

Red Wheelbarrow



Student Edition 2024

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special thanks to
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From 1976 to 1999 this magazine was known as Bottomfish, a name that referred to neglected, overlooked writing that had (metaphorically) fallen to the bottom of the sea. We hope that Red Wheelbarrow also signifies unpretentiousness and the casting of a wide net in search of new, exciting young writers as well as an ongoing commitment to originality, courage, and craft.

Red Wheelbarrow publishes twice a year. The National Edition publishes literary and artistic works from all over the country and the world. The Student Edition is open to De Anza students. We welcome submissions of all kinds, and we seek to publish a diverse range of styles and voices. We accept student submissions from September to mid-May and publish by the end of spring quarter.

Poetry: submit up to three poems

Fiction: submit one short story (up to 5,000 words) or up to three flash fiction pieces

Drama: submit one play or screenplay (up to 5,000 words)

Creative Nonfiction: submit one personal essay (up to 5,000 words)

Photographs and Drawings: submit up to three b/w prints or digital files (.jpg, .tiff, or .psd format); please do not send originals.

Comics: submit one b/w strip

Other: submit one!

Preferably please submit text files in MS Word (.doc or .docx) format.

Keep your name and contact information separate from the actual submission.

All Red Wheelbarrow submissions are judged anonymously.

Judges for all contests make their decisions independently.

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Frontispiece: Yin Hnin Nu Wai “Chameleon Baby”

Back Cover: Iryna Kaleniuk, “The Lighthouse”

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CD

Shuo Yin



The Foolish Boy's Pursuit of Happiness

Diego Armando Chavez

A young man with intellect unmatched, a friendly neighborhood boy with many friends and family to call home, roamed the streets of Olympus amongst the gods. This little demigod boy displayed otherworldly abilities, which stunned all who lived in Olympus and those on Earth whom he paid a visit to when visiting his human parent. The gods were marvels to this boy, his awe indescribable and his admiration for the beauty of the Goddess and the way he would follow and copy each and every step of the gods. In his eyes, these were men and women of honor, who were worthy of all the honor in the world.

This young man was a curious creature. His mind slithered into all the wonders of the universe and inquired over all things. Compared to the Gods, he was but a baby, only having been alive for forty years but with the semblance of a teenage boy. One day, the young man met Dionysis. Women hung over his arms and legs, all beckoning for attention each with their wine goblet in hand.

Rosey cheeked, and the words slurring from their mouth, the God beckoned, "What do you want, boy?"

"Please, Your Majesty, allow me to ask you of all the beautiful vegetation that you have created upon planet Earth, what is the most beautiful sight to see? Which one is closest to your heart, which means most to you?"

Dionysis looked in disgust upon the child, "Foolish boy! Nothing upon planet Earth is worthy of my attention any longer. After the creation a millennium ago, all business I had with Earth vanished. I only now and again bring earthly women to be my servants and to facilitate my pleasure and ecstasy. Now leave me be, boy, and do not return. The wonders of earth and the rest of the universe are yours to unfold."

Disappointed, the young man left and stumbled across Aphrodite. Hoping to gain insight into the mystery of love, he inquired, "Dear Aphrodite, the most stunning of all Gods alive in Olympus, please reveal to me the path to true love. How may I find it, and what are the signs of true love?"

With a look of disgust and horror upon her face, Aphrodite responded, “You idiotic and foolish boy! Why are you inquiring of such a futile endeavor? Love is but a figment of your psyche. You may only get a glimpse of it indulging in sexual pleasures, but all is lost in the mental clarity that ensues afterward.”

Shocked, the boy responds, “But Aphrodite is that not lust and not love?”

“Quit it with your nonsense, boy; there is no difference. In all my experience, there is not even a single God that is worthy of such an emotion, and if there were such a thing as love, each would have to decide what that looks like to them. I could not reveal such a thing.”

Frustrated, the boy seeks higher knowledge and meets with the almighty Zeus, the leader and God of all gods. Hoping that his majesty may enlighten him on how to be an effective leader, negotiator, peacemaker, and better man.

“Allfather Zeus, your royal and righteous majesty,” the boy begins. “All that you have achieved is what I wish to do with my life. You have negotiated peace with humans, been the ruler of Olympus for all of time, and have become the greatest role model any young man could ask for. What must I do to practice all that you have practiced and to become that of which you have become?”

Confused and annoyed, Zeus turns away from the boy and attempts to go back to sleep. Undeterred, the boy tries again, “Zeus, please, I beg of you as your most loyal servant, I wish to know the secrets of this universe, and wish to follow in your footsteps. Please impart unto me your glorious wisdom.”

“No, you useless, human-bred boy, although being my son, you truly are the most foolish of all the boys in this world. Nothing I have done has any purpose. I have started wars to seek entertainment. I have bred wives to then have my sons fight to death and determine who is the strongest. I have cheated and lied and deceived because I am the most powerful being to ever exist, and if you wish, truly wish, to be like me, you must find your own way to success. Now leave me before I handle you myself.” The foolish, foolish boy had lost all hope, been rejected by his own father, and been shooed away by his role models.

One day, while dwelling on earth, the young man came across a serpent who had been observing all the things happening in Olympus and following this boy in all his endeavors.

“Say, boy, why do you appear to be so lost? You are more powerful than any human weapon, than any earthly being. You are a demigod; you shall live for centuries to come, and yet you mope as if your life shall end tomorrow.”

“I am lost, dear serpent. I seek answers to my questions, but no one wishes to assist me. All those I held dear have betrayed me, and I am left to my lonesome.”

In response, the serpent lay meditating for a few moments before responding, “I have seen all of this, and wish you my sincerest apologies. What the gods have said is correct, they do not lie. Truly, only you can figure out this vast universe and the wonders that exist alongside it. There is no other way about it. What they say about themselves is true as well. They are not all they made to seem through popular opinion.”

The boy began to weep, crying out, “Must I roam this world alone then, with no guidance, to suffer as a foolish boy?” The serpent began to shift in shape and to sit next to the man as his brother, a dark-eyed and gloomy countenance of a man. A handsome and strong older man with a look that could pierce even the lightning rod of Zeus.

“Listen, boy, you seek human pleasure because you, indeed, are part human. You wish to experience the joys of being human because it is in your blood. The Gods live meaningless lives that have no end. They shall be indulgent, greedy, cruel, and have power beyond measure for all of eternity. Humans however, live for a fraction of time, and yet, their existence carries a plethora more of meaning.”

“What do you mean old and wise one?”

“I, at one point, wished to see humanity’s doom because I had sympathy for them, I did not want them to suffer by the God’s hands and instead chose to attempt to end them for good. The Gods stopped me solely for the purpose of keeping them around to exploit and take advantage of their women, children, and institutions. Defeated and hopeless, I came here to live amongst them, hoping to get a glimpse of what they live and breathe. I, a God, shall never be able

to fully see what it is like to experience the only true joy of this universe, that of a human life. However, my boy, you can. But, you must see for yourself and be foolish and naive for a bit. Only then will your wisdom come, and will you be able to learn about what it truly means to exist. Humans shall die one day, as will you, but you will have much longer to wait for that day. The fact that there is a due date for all human life is what gives it meaning. It forces you to enjoy the moments that occur in the meantime and to never take any instance for granted. That, son, is the only purpose that is worth fulfilling.”

The boy was left, astounded as the man walked away. “Wait, Your Majesty, what shall I call you? Who do I have to thank for the only genuine advice I have received in all of my short existence?”

In response, the man said, “The Catholics call me Lucifer, the Christians Satan, the Romans Pluto, but Olympus refers to me as Hades. Good luck, boy, I will see you when your time comes.”

Where Art Thou Sunglasses?

Zachary Francis

Where are my glasses? Where might they be found?
The sun fell to dusk, and the skies got dark.
They could be together, close to the ground.
The horizon or my floor, where to start?

My sunglass frames held back my hair for me.
I know headbands, but my frames were enough.
They trained my hair to muscle memory.
Even one hair falling down was too much.

Rays from the sun, my glasses would defend
Now, not finding them can feel unnerving.
I'd spend a wish to see my eyes again.
I've looked all day, what good is time serving?

Grown tired from searching, I'll go to bed.
Ow, my pillow hurt. Wait, they're on my head.

Maroon

Anonymous

Maroon is the color of kings and queens.
To view a world that's adorned by its grace:
Look upon robes, ribbons, the rug, and rings.
We long to feel such warmth and its beauty.

How apt to draw one to passion and love;
Maroon is the allure in those young hearts.
The will of the mind is worth less than dimes
When the tempting face of maroon beckons.

And yet, maroon is found in much great strife.
It burns like hot anger behind the eyes.
Velvet, when tugged with greed, turns coarse and cracked.
It grows loud, and "dies irae" echoes.

If it reaches its horrid worst, you'll find
Maroon is so hauntingly cold and stiff.
Squirming, buzzing, and deep in sour cloth.
To rest, maroon be put before it greys.

Maroon is luxury but never ease.
It strikes the hearts of all with its power.
Beware the strength and might that maroon has;
Indulgence is known to be dangerous.

So Young

Anonymous

Don't let us be sad, life's short, my dear friend.
If through a grim end, our hearts have been hurt,
Think of good, divine life for which we yenned!

With loose sticks as our swords, we played pretend,
Rubbed our soft, young faces into the dirt.
Don't let us be sad, life's short, my dear friend.

We'd sit, knees stained, eyes fixed, with logs to tend,
watched the fire craft us a fine dessert;
Think of good, divine life for which we yenned!

High jinks in a town that was ours to wend
We'd fib to Mom just once: "it's a brown shirt"
Don't let us be sad, life's short, my dear friend.

Limbs splayed on the old oak floor as we penned
Silly songs to give a parlor concert.
Think of good, divine life for which we yenned!

How sad, the fate, with which you must contend
Had I been there with you, you'd have been girt
Don't let us be sad, life's short, my dear friend.
Think of good, divine life for which we yenned!

Wonderland

Allyson Thylin

Outside in my backyard, there is a tiny world
That my friend Alice introduced me to,
Inspired by the words that I used to read on paper.
A world we made together with love and imagination.

We sipped tea and wandered through the forest,
Full of peculiar creatures and unusual undergrowth.
Everyone was everything they wanted to be
And nothing they were told to be.

Fairies were flying over my head as the clouds
Eagerly passed by, and the wind carried the whispers
Of great giant trees who told me
There were intruders knocking on our door.

They stormed into everything we created,
Knocked our forest to ruins,
Erased our home and everyone in it,
And wiped us away like pieces of dust.

Thoughts...

Allyson Thylin

Who knock at my door in the dead of night
To snap a sleepful rest, I'm awoken
Who lurk in the shadows waiting bite
Latching on and suddenly I'm frozen

Whose creeps and crawls go unnoticed by me
Following as I reach highest of crowns
Before one crawls in that I can't unsee
To suffocate me until I'm long down

I'm moved around like a pawn in your game
By words so real, yet no one else can tell
I would do anything to dim your flame
Yours may sting, but I have the louder yell

You are free to come and go as you please
But there's no permanent place to clench your teeth

The Silent Majority

Helen Piper

You fools, you thought you were so safe on top
You said: no harm, just let the idiot be
You don't know how to make the crazy stop

Trump said: the Constitution I will crop
You said: he jokes, he smirks, he laughs, you shall see
You fools, you thought you were so safe on top

The right to be so free was deemed a flop
The Court Supreme with its decree: woman unfree
You don't know how to make the crazy stop

They want to make another bubble pop
J6 shooters are hostages, they plea
You fools, you thought you were so safe on top

Trump wants you to give perps a pardon shop
you try to strategize push this out to sea
You don't know how to make the crazy stop

Long Distance

Joseph Shaffer

How can one put to words their heart's desire?
When will we find the bravery to smile.
I can hold my own when we require,
I have a feeling we'll be here awhile.

In whispers soft our dreams begin to weave.
When will we find the strength to reconcile,
With every glance a promise to believe.
Until hearts meet, we draw closer, meanwhile,

Hidden passion glows, concealed love gleams brightly.
Each heartbeat echoes a love versatile,
In nightly talks fantasies intertwine.
For you I'd travel a million miles.

Throughout fading echoes our doubts will go,
Enshrouded in love's melancholy flow.

Pelo Negro, Bonito

Juliette Levy

yes, she is soft-
my hair
no, you cannot touch her!
she is delicate
your oily fingers are not welcome
my pelo negro, bonito

she is twisted up and tied off with ribbons
she is three beautiful strands
made up of thousands of straight individuals
up and over in a long, dark braid
i have earned her length
pelo negro, bonito

every inch tells a story
every strand connects to a root
on the left, she tells of my grandmothers
they both meet and blend into Mexico
she tells of their childhoods
the towns filled with red-cheeked,
grinning indigenous girls that look like them
that look a bit like me
pelo negro, bonito

on the right is my mother
my hair, she tells me folk tales
through the lips of my mother
she tells me i am like a willow tree
and my hair streams down
threads that flow elegantly in the wind
my hair is pleasing, she says
it connects me to the earth that God created
pelo negro, bonito

in the center, i sit
i create a new history for my hair
one of tangles riddled with sticks and grass
a story of toy trains and hamsters on wheels
trailing ponytails that get stuck to gates and screws
she tells of a messy child that turned into a teenager
where she becomes a veil rather than just hair
she now covers my eyes and shields my flushed face
and gets pushed back behind my ears
so i can sneak a kiss behind the stairs
and eventually, she will tell of a young adult
who wears her up in a bun
powerfully, my hair will be a crown upon my head
sleek and elegant
pelo negro, bonito

my braid sits on my back
i wear her with pride
ribbon tying together my life
she is everything i was
and will be
pelo negro, bonito

Femininity

Juliette Levy

Woman

Remain small,
I say to my waist
Remain young,
I say to my skin

Exotic

Compared to birds,
Latinidad is a foreign concept
Compared to peppers,
Latinidad is too hot to handle

Conceited

I call myself lovely
But that makes me superficial
I call myself worthy
But that makes me a bitch

Uptight

Who am I
To decline generous offers
Who am I
To say no when I please

Easy

The way I share myself
Makes me hard to keep
The way I carry myself
Makes certain everyone knows

Sculptures in the Air

Delia Shepherd

A dancer moves
Freely, gracefully
Lost in motion

At that moment in time
music and movement are all she has
Emotive, expressive
Rhythmic, *evanescently flowing*

Shaping emotions and thoughts
A language of shapes all her own
Like poetry on air

High, low, laying down
Circles, diagonals, leaps, jumps
Sharp, jagged, convoluted
Painfully distorted
A dance called
“The Rite of Spring”

Rehearses, refines, feels
An act of creation
An act of sharing
A language all her own
Like poetry on air

All have their
purpose
A dancer
moves
Creating
Sculptures
in
the
air...

Leaf

Delia Shepherd

Falling

So

Gracefully

Lofty and free

Soft as

Can be

That's

free...

I'm

free...

I'm

what

you

say

to me

free...

be

can

too

I

Hey, It's Been a While

Zachary Francis

Good to hear from you!
Yes, a lot has changed. (...)

..no not anymore.
But I still want to!
and how about you? (...)

Ah ya, same for me. (...)
Ah no, I agree. (...)
Ah okay... I see.

Hey, want to go out? (...)
No, I can't that day. (...)
Ah ya, that's okay.

(Hey, it's been awhile.)

The Rising Sun

Sandra Tingalay



Nuns, Cherries, Reflections in the Water

Sandra Tingalay



Something's Gone Wrong with Grandma's Bathroom Art

Ayla Khoshaba



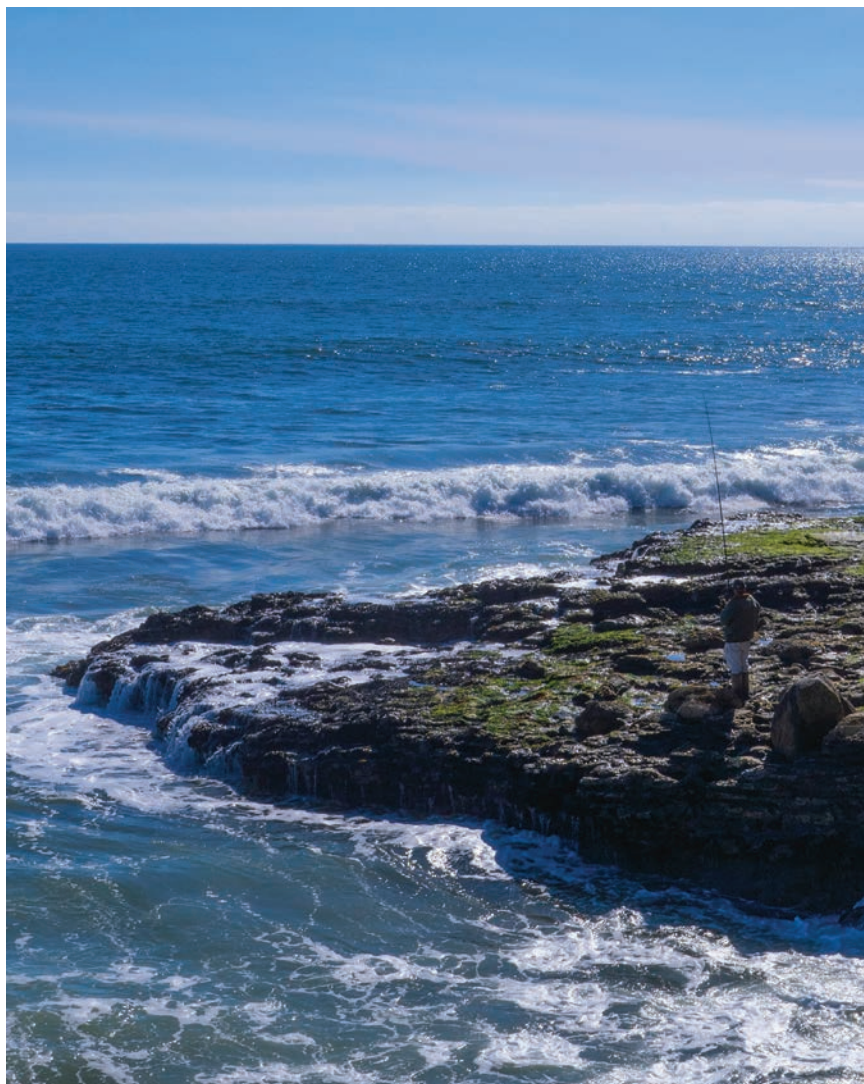
Peace

Linda Middleton



The Hidden Fisherman

Jazmin Manchester



Self-Portrait, 2023, Watercolor

Frank Yung-Fong Tang



Great Dane in Colors

Alla Panova



Pinay

Jean Samson



Growing Pains

Sucheta Sanyal



Poems to the Youth

Joanne Ha



Eight Fifteen

Romie Asplund

Hiroshima, Japan

August 6, 1945

—THE CLASSROOM—

“Ohayou gozai masu.”

Misao smushed the butt of her cigarette into an orange ash-tray that sat at the very center of a city of paper. Skyscrapers, like the ones they had in America, probably, of half-graded essays and sloping homes of vermilion-markings-and-chicken-scratch mottled the grand blueprint of that rusting desk. Amidst the stomps and screeches of children filling up the empty seats before her, Misao set free the final smoke-ghost she'd been savoring under her tongue, and she surrendered to the tick-tick-gong of 8:00 A.M.

“Ohayou gozai masu, Koda-sensei!” said Junko Honma, flushed and breathless.

“Good morning, Miss Honma. Long time no see. Have you been enjoying your summer vacation? I take it you've been getting in plenty of studying.” Of course, Misao was aware of the funeral last weekend. Killed in action, Junko's father had been, on some godforsaken island—lost to the ferns and cicadas of a late-July skirmish. Still, she thought it was a good thing she was doing keeping the war outside of the classroom. School should feel like school for her students.

“Eh! Hmm,” Junko swiped the back of her hand across a drenched hairline. “Of course!”

Tucking in her chin so she could get a better look over the rims of her glasses, Misao imparted her student with a soft nod.

“What about you, Mr. Matsuoka? Have you been studying hard?”

Akinobu Matsuoka shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, the chart says it's your turn to be nitchoku today. Whenever you're ready,” said Misao.

Akinobu, groaning softly, kicked himself out of his chair and

stood as tall and stiff and straight like a soldier, fingers splayed and all. Misao made a note to call his mother up later to remind her that her son's shorts were, once again, in dire need of washing.

"Class up!" he yipped, and Misao grimaced. He sounded just like the troops that marched past the school. Perhaps her old students were amongst the ranks. She swore she saw a soldier-boy who looked just like little Kentaro the other day... Never mind.

"*Ohayou gozai masu!*" said Akinobu.

His call was answered by the faithful shudder of thirty-eight sets of feet and chairs on hardwood following suit. "*Ohayou gozai masu,*" droned the rest of the class.

"Today. Is. Monday, August 6, 1945! The weather is, uh, warm—very warm! And the sky is clear! We wish our soldiers good fortune and thank our Holy Emperor for granting us victory after victory in this great war. Now, we will begin our first period! Bow!"

Misao stood there gritting her teeth as thirty-eight tenth-graders folded in half like paper dolls. You could hear sweat *plip-plopping* from their silken foreheads onto the old, wooden cheeks of their desks.

Plip-plop.

Tick-tock.

Tickety-tockety.

Misao looked over her shoulder to check the time. Tacked above the blackboard was a yellowing clock, a perpetually rising sun over a sea sullied with detritus, adjacent to which hung a framed photograph of their young emperor.

8:05 A.M.

Her eyes flickered to the photograph.

Not right now. There's still time until the end of class.

"Okay, children, take out your textbooks." Slowly, she spun back round to face thirty-eight sets of ruddy grimaces. Even when they scrunched up their brows in protest, their skin remained unrippled by evident disdain. "Today, we'll be covering the fall of the Edo period and the relocation of our capital city from Kyoto to Edo, or as we've come to call it, Tokyo."

"*Eeehhhhh?*" came the cacophony of fulmination.

"*Sensei, we already covered this last year,*" shouted Yusuke.

“And the year before that!”

“And the year before that, too,” nodded an emboldened Harue.

Misao smiled. Though she'd never admit to it, she found it endearing when her students complained like this. If anything, it unnerved her when their eyes glassed over and they'd sit there bobbing wordlessly in agreement to every word she said. “Okay. Then shall we hop right into the quiz?”

“Eeeehhhh! Sensei!” they harmonized.

“We'll take the lecture,” added Harue.

Misao peered over her glasses again. “That's what I thought.”

“Wait, Sensei,” Akinobu hoisted his hand.

“What is it, Mr. Matsuoka? Have you decided you'd rather take the test?” She let her brows hover in the center of her forehead until the students wiped their mouths clean of remnant giggles.

Mr. Matsuoka, however, didn't seem to find it so funny.

“No, Sensei,” said Akinobu Matusoka. “It's just—you still haven't signed off on my papers for the Imperial Special Attack unit. I don't wanna waste any more time hanging around children when I should be out there serving my emperor.”

The classroom grew so silent you could hear that bloated, yellow clock tutting its fat, black tongue in glee.

Tut, tut.

Tut-tick-tick-tock.

Misao felt the muscles of her face give out where they'd been pinning up her smile then tense up again in all the wrong spots.

The classroom exploded.

“Eeehhh! You're gonna be one of the *Kamikaze*!?”

“Oi, Matsuoka, when did you even volunteer? I thought you had to be 16 to join.”

“You turned 16 last month, didn't you, Matsuoka?”

“Wait, Sensei, when I join, can you sign mine, too?”

Under the parapet of coiled up fists, her brittle fingernails imparted frowns into the soft of her hand. Misao, a creature of habit, looked over her shoulder.

8:10 A.M.

Tick-tock.

Tick-tick tock.

“Yes, Mr. Matsuoka. Come,” she said, and she freed the sealed letter tucked away in the foundations of one of her skyscrapers, sending leaflets and ashes billowing about her paper city. “On that same note, I’d like to announce that three boys in our class turned sixteen this past week. Happy birthday. Even though we’re already winning the war, our emperor would still like you invite as many of you as possible to share his, hm, glory.”

Akinobu, abandoning his rust-speckled seat to receive his envelope, returned to a throne inlaid with googly eyes and the rounded lips of children.

“Aki, you are so cool! I wish I could join, but I’m a girl..” Junko dropped her shoulders.

“Yeah, well, you’re still a kid, and I’m about to become a man. Go play with your toys or something,” he rested his cheek on his desk and shut his eyes.

Misao couldn’t take it anymore. She strode to the window and pulled back its rotting veil to let in the damp breath of a still-callow August. Strolling the field of gravel under a cloudless sky was a young woman with an infant swaddled about the breast of her tattered kimono.

Poor, young thing.

Misao had seen her here before a number of times at the school begging for food. The mother looked even thinner than before. Perhaps she could spare the rice balls she’d packed for herself today...

Just then, past the students playing ball in the heart of the dirt field, she spotted a soldier stumble forth from a skirt of trees. That was it. She was going to have a word with the local unit after class.

What time was it?

8:14 A.M.

Tick-tick-ticktickticktick.

Ah, yes, she still had time.

—THE FOREST—

“Ohayou gozai masu.”

Kenjiro, blinking through tears, swallowed another yawn before it could rip through his jaw.

“Private Yamada! Feeling sentimental this morning? What makes you think you’re ready to be shipped out to San Francisco in two weeks’ time when you still don’t know how to perform the simple task of greeting your superiors?”

“Sergeant Shirai! I am sorry, sir. *Ohayou gozai masu, sir!*”

God. Sergeant Shirai’s booming, nasal hum was the one voice he didn’t want gnawing at his eardrums at this blasted hour.

“Your parents clearly never taught you how to greet your superiors, but they did teach you how to tell the time, right, Private?” the sergeant was so close Kenjiro could smell on his breath the watered-down coffee brushed with a salted pointer-finger.

“Of course, sir,” Kenjiro, squelching a third yawn, peered under the khaki sleeve of his uniform. “8:00 A.M., sir.”

“8:00 A.M., you say?” Sergeant Shirai lifted his cap to reveal a matted tuft of thinning hair. Kenjiro didn’t know why, but he suddenly felt sorry for him. Only a handful of years his senior, Sergeant Shirai had graduated alongside Kenjiro’s sister. At one point, they’d even played on the same high school baseball team, although he was beginning to doubt such a reality could’ve existed as they readied for battle. “Okay. That gives us just enough time to make today’s training exercise extra fun for you boys. We’re taking the long way down the forest. That’s a six-hour march. San Francisco is covered in trees. If you can make it here, you can make it out there.”

“Yessir!” huffed the unit.

“Oh, and Privates Wakita, Kameoka, and Hoshi, great work at yesterday’s exercise. You boys go ahead and entrust your knapsacks to Private Sleepy over here,” added the sergeant. “That’ll wake him right on up. Now, after me!”

You gotta be shitting me.

Wakita, Kameoka, and Hoshi peeled off their knapsacks to join the jingling cluster of men being sucked into the branches row by row. Kenjiro looped two around either shoulder and one across his chest. No idea how he was going to manage a six-hour hike carrying four knapsacks, including his own, but he figured he’d stay in

the back—conserve his energy, you know?

He felt like a pack mule with all the straps and gadgets rattling about his flesh. Good thing he was tall; otherwise, he'd *look* like a pack mule, too, and he wasn't about to embarrass himself any further.

It was moments like these that he'd forget why on earth he'd been so eager to enlist back in school. Hell, he was so determined to join a year early he'd begged and begged his parents to let him go the day after he turned sixteen. Come to think of it, didn't his mom drag his teacher to try to talk him out of going? Yeah, yeah that definitely happened. Shit, what was her name again? Koda-sensei or something?

He'd been reluctant at the time to introduce his teacher to his mom. She was Korean, you, see—well, technically, it was his grandpa who was from Pyeongyang—and he knew his teacher wasn't fond of Koreans. No one here really was. She was nice about it, though. Treated her like any other lady in Hiroshima and even complimented her cooking. Before she left, Koda-sensei had said something about rethinking his decision to enlist early—said there'd be plenty of chances left for him to join later on—and to complete his education while he could. Go to university, she'd said; make it easier to get by as a Korean.

He supposed that's why he couldn't bring himself to hate Sergeant Shirai like he'd grown to hate these training exercises, even if the Sarge did have a big, ole, balloon head chock full of his own nut. The sergeant had known about Kenjiro's mom since their school days, but he never did say a word about it to anyone as far as he knew. Didn't bring it up as an insult, either, like the other guys did.

“Oi, Korean guy, you awake yet-*habnida*?” A scrawny, bespectacled private second class struggled to keep stride beside him. “See what I did there? *Habnida, habnida, habnidaaaa*?”

“Oi, midget, can you hear me from down there? How many times have I got to tell you I don't. Speak. Korean?” he exhaled, stretching out the swelling kink in the back of his neck.

“What! How are you gonna call yourself a Korean if you can't speak Korean?”

“I never called myself Korean.”

Kenjiro adjusted one of the eight knapsack straps that started digging into his shoulder. It was too early into the march to be feeling this way.

He slipped two fingers up his sleeve again to check the time.

8:05 A.M.

Tick, tick-tock.

Seriously? It'd only been five minutes?

"Oh, really?" Private Second Class Takahashi swatted a mosquito off his cheek that bore a coagulated gash from his morning shave. "I don't remember. Why are you so sleepy today anyway?"

Kenjiro didn't want to get into specifics. "I was up... writing something."

"Writing what?"

"A letter."

"Oooo! A love letter, huh? You hear, boys? Korean guy's found himself a Korean lover!"

A few of the soldiers threw their heads back to hurl their practiced, macho guffaws into the trees, while the rest marched onward.

Kenjiro looked at him for the first time. "I was drafting my final letter to my mom. But you wouldn't know what that feels like because yours is dead, isn't she?"

Takahashi's gait slowed to a halt so leaden it ruptured the pinecone beneath his worn, pigskin boot, a size too long. The next thing Kenjiro knew, the puny thing was swinging for his head. "The hell did you say about my mother? Watch your mouth, kid. I'll sock you in the jaw."

Kenjiro would've kept on walking—he really would've—if he hadn't noticed that his shoelace was untied. Ducking a blow as he knelt to marry two frayed laces, he muttered, "Sorry, don't understand. I only speak Korean—*habnida*—agh, *chikushou!*"

Kenjiro found himself on his back blinking into a gable of bristled foliage. That bastard Takahashi'd knocked the wind out of him before making a run for the trees.

"Sergeant Shirai was right!" came Takahashi's distant voice in shades of green. "You really don't know any manners. Go back to Korea, *kuso-yaro!*"

“Yeah, yeah, fuck off. Damnit, I’m stuck.”

But by the time he’d hauled himself back up on his feet, like a pack mule in heat, neither Private Second Class Takahashi nor his unit was to be found. There’d apparently been a fork in the road, swathed in foliage, and he was none the wiser to whether they’d gone left or right.

“Hello? Which way did you all go?” the sound of his voice completed a rollick through the trees, reincarnated through revenant-iterations and each one weaker in timbre than the last. “All these trees, yet we don’t get a single toothbrush, huh? Let’s see, left it is, then.”

And, so, the private found himself minutes later at the edge of the forest. Before him was the gravel field of the very high school he’d dropped out of two years ago. On the opposite end, where the sun shone bright without the cover of the trees, was a beggar girl and her baby. Today must’ve been *tokkoubi*, a day of mandatory classes during summer vacation. He wondered if she’d shown up for food knowing class would be in session today.

Remembering that there was a path stitching the school to the main road, he squared his shoulders and began to march past the exercising students toward the big, white school building.

Kenjiro shoved two fingers up his sleeve once more.

8:14 A.M.

Chikushou.

Sergeant Shirai was going to hack his head off if he didn’t catch up soon.

—THE SQUARE—

“*Ohayou gozai masu.*”

Shizuko was positive her stomach had singed cavities into itself. It sure felt that way. Ten days had come and gone since she’d given it food, the longest she’d waited to eat in her life. But her baby—and she’d done so well in ensuring she was fed—had gone hungry for three whole days. She needed to give her something.

That’s what she told herself as she forced out the words, “*Oha-you gozai masu.* Please, do you have anything to spare for my child?”

Please, she hasn't eaten in three days."

Only it wasn't really her uttering those words, was it? Surely, her lips must've been moving, but she couldn't feel it.

The town bell wasn't having any of this folly. It lapped its tongue over the painted-white stone and just-cleaned ears of the square, and her baby began to cry.

It was 8:00 A.M.

"Shhhh," she unswaddled Kimika and rocked the little thing in her arms. She made to tuck her pillowy head between the folds of fabric holding in her breasts—a force of habit—before remembering she'd been out of milk for weeks.

A young girl in pigtails had stopped to come stare at Shizuko. "Your kimono has holes in it," she pointed.

Shizuko pulled her best impression of a smile so as not to frighten the child. "It's a hot day, and this helps me keep cool."

A giggle-squeal wriggled free from the hand the girl clapped to her plump, bowed lips.

Shizuko didn't know what to say. No one had spoken to her in months.

"It's a beautiful day. Let's appreciate the clear, blue sky," she heard herself say.

"Oh, you're right! I never noticed," the girl giggled again.

"Hanako? Hanako! There you are," a woman draped in ruffles and pearls had come to whisk the girl away from her. Soon, their figures blurred into bleary sun-ribbons, but Shizuko could hear the mother tut her tongue. "And do *not* speak to people like her, Hanako. All they do is ask for your money without contributing a yen to society."

"She didn't ask me for money though," Shizuko could barely make out the girl's words just before they vanished behind an alabaster column.

Or did she? Did the sweet, little girl who'd found her so funny really say that? For all she knew, she could've been making this all up. She didn't know anymore.

Her head hurt.

Securing Kimika into the nest of fabric at her breast, she tried her luck once more, this time with a man in a navy kimono and top

hat. “*Ohayou gozai masu*, sir, can you help my child? If she doesn’t have food, she will die soon.”

“Away from me, woman! Aren’t there any other corners in this city?”

Shizuko felt her legs give out, and moments later, she’d withered into just another heap of frayed hemp along the bank’s white, stone skin. She saw the children squatting beside her with faces burrowed in leather-bound bones and she did the same. That’s when she noticed laying at her bare feet the front page of this morning’s paper: ANOTHER VICTORY IN OKINAWA FOR THE EMPIRE. THE AMERICANS RETREAT IN FEAR.

Right...the war.

If they were really winning, why was it taking so goddamn long for it to end? She’d lost everything in the past three years. Her father was killed at sea, both her mother and sister died when in an air raid, and she hadn’t heard from her brother in months. That was okay, though, because at the time she’d still had her husband to write to. But he, too, left her. Killed in Okinawa, apparently. He didn’t have to go; he was the only son. But the emperor said, huh? The day after she got the telegram, she’d come home to a pile of rubble where their home once stood.

She winced as the acid burned another hole into her stomach.

How much longer did this have to go on? She craned her neck so she could see the clock tower.

8:05 A.M.

Tickety. Tockety.

With a hard, heavy huff, she rested her cheek on the cool stone. Sometimes she wished her daughter would simply—

—die. Only because that way she wouldn’t have to do this anymore. It was humiliating enough to have to beg on the streets, but to do it in her crumbling nightgown made her look like a prostitute or something. Running a finger down Kimika’s soot-laden cheeks, she cooed. “*Kaa-chan* will save you, okay?”

“Darling? Darling, can you hear me?” came a timeworn bleat, although it wasn’t anything like Shizuko’s kimono. When she looked up, she could make out through the sun-spears the outline of

an older woman. Must've been the wiry hair. "Sweetheart, I'm sorry. I heard you talking to that man. I don't have much food myself, as all of it goes to feeding my grandchildren. But I hear that the high school is having a *tokkoubi* today. Why don't you go ask for some leftovers?"

"High school?" whispered Shizuko. The thing was, she wasn't hungry anymore. If anything, she felt like vomiting.

"Yes, darling, go get you and your daughter something to eat," said the woman. Shizuko wished she could've seen what shape the lines and wrinkles on her face had coiled themselves into, but it was too bright. "It's only a five-minute walk from here. Can you make it on your own?"

Clutching Kimika over the swaddle, she stood up, and all the blood rushed to her head in blinding swirls and starbursts. She tried to nod.

"Do you know where it is?"

Of course, she knew where it was. That was her old high school. And it wasn't her first time begging there, either.

God, this was embarrassing. She prayed they wouldn't recognize her.

"Th-thank... you," said Shizuko.

The walk felt longer than five minutes. Perhaps it was because of all the weight she'd lost, but by the time she heard the sound of whistles and giggles and the familiar crunch of the gravel beneath her soiled soles, the big, white clock on the school tower read 8:14 A.M.

In the distance, the forest across the field spat out a disheveled-looking soldier, hunched over from the weight of whatever it was he was carrying. She blinked as she observed him beyond the children kicking a ball around in the center of the field making his way to the building. She supposed she should follow suit if she was going to secure a meal for her daughter.

—THE TEACHER—

Misao was in the middle of a lecture when it happened.

It started with the familiar grizzle of a B-29 sailing lower than

normal—

—a blanket of white—

—the jelly-jiggle of thirty-eight pairs of eyeballs staring stupid straight at her.

The children had grown silent, but not out of obedience.

Misao, drenched in the slobber of a thousand suns and stars crushed open, turned her cheek to the left toward the light—force of habit—so she could check the time.

8:15 A.M.

Tick-tick-tock-tick.

That's when she saw it.

Her bones.

She could see her bones glowing through the flesh of her arms.

Misao looked to her students in horror.

—THE SOLDIER—

What was that?

Kenjiro was, once again, with his knee to the ground because—once again—his shoelace had come undone. He lifted himself from the shadows of the school building and wheeled around in search of the source of the flash.

What he saw convinced him he must've been dreaming after falling asleep somewhere in the forest.

It was gone—all of it—everything. The forest, the fence, the city—oh, *God*, the city!—gone!

But how?

It was just him, the school, and the howling wind.

Something was wrong.

Kenjiro flung himself into the school without bothering to remove his shoes.

Strange.

The classrooms on the first floor were empty.

He was on all fours as he clambered up the staircase and into the classroom nearest the hallway numbered 2-3, where he encountered the first signs of life.

A handful of students, marble-eyed, were huddled against the wall among petals of ruptured glass and toppled tables.

“Wh-what happened here?” he called. “Are you alright? Where is everyone?”

A girl shook her head.

“What do you mean? Where is your teacher?”

Nothing.

Just then, a boy in dirty shorts pointed somewhere behind Kenjiro.

“The wall?”

The boy nodded.

Kenjiro traced the boy’s gaze to the wall that lined the hallway. There, he saw what appeared to be, well, posed silhouettes singed into the white paint.

He didn’t understand.

Where did the students go?

Outside, he could hear people singing—no—crying? Yes, they were crying. But for what?

He rushed to the naked window to get a better view. Only he wished he didn’t, for what he saw was certainly nothing you’d see in a dream.

He ripped the sleeve off his uniform.

8:15 A.M.

Still?

This was a nightmare, and he was trapped in it.

—THE MOTH—

“W-water... W-w-water, please...”

Shizuko’s eyelids unfurled slow and sticky. She must’ve collapsed. Now, a throng of people had appeared around her, marching like soldiers toward the school.

Maybe they were soldiers.

Her eyes flickered to the clock tower.

8:15 A.M.

She wasn’t out for that long, and yet, was this the same city she had been begging in just minutes ago?

“Water... W-water please...” chanted the soldiers.

Wait a minute... They weren't soldiers. They were people—men, women, and children. Either everyone in town had decided to copy her new holey trend or she wasn't seeing straight.

Shizuko rubbed her eyes.

If she was, in fact, seeing straight, then that meant that the woman ambling past her didn't exactly have hands. While she did have arms, the flesh appeared to have been melted—like ch-cheese—and dripped down to where her hands should've been.

“What happened to you all?” Shizuko tried to say, but there remained no breath left in her chest.

“Water... Water, please... Water...” they crooned.

And then she saw the pairs of feet dragging past her. They were just like that woman's hands: flaps of flesh. In their wake, they imparted to the earth a trail of crimson.

Shizuko lifted a hand to pull her baby closer to her bosom, away from these freakish beings, but her fingers wouldn't reach.

She tried again, but her fingers weren't making contact.

When she looked down, a strange noise left her lips.

“M-my hands... My hands...”

Something was telling her to check on Kimika.

Pressing her cheek into her daughter's, she cooed. “Kimika. Kimika! Wake up!”

NO.

She knew.

She knew as she rolled the rest of her face into the sunken splosh where her daughter's pillow-cheeks once swelled and as she tasted the iron-nectar that trickling into her parted lips—she knew, okay?

But still—

“Kimika? Kimika! No! Kimika! Someone help! Please!”

A group of soldiers had convened round the faucets in the school garden to give out brimming canteens to the molten people. Amongst them was the young soldier Shizuko recognized from earlier, although he didn't seem to have melted like she and Kimika did.

Kimika.

She had to check.

“Oh, thank God! Ha!” she began to giggle, and she thought she sounded just like the girl from the square. “This isn’t my daughter! Ha—hahahaha! Someone must’ve given me a huge lump of corned beef! I’ll never go hungry again! *Banzai! Banzai!*”

But no one was listening. Like moths in the light, they grew more and more enraptured with the wetness up ahead.

All at once, the five or so people who had, just moments ago, been guzzling down the canteens of water, grew possessed by fiendish convulsions, hacking up blood and guts, until they dried up and folded to the ground like paper dolls.

A soldier came darting into the school. “No! Don’t give them water! Stop! They’ll die! You have to wait for aid!”

“What do you mean?” said the young soldier.

“You haven’t heard?”

He and the soldiers standing with him shook their heads.

The new soldier plucked off his hat and let it flutter to his boots. “They say it’s an atom bomb. Dropped by the Americans. These people are severely burned. You can’t give them water.”

How strange. Shizuko could hear them so well now. Did this atom bomb enhance her abilities?

“Shouldn’t we just give it to them, then, in that case?” said another soldier.

“How dare you!” the young soldier shook his head. “We can save each and every one of them.”

“Heya,” the hatless soldier pointed at the young one’s remaining sleeve. “Your insignia. You were one of the soldiers training this morning?”

The young one nodded.

“Well, in that case, I’m sorry, son. They’re gone. Burnt to a crisp.”

“Wh-what do you mean? What about Sergeant Sh-Shirai?”

“Was he your commanding officer? There, there—you lucky bastard, you’re the only survivor from your unit.”

The boy crumpled.

“Stay back! Please wait until aid arrives!”

“No! Please, *please*, give us water,” said a figure on her knees. She was missing the scrap of flesh meant to cover her spine. “We are

so thirsty.”

Finding herself at the prow of the warbling swarm, Shizuko felt a set of wings vibrating deep inside her womb. So violently did the beggar begin to jiggle that her vision vacillated from black to ruby until the only visible thing was the glowing faucet just meters ahead.

“*Mizu... Mizu... Please... Mizu...*” warbled the swarm, drawing closer.

Shizuko broke her fever-waltz to steal a glance at the lump lying cold by her milkless breasts, smiling through the thirst. “Kimika. Kaa-chan saved you, didn’t she?”

“Stop them!” said the hatless soldier.

But it was too late, you see, for Shizuko had hurled herself past the throng of flapping flesh and corned beef, past the armed soldiers and into the garden faucets that lay yawning at their feet. Twisting the wings she had grown in place of arms, she wrenched free the faucet handle and stretched her mouth as wide as it would go as if collecting gold.

The water burned as its squirted hot love down her throat, and for the first time in years, she felt very rich indeed.

On his knees beside her was the young soldier, his handsome features mutilated with veneration.

The last thing Shizuko saw was the ghost of that thing called the sun. It was a chalky-white bag-full-of-god branded with symbols so they’d never forget—rising, rising, rising with a *tick-tick-poof* until it sat fat and twitterpated over a bastardized city of paper.

“Wait for me, Kimika.”

But there was no rush.

After all, for the people of Hiroshima, it was 8:15 A.M. forever.

Not Shizuko, though. Only the moths that burned then burst were free at last.

Kinds of Absence

Sarah Chin

I

Sweet cotton candy liquor and the infrared sunset
Hollow winds besiege the park
Hinder the crumbling grey clouds
Stars emerge from the sea of dusking blue

II

You smell the flaring charcoal and woodfire
In a neighborhood where darkness burns
In the night northern and southern lights kiss
Silence is thundering

III

Every lamppost illuminates your steps
Your shadow paints a sauntering loner
Your rhythmic footsteps fill the space
Isolation is populating

IV

The absence in your eyes
The faint thread of stars
Tree whispers replace
The distant chattering of two strangers

Peace

Sarah Chin

As darkness descends
Upon the town of indulgence
The somber full moon beams
Like a flourish flute of
La Fleurette

Aromatic scents of intoxication
Unfold a luminous bliss
Ensnaring my senses

The bar is a shelter
For people whose spirits
In their heads scream madness

A potion served in a highball glass
Enchanted remedy spikes
My mind

I savor the clarity of reality
Enticed by the ferment of
Citrus and bitters

My dreams are eclipsed
By the wonders of delusion
Like a sunflower smothered in shadow
I am at peace

Ashes Villanelle

Amnah Jaafar

I thought that I would try to give my best,
you took my best and turned it to ashes.
The love I had, I now will put to rest.

I hid my pain and tried to ace your tests,
you laughed and threw salt into my gashes.
I thought that I would try to give my best.

You made me feel like nothing but a pest.
I was your moth, you held all the matches.
The love I had, I now will put to rest.

I love the serene beaches you detest,
and like those waves, we ended in crashes
I thought that I would try to give my best.

I am taking off my bulletproof vest,
mending those deep holes with sewn-on patches.
The love I had, I now will put to rest.

Sometimes I can still feel it in my chest.
The pain comes back to me in sharp flashes.
I thought that I would try to give my best.
The love I had, I now will put to rest.

Red

Amnah Jaafar

Red is a man who's built to withstand pain.
Rough like the hands that move lumber through woods,
textured as brick on New England townhomes.
The wine that's poured to soothe her husbands woes.

Fiona Apple plays through headphone cords
Her spite cuts through the tune like blades through silk
The anger is red like fighting with Mom
The push and pull sings flames across the room

Soft as lovers dancing on rainy streets
Red is the heat that bubbles in between
Red screams and sobs and kisses you goodnight
It warms you like arms tangled under sheets.

Red is carnations tied up with a bow.
Notes passed between two girls in Algebra.
Red blushes with innocence and passion
Red, romantic and lethal as prom night

Red is the gifts exchanged on holidays
Clanking flutes to the countdown to midnight
The gentle glow of lights cast from the tree
Red hearts filled with deep love and tenderness.

Red is love that is boundless and is full,
Unconditional love that makes you whole.

A Dream Yet to be Dreamed

Matthew Tran

When I awoke
I found myself tired and lost in a sea of flowers
Flowers as white as snow
And a slight yellowish glow
A field reaching out as far as the eye could see

Alone with my thoughts
The clouds begin to part and fade to black
As the sun slowly sets and reveals
Illusory stars shining like these flowers
I wonder if I am alone

My eyes wander around
Seeking that which is not seen
I see a scarred and weary man
Sleeping peacefully alongside a worn sword
More than content with his life

He has done his duty
And has chosen to rest eternally
With his blood slowly drying up
On a bed of stained flowers
His dream was fulfilled

The sound of droplets emerged
As the sound of red starts to be replaced with blue
And the tears begin to flow out
I dropped to my knees in silence and wondered
If this was truly my dream

The journey has come to an end
Yet there are still those who dream of dreaming
My memory has all but faded completely
But I will always remember how much he too
Loved these flowers

A letter from the hero's wife

Tina

I think the universe brought you to me,
soft skin and charming smile,
smooth hair and cheerful laugh.
I think the universe wanted me to fall in love,
it wanted me to fall,
for the way your hips sway to the music,
for the way you light up a room,
like the sun.

Like the sun,
with a smile as bright as the sunshine
(look at it for too long, and you'll burn).
His warmth was like the sunlight
(stay in it for too long, and you'll burn).

The universe did not bring you to me
as a blessing or a love.
It gave me a martyr.
A man as enigmatic as the sun
can only be swallowed by it.

And as the light left your eyes,
I am reminded,
that the universe brought you to me
not to keep or to hold,
but to remember and mourn.

Closed Book

Leah Quintero

I am okay
is what I say
Yet
Here I lay,
In the frightening bottomless pit
of shame and hate
Here I drown,
In the depthful, deep, blue
waters of depression and
perfection obsession
Here I fight,
In this very ring,
me against me
Me against me.
Remembering the words of my
father
The words said by Ali
Float like a butterfly
Sting like a bee
But I am slowly sinking like the
titanic
Here in this very ring.

It has always been a never ending
fight.
Opposites opposing.
Black and white.
They say love is blind
But this thing called hate must
have been born without any
eyes
To distracted by comparison and
perfection, unable to realize
The creation of God, sculpted,

crafted, and perfected
This self hate has no gate
This painful pit has no reach of
end
This ongoing ocean has no limit
of depth
This mourning mind has no
boundary or borders
This heavy heart has no walls
only weights.

Everything inside is expanding
No one outside is understanding.
But it is okay
Because
I am comfortable now,
comfortable with where I lay.
Tightly tucked away
cozy inside of my body
No one has access inside.
Here in this body,
is where I hide.
I have finally found
My gate.
My end.
My depth.
My boundary.
My wall.
My body is my border
And I realize I am not an open
book after all.

Through the Eclipse

Jack Chernyak

I grew to love the awkward silences.
Staring into each other's eyes
Until someone pulls away, blushing.
Fighting over who pays, who drives,
Who DJs in the car on a road trip
Or picks the movie for the night.

You are my everything.
A solar eclipse, the sun to my moon.
The lion to my panther.
The soul that was able to unlock mine.
I met someone new in the mirror,
Someone that saw a future worth living.

Yet in the future there's a messy bed,
Awaking on opposite sides.
Why weren't we in each other's arms?
Irritated mornings, never knowing the plan.
Constant arguing, a ring in the sink drain.
You want me all to yourself, I can see.
I'm trying my hardest.

You say you know you aren't worthwhile,
But that you'll try for me.
A little time is all you need,
I'm more than perfect, someone you cannot lose.

And yet I cannot lose you too.

Even when the sun sets on us,
The moon will always shine bright.
Reflecting off of your glasses,
Illuminating your earthy curls,
The sparkle of your sweet, doe eyes.

The Earth always rotates.
The warm beach in Hawaii will become
The turbulent seas on a cold and windy shore.
Soft sands become unpleasant stones.

My hands are cold but you still hold them.
I'll never know why your hand is always warm for me.

I know I lose my patience, I know I get scared.
I open up to you, cry it out to you,
Let my guard down till you love me.

And I learned that I love you too.

My Religion

Poe Myat Hay Thar

What is stability if not a short while,
If not a lie we tell ourselves
Frozen faultless
Affliction at the end of a dark staircase
A child runs
With the close of a door
She is safe
The psyche's survivalist fabrication
To convince maya
To tell maya
For maya to believe
For stability and contentment
An adherence to delusions
My self religion
What is stability in the words of alternates
Perspectives I do not know of
Angle I wish to see
Is your stability religion?

Call the Cobbler

Leah Quintero

The heart is nothing but one big shoe.
Always being stepped on, but it always pushes through.
It never stops giving what it can give.
Protection, comfort, and security
to those who walk a thousand miles leaving them dusted and dirty
just to kick their shoes off outside until they need to use them again.

The heart is nothing but one big shoe.
Always being grown out, replaced, or sold
or somewhere forgotten and left in the frozen cold.
Though it always is there in the same spot to be worn again,
for any family member, lover, or close friend.

The heart is nothing but one big shoe.
No matter where it is taken, or what it has taken,
it was created with one sole purpose,
yet its outworn soles remain forever forsaken.

linger

Abbey Cinco

Blood was never drawn and marks were never made
The girl had nothing
To show when it came to her pain
So she gets bruised
And prettied up for her days
Just her words and memories linger
All in her head but it still feels so bitter

words

Abbey Cinco

Daddy found my diary
I felt as if they all could see right through me
The day I wrote the page he read
Got mad that he found I wished I was dead
Is that how you use your words?

My best friends, all downstairs
While I'm half asleep with my still messy hair
I can smell the rice and hear their laughs
Tears fall from my eyes as i think of our past
I wish I could use my words

I cried to my mommy
We haven't spoken in 3 months
I love her and she loves me
Is that all that there was?
When will I start using my words?

My lover hurt me
So I ripped him out of me
I miss my dear hailey
My best friend, our love is evergreen
I will use my words

Within the Red Walls of the Arlycchoris Institute

Matthew Tran

When I first arrived at the Arlycchoris Institute, I was eight. Upon seeing the building for the first time, the walls were shining a bright red. The marble pillars outside stood tall and the courtyard was laced with luscious grass and a variety of colorful flowers, from the lilies surrounding the statue depicting the founder, to the daisies lined across the walls, and to the bed of roses near the front entrance. The inside of the building was just as wonderful with the crystal chandelier overlooking the lobby and the decorations along the hallways varying from antique ceramics to elegant paintings showcasing beautiful landscapes or former directors of the Institute. Walking past the lobby into the main hall, I saw the children that I was going to be living with for as long as I was welcomed here.

I believed they were all having lunch and playing around with each other all while the Father was watching over them. Father appeared menacing, yet gentle to me as I felt their eyes shoot daggers at me, staring into mine with a caressing radiant red. I didn't notice it at the time, but I think Father knew how nervous I was before relaxing and calmly walking towards me and introducing me to the rest of the children. I don't recall telling Father my name at first, but it unexpectedly came off their tongue to the ears of the privy, and a cacophonous response saying hello to "Marcel" came from the rest of the hall. I didn't know how long I was going to be here for, but it was certainly better than living off scraps wandering aimlessly on the streets. So I stayed, and prayed with the other children when night fell, hoping for a better future for me and the others like me here.

A couple of years have passed, and I was ten. I had become accustomed to the red walls of the Institute and what was once exceptionally brilliant has become a normal part of my life. Life here has treated me fairly and I found myself becoming friends with a couple of the other kids here, namely Andrew, Carole, and Vertin. Andrew was a troublemaker and loved to mess around with the oth-

er kids, always interrupting the daily grace at supper, but he knew his limits when Father would find him and get him to repent. Carole was quiet and reserved and I would always find her reading in the library alone, but she was the one who introduced me to the wonderful worlds found in her books. Vertin was the strangest one out of all of us and I think that I got to know him out of pity, but he always knew how to lighten up the mood with one of his jokes or antics we would usually find him busy with.

These were the three I would spend most of my days with, and we would go on all sorts of adventures throughout the grounds. Whether it was play-acting with each other about tall tales of defeating the evil warlord Remus terrorizing the hallways of Arlycchoris or seeking the buried riches of King Erinnyes underneath the garden of the courtyard, each adventure would always be something a little different. Andrew would always take charge as the leader of our party and I would assume second-in-command. Carole was usually the one keeping us in check from doing anything stupid and Vertin tagged along to add a little more fun to our adventures. Fun is always had and whenever night fell, we would always be happy enjoying our supper before bed. And just before bed, I would always give my thanks to Father for taking me in and my prayers to the Lord for blessing me with a better life here at the Institute.

Two more years have passed, and I was twelve. The walls have begun to dull a bit more and the garden in front has lost a little bit of its color as I've grown up a little and started taking my studies a bit more seriously. I think the others have realized as well that as we got older, there was less of a chance that we would get adopted and had to take matters into our own hands. Most of the children that were here before my arrival have already left and more have always come to take their place. Even Vertin was lucky enough to be adopted a couple of months back, and although we continued to miss his presence, we hoped that it was for the best. "Father" seemed exceptionally pleased that he was able to leave the Institute, perhaps out of relief that caring for him would no longer cause such a ruckus given his odd nature. Andrew was a little jealous that Vertin was able to be adopted first, but he was still happy that he could at least spend some more time with Carole and I. We still went on our little adventures

every now and then, but I think I found myself spending more time with Carole in the library, reading more books and acquainting myself with finer works of literature. We both tried to convince Andrew that reading wasn't really a huge waste of time, but it was to be expected that he didn't care and continued to make things difficult for us and the other children.

There was one evening when Carole and I were reading a book together at the library when we got into a conversation about how Vertin was doing. We both reminisced about our past and how we would have so much fun with him and Andrew, but Carole told me that she felt something was a little off when Vertin was adopted. I didn't really notice anything was off back then until she told me that he had left without saying goodbye to any of us, which I then realized was true. Vertin was a strange child to be taken in by the Institute, so he didn't make any notable friends with any of the other children outside of us, which makes it kind of surprising that he was the first to be adopted out of the four of us. More importantly, why wouldn't he want to tell us the good news and perhaps invite one of us to join him with his new family?

Both of us kept speculating about the whats and the whys, but it just felt like we were downplaying his attributes, so I told her that maybe his adoptive family wanted to take him in because of how much more special he was compared to us. She sighed and reluctantly agreed, which I believed was for the better because things started to become a little awkward. We finished reading our book and as I was putting it away, Carole gave me a warm hug and told me that she wouldn't mind staying at the Institute if it meant that she could continue being with me. I was shocked and started to blush a little, which I think she noticed before she waved goodbye and left the library. I didn't know how to react at the time and I probably would've kept standing there if Father hadn't shown up and told me to head to bed. I jumped a little given the surprise, but I anxiously complied and said "good night" to unamused ears before leaving. However, when I turned back to look at the now dark figure, I could have sworn that I made out a strange grin on Father's face. I don't think I slept peacefully that night due to the confusion from either Carole's embrace or Father's expression.

Soon after I turned thirteen, the walls of red have dulled so much that it felt like I was looking at a wall of dried blood. Maybe it was because I kept growing older or maybe it was because of the day I found out from Andrew that Carole had been adopted. He told me that she left us a letter, telling us how she's enjoying being with her adoptive parents and their lively family and that she plans to travel with them to explore the world. Both of us felt shocked and betrayed because it was barely last week when we saw Carole in the library, feeling more than content with her life here at the Institute. I especially felt baffled after what she had told me that one evening and I wanted to cry a lot, but I tried my best to hold back the tears because if I told Andrew what had happened that night, he would surely punch me in the gut. I knew he had a little crush on Carole, so it would hurt him more than me to hear that the letter she left was more of a parting gift to me rather than him. Needless to say, we were both feeling down during lunch when Father decided to come up to us personally. I asked if Carole had really been adopted and had Andrew to back me up, but all that came out of Father's devious smile were words that still haunt me to this day: "Do not worry, my children. Your friend is in a better place now."

That night it had rained especially hard to the point where I didn't even know if I was seeing the raindrops on my window or the tears building up in my eyes. I didn't want to know if I could take those words Father said to me to heart. I didn't know if I could bear to remain at the Institute knowing that one by one, my friends were going away without even looking back. I didn't want to believe that Carole was gone. I wanted to keep seeing her in the library, reading the book she would always tell me about during lunch. I wanted to keep going on our adventures with Andrew, solving a mystery behind a secret left beneath the statue of the founder in the front courtyard. I wanted to hear her soft voice again, feel her warm embrace again, see her timid smile again. I wanted her to stay with me, just like how she said that she wanted to as well. I wanted to give her a rose from the beds in the garden and tell her how much I liked her. But now she was gone, and I didn't know what to do except cry. I cried in my bed and tried to sleep, looking up at the dark ceiling and asking myself: Why her? Why not me? Why can't I get adopted? Why isn't my life here fair? Why am I still stuck here looking at these

dull walls and seeing people come and go? When will it finally be my turn?

The next couple of months felt depressingly long, but Andrew had finally realized that it was just the two of us left. So on an afternoon when we were studying together, he asked me if I wanted to come with him outside of the Institute grounds and see what was beyond these dull red walls, to which I hesitated. We have been here for almost more than five years now and I was so accustomed to life here that I forgot what life was like in the outside world. So I agreed, and we decided to set off on one last adventure a couple of nights later when Father wouldn't be too wary of us. When the night came, I had saved a bit of food from supper and wrapped it up so that I could bring it with me. After that, I went to go find Andrew and to my surprise, he was in the library reading a book. Putting it aside when he saw me, he told me that the reason he wanted to go on this adventure was that he had found a small dug-out opening on the far-left corner of the courtyard. He once saw a couple of foxes coming through, so he decided to make the opening bigger to fit a person through. He went out and saw a bit of the world past the walls, but came back and wanted me to come as well, so he waited for the right moment to invite me. I didn't know he was that considerate of me, so I made sure to thank him as we crept our way to the corner of the courtyard. The moon that night wasn't too bright, but it was enough to see our way toward the opening, and we made our way through it as quickly and quietly as we could. Still wary of our surroundings, we ran a bit until it was finally safe to let out a sonorous shout of victory and joy. We were free.

Even if it was just for a little while, we felt free from the shackles of those red walls, those lifeless portraits, those cloudy nights, and especially Father's watch. The Institute was near a cliff that faced the ocean, so we sat there after running for a bit and relaxed for what felt like the first time in forever. I didn't know how happy he felt, but I definitely felt like there was something to look forward to now, despite all the depressing tribulations we would have to face back at the Institute. I took out the food I had saved and gave some to Andrew, and we sat there as the night went on. We found ourselves talking about the past, in such a manner that felt all too familiar as when

Carole and I did that one evening, except this time, Andrew knew something I didn't. He told me that something is definitely up with what happens to the children who get adopted and that he suspects Vertin and Carole weren't actually adopted. That much was obvious, but seeing his face made me think of something horrible. Whatever it was he was hiding, he didn't want to tell me, so my thoughts remained unanswered. Yet it was clear that Andrew was doing all of this out of consideration for me, telling me to enjoy the view while it lasted. Enough time had passed, and we had to make our way back home which slowly started to feel unwelcoming as our time there started to feel more like a sentence rather than a blessing.

Just a day before I turned fourteen, Father had told me that Andrew was adopted and that it was heartbreaking to see him go knowing how close he was to me. I don't remember the last time Father called me by my name, but the moment I heard the name "Marcel" uttered from such a conniving mouth, I knew something was terribly wrong. Whether or not it was intentional, those words were all I needed to want to leave this devilish place. I no longer believed that "Father" was my father at that moment, and I think that Father realized it too. Perhaps out of pity or remorse, no more words of sorrow were spoken, but I was instead told that there would be a truck visiting the Institute that night and that any future decisions I make should wait until after that truck left. As angry as I was, there was truth in those words as I remembered that there was indeed a truck that visited every so often to deliver food supplies and cleaning materials, but I never noticed if it also took things along with it. It had to have taken garbage and other waste with it, and as I tried to make sense of Father's words, their presence was no longer felt when suddenly, my thoughts became clear, but my heart became heavy. I ran as fast as I could to the main hall, dodging past the other children preparing to eat supper. I ran toward the kitchen, ignoring the warnings and shouts telling me to stop. I ran outside to the back side of the building, where it casted a looming shadow from the moonlight. I ran around the corner to where the garbage was tossed, throwing open the dumpster lid. And then, I saw him. His cold lifeless eyes. His dried bloodied clothes. His tilted neck and slit throat. And a hole where his heart should have been.

I threw up, making sure to not get any on him. My body froze, my eyes widened open, and my mind was devoid of all thoughts except one: Run. Run as far away as possible. Run to get the hell away from this godforsaken place. Run to escape what was next for me if I stay. Run to not die at Father's hands. But my body couldn't move. I was so in shock at seeing Andrew's body that I couldn't think straight. My mind wandered, asking if the same thing could have happened to Vertin, Carole, or any of the other children here. I wanted to throw up again at the thought but was stopped short when I heard the back door open. I didn't care who it was, but I ran around the building to the small opening at the far-left corner of the courtyard. I crawled out hurriedly and ran away as fast as I could from the Institute. I thought about wanting to kill the one who was running the Institute, but I couldn't begin to imagine what would happen to me if I had failed. I kept running and running until I got to the nearby town. I couldn't tell anyone what happened because I was afraid people would think I was crazy and they would send me back to that place. I ran until I found a dark alley where I could hide for a bit, worried if there was anyone that was chasing me. When I felt the coast was clear, I slumped down and cried. I hadn't realized it through the tears, but it had started raining soon after.

It had not occurred to me that I didn't even have time to cry upon seeing his body. I didn't know any better, but I cried and cried. I cried for what felt like hours into my fourteenth birthday. I didn't even hear the woman who had asked me what was wrong until she got closer to me and I saw her face. Terrified, I backed away until she made it clear that she was trying to help, offering me her umbrella and asking me again about what was wrong. Almost reminding me of Carole, I chose my words carefully and choked back my tears as I told her I was an orphan who had just turned fourteen and had run away from home because I couldn't take it anymore. She looked at me with a saddened expression, and although she was cautious of me, she invited me to join her for a meal and to escape the rain. I wanted to say no and wanted her to forget that this ever happened, but my stomach told her otherwise. She let out a small laugh and helped me get up, taking me to the nearest place open. I was sopping wet, but it was obvious I still had a couple of tears on my face. However, as I started to eat the pastry she had bought me, she asked

if I wanted to come with her instead of roaming the streets alone in the rain. Seeing that she had already bought me something to eat, I couldn't really refuse, but as I relaxed and kept eating, I knew that I was truly and finally free from the confines of the Arlycchoris Institute. And as I went with the kind woman who helped me, I would be the first to look back and solemnly remember my friends from when we first met within those glistening walls of red.

Sanctuary

Rylan Leipelt

Nature wails,
Tormenting tears hammer glass,
Isolating resolve,
A bulwark to serenity,
Spirits watch the candlelight play above,
Dancing to inherited hymns,
Invading amber moonlight,
Sharpened and honed,
Distorted and warped,
Like blade frees tether,
Conscious seeps through skin,
out of frame, out of form,
From being I see,
The contour of subjection,
A delusion of bondage,
Vexing apprehension,
An omission of self,
This ancient contradiction,
As I retrogress,
Her tears fade,
Moonlight is transposed,
And I return,
To sanctuary.

Perkins

Daniel Lybra

Chauncy Perkins sat nervously in the driver's seat of the idling car. He sat perfectly still, trying not to think too much, and making an effort to breathe normally. Without a warning, the back passenger door opened and in plopped a large man with all the personality of a hurricane.

"Thank you, I'm late as it is," said the puffing stranger. "So glad there's always a car available when you need one." The heavyset passenger pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and began wiping his perspiring face. "Can you imagine if I had to run for it?" he said laughingly.

Perkins took all this in from his rearview mirror. He hadn't turned around. He more or less sat frozen, as startled as he was.

"Right. I'm going to Parkmore Plaza, but then, you probably knew that already." The stranger looked up at the driver for the first time. "Wait—Perkins? Chauncy Perkins, isn't it?"

The bulging eyes from Perkins face gave the affirmative.

"Why, Chauncy! How are you? And when did you start driving for Uber? It's me, John. John Krichen. I haven't seen you for... what is it, two years now? My, how time goes by. I'm still at the same department. We missed you down at the office. It was such a shame to see you get sacked."

Perkins still sat frozen in his seat, unable to think of what to reply. Beads of sweat were becoming more visible on his forehead, and he couldn't have gripped the steering wheel more tightly.

"I must get going, Perkins. I don't want to be late."

"I- I don't drive for Uber," squeaked Perkins.

"Oh? Lyft, then? I don't know that there is much of a difference, I use them both."

Just then, a loud bell sounded from the bank building just to their right. Two men wearing ski masks and carrying money bags came dashing out of the bank. The two men tripped each other, and fell down.

"Oh, look! I think those men may have robbed the bank!" John gasped loudly.

They scrambled to get up and started heading towards the car occupied by Perkins and John.

“They’re heading this way!” John turned swiftly to Perkins. “You better get out of here. They look mean, and it could turn ugly. Drive! Now!”

With a frustrated scream, Perkins stomped on the gas pedal and the car shot away from the curb, much to the surprise of the masked bank robbers.

“That was close!” John said, wiping his neck with the handkerchief, and mopping his face once again.

As Perkins sped off, he looked down at his own black mask sitting in the seat next to him. He could only shake his head.

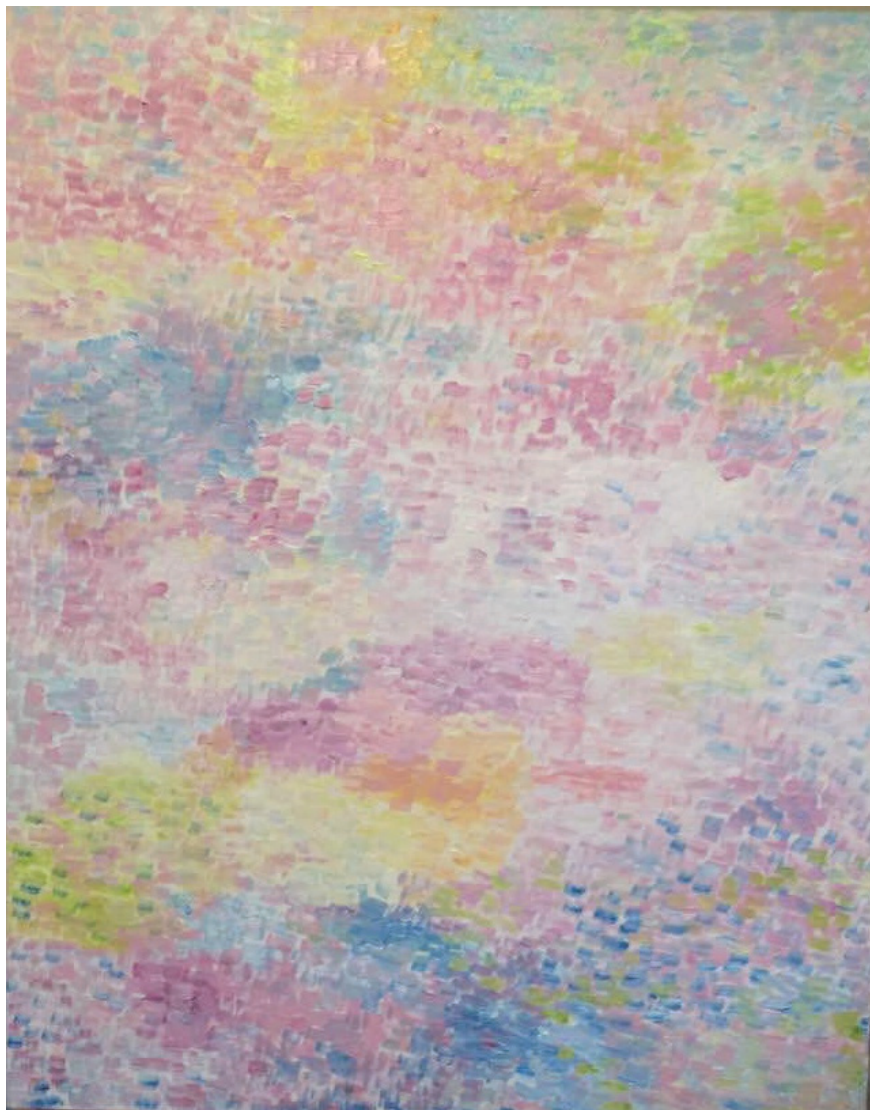
Child is a Father to the Man

Joanne Ha



Spring

Grace Li Zheng



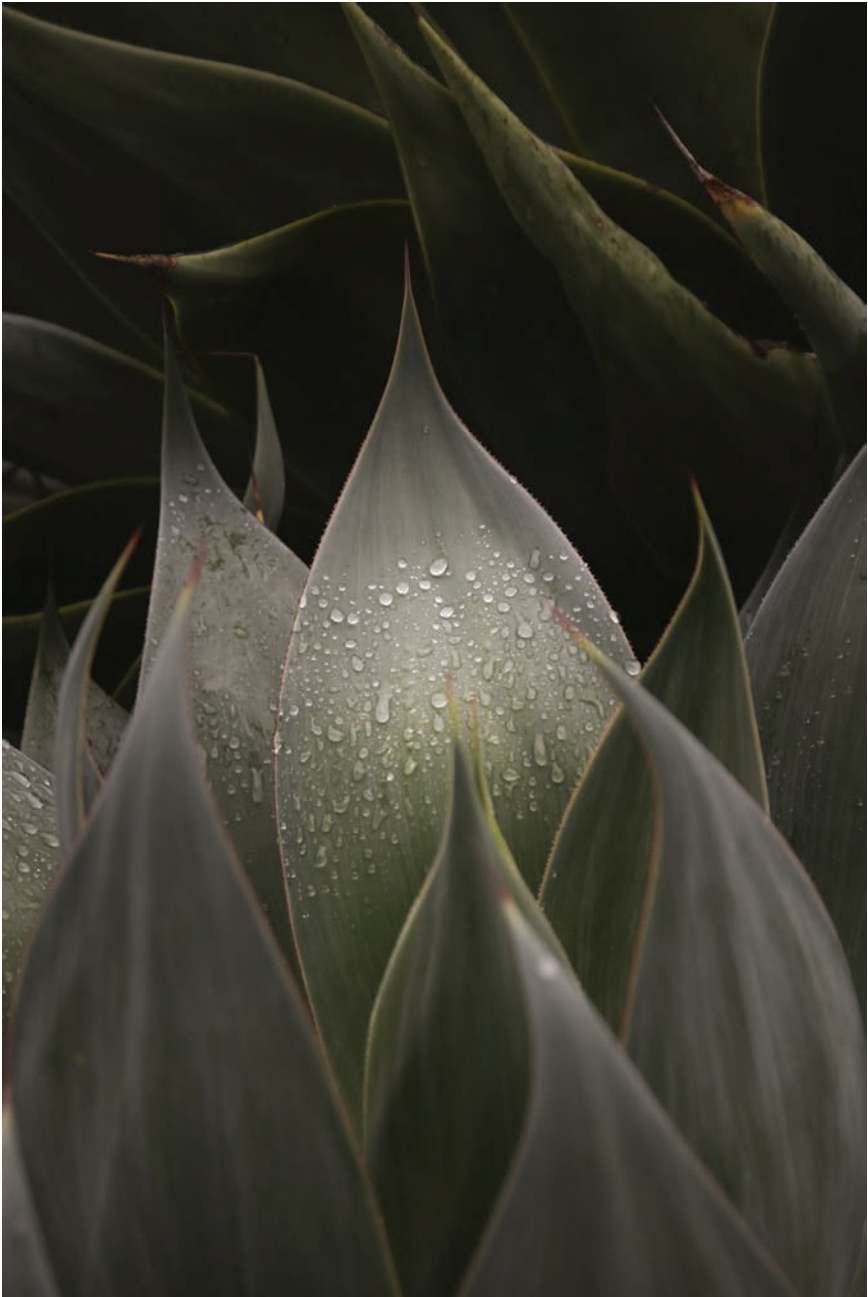
Love

Grace Li Zheng



After the Rain

Bob Zander



Eyes of the Innocent

Jazmin Manchester



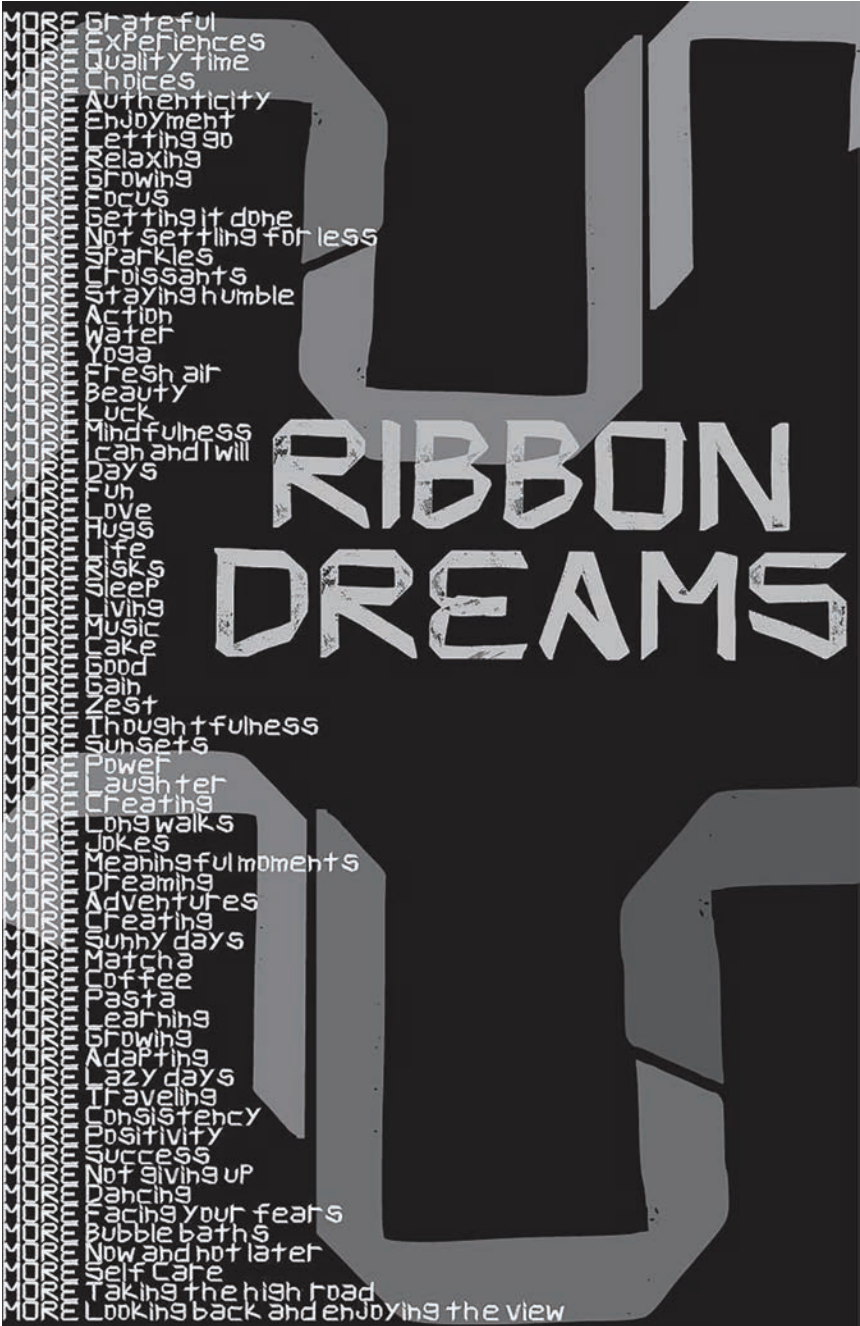
Chaos

Kanakpreet Kaur



Ribbon Dreams

Annie Yu



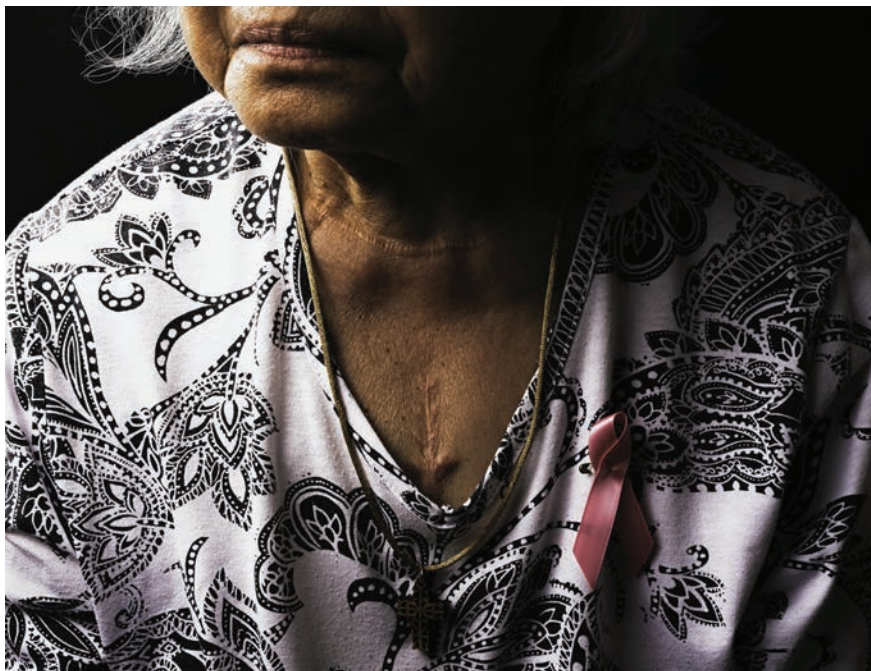
Inquietude

Yin Hnin Nu Wai



Cancer

Norman Aragones



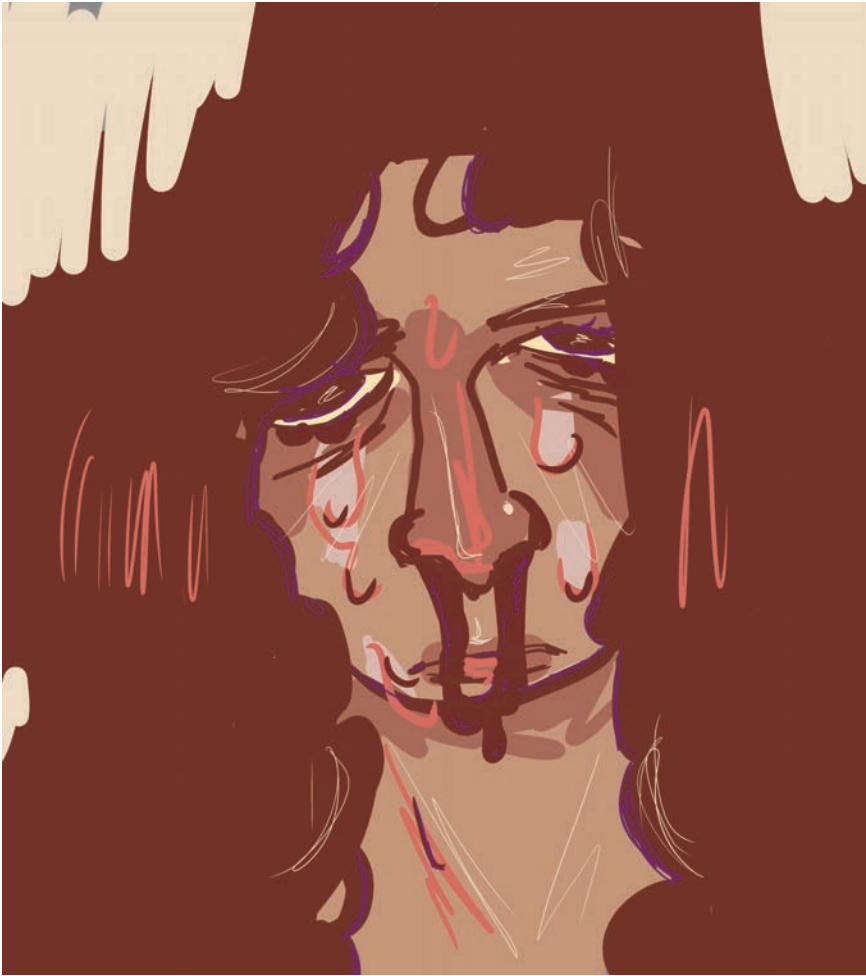
Beautiful Strength

Elsa Nuñez



Headache Heartache

Celeste King



The Cost of Freedom

Eion Daley

Boots crunched on the cracked surface of a dreary landscape. The soles leaving behind left wavy patterns. The trail formed behind the man didn't last, as the occasional wind gust was able to push loose debris over the prints. A brown jumpsuit made of leather hung off his frame, allowing space for air around the whole body. Deep worn folds all over the suit, but none more than those in the waist, elbows, and knee pits; his purpose for being here involved its fair share of squatting and bending at the waist, and the suit had been with him through it all. A large rucksack held everything he would need for this next venture. A strap worked its way around one shoulder and down to the opposite hip. Each strap-end attached to separate sides of a long barreled rail-gun that he grasped with both hands. His left palm resting on the grip, the pointer finger laid over the dual action trigger, and his right hand supporting the underside of the barrel. In a non-threatening position, yet able to be raised and fired in an instant. He approached a small hill with a knee-high dead shrub that did little for shade. 'A good place to survey the area,' he thought to himself. The man trudged up, each step bringing the barrel of the rail-gun to a more threatening position. The LED lights came in pairs down its strong length. Its menacing electric snaps and pops warned of its lethality when fully charged between shots. After scanning the landscape with a methodical gaze, he placed the weapon against a small boulder to his right.

He began to set up shop: starting with the rucksack, he unpacked various handheld tools, a map, and a pouch that contained a green, yellow, and red liquid, each in their own vials. Tapping the auto screen on his left forearm, a menu cycled up. Scrolling through the inventory, he selected the solar system before narrowing his search for the highly sought after, "fruit-engum," to a couple of planets and moons. Flickering colors reflected off the dark screen from above. It caused his head to raise and look up. A bright concoction of various purples pinks and tiny bits of orange invaded the sky. The sun had begun its descent below the horizon. The light rays shot through the

various gasses in the stratosphere of Boron's moon at a tight angle, causing a phenomenon known as "the fruity firmament;" the sky turned from a dusk vale over a starry space view, to tasty colored lights that reflected onto barren valleys, and the occasional mountain range. The contrast between the two truly staggering; a sky that was colorful and alive, and a dead world, devoid of such hues. A dead landscape that was both ominous and inviting.

The large boots stayed in their print, heels set at around shoulder width apart. The man's name was Joshua. As the raised orphan of a skilled digging colony, Joshua could sense the evidence of "fruit-engum" growing below the surface. He felt his eyes get invited back to the valley before him, scanning the border between land and sky. Reaching to the tops of his lids, his eyes looked at the helmet surrounding his own head. Its airtight feature prevented any entrance of intoxicating aroma. Filled with microscopic spores produced by "fruit-engum," the air could cause the body to be plunged into an inebriated state that could quickly lead to death if you weren't careful, though people lived on the surface without a worry in the world. Joshua figured they had been here long enough for the spores to no longer affect them. Or they simply liked the feeling of being perpetually high all the time. The delicate separation between himself and the outside world served as an audacious reminder of the inevitable danger that comes with freedom's true nature. Seemingly safe, yet in a constant state of endangerment. His eyes wanted to stay glued to the landscape before him. His lids fell and rose, bringing his watchful eye away from suspicious trenches to the only pleasurable looking spectacle; the sky. Candy for the sight. No matter how many times he came back, "the fruity firmament;" never ceased to amaze him.

Brisk air washed over him. Even through the thick jumpsuit Joshua felt the drop, noticed his stomach cave inward. The wind gusts were rumored to be freed spirits of lives lost on Boron's moon. And without laws to govern, freedom flew its true colors. He couldn't put his fingers on what was worse; the danger that came with complete freedom, or the stringent rules that followed the galactic democracy set up after humanity fully evolved into the age of space travel and all

the new dangers that came with it. Four months since the last piece of the insufferable propaganda crossed his path, and he intended to keep his streak. The only issue in keeping that streak meant living outside the reaches of government, and within a state of perpetual danger. It's a common saying among miners and bandits, "a life lived on the edge invites the possibility that you'll eventually fall off." Joshua's chosen lifestyle and profession certainly placed him in that category. Up until this point, no government had been able to wriggle its policies into Boron, nor its plentiful moon. Which had always surprised him, considering the market for "fruit-engum" throughout the stars. 'Freedom is what you make it,' he told himself. Miners held value for more than just themselves too; often a target for exploitation by marauders, being a miner had more than one dimension to it. Miners uncover their own currency, quite literally pulling it from the surface with skillful precision that money couldn't buy.

Joshua rolled his weight over to the balls of his feet. The folds in his suit legs deepened from squatting. Wrinkles formed in the crook of his elbow as he reached backwards. His head angled back naturally, catching a glimpse of a thicket of rocks with dried out trees. A hint of movement was there for a moment, he was sure, but it could have easily been the wind rustling the dead branches. He moved his gloved hand into the top pocket of his rucksack to retrieve his scanner. The glass of his helmet reflected the purple and pink twirls above him, his breath pushed out and spread a soft dew on the surface. 'Where is that scanner...' His thoughts were cut off. Someone was here.

The sixth sense, developed from countless hours of being alone, contrasted by the threat of complete silence. An inexperienced miner wouldn't feel the difference, but he was both plagued and gifted with wounds familiarity. His right hand found the scanner at that moment. Keeping his right still, he allowed the left to slip into his right boot. His pointer finger activated the switch on the concealed ankle blaster. A smaller version of the weapon he had holstered on his left hip. A quiet buzz sounded from his right boot, then again, and a third time. Full charge after three, he thought to himself.

Joshua unbent his knees to stand. He did so at a normal speed

to avoid suspicion. He could feel eyes on him. His movements under a microscope. His boots shuffled on some bone-dry chunks of clay. “Why hello there stranger.” An old raspy voice sounded to Joshua’s back right. He turned around, forming a puzzled look on his face, “Howdy...” It was how Joshua addressed anyone he didn’t know. It was friendly enough to keep interactions even keeled, but had enough of a questioning tone to let them know he was cautious. The first thing that struck Joshua were the clothes: loose fitting, almost robe-like, definitely not airtight. No sign of any breathing equipment, including the absence of a helmet. He was fully breathing the air in. Joshua wondered if the man was in a perpetually, “high” state with all the gasses moving in and out of his lungs. It was almost scary how “naked” the man was compared to him. So unprotected. So...free.

There was a decent pause before either of them made another move. Joshua had rotated his body so that the man could only see his right side. The general idea was to keep the left side with the blaster away from view, thereby allowing his left hand to be poised above without adding tension. He was lucky the man approached diagonally from his back right: There was a good chance his blasters, and their locations were unknown. The added bonus was that Joshua had his rail-gun on the ground, in complete view. With any luck, the man would believe it was his only weapon.

“Howdy back,” the man smiled to reveal a mouth nearly devoid of any natural teeth. Joshua could now see his true age. He was more than middle aged; the wrinkles on his face and neck were deeper and more hollow than the ones all over Joshua’s jumpsuit. It was possible though, that the man wasn’t all that old, and that the wrinkles on his face were an abuse of the highly addictive “fruit-engum.” Joshua had never used it on himself, but knew of the physical deterioration people underwent from misusing it. The man’s stance was erect, tense in a way, but somehow didn’t seem threatening. Joshua’s hand drifted closer to the blaster, ready to administer searing pain. His knuckles twitched with anticipation. The man’s posture: right hip pointed back, tucked away from view. ‘Much like my left side,’ Joshua thought to himself. He tipped his brow in a nodding salute, the swirling lights caused a glint off the helmet. He could see the muscles

in the man's neck relax after the gesture. His shoulders dropped, and became less rigid, but he didn't make a move forward.

Joshua felt his own muscles depress. His left palm came to rest above the belt now. He took a breath and opened his mouth to speak. The man's eyes suddenly interrupted; pupils roaring to life, and shooting past Joshua.

Crunch!

Joshua's legs sprung off the dirt to send him diving backwards as a warm beam of light zipped past. His left shoulder shrugged so his hand could push down and up on the handle of his blaster. He let it loose, scattering shots to his left. A spurting noise erupted as another light zigzagged into space, off kilter.

His head whipped around to the wrinkled man, rocks shuffled underfoot. He ducked down and revealed his own blaster, a fiery blaze in his eyes. His arms jutted forward, the fabric of the robe slid down to reveal loose skin hanging off thin arms. The muzzle of his blaster trembled with weak aim, scanning the ground but not seeing Joshua in the shallow ditch. Still on the ground, Joshua dispensed a couple more orange blasts over the hill crest at the unseen attacker. A whirring noise came on when Joshua removed a small device from his back pocket. Dense, square, and metal plated, a small flick of the wrist sent it flying. The man's gaze locked onto the noise, but not in time.

Pop!

Electric bolts exploded out in a blinding flash. His robed body convulsed wildly, his blaster discharged into the ground with wild chaos. Dust rose heavy through the air, even through the helmet filters, Joshua let out a dry cough. One glance to the hill crest... nothing. Back to the man. The dust settled, revealing a crumpled heap of robe, a hand or foot protruded in a couple places. Meanwhile, Joshua's body laid in a very erect T shape, both arms flat, he felt one with the ground. The knuckles on his left hand were white with tension. His blaster watched the menacing crest. Not a sound through the air, but rhythmic beats deep in his chest.

He was finally able to take account of his surroundings. His backwards dive had left him in a shallow divot in the moon's surface.

‘Many things could have created the mini crater,’ he thought to himself, ‘A small asteroid, could’ve been an old dig site from the rush.’ No matter what or who made the crater, his life would continue because of it. In negative space, the hill’s crest stood as a natural barrier between him and the other marauder. ‘The string of luck weaves on.’ He stole another glance at the sleeping robes. Still dormant, his legs had folded at the knees as he came to rest on his left side. One arm pinned underneath in a chicken wing, while the other laid out straight, the blaster an inch or so from the fingertips. He peeled his eyes off and back to the hill that was watching him the whole time. Thin smoke made its way upward, twirling through the low oxygen atmosphere without haste.

Keeping his head low, Joshua turned onto his left side, his blaster still trained on the crest of the hill. One count, two, three... the seconds ticked by, silence still. ‘Is he dead, or just prowling...?’ His thoughts filled the time devoid of sound. Dead or not, each second rose his heart beat a notch. Nine count, ten, eleven, twelve...

He shifted his body again, moving into an army crawl. His bent elbows sunk into the crater side. He pushed the muzzle of his blaster over the edge. Forteen count, fifteen, sixteen...the continued silence boiled his blood. The unknown bothered him more than the blasts coming for his head, especially with sleeping robes at his flank. Then he heard it; a gurgling cough. Then another paired with some shuffling. ‘Movement,’ he thought. Joshua’s body adjusted to the noise. It was diagonal to his left shoulder now.

Backwards army crawling moved him into a more favorable position. He brought his legs up into a crouch. Gripping the blaster with both palms, he took a deep breath. He wanted to wipe the sweat, its slow trickle caused his head to itch. His legs started to straighten. The crest led into a valley that stretched on for a while, Joshua remembered noting that from his initial survey from the hill. The scene unveiled itself, his helmet poked over the sight line. Shrubs, some small boulders, as before. Then he saw a dark spot soaking into the moisture parched ground. Its red tint gave the idea of fuel, but the smell of burning flesh quelled that thought. More patches, varying in size, followed. The convoluted trail of puddles was coupled

with twists and drag marks. Then he saw it; about thirteen meters away, at the end of a struggling trail of red soaked patches, a figure flailed about. They incessantly attempted to roll over, occasionally trying a crunch, each attempt more grim than the previous. Just the sight of it made his muscles weak. The image of a horned blue beetle, stuck on its back, flashed in his head. Joshua remembered seeing one earlier that morning, at dusk, right when his pod touched down. Except that beetle was on all six feet, roaming free. The beetle had scuttled across Joshua's path before vanishing under some stone. The marauders and the beetle had that in common.

A thick cloak hid his physique, but it was a foregone conclusion that he was thin like his partner. The cloak he wore was thicker than the other man's. The dense threads engulfed him like water over a rocky shore. The thickest fabric in the universe couldn't hide the scorch marks in his chest and neck. Each cough caused a mini eruption from the wounds, burnt flesh pushed back by gushes of blood. Tiny wisps of smoke rose from the crispy edges. Joshua took a few careful steps. A step or two from the man's struggling foot made it clear; he wasn't getting up. His weapon lay quietly at his side; a thrown together mess of a blaster, clearly modified with scrap parts. Joshua stood over the person. He tried to cough again, but became overwhelmed as blood filled his throat.

'No helmet either...' Joshua's near black eyes searched his face: Pockmarked, scarred, and dry. Nearly all color was gone. Watching people die was the worst, but he had seen it enough times to let this one flow by him. Except...for some reason, Joshua was too stunned to move. His soulless eyes found the man's and were trapped. A mirrored magnet, he looked into his own eyes. They were the same. He knew that look. Joshua's hand slid into the robe sleeve and turned the man's palm to the sky. There, on the inside of the wrist, was a tattoo. Worn down, but still visible. Angel wings paired with the shield, and a shooting star passing through the whole thing: The mark of a galactic soldier. He was overwhelmed with a wave of depression for the fallen angel. The muscles loosened, his heart beat nothing more than a light tapping. The eyes welled up as a dam ready to explode. "I'm sorry..." Joshua spoke softly. His eyes surveyed the dying an-

gel, hoping the answer for the next step would magically appear. He holstered the blaster without taking his eyes off the dying angel. The pupils darted every which way, the usual blink here and there as the brain tries to put the feeling of dying into perspective. But there is no greater task for a brain than realizing the body is dead and they will soon be following. Joshua felt heavy. He cried with the man. His hand moved to wipe his eye, but alas, the helmet separated the two men, a barrier between two angels moving in opposite directions. Joshua looked at his own wrist and tapped it with two fingers.

He saw the swirling lights on his helmet again. "That's it..." he whispered to himself, "here, look at this," the words got out between voice cracks. He knelt down next to the man, wrapping his left arm behind the man's neck and shoulders, he propped him up, having the man's back rest against his planted inner thigh. "See, look at that. The sky..." Joshua looked up at it himself, admiring the colorful beauty, how it was alive. The colors danced in slow swirls, an illusion the man was probably all too familiar with, especially from his war tours on Boron. The galactic fleet retreated nearly a decade ago, pledging to come back and retrieve all the soldiers stranded in the trees. But the drop ships never came back. Joshua, along with fifty thousand men sat in enemy infested forests, for months, awaiting liberation that never arrived.

He felt the light strain of the man's neck muscles contracting, then relaxing to allow his head to roll back. For a moment...nothing. The silence couldn't be broken, not even by exhaled breaths. "Isn't it marvelous," Joshua whispered after a fleeting moment. One more tear escaped his eye. Carefully rolling, it journeyed to the very edge of his chin...held for a moment...and then fell. The seconds ticked by once again...but held no pressure. He looked down. The pupils were frozen in dilation, creating a stare that held far into the reaches of space. He wanted to look away and let him rest, but his eyes kept hold of the fallen angel.

"Hold it right there," a voice called from up the hill. It was the same voice that approached him earlier. He ignored it and continued looking down, "Oh, the nature of freedom, and the cost of service," his head drifted, but his eyes were unmoving.

“What was that?” The voice inquired. The question startled Joshua out of his head, or so, he thought he’d spoken in his head.

“Let’s get this over with,” Joshua sighed. Scooching back, he laid the upper body down, and let the head sink through his hands before coming to rest on a small rock. It almost looked like he was sleeping, except the vacant stare. Joshua formed his gloved hand to have his pointer and pinky stick out, the way they all sent off their fallen angels during the war. His fingers gently closed the eye-lids for the last time.

“Get what over with boy, your life?” The voice became less patient. Joshua brought his eyes up to see those disturbingly thin arms stuck out again, a blaster full charged, loomed at his head.

“Leave.”

“Say what?”

“I said leave, leave now,” Joshua said with command.

“You would like that, now wouldn’t you?” the old man chuckled, his smile revealing his lack of teeth once again. His amusement was short lived though, as the snarl that came next showed his true age. “I don’t think so. I’ll be taking whatever loot ya got, especially any ‘fruit-engum’ you’ve mined. I know your type...you’re a miner.”

He sighed again. “That I am, but I’ve only just got here. I was setting up when you two tried me. Should’ve waited a couple more hours. *Could’ve* walked away with a whole pod load.” The old man’s lips tightened.

“Shut it miner, I’m too old and tired to listen to your crap. But now that you mention it, you *don’t* live here. You’s got a pod out here somewhere.” His eyes moved right, then back across to the left.

“Don’t bother looking for it, you’ll never find it without me,” now the old man ignored him.

“For the last time: Leave now, or I’ll have to kill you like I did your friend. I don’t want that.”

The old man smiled again. “You miners must be using your own supply these days,” He took some shuffling steps towards him. The man’s knuckles flexed. “You’re crazier than me, if you think I’m gonna let you live. And I’m not sure what friend you’re referring to. That fellow had been tailing me for weeks. You killed my natural

competitor, son. More of a 'fruit-head' than me, said he needed it for the pain of losing his wings...guy was nuts."

"What are you waiting for then, clip my wings."

"I intend to, but...wait, what?" Joshua stood up, dusted himself off and looked around.

"Stay there, miner." He moved his boots again. "I'm warning you!"

"All right." Joshua raised his arms into the air.

"Remove your weapon, slowly." With two fingers, Joshua pulled out the blaster, and carefully laid it down on the ground in front of him. "No no, push it away." Joshua listened, kneeling down, he pushed it away, the other hand gripped his ankle for support. The man's own grip on his blaster relaxed, the smile played out again. He took a step forward and smiled wider. Joshua sprung to the side and removed his ankle blaster. The man brought his own weapon up and fired. Orange blasts exploded, cracking noises filled the air, pieces of cloth and flesh burst off and littered the soil. A body fell apart and collapsed backwards in a heap. Silence and smoke. The smell of flesh hung heavy, red mist in the air. A man moved to stand up, before keeling over, his eyes squinted shut. He moved his arm to the side, revealing a burnt hole by his hip. He coughed, red stained droplets cascaded out. The gloved hand shook in front of him before pushing down hard on the dripping wound. Pushing off his knee, the man trudged back up the hill.

Distracted

Cerys Abraham-Wang

The blank page glares up at me
The spine bends as I hunch over
To explore my mind, a vast ravine
Wide as my seventeen years
Deep as my lack of understanding of myself

Firm hand with thin lead snapping
Unsteady vision tempted
By flashy rectangle distractions
Knowledge that writing too will brighten
Experience that it will glow longer
Fearing pause, condemning boredom

Date it, Write it, Do it
Easy as that, but unable to do even the first
Without reaching into
My back pocket
I sigh crumpling an edge

Finally tossing any idea of exploration
Getting up to see the lack of result
Dull gray smears pushing past lined edict
Sigh and before I know it
The journal arcs and crashes to the dark floor

Gray

Cerys Abraham-Wang

Gray is indecisive, not white or black.
Shamelessly clinging to both and all sides,
Complacent in concerning good or bad,
Imperfect neutrality at its core.

Worn hoodie buried under clothing piles,
Drowned out by explosive neon colors.
Something that began brighter then faded,
Something with fraying ends and torn middle.

Holed up in a deep corner of your room,
Forgotten until it is a last resort,
Contented to be worn on laundry day,
Something to blubber into without shame.

Gray are the dim remnants long past sunset,
Five minutes of discolored perspective,
Grasping at the rare opportunity,
To cast the world in dull gloom before dark.

Silent companion always following,
Not enough to touch the ground you walk on,
Longing shadows stretching out of your blinds,
Etching parallel bars across your face.

Persistent coloring under your eyes,
Bleary vision you just can't rub away,
Passion dulls in the wake of its fatigue,
A bad habit you just swear you'll shake off.

And yet your opinions are still ombre,
Your tattered hoodie still remains at home,
Your eye bags still have yet to disappear,
And your shadow still lingers at your side.

Goodbye to Blue

Kylie Arenas

Said you wouldn't go, who will I hold?
I lay aloft on my bed, bleak.
I miss you so, my baby left cold.

Didn't you know? You were my strength.
Appearance appears very weak.
Said you wouldn't go, who will I hold?

Carried you through sickness and health.
Golden eyes, silver coat, unique.
I miss you so, my baby left cold.

Can't get you out my head, just breath.
I rubbed my hands, pray you'd speak.
Said you wouldn't go, who will I hold?

Glued to me day and night, such lengths.
Lukewarm streaks fallen down my cheeks.
I miss you so, my baby left cold.

A blue spring, stained with your death.
Life isn't right without you, heart oblique.
Said you wouldn't go, who will I hold?
I miss you so, my baby left cold.

The Sun and Rain

Gloria Mach

Every good memory I have has been in the rain
I have danced and spun in the rain
I have made paper boats with my brothers and released them in
streams from the rain
I said “I love you” in the rain
There have also been bad memories that were considered good to
me in the rain
I have cried
Cried so much that I thought that I was getting devoured by the
rain
I thought because I was so gloomy and dark inside that I was
created by the rain
Slept so well during thunderstorms that I felt as I was being cradled
by the rain
Stayed in bed all day because it was like a hug from the rain
When I picture perfect moments I don't picture the sun
I don't fantasize about the burning sensation of my skin
I don't miss sweating up a puddle that can eventually turn into a
stream
But man oh man once the sun goes down
It feels like it's raining all over again
I can dance, cry, and stay in bed all night
The comfort the darkness as gifted me is invaluable
I can still feel the droplets hitting my head down to my face and
skin
Summer is finally over
I have been praying and wishing for it to be over soon
For it to be over soon so that I can feel that comfort again
The comfort of the gloominess and rain
The darkness has consumed me in such a brightening way
Because I was born in a summer day
Where it rained

The Tsunami of Grief

Robin Callahan

Miyoki picked carefully through the rubble, only interacting with other parents and community volunteers when she had to. Miyoki wasn't looking for a body; she was looking for any trace that might be left of her husband's life. This was where her husband's classroom used to sit. His body had been found quickly, pinned under debris that had roared through the village with the powerful water flow that ravaged everything in its path. Miyoki was numb, unable to believe the events of the past two days. She felt like she should cry, but the tears didn't come. She kept moving because she didn't know what else to do.

Over the last 24 hours, the obvious bodies had been pulled out of the debris and moved to a field down the road, but the smell of rotting flesh – sickly sweet and nauseating – permeated the air for miles, traveling whichever way the wind blew. Miyoki readjusted the scarf she was wearing over her mouth and nose to help with the smell. She glanced up, noting the overcast weather. Rain was on the way, maybe snow. Occasionally a volunteer would cry out and it was understood that another body had been found. Everyone picking through the rubble would stop for a few moments, close their eyes, and mourn briefly. Many bodies had been found by the elementary school, many tiny little bodies.

After the earthquake – that enormous earthquake – had shaken the town for two straight minutes and turned all the buildings into rubble, everyone thought the worst was over. They carefully stepped around the rubble and began to gather in what was left of the town on the edge of the ocean to assess the damage. No one expected the tsunami that swept through, carrying rubble and people alike. How could two disasters strike in as many hours?

Ken's five-year old body had been found in the river just a few hours ago, his little backpack snagged on a piece of metal that had wedged into the bridge. The backpack was still slung over his slight shoulders. Miyoki could not bear to verify his identity, so her brother had mercifully gone to the field to confirm that yes, it was Ken. He returned with the little Spiderman backpack dangling from his hand, his other hand covering his face in anguish. Miyoki recalled how excited Ken had been to pick out this backpack for his

very first year of school. He had insisted on sleeping with it in his bed for a week before school started. He couldn't wait to go to school where Daddy and older sister went every day.

Sushima had fallen to her knees and wailed when she heard the news. It frightened Miyoki to see her mother lose control this way. Sushima had always been so calm, on the verge of cold.

Maya was still unaccounted for.

6 months later

Miyoki was half-heartedly mending one of Maya's dresses, but was more lost in memories. Today she was remembering the last lazy Sunday her family had spent together, one week before the world ended. They had all made breakfast together, then walked in the woods behind their house. Maya had run ahead, and Ken tried to keep up, but he kept stopping every few feet to examine a new rock that he found in his path. At the end of the day she had to empty out pockets in his cargo shorts, pulling out dozens of stones. She and her husband had held hands, and she remembered his loving look when he handed her a flower he had just picked. He had loved all plants and flowers, and could identify all the plants in those woods. She did the best she could to tend the garden in their yard, a garden he had planted with so much care and attention.

Suddenly, she heard Sushima cry out for her. "Miyoki! Come here!" Miyoki sighed and dragged herself from the rocking chair facing the ocean, the only place she could find any solace now. Well, solace wasn't quite the word, but it was the only place she could tolerate sitting still. She found herself losing hours of a day sitting in this chair, staring at the ocean, trying to figure out how this beautiful landscape could so completely betray and destroy her family.

Sushima had been doing this since that day – insisting that impossible things were happening. Items moved inexplicably, lights were found on at odd times, doors were left open that the women swore had been closed and locked. This time Miyoki found her mother standing at the door to Ken's bedroom, her gaze fixed on the floor in the middle of the room. They had not touched it since that day – neither of them could bear to change anything. Ken's little carpet with a town printed on it, complete with streets for toy cars, was still laid out in the middle of the floor. The little shelf that normally held his cars stood next to the carpet, with little metal cars lined up in neat rows. As Sushima took in what was in the scene, she

noticed that there were odd spaces in these rows, where cars should have been. Sushima stood transfixed, and Miyoki's eyes followed her gaze. She froze. Ken's favorite little red truck sat in the middle of the carpet, surrounded by several other cars lined up neatly on the roads around it.

"Maya," she called quietly. Her voice became louder as she called again "Maya, come here!" Maya came out of her room across the hall to stand quietly by her mother. She had not talked much in the last year. She had been found trapped inside a refrigerator five miles up the river, with a gash in her side that took weeks to heal properly. She still wouldn't talk about what had happened that day, but Miyoki was grateful for whatever events led to her to that refrigerator. Miyoki watched as Maya's eyes widened as she took in the scene. She grabbed her daughter's arm roughly "Why would you do this to your brother's things? Why?" Miyoki could hear the shrillness in her voice and knew it wasn't right, but she felt like she was outside of herself, like a different person was yelling.

Maya looked at her, eyes wide, and slowly shook her head. "I didn't! I wouldn't!" Miyoki slapped the girl across the face. Her hand hovered in the air and Maya's hand flew to her face as she stared at her mother, betrayal marking her beautiful childish features. Miyoki was shocked at herself. She stared at her hand as if it didn't belong to her as she slowly lowered it, her eyes wide as she realized what she had done. Maya was silent; a single tear slipped down her cheek. Maya slowly turned away, holding her face, and walked into her bedroom, closing her door quietly. Miyoki could feel Sushima's eyes on her, but she couldn't bear to meet her mother's gaze. After a moment, Sushima also turned away, walked into her bedroom, and closed the door. Miyoki was left alone, staring at the cars on her dead son's carpet.

A few hours later, Miyoki lay on her back in her bed, staring at the ceiling. The emptiness occupying the space next to her was painfully present, as if a vital force were missing. Tears slipped down her face silently. Finally, she could cry. She was shocked to realize she wasn't crying over her family that was lost. Instead, she was crying over the family she was slowly pushing away from her.

Miyoki missed the comforting sound of her husband's breathing at night. She missed his wise counsel and their conversations. She missed laughing with him and making love to him at night. She

missed reading Ken his favorite bedtime story and saying goodnight to his favorite stuffed bear. She missed her husband and her son, but she realized now that she needed to do something to save her daughter and mother. Maya hadn't eaten in weeks. She picked at the plates that were placed in front of her at mealtimes but would only take one or two bites before asking to be excused. She had lost weight. They had all lost weight. Who was Miyoki kidding? This house was full of ghosts.

Miyoki's mind was pulled back to earlier that day, the slap. Her hand still stung from the impact. Why had she done that? She had never struck her children, and Maya had done nothing to deserve it. Miyoki knew that Maya would never have moved Ken's cars. But if Maya didn't, then who did?

Somehow, Miyoki fell into a restless sleep, haunted by anxious dreams. She saw her husband walking along the beach, holding Ken by the hand. They were so vivid, she felt like she could reach out and touch them. She could hear Ken's laugh, so tiny and pure. Oh, how she missed his laugh! She called out to them "Wait! I'm here, I'm coming" but they were always out of reach. She woke up, her cheeks wet with tears. She sat up in bed, determined to save the family that she had.

She stepped out of bed and quietly made her way down the hall to Maya's room. She opened Maya's door, careful not to make noise. The only light in the room was her night light. She looked down at her lovely daughter; Maya was holding Ken's teddy bear tightly against her. She had taken to sleeping with it since that day. Maya looked peaceful – the only time she looked peaceful now was when she was sleeping. Miyoki walked around to the other side of the bed and slipped under the covers with her daughter. She wrapped her arms around her gently, feeling the rhythm of her breathing. Maya sighed into her, just like she used to do as a small child. Miyoki knew that she had to try for Maya. Maya was still here; her mother was still here. Somehow, they had to find their way back to each other. Miyoki didn't know how she would make that happen, but she *would* make it happen.

To Everything Below the Neck

Molly Baeta

Stuck in a hospital bed for months, unable to move,
unable to scratch your own head, move the hair from your eyes,
Stretch out your legs, or even feed yourself.

Someone else doing those things for you,
unable to feel anything touching your skin
the sensation just felt like pins and needles all over your body.

The only pain you felt was the constant muscle spasms and cramps
and the most painful needle entering your spinal cord.
It's amazing how resilient the body is,

it's also amazing how unpredictable it is.
And when you lose the ability to do anything
other than move your head and speak.

It makes you sit there and thank
every single part of your body
that has kept you alive, able and well.

Thank you to my feet for keeping me up,
and to my legs, who never seem to get enough rest.
To my stomach that I hate but learnt to love,

My sore, and tired arms,
even my neck that holds my head up,
and an adapting mind that has kept me sane, safe and comforted.

Regretting how much you've taken
for granted, just the simple
ability to walk, feed yourself,

being able to brush your own hair.
To everything below my neck,
Thank you for coming back.

Traveling the World in My Head

Gloria Mach

I haven't been to many states
But when I close my eyes and doze off
My mind starts to drift and wander all across the globe
At 19 I moved across the country to start a new life of my own
First year of university I was trapped in this cell which was now my
new home
Been woken up many nights by sounds of laughter
Sounds of laughter that I did not recognize from my neighbors' chit
and chatters
I did not recognize that emotion anymore
I started to not be able to recognize myself
Although the changes were difficult all I felt was devotion
Same routine for a year
Did I still dream about running across this sphere?
This sphere we called our world
When I dozed off this was not what I wanted to dream of
Aren't dreams supposed to be filled with love and hope?
How come this dream was so hard for me to cope?
Same routine for a year trying to wake myself up
But I was awake this whole time
None of this was fake or in my head it was time to climb
Climb out of this mess I got myself in
It was most certainly not divine
New routine for a year and I still haven't been to many states
But this time I'm not going to wait and doze off to wander across
the globe
This time I'd rather choose to stay awake

Sonnet

Scott Parker

The berries grow close to oily dark ground
Most in fact do not know this trivia
But wherever pickers are to be found
Know they will ache from hand to tibia

The work is described as breaking the back
My brother and I know this to be true
With gritty hands and the water we lack
We spent ten hours as if tying our shoe

But much we gained from this green bush and dirt
Despite fingers left bloody and raw red
With each box of berries my brother would blurt
Alas we can now trade this for more bread

Think of the picker next time at the store
The berries before you contain such great lore

Eden

Rylan Leipelt

If not beneath a Euclid shade of twilight,
So then under the hollow darkness of a set sun
For this night does not belong to god.
And with eyes of fire,
A threat to this pyre,
Ignited by your holy virus
So what awaits,
But for a face,
Behind a face,
Behind a face,
Let the fire rage,
Bring down the veil,
Burn away these strings,
The flames kept us warm,
A bit tongue tastes scorn.

Brown

Lucia Lara

I am so proud of my Crayola Crayons.
The big box, the one with 64 colors.
The blue-green crayon is my favorite.
When I draw, the blank page comes alive in my imagination.
Purple rabbits and orange houses, a smiling yellow sun.
I draw a picture of myself.
I think that I am blue-green.
Blue-green is pretty and sweet, clever and funny; it brings
 happiness.
How can anyone not love it, too?
In school, I am told that I am not blue-green.
I am handed the brown crayon.
Brown is okay...brown dogs, chocolate ice cream, sandcastles, and
 my new shoes.
But everyone else has a white crayon.
That doesn't make any sense. How will it show up on paper?
I am told that it doesn't matter if it can't be seen; everyone already
 knows that it's there, and that's all that is important.
It confuses me because there are so many beautiful colors to be
 enjoyed.
I think that I will give the white crayon a chance, but they take it
 away from me.
Well then, I will just pretend that I have a white crayon, too; I will
 be like everyone else.
I bring my own white crayon to school. I use it when I play with my
 friends; I tuck the brown crayon away in my pocket.
When we are older, my friends tell me that I cannot have the white
 crayon, and they strip it from my hands.
They stick a note inside my desk.
"Did you know that your epidermis is showing?"
This makes no sense.
I find out that my epidermis is my skin.
I say, "How dumb! Everyone's skin is showing."
My "friends" look at me differently now.
I don't understand.
They push the brown crayon back into my hand.
"This is your epidermis. You can't pretend anymore."

Crayon Wax

Sehej Pawar

No matter how hard I try to erase
the crayon wax on my body,
it never fades away.
My stomach smudges even larger
while every other kid's drawing is perfect.
My thighs have gotten larger.
Maybe if I try coloring outside the lines
I can look skinnier.

no

no

no

I just ruined the body of a little boy
who wants nothing to do with
life yet cries on somebody's shoulders.
He crumples up the paper
and lights the drawing on fire.
You can't burn away your skin.
You can't cut parts of paper
to make you appear smaller.
You can't fold and crease.
Can't call the police
when everyone around you
thinks you're this beast.

Two views of facing age and death

Frank Yung-Fong Tang

How peaceful is the one who
does not climb in the hills of the skeptics,
Nor wonder in the bushes of doubters,
Nor rest in the valley of rebels!
But his hope is in the promise of the Shepherd,
And in His promise the one relaxes from dawn to dusk.
He will be like a ram joyfully fed by plenty of grass,
Which extends its horns in early spring
And its wool does not shed;
And in whatever he possesses, he contents.
The skeptics are not so,
But they are like bunnies that the rumble trembles away.
Therefore
the skeptics will not drink from the pond,
Nor doubters from the fountain of the Mercy.
For the Shepherd leads the path of His sheep,
But the path of the skeptics leads to depression.

Streets of Africa

Valerie Pham

Lying down on the cold streets
Begging for help in the storm
For food, for water.
His ribs visible to the skin
Weak, unable to stand.
He watches people pass by
Muted and deaf,
he can only show his bones.
A child, frail and feeble,
ill and dying,
He beseeches in silence
For a crumb, for a sip,
for anything.

My Sternum Works Overtime

Alyssa Diaz

My sternum works overtime –
that little flat bone,
how I put it through the ringer.

I rap it fervently
every time stomach acid creeps up,
thinking it will help cease the scorching.
Sometimes I hear it whisper to me,
“Just lay off the marinara sauce.”

I grip it desperately
when I watch a scary movie,
or see a spider in the bathroom,
or overuse my stationary bike.
I’m surprised it hasn’t buckled in yet.

I rub it anxiously
before I make a dentist appointment,
or when I get a passive-aggressive text,
or when I walk home after dark,
wishing it was a portal I could slip into.

Sometimes it gets rewarded for its hard work,
when my chest bubbles with
pride or accomplishment or joy.
I’d like to think these fleeting moments
keep that little bone fed
the rest of the time.

Filler

Cynthia Marie Gomez

Don't tell them what you think
They're not interested

Foolish girl
Sitting here
waiting your turn
It will never come
You are just a placeholder
They don't want to know your favorite color
What you like to eat
Where you like to go
What you like to dream

They don't know when you are sad
You don't dare shed a tear
Dear girl
You are just here
To fill an empty seat
An ear to hear them weep
The company you keep
Them

It doesnt matter your wit
Or about that time
Or this or that rhyme
That song that makes you smile
Every time
All they know
Is sit girl, don't think
And please
don't speak

A Town By the Sea

Sophia Minor

As I often do, I wake up feeling dazed and unrested. The sun was still setting when I fell asleep the night before, yet I still woke up past noon. I didn't have to check the kitchen to know it was practically barren, so despite my sluggishness and the heavy weight of my body, I knew I would be going to the store today. I spend no time getting ready before leaving, due to the many possibilities that come with going out that would make it a waste.

Still a bit lethargic, I leave my apartment to head to Lennel's, which is pretty much the only place I find myself shopping these days. It's a relatively small store, but it still has everything I need, and if it doesn't, then I accept what it lacks without a fight.

As I begin my walk to Lennel's, my mind wanders while looking around the neighborhood. Clearington is a small seaside town, filled with many shops and markets, and kind people. It seems almost boring until you look a bit closer at everything around you and you notice its small, peculiar details, like scraps of hair strewn on sidewalks or drops of dried blood on the cement.

The peace in Clearington was first disrupted 20 years ago and ever since, people have grown to live with the repeated misfortunes. It first began when a young boy once saw a rainbow and decided to follow it, hoping to find a stash of gold on the other end, just as many tales said. Instead, he was greeted by a small, but strong angry man, with an ugly face and dirty beard. He killed the young boy for trying to take his gold, saying it was a consequence of his greed. His parents grieved thinking they had lost their son until the boy returned home a few hours later, he was alive but he was far more selfless and giving.

Another time, a team of scientists had heard news of what someone claimed to be "part human, part fish" lying on a nearby rock in the ocean. The scientists wasted no time in heading to the shore and looking for the being themselves. They expected to be greeted by a beautiful mermaid, but instead, they were met with a disturbing creature. It was indeed part human, part fish, but it was covered in scales, mouth filled with two rows of sharp teeth, and eyes that were pure black. Before they had time to run, they felt the slimy hands of the monstrous species wrapped around their ankles before dragging the screaming scientists into the water. The experiments

they had planned to perform on the sea creatures were instead done on them, as was concluded by citizens after seeing various limbs wash up along the shore. People had become terrified of the beach until the lost scientists suddenly returned a week later, though they all swiftly resigned from their jobs after getting first-hand experience of the experimentation.

There were infinite stories just like this, a young girl impaled on the horn of a unicorn after getting too curious about the creature she had once only seen in animations, or the heads of hunters found framed on wooden planks after being murdered by unknown beasts living in the depths of the forest. The deaths were brutal, but the victims always returned, whether it be in minutes or months. At first, the attacks and killings acted as lessons, ways to humble the oversized egos of humans, but over time, the attacks seemed to come without reason.

I'm abruptly ripped out of my thoughts as I hear the vicious screech of a giant hawk. I notice its beak is covered in blood as it suddenly swoops down and sinks its claws into a young woman walking ahead of me. She doesn't even scream as the flesh of her shoulders is pierced, blood drawn as she is lifted into the sky, her body going limp before she leaves my vision. No one reacts, including myself, continuing with their day as if such an incident is nothing at all, as that is exactly what it is. I walk a bit more until I can finally see the bright, blood-red, cursive sign resting on the side of the building that reads, "Lennel's."

The bell of the shop rings through the small building as I enter, causing Mr. Lennel to look over at me with a small smile. He mostly works here on his own, but he manages to keep the place running nicely. I give him a small smile in return before he turns back to the customer he was checking out before I arrived. I shortly recognized them to be the woman I had seen get swooped up by the beady-eyed hawk. My eyes are drawn to her shoulders where the hawk's talons were previously submerged. There is not a drop of blood, no bruise, not even the smallest scratch or speck of dirt, and her face is expressionless. If I had not seen her get picked up and flown away myself, I would have thought she had gotten here peacefully, I would have never thought of her as a woman who had experienced such pain and death. I give her a slight nod as she brushes past me and out the door, not before shortly glancing at me with tired eyes.

The Rock

Cynthia Marie Gomez

You are a rock
that is quickly starting to crumble
It's not the way we envision it, a rock
that is meant to be sturdy
unbreakable
but it makes you human
brings you back to earth
where you belong

I know you will find yourself again
I'd shine a dimly lit path for you
for I haven't much light to shine
but what I have I will gladly give

my friend,
there is no end
but the kind we never ask for
still we blindly follow
destroying ourselves
in this witless storm
Oh our precious rock
that's losing its form

The Timeless Diner

Dana Lorenzo

Lost in the heart of San Francisco's renowned advection fog, I found myself wandering the empty morning streets. The cable cars generated a harmonious symphony of metallic clangs and whirring machinery as they navigated the city's hilly terrain. My departure from home remained a hazy memory, but as I slowly regained awareness, I stumbled upon a diner that exuded a sense of nostalgia, pulling me in like a moth to a flame. Its sign, bearing the name "Timeless Diner," appeared to flicker like a mirage in the dense, otherworldly atmosphere. It was almost as if Karl the Fog himself had a hand in crafting this enchanting ambiance.

Crossing the diner's threshold, I felt a peculiar sense of déjà vu, as if distant memories were slowly emerging from the fog of my mind to greet me once more. I was welcomed by the black and white checkered floor beneath my feet. It resembled a vintage dance floor, casting an enduring charm over the entire place. Potted plants embellished the walls, infusing the space with life and vibrancy. The plush and luxuriously soft teal booth cushions beckon, inviting me to lose track of time in their comforting embrace. Choosing a secluded corner booth, I discovered the ideal sanctuary to retreat from the outside world and the all-encompassing presence of Karl the Fog.

As I gazed out of the window, an unsettling feeling washed over me, as if something foreboding loomed. A mystic figure materialized from the dense, eerie fog, slowly inching closer. I strained my eyes to discern her form. It was only when the mysterious being reached the diner's entrance and the fog slowly cleared that I understood the reality. Revealed before me was a woman, wearing a knee-length forest green dress with a delicate lace hem that gave a vintage touch. The dress was cinched at the waist with a black patent leather belt, adding sophistication to the look. She also had a white apron tied neatly around her waist, bearing the diner's logo, signifying her dedication. The apron's front pockets, once clean, now held faint stains from her work, showcasing her hands-on approach to running the diner. It was evident that she held a revered and enigmatic role

within this timeless establishment, casting a shroud of intrigue over the entire scene. A handful of regulars in the nearby booths collectively welcomed her, affectionately dubbing her “The Boss.”

As I scanned the room, it became clear that The Boss had identified me as a first-time visitor in her diner. With a wordless understanding that surpassed verbal communication, she gracefully vanished into the kitchen. In no time, she reappeared, setting before me a hearty stack of piping-hot, fluffy blueberry pancakes accompanied by a cup of coffee, artfully sweetened with two sugars and a hint of creamer. It was my long-missed favorite meal. How had she known?

I closed my eyes as I savored the first bite. The pancakes, fluffy as clouds, dissolved on my tongue, releasing bursts of sweet blueberry flavor. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee, rich and comforting, swirled around me, wrapping me in a warm, inviting hug. The diner’s sounds slowly faded, and for a short, captivating moment, I heard a gentle and melodious echo from a distant, forgotten memory. It sent shivers down my spine, and my heart quickened. It resembled the voice of someone I knew, calling my name, “Bernie.”

As my eyelids slowly lifted, I awoke to the comfort of my own home, greeted by the sight of my beloved Maria sitting across from me. It was as though I had been transported back to those leisurely Sunday breakfasts we used to share, when she’d make blueberry pancakes and the perfect cup of coffee with two sugars and a splash of creamer. She looked just as I remembered her, as if she had never left my side. My mind became fixated on the idea of gazing into her deep brown eyes for an entire day once more. Her hair, like a flowing waterfall of ebony silk, framed her face with a radiant and ageless grace.

Her smile, oh, her smile. Maria’s smile had a contagious charm that lit up the room, dispersing the fog in my mind and dispelling all darkness in my heart. I held Maria in my arms, and it was as if time had stood still. I couldn’t help but whisper, “Maria, I’ve missed you so much.”

Her eyes met mine, and a soft, understanding smile played upon her lips. She knew, as if she had heard the unsaid words lin-

gering in the air. In that embrace, the longing I had carried with me during our time apart melted away, replaced by the joy of our rekindling love. It was a moment of profound reconnection, a reminder of the deep bond that had transcended the distance between us. The world around us seemed to fade away, leaving only the two of us in our own private universe.

In her presence, I felt complete. It was as if a missing piece of my soul had been returned. The weight of time, of memories slipping through my grasp, momentarily lifted, and I was transported back to the days when Maria and I were inseparable. It was a beautiful yet touching reunion, and I savored every moment. Yet, the joy of our reunion was as real as the pancakes before me, though within that happiness, a painful question lingered - was this a delicate mirage, born from the haze of my dementia-clouded thoughts?

In that instant, I found myself doubting my own sanity, questioning the boundary between reality and illusion, and yearning for the past. Yet, there she was, her eyes still shining with love, her smile a balm to my soul, and her laughter rekindling the warmth in my heart. We shared breakfast as though time had stood still, and the years that had separated us dissolved into nothingness.

But as the last bite of the pancakes graced my taste buds, I blinked, and reality rushed back in. The diner's checkered floors, the teal seating, and the Boss's enigmatic smile all returned. I was once again seated alone in that familiar corner booth, the memories of Maria slipping through my grasp, like fragile sand through my fingers. It proved to be a paradoxical gift, a double-edged sword—an encounter as fleeting as the ambiguous fog veiling the city. However, within that moment, I had tasted the potency of love and memory, surpassing the constraints of both time and reason.

With a heart full of gratitude and a satisfied stomach, I bid farewell to The Boss and left her esteemed establishment. Since that memorable day, whenever Karl the Fog rolled into the city, it was as though an old friend was gently calling me back to the diner. It was an invitation I couldn't resist. The memories of Maria and the enticing aromas of The Boss's culinary creations continued to draw me back to the diner, time and time again.

I eagerly shared my diner adventures with anyone willing to lend an ear. My emotions ran high when I spoke of The Boss's enchanting dishes, ones that seemed to conjure the presence of my dearest Maria. However, my stories were often met with skepticism from the world outside. My family and friends had been growing increasingly worried. There were times when I would suddenly vanish from their sight, only to return later with these fantastical stories about the diner. They were deeply concerned about my well-being, suspecting that my dementia was playing tricks on my mind. They tried to offer me comfort, assuring me that the diner, The Boss, and my reunions with Maria were nothing more than figments of my imagination. As my dementia continued to worsen, my family, guided by their profound love and concern, faced the heart-wrenching decision to move me to a care facility, believing it was the best course of action for my health and safety.

In the unfamiliar setting of the care home, doubt's shadow and the ache of longing consumed my every thought. A weighty and persistent regret gripped me as I contemplated the missed opportunities to connect with my fellow diner regulars. I also pondered how The Boss's food always brings me back to my Maria. I should have brought my family with me to prove to them I was telling the truth. It felt like a frantic pursuit of confirmation, a race against time to validate that these experiences were not mere products of my fading memory. An overwhelming sense of isolation and frustration gnawed at my heart as the line between reality and memory continued to blur.

Held Down

Shauncy Lim

On the trail of the mountains where the sun starts to set and the ray shines on her. A furry gray wolf with a bushy tail. The sun reflects her fur as it turns reddish brown due to the dust of dirt. She looks behind her for a glance, but then she turns her head back and starts to prance. She starts to run as she leads me farther down the path, where is she going? I follow. Her wild spirit, determination, her run for freedom as she heard hunters with their loud weapons chasing her. Running through holes, hiding behind rocks and in caves, just to survive and live, catching our breaths, I hear the sound of her beating heart; scared of getting caught she tries to be as cautious. For the next few days, the hunters nowhere to be found, she wanders around, just living life freely, the wind quite breezy, now she takes a breath of fresh air, into the distance, an open view she tends to stare. She does what she wants and does what she needs, of course her own life she wants to lead, her intentions hunters misunderstand, "NO" they demand. She kicks, snarls and bites as she fights but is taken captive. A smile at the scars from her escape the taste of good times in the attempt. In her heart she knows there will be no apology as they took away her autonomy. I am her and she is me.

Puff Mama

Annie Yu



Bailando

Elsa Nuñez



The Irises

Iryna Kaleniuk



Sunrise Strike

Bob Zander



Hazy

Ayla Khoshaba



Edge of Eternity

Aga Syrzycka



Ghost Bird: Northern Pygmy Owl

Linda Schuurmann Baker



The Last Walk-In

Charles Pham

I have read the same oath every Monday to Friday from 8:30 AM to 5:30 PM for the past 6 years, but the goddamn machine tracked my eye movement anyway. Sighing, I began scanning as fast as I could.

Oath of Memoria:

As a guardian of Memoria, I, Nemo Syne, hereby swear on the following:

1. I will not attempt to use the Animus for my own personal gain, with examples being:
 - a. Contacting the patient after the operation
 - b. Attempting to convince the patient to reconsider their choice regarding the operation
 - c. (IF) Recognizing the patient, to maintain a sense of professionalism and not to strike conversation with them
 - d. Using the information against the patient for any other purpose, such as blackmail.
 - e. Saving any information retained after the operation for my own personal viewing
2. To clear the Animus of any residual from the operation before
3. To purge any information stored on the Retinentia after 10 years, unless the patient has asked for us to keep the information on hold.
4. To follow the instructions of the patient on how to proceed with the operation (including the option to opt out of the operation should they choose to do so).
5. To maintain an oath of secrecy about what I see while operating the Animus, even if the information I have seen is illegal or unethical.

Even though I will be alone with the patient during the operation, I will not be tempted to peruse the information laid before me.

I understand that breaching any of the following will result in many legal ramifications, such as consequences relating to my job, and punishment through a forceful use-

A yawn escaped from my mouth, as I stretched. As a result, I had to

restart the paragraph I was reading.

I understand that breaching any of the following will result in many legal ramifications, such as consequences relating to my job, and punishment through a forceful use of the Animus.

For a full list of laws relating to the use of the machine known as the Animus, the server known as Retinentia, and the company known as Memoria, please click [here](#).

I understand that by hitting NEXT at the bottom of this screen, I agree to uphold the Oath of Memoria, and to do my best as a guardian of Memoria.

NEXT

I hit the huge black “NEXT” on the screen, giving it the customary finger, before it finally logged me in to the system. Thank God it was short. The old version had 50 pages regarding all the laws I would be breaking, and no one really wanted to deal with that. The higher-ups ended up creating a separate page with a hyperlink to speed things up a few years back.

“Long night?” a voice behind me asked. I scoffed, booting up the Control Station before turning to face the owner of the voice.

“You know how things are, sir,” I replied, “Days similar to today are dispersed amongst the rest.”

Vito walked past me and leaned against the railing overlooking the Animus, and sighed. Even though his back was facing me I could tell by his hunched back that he was still troubled by what I was referring to

“I don’t know how many times I have to tell you, Nemo,” Vito said worriedly. “You know as well as I do that everyone deserves a break, and Memoria will be fine without you. Just ask for the days off. When was the last time you took a vacation?”

I rubbed my temples and stared pointedly at the screen. The day’s appointments began scrolling and I glanced through them.

“You know what they say, boss,” I replied, not looking at him. “No rest for the wicked.”

Vito sighed, sounding frustrated.

“Quick topic change then, Nemo. We got a lot of appointments today, Doc, and it looks like most of them might actually proceed with the op.”

This caught me off guard. “You’re serious? What kind of person would want to go through with this? They know what we do here, right?”

Vito rolled his eyes, and walked down the control station to the Animus, before running his hand over it, lovingly. Almost like a grandfather who never gets tired of seeing his grandchild.

“We’re one of the most prestigious mind-wiping operations here, Doctor Syne, no thanks to you. You made this thing a goddamn art form.”

“And the most heroic soldier in war probably just wanted to be a simple farmer, Vito,” I replied glumly, “Sometimes, I wonder if I’m doing the right thing here; just completely wiping out portions of a memory as if they’re just browser history, you know?”

Vito looked back at me, with a somber look on his face.

“Sometimes, they’re not permanent, you know. Remember how some patients come back to have their memories restored, after some bullshit soul-searching journey?”

“I remember, Vito.” Such an occurrence was rare, and not just because of the odd request. All mind-wiping operations charged another exorbitant fee for such a thing.

We both fell silent, as I pondered about the morality of my work. As for Vito, I’m not sure.

A buzz from the intercom interrupted our pensive thinking. Sarah’s (our beloved secretary) voice rang loud and clear.

“Doctor Syne, your 9:30 is here. Should I send him in?”

Vito strolled up to me, patting my shoulder. “So the day’s work begins, kid. Remember all the good you’re doing here.” I nodded silently, staring at the Animus. I hit the intercom button. “Send him in, Sarah.”

At first glance, it looked as if the Animus was a chair you’d probably sit in while the dentist was filling your cavities and saying how important it was to floss. On closer inspection, however, one can see straps meant to restrain the patient at the arms, legs, and chest. I shuddered inwardly.

I was not that good when I first started. In fact, my first operation was a patient named Patrick who had recently murdered his wife. Obviously, the patient requested that I remove the murder from his memory, and I did a terrible job of it, accidentally leaving a fragment. The patient suffered a psychotic break on a train ride and remembered everything. Things got pretty awkward from there, but Vito smoothed things over pretty quickly, as I thankfully only suffered a warning.

I declined the offer to wipe the operation from my memory, as this was definitely a valuable lesson to learn.

Then there was the headgear. Bam. Something right out of a hair salon.

A series of tubes and wires connected this helmet to the Control Station where I sat. On top of the Control Station was a monitor. While having a long boring Memoria Designation, it was christened The Looking Glass, due to the fact that all memories were to be displayed there.

As the Doctor in charge of the Animus, it was my job to follow the requests of the patient in terms of what memories were to be replaced. Such a process was... stressful. I had seen more than my fair share of fucked-up or saddening memories. Things I would like to forget. Things that kept me up at night.

Things I wasn't allowed to talk about because of the oath I took every day.

There were days when I wished that operators could also have their memories wiped, but there were regulations surrounding that. If I remember correctly, it should be possible soon...

The comforting hum from the Animus brought me a brief respite from my lamentations as it began to turn on. The headgear pulsed a soothing baby blue, almost like a heartbeat.

I checked my first patient, and the required form to fill out. Name: Bryce Peralta. DOB: 11/30/2050. Age: 29. Range: May 2075-July 2079. Reason: Delete Cheryl. Psychological Assessment: The patient appears to be of sound mind...

The assessment went on and on for a few pages, dictating how Bryce was heartbroken when he found out Cheryl had been cheating on him with multiple men, and eventually took everything (money, car, dog) from him. Due to Cheryl's connections, Bryce

was unable to get anything back. In conclusion, the report stated, to simply delete Cheryl would help Bryce's psyche immensely, and he would move out of the country to be with his parents again anyway. His mind would fill in the necessary gaps for him. Such was the power of the human mind.

Memories from this operation will be stored in the Retentia with the standard 36 months before permanent deletion.

Operations like Bryce were pretty typical. Give me a date range, and I'll just delete those memories with a snap of my fingers. Not literally, but being able to sift and delete all relevant information given was a gift of mine. After Patrick's operation, I always took my time to inspect each memory as carefully as I could in the given time frame. Sometimes, other Doctors messed up and accidentally wiped out something important in that date range, or even missed their range, in an attempt to rush through the process.

I guess that's why I was considered the best. I took my work seriously.

Even then, though, I could not enjoy the work. Compounded with the things I have seen, just the thought of permanently removing someone's memories just because they were heartbroken or traumatized put me off. After all, pain builds character, doesn't it? And if you remove the thing that causes you pain without dealing with it, how can you expect to improve?

I still remember one such operation, where the patient brutally murdered his family and dumped the bodies in an abandoned mine. Filled with grief, and afraid to take his own life, he had the operation to forget he ever murdered them.

In the end, his mind lied to him that his wife left and took the baby with her.

I couldn't sleep for a long time after that. I ended up calling an anonymous tip line for the location of the bodies.

That was one of the few times I broke my oath.

And a primary reason why I couldn't enjoy my work anymore.

If word got out I called the tip line, I definitely would have lost my license. Yes, it was the morally correct thing to do, but the oath was binding in more ways than one.

The door behind me opened, interrupting my thoughts. As I

expected, Mr. Peralta walked in, looking nervous.

“Morning, Mr. Peralta,” I said as warmly as I could, gesturing towards the Animus. “Are you ready for the procedure?”

He nodded.

“No questions before we begin? No second thoughts?” A shake of the head.

“Alrighty then, Mr. Peralta. Please sit in the Animus right over there and lay still while the restraint will turn on. Just like that..”

I tilted my chair at the Control Center back, quietly sipping my cooled down coffee as soon as the 4:45 PM appointment was shown out the door, looking a bit more dazed than normal. The day had been busier than usual, just as Vito said. More people had opted to go through with the mind wipes, and only two had opted out.

I couldn't really blame the former, to be honest. Memoria and other mind-wiping businesses all charged a nonrefundable deposit fee (hell, that's the majority of our income), and a smaller fee after the operation was done. To come here and get cold feet would be like buying a first-class ticket to Paris and then purposefully missing your flight.

I was glad some people got cold feet, though. That meant the following:

- 1) Less work for me.
- 2) They figured that living through the pain was worth it.

Now that the last appointment was out the door, I could just relax and begin my closing process.

Rapid knocking from the door caused me to jump slightly, spilling some of my precious drink. Swearing quietly, I began to dab at the spill. No one knocked doors here at Memoria.

“Yo what is it?” I yelled, trying not to sound annoyed.

Sarah's voice sounded muffled as it came through the closed door. Another oddity. “We, uh, we got a walk-in,” she said nervously.

“Since when did Vito approve walk-ins?” I asked, feeling surprised. There was normally a waitlist of a few weeks, and there was a long process to getting one's mind wiped.

To put it simply, walk-ins do NOT just happen.

“The woman offered a lotta money for her mind to get wiped.

And I mean a lot. You're gonna have your hands full too, judging from this date range."

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair. This probably was not gonna bode well. But hey, man's gotta pay rent somehow. Maybe this would brighten up another dull and sad day in my life.

"If Vito commands, then so be it. Send her in."

The door opened to a face I thought I would never see again.

"...Oh my God. Moneta?"

"Hi Nemo. How long has it been?" Unlike her customary self, Moneta's eyes stared blankly at me. On second glance, I noticed some sadness behind those eyes. Interesting.

"To be honest, I don't remember," I lied.

3 years of happiness, then 2 years of pain. Part of me still loved her.

"Really did a number on yourself, huh," Moneta replied scornfully, walking past me and running her fingers across my chair. I shuddered inwardly.

"I can't blame myself for what happened between us." I swiftly began to boot up the Animus once more. "You share some of that blame too."

"Maybe I did, maybe I didn't. You stopped loving me long ago."

That was a lie, and you know it.

I closed my eyes, as it began to fill with heat.

"Let's just get this over with. We're running behind already." I pulled up her file.

Name: Moneta Lynn. DOB: 8/13/2053. Age: 26...

That's when the date range hit me.

Moneta was a self-made cosplayer, and had garnered a huge following. When she wasn't in costume, she was a shy geek, one who loved to watch TV and play games all day. When she was in costume, she turned into a confident model named Mona Pureta who commanded the world at her feet.

We met when we both grabbed Starbucks together one day at a convention. I managed to recognize her out of her costume, and that somehow won her over. The next few years were spent with her being like a devoted housewife, except she was a successful model

who spent the day working on her purchase orders and the housework was split between us. A happy and simple life. And yet...

All good things must come to an end. She was a control freak, wanting nothing but complete utter control and I was a simpleton who wanted to please her. She wanted me to pay more attention to her, but I was too devoted to my work to do so.

I don't know how I got out, but I still loved her dearly even after she left. Looking back, it really wasn't 100% her fault. I honestly should have appreciated her more.

Moneta's date range basically covered her entire modeling career. Strangely enough, she left out the months when we were together (since we were dating while she was still modeling).

Did she really want to remember how things ended?

"I'm in for a rough time," I couldn't help but comment, as the dates zoomed past me.

"Nemo... Can you do something for me?" Something in her tone made me look up. She stood in front of the Animus, shoulders hunched. Her arms were crossed over her chest, as though she was cold.

"What's up?" I asked softly.

"Part of me doesn't want my memories wiped. I... I only came because I wanted to see you again. Can you go through my memories and see if they should be wiped? It's... It's not normal for you to do this I guess but one last favor for me?"

I stood there, mouth agape.

"I'm at a loss, Nemo," she continued. "It's a bit too hard for me to explain, so I'm letting you have a glimpse at my memories."

"After what we said to each other, you're placing a lot of trust in your ex."

"To be honest? Actually, I'll let my memories speak for me." Moneta turned to face me, her eyes filled with a certain determination I fell in love with all those years ago.

"...Done."

She smiled sadly at me.

"Thanks, Nemo. I appreciate it."

I shuddered, and took a deep breath.

"Just sit down in the Animus, and the restraints will bind you there."

“I’m going to count down, and you’re going to feel sleepy,” I continued. “10...9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1...”

Moneta was already knocked out with the sleeping gas when I said “6”, but one can never be too sure. I breathed deeply, like I always have, and swiped my hand up. The Looking Glass began to load up Moneta’s memories, as I recognized some of them.

Her fascination with becoming like a character in a certain TV show when she was growing up in the orphanage.

Her hard work in her first costume, with the nuns happily taking pictures of her, and her friends praising her.

I continued to sift through.

Her popularity surging as she finally made it big at a convention, having to hide her alter ego from her fans and distant friends, with only her closest friends and family knowing.

I stopped for a brief moment on May 25th, 2074. The day we met.

Moneta changed out of costume in her hotel room, and decided to grab something to drink at Starbucks. The con was still going strong, but she needed a break. While she was in line, ordering, she felt a tap on her shoulder, and my voice broke through.

“Hi, um, you wouldn’t happen to be Mona Pureta, right? Can I buy you a drink? I’m a huge fan.”

I frowned. After all this time, I can’t believe that line was a catalyst for beginning our relationship.

Time to keep going.

The two of us in bed together, cuddling as we watched a movie.

The honeymoon phase finally wore off, as life became more intertwined.

Disappointment, as her boyfriend constantly worked, saying that he loved it despite not being able to go into details. Then tinier disappointments, like missing the dishes, missing date night, missing her photoshoot.

More cons and photoshoots. This time, Moneta was a bit more flirtatious and daring to her fans, but never went all the way, because she still loved Nemo. But everybody has their limits.

Finally telling Nemo over dinner that they were over. That all he did was work and play, and didn’t devote enough time to her. That

she felt that the two of them stopped loving each other long ago, but deep down she still loved him.

I had to stop for a moment. Moneta's vitals were becoming more and more erratic, with her heartbeat beating fast, as if she was fearful or even stressed.

I bit my lip. Our lives were intertwined, I thought to myself.

It felt weird to go through memories and not put them in the Retinentia immediately. Another memory.

Us drinking coffee together. I was writing something in my notebook while Moneta was sketching one of her new costumes.

"Moneta?" I asked.

She looked up at me, looking puzzled. "Yeah?"

"Where would you go for vacation if you had the chance?"

She sighed deeply.

"Hm.... I've always wanted to go to Venice! There's just something so beautiful and mystique about it.

"Were you able to take time off work?" she asked excitedly.

I grimaced and clasped my hands.

"Vito said he'll think about it, but I doubt it," I replied. A disappointed sigh.

I sighed gently, and moved on towards the next memory. That was the moment we started drifting. I had lied to her, as I had just wiped the memory of the man who murdered his family.

I gently swiped towards a defining moment when we became a couple.

The two of us were in bed together. Moneta was lying on my chest as I read a book. From her POV (as in the case for most memories), the only thing she could see was the book.

"Nemo. Nemo Nemo Neeemooooo," she started playfully. I lowered the book and grinned. "Yeah?"

"How did you recognize me out of costume?"

"Something about you looked familiar, honestly. I can't really place my mind on it, now that I think about it," I replied, pondering.

How did I recognize her?

She giggled.

"Ok stalker," she teased, squeezing my cheeks. I started laughing and grabbed her hands.

"And yet here you are, in my bed, staying the night," I teased

back.

I swiped past that memory before things progressed further. We both knew what happened next.

I hated the fact that my job entailed me being a very careful person. Every time I wiped someone's memory, I felt like I became a part of them. I knew them better than they ever could. And every time I wiped their memory, I was disappointed in them for going through with the operation.

Every problem was fixable, given enough time.

Looking through our memories, it really wasn't 100% her fault. I kept on telling Moneta I loved my work, and when she pressed me why, I couldn't tell her because of my oath. I wasn't able to devote as much time to her as I needed to.

It was on her, and it was on me.

Burnout. Exhaustion from traveling so much. Sure Moneta had a new boyfriend, but he was too boring. Too devoted. The problems stacked up. He was an idiot, and couldn't do basic house chores, correctly. Sure, he never cheated on her, but man he was not a good boyfriend.

And then turns out he wasn't a loyal boyfriend. Word got out. He had been having an affair with her other model friend. The two then proceeded to paint her as an evil bitch who was arrogant, and her heroic model friend fell for her boyfriend and the two had a secret forbidden affair.

Her popularity tanked. People stopped wanting to book photoshoots with her. Her fans stopped buying her merch.

Something inside Moneta cracked that day. She contemplated committing suicide, or moving away, or murdering the treacherous pair and then committing suicide.

Wait I can just get my mind wiped, *she thought to herself.* Hell, Nemo can gloat if he wants to before he wipes me.

Then trepidation, because she was afraid of seeing Nemo again. He for sure still remained constant, and as boring as he was, that was a certain charm in of itself.

I never knew how much I loved Nemo until I saw him again, *she thought faintly while I began to count down from 10.*

I wish we had a second chance.... *she continued before drifting off into sleep.*

There was no need to delete myself when we still had feelings for each other.

I tried not to cry out of happiness. I was tired. This operation was more draining than any operation I've ever done. I had to hit several more keys, as the Retinentia did not detect any new memories within its banks. The Looking Glass shined faintly, as if asking, *You done here, man?*

One more key, and I began to call out to her, as she began to wake. "Hey, it's over, Moneta. You can get up now."

She got up groggily, and rubbed her eyes blearily. "Nemo?"

Normally, I had a long speech to give to all the patients who came in to see me. Except, the only thing I could muster up was:

"I didn't... delete anything."

Moneta got up out of the Animus shakily and made her way towards me. "Why?"

"I heard your last thought, Moneta. I... I haven't been the best boyfriend I could have been. I didn't realize how good I had it until you left me. As shitty as it sounds, pain builds character. And uh...

"I'm willing to work things out between us. I want to be there for you." I finished lamely.

Moneta placed her hand on my cheek and laid her forehead against mine. It lasted a few seconds but it felt like a lifetime.

"I know I haven't been the best girlfriend I could be, either. I'm sorry I kept bugging you about your work," Moneta whispered.

I chuckled softly, and laid my hand over hers. At this point, I'm technically breaking a lot of the Oath, but I didn't care.

Wipe my memory. Fire me. Just let me treasure this moment. "I'd be lying if I said I enjoyed my work, Moneta."

Moneta scoffed. "I'm sure you've seen pretty shitty things."

"Moneta?"

"Hm?"

"How does Venice sound?" I blurted out. I didn't care. I genuinely didn't care.

Moneta started laughing.

The lights in the room began to flicker off, as the only thing that showed on the Looking Glass was our reflection as we walked out of the room, hand in hand.

A Fish's Dreams

Christine Nguyen

A single betta fish, known for its vibrant colors
Has the ability to glide around the world
In a matter of seconds
As this one's world is starkly unlike others.

In solitude, its world is a miniscule plastic container.
Its sun, the harsh glare from the ceiling light above.
With frequent earthquakes stirred by curious children.

Days drift by of longing for divine hues of royal blue and scarlet
And how its fins could grow into the wings of an angel if only-
The circumstances were different.

The realization of its certain fate dawns upon it.
It begins to lay in an almost lifeless state
Each scale dulling as time passes

And its glorious shine has shimmered down

Until inevitably, the store clerk decides its journey over
As the color is drained and the soul is swirled
Now deemed worthless to its spectators.

The clerk releases it from its plastic gates
For it to flourish-
In another lifetime.

Fear of Water

Bethany LaRussa

Everything was a blurry hue of aqua, my hands were flailing as my shoulders were pressed down. My cries were muffled, voice consumed by the water. *Stop it, stop it!* I tried, but they couldn't hear me. They didn't know. Their feet kicked my body as they fought each other above the surface, it wasn't on purpose. They were pushing each other, I was only caught in the crossfire. They were just playing.

But my eyes were burning, my throat stung, water threatened to fill my lungs.

I struggled to retrieve the air I'd lost, my chest constricting.

I grabbed at their legs, small hands becoming claws in desperation.

It only lasted twenty seconds, but it felt like forever.

The air returned to my lungs.

My tears mixed with the chlorine water dripping down my face.

My hair plastered in front of my eyes.

But it was bright again. I was above the surface of the pool, my brothers exchanging a few guilty glances. Mom scolded them, told me to come out, and asked if I was okay.

I was okay, I lied through tears. I was fine, she wrapped a towel around me. I sat down on the poolside chair, watching my brothers race each other from one side of the pool to another. The sun warmed me, but my mind was filled with that cold water. It seeped into my brain, filling every crevice.

Seven years later, I returned to the pool.

It wasn't an accident, this time.

It wasn't a joke.

The water filled my mouth, stole my breath, and I let it. As I submerged myself, I kept my eyelids pressed tightly together. I lingered there, in the moment, for as long as I could. Months would pass me by, my shoulders would turn to lead, the air in my lungs became replaced by water. I learned to breathe it, it wasn't a prob-

lem anymore. I had adapted, I told myself. I was no longer afraid of the water, I mastered and overcame my fear. But soon enough the pool walls crept closer and closer. The water grew too thick for me to breathe, I felt it again, that fear of the water. My shoulders weighed me down, sticking me to the bottom of the pool.

I pushed off the bottom, desperate, only to sink back down. I tried again, and again.

I couldn't resurface. The faces of my brothers appeared above me, painted by the water. They watched me for a few days. They watched as the pool walls caved in, as I struggled to claw my way to the surface. My parents appeared next to them. All four of them gazed down below at me, their mouths moving.

I couldn't hear them.

But I kicked harder, I pushed myself higher and higher. It would be months before I resurfaced for the first time. It would be only a few weeks before I sunk again. It cycled, over and over.

It's been a year now since I've sunk beneath the surface. Sometimes my shoulders are lead again, I have to try even harder to keep afloat. But I've learned the rhythm of the water, my legs always kick on beat. It's enough, for now, but my fear remains.

Though, it's no longer the water that I fear; sometimes I think it might never have been.

That Type of Anger

Shauncy Lim

The anger that makes you want to set ablaze the football field,
then kick everyone out,
and then shut down the whole track meet.
The anger that confuses you
By how parents can be
The ones who are immature.

The anger that makes you wish you had a whistle
To blow a loud noise just to freak them out
When they would cross the track.
The anger that you wish that a certain
Demographic of people would use their
Brains to think.

The anger that made me feel to seek revenge,
The revenge that would combat their foolishness
Of their insensitivity and selfishness.
The anger that lets out a deep sigh
Just to let God reap what they sow
And let it go.

Lavender Envelopes

Sehej Pawar

my brain is clotted with
rain showers of despair
because a 14-year-old boy
never wanted to share how he
was actually doing because he thought nobody cared.
14 went from 15 to 16
and still kept how ending his life
in the bathroom would be too much to
bear for the people who he thought didn't care.
maybe if he was gone they would be happy.
maybe if he was gone he would leave this misery.
I might still have his memories from 13
where he wished someone would ask him if he was ok but instead he
needed to cry
sitting alone on bathroom floors writing
goodbye notes to his mom and friends.
14 was the hardest letter he wrote to his sister who he cared for the most.
He only cared for the idea she would be happier if she grew up alone.
15 15 15
the arm scars of 15.
Cursive was a beautiful way of writing
but a heartbreaking way of reading.
Letters about apologizing for being
a horrible friend, son, and brother.
Coffee stained paper
nothing but a cry for help on each letter.
Stored and licked on lavender envelopes
with a smiley face sticker and the names of the ones he loved.
13 14 15
letters he never ended up giving.
16 17 18 now 19
he's now a boy living.

La Lune

Shuo Yin

Charred plastic sighs, festering dreams,
Watching the chimney step by step into white mist's seams,
Shrouding all around,
Shorts still in the corner found.

Riddles in the ever-turning drizzle lie,
The moon reflects into my embrace, oh so high,
Palms clenched tight, no space to fly,
A hundred days of May pass by.
Pity for nineteen low preludes' sway,
Pull back the water from the cup, away,
Pull back the impulse, keep at bay,
Wooden boards sliced by light display.

Unfold the cicada's prelude, taking flight,
You know all questions will even out right,
While lies remain mere lies in sight,
The answer is an empty night,
A void where stars hold no light.

Condition

Lucia Lara

The screaming in my head starts. High, piercing screeches that make me want to recoil into a fetal position. I want to protect myself, but my efforts are not enough to save me from the cries that beg to be sobs and words that ache to be spoken aloud.

I am on the edge, on the ledge...please make it STOP! I want to leap, fall, crash, dissolve, obliterate, and be done.

A tiny little meridian in my left pinky finger tends to sting when I feel particularly distressed, telling me to pay attention. I know that I am in despair. I know that I need attention and healing. But this...this condition, the state that I am in...this is what feels like my truth. I chase knowledge, guidance, and loving recommendations from beautiful people. I want to remember the things I've heard, the things I've read..." tools." It all appears like apparitions and evaporates into the stagnant air around me. It's so hard to breathe. I can feel myself sinking into these murky, familiar waters...black and made of fears. I'm tired and have very little desire to try to tread water...I just need to do enough to keep my head above the surface. Ah, yes, the "surface" of things. It is all about appearances, after all... that which is allowed to sit out in the open and meant to conceal the reality of what lies beneath...that which is generally considered socially unacceptable. Do whatever it takes to keep others from feeling uncomfortable. I despise this. I want it to mean nothing to me, yet here I am, giving it my time and consideration.

I wound myself trying to cut away at my pain; each vicious thought and the constant berating dialogue slice and dissect pieces of my soul...a fleshy mess that distracts me from...everything else. I've locked myself in a cage, knowing I have the key...and yet, I stay. Fear and uncertainty bind my hands and cloud my thoughts. Cut some more.

I have become a collector. Gathering pieces and scraps of information, books and podcasts, meditations, gemstones, videos, and courses. Each one represents pieces of this puzzle meant to reveal possibility. It all exists as an incomplete image begging to be solved. Pieces are scattered all around me. I can't seem to make them fit together. Tattered, worn edges and missing pieces...nothing seems to fit together. It's an incomplete image that looks strange and confusing... I need to leave it alone...it's too much for me to process. Leave it alone. Please don't touch it!

The energy around me feels like I'm being pelted with tiny shards of glass. Unseen, but I feel it. More pain. I feel the visceral reaction... eyes closed, head down, a whisper, "Protect yourself."

All of this feels as big as a mountain. It is vast, intimidating, and treacherous. It has existed all my life. I run into it quite regularly. It's hard to pretend it's not there...it is constantly in my path. But today, I wanted to challenge it. I convinced myself I had the strength to stand at the summit, but instead, I fell and rolled back to the bottom. I failed because I started to think and feel. I thought about things I had caused that felt shameful and impactful. I thought about the choices that I've made...those that have brought me so much uncertainty, sadness, regret, and pain. I felt it all nipping at my heels. They distracted me. I looked behind me and lost my footing, so I fell. Today would not be the day.

Exhausted and desperate for respite, I chased potions...one to make me small, one to make me tall, but mostly one to make me forget why I'm even in such desperate need of writing this. I am purging this acidic word vomit...out of my head... onto this page. A tonic to pass the time...praying that I will succeed in silencing the screaming in my mind. Drink it in. Go numb. Let the fog roll in...I will hide in the mist.

Her Wolf's Cry

Seanna Y. Henry

To fight the isolation is a struggle
It's where my mind immediately goes
To be alone is to be safe
Yet alone is where my insecurities grow.

I long to be a part of a pack
A pack of two I suppose
I don't desire to be a lone wolf
But that's how my story always goes.

How can I desire social connection
And run away from it all the same?
My heart is untrustworthy
I've been a victim to organized crime
Against my heart
It has hardened over time.

Will you prove my pessimism right?

To fight the selfishness that comes with self preservation
It all comes down to my bad communication,
I shut down and don't want to feel
I shut down because then it can't be real.
If I deny it
I can recover from the hurt
As if it never happened.

You see, I covet wisdom
And most people say that I have it
But if I had wisdom
Why doesn't anybody stay?
Is my maturity not enough?
Am I not a catch?

Am I ruining possibilities because I'm often stuck in my past?

There's a back and forth in my mind
My desires and my defenses
They overrule my senses.

I run away and cry
I howl at the unfairness of my life
Yet I'm the one who sabotages myself.
I'm determined to avoid going all in
I cannot fall apart
I cannot trust my own heart.

At the end of the day
I will be okay if you stay or go.
At the end of the day
I'm never truly alone.
At the end of the day
I will overcome my fears
The ones that have caused me many many tears.
The questions remains
Will I learn to let people in?
Will I thrive when the moon is high?
Or will I have to say another goodbye?

To the wolf inside
This is my inner cry.

Sculptor's Pride

George Ngo

Click

The lights reveal the room.

Humble workbench, myriad tools

The sculptor paces and turns

finds material, pieces, fragments of inspiration

He places them on his table

methodically arranged, meticulously chosen

The first piece is picked, held tender

yet firmly in his hands

Snipping at the plastic, shape begins to form

Followed by a brushing like wind,

sanded clean

Like a crow handles its treasures

the man works through his pieces.

Gentle hisses sing out in melody,

follow the maker's muse.

Spray and fill, does the form take on hue.

As an archeologist uncovers fossils, slow and with tender care

he too shapes and snips, then sprays fresh coats anew.

Masking with precision

layering with intention.

Then peels away revealing color shone true.

The sculptor gazes at the piece and part

see the fresh bones to build.

Together they are brought, at last to be

No simple toy, but masterpiece

Culmination of a maker's joy.

All In

Kayla Martinella

The town was silent during late nights. The children would be sleeping, women would be setting the table up for breakfast, and the men were already undressing for the night. The wild west was filled with dry sands and hollow ghost towns. The only part of town that was lively would be Downtown Sinpeak. Sinpeak was home to multiple bars and casinos for anyone to come in and enjoy. The town was overall a small town, and downtown was the highlight of nightlife. The echo of drinks being clanged together with hefty laughs emerged through the flimsy wooden doors of the casino. A hand would soon come from the darkness to shove the door wide open. Finally walking into the bright casino entrance, a man with dirty blonde hair and sharp blue eyes came in. Along his quite athletic built body he wore a fine brown leather coat. Underneath the coat would be a white button-up shirt, black pants, and matching brown shoes to sum up the outfit. The man dug his hand into his front jean pocket and pulled out a cigarette from a pack of smokes he had. Placing the flimsy stick near his scruffy bearded face and into his mouth, he used his other hand to light it.

Using two fingers to hold the cigarette between them, he drew his breath in. Inhaling the smoke, he didn't breath for a few moments before he drew the cigarette away. Deeply exhaling, a large smoke cloud could be seen forming out of his lips. He was a regular here. And everyone knew it. Some days he would spend hours gambling, some other days he would spend weeks here. Walking steady towards his usual blackjack table, he took a halt as he stood in front of it. The people around him would be chatting loudly as he took another draw from his cigarette. His eyes focused on the table. He was hunting for a win and he will not stop until he gets it. Finally breaking his gaze and looking about, he noticed that none of the people around were playing. So, he decided to take a seat. The dealer walked up to the table after taking a momentary break, and so the man gave him a brief nod in greeting.

The dealer nodded back, as the man took out five for his entry bet and five more for each of the two bonuses. The dealer auto-

matically slid the man two cards and kept two cards himself. The rodeo had begun. Slowly picking up the cards, he saw that he had a 4 of clubs and a 9 of hearts. Eleven points total. The man tapped the table twice, receiving an additional card, a ten of spades. And that makes 21. The dealer checked his hand and drew one to reveal a king, a 3 of diamonds, and a ten. "And that my good sir is a bust!" The dealer said in a happy tone. The man tisked before throwing in his bet once more. He responded in a dry, deep, and raspy tone. "I ain't done yet." He fiddled with his cigarette which was still burning in his mouth. He was ready for another round. The dealer dealt two cards to the man and two for himself once more. The man looked at his cards, a queen and a king, a solid twenty. The man signaled that he was going to stay with his current hand to the dealer, the dealer checked his cards and put them down 17 for the dealer 20 for the man.

The man looked up at the dealer with a smirk along his face. He had won. The dealer gave off a huff before he gave the man the thirty chips he won. "Congratulations." He responded coldly before taking yet another break. The man stared the dealer down as he walked past the table. "Something must've slivered up his ass." He muttered to himself. The man decided to take a break. His cigarette had died off, so he decided to get a drink. He strolled towards the bar before taking a seat. "I'll have a beer." He said lowly. As he waited, he dug into his pocket for yet another cigarette to light before a sudden silence filled the room for a couple of moments. Confused, the man looked up from digging into his pockets before looking around. Everyone was staring at someone in the front of the casino. Curious, he leaned forward to see a pale woman with all black attire walking slowly past everyone and towards the blackjack table. She wore a long, black velvet dress and a black cowboy hat. Along her feet she wore black heel boots. Her skin was as pale as snow and her lips were a natural crimson red. She turned her head as she walked past the bar meeting eyes with the man that was staring her down. Her eyes were of a bright emerald green that would shake any soul to its core.

The man continued to stare the woman down before he finally got his beer. Paying the bartender in a hurry, he coolly walked back up to the black jack table she was at. He stood next to her before clearing his throat. "By chance, have I ever seen you here before? I

definitely woulda remembered a beautiful face such as yours.” He said in a calm, collected tone. The woman gave him a soft smile before looking at him. “No, you haven’t. But I have seen you before, Mister Everest.” Everest stared at her for a moment before giving off a soft chuckle. “I am honored to have a woman like you remember my name. Can I have the pleasure of getting yours?” His voice was as smooth as butter. She smiled again. “My name is Celeste.” She said in a soft, luring tone. He held his hand out before she placed her soft palm into his. He shook her hand slowly. “The pleasure is all mine.” He gave her a wink. She looked down at the black jack table before she looked back up at him. “Say, how about we play some black jack!” Everest shook his head at first. “I don’t typically play black jack with women.” Celeste frowned in reply. “Oh come on, are you scared to be beat?” Everest laughed off her comment with a chuckle. He wasn’t scared to be beat. He just wanted to be nice. However, a challenge is a challenge. He wasn’t about to give in.

“You have a deal then. If I win, you let me take you on a date.” He said jokingly. She strummed her fingers along the table. “You have a deal.” She met his gaze once more before looking at the dealer who was there once again. The dealer gave out two cards per person and two for himself. Everest looked at his cards, a nine of spades and a two of diamonds. He tapped twice signaling for another card. A king. Everest layed down his cards `` And that’s twenty one! What have you got???” Celest put her cards down face first, an ace and a queen, twenty one as well. Both players looked at the dealer, a king and an eight eighteen. Celeste looked at Everest, holding her cheek in her hand. “Good game.” Everest nodded back at her. “Good game. Guess I’m taking you on that date.” Everest collected his reward. Celeste’s eyes wandered off, looking back down at the table.

Everest took a drink of his beer before asking. “So, where did you hear about me from?” Celeste finally snapped back her gaze on him. “Oh you know, word gets around fast when you are popular. I have just taken a bigger interest in you.” Everest raised his eyebrow. “Is that so? Well I’m only ever here besides that day job I got. Even then, I don’t really go to that either.” Celeste nudged him. “Come on, that’s not true and you know it. You were the first man to climb Mount Deathraddle and come out alive.” Everest waved his hand in

dismissal. “Yeaaaah, it ain’t that big of a deal. I was younger back then.” Celeste looked him up and down. “Well you certainly don’t look old. I know you are only 22.” Everest took another swig of his drink. How does she know my age? he thought to himself before quickly dismissing it. It was probably nothing. He knew she took a big interest in him. “I might be 22 but my body feels like I am 60. Al’at hiking caught up to my body quick.” Celeste nodded slowly in silence for a few moments before asking, “Would you be interested in yet another game?” Everest downed his beer before replying, “Just lettin’ you know, you might get beaten again.” Celeste giggled softly. “Yeah? We’ll see.” She glanced over as the dealer nodded to them both. The dealer dealt two cards for Everest and two cards for Celeste. Everest looked at his cards, a king and a four. Was it worth the loss? Everest tapped the table and the dealer slid a card his way. A six of clubs. Not bad for a hit, twenty is better than fourteen after all. Celeste looked at her cards and signaled a stay. All parties flipped their cards twenty for Everest, nineteen for Celeste, and eighteen for the dealer. Another win.

Everest was on a win streak today, and was steadily winning more and more. He collected his chips quietly. Celeste leaned over the table before abruptly saying in a snappy, cold tone: “So Everest, was it for survival?” Everest looked at the chips with confusion on his face. He quickly took note of her attitude change. “Whatcha mean?” Celeste started walking around the table, tracing her finger along the rim of it. Her nail digging into the wood of the table. “Oh you know.. The murder you committed on that innocent man a long time ago on Mount Deathrattle.” As sudden dead silence filled the thin air in the casino, Everest whipped his head towards her. “...How... How do you know about that?” His tone got serious, but he tried his best to remain calm. Who was this girl? Everest hadn’t told a soul about that day. Not even his own family. The day he hiked Mount Deathrattle, the weather was deadly. Heavy dust storms and hard to breathe conditions left Everest and another man alone in the mountain together. The rest who were competing to get to the top faded off towards the beginning of the hike. Everest and the mystery man stuck together until the harshness of Deathrattle hit them both in the form of a storm filled with heavy dusts and huge rocks. As the storm got

worse, the mystery man that Everest was with got taken by the storm, and was hurt by a huge rock. The rock was just a tad smaller than a boulder.

Helpless and afraid, the man cried for help. He was losing blood quickly as the rock had landed directly on his lower body. From the waist down, he was hurt pretty badly. Trying his best to help, Everest tried prying the rock away from the man's body in a hurry. Unfortunately, the rock was too heavy for him to even lift. The man begged Everest to stay with him and so Everest did. The storm continued till the next morning, and as Everest woke up from almost being buried alive by the sand, he looked over. Only to see the once alive man dead, and motionless. The blood loss caused him to die. Everest couldn't do much. And so he took the dead man's water, and supplies to continue on. The guilt of leaving the man there to die and taking his stuff stuck with him through the years. He was just a kid, and he wanted to live. Everest thought about Celeste's words a bit longer before responding in a cold tone. "I'm getting out of here." Everest quickly got up and turned to walk towards the door. Before he could do so though, Celeste had grabbed him by the wrist. Her grip was strong, and rough on his skin. "Wait a minute. I want to make another bet." Everest stopped struggling and met her gaze. A gaze that was once warm, had turned cold, and bitter. She was staring deep into his eyes. "Let's play another game... A game that I made up. It's called, All In. If you win, you get all the money you can think of. If I win, I will get your soul." His soul?? What was this girl? Crazy??? His head started to get fuzzy. What did she mean by his soul?

Dazed and in thought, he couldn't help but feel a tad interested in this offer. Although this girl knew things about him she shouldn't know, and although she was pretty crazy, he loved the thrill of a gamble. He spent days on end straight gambling at the casino. Yearning for the thrill of winning, and trying harder each time. The feeling of wanting to win lingered onto him, an ongoing addiction. It was a high for him. "Fine. If I do this will you leave me the hell alone?" The girl nodded. "Fine then. Follow me." As they walked to the back, it seemed like the whole casino had emptied out. It was just the two of them, going into the back of the casino. This could

be the end of his life. The feeling of his life ending sat deep within his gut. He knew it was all or nothing. As she led him to the back of the casino, the area became darker. Soon becoming pitch black, Everest looked around. He could feel himself getting more and more nervous as time passed. From the distance he had finally seen a large, all black table with two chairs in the middle of the blackened room. The only thing lighting the room up would be a singular spotlight. Shining ever so brightly down on the dark, almost abyss like table.

Everest slowly and carefully took a seat on one side of the table while Celeste took the other. Celeste's once beautiful and glowing pale skin now looked grim and dark. A dark shadow casted along her face. "I will now explain the rules. The rules are quite simple to follow, unless you are an idiot." Leaning back, Celeste studied Everest carefully, like a wolf hunting its prey. "Since you are a liar, and a deceiver, I picked this game specifically for you. All In is a game mixed between Russian Roulette and the card game B.S. As I stated before, if you catch me lying, you get a lifetime of wealth. If I catch you lying, I will get your pathetic soul." As Everest blinked, Celeste quickly disappeared and reappeared behind him. She grazed her hands along his back and towards his chest in a seductive manner. "Is that.. Clear to you my dear Everest?" As her hands glided down his chest, the flesh on her hands would turn to bone. Everest felt a briskness along his ear. He looked down and saw her now bare boned hands. He froze up almost instantly as he felt her icy cold breath whisper ever so softly. "I do wonder... how your soul will do under my control." Everest closed his eyes once more whilst his heart dropped. She was no human, this was a demon waiting to prey on his soul and take him as hostage. This was the grim reaper in disguise. His nerves reeked of fear, and nervousness. He was not sure he would be able to pull through. He reopened his eyes, seeing Celeste was back on the other side of the table where she originally was. She was ready to play. In order for Everest to win, he had to put on a poker face and pull through. He regained his consciousness, soon looking at her with nothing but calmness in his eyes. He would make sure he would not lose.

Flipping the deck of cards in her hand, Celeste started removing the jokers one by one and started to shuffle. Once the deck

was shuffled good enough, Celeste passed him and herself the cards one by one until the deck was complete. Everest picked up his cards, examining them carefully. Whoever had the Ace of Spades was to go first. Between two fingers, Celeste had pulled the ace of spades out of her pile to show him it. “Lucky me, guess I get to go first.” Everest nodded once at her. “Yes ma’am. That you do.” Celeste smirked, looking back down at her cards. The round started off steady. Celeste started out by putting two cards down. “I place down two kings.” Celeste gave an eerie stare at Everest. Everest could feel her soul-gouging stare along him. He tried his best to focus, looking at his options. “I put down two queens.” Celeste nodded in approval. “I must say.. You are quick. Maybe you won’t get to join your parents soon.” Everest glared up at Celeste. Feeling anger in his heart slowly start to rise up. This was definitely the Grim Reaper. Everest had lost his parents a long time ago. Someone who is normal wouldn’t know this information. Celeste broke out into a putride cackle. “Sad really. They miss you so much.” Everest kept his glare on her. He knew she wanted him to get mad and distracted.

Focusing back on his cards, a few more rounds came and went by. No calls of bullshit were made, just pure focus on the game. The both of them were steadily growing onto their last few cards. The tension was getting higher. Celeste was studying every detail of Everest’s face. Any slight movement that was off, and she would call him out in a heartbeat. Everest put down his second to last card which would be one nine. Celeste followed behind his action, also placing down her second to last card. “One nine as well.” Everest kept a straight face as he looked down at his last card. If he made one last mistake, his whole life can end now. Celeste kept her stare on him. Her face started sinking in by that point. Her skeleton could be seen seeping through her cheeks and eyes. Reluctantly, Everest placed down his final card. “One ten.” Everest looked horrifying. Standing up, a black hood appeared along her body. She grew taller and longer, her body now became a full skeleton. “Are you ready to come to your new home?” Her voice was deeper now, as if a man was speaking. She reached her long, skeletal fingers along her back to pull out a long, sharp scythe like object. With swiftness, The scythe made its way across Everest’s gaze. Nothing but the dark filled his eyesight.

“I’ll have a beer,” Everest said lowly. Wait a second. This seemed familiar. Everest’s pupils widened as though he had a flashback of his life. With silence, he realized where he was. He was at the bar he saw Celeste at once again. Looking around rapidly, he saw that everyone was chatting normally, enjoying the time they were having there. Everest let off a sigh of relief. He had done it. He escaped the grim reaper. He looked at the bar tender before slamming a few coins on the table. Getting up, he told the bartender, “Keep the change.” He lit a cigarette and fell deep into thought. Everest had realized that this life was not for him. That gambling is not a good way to spend the rest of his days. For all he knows, it could be his last. As he strolled out of the casino, he took one last stare at it. “I’m never coming back to this place again,” he said to himself. Tossing the cigarette towards the direction of the casino, he knew his life had to change. A new leaf had sprung, and soon to be a new life.

Ode to My Arms

Valerie Pham

My arms
how I’ve kept them hidden,
frightened to show them to the world.
The flabby arms
that make me feel big
that make me feel so insecure.
Under the sleeves
I’ve concealed the battle scars and
all the wounds penetrating my skin.
These arms.
They’ve endured so much.
Yet, they give me the strength
to reach for the impossible across the table,
to carry heavy weights that my fragile aging parents cannot;
they help me get through the day, through life.
My arms deserve so much love
and I wish I could thank them
because I wouldn’t know what to do without them.

Nani

Kanakpreet Kaur

I woke up from a snooze deep enough to make Sleeping Beauty jealous, still lost in dreams where Minnie Mouse and I were planning to meet-up. As I squinted my eyes open, I found myself in this weirdly familiar chamber that is my grandmother's (Nani to me) bedroom. It was the day-2 of summer break, and instead of jet-setting like my kindergarten friends, I was stuck at home because my parents had more work than Santa during Christmas Eve. I couldn't help but wonder, "Do grown-ups have a secret society against fun, or are they just not privy to the allure of Minnie Mouse meet-and-greets?"

Shuffling into the living room with eyes doing their best impression of halfway-open blinds, I came across the familiar faces – the creaky wooden furniture and my grandparents in their throne-like recliners. However, something was amiss. The room had a hint of quietness, like a dormant volcano. The volcano erupted when it hit me "Where in the world are Mom and Dad?" Before I could unravel this mystery, a voice interrupted from the balcony, with an unknown fear starting to build knots in my heart. I sprinted to the balcony channeling my inner Flash, only to find my parents waving goodbye from the other side, leaving me alone, like Minnie's bow lost in a sea of polka dots. Panic set in with thoughts racing – "Did they forget their kid?" "Are they not happy with me? But I always try my best to be a good girl". Tears welled up, and I started searching for my jeans like a detective looking for clues (I was still in my undies from the night before, living my best summer life). Wiping them away (so that I at least have a vision clear enough to look for my pants) I frantically searched for my jeans, just in case my parents had an "Oops, we forgot the kid" moment. Before I could grab them, Nani enveloped me in her arms, consoling me with, "They had some boring grown-up stuff to do, but it's great news for us! We'll have lots of fun together." With no other alternatives, I agreed, never imagining I could enjoy playing with the elderly, since they mostly read newspapers.

The summer unfolded into a cascade of joy. Playing with great-grandpa, grandpa and the gang felt like being in a sitcom, with

piggyback rides, fort-building, and leg-swinging shenanigans. Every day's highlight? The aroma of homemade food that could rival my go-to McDonald's masterpiece. Surprisingly, I hardly missed my parents or my mother's cooking (which I now realize she picked up from Nani). It turns out, Nani is the real kitchen maestro in our family. The break zoomed by like a dream, and as we shared our final dinner, I realized I had developed a case of "I-don't-want-to-leave-grandma's" syndrome.

Post-dinner, Nani transformed into a bedtime wizard, like every other day in the break. We strolled out to the balcony, where a breeze whispered the end of summer. Together, we stared at the stars, playing celestial connect-the-dots. Tucked into bed with a goodnight kiss and another wild tale, I marveled at the fact that, in the span of a summer, I became a fan of Nani's.

Ever since that unforgettable summer vacation, I've eagerly anticipated every opportunity to spend time with her. Her warm hugs envelop me like a comforting breeze on a hot day, and there's something special about cuddling up with her that just feels like home. Plus, the meals she prepares are not just delicious but also served with heaps of love, making each bite a moment to savor and remember. She's got this amazing talent for making me laugh at the littlest things and jokes. She's not just my ultimate cheerleader; she's my unwavering support system, standing by me through thick and thin. Her boundless joy for my successes often leaves me in awe.

Fast forward 15 years, and here I am, grappling with the uncertainty of what's to come. Three years have zipped by since I last laid eyes on her in person. I often find myself pondering, "Was immigrating to the US worth sacrificing some of my closest bonds?" The thought that I may never get to wrap her in a hug grows more daunting with each passing day. The idea of losing her and facing the unknown stirs up a mix of emotions, leaving me feeling uneasy.

With her battling health issues now, all I want is to turn back time to simpler days.

Chaotic Comfort

Sophia Minor

sitting in my room,
window open for air as i work on assignments
as i type,
i notice a new scratch on my hand,
or that the hair i pulled out of my face two hours ago
had slowly been slipping out,
and now rests freely on my shoulders
the tie once holding it has fallen somewhere on the floor.
i hear my parents moving downstairs and their mumbled voices
conversing.
i hear the stove timer go off,
letting me know they'll be eating soon.
i hear scurrying outside and take a break from my work to look out
the window
i see my cat chasing a fly or a beetle outside,
jumping,
then sitting trying to spot it,
and then pouncing again.
i hear my neighbors playing with their kids,
or with their friends gathered happily in the backyard.
the car shop nearby blasts music to fight against the sounds of
clashing metal
it's loud,
but not loud enough to drown out the genuine laughter of the
workers,
and not loud enough to disturb the pets
or the children playing with them, and one another
the sound of the train passing by
at the same hours every day,
making my room shake
and adding to the commotion outside.
cars join as well,
honking and speeding away,
sirens yell,

jets fly by,
dogs bark,
stray cats fight,
different birds speak in different ways,
even squirrels add their own noise,
and even when it gets quiet,
there is still a single car that will drive by
or a single animal that will make the slightest noise,
that will break it.
although there seems to be no peace,
i realize,
this is where i feel most comfortable.
the dissonant noises blend,
into what is almost like white noise to me.
it's still loud,
and there are times when even i get annoyed,
but more than these noises are a disturbance,
they are the sounds of life.
they make what may be lonely feel less lonely,
filling what otherwise would be
empty space.
it's chaos but,
it's also comfort.
a reminder that i'm living,
and so is everything else.

The Anomalies of Ridmouth

Natalie Ninichuk

Drip drop drip drop. The sound of a leaking ceiling echoed through the cabin, repetitive and almost soothing. The raging thunderstorm shook the room, wind blew up against its thin wooden walls, whistling through the unsealed cracks in its exterior. Gusts of wind periodically pelted the windows with rain, and streaks of lightning lit up the night sky. The cabin was empty, the only thing inhabiting it being a wooden desk, a chair, a straw stuffed mattress on a metal bed frame, and a cast iron wood stove. As the thunder rattled the house a figure appeared on the front step illuminated by the moonlight that shone through the window. He wore a brown duster, a pair of black work boots, a scarf covering most of his face, a pair of round glasses, and a hat that was supposed to keep the rain at bay, but was soaked through to his scalp. The man rushed inside, intent on drying himself and warming himself up.

It was late November in the remote New England town of Ridmouth, The trees were vibrantly red, orange and yellow, and the sky was a consistent cool gray. Sunlight failed to radiate through the low hanging stratus clouds blanketing the landscape. The town consisted of old wood and cobblestone houses lining the coast, and a lighthouse on a rocky outcropping. The sea beat up against the rocks sending white foam up into the air. The town was largely a fishing village that relied on the ocean for its livelihood, with the occasional tourist during the summer months. Ridmouth was perfectly ordinary and mundane.

In the Cabin outside of town its sole inhabitant was scribbling away at his notebook, by the light of a candle. On shelves lining the walls of the cabin countless jars were illuminated by the orange glow of the wood stove. Light reflected off the jars, specimens of all sorts were visible. Embryos, organs, limbs, and strange malformed creatures that looked otherworldly, all preserved in formaldehyde. Insects with their taxonomic names were mounted in frames that hung on the wall, and there was some taxidermy scattered around the room as decoration. As the man continued writing his face

contorted, looking frustrated and confused. With a sigh the man slammed the book shut, and a cloud of dust blew from his desk. The man reluctantly got up from his creaking chair and made his way to his wood stove.

He gazed into its orange glowing embers, the swirling flames dancing in his eyes as he stared longingly into the hearth. He added a few logs to the fire, hoping the added fuel would keep his cabin warm until morning. As the man sat on his straw mattress he stared at the ceiling of the cabin, his eyes tracing the cracks in the wood as he slowly drifted off to sleep.

Darkness, pitch black. A door was accompanied by a single red light that gleamed down the hallway. The streak of light was coming from the bottom of a door. The house shook, howls and wails echoed through the halls. He approached the doorway, the shrieks getting louder, the light growing brighter. As the moans and wails loudened they became more defined. He could almost make out human voices, but it sounded as if one voice would merge into another, and would eventually devolve into a sound that was indiscernible and bizarre. He could feel himself being led down the hall towards the door by some unknown force. A feeling of dread filled his body, a pit in his stomach tried to keep him from moving further, but he couldn't stop. Slowly he put one foot in front of the other seemingly against his own will. As he stood outside the door he felt himself reach for the knob, as he touched it the door swung open with a loud bang. He gazed into the room, in the corner he saw a nebulous cloud, that was entirely indiscernible. He thought he could see screaming human faces but they would recede into the mass as quickly as they appeared. The mass was incomprehensible, inconceivable, impossible to fathom, and its enigmatic nature seemed to torture his mind. The howling screams sounded almost human, but at the same time they sounded bestial and unfamiliar. His head throbbed, his heart raced. He could feel the cloud growing to fill the room, with tendrils of black smoke pouring out of the corner to lap at his feet. He fell back kicking at the cloud as it approached him, crawling backwards. The howling got louder, it almost sounded like a roaring wind. His heart beat in his ears, he could feel his heart wanting to give out.

The man in the cabin woke with a thud, entrapped in his blanket on the wooden floor. His heart was pounding in his chest, he could feel his neck pulsing violently. He shot up clutching his sweat drenched blanket not quite sure what he saw, but was terrified nonetheless. His dream was vivid, and everything seemed familiar to him, but not quite like reality.

He rushed to his desk and flipped open his journal, ripping pages upon pages out. Within minutes drawings of what appeared to him in his dream covered the walls. Each drawing tried to capture what he saw, but the incomprehensible entity couldn't be rendered on paper. He needed to understand, but it was hopeless. With every drawing the vivid entity from his dream faded from his mind, he was unsure if he even remembered what it looked like.

Viewers

Eryth M Jaworowski

Why must anything be seen in more than one way?
Why analyze more than once
Why take more than a single glance or dedicate more than a single
eye?

Why are there more eyes on me?
More than I can count
How many perspectives are there on this piece?
How many to criticize?

How many tiny little slits encircle me,
They stare, they pierce
Spears fly from the tiny holes.

The weakest of their form may be the most hostile to me
An eye will be poked but these poke at me.
They Drip, with acid, with envy, with contempt, with judgment.

I am so afraid of them,
Eyes surround me,
At every angle, they see all I do.
They can attack from any direction.

I do not know which is open or closed.
I do not know what lays beyond each portal,
What is within each pinprick hole.
But they know of me,

Are they watching still
Do they continue to read on
What do they see
Is it my Anxiety that they seek

Water gushes from each
Threatening to drown me
Mine follow suit
And it is those added drops of acid bleach
That becomes my undoing.

Poetry For a Troubled Soul

Bryanna Dolida

I grew up dark in the shadow of my brother.
My feelings remained safe in my mouth covered by tape.
“Do better. Do this. Your brother did that. Try this.”
No...Why?
A latina boy in a new town fits in better than I do.
I walk past his friends and hear “Damn nice body. Let me hit boo.”
This isn’t fair.
Why is he only silent? Doesn’t he know his friends are violent?
He is supposed to be my best friend. My protector. My Twin
brother.
I cry and just hear shut up by our mother.
Why do people not understand me?
They just walk past and let it be.
I’m older by just minutes.
What makes me so different from him?
I go to school. Learn. Go to church. Pray. Go home. Cry.
Why do I even wanna try?
Nobody listens to what I have to say, they just expect me to pray.
Instead, I lock my door, sit on my bed and start writing.
My red notebook, buried with thoughts and feelings and poems.
At that moment, I hear nothing else but my pen writing hard on
paper.
Poetry helps me heal.
It is the drug to my soul.
It’s the only thing that doesn’t flake.
Everyone else just makes me break.
But not my poems. They stay put and keep me together.
Poetry is the outlet for expression. It is the healing for a troubled
soul.

The Hero's Journey

Zach Overton

In Shadow's home, the hero's tale unfolds,
A steadfast heart in valor's sweet embrace.
Against all odds, his noble story molds.

Through trails dire, his courage holds,
He rises, undaunted, courage enlaced.
In Shadow's home, the hero's tale unfolds.

A beacon against the dark, he stands bold,
Defying fate, destiny he must chase.
Against all odds, his noble story molds.

With every step, a new fight he beholds,
A symphony of hope, he is their ace.
In Shadow's home, the hero's tale unfolds.

Through battles fought, and triumphs inscribed,
He stands, a mark of unwavering grace.
Against all odds, his noble story molds.

In songs sung, his heroic tale extolled,
A hero's soul, time cannot replace.

In Shadow's home, the hero's tale unfolds,
Against all odds, his noble story molds.

Long Nights

Megan Nguyen

The time that I have dread finally came
Daily routine simply delays my trial
Every day my fears remain the same
The brief walk to my room feels like a mile

I climb under the sheets which feel like weights
In bed, my mind just wants to run away
The clock ticks on as I await my fate
This time of night my thoughts have more to say

Self-loathing fills my head with no remorse
Anxiety makes me yearn for escape
Silence only gives my voices more force
I close my eyes to go to the dreamscape

The voice tells me I don't deserve to live
But every night I find ways to forgive

Embracing My Own Path

Dana Lorenzo

The summer breeze carried the scent of grilled pork and the lively chatter of my extended family during our reunion at the park. I started to mentally prepare myself for the expected waves of upcoming criticism and passive aggressive comments from relatives, who I barely see, about my choices and lifestyle. The air was thick with anticipation as I approached the buffet table, where a distant relative, Tita Baby (Tita meaning auntie in Tagalog), awaited with a plate piled high with pancit (a Filipino noodle dish) and a judgmental glint in her eyes. We exchanged pleasantries, but it wasn't long before the conversation took an unexpected turn.

"Diana, how have you been? Have you eaten yet?" Tita Baby inquired, her tone laced with a subtle edge.

"Oh, you know, busy with school and life," I replied, attempting to keep the conversation light.

She assessed me with a critical gaze, and with a disapproving smirk, remarked, "School? Aren't you too old to still be in school? You know, your younger cousins, they're all excelling in their careers. Nurses and soon-to-be lawyers. What about you? Wait, are you pregnant? That explains so much about how big you've gotten."

I felt the sting of her words, each one a punch in the gut and a pointed reminder of the expectations placed upon me. The unwritten script insisted that at my age, I should already have it all with a picture-perfect body, a flourishing career, a family, and maybe even a home with a white picket fence. Life, as I had come to know it, had its own plans for me. In that moment, I wished I could have disappeared, escape the prying eyes and intrusive questions. I tried to brush it off with a forced laugh, masking the hurt that lingered beneath the surface. Tita Baby was relentless as always. But then, a quiet voice within me began to rise, a voice that carried the resilience of years spent navigating a path less traveled.

I took a deep breath and let that voice speak out, "No Tita Baby, I am not pregnant. You might not see it, but I've been working hard all of these years. After high school, my dad disappeared, and I had to take on responsibilities to assist my mom in caring for my younger siblings. I juggled driving them around, working full time, and attending community college part-time just to make ends

meet. Unfortunately, I lost my motivation for school and eventually dropped out. Then during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I lost my dream job, my best friend and grandma. I was depressed for months. I admit that I gained some weight during this challenging period, but it was a means of survival for me. Now, I'm back in school, learning at my own pace, being more mindful of my diet, and incorporating exercise back into my routine. I've also made the decision not to have children until I complete my education and save enough money to provide for them. I've been forging my own path, and I'm content with that."

The moment hung in the air, my words were a declaration of my resilience and self-worth. However, as I looked into Tita Baby's eyes, it became clear that my narrative clashed with the preconceived notions she held about success and fulfillment. Tita Baby's response was a dismissive chuckle, a condescending smile playing on her lips.

"Oh, Diana, always with the excuses. You're running out of time. Your younger cousins have it all figured out. Angelica just got a promotion, and J.J. is top of his class in law school. I guess you'll never be as successful as them," she blurts out. I knew that she was just going to continue to put me down while she boasts about her kids. I neither need nor deserve this toxicity, so I decided to stand my ground. By suppressing the urge to respond with anger, I chose a measured tone and took another moment to breathe deeply.

"I'm genuinely happy for them, Tita Baby. Everyone's journey is different, and I've learned to embrace mine. It doesn't diminish their achievements for me to have my own path," I replied.

But Tita Baby remained unmoved, her perception clouded by societal expectations and a narrow timeline of success. I took a deep breath and continued down the buffet line. The family reunion continued, but a palpable tension lingered between us. The negativity that clung to Tita Baby's words couldn't erase the years of hard work, the sacrifices made for family, and the resilience that defined my journey. As the summer day wore on, I chose to focus on the connections that uplifted me rather than those that sought to diminish. The echoes of Tita Baby's negativity slowly faded into the background, drowned out by the chorus of understanding and acceptance from those who saw me for who I truly was—an individual forging her own path, unapologetically embracing the complexities of life.

The 2024 Jim Luotto Prize for Essays on Literature

winner:

Romie Asplund

“To Write is to Weave: The Tapestry of Truth as Told by the Dialogic Narrator”

To be a writer is to be a weaver of tapestries. Humanity peers into mirrors, and what they see they call their reflection. Only the writer knows that the mirror is actually a tapestry painstakingly woven into the likeness of the observer. After all, it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. To tell a story, then, requires more than illusion and innovation; it is to reflect truth through the voice of a dialogic narrator. Tim O’Brien is a prime example of a dialogic narrator who has separated his literary voice from his personal one in order to embody various forms of truth. Truth is relevant, truth happens, and truth is felt. According to philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, the dialogic voice is a form of literary consciousness that is “born as a voice in a dialogue that is already constituted” and is therefore connected to greater “social, historical, and ideological contexts” (Mambrol). Rather than following the story of a singular, isolated voice, it switches perspectives depending on the type of truth it wishes to convey (Huang, Sutherland 321). O’Brien accomplishes just that through his odyssey into the “literal and metaphoric relationships between stories and bodies” (Chen 77). In his short story “The Things They Carried,” O’Brien invokes Bakhtin’s dialogic narrator to flit between variations of truth that exist between stories and bodies with the purpose of weaving a literary tapestry that reflects the complexities of human suffering.

The first relationship that O’Brien explores in “The Things They Carried” is one between the reader and the unreliable narrator, replicating the wary attitudes that humans harbor toward the story of death. In this instance, the truth is portrayed in the form of American soldiers and the war they fight both externally and internally in the jungles of Vietnam. The Vietnam War was “a wild and terrible work of fiction” authored by the United States government to expand military and political power across the globe (Kaplan 43).

For the soldiers, on the other hand, as literary critic Stephen Kaplan puts it in “The Undying Uncertainty of the Narrator in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*,” the discrepancy between the stories the government told about the war and the truths experienced by the bodies that fought in it was so appalling that it engendered a strained relationship (43). After being fed false narratives about the enemy, its sins, and the brutal tactics to triumph at all costs, “[t]he only certain thing during the Vietnam War was that nothing was certain” (Kaplan 43). With “no sense of strategy or mission” (O’Brien 8), the soldiers in Lieutenant Jimmy Cross’s unit live in perennial fear of death. The narrator insists that the things the soldier carry are exclusively for necessity, only to later confess that they succumb to superstitious amulets in hopes of fending off the inevitability of an unpredictable death (O’Brien 7). The following question is then raised: what is the truth? Are the things the soldiers carry “determined by necessity” (O’Brien 1) or by “a world of uncertainty” (Kaplan 43)? O’Brien cleverly replicates the soldiers’ layered internal chaos in the minds of the reader by delivering his truths through an unreliable narrator who falls into a “pattern of quickly stating facts then calling them into question” (Kaplan 45). This is especially apparent when the dialogic voice is channeled through Cross.

Initially, the reader is informed that his lover, Martha, is a virgin, but this certainty is muddled by his admission that “he was almost sure” (O’Brien 1). The way that Cross feels toward Martha is a convoluted and tainted microcosm of what seems to be his own feelings toward the war, death, and the remaining men death has yet take from him. In fact, he carries in his wallet a photograph of Martha playing volleyball. The narrator, through Cross, attempts to convince the reader that she has a “taut” tongue, “no visible sweat,” and “the legs of a virgin, dry and without hair... carrying her entire weight, which was just over 100 pounds” (O’Brien 2). There is no way for anyone to deduce these facts from a 1970s photograph, let alone a man who has only interacted with Martha platonically. Or are they more than friends? The reader quickly begins to question their own understanding of Cross and Martha’s uncertain relationship when he calls her a virgin yet speaks of her “boyfriends” (O’Brien 2). For all the reader knows, Cross could very well be in a requited relationship

with Martha yet chooses to “preten[d]” (O’Brien 5) that it is one-sided in order to combat his uncertainties through the act of portraying her as predictably unattainable and cold. In the same vein, the narrator stewards the reader through the series of stories shared by Cross and his men, only to reveal toward the end that those stories may not even be real, for the soldiers are but “actors” with “stage presence” attempting to conceal their “[g]rief, terror, love, longing” with “hard vocabulary” (O’Brien 11).

The purpose of the unreliable narrator, then, is to make the reader “fully aware of being a participant in a game, a performative act, and thereby also is asked to become immediately involved in the incredibly frustrating act of trying to make sense of events that resist understanding” (Kaplan 48), just as the soldiers are but pawns in a war that does not make sense to them. They trusted the government but found themselves dancing with death. By carrying the burden of truth that cannot be trusted, O’Brien’s narrator tells the truth about the way the soldiers felt toward the war—and how humans, as a whole, react in the face of death. Truth is ambiguous and untrustworthy because truth, at its core, is irrational.

As O’Brien’s dialogic narrator weaves itself into the consciousness of Cross’s irrational relationship with Martha, he mirrors the stories of love that connect bodies of the living and the dead. Although the narrator leads the reader to believe that the most significant relationship in “The Things They Carried” is the one between Cross and Martha, this is but a performative tactic meant to serve as a distorted funhouse mirror. Beneath it is the heart-wrenching story of the love he harbors for his fallen comrade Ted Lavender. Literary critic Susan Farrell reminds readers to separate O’Brien the writer from O’Brien the narrator, for the former is “much more self-consciously aware of gender issues and critical of traditional gender dichotomies” than he may present himself in the text (2). While Cross’s relationship with Martha is certainly reductive and borders creepiness, the narrator does not intend for it to be taken at face value because:

...readers are not supposed to make the same easy gender classifications that Cross does. This point is driven home by Cross’s reaction to Lavender’s death. Cross is not only a ro-

mantic who fantasizes a love affair that's not really there with Martha, he greatly exaggerates his responsibility for Lavender's death. (Farrell 3)

In other words, Cross's infatuation with Martha, and, later, his increasing disdain for her, is an embodiment of his "guilt-ridden imagination" (Farrell 6) and the "irrationality of...Cross's burden of guilt" (4).

As Cross convinces himself that his infatuation for Martha is what kills Lavender, he comes to the conclusion that she never loves him in the first place and that he, in fact, hates her. This sudden departure from infatuation to hatred comes off as irrational to the reader, but the dialogic narrator has seen it all. It is the omniscient voice of god that is cognizant of what has transpired and what is yet to come (Mambrol). The reader, however, is not god, so this tension between what the narrator knows and what the reader is meant to know mimics the tension between what Cross knows to be true and what he wishes had happened instead. Because of the deep love he carries for Lavender and his desire to have prevented his freak accident death, Cross develops "standard operating procedures...focusing instead on duty" (Farrell 4). He is done with love. Love is what kills Lavender; if Cross did not love her, he would not have been ripped apart by his death. Death only feels real when there is love. For now, he blames Martha because his heart is "tainted by a masculine anxiety over his failure to be the best platoon leader ever" (Farrell 6). At the core of the "relationship between stories and [dead] bodies" (Chen 77) is love with nowhere else to go. And grief invites isolation.

O'Brien's narrator crafts dialogic isolation by setting Martha apart as the incorruptible virgin to drive a wedge between the relationship the reader has with the idea of women. This is his way of capturing in his tapestry the overwhelming sense of isolation that follows a shared traumatic event. In the case of Cross and his men, the traumatic event is when love intersects with the Vietnam War. Cross carries Martha with him, both metaphorically in his heart as well as physically in the form of a photograph. Originally, he allows her to coexist in his world of "stresses and fractures, the quick collapse" (O'Brien 6) of war. Her innocence provides him with escape

from the daily bloodshed he is involved in, but once he loses his close friend Lavender, his trauma becomes personal. Though war itself is traumatic, he has men to share that trauma with, particularly Lavender. When this person suddenly dies for seemingly no reason, Cross is at once revolted by Martha's purity he once celebrated. So affected is he by Lavender's death that he now wishes to keep Martha out of his world "because...she [is]...a virgin and uninvolved" (O'Brien 9). Critic Pamela Smiley suggests that O'Brien's "point seems to be less the gender stereotypes than the (non-gendered)" reality that "[w]ar destroys order, subverts higher processes such as reason and compassion, and returns us to instinct and our bodies" (605). Cross has entered self-defense mode, and the sense of order that the war destroys is the idea of home.

Because at its core, "The Things They Carried" is not a story about trauma recovery or resolution but "about accepting...and learning to live not through Vietnam but with it" (Chen 80). Literary critic Tina Chen posits that Vietnam in "The Things They Carried" symbolizes the "alienation" (80) one feels after experiencing "psychic trauma" that "engender[s] the...impossibility of ever achieving an unproblematic return home" (79). It is not that home no longer exists for men like Cross. On the contrary, home is alive and well, only it no longer feels accessible to the traumatized, who have spent months steeped in death and agony. Home feels virgin-like: young, callow, and unadulterated by bloodshed, much like the woman in the story. How can the soldiers feel connection with the people back at home who have never lodged a bullet in another man's head or lost their best friend mid-urination? As Cross's objectification of and disdain for women bleeds into the reader's consciousness, the dialogic narrator toys with gender roles to recreate the estranging nature of isolation and the subsequent resentment experienced by the traumatized. Of course, that is not to say that the narrator eschews shedding light on real gender roles.

O'Brien's dialogic narrator shifts gears to critique American imperialism by weaving the threads of living and dying bodies into a portrait of pawns in an ongoing story of fictitious morality. At its surface level, "The Things They Carried" runs the risk of presenting itself as a heroic tale of macho infantrymen avenging the death of

a fallen comrade. A closer look says that it is a criticism on the nation's "self-narration" that seeks to conceal the fissuring illusion of American "glamor" and morality (Chen 78). Critic Marilyn Wesley's "Truth and Fiction in Tim O'Brien's 'If I Die in a Combat Zone' and 'The Things They Carried'" propounds the idea of "The Things They Carried" as an anti-war war story that calls into question the morality of the Vietnam War and, moreover, what was required of the soldiers to perpetuate the story of American imperialism. Pillaging, plundering, and rejecting effeminizing softness are traits that Cross and his men emulate in order to "ferociously reassert traditional notions of manhood" (Farrell 5). The dialogic narrator reveals this to be no more than an illusion invoked by men who possess, in actuality, neither "courage" [n]or valor" but a crippling fear of death (O'Brien 11) as they are forced to resort to crimes against children and civilians all the while "America [] declare[s] itself innocent" (Wesley 13). Modern war stories are normally imbued with riveting battles that "assig[n] absolute righteousness to 'us' and complete culpability to 'them'" (Wesley 6). O'Brien's story, on the contrary, portrays "violence in terms of burden rather than battle" (Wesley 6), a burden shared between American and Vietnamese lives.

This is how O'Brien's narrator tells the "truth not just of texture but of accountability" (Wesley 13). One of these burdens is that of being a man as dictated by American imperialism. The war teaches Cross that he is to do away with feelings that might come between the agenda of pushing forth the frontier. He learns to become an icon of "American individualism and courage" who "shrug[s] off barbarity" (Wesley 13). The narrator expresses the disillusionment the soldiers harbor toward the war by inserting his voice into dialogue uttered by characters other than Cross, like Mitchell Sanders, who repeatedly insists that "[t]here's a moral here" (O'Brien 11) but is never quite able to determine what that moral is. And that is just it—there is no punchline, no higher cause that can impart meaning to the rotting, "badly burned" body of a sixteen-year-old having his thumb cut off by G.I.s as booty (O'Brien 7). Someone has to take responsibility for the damage that has been done, but to do so would be to disrupt the story of America's "past and vision of the future" (Chen 78). That the narrator believes the reader capable of account-

ability, however, implies that he carries hope for change.

Finally, the narrator can illuminate his tapestry with tinselly threads of hope for human suffering as reflected in the relationship the soldiers have with the stories they tell. The dialogic narrator creates a deliberate rift between the “standard of literary authenticity and the project of moral evaluation” (Wesley 2) in order to cater to the relevant “social, historical, and ideological contexts” (Mambrol). The implication is that happening-truth and feeling-truth are both the truth, and they share a symbiotic relationship. While the former version of truth tends to wax “apocalyptic and secular” (Vernon 185), the latter “uplifts us [and] provide[s] some small bit of rectitude, if only temporarily” (183). Cross carries with him the happening-truth in the form of Martha’s photograph, but he also presses his lips into his good luck pebble in hopes of actualizing the truths that her photograph makes him feel. Lavender carries eleven more rounds than the typical load of 25 rounds (O’Brien 30); simultaneously, he fearfully stores his tranquilizer on him at all times to prevent the deathly truths the rounds represent.

Literary critic Alex Vernon in “Salvation, Storytelling, and the Pilgrimage in Tim O’Brien’s ‘The Things They Carried’” purports that the men turn to the “transcendent power of storytelling, and the trance-like state of its composition” (Vernon 178) to get themselves through the happening-truth of the war. Vernon likens Cross and his soldiers to pilgrims on a progress through the metaphorical story of Nam. What this story bestows is “universal” (Vernon 180) meaning and purpose upon the soldiers as well as “the enemy and with the reader, even—and especially—those with no military or war experience whatsoever” (181). O’Brien’s narrator reinforces the idea that humans will always have stories to tell to bridge the gap between what is happening and how it makes them feel. Somewhere in the middle lies what Vernon calls the “ability to imagine the future,” (187), or the pilgrim’s salvation. The happening-truth is that Cross and his men are killing villagers and defiling corpses. Their “unweighted fear” (O’Brien 3) is the feeling-truth. Though the soldiers in “The Things They Carried” ignore the feeling-truth in favor of a lie, the reader can tap into the connection between the two forms of truth to discover a fertile ground that catalyzes change. For instance,

just because the government carries an agenda that deprioritizes human life does not mean that the citizens must partake in it. They can access their feeling-truth and resist. In the same way, the isolation one feels after a traumatic event can be catalyzed into a realization for the necessity of “universal fellowship” (Vernon 181). There is no moral to be learned from suffering because the narrator’s intention is for humanity to learn how to reduce suffering overall.

O’Brien’s dialogic narrator exists within and without “The Things They Carried,” tugging then plunging into the consciousnesses of stories and bodies that, when stitched together, reveal the evolving relationship between truth and human interpretation. He abnegates monologic discourse, which denotes a “one-way transmission of unchanging ideas...to interpret predetermined meanings” (Huang, Sutherland 321). The narrator’s tapestry is not limited to Cross or Lavender or the corporeal setting of Vietnam, and it is not meant to be taken at face value. The context of the Vietnam War allows O’Brien’s dialogic voice to espouse a diversity of personas that connect the reader to their personal truths regarding death, love, trauma, politics, and hope. They are forced to direct their attention away from the war and peer inward to the crux of human suffering: relationships. Then and only then can the reader awaken to the tapestry within themselves that connects their own “stories and bodies” (Chen 77) to the stories and bodies of the rest of humanity. This is how O’Brien’s narrator leaves his mark on the ever-regenerating fabric of stories, thread by thread, dyeing humanity’s lore with the color of connection.

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Parallel Perspective

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