’m getting better. Will said he stops by and talks to you a lot. Told me six years is too long to go without seeing you. Said you would hate me for not visiting you. Well, I finally made it.”

You turn back looking at Kensy, waving him to your side.

“I have someone I’d like you to meet.” Kensy grabs your hand leaning in smiling softly. “This is Kensy. I know you want to keep me to yourself, always have, but Kensy’s helped me realize that I still have a life to live. He’s special to me.”

He smiles at you as you take a deep breath.

“Don’t worry Remy,” Kensy says. “I’ll take care of him for you. I hope you can help me when you have time. Come visit, maybe move the blanket on the couch to the window sill again, or drop your favorite mug. I’m sorry I used it; I didn’t know.”

You both stand there for a while. Kensy lets you take your time. I can tell when you’re ready to leave.

“Okay Francis, maybe your right. Just let me say goodbye.” I step up to you resting my hand on your cheek as the wind blows. I wrap my arms around you. I’m delighted by your warmth; I had been feeling so cold.

“I love you, Liam.”

I let go of you brushing a kiss against your lips before I follow Francis away. I look back only once to see you two standing together. The smile on your face makes butterflies take flight in my stomach. I try to hold back the pain in my heart as I force myself to keep walking.

“Okay, Francis, I’m ready.”

Cooking with Natasha: The Omelet Episode

Kaylee Reis

“**Miranda**, she’s on in twenty,” Kim, my boss and the producer of Cooking with Natasha, urgently stated. “Where the hell is she?”

“I don’t know, Kim. Don’t worry about it and I’ll go find her,” I said as I began to jog towards the dressing rooms.

How many times do I have to lie for this woman? I know exactly where she is and exactly what she’s doing. More like who. As soon as I turned the corner into the hallway of dressing rooms I saw the head of security slipping out of her dressing room. Natasha has been taking the recent separation from her husband very difficult. I suppose finding your husband with another woman in your beach house will do that to someone. Since they, mainly her husband, decided on divorcing each other; Natasha has turned to Mario for comfort.

“Natasha goes on in twenty. Is she ready?”

“You know she isn’t,” Mario said with a mischievous grin.

“If she keeps cutting it close, there won’t be a show, and we won’t have jobs dumb ass,” I snapped quickly passing by him.

I glanced down at my watch and saw that Natasha now only had fifteen minutes to be in front of the camera. Panicking, I began to run the rest of the way and burst through the door. Not fazed in the slightest, Natasha was slouched on the pink loveseat drinking vodka from a small glass. Occupied on the wall behind the love seat was a collection of frames that held Natashias’ college diploma, a blown-up selfie with Oprah, and an empty spot where a picture of her husband used to be. Opposite the door was a large vanity with makeup and hair products sprawled across the counter. Looking in the mirror I noted that I appeared ten years older and thought, *I’m the one that could use a drink.* Across from Natasha was a small flat-screen TV wrapping up the segment that went on before *Cooking with Natasha*.

“Come on you have to hurry you’re on soon,” I told Natasha.

Looking at me from under her brow she snorted, “Miranda don’t talk to me like that, I’m the talent. I was on my way before you shoved your way in here.”

She isn’t slurring her words, perfect. The segment on the TV only had ten minutes left and Natasha needed to get up. Rushing over to her I grabbed her forearm and lifted her onto her feet. Doing so caused Natasha to spill a little bit of her drink on my sneakers and a small hiss came from her mouth. Rage filled her eyes as she looked into mine, quickly Natasha brought her hand to my cheek with a loud smack.

“You spilled my drink!”

Stepping back I began to rub my cheek, “I didn’t mean to Natasha, Christ!”

“Whatever, let’s get to set before you make me late. You’re one of the worst assistant producers this show has ever seen, ya know! I would’ve fired you already if I had a say in it,” she flung the words over her shoulder as she wobbled down the hallway with the glass still in hand.

I knew Natasha was just trying to get a rise out of me. She always did this when she was drunk and rushed before a show. *I leave one abusive old hag and go straight to another, classic mommy issues. At least the job pays well.* Still rubbing my cheek, I grabbed the hairbrush from the vanity and swiftly followed the clicking of Natasha’s heeled feet.

When I caught up to her I began brushing her hair and said, “Okay, do you remember what you’re cooking today? I emailed it to you last week so you should have had plenty of time to look it over. Also, Kim has me in charge of everything today. It’s a big day for my career, please don’t ruin it Natasha.”

Peering over at me from the corner of her eyes, Natasha shoos the brush away and says, “Yes, I know what I’m cooking today. Ha, Kim would leave you in charge the day I’m cooking something as easy as an omelet. I’ll play nice if you don’t ruin my show, Miranda.”

Not feeling the need to start an argument, I began to run through the mental list of what Natasha needed to have ready for the show. Coming up on the set, I began analyzing her. I noticed her makeup was oily from sweat and needed some touch-ups. She also didn’t have a microphone hooked up and would have to quickly get one on her. The little brushing that was done speeding down the hallway had flattened her hair enough to look presentable on camera.

There was a little rat’s nest on the nape of her neck, but the camera wouldn’t see it therefore it didn’t matter. Promptly we came up to the set, my watch read that Natasha had five minutes to get in front of the camera.

“Okay, stand still someone is going to mic you,” I directed at Natasha. “GUYS! Natasha’s here, she needs touch-ups and a mic immediately!”

Suddenly, Natasha and I were rushed by people ready to assist in getting the star of the show ready. Behind Natasha was an intern frantically clipping a mic pack on the waistband of her slacks and pulling it through her blouse. In front of Natasha was a makeup artist pounding powder all over her face and finishing it with setting spray. All the while, with the hurried chaos around her, Natasha was staring at the kitchen-styled TV set with a determined look in her red eyes.

“Shit, Natasha your eyes! Does anyone have eye drops?”

“No,” the intern quietly replied as they finished clipping the mic to Natasha’s collar.

The makeup artist just looked at me with apologetic eyes and shook her head. Signaling the end of Natasha’s touch-ups, she snapped the powder palette shut and walked away.

“It’ll be fine Miranda. The whole town knows I’m getting a divorce, they’ll blame it on that bastard and just think I’ve been crying,” Natasha sharply retorted while adjusting her blouse.

“Okay well let’s get-”

“Natasha, you’re on in sixty seconds! I need you on your marker,” the cameraman hollered towards us.

Shocked by the commencement of the show Natasha’s eyes grew wide and finished the rest of the vodka in a big gulp. Pushing past me, she walked onto the *Cooking with Natasha* set. Quickly I rushed to take my spot next to Kim and the cameraman. While doing so, I began to observe Natasha and noticed her whole demeanor shifted as she walked to her mark. What only moments prior looked to be a shrew wobbling in her heels, now seemed like a completely different person. Instead of wobbling, Natasha confidently walked with vigor and pride for the accomplishments of her show. Reaching the mark, Natasha stood on it with no resemblance to the woman she was minutes ago. Except for her scarlet red eyes.

As I stepped next to Kim, she was flipping through her clipboard for today’s episode. The cameraman peered from her to his watch, waiting for his countdown. Noticing me beside her Kim opened her mouth, but was promptly interrupted by her phone vibrating with a call. Quickly she answered it, her eyes widening with what the

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other end was saying.

All of the sudden, Kim shoved the clipboard into my chest and put her hand over the mouthpiece whispering, “Miranda I have to run over to Lot B. I’ll be back as soon as I can, but you got this! Don’t worry.”

Not waiting for my reply Kim runs towards the exit, leaving me staring after her. *Shit. I guess I really am in charge of everything today. I hope-*

“Okay, quiet on set! We’re on it....five....four....three...two...”, on one the cameraman pointed his finger towards the set initiating the beginning of *Cooking with Natasha*.

“Good morning everyone! I am Chef Natasha Butler and welcome to *Cooking with Natasha*. Today we will be making a delicious omelet, with a twist on the overdone breakfast staple,” followed with a wink and a shit-eating grin, “When people think of an omelet they don’t necessarily think of it as an easy to make breakfast item. Many wonder what fillings should they put inside, there are so many options! And, quite frankly the more relevant issue with omelets, how the hell are you supposed to fold them?!”

Everyone’s attention on set turned towards me to gauge my reaction to Natasha’s use of language. While the use of small curse words wasn’t forbidden on the network, I was instructed to run the show similar to Kim and she did not allow Natasha to use them. She believed the show should have integrity for the viewers, especially the younger ones. Realizing there wasn’t anything I could do at the moment, I ignored Natashias cursing. *Just relax, they say hell in church. One time won’t hurt anything. Kim might yell at you, but you’ve been through worse so it’ll be okay.* Noting my lack of reaction, the set relaxed as Natasha continued the introduction of the ingredients needed for her eggcellent and easy-to-make omelet.

Finally looking at the clipboard Kim had shoved at me, I began reading through the pages. It had all the information of today’s episode and gave an overview of how it should unfold. One page even had a list of ‘Suggested Egg Puns’ Natasha could, and should, use throughout the episode. While looking through the list, Natasha had begun preparing the fillings for the omelet.

“.... So the first thing we’re going to do is to start cooking the bacon and that will cook while we continue preparing the vegetables. We’ll start with the decor or garnish for the omelet; the green scallions. We’re only going to need the green portion of the scallions, so just make sure to slice them into thin sections.... Oh shit!” Natasha yelped in pain.

A soft gasp came from the crew as my eyes moved from the clipboard to Natasha holding a rag over her finger. *Shit, you have got to be kidding me!* Looking around I noticed the crew didn’t know what to do and ran to the first aid kit beside the set.

“I am so sorry about the inconvenience today folks! The knife must have slipped right into my finger, but don’t you worry my *assistant* producer Miranda is going to bandage me up. And we’ll get right back to our omelets! *Miranda*,” Natasha hissed towards me in an attempt to make me hurry.

Arriving at the first aid kit, I grabbed it from its shelf and stepped onto the set. From behind the counter, I noticed the small amount of blood that had begun pooling underneath Natasha. Slightly queasy at the sight of blood, I quickened my pace to bandage Natasha and carry on with the show.

“Look who has come to save me! Everyone, this is Miran-”

Before Natasha was able to finish introducing me I had slipped on the small puddle of blood, taking both of us down in the process. This time an even bigger gasp came from the crew, followed by Natasha and I’s agonizing moans. My head began to ache

as I realized Natasha had fallen on top of me, still holding the bloody rag on her finger. Becoming annoyed by the catastrophe of the day, I shoved Natasha off of me and she thudded to the ground.

“OW! What the hell Miranda? I thought you came to help the problem not make an even bigger one,” she growled at me.

“I didn’t mean-”

All of the sudden, Natasha put her non-ragged hand on my head and thrust it into the counter behind me. An immense pain shot through my head as I slid down the counter, a blurry Natasha carefully stood to address the camera.

“Once again, I am SO sorry for the inconvenience today people! It’s Miranda’s first day running Cooking with Natasha solo without our producer around. I guess, this just proves the significance of them, HUH, Miranda,” as Natasha said this she looked down at me with vengeance in her eyes.

At that moment I didn’t care about all the hard work I had put into my career to get to this point. With the way the episode today was going I would never have a career in the field ever again. Filled with rage, my vision cleared and I slowly stood up until I was eye to eye with Natasha. Staring at each other, I waited for her to break the silence. The tension on set was at an all-time high and from the corner of my eye, I could see some security guards had gathered. Uncomfortable from my piercing stare, Natasha opened her mouth to say something.

“Aren’t-”

Almost as quickly as Natasha had opened her mouth, my fist connected with it. Stunned, she stumbled back and her nose began to gush blood. Bringing her rag-covered hand to her face she realized she was bleeding and looked at me with disbelief. Abruptly I felt one of the security guards grab me from behind as Mario rushed past to Natasha.

“Get her the hell out of here! She’s barred from setting foot on this lot ever again,” Mario hollered with a glint of something in his eyes.

“Got it, boss,” the security guard retorted as I was effortlessly thrown over their shoulder and carried towards the exit.

Being carried away from the set, I realized what I had just done. Ashamed of myself for throwing away the career of my dreams, I hung my head and watched the ground move by. *You are a dumbass. Throwing away your livelihood just to hit Natasha in the face. God damn it, you’re turning into your mother.* Tears began to stream down my face as I realized we were walking through the door.

All of a sudden, I decided to look at the set for the last time. The still stunned crew stared at me in an oddly fascinated, almost envious, way. Giving them a soft wave goodbye, my eyes turned to Natasha and Mario still on set. Staring right back at me, Mario was whispering something into her ear and a wide grin spread across his face. Confused, I looked at Natasha and realized she too had a bloody smirk. Then the door slammed shut in my face.

Contributors:

Grace Ainsworth is a MSU freshman majoring in Early Childhood Education with an interest in art. Ainsworth hopes to be a role model and create a safe space for the next generation through teaching and art. Her cartoons are from her more childish side, looking to make people laugh. Her abstract and detailed works convey more raw emotion as she puts her thoughts on canvas. Her battle with mental health and a busy life is what inspires her artwork the most.

Emily Bayliss is a Lubbock, Texas based artist and strives to make 3D works that incorporate mixed media and found objects. In recent years, her work has focused on current social and environmental issues such as the spread of COVID-19. She tends to have an eclectic style of artwork, meaning that no one style can tie her down. Bayliss finds joy and happiness in the randomized design and technique of her works.

Sarah Campbell is a graphic artist and metalsmith from North Texas. She is currently finishing her Bachelors degree in Fine Arts at Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls, Texas. Themes within her work draw from astrology, nature, and spiritualism. Post graduation, her focus will shift to building her brand and being a freelance artist and jeweler.

Kylee Crain is a senior at Burkburnett High School. Her poem is a take on terrible dads.

Stephen Cooper is a graduate student studying Nursing Education in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His passions include live storytelling throughout the city and working with children. While working as a PE teacher for an elementary school, he has engaged in many campaigns of capture-the-flag. Cooper has been published in several literary magazines and academic journals including the National Association for Environmental Education and the American Journal of Nursing.

Marci A. Crawley was born and raised in Southern California, earned a BA in Psychology from California State University, Northridge, served 13 years in the United States Air Force, and finally settled in Wichita Falls to be near her family. In a moment of spontaneity, she enrolled at Midwestern State University and fell in love with photography. She is currently attending MSU working towards a BA in Art.

Bailey Dold graduated from Burkburnett High School in 2016 and enrolled at MSU Texas in the fall of 2018. Dold is a painting major with a printmaking minor. After graduation, they plan to create and teach art. Dold's works tell the story of their journey as an artist in acrylic and oil paint as well as in prints. As an artist, Dold hopes to inspire their viewers that their stories can be told and heard through their art, just as Dold's is.

Kristen Dunn was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. Dunn attends Loyola University Chicago where she studies English, Creative Writing, and Philosophy. She is the author of the full-length poetry collection, *Leaves to Stay*, published by Cyberwit.net. Dunn's poetry has appeared in Dream Noir Literary and Art Magazine, as well as For Women Who Roar Magazine.

Kallie Gooch is a Graphic Design major at Midwestern State University, graduating spring of 2022. An Abilene, Texas native, they graduated high school in Wichita Falls. Though a graphic design major, they have dabbled in all mediums including photography and drawing. Gooch wishes to get a Graphic Design job in the DFW in an illustrative position.

Eesha Gundam is a sophomore at Jasper High School. She loves art, especially oil painting and watercolor. She is really passionate about art and about learning new things. Her artworks are inspired by her daily life experiences. In her free time, Gundam plays soccer, watches new movies, and loves going on late-night walks!

Ashley Guo is a student from Plano, Texas who does art in and out of school. She enjoys exploring new concepts and mediums of art such as charcoal and virtual design. She is working towards becoming a professional in the art field.

Mark Hammerschick writes poetry and fiction. He holds a BA in English from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana as well as a BS and MBA. He began writing in grade school and has contributed a number of poems to literary journals over the years. He was a lifelong resident of the Chicago area, but now lives in Naples, Florida. His current work will be appearing in: Calliope, Former People Journal, Sincerely Magazine, Mignolo Arts, Blue Lake Review, Naugatuck River Review, East on Central, Grey Sparrow Journal, Griffel and The Rockvale Review.

Sabrina Herrmann is an emerging writer who just completed an independent study at Gotham Writers Workshop in New York City. She graduated from New York University with a BS in Business and is currently applying to MA programs to study English Literature.

Farah Kamal is a sophomore in high school. She has been drawing since the age of 6. Farah takes art classes in school and finds joy in drawing and painting. She hopes to continue to make art and make a career out of it.

Kaylen Kirkhart currently attends Burkburnett High School. Kirkhart is in the 12th grade and plans on studying business in college in hopes of owning their own business to help their community one day.

Connor Lee is a sophomore English major from Richmond, Texas. He currently attends Midwestern State University and plans to get a job in publishing post-graduation. Outside of writing, he enjoys reading, working out, and watching horror movies.

Markella Lousidis is 17 and has been painting and selling art since before she could walk. Lousidis has a website where she has sold many pieces.

Mikey Maddox is a senior English major at MSU who writes under a pen name. They feel a pen name gives them the freedom to write the emotions and experiences they have had into their stories without the judgement of family or friends. They are excited for the future and the possibility of grad school for publishing.

Rebecca L. Monroe lives in Montana in a log cabin by a river and has been writing for most of her life. She has over 100 published stories and a book of short stories, *Reaching Beyond*, published by Bellowing Ark Press. Along with writing, she loves to read, take long walks with Dodge, her yellow Labrador Retriever, and volunteer at the local animal shelter.

William Rieppe Moore is from Richland County, South Carolina and moved to Unicoi County, Tennessee in 2012 with his wife, Cherith, where they practice homesteading and animal husbandry. In May of 2021, he received his MA in English from East Tennessee State University. His work has appeared in *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*, the *James Dickey Review*, *Still: The Journal*, *Vita Brevis*, and *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*.

Lauren Mullins is a part of the class of 2022 at Burkburnett High School. She enjoys reading, writing, and all things English. Writing poetry is new for Mullins, but she is so excited to try it out.

Andi Newberry is a senior pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts at Midwestern State University. She creates work using printmaking, drawing, painting, textiles, clay, and mixed media. Newberry draws upon childhood experiences, connections with others, and everyday consumption of images and objects. She enjoys working as the Printmaking Studio Assistant at MSU, participating in group shows, and having art-making nights with her friends. Newberry believes art has proven crucial to forming connections, relationships, and community, all of which are necessary for growth. Through symbols and storytelling, art is uniquely suited to the communication of complex experiences. The art community benefits from the sharing of differing knowledge and worldviews. Therefore, the process of artmaking brings society together as nothing else does in such crucial times.

Jennifer Moreno Ortega is a student at Burkburnett High School.

Adriana Otto intends on attending a university after graduation to become a pediatric nurse practitioner. She loves kids and helping others and is excited for what the future holds!

Johnathan William Potter is a Creative Writing major from Rosenberg, Texas. He has published works across multiple genres in journals such as *Midwestern State's Voices*, where he was awarded third place in their President's Award for Prose, and Howard University's *The Amistad*.

Kaylee Reis is a senior English major. They are currently attending Midwestern State University and plan to get a job in content writing post graduation. Outside of writing she enjoys hiking and painting.

Kerrigan Reyes is a junior at Midwestern State University. She illustrated, wrote, and edited her own coloring book in 2021. She has been in five exhibitions and hopes to be in many more. Reyes hopes to become a medical illustrator. Her artwork focuses heavily of mental health, death, and what being alive means.

Ryan Rivera is an emerging writer currently attending Northwestern University's MFA Prose and Poetry program with a dual-genre focus in Fiction and Creative Nonfiction. When he is not writing prose, Rivera works as a product manager at a large tech company.

Ciana Rucker is a student at Jasper High School who enjoys all varieties of art, especially digital art, poetry, photography, and ceramics.

Hannah Xu is a sophomore attending Jasper High School located in Plano, Texas. She received a silver key for one of her entries for the Scholastic Arts and Writing and also medaled at the VASE Texas State competition. She finds a passion in creating art and making music.

