

Red Wheelbarrow

Student Edition
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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 five 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 five 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.

Red Wheelbarrow

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Front Cover: "The State of a Pandemic Infested World," Fatema Kazi

Back Cover: "In His Hand," Ann Lee

Frontispiece 1: "Gate," Maria Anisimova

Frontispiece 2: "Untitled," Fatema Kazi

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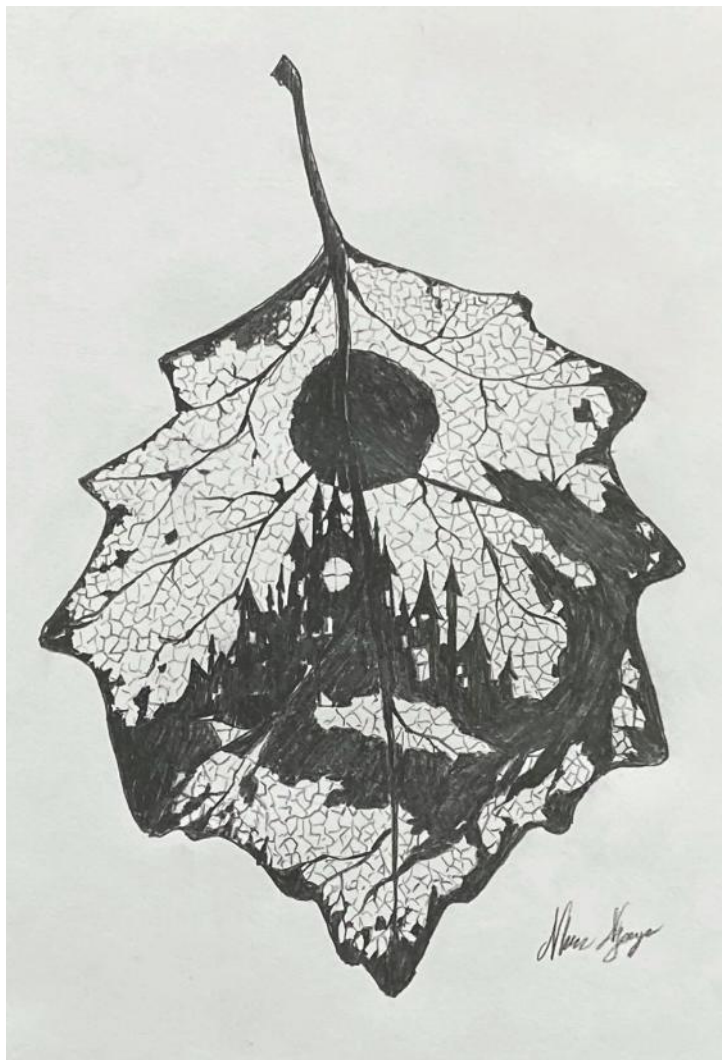
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Natural Arrangement

Nhan Nguyen



Where the Grapevine Grows

Paige Walker

The grapevine grows outside a window
Unfurling toward the sky
Soaring until it births
Sweet green alien eyes

Fated to be woven with a fence
Aching from cavities unknown
To a mother whose sweetened stitch
Is bound to where her fruit is sewn

The aliens grow downward, craving
Coils of mother's love
Heedless of the pillars
Whose rot looms from above

When the sugar proves too potent, and
The cavities crack throughout
The wood and vine, now labyrinth
Their wayward tangle slinks out

In the fledgling rubble, the violet eyes
Remain, alone with the nectar
Of a knotted vine's bygone reign

Blue morning, again & again

Julian Parayno-Stoll

Quiet now as the sky's first light breaks through little cracks in the blinds where birds hug in nests above you. I lay soft steps onto the carpet. Do you know that? These steps made of bare feet & shallow breaths? How the air chill sinks into the floor, like moss? Subtle

folds in brown blankets worn as fur run electric currents through me. There a knee, round curve of hip, fire peaking between your breasts. Even in the dark that swallows us whole, I feel its lines. Tracing them for the tip of a tongue or leafing blossom. Hear your

silent prayers to sunken seeds — thin roots for whose sake you push small fingers in damp, black soil. "Patience is loving," you said, under stairs where kids were playing. & you climb over creases where I slept within the sheets. Squinting against the light, you smile at me.

Sugarcane cavity

Julian Parayno-Stoll

I wonder:

if my feet will remember

the soil where my ancestors walked,

if my legs will know how to swim

in clear, warm waters,

if my arms will be able to hold

my body's weight from a coconut tree,

or if my mouth can still produce

withheld consonants

dripping off my tongue

at last?

Or, if nothing else:

if my heart will pump

channels of blood between

the islands of me —

beating to the rhythm

of volcanoes &

rainy seasons,

& standing on stilts

thatched with palm leaves,

a home

wherein lives

the brownness

in my soul.

My father's carving

Julian Parayno-Stoll

I am the apple
that fell far
from the tree.

 You're the tree.

& you are the burning ring
of the wall tearing at itself
in the oval impression
of a fist.

 While I am memories
 that click by —
 fuzzy images
 in a ViewMaster
 & no eyelashes
 to make it clear.

& you are grabbed hair
severed
like grey veins
in broken tile

 as I am a hatched egg's bird
 scrambled
 on the doorstep
 learning to fly.

& you are the seller of cages
looking away
at tall ceilings,
looking for more
always more —

 but I am afternoons
 on the windowsill,
 seated above the driveway

in the glimmer of a thousand
golden squiggles of dust,
clenching my throat.

Because you are my anger:
the fist I blame
when the door's teeth
are stuck in my hand
cupping tears.

Yet I am
your smile
buried under
a stack of photos
& dreams
let go.

So when I was
two puppies sleeping
at the foot of the bed,

you were
a drawer full
of Irish Spring that answered
every question I had.

& now we are both
a telephone
that refuses
to be touched

& we are both
pain.

Lemon Tree Calendar

Madison Salas

Last year in March
The lemon tree bloomed
White-blossomed outside my window
With the promise of fruit

I suppose you could call it ironic
that I never used to have enough time—
and the things that I wanted
sat unripe, in my mind
soil untilled, creation unnurtured
laid dormant
for “someday” to come

Last year in June
The lemon fruit sat—growing
Yellow suns in green foliage
And I think I picked a few

never moving outside
without the new mask
but trying to relax
and understand that the isolation
was people made strong
the sadness meant safety
and hope could still grow

Last year in September
The lemon fruit dropped
And sat rotting on gravel
Fruit festering slow in the cold

and corruption had called
the rights of existence—
of people's lives into question
and California turned
orange and I wondered
just how much of the world had to burn
before it was "real"

Last year in December
The tree sat barren
Branches scratching empty at a window
That I barely moved to open

I've never had the best memory
years lost and slipping through my fingers
but I never knew it could happen so fast
time turned to a wound
left rotting and stale
the still air of a house
haunted by routine

And then it is March again
A year traveled
In one long stretching, sudden instant
And the lemon tree blooms are late

the

Fall

Sara Robertson

it seems as though
we are always
Falling:

we Fall
in love
and surrender ourselves to honey lips

we Fall
asleep
and slip under the surface of subconscious

in Fall
the flowers
die away.

everything Falls
from the sky:

hail,
feathers,
& planes.

Fall
down on your knees,
and pray with me:

Goliath
was unbeatable—
— was beaten.
he fell
to the ground with a thunderous *boom.*

Adam
Fell

from grace;
Fell
for Eve's sweet taste;
Fell
for Lucifer's disgrace—

Lucifer
Fell
from Heaven

you have heard it said
that Lucifer
was God's favorite
son?
the sun
does not rise;
we know

we orbit
around it.

would we Fall,
without it?

the sun—
they think—
orbits
around a supermassive
black hole
at the center of the milky way

someday
will it, will we—Fall in?

for the very last time ?

Girlhood

Sara Robertson

The boys would whisper to each other, peer at her out of the corners of their eyes and laugh—quietly—as she walked by. They would laugh quietly so she wouldn't hear them but she heard them; she always heard them. She held her head up high and walked past with a tall back because she knew they just wanted her. After all, boys are only mean to you because they secretly like you.

The boys would whisper to each other, whisper the names of the boys who've said they've screwed her, the boys who told the other ones that she was dirty, she was nasty, she was bad. But she heard them. She heard them say these things about her and she didn't know if she liked it, because not one boy had paid her any attention the year before, but over the summer she had blossomed into a plump, luscious creature with pillows for lips and small budding breasts. She didn't know if she liked it because the boys finally noticed her but they didn't seem to talk about all the other girls that way and she didn't know why they said they had done these things to her, or why they said that she did these strange, grown-up things. Did her parents do those things? She didn't know. She did know that the boys imagined her doing those things and she didn't know if she liked it.

She heard the girls start to talk about her too, because the boys told the other boys who told the girls who told more girls so she started to wonder when the teachers, when her favorite science teacher, would start to talk about her too. She pictured herself called into the principal's office and getting a Saturday school like she did that one day when she had a mean, wrinkled gargole of a substitute teacher and her phone had gone off in her backpack. But now the girls knew about these things she had apparently done, these things that she wasn't even entirely sure she knew how to do. Some of the girls even asked her, did you really... he said you...what was it like to...did it hurt...and she would shrug and mutter something small and insignificant, I don't know, and then they would go on with their day.

Then one day she did hear her name over the loudspeaker, and she did take slow, heavy steps down the empty hallway when she was supposed to be doing a science experiment; they were making ice cream with salt and ice cubes today and she was going to miss out, on this stifling hot day, the day she had so looked forward to because she loved

her science class and she loved ice cream, but now she was walking down the empty hallway to the principal's office and she knew what they were going to ask her. She knew what they were going to ask her, so she was surprised when she sat down at a long wooden conference table, not in front of the principal's desk, and there was the principal but there was also a soft-looking woman with wispy white hair and kind brown eyes who smiled at her and asked her how she was doing today.

She said she was okay but kinda nervous because she didn't know why they had called her in and she didn't think she did anything wrong and she was sorry if she did, when the lady with the kind eyes quickly glanced at the principal with knitted brows and then put a warm, wrinkled hand on top of her small, smooth one and said that she wasn't in trouble, they just wanted to talk about some things. They asked her how her parents were and she said they were good, that they were nice and they loved her. Did she have any friends? Not really, but she ate lunch with her science teacher and they talked about space, about the earth's layers, and she thought if she was twenty years older her science teacher would be her best friend. Then they asked if she thought the other kids were mean to her, and she didn't know what to say.

Were they mean? Boys are only mean to you because they like you, and she knew they did like her—they liked her a lot—but they never talked to her, only about her.

We're concerned about you, the principal said. Some teachers have come to us with what they've overheard. We just want to make sure you're doing okay. Miss Kim, our school's free therapist, is right here if you ever want to come in and talk to her.

And she didn't know what to say. All she could think about was that her science teacher knew and probably thought so much less of her, though she didn't know why.

She said that she was okay and that she would go talk to Miss Kim on Tuesdays during lunch and asked if she could leave because they were making ice cream in science today.

She would go see Miss Kim. It wasn't that big of a deal, really. Although she wasn't sure if she liked it, she knew that boys are only mean to you because they like you.

A Demon Did My Homework

Maxwell Smitherman

I always imagined that if I sold my soul it would be to save the world, or to time travel, or something of equivalent awesomeness, not to pass the eighth grade.

“Hey nimrod, what’s the deal?” Echoed the serpentine voice in my skull.

“Shut up, I’m trying to think.” I hissed back. I was alone in the school bathroom for now, leaning over one of the functioning sinks with maggots squishing around in my stomach. Everything felt really big right now, the lights were too harsh, and I was somehow hot and cold at the same time. I stared at myself in the mirror, my dark hair falling over my face like a curtain, but I could still make eye contact with my reflection. Inside the shivering blue of my eyes I saw a faint swirl of purple smoke coil around my pupils. That smoke was Corvax, the demon that had been riding shotgun in my brain for the past few weeks.

“Come on, Jeffrey, buddy, I can hear your thoughts and you’re thinking way too loud right now! Slow it down and talk to me, pal.” Corvax’s voice echoed and reverberated like he was somehow underwater, even though he was in my head.

“What are we going to do?” I asked, desperate. “If they know that I’ve been cheating somehow—”

“Hey!” he interrupted, offended. “What did we talk about? You’re not cheating, remember? You just have a very engaged and effective tutor.” Purple smoke poured out of my reflection’s ears and coalesced into a translucent blob that floated over my shoulder, attached to the back of my neck. Two shining golden eyes winked open and a grinning mouth spread over the blob.

“Yeah, whatever,” I said, swatting over my shoulder, my hand passing through his form like it would through smoke. “Still, I can’t just tell people a demon did my homework! They’ll think I’m crazy, and if my dad finds out...” I gulped and felt the blood drain from my face. “I don’t even want to think about that.”

“Yes, the wizard becoming aware of my presence and our partnership would be less than ideal, which is precisely why we will not allow that to happen, correct?”

“Yeah, yeah, okay.” I said. I felt sick to my stomach, I hated everything about what was going on. But I needed to pass my classes, and Corvax was the only way I could do that, so ... In for a penny in for a pound I guess. I checked my watch—my parent-teacher-student meeting was supposed to start five minutes ago, which meant my dad was probably getting to school about now. He had a bad case of chronic lateness with everything that didn’t involve his work.

“Kid, hey,” Corvax said. I looked at the form he’d taken in the mirror; he was still smiling. “I got this, and so do you, alright? We’re in this together, and I’ve got everything you need to make it out of this suspicion free and with passing grades.”

“You do?”

“Absolutely.” The smile on his purple form widened. “You just have to let me help you.” I nodded, trying to gather my resolve. I’d gotten Corvax’s help dozens of times now, and it wasn’t really a big deal, honestly. I just had to lend him some energy, and he would give me some knowledge in return, it’s no big deal, it even feels pretty great. As a wizard’s apprentice, I have a little energy to spare, and I don’t focus all too well most of the time. Trying to remember all the facts we learn in school is ridiculously hard, impossible even. But with Corvax’s help I can remember everything—heck, I even know things we haven’t learned about yet, and I don’t even have to study! I can read fun books, and watch shows, and play with my friends, and still pass all my classes—it’s great! I bet with his knowledge I could even figure out how to build my own computer from spare parts found in a dumpster. How cool would that be?

But I know what my dad would think. He doesn’t like it when people make deals with entities like Corvax. He’s a real wizard, like Merlin or Doctor Strange—it’s pretty cool. No one knows about his magic, or any magic, unless they have to deal with something weird or spooky, then he usually helps them. He’s a freelancer basically, at least that’s what he tells the other adults, which is his code for being a wizard for hire. A lot of the jobs he ends up taking actually involve helping people deal with entities like the one sitting in my skull. But he won’t have to help me with Corvax. He’s got enough on his plate and I know a lot about demons and stuff, not like the people who lose to them. I’m the son of Callahan Wyrd, the wizard. I can handle a simple deal with Corvax.

“Okay, help me.” I said to Corvax’s image in the mirror. His smile widened and his form zipped back into my ears. I could hear the rush of energy as he flew through my mind, and the whole world began to spin. My chest became tight and suddenly gravity pulled on me twice as hard. I barely held myself up on the sink as my vision tunneled, but in a second it was over and I felt...good. Everything was going to turn out great, I was sure of it. I picked up my backpack, slung it over my shoulder and strode out of the bathroom and into the empty school halls with newfound confidence. I walked to Ms. Fay’s room, the teacher who had gotten suspicious of my grades suddenly going from C’s and D’s to straight A’s. I walked past row after row of green lockers, and nodded to a few people I recognized as I passed and said hi to friends.

Most everyone else had either gone home, or was heading home—the only people left were stragglers, teachers, janitors, and me. And as I rounded the corner that lead to Ms. Fay’s room, I saw that my father was also on that list.

My dad is a tall guy, and his height is accentuated by the long overcoat that billows beneath his knees; he wears it everywhere. He’s got a hat too, one of those flatcaps you see in movies that take place in old London, and he walks around with a cane—it’s very Victorian. It’s not really a cane though, it’s his wicked cool wizard staff that focuses his magic. My dad has the coolest toys. As he saw me round the corner a smile touched his mouth and the wariness in his features vanished. He wasn’t accustomed to being in places filled with so many normal people. As I saw him I felt Corvax writhe inside me, recoiling in a mixture of volatile fear and anger.

“Wizard...” I heard him hiss.

“Hey!” I called out to him with my thoughts. “Leave my dad alone.” He didn’t like me talking to him like that, and I felt him pinch my brain in frustration. I tried to smile back at my dad while I walked up to him, but I knew worry was written all over my face.

“Hey kiddo, how’re you doing?” he said, pulling me into a half hug as I reached him.

“I’m okay, Dad, how’re you?”

“Oh I’m doing just fine. Do you know what this meeting is about?” He looked down at me, searching my gaze.

“Not sure, but this is her room.” I shied away from his eyes and

pointed to the door in front of us as an excuse. He nodded.

“Okay, well, I guess we’ll learn something new together.” He gently clapped me on the shoulder and knocked on the door. “It’s been a while since I’ve been in school. That’s what happens when you’re as cool as me.” He smiled and winked at me. I laughed and rolled my eyes while my heart began to race.

“Here we go,” I thought to Corvax.

“Alright pal, just keep calm and don’t give us away. If you start floundering, just hand the wheel over to me, sound good, Bud?” He muttered back. Wait, hand him the wheel? What did that mean? Before I could ask him or think too much about it, the door opened and in front of us stood Ms. Fay. She was tall too, but not as tall as my dad. She wore nice clothes like always and had her red hair tied back in a ponytail. Her startling green eyes took my dad and me in, then she smiled and held out her hand to him.

“Mr. Wyrd, I presume?” she asked. My dad took her hand and they exchanged introductions. Both of them were very polite and formal. I was too busy trying to tune out the ringing in my ears to listen. She led us into the room, shutting the door behind her, and sat us down in front of her desk. My dad squirmed in the too-small middle-school seat, and took in the orderly classroom around him. Ms. Fay taught us science and had planets hanging from different parts of the ceiling and all these different colorful models from every scientific field I could think of. She sat down behind her desk and took out a folder with my name on it. Gulp.

“So,” she started, opening the folder. “Let’s talk about the recent change in your grades, Jeffrey.” Sweat immediately started to bead up on my temple, but I took a breath and tried to stay calm. My dad looked between us, confused.

“Wait,” he said. “I thought his grades were getting better?”

“Yes they are,” Ms. Fay laid out a test I’d bombed before Corvax. “Almost too good.” Then she laid out a test we’d taken a couple days ago, which had a perfect score. “About two weeks ago, Jeffrey’s grades made stark improvement, from C’s and D’s to straight A’s. As you can see here, even perfect scores.”

“This unit makes more sense to me,” I heard myself say. “And that meeting I had with the school counselor really woke me up.” And

that was true. The counselor had come to me telling me I was going to be forced to repeat the eighth grade if I didn't start doing dramatically better in all my classes. It's why I called up Corvax in the first place.

"While I think it did wake you up, I don't believe you when you say that this unit makes more sense to you." She pulled out another folder and laid out an assignment from my math class, which I had also aced. Gulp. Then one from my history class, and my English class, all with perfect scores. Double gulp. "Because it seems like you've been getting perfect scores in all your classes all of a sudden. Almost like you have access to the answers."

"You think he's cheating?" my dad asked, his brow furrowing as he went over the papers.

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Ms. Fay said. That gave me pause, and I could feel Corvax pause as well. What did she mean in a manner of speaking? Did she know about Corvax somehow?

"No," Corvax hissed in response to my thoughts. "She's mortal, she can't know about me."

"What, did he steal an answer key or something?" my dad asked, looking to me after he said it, hints of anger starting to show through his expression. That hit me like a punch in the gut and I felt the confidence I'd gained from Corvax's power begin to wane.

"I don't think it's quite that simple." Ms. Fay said, pointing to the most recent test. "This was a pop quiz, one I'd created without an answer key to test that very theory before calling you here, and he still got a perfect score."

"Well maybe he's just a smart kid. I happen to know him very well, and intelligence is one of his key attributes," my dad said hotly. A small smile tugged at the corners of my mouth, but it vanished quickly as the pain set in. It felt good to have him believe in me like that, but I knew he was wrong. I was only doing well in school now because of a demon, the exact thing he spent his days fighting.

"I never said he wasn't smart," Ms. Fay said hastily, "but I think something is off here." She paused, pursing her lips as if thinking carefully about her next words. "Mr. Wyrd, you work in an...unconventional field, correct?" Everything got very quiet and still all of a sudden. My heart skipped a beat and I don't even want to know what was going on in my

dad's head. I glanced over to him and saw his fingers gripped tight on his staff, and his other hand unconsciously flexing and relaxing underneath the desk.

"I'm a freelancer, if that's what you mean," my dad said cautiously.

"Yes, and you're a freelancer in a rather interesting area, as far as I'm aware." Ms. Fay leaned back in her chair, maintaining eye contact with my dad. "I believe you helped an old friend of mine out with a problem she was having at home with an...uninvited guest." She examined his expression as a look of recognition flashed over his face.

"That is my specialty, why do you ask?" He was speaking slowly, trying to gauge the new nature of the situation. I was just glad the spotlight was no longer on me for the moment, it gave me a chance to—

"I cheated," I blurted out, to everyone's surprise, especially my own. Suddenly everything sounded very far away and I felt a throbbing pain explode behind my eyes as words were drawn out of my lips without asking me first. "I paid a friend to pass me answers to tests while we took them and to do my homework for me." My own voice sounded foreign to me, and as I tried to stop talking, I realized that I was no longer in control of my body. I felt my back straighten, and my legs cross, and I desperately fought to move anything at all, but was held back by that throbbing pain in my skull.

"What?" both adults said simultaneously.

"*Hey!*" I tried to shout. "Something's wrong! I didn't say that!" But my words rattled around my head without leaving my throat.

"*Shut it, nimrod.*" Corvax spat at me. "I'm getting us out of this, you'll thank me later." That's when it dawned on me—Corvax had moved from riding shotgun, straight into the driver's seat of my body. My chest tightened, or maybe it didn't, I wasn't sure anymore, All I could truly feel was an overwhelming sense of dread and fear wash over me.

"Jeffrey, did you really do that?" My dad asked, looking at me with confusion and disappointment plastered on his face.

"*No! There's something wrong! Dad, help!*" I tried shouting, but it was no use.

"Yes, I'm sorry, I just couldn't do eighth grade again. And you're always so busy with work, and hardly ever around to help me with

schoolwork, so I had to find another way to pass my classes,” Corvax said through my teeth. I watched the words hurt my dad as Corvax blamed him for me failing.

“Look, kiddo, I know things have been hard since your mom...”

“It doesn’t matter,” Corvax said hurriedly. “I can just retake the tests on my own, can’t I? I think I understand the material now.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that easy, Jeffrey,” Ms. Fay said, her brow furrowed. “Cheating is a serious offense, and needs to be suitably punished.” She reached into a drawer on her desk and pulled out an old wooden pen. It looked like an antique from decades, if not centuries, ago, and was made by hand. “First, I need you to write out a full confession of what you did.” She pushed a piece of paper and the antique pen toward me. I felt my hands move up, reaching toward the desk. I tried to fight them, but it was no use. Corvax had an iron grip on my body, and I just couldn’t shake him off.

He reached out and picked up the pen, and as soon as he did a shock of white hot pain exploded up my arm. I yelped in pain as a flash of green and purple lightning arced between the pen and my hand. Suddenly the world rushed back to me, mostly at least. Now things didn’t sound so far away, and I rubbed my stinging hand of my own free will.

“What the hell was that?” I heard myself say. Corvax wrenched back most of the control he had over my body, but I pushed back with the small foothold I’d gained.

“Hey!” my dad shouted, pushing my desk back and standing in between me and Ms. Fay. “What did you do to my son?” Suddenly the scent of woodsmoke filled the room and I saw the runes carved along my dad’s staff begin to glow with a faint orange light. Ms. Fay brought her hands up in a placating gesture, her eyes wide and locked on me.

“Old fairy magic,” she said. “A spell designed to ward off evil spirits was imbued into that pen centuries ago. It reacted violently to him, which means that’s not your son, not entirely at least.”

“Well, that’s not very nice sweetheart.” Corvax hissed out of my mouth. My back arched as Corvax did the psychic equivalent of a suplex to my brain and tore all control of my body away from me. I was kicked back into the recesses of my mind and became an idle watcher through

my own eyes. In them I saw my dad whirl around to face me and saw him close his eyes and open them a second later, a ring of blue light encircling his iris. He had opened his third eye, and was able to see things as they truly were, and as surprise and fury flashed over his face I knew that he could see Corvax's essence wrapped around my body like chains.

"Let go of my son!" he roared, bringing his staff up to point at me, the smoldering runes flaring with light and power as he did.

"Not so fast old man!" Corvax said through me. He brought up my hands and I felt him draw in power. He was using me to cast his own magic! Magic is a complex force, that exists in every aspect of the universe, one that I'd only just begun to experiment with. The elemental forces of creation, matter, atoms, all forms of energy, everything has a little bit of magic laced into it. Corvax and my dad drew upon the energy within them and around us, causing lights to flicker and wind to whirl.

"Spiritus Torques!" my dad shouted, swinging his staff around and unleashing a glittering wave of verdant sparks towards me. Corvax hissed something foreign and ancient in my mouth, and swept the shower of sparks aside with a rush of power. My dad's spell crumpled under whatever working Corvax had whipped up. I had never been able to do something like that on my own, especially not without a focus like a staff or a wand.

"Slow down, geezer, we don't want your darling boy to get hurt in the crossfire, now, do we?" Corvax said, and with an effort of will he summoned a jet of flame in my hand and held it up to the side of my head as he stepped backwards into the rows of desks. Everyone stopped moving as Corvax held the fire next to my temple, maintaining control of the flame so as not to burn me. At least not yet. "Let's all just take a moment to talk here, okay?"

"Get out of my son." My dad growled, power seething off him even as he held himself back.

"Nuh-uh, this is a hostage situation, Callahan, I make the demands here." Corvax pursed my lips as he thought, still maintaining the fire. I kept struggling in my psychic prison, but I couldn't break free of whatever hold he had over me.

"Who are you?" My dad asked.

"Oh, what? You don't recognize me? I'm hurt, Callahan, really.

And I thought we had something back in '08." Confusion flickered over my dad's expression. Corvax sighed. "Come on, you don't remember Jersey?" That's when confusion changed to recognition.

"You're that thing that got those warlocks all hot and bothered with power back then. Called yourself Corvax."

"Ding ding ding! We have a winner ladies and gentlefolk! I had a bunch of little warlocks back then, and you took them away from me. So I've gone and found myself a new one. Only problem is that it doesn't quite have the juice I'm looking for, and you certainly don't want me riding around in your little boy anymore, now, do you?" My dad didn't respond, he just clenched his jaw and stayed silent. A quiet affirmation. "Good, now, we can make a deal that benefits both of us. You want your son, and I want to experience the wonders of the world with a proper vessel." Corvax smiled. "What if I take a ride in you instead?" My dad blinked and I screamed from my mental prison. My dad was one of the most selfless people I knew, and I knew he would do anything for me, including letting a demon into his body. I couldn't let him do that, not because of me.

"Take a ride in me? How would that work?" my dad asked, which was odd. He knew how something like that worked, it was almost as if he was trying to keep Corvax talking. That's when I took stock of my body and noticed that I was breathing heavily, and my knees were shaking. I was exhausted. Corvax was still maintaining the fire he had summoned. On my own I could barely light a fireplace, let alone conjure a self-sufficient jet of flames. Corvax was exhausting my reserves, but hadn't noticed over the sound of his own voice. He was going to run out of power to draw on soon, which meant that he wouldn't be able to deflect another attack from my dad.

"Oh come on, you're the big fancy wizard, master of magic. I thought you pretentious scholarly types claimed to know all about what something like me can do." Corvax coughed and his balance wavered. "What the...?" He panted. The fire in my hand began to flicker and die. My reserves of power had finally run dry. "What the hell?" Corvax yelled, fear and confusion evident in his voice. Without any witty one liners or preamble, my father shouted his incantation again and hurled a second

wave of sparks at me. The spell slammed into my body as Corvax collapsed to one knee, and it washed over me. Suddenly it felt like my whole body had fallen asleep with that tingly static feeling as the sparks worked their way through me. I fell backward, bowled over by a surprisingly strong wave of force, and landed on my back with full control over my body restored in an instant. I felt fatigue batter me like a hammer, and every part of me was wracked with a dull aching pain. And behind me there was a screech.

I looked back to see a writhing purple mass struggling within a sparkling green net that had folded in on itself to create a sack to hold Corvax. My father rushed over to it, pushing desks aside, and hastily drew a circle on the ground around it with a piece of chalk he'd pulled from his coat. After the circle was drawn I heard the quiet pop of magic sealing it shut, and my dad began to mutter an incantation while Corvax struggled as helplessly as I had moments ago. Within seconds, the circle lit up with bright light and with a deafening whoosh, like the flushing of an airplane toilet, Corvax and his prison vanished into thin air.

After the threat had been dealt with, my dad whirled around to tend to me, frantically searching me for wounds of any kind. Ms. Fay grabbed a bottle of water and rushed to my side as well.

“Hey Jeff, kiddo, are you okay? Talk to me, kid,” my dad said.

“Yeah, I’m okay, I’m okay, Dad.” I said. He smiled and leaned down to hug me. I hugged him back and felt a lump form in my throat as tears began to fall from my eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Dad. I’m sorry,” I cried. He hugged me tighter.

“Hey, it’s alright, kiddo, it’s okay. I’m just glad you’re okay.” He leaned away from me and looked at my face as I wiped snot away from my nose and tears from my eyes. “What happened, Jeff? Why didn’t you tell me you were in trouble?”

“I was scared,” I said, looking down at the ground. “I was failing and I didn’t want you to know because I didn’t want to disappoint you, or make you mad. So I looked through your books and found a knowledge spirit, or demon I guess, and used it. None of this was supposed to happen, I’m sorry.” My dad held on to my shoulder and moved down so that he could make eye contact with me.

“Hey, listen to me. You don’t have to be scared about disappointing me, ever.” His eyes welled up with tears too. “I know I haven’t really been around much lately, and that’s on me. But we’re a team, right? Two wizards against the world—it’s going to be okay.” He hugged me again, and I felt all of the tension and fear I had held melt away. After I had gotten myself together I looked to Ms. Fay.

“I’m sorry to you too, Ms. Fay, if you have to fail me I understand.” She smiled at me, sadness coloring the expression.

“Well, you did cheat, sort of, but I’m sure we can work something else out in another meeting. For now,” She looked around at the trashed classroom. “I think I have to clean up, and you two should get home. We’ll work out a solution tomorrow, okay?” She held out a hand and helped me up. I nodded, ashamed, but hopeful. My dad and I started to leave, but I stopped as a thought struck me.

“Hey, Ms. Fay?” I called. She looked up from the desks she had started to put back in place. “How did you know that I had cheated using...well, something weird?” She smiled, a twinkle in her eye.

“Maybe because you’re not the only one here with some experience on the other side of the fence.” She winked, and nodded to the door. “Now go on, get some rest, little wizard. We’ll talk soon.” And with that, we parted ways for the day, and my dad and I drove home without an unwanted passenger sitting in the car.

A Collection of Ashes

Deven Sutaria

“Come on, come on,” I muttered as I watched the timer tick down on the eBay listing. I looked on in anticipation as the auction for a signed, limited edition, and very hard to find comic was coming to an end. I was the highest bidder, but I have been sniped before and I knew everything would come down to the last couple of seconds. I had three different tabs open, constantly refreshing each to see if the bid changed. “Three, two, one...” I hesitantly said as the auction ended. The screen reloaded and... “Oh thank god,” I said, releasing a huge sigh of relief—I had won. It took \$200, what I had saved up from about a month of babysitting, but I would finally have my grail. I glanced at the clock and saw it was already 11:30 p.m. Technically since it was a school night and I was in middle school I shouldn’t be up this late, but getting this comic book was worth it. I stretched and got to bed, feeling pretty happy at being able to get that comic. Little did I know that this was going to be the last time sleeping in my own bed for a while.

*

I am usually a pretty heavy sleeper and have a hard time getting up, and unfortunately, that night was no exception. I was vaguely aware of background noises but I tuned them out. I don’t know how long I was in that state, ignoring the sounds of activity, still in my warm dreamland, until the lights in my room suddenly turned on and my dad was shaking me awake. “Hey, hey, get up, right now—it’s an emergency.” As I heard him say those words my consciousness slowly seemed to return and I was suddenly aware that something wasn’t right.

“What’s wrong?” I grumbled still not fully awake but trying to keep my eyes open. I glanced at my clock and saw that it was only 2 a.m. and it looked like it was still dark outside.

“Listen,” my dad said, shaking me again, “There is a fire and it is really close to here. We got an evacuation notice so we are leaving. Get up and get ready to go. We are going to try to be out of the house in ten minutes. Grab what you want to keep, then meet me out front. I already have grabbed all of our passports and medicines, I’m going to go back outside now and help your mother prep the cars.” And just like that he turned around to leave, but not before throwing my blankets off to make sure I didn’t go back to sleep.

“Wait, hold on,” I hoarsely yelled after him. “It’s not even fire season yet!” But he had already gone and I was left alone, in my PJ’s and lying half upright on my bed. As I rubbed my eyes I got up and looked at my phone, and realized it had been buzzing this whole time with a fire evacuation alert. As I silenced my phone I walked towards the sliding door to the backyard and went outside. The brisk night air washed over me, finally waking me all the way up. It was pitch black out and I could barely see anything as there was no moon. I waved my hand a bit and the motion light turned on. And as the area was illuminated, I saw a lot of dust flying around in the air. No, not dust I realized, it was all ash, and it was already starting to coat things in the backyard. As I smelled the smoke, the gravity of the situation finally hit me—the fire really is close. I ran back inside and into my room. I looked around wondering what I should do. I remember my dad saying to grab what I wanted to keep.

I looked around my room and froze. I wanted to keep it all. From the signed Batman poster on my wall to my shelves of collectible figures, there was no way I could leave any of it behind. I pulled out a suitcase from my closet, a Batman suitcase, and started to load my figures into it. “Dude, what are you doing?” my older brother yelled as he was passing my room. “Deal with the stuff you want to keep later, first change out of your pajamas and into some real clothes. Then pack some more clothes, toiletries, portable chargers, etc. C’mon, we don’t have much time,” he said as he tossed a little bag at me and then hurried down the hall with a backpack in hand. I looked at what he had tossed me and saw it had my toothbrush, toothpaste, comb, and some floss. I let out a sigh and decided to leave my Batman suitcase for now as I grabbed my Superman suitcase out of my closet and started stuffing it with some clothes and other things I would usually pack when leaving the house to go on vacation. Once I felt like I had enough I turned my attention back to my Batman suitcase. I carefully started to add in more collectibles until it was almost full. I looked around my room and saw I still had so many figures, comics, and other collectible memorabilia.

There was no way I could fit it all in both of my suitcases. Maybe my brother would have some extra room. As I had that thought he

was going down the hallway again, this time empty handed as he must have already brought his bag to the car. “Hey,” I called out to him, “do you have an extra suitcase?”

He peeked his head in my room and asked “for what?” I vaguely gestured to the stuff in my room and he noticed my batman suitcase overflowing with collectibles. “Do you... even know what is happening right now?” he said, staring at me as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“Um yeah, we have to evacuate for the fire. I need to save my collectibles though so I need some extra—” Before I could finish the sentence he came into my room and turned off my light. He grabbed me by the hand and brought me to the window.

“What do you see?” he asked.

“Um, darkness?” I replied, not sure what he was getting at. I felt him push me hard in the back and I almost slammed up against the window. “Hey WTF, dude,” I yelled at him.

He said, “Look again, right there,” and he pointed to one spot in the distance, emphasizing it by hardly tapping the window. Something was slightly bright at that spot, although I wasn’t quite sure. “That,” he said, as if speaking to a child, “is the fire. It is so close we can see its light. We are evacuating because we are in danger—as in the fire is going to be here soon. Get a grip and stop worrying about your damn collectibles. You have everything

important to you packed? Good, you’re done, go meet Mom and Dad outside.” He turned to leave my room and he turned the lights back on.

“No,” I said, “I’m taking them with me. I’ve been collecting for years and I’m not leaving it all behind.”

My brother turned around, walked up to me, grabbed me by both shoulders and shook me really hard. “How stupid are you?” he yelled. “We can see the fire. That means the fire is probably going to be here. Soon. That means it may burn our house down. We may have no house after this. Even if you take your collectibles with you it’s not like you can keep them, we would probably have to sell them for money if we lose our house. So whether you take them with you or leave them here, either way you are losing them. And if our house doesn’t burn down, then you don’t have to worry—all your stuff will be safe. So, take

what you think you will be able to sell for the most money or something that is truly irreplaceable to you. Because this—” he waved at my room— “might all be lost either way. Now if you’ll excuse me,” he said leaving my room again, “I have some things that are actually important to do.”

I stared at the door for a few seconds after he left, then turned back to my Batman suitcase. I just stared at it for a few seconds before unpeeling it and having all the figures spill out. What my brother had said pained me, but it was true—I can’t have a collection if I don’t have a house. These figures may be considerably expensive, but I had other things that were just as valuable, monetarily, and would take up less room than the toys would. I grabbed my bin of comics and grabbed out the ones I knew were the most valuable—signed comics, variant covers, limited editions. All things I suddenly realized might not be mine for much longer. But I would rather sell these and have them go to another collector who would appreciate them than have them burn up in a fire, and I knew that every one of them would fetch a pretty good price online. With a note of finality, I zipped up my Batman suitcase, now stuffed with many prized comics. As I looked up I saw one other comic lying in another pile. While I was pulling out my most valuable I had left that one behind—it was an old tattered comic anthology, not rare in the slightest, and held together in some areas by tape. But as I held it in my hands I realized it was my most valuable comic. To me anyway. It was my first ever comic—what had gotten me hooked in the first place when I was younger, and that I had read hundreds of times throughout my life. Before I really had friends to play with at school I would bring this to read, and it actually helped me make friends as I met other kids who liked comics. Out of everything in my room, this was probably the one thing I would never be able to replace. I opened up my Batman suitcase one last time and managed to slip it in there. That was one comic that I would not be selling. It was my first comic that had started my collection, and if everything here burned up and I had to sell the rest, it would be the only thing left from a life of collecting.

My mom came into my room then, taking pictures of each room probably for insurance purposes. She came up to me and held me and told me it would be alright. I hadn’t even realized I was crying until she

wiped away my tears. She told me to go and meet my dad and my brother out front in the car, and she took my Superman suitcase with her. I slowly left my room, dragging along my now extremely heavy Batman suitcase. I took one last look at my room, my unmade bed, my drawers open with clothes spilling out, and comics and toys littering the floor. I closed my door and left it all behind. As I got to one of the cars my brother helped me load the suitcase into the back of one—the car was practically stuffed with things like blankets, food, water, and other bags, but he managed to make room.

My brother explained that my mom would be driving one car and my dad would be driving the other, and that I would go with Mom and he would go with Dad. He said they would be out here soon once they were done checking everything over. When they came out we all met in the driveway, with the porchlight illuminating the area, and with ashes falling around us. My dad gave us each a flashlight and walkie talkie/radio and said, “Alright, we have food, water, and some other rations we might need. I turned the gas off and tried to move away any easily flammable things. And I unlocked our garage door so it can be opened manually.”

My mom said, “I did a final sweep of the house to see if we missed anything important. I closed the doors and windows and took pictures and videos for insurance. I contacted our cousins who live about an hour south of here. We will try to head to their house. Is there anything we are forgetting?” She looked at both me and my brother when asking this—she and my Dad had probably already gone over this in the house.

My brother added, “I grabbed our laptops, some backup batteries, and I see we all have our phones and a radio so I think we are good.” My dad rubbed my head real quick and then we split up into each car and headed out. I had wanted to contribute something to the conversation but my throat was too swollen to talk. I felt like I would either throw up or break out crying again if I said anything, so I stayed quiet. There was a lot of traffic as everyone in the neighborhood was also trying to leave. My mom and I were following the car with my dad and my brother. I tried several times to look out the window in the back, trying to catch a glimpse of our house, but the car was so stuffed there was barely a gap to look through. My mom wouldn’t let me open the window because the ash was still coming down and it was already starting to smell smoky in the

car. The car's radio was on the emergency channel and it kept broadcasting evacuation instructions. My eyes had finally dried up, although they still stung a bit, but I wasn't sure if it was from the smoky air or the tears. My stomach had started to hurt too, and I regretted not using the restroom before we left. Finally, we rounded a curve and we were on an open-ish road.

I used to love driving through this area because it overlooked our neighborhood, and when I was younger I would always say, "I can see my house from here." But now when I tried to look out my window I could only see a couple of feet away. The smoke was blocking the view I had grown so used to growing up, and I felt my throat tighten again as I was hoping to see my house one last time. My phone dinged—I had almost forgotten I had it with me. I looked down and saw a message from eBay. It was a congratulations message for winning the auction earlier, and it said the order was shipping. I had already forgotten about that comic I had been so happy about winning, and now I looked at the post with disgust, wishing I hadn't wasted so much money on it. It already felt like a lifetime ago that I had ordered it, and since it had shipped it was too late to cancel the order. I wondered if there would even be a house standing for it to be delivered to, or where it would go if our house was no longer standing. Just the thought of our house being gone like that brought fresh tears to my eyes.

Waiting for the Rain

Sara Robertson

Gray stormclouds gather, grayer as they stand stark
Against the glowing sapphire sky, who
For too long has lied, peeking her blue eyes through the
Ever-fading cracks and holes amongst the storm.

The world holds its breath
waiting for the rain.

We feel the gentle breeze kiss our cheeks.
Her cold voice nips at our ears
Her quiet refrain,
Hush, the time is near.

The puppetmaster holds the stormclouds by a string,
Adding ever more, yet never rain
And seems to laugh
At our eyes upturned
waiting for the rain.

A still, gray sheet blankets the earth
Under which she cowers
With heavy eyes and
Dry, cracked lips parted,
waiting for the rain.

The heavens tease us with foreboding clouds
As we wait,
we wait,

Until a grand thunderCLAP sounds across the shores
Heaven's hinges fall back to let out the downpour.

Oh, rain!
Dance with my tears and
Wash away the sorrow of the year!
Sing to us your mournful song
So that we may sing along with new lamentations
On fear on grief on sheer disbelief

Free us from the rotten chains of yesterday
Grown over with grime,
And fear, and wasted time.

Expose our shackled wrists to the elements—
To the icy tears of the sky
So that she may wash away the blood
 And our wounds will heal and close and scar

Rouse the shriveled roots
So that tomorrow, the flowers will bloom
And the world will glow with color again.

Forgive us our trespasses.

As we forgive those
Who have trespassed against us.

Forgive us. As we forgive. Forgive us.

Forgive, repent, forgive, until we are never again

Waiting for the rain.

Okie Food

Paige Walker

You're nine years old and you've just come back from a full day of making mud castles and capturing crayfish. You clutch the frayed hem of your skirt to your waist, creating a makeshift pouch for your newly minted river rock collection. Your cheeks are smudged scarlet by the sun, and your feet are wrinkled and waterlogged from a day's worth of wading in the murky creek. You hobble up the eroded stone steps, careful not to allow a single rock to tumble away. You march straight through the moth-eaten screen door.¹ A heaven-sent whiff of lemon, garlic, and grape-seed oil graces your nostrils. A siren to your aching stomach. You peer over the counter, transfixed as your mother slices the avocado.

She coughs, awakening you from your famished reverie. "Excuse you, chickadee. How many times do I have to tell you about the rocks?"

"No, wait. Mom, you don't understand. You haven't seen these ones yet! They have turquoise speckles!" You open your skirt pouch and gesture emphatically at your treasure.

She crumples her lips in disapproval.

"Outside, now,"² she orders. Her tone reveals what her words belie. Your father claims your mother is as stubborn as the Rocky Mountains; you don't dare test this assertion now. Instead you release a single indignant exhale before trudging back outside and lining your rocks up one by one atop the chicken coop.

You stroke the shiniest one and whisper, "Don't worry, you're coming with me," before slipping it into your pocket and bolting back inside to watch your mother slice the last of the avocado. Your sticky fingers have a mind of their own. It can't be helped; you sneak a slice.

"And who is setting the table tonight?" she asks, tapping her fingers on the cutting board. You take the hint and begrudgingly lay out wrinkled napkins and mis-matched silverware. You pause and watch wide-eyed as she pours the lemon and dressing over the avocado and white cannellini beans.

¹ Two New Years ago Uncle Rob took a drunken plunge through this closed screen door. Left unraveling on three of the four sides, it's functioned more like a mosquito net ever since.

² Translation: one more word your rear end will be staring down the backside of my flip-flop.

Auntie Marge³ drifts in just in time to criticize the order in which you placed the silverware.⁴ It strikes you as slightly incongruous that tarnished Goodwill silverware must be arranged in perfect order, but you don't challenge her. Grandpa Eddie and Daddy saunter in soon after you've finished refining your table setting skills. Fresh off the high of yet another gripping chat about Civil War generals, they seem unusually chipper as they settle into the splintered wicker dining chairs. Your mother insists the men light a couple candles as she sprinkles cilantro atop the nearly finished meal.

At last, heaping spoonfuls of saturated rice, avocado, and beans topples onto chipped faux china. You're so busy shoveling food into your mouth you almost don't notice your grandfather's low grumbles.

"This is rabbit food. No, not even. This is Okie food," Grandpa mutters.⁵

"Dad, please, I made you dinner. Can't we just enjoy being together?" Mother replies.

"You know I don't think they had many avocados in Okla—" your father begins.

"What's an Okie?" you interject.

Your mother opens her mouth, but your grandfather is quicker, "A poor person. White trash."

"Dad, what did I just say?" Your mother turns toward you.

"Honey, an Okie is just a person from Oklahoma. Do you remember me telling you about how Grandpa's dad came to California during the dust bowl? He's an Okie."

"Oh." You turn to Grandpa, "Was he poor?"

"Poorer than a church mouse," he replies.

³ She's actually your great aunt, but don't you dare refer to her as such. If you couldn't tell from her bleached hair and tennis mini skirt, she likes to feel young.

⁴ You're bound to forget this a dozen more times in your lifetime, but I'll remind you now anyway: the small fork goes on the far left.

⁵ Unless discussing war or the newspaper, your grandfather speaks almost exclusively in low growls emitted from the corners of his mouth.

As it happened, bringing a lunch of leftover avocado, beans, and rice to Silence settles like dust. Your stomach twists as the memory of the time you brought this meal to school surges back to you. School was a sure-fire way to incite ridicule from the kids with Lunchables and Twinkies. You didn't understand the shame then, but perhaps your grandfather knows something you couldn't have at the time. Your mind swirls as you trace the outline of the river rock lingering in your pocket.⁶

It's Auntie Marge who severs the silence. "Hey now, little bird, what happened to all that hunger of yours?"

You shrug and let out a meek, "I don't know."

"Hmm"—her gaze shifts to Grandpa—"Wasn't it our daddy who was always going on about how beautiful California avocados are? He never had one before coming here, but sure as hell wouldn't shut up about it once he did."

"Never shut up about eating all together either," Grandpa replies. A new expression falls over his face, though you can't decide if it's wistful or embittered.

"Ain't that the truth? And look at us, a family all together with the best avocados north of the border.⁷ That's a rich family if I ever saw one," Auntie Marge remarks.

"Sounds like an Okie's definition of rich if I ever heard it," Grandpa quips. Your mother chuckles as Grandpa begins spooning the food into his mouth with increased vigor. The dust has lifted, the rest of the family follows suit.⁸

⁶ It occurs to you that river rock collecting was also decidedly uncool, and would likely be met with the same mockery if you ever endeavored to bring this rock to school. Still, you wouldn't dare abandon a single rock in your collection.

⁷ It was you who picked these avocados from the tree. They're perfect—a gradient of green hues and as soft as dawn's first light. Your auntie told you the secret to choosing the ripest ones; you plan to take it to the grave.

⁸ You savor the food, but someone should have told you to savor the moment too.

The Witness

Sara Robertson

i will never know
what she looked like,
when my grandmother lay flat on the hospital bed,
in 108 degree heat
in august,

so i imagine:
fluorescent light beat down on her thin frame
half-sunken into a flimsy mattress and paper-thin sheets,
buried under 11.6 feet total
of tubes
stuck in her arms,
her nose, pumping liquid food to her stomach
her throat, pumping air to her
bleeding lungs.
i imagine the air conditioner was
a breathless whirring in her hospital room,
no relief
to doctors and nurses burdened under layers and layers
of personal protective equipment:
sweat pooling under
their surgical gowns, N-95s, dripping down the sides of their face shields.
my grandmother
just another face, another bed
wire-rim glasses folded neatly on the bedside table,
and an anthology of greek myth and folklore waiting for her at home.

while
wildfires blew through the santa cruz mountains,
and turned the air to ash
i sat on the ground, in my driveway
and i watched heat waves float up from the pavement in the street,
blurring out the ground before me.

Cold as a Stone

Hannah Kaikkonen

I am waiting to be swept away
from the troubles of the day,
the hour, this year.
Waiting for the world to stop living
in this perpetual fear.

The fear of not living, or dying alone
6 feet apart and cold as a stone.

My grandmother says,
she is scared as can be
She doesn't know if she'll ever again
hug Aunt Kelly, Uncle Kenny, Dad
or me

before she leaves this world and departs.
She grows older and sicker at heart.
From 6 feet apart,

“Take off your masks,” she says sternly,
“I want to look upon your faces.
All of my grandchildren are here,
from near and far places.

I know well what I ask,” she says,
“To hold and hug the ones I love.
To see your smiling sweet faces
before I'm sent up above.

So you better listen!
Take off your masks and come here.
You have my permission.
Relax and come near.”

“We came to see you Grandma,
For fear it would be the last time.
It would be a crime to take off our masks
Or cross the 6 foot line!”

In doorways, through windows, with masks that cover our face
6 feet apart never felt so big a space

“I am waiting,” she says,

“to be swept away
from the troubles of the day
the hour, this year
Waiting to stop living
in this perpetual fear
I’m not scared of death but of dying alone
6 feet apart and cold as a stone.”

In doorways, through windows, with masks that cover our faces
6 feet apart never felt so big a space

"فلسطين حرة"

Anonymous

I.

occupation is a crime.
don't you see
children crying
people dying?
why do you
deny their right
to live
and breathe.
to smile. to be.
to believe
in good.
you destroy their homes
their everything
and make them bleed
for your petty greed and
i do not see
how stolen land
can be worth anything.

II.

the sky clears as we march
god shines a light on the people, the
voices, the demands, the resistance
red black white green

FREE PALESTINE

Whale Hunt

Kimi Fernandez

They were never meant
to turn the water red
and the salt into iron.

This is not a miracle.

The white rope strains
as it pulls and strikes

a matchstick against skin
and sets the ocean on fire.

This is a tragedy.

March 11, 2011

Kimi Fernandez

A crisp early morning in the rousing streets of Japan. Shopkeepers sweep their doorways and magpies stretch their wings. The smell of coffee brewing and rice cooking fills the air on the little streets of Kyoto, blissfully unaware that the sea would soon swallow the land.

sakura
will bloom in spite of
tragedy

Mama

Kimi Fernandez

In my mother's eyes
lay brown dirt floors
bare feet to match
march in

In my mother's eyes
temples rest on hills
their dead
buried below

My mother's eyes reflect
rivers of black embroidered through
and our roots have remembered
that they grew here too.

Ode To Sappho

Sara Robertson

*Someone, I tell you,
will remember us.*

13 pages
in an anthology of women poets
dedicated to
“Some say nine Muses—
But count again.
Behold the tenth:
Sappho of Lesbos.”

*to me, you seem like a goddess
i could not hope
to touch the sky
with my two arms
if not for your mastery of words*

Oh, Sorrow, Oh Sappho, as
your *tongue*
cracks and slender fire is quick
to burn your memory to ash
by the judgement of good men
—What would you be, if not for them?

*The glow and beauty of the stars
are nothing near the splendid moon*
Dear, Tenth Muse,
*when in her roundness she burns silver
about the world*

they tried to burn you, burn me,
burn
we, silver

And you have—and we, I tell you,
have remembered.

On Forests and Femininity

Sara Robertson

every time I shave my legs, it just grows back again—
and I just keep shearing it off

but what if we imagined
that the thick black hairs that poke up through our skin were vast forests:
a blanket of shade over mossy soil,
cooling our burning earth,

because we've all heard it said that deforestation is
killing our planet.

Apology to My Curls

Tara Sabet

O Curls

my 3a-3b locks

i'm sorry for the shit i put you through

all the bleaching, heating, and treatments

trying to make you something you're not

for the times i tried to make you the standard

thinking my uniqueness wasn't attractive enough

i hurt you but you had been damaged

long before the straightener

when that boy in the desk behind would pull you

you pretended you didn't notice

when those white folks touched it without your permission

pointing & prodding like you were an alien

when people lost pencils and coins and spitballs in your tangles for amusement

only for you to find at your feet in the shower

When you were told to be straightened

to look "safer" and "more professional"

when he screamed "shut the fuck up medusa ass bitch"

naming you as a monster to silence the both of us

the first time i singed you i was met with

"you should do this more often! it looks so much better this way!"

and in an instant the straightener became my drug

a one time thing became the fix i needed for instant confidence

finally i looked like i belonged

like the girls at my school, on TV and in magazines

I let myself believe that to love me, I had to erase you

you are, in fact, what makes me

people notice you before they notice me

but that is because we work together, you and i

to make this "mufasa roar"

I'll nurse you through the damage the world caused

the damage I caused,

because my hair will not be quiet for anyone that asks

I'm sorry that it took this long

But thank you for teaching me how to be

unapologetic, unique, authentic

Thank you for teaching me

How to be me

Machismo

Jesse Hernandez

Man up

Don't cry

Are you a girl?

Keep those feelings in

Don't talk about it

Why don't you just shake it off

Be a man

Bulk up

Best form of defense is with a punch

Don't cry

Don't cry

In My Grandfather's Eyes

Jesse Hernandez

In my grandfather's eyes
Dry as the desert
He calls his beans
Drink
Drank
Drunk
Heat of mule
Stubborn as the desert
He sees nothing in front of him
Just the wall behind them

Left handed
Same as me
Never seen me
Never seen him
He goes away
Goes away for weeks
In my grandfather's eyes
He comes back home
To restock on cash
Never met him
Don't think I ever will.

Harry Styles Owns My Heart

Claire Wilbanks

Nov. 6th 2020

If you were to ask me, at any time of day, what I was thinking about, I'm one hundred percent positive my answer would be Harry Styles. Today is no different. I'm thinking about Harry. Maybe I'll take a break to check the polls and see what Nevada's up to, but mostly it's just Harry. Sadly for me, Harry Styles doesn't know I exist, and while that's truly heartbreaking, it's not without a great effort on my part.

My birthday is on the ninth; I'll be nineteen. Do you want to know how I'm celebrating? As immature as it sounds, I'm picking up my best friend, driving to Los Angeles, and visiting Harry Styles hot spots. We did the same thing when we first met three years ago, but this time I know for a fact that Harry is in LA. He's filming a movie, his second in his acting career.

The more I talk about the man, the crazier I feel. I promise I'm not a stalker, just a devoted fan. There are at least a million others who are in the same position I am in. While it makes me somewhat jealous, I also find so much relief in that statement. I'm not alone in my obsession, although sometimes I wish I was. And I truly didn't feel like I had a problem until now after I stated I was going to purposefully show up at places he frequents. But I don't think that it's my fault. It's Harry's.

I sometimes worry that I'll never find true love because I am that enamored with Harry. I see pictures or read articles, which makes me consider that no human on the Earth could be better than him. I guess that's part of the reason I'm going to LA. Being in Los Angeles "coincidentally" at the same time he is is the beginning of a fantasy I've built in my head. We'll run into each other at coffee, or on the beach, and we'll fall head over heels in love with each other. We'll tour the world and make music together, get married in his backyard, and then have three beautiful children named after our favorite songs/musical artists. Could you imagine what a birthday present that would be?

Nov. 8th 2020

It turns out, Harry and I won't be meeting anytime soon. Despite having the best weekend trapezing around Los Angeles with the people I love most, I can't help feeling a little hollow driving home. It doesn't help that the first thing I saw on social media this morning was another

fan living my dream of running into him on the street, just a couple of neighborhoods away from where I was. I found myself shaking when a waiter sat me at his famous table in one of his favorite restaurants. If I was normal, just that fact alone would appease me, but I'm not and it didn't. I wanted more, of what I don't know, but I didn't get it and I let it ruin me.

I do find it a little alarming that I've given a man I've never met the power to change my mood so instantaneously. And it's times like these where the worry of never finding anyone I truly love is most prevalent. I can't imagine another human being ever getting this same reaction out of me. At this point, I'm not sure I could, or even want, to change that.

Someone asked me to describe him recently, which boggled me because how do you not know who Harry Styles is? He's so ... good. His personality, or at least the side of him that I get to see, is so good. His manners are so good. Everything about him is good. He's also the most gorgeous man I've ever seen, which I'm sure doesn't help with how infatuated I am with him. He looks like a young Mick Jagger, with pink pouty lips and a decent-sized nose. His nostrils, in my opinion, are big, but I find it so endearing. His hair is a soft, chestnut brown color. It curls as it grows longer; it's personally one of my favorite things about him, aside from how good of a person he is. His eyes are the most entrancing color of green, and now when anyone asks my favorite color it's always going to be his specific shade, meadow.

He's also covered in tattoos. Tasteful ones, littered down his left arm, all in black, kind of like an old sailor. A couple of them are on his torso, like his big black butterfly that sits on his tummy. And then they trail sporadically down his legs.

I wish I knew what it was that makes Harry so different. I have crushes like other people brush their teeth, but they're usually fleeting. It's been ten years since I discovered Harry Styles and I'm still just as in love as I was back then. I still want to fight every girl, or boy, that has broken his heart. I'll still pretend his most beautiful lyrics were written about me. I'll still get butterflies in my stomach (just like Harry's tattoo) whenever I see new pictures of him on my timelines.

And I will still, despite currently being depressed over missing him this weekend, hold out hope that we will meet on a picturesque street somewhere in a city he frequents and fall desperately and hopelessly in love.

Father's Day

Reilly Johnson

Beautiful, the sun dancing on the surface, absolutely beautiful.

I felt so alive, vibrant almost as the energy jumped around my body. The lake was perfect, serene, calm and desolate for the most part. I could hear a family around the bend, kids at play near the shoreline, concerned mother shouting precautions that blew away in the breeze. I smudged away a crimson drop from the toe of my boot. Not everything was perfect, but it was close.

I can stay until dark. No one stays here overnight; there is no place to camp. That rowboat will be helpful; I can get out to the middle....

My eye scanned the far banks, empty with the exception of a rowboat that had been pulled ashore. The green canopy of the redwoods paired with the rocky shore and framed a picturesque landscape. This was not a day that I would forget. Even years later I can recall how alive I felt sitting beside the water and watching life unfold. Birds soaring high about the trees, seeming to touch the sun and dropping suddenly from the sky to snap up a fish that was completely oblivious to its fate.

Some things don't deserve to die; fish never did anything to anybody. Nothing.

I walked back to my pickup, parked just out of view from the road. Taking a glance under the camper shell to make sure nothing was amiss. As I drove around the lake the shadows from the tree limbs had a strobe effect, the dark cycling with the light. I parked my truck as close to the shore as possible, but it was still about a half mile away from the rowboat.

It's going to be hard but what a stroke of luck that the boat is here.

The sun was resting atop the western hills, slowly setting and releasing flares of orange across the blue sky as the day extinguished. The most beautiful moments of a day come in the final moments as the sun fades away. I watched the family on the opposite shore, laughing, playing with such innocence.

No understanding of how quick it can all disappear. The happiness, the laughter, gone in the blink of an eye. Forever.

Watching the father teach his son how to cast a reel made me think back to the times my father taught me to fish. We spent entire days on the banks of the Green River, fishing and spending time talking about nothing in particular. Wiping away the tears before they could well up and run down my cheek, I reminded myself that the man I remember is not the same man. My father became cold, dark and deep. He was always immersed in some disturbed thought.

This father is different, happy. These children are smiling, safe.

After the sun completed its descent and the lush wooded hills turned grey and still, the family packed up their belongings and left the shore. I sat for an hour or so, until the moon cast its spotlight over the center of the water. The still water was cold, dark and deep.

This is the perfect place.

A Late Night

Alec Hattan

The truck slowed as it passed her before coming to a full stop. Dropping her arm, she started towards it wearily. The brake lights swamped the forested road with red, and she glanced back to see her long shadow as she walked. This frightened her, but still she marched on; she needed to keep moving. Nearing the truck's cab, she could just make out the low hum of the radio beneath the whirl of the engine. The driver poked his head out the window with a friendly expression, stopping her movement.

She wasn't stupid. She knew it was unwise to hitchhike—especially at night—but she had a bus to catch early the next morning in the next town. She very well would have avoided this situation altogether if her car hadn't broken down a couple miles back. She was caught between a rock and a hard place. However, as she looked on the man, her nerves were partially settled. He sported a warm and what appeared to be a genuine smile, wide enough to reveal a number of wrinkles and deep smile lines. He was old, appearing so frail that she struggled to imagine him even getting out of the small pickup with any sort of ease.

She shrugged her bag back onto her shoulder as it slipped down her arm. "Could I get a ride?"

He nodded politely. "Where are you headed?"

"Essex. How far could you take me?"

He huffed and spoke with amusement. "I'm actually passing right through there." He paused and glanced at the road. "Going to Clinton myself." Turning back to her with a smile, he spoke warmly, "Hop in. I can take you all the way."

She said a silent prayer and thanked him generously before jogging around to the passenger side of the cab. They didn't speak again for quite some time.

She kept her bag nested between her feet, pressing tightly as if the collection of vinyls inside would somehow spontaneously crack. She feared what that would bring. If even one were to break, her mother might too. She squeezed her feet against the bag.

Somehow, the inside of the car looked older than its rusted exterior. Or maybe worn-in was a nicer description. The cloth of the seats held stains that appeared older than her, and the windshield was dirtied with

dried mud around where the wipers could reach. When she rolled down her window, she noticed a medley of crude drawings on the inside of her door. Things like cats and rainbows and suns with faces.

The radio played at an almost unnoticeable volume, and the crackling static seemed to dance to the swing of big-band music beneath it. The songs reminded her of her childhood. She would spy and watch her parents slow dance in their little living room late at night. She remembered a night when they had danced only to “La Vie en Rose” for what seemed like hours, stopping only to reset the vinyl. It was their wedding song.

The car broke out of the tree-lined road into clear sky. It was near midnight, but the moon and stars shone so brightly they lit up the whole night. The stars twinkled on the ripples of the wide body of water to the right. She held her hand out the window and flew it, feeling the tickle of the summer night breeze on her skin.

Occasionally she had eyed the man in her periphery, but he never seemed to waver from his peaceful concentration on the road. Taped above the rear-view mirror was a picture of a younger-looking version of the man, a woman, and a young girl. They stood on a wooden deck close to the water, shielding their eyes from the sun. It looked very candid. She recognized the lake. Her parents often took her there in the summers when she was young.

“Is that your daughter?”

The man followed her gaze up to the picture and pulled it from its place, handing it to her with a sad smile. “Why yes, it is. Her name’s Annabelle.”

She brushed her hand over the girl. “She’s so pretty.”

“Just like her mom,” he chuckled.

She smiled and stuck the picture back in its place.

“Where is she?”

He rubbed his chin. “Well,” he said with a pause, “we’re hoping she’s in Heaven.”

She looked over, expecting to see the man fighting tears, but he just sported a sad smile.

“I’m sorry. May I ask what happened to her?”

At that moment, the road twisted closer to the water, close enough that she could hear the waves washing against the rocks. On its surface, the moonlight danced with the twinkling stars.

He spoke unevenly. “Asthma attack—about ten years ago. She didn’t like to carry her puffer, even though she would get to coughing something bad.” He cleared his throat. “She always said she wanted to be pretty like her mom. She didn’t like to carry that puffer around, thought it made her ugly. I guess that’s my fault.” He thumbed the inhaler nested in the center console, which had more crude drawings. “Anyways,” he sighed through his nose, “She was out with her friends and they didn’t know what to do. They weren’t near any phones.”

She sunk deep into her warm seat.

“That’s so sad.”

He laughed lightly and sighed. “It is. It sure is. But we made a whole lot of memories. Her, her mom, and I. Enough for even three lifetimes,” he said to her with a smile.

She hummed sadly and looked up at the moon through the dirty windshield. She focused hard on making out the details and grooves of its surface. She didn’t want to start crying. She had too much to cry about. She feared she wouldn’t ever stop.

“What song is this? I recognize it. My parents used to play it when I was young.”

He smiled and turned the radio up, static and all. “It’s Frank Sinatra. One of Annabelle’s favorites. ‘Strangers in the Night.’”

She huffed with endearing amusement and gazed upon the moon’s face. The man started to hum along to the song, which lulled her to a needed sleep.

She dreamt of her parents. A dream where they were all together again, seated around their wooden dining table during Christmas time. Behind her, her father fiddled with the record player and flipped through a large stack of vinyls. He had so many. She always gave him grief for it, telling him that records were for old people. But he’d always laugh and say to her, “You know, you better get used to these things. You’re gonna have to deal with them all when I’m gone.”

One Call Away

Hillary Hoang

It was cold on the porch—not that I could feel it. There was a slight breeze that added to the chill, and the sky was devoid of clouds. Endless stars were scattered across the night, and were too beautiful for such a wretched day.

My baby lay in the carrier, covered in a thick blanket, a cap on his preciously small head. I wished I could pick him up, but the blood on my hands still felt hot. Like it could ignite and burn me and my baby to mere ashes if I dared to touch him with such dirty hands.

Killing someone was frighteningly easy.

Maybe things would've been different if I had gotten ready a little faster and left the house. I had the diaper bag set up, Jack dressed and in the carrier, but I wasted time fiddling with my phone and fixing my hair. Still the procrastinator, even after my baby was born.

I had heard something downstairs, what sounded like the footsteps of another person in the house, and my heart began to race. I had almost dismissed it as paranoia, nightmares that had been plaguing me ever since I brought Jack home from the hospital and no longer had a team of people to make sure he was still breathing. I'd spend restless nights hovering over the crib, terrified he would stop breathing if I even blinked.

I had fallen asleep in the rocking chair with a baseball bat, not yet used to all the noise of the countryside. Every creak of the old house an intruder, every animal scream from the woods a threat. But the bat had been moved to my room once I had relaxed enough to sleep in it, leaving the two of us defenseless as someone made their way up the creaky staircase, the wood groaning with each step.

I hid Jack in the closet, tucked in the corner of the small room, and pleaded with every god that could exist to protect him. I wasn't a large or strong woman, but I needed to be enough. I would make myself enough to stand against the intruder for my baby.

Heart pounding a mark into my ribs, I stood right next to the door with a paperweight that decorated one of the shelves. The door opened, and it was like a movie in slow motion. The door didn't creak—I had oiled it when I had decided this would be the nursery to make sure I didn't wake the baby up when I checked on him—but the sound of the handle moving, of the hinges on the frame, felt overwhelming loud. A

man stepped into the room, and before he could turn to look eyes with me, I smashed the paperweight into his head.

I hit him. I hit him over and over and over again, until the crack of the metal against his skull quieted. I hit him until it was soft, like tenderizing meat with a mallet. He might've begged, pleaded for me to stop, but I couldn't hear anything over the pounding of my heart and the mantra of you will not get to my baby, you will not get to my baby, you will not get to my baby.

I always thought those crime and action movies were exaggerating, but when you hit someone like that the blood really does get everywhere. It splattered on the walls, on my clothes, on my face. The blood on the paperweight spread to cover my hands in it.

When I stopped, when the fear and adrenaline died down enough for me to hear Jack wailing in the closet, I looked down, and had to turn to vomit.

The man was thin, a straggler maybe, before I mutilated him. He didn't even have a weapon.

Ha! I killed him, beat him until his skull caved in, and he didn't even have a weapon.

I couldn't look at him without losing my stomach again, and I needed to get to my baby. Sidestepping the body felt almost disrespectful. If I had killed him I should look at what I had done. My hands trembling, I opened up the closet to comfort Jack, shushing and rocking the carrier with a clean finger to make sure I didn't drip any blood on him. Thankfully, Jack settled down quickly. He was such an easy baby. My sweet boy.

I curled up into a ball, my face pressed into my knees. What am I going to do if I go to prison? Who is going to take care of my baby? I had never gotten along with my parents—they were too strict and I was too careless. When I left they never even bothered to contact me.

No one else in our family tried to either. No one except my sister, that is. We stopped getting along when she got old enough to feel the need to direct me onto the right path. The month before I packed up there wasn't a second when we weren't fighting. All the yelling, the passive aggressiveness, the resentment I felt toward the entire family for trying to make me into someone easier to tolerate was too much to handle. I had a car; I had money saved up; all I needed was a place to go.

I had jumped from city to city, made a few mistakes, made more bad decisions, and got pregnant. I settled in the farmhouse just before I got too big to move around too much. The town was quiet, cheap to live in, and the people were kind. A few of the moms even offered to watch Jack for me when he was born so I could work, which I had gladly accepted.

Even though I was happy here, I never stopped thinking about my sister. I didn't pick up her calls, of course—what would I have said? But I kept track of her life through the pieces of it she posted on social media, which is why I knew she lived only a few hours away, and why I thought if she picked up the phone she could help me.

The call connected on the last ring when I expected it to go to voicemail, and soon she was on her way. I didn't even remember how I'd convinced her to come.

Lost in my thoughts, I barely noticed the car drive up to the old farmhouse until the slam of the vehicle's door jolted me awake. A woman rushed out, slamming it shut and walking up the driveway, only to pause when she saw me.

"Oh Anna," my sister said, in the tone of voice she used to use when I spilled food on myself as a kid, and not like she found me sitting bloodied on my porch in the middle of the night. "What have you done?"

She hadn't changed much at all, even after all these years, and that simple fact alone almost brought me to tears. The same single haircut she discovered in college and never strayed from, the same warm brown eyes, the same taste in fashion. I had seen her in photos, but that Joane never felt real.

It was like the world snapped into place at the sight of my sister—my big sister. The dream-like trance I had been in was broken, and abruptly everything was too sharp, too much for me. I wanted to reach out and touch her, to hide away in the safe expanse of her arms like I used to do when the worst of my fears were monsters in the closet. I wanted to feel her warm palms on my back, rubbing and rubbing until the hurts faded.

But the blood on my hands was still too hot, and I couldn't let it burn her too.

"Did you call Mom and Dad?" I said, instead of trying to explain.

"No," she said slowly, standing just out of arm's reach from me. "I figured you wouldn't want them to know."

I laughed, the sound more hysterical than I intended it to be. “Uh, yeah. Yeah, I wouldn’t have wanted them here. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

We sat in tense silence, neither one of us knowing what to say, until my sister’s eyes glanced to the side and saw the baby carrier.

There was a gasp, small and startled, out of her. Joane’s eyes were wide, like she didn’t understand what she was looking at. She made her way on the porch, crouching over the carrier, a hand reaching out to run the back of her finger over Jack’s cheek. “You had a baby?” she whispered.

“Yeah,” I said, managing to smile for the first time all night. I could’ve spent the rest of my life without my family, with only me and Jack and the friends I made in town, but there was something that eased a knot in my chest as I watched Joane touch my baby like he was the most precious thing in the world. “His name is Jack.”

A few more moments passed, Joane watching my baby sleep all the while, a small smile on her face. She looked back at me, voice soft. “Why’d you call me, Anna?” she asked,

She asked, but I almost felt like she already knew. “I didn’t know what else to do,” I whispered, the truth caught in the bottleneck of my throat. I swallowed around it to help ease the way. It needed to come out. “He just came in, and I—I was so scared, and then I killed him. I killed him Joane, what do I do?”

The silence was like a living thing, wrapping around the throat and threatening to choke me. My sister’s face was almost blank, the lines on her face illuminated by the lights in the house that I couldn’t have been bothered to turn off. When did she get so old?

“Who’s ‘he’, Anna?”

“Someone broke in,” I said. I lifted my hand to run it through my hair, my fingers catching on some of the parts with dried blood and sweat. To ground myself enough to speak, I tightened my fist, the pain of my hair pulling at my scalp helped to clear my head. “I was going to get my groceries for dinner. I heard someone downstairs. I waited for him to come up and enter the room and I—I hit him until he stopped moving.”

“Anna—”

“The funny thing is he wasn’t even armed. Did you know that, Joane? Wasn’t holding anything, maybe wasn’t even going to hurt us. And

what did I do? I killed him.” The tears started anew, my voice wavering. “Nothing in that house was worth dying for, Joane. Nothing. Especially not like that.

“Did you call the police?”

“I—no.” I answered. “I was scared. What if I get arrested, Joane? Who’s going to take care of my baby while I’m in jail? What if they take him away from me? I can’t lose him.”

Joane opened her mouth, and then shut it abruptly. “There’s ... there’s no father?” she asked, like she should be worrying about delicacy when I just told her I killed a man.

“No. There’s no father—just me. Just me and Jack.”

Silence again. The tears were still flowing from before. Ever since the dam burst I couldn’t get them to dry up. Something about the presence of another person made me feel safe enough to shed tears, because I didn’t need to be strong for Jack—someone else could take care of him for a bit. After a few moments more, Joane set her shoulders, and it felt like a decision was made. “Well, first get your baby inside my car, he’ll catch a cold out here.” She said.

“But I can’t,” I protested. “I’ll get the carrier dirty.” I shook my head frantically, internally a bit surprised by how panicked the idea of it made me. I started crying harder, little hitching sobs that caught in my chest. “There’s so much blood on me, what will I do if it gets on him?”

Joane’s face got sad and her mouth pinched around the edges. Her hand reached out to cup my face and wiped away the tears as they came. She was so calm I almost felt stupid for crying. “You had to hold the carrier to get him out here didn’t you? You can’t get it any dirtier than it already is. Get your baby inside and I’ll give you some water and napkins so you can get yourself cleaned up. I’m going to make some phone calls and things are going to be okay, alright?”

I nodded my head, not sure I could do anything other than agree.

“Okay, good,” she said, before squaring her shoulders and looking at me harder somehow, firm. “And I’ll take care of your baby if the worst happens, okay? You don’t have to worry about him.”

My breath caught in my chest. “What?”

“You heard me. I’ll take care of him.”

“But—” I stuttered. “You can’t! You—I—”

“What?” she raised an eyebrow. “You don’t think I’d make a good mom?”

For the love of— “No, it’s just—it’s too much Joane. I couldn’t ask this of you.”

Joane huffed, crossing her arms. “You didn’t ask; I offered. Now get in the car, Anna,” she said, like that was enough to settle it. And I guess it did in some ways. My heart felt lighter than it had been all night, and even though I was in disbelief, Joane always kept her word. Even after all these years that was the one thing I would trust. I almost laughed in shock, but stood up to follow her orders anyway, and that was as good of an agreement as any.

Although, there was one last thing before I could move from this spot, where it felt like years of our relationship had been recovered. Maybe it was lucky, even with the ghost that surely haunted it now. I licked my lips, nervous. “Are you mad at me?” For leaving, for not contacting you until now went unsaid. I thought she would’ve brushed off the question. Joane had always preferred to stay silent than to lie.

But all Joane did was sigh, look at me like I had said something stupid, and said, “No, I’m not mad at you, Anna. I was never mad at you.” My shoulders had new burdens, but now, miraculously, they were free of old ones. I never thought this would ever happen, not until either one of us was on our deathbeds. And if the impossible had happened tonight, it gave me hope that the impossible could happen again, and things really could end up okay. I nodded at Joane, pursing my lips to try to prevent myself from crying once more. So I picked myself up from the porch of the house my life died in and walked to the car with my baby.

Mrs. Lavish

Stevie Salcido



The Town of Afigarh

Vidhi Vivek

No worldly insinuations made their way into the fragmented town of Afigarh. The town sat isolated between the neighboring cities; all the residents knew each other, and across the apparent borders of the four walls of their huts, everyone lived together as one large family. Nobody ever left the town to visit the cities—some stayed out of love for their community, others stayed out of their fear for cities. Everybody grew up hearing stories of how monstrous the people in cities were—all the death, robbery, hunger, poverty, and sin that preceded city life. The town's sarpanch, the leader, only allowed his trusted man, Jeet, to go to the town and sell the crops for the farmer's revenue. Nobody other than Jeet could be permitted to leave. The sarpanch did not want the city's devastation to seep into a town as pure as Afigarh and believed that only a man as pure as Jeet could be trustworthy for the task.

If there were to be a wedding at Afigarh, the whole town was invariably invited. If someone could not afford catering the entire town, they simply were not eligible for marriage—this soon became a tradition, and every household began saving up for their children's weddings the instant they birthed a child. Rita Jaiswal's wedding was the most recent and one that the town's residents spoke of very highly. Jeet, Rita's husband, procured enough wealth from his services to the sarpanch to pay for an entire three-course buffet to feed the town. The residents thoroughly relished their memorable meal. Some even sneaked some food in their handkerchiefs to take home for the next day. Praises for Jeet spread like wildfire.

Jeet cherished the appreciation offered to him in return, and as a result, he did not hesitate to spend all of his savings on his wedding. This opportunity would never come again, might as well make this auspicious ceremony as memorable as possible, he thought. He'd been in love with Rita for weeks, and he knew he would marry her the instant he saw her. Besides, he was certain that she would agree—only a fool would refuse to marry a man as influential as him.

Rita saw marriage as her escape from working endless hours in the field and struggling to manage food. Her mother, too, insisted that she accept Jeet's proposal. Perhaps her mother also saw an escape from their strenuous life in her daughter's marriage to Jeet, and in the following weeks, Rita became Jeet's wife, and Jeet promised her mother a fixed food ration every week. Their days in poverty were finally over.

Between her weekly visits to her mother's house and her monotonous life as a housewife, Rita grew accustomed to her new life in Afgarh. Jeet's consideration made him willing to wait until she was ready to have a child. Contrary to tradition, they did not have sex the night of their wedding. Jeet understood her hesitant remarks and decided to just go to sleep. Sex could wait. Rita appreciated his gesture and lay on the bed all night, blankly staring at the ceiling until the sun lit their windows. She kept thinking about how fortunate her destiny appeared, and each moment re-inforced her anticipation for the merits of married life. "It is a good decision," she kept saying to herself.

But as months began to trail away, she began to feel indebted to Jeet every time she would pretend to go to bed a few minutes before he arrived, just to avoid interactions or any possible attempt at physicality. Other times, she would let him wrap his hand around her and would ask him to hold her. She could neither think of anything beyond that nor did she want to strike an attempt.

Jeet did not understand her gestures. He started to grow frustrated, but every time he looked at his wife's tender eyes, he felt as though he understood what she needed, even though he couldn't put it into words. She is young—merely nineteen; time would change things, he thought. But as time began to overpower their relationship, he began visiting brothels during his trips to the city. Rita knew nothing of this, and the two continued their lives in the light of the unfulfilled ambiguity that left its traces on them both with each night that passed.

Rita's mother would often ask about their plans for having a child. Rita did want a child, but she often dodged the idea to prevent herself from thinking beyond the realms of her imagination.

One morning, the sarpanch asked Jeet to accompany him to the municipal office in Delhi to receive their yearly funding. They were to stay there for a few weeks to complete all the paperwork. Rita found herself relieved at the news. She wouldn't have to find ways to avoid Jeet and looked forward to spending the next few weeks at her mother's place.

Visiting her mother always felt like a repose from her married life. Although Jeet had been incredibly understanding, she always felt this constant sense of tenseness in his presence. Her pace would quicken, her

speech would quiver, and her mind would resort to finding ways to escape his notice. She did not know why, but she was glad to be at her mother's. Things felt in her control here, like they were before her marriage.

Her mother was persistent in her persuasion—

“Have a kid now before it's too late!” she'd say. “When I was your age, I had three; of course, two died, but you're here.”

Rita, too, continued to dodge the subject whenever it came up. And so the tension went on, some unsaid, most unknown.

The following week, Afigarh raged with gossips and discussion. A group of people from the city came to Afigarh, claiming to have been appointed to conduct a gold mine operation just at the town's outskirts. The workers requested meals and lodging in the town to make their everyday commute less strenuous and offered a prominent sum of money in exchange. The villagers grew excited at the proposition, but their fear for city people brought forth their apprehensions. Besides, the sarpanch wasn't here. Who is to make a decision? That is when everyone turned to Rita. Jeet invariably stood next in line to the sarpanch, and there could be nobody other than Rita the town could trust. Perhaps it was responsibility the crowd feared.

Rita, as someone who'd known the blows of poverty too well, saw an opportunity for the villagers in the event and declared that they should lodge these workers in their houses in exchange for payment. “Make use of the opportunity,” she said in front of a crowd that gathered outside the town's Durga Devi temple to hear her decision.

Everybody screamed in excitement as though all their apprehensions were securely taken away. Some even began referring to Rita as Afigarh's Durga Devi to applaud her decision and staunch morale. People flocked to sign themselves up and availed their houses without a flinch of a second thought.

An intuition struck the sarpanch that night about some calamity hovering over Afigarh. He told Jeet that they must hurry back to Afigarh as soon as they could.

Meanwhile, the villagers at Afigarh began welcoming their tenants into their homes with all the thoughtful gestures of hosting a family member. They'd go out of their way and would prepare their best meals for them, with whatever food ration they obtained. And they kept

aside every rupee the workers gave them given as proud savings they never held before. Things were going well for everyone.

One sunlit evening, as the sun receded into the faraway mountains, a woman traversed the narrow streets of Afigarh. Every eye in Afigarh stagnated at watching her walk by. People ran out of their houses to catch a glimpse; passersby withdrew from their activities in exasperation. *Who is she? A worker? Far from one, workers didn't look like that. Who then? Was someone to lodge her? How fortunate they must be!* thought the villagers.

She wore a pair of beige overalls—a garment that Afiagar's residents didn't recognize. Her wavy brown hair sat right above her shoulders and glimmered against the golden sunlight. She turned into a narrow street lined with makeshift straw huts, whose residents barged out of their house at the call of their neighbors and stilled their gazes the instant they fell upon the woman.

She turned to every villager with a smile, a greeting that communicated to them how impacted they were by her presence. The town had never known movies, but they would assume her to be an actress if they did.

As she furthered into the street, past all the curious faces, she approached Rita's mother's haphazard brick house. Rita's mother, an old woman with a hunchback, stood outside the door and looked at the visitor inquisitively. Suddenly, something came over the old woman, and she rushed to confront the walking visitor.

"Who are you?" asked the old woman, a slight hint of annoyance in her tone.

"Namaste!" greeted the woman kindly. "I'm a mill supervisor nearby, and I'm looking for Jeet's wife? Well, I am actually looking for a place to live, and my workers said she could help me out. I will also be paying for lodging—"

The old lady's eyes lit up in anticipation. "Yes, yes! I have a house! you can live here. Rita—Jeet's wife is my daughter!" she said proudly.

"Oh!" exclaimed the visitor, reciprocating the old lady's excitement. "Can I still meet her once, though?" she asked.

"Yes, yes, I'll call her out," she said before shouting for her daughter to come outside the hut and welcome their guest.

Rita stood stunned by her mother's call. *A guest? At their home?* She put down the tomato she'd been chopping and walked straight to

the door, wiping her palms to her saree on her way out. Her breathing quickened and feet stopped the instant she noticed the women standing outside their door. *Who is she?*

“Rita! My child, look, she will live with us!” her mother announced excitedly. The woman chuckled in response and turned to Rita.

“Namaste, I’m Keertha,” she said, her luscious brown lips parted in a wide smile, and her hand extended toward Rita in an attempt at a handshake.

Rita looked at the hand to see if the women’s extended hand held some offering, but it held nothing. Rita couldn’t interpret her outstretched hand, and out of plain confusion, Rita just smiled and said, “Are you a mill worker?”

Keertha withdrew her hand back and shoved it into her pocket. “Yes—I am a worker, supervisor but still a worker. I am looking for a house, and your mother was so kind to offer me some space in your house. Of course, I didn’t mean to intrude, but if you could help me find a place—”

Her accent sounded different than her own, Rita thought, although the words she spoke were the same as hers. Rita stared at the shape the woman’s mouth took when she spoke, wondering how the resulting sounds flowed gracefully as they did.

“So . . . will you be able to help me?” repeated the visitor.

“Yes, yes, you stay here,” continued her mother, elbowing Rita to speak.

The momentum of the situation kept Rita from thinking straight, and to prevent herself from seeming overly ambiguous, she looked at her mother and said in a low tone, “OK,” before turning around and walking into the house.

“She’s shy sometimes,” said her mother, attempting to explain her daughter’s awkward behavior.

Rita ran to the kitchen to catch her breath, her mind storming her with an exuberant amount of unprocessed thoughts.

Why did I steal that cup of rice three years back? Oh god, I’m so stupid; why did I not say this that day? Deva Deva Deva, I’m a disgrace. She couldn’t slow them down. Everything she avoided in the past now seemed to surround her staggeringly.

“Rita, come out!” called her mother. Rita could vaguely hear the distant chatter between the visitor and her mother and turned to go out of the house.

“Come, come, take Keertha to the well. It’ll be nice if she took a bath,” said her mother.

Rita gulped in a deep breath and nodded in agreement. She felt the visitor’s gaze draining her out, and her words suddenly went out of reach.

“Come,” said Rita and headed through a narrow pathway between her house and the adjacent one. Keertha followed.

Keertha sped up to keep up with her, and when she finally made it to walking alongside her, Rita felt the visitor’s gaze hovering over her yet again. She wanted to confirm her assumption, but a part of her thought that if she looked her way, the visitor might turn her gaze away.

“So...what do you do?” asked the visitor.

“I’m married,” said Rita, grasping the sounds of the visitor’s words and mouthing them in her head.

“OK,” said the visitor, “I knew that.”

“Yes. Are you?” asked Rita, wondering why she’d asked the woman such a question.

The visitor chuckled, and instant regret stormed into Rita’s mind.

“No...I’m not,” she said.

“The well is right here,” said Rita, hurriedly pointing toward an old brown brick well in the midst of the wilderness.

“And? How am I supposed to bathe here?” the visitor asked.

“You just pick up some water and go behind one of those trees. I’ll stand here, and I’ll alert you if anyone happens to come by.”

“I’m not doing that,” chuckled the visitor. “That lake right there. Do people visit there?”

“Kids go there sometimes, but everyone works on the field these days.”

“Good, come with me,” said the visitor and walked into the distance toward the lake.

Rita grew perplexed but automatically followed the woman.

As they reached the lake, she saw the visitor unbuckle her overalls and take off her shirt. Rita felt her goosebumps springing up as she

saw the woman strip down to her undergarments, walking into the lake. The woman's slender brown shoulders tapered into a perfectly sculpted, chiseled back that Rita couldn't stop looking at. Her gaze traversed further down when she found Keertha half-immersed in the water.

"The water's perfect; come see," the woman said before dipping her head into the water and back out.

The water droplets on her skin glistened under the sunset, and it almost seemed as though she was illuminated against the orange sky. Rita was moved. The whole moment seemed surreal to her. Without conscious thought, she took off her ghagra, let her long black hair loose for the first time since her wedding, and stepped into the lake. None of this felt real. The cold water gliding against her skin, the birds chirping around, this woman smiling in front of her, standing half-naked. Her eyes couldn't possibly seem to drift away from the woman's face, and it didn't matter how appealing the surroundings were. Yet, for the first time, she felt no apprehension. She felt powerful, moved, as though her own body suddenly regained consciousness and lost it all simultaneously. She stepped toward the woman, the water quivering around them, and looked into her eyes. Keertha looked back into hers, occasionally shifting her glances to Rita's lips, before resuming looking into her eyes again. Rita felt the rush inside her grow faster. Her heartbeat quickened, and her breathing struggled to make its way through her nostrils; her throat ran dry. She continued to inch toward Keertha. Moments later, they stood just inches apart from each other, and Rita couldn't bring herself to look up into Keertha's face. The rush now moved to her knees, which she felt quivering under the water. Keertha moved closer and began to lift Rita's face to meet her own when Rita pressed her lips against hers and pulled back almost instantaneously. She looked into Keertha's eyes and closed them shut when she felt her lips against hers once again. Her breathing intensified, but it couldn't keep her from tracing her fingers through Keertha's neck and down her smooth back. Surreal! Everything seemed surreal, like a distant dream that would never come back, and perhaps that's why she felt so mighty and intensely weak at the same time. Nobody could take this away from her because it simply did not exist, she thought.

"Rita!" someone screamed from behind them.

She knew this voice. Reality struck. In the distance stood a little boy who led the villagers to the lake. The crowds disapprovingly chattered; some women screamed in response to the sight of the women, others were busy covering their children's eyes to prevent them from witnessing such a sight. Rita's mother stood sobbing loudly in front of them all, beating her chest and screaming her throat out—

“I should've been dead before seeing this! What kind of a scoundrel have I given birth to! Lord, call me to you. I can't bear this sight. Call me already!”

Some went to comfort her; others continued to scream at the women for the hideous sin they witnessed. But then came the voice she previously heard.

Jeet ran towards her and stepped into the lake, his movement as vexed as his heavy breathing, his palms rolled into fists. He pounded against the waves, screaming; the nerves on his forehead peered through his skin.

Rita couldn't hear anything he said. Everything felt as hazy as a lost dream. Jeet gripped her by the hair and pushed her into the water. He grabbed her back up and held her by the neck. Then, he turned to the villagers and mouthed a loud cry.

The sarpanch looked at the situation with his anger mounting to its peak. He ordered the villagers to pick up a stone and stone these god-forsaken, monstrous women to death and put this situation to an end. And so the enraged villagers agreed, and without any hesitance barring their conscience, they picked up stones from the ground and threw them at the women. Cries broke out, Keertha tried submerging herself and the motionless Rita into the water to escape the barbarous blows, but the following twenty minutes described their fate forever.

The water ran red for the next three months in Afigarh. The borders were barricaded. Drought prevailed in every corner of the town, and the infuriated sarpanch refrained from seeking any resolution. The villagers deserved this; this would be the cost they were to pay for allowing people from the city to enter the town's premises, he declared.

The women's naked bodies were then hung from a tree by the town's temple to serve as a reminder of the event. Day in and day out, the bodies reduced to bones and foul odor and remained as the price of Afigarh's sanctity. The fragmented town continued to stand isolated against the world.

***Author's note:**

“The Town of Afigarh” is a fictional story that references certain aspects of Indian culture but bears no known resemblance to reality. A lot of the inspiration behind this piece comes from the stories I’ve grown up listening to in India—the idea behind the stoning scene at the end is in fact a historic form of capital punishment from ancient Indian societies. The character Rita is inspired by my grandmother, who was pushed into an arranged marriage when she was 17 years old. By marrying a powerful man (my grandfather) who made a good living and had a lot of political influence over their town, she could get her family out of their generational poverty. And so the story goes with Rita looking at marriage as her escape from poverty and as her responsibility to give her mother a better life.

The themes of homosexuality and adultery are intended to challenge the societal rejection of new identities and ideas across cultures. I grew up in a conservative town in India where homosexuality was believed to be a “modern evil from the west” that is bound to ruin the sanity of our holy country. This also goes back to how the Sarpanch in the story doesn’t want bad influences from the cities to ruin the sanity of the holy Afigarh. Jeet is the only “holy” aka the he-who-who-cannot-be-influenced man who is permitted to leave Afigarh. But the irony is that Jeet visits brothels in the city, and Keertha’s “influence” is the only reason why Rita will ever know her true self.

Other themes explored in this story include feminine power and hypocrisy—goddess Durga is regarded as a symbol of feminine power and is worshipped in India. The villagers in the story applaud Rita and praise her as though she was goddess Durga for her decision of allowing the workers to seek lodging in the village—a decision that could financially benefit the villagers. But the villagers’ nature of compliance to authority, and the patriarchal influences that prevail in the town, create a double-standard as the villagers stone Rita to death when the Sarpanch orders them to. This brutal ending also serves to emphasise the result of ignorance and of not realising one’s responsibility in society. It isn’t as simple as just existing and trusting, but it also extends to actively questioning and standing up for change, and this is why the negative ending should serve as a call to action.

—Vidhi Vivek

Chaos

Mai Nguyen



“The Revolution has always been in the hands of the young”
Adrian Discipulo **(Huey P. Newton)**



Black Lives Matter

Fatema Kazi



Dancing Flames

Kathy Franceschini



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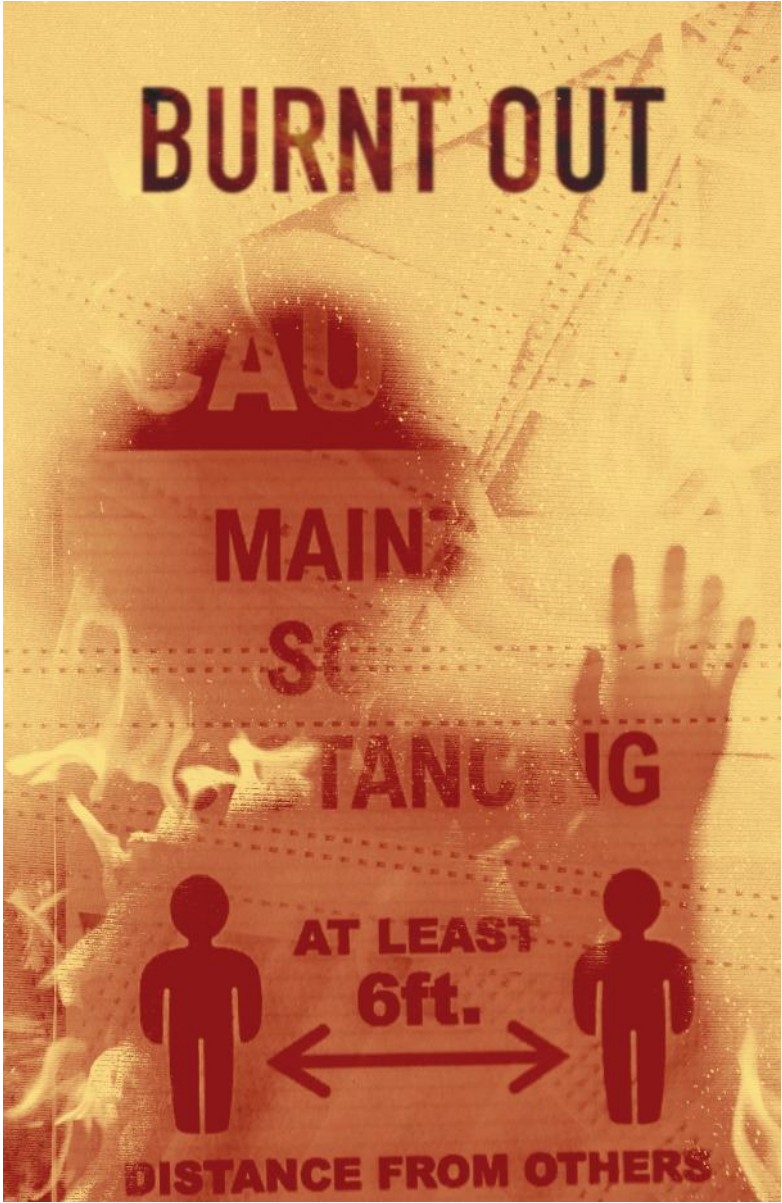
Silence

Mai Nguyen



Burnt Out

Grace Lee O'Malley



Speak the Uncommon Cold

John Dorrance



Persona

Vanessa Palafox Reyes



Blood Orange

Vanessa Palafox Reyes



Decay

Fatema Kazi



Shell Reflections

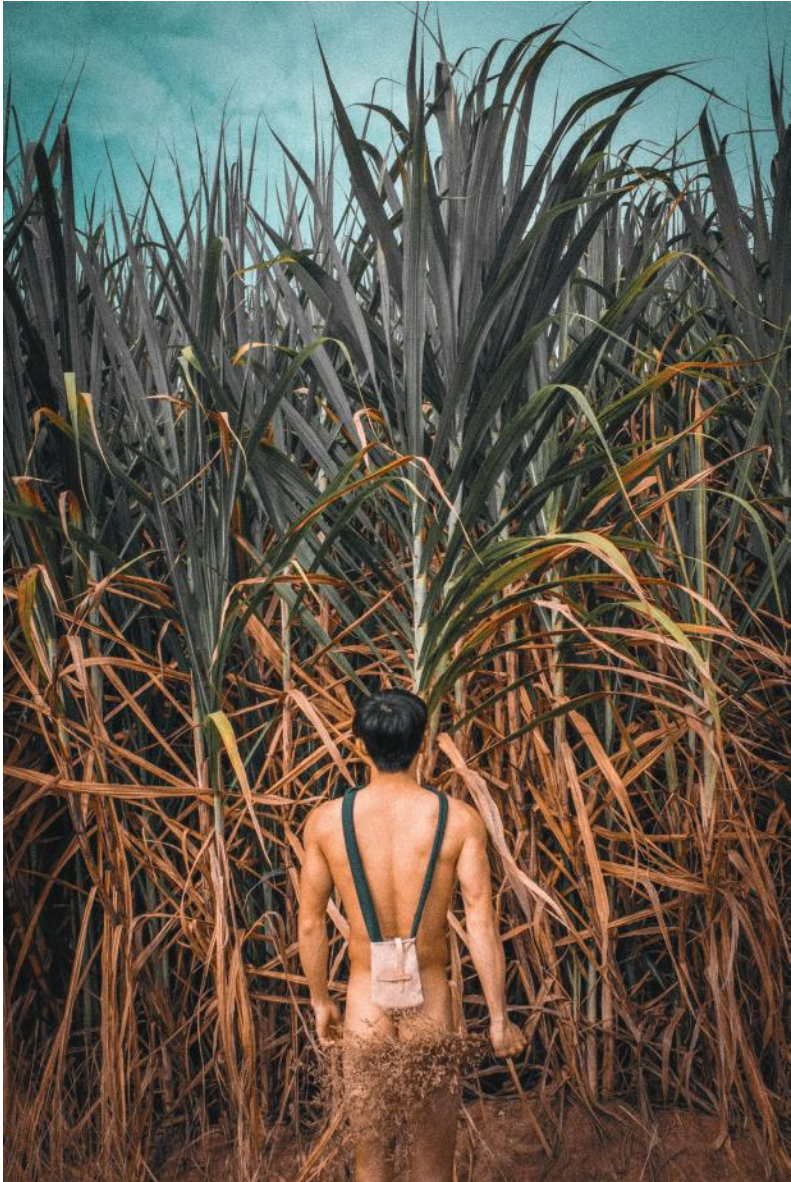
Kathy Franceschini



@krfrances 2021

Into Nature

Chengyan Wu



Alone Together

Mai Nguyen



Untitled

Ann Lee



Movement

Ann Lee



A Tall, Very Tall, Light Pink Cake, and My Loving Mother

Saskia Latievarya



A Tall, Very Tall, Light Pink Cake and My Loving Mother

Saskia Latievarya

I've always taken my dreams as a joke because they're really absurd. What am I supposed to make out of that dream where I started a communism revolution, stole all of Singapore's money, and ended as a commoner having a bar fight with my ninja ex-boyfriend? But I guess the main way going to college has changed me is my now-growing hatred for science and the way I should take absurd things more seriously. I'm going to take this moment to analyze a short daydream I wrote in a class assignment.

What did you see in your dream?

A tall, very tall, light pink cake with many, many, tiers! The icing was green, but not as green as green frogs. I then see a real green frog jumping around the cake.

Splat,

splat,

splat,

some icing got off the cake. It's vanilla inside!

But suddenly, so very suddenly, my mom came, huge she was, out of the cake(?), and the big pink cake burst around the room.

I think language wise, I was really inspired by the children's book my professor read in class before the one-minute nap they made us do. My babysitter, or my mom when she was available, would read me at least one book before bed when I was little. It was a daily routine I had. No matter what happened that day, whether I cried because I wanted to play or spent it cheerfully with my imaginary fairy friends, Celline and Felicia, I would sleep on the right side of the king-sized bed I shared with my sister. Two babysitters would each grab a chair, one next to me, and the other next to my sister, reading different books of our own choice. My mom made that our routine; she would always make sure every time we had a new babysitter that they could read and would read books passionately to us. I guess that's why I really like storytelling in theatre, photography, and art, and also why I once did literal storytelling, competitively. I've never really thought of how the bedtime stories stopped being our routine, but I think I can remember it very clearly now.

Two main reasons. The first being that we didn't have two babysitters at the house anymore because of financial issues. I remember vividly when we shifted from having everything we ever wished to living in modesty. We went from having six cars to two, both babysitters replaced with one maid, how we stopped having drivers take us to places, moved schools, and eventually from living in a 600 m² house my parents fully owned to a 300 m² house they had to pay a mortgage for in an area far from everything. My mom had just finished her bachelor's in psychology, I believe, or bachelor's in whatever. She went to college a lot of times. I remember thinking, why can't my mom read me a book tonight? Why does she have to be in college? But she was finally home a lot because she had to take care of us instead of doing the research her professor asked her to do.

The second reason was social media. At one point, my mom, who had been absent my whole life, was suddenly present, and instead of the two babysitters reading by our sides, my mom was in the middle of the bed reading us both the same story of *her* choice. But even though I was glad she was finally there and felt the most love I have felt from her that I have memory of, I also felt the most connected with the people at school, specifically two people: the guy "crush," and my girl "best friend" my crush liked. Well, we can go into the whole "I actually had a crush on my best friend, not the guy" story, and how I was actually jealous because of my best friend not because of the guy, but the point here being *I'm not that into guys*. So, I was on my new iPhone 4 that has data, listening to their stories about their annoying siblings and fighting parents instead of living the moment of having family at home. Regardless, hearing my mom read a book made me very calm, even as background noise. Maybe it's how well she reads, or maybe because it was one of the very few ways I was reassured that I do have a mom.

I do not really experience that type of tranquility a lot these days, but one of the few times I did was in a drawing session with an Instagram artist, @gorkiegork. It was May 2020, just when I started quarantining. I was angry at humans, the world, everything! I was uninspired. I wanted to have another senior year beach day, because the first time my batch had one back in January, it was too cold for me to dip in the

sea for too long. I was having an art block, and I really wasn't looking forward to the webinar, but I did it anyway because there really isn't anything to do in a pandemic other than watching a webinar on your laptop. Their class was great. Apparently, it was meant for people who think they do not like art and artists with an art block. All we had to do was take all the colorful crayons, highlighters, and pens we had and just to *draw things as ugly as we can!* One of the drawings I did was a tall, very tall, light pink cake with many, many tiers. The details were green, but not as green as a green frog. Only at that time, a cat jumped around instead of a frog, and more importantly, my mom did not burst out of the cake to ruin the mood.

The drawing, although *ugly*, means a lot to me because it reminded me of my amazing childhood. For a split second in the forced daydream I had in class, my thoughts brought me back to that moment with gorkiegork without my knowledge. But not so fast. This isn't all, ah, I love my childhood and I wish I were a child sort of story. The way I see my mom and what she means to me have changed drastically. I've since been forced to spend a lot of time with her, witnessed her getting her master's in psychology and, shortly after, her radical political and spiritual change towards a fundamentalist Islamic group in Indonesia. Her self-righteousness, her being entitled to hitting me when I "misbehave," and the way she steers my friends away because how protective she is all happened before she was religious.

I remember one of my friends when I was in third grade, told me as I was ordering ice cream, that one time we were hanging out with my mom accompanying us, "Why is your mom so mean to you? Isn't she studying psychology? Psychologists can read your mind, right? She would know if she's being mean to you." At the time I thought to myself: *Not this comment again! No, she can't read my mind. Psychologists can't read your mind.* But out of the millions of comments about my mom being a psychologist, this was the only one I remember vividly. It was not psychology; it was my friend thinking my mom was mean to me. I used to brush off my mom being mean, because I thought moms are supposed to be mean. That was something I never questioned before religion became a significant part of her life.

With religion in the equation, she would do the same things she would, but with an additional ending of her saying how God supports her, how unreligious a person I am for disrespecting her, and how I would go to hell if I kept being me. At the time, I identified as a Muslim. I did the prayers, not always but most of the time, and although I questioned religion and God, it wasn't something I had the urgency to figure out. Besides, 87 percent of Indonesians are Muslim (I don't know where this number came from, but I hear it a lot), and 98 percent of Indonesians believe that in order to be moral, we have to believe in God (Pew Research Center). So not being religious is out of the picture for me. But I did, to some degree, have the confidence that I was a good Muslim. I really enjoyed my Islamic class with my teacher from first grade, who used to tell stories of the prophets I looked up to; in my prayers, I did more than the compulsory rituals sometimes; I used to cry because I missed going on a pilgrimage to Mecca, the Islamic holy city. I turned to religion when I was sad and happy.

My mom, and the environment she moved me to—religious schools—ruined religion for me. It was no longer peaceful, it was no longer like drawing a tall, very tall, light pink cake—it was like the cake just exploded suddenly, and it exploded because of my mom. When I have the *rukya*—Islamic feminine prayer outfit—on me, I cannot look at myself in the mirror. When I do, I see my old self, and I am disappointed in her. She lived a perfect life where all she wanted was to be with Mommy and to look like Mommy. She used to borrow Mommy's *hijab* sometimes and wore it with pride. She was the perfect daughter, and she is not me.

Although online, I am grateful to be in college where a lot of people are supportive of differences, and that I feel less alone. I am confident to say I may not be that into guys, enough to end my relationship with my ex-boyfriend, who I loved and still do. But as I feel the most liberated, the contrast between the life I found outside of my mom's, and my life that has my mom in it, just seems so obvious. I have a rainbow kite, emphasis on the rainbow, in my room that I bought in a park with my mom when we had a picnic together. But for all she knows, it is a kite, not a *rainbow* kite. Although I hate her so much, I wish I could tell her that it is a rainbow kite. I know it's impossible, though. There aren't

just cultural reasons, but also legal reasons that come into play because of where I am located right now, which I would not mention for legal reasons. But if you're curious, think of a country that not only forbids but criminalizes LGBTQ+ relationships. I would be sabotaging my own future by telling the person who made me think I'm such a sinner for disrespecting her about what she would hate the most about me. My mom told me, multiple times, about how I should be careful of LGBTQ+ folks, atheists, and any other people with "Western" ideals. But here I am, being the person she put so much effort into protecting me from.

Overall, my life, at least in the past few weeks, has been like drawing a tall, very tall, light pink cake, but somehow my mom being here and the memories of her that I will have to live with forever act like a ticking bomb inside the perfect cake just waiting to ruin everything. But maybe some cakes are better off to be put in someone's face, like how it is in circuses. I find it really funny how I cry every day and manage to act like nothing happened five minutes after. Sometimes the idea of it makes me stop crying. It's like all is fine, but the cake is crumbling apart slowly but surely. I can always bake another cake, I guess. I hope I never get tired of baking.

*

"Most in Western Europe say belief in God not needed to be moral." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., 17 Jul. 2020. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/07/20/the-global-god-divide/pg_2020-07-20_global-religion_0-03/.

H capital H

Hannah Kaikkonen

dear Hannah don't you see me? sores and scabs, pimples and zits, tempers
and tantrums, i am H.

"no tracks, no marks. H? you must be mistaken." take a look at His toes.
i'm capital H.

"you've been off at scHool getting your pH? or Have you been out with Her?
H capital H.

jealousy? no, not me. but won't you just admit please? you've been with Her,
H capital H.

How do i know wHat you do wHen alone? tHe internet History on your
phone, says H.

'How to: vein care? inject the first time? make a speedball with c and H?'
H capital H.

'brown, wHite, curry and rice, snowballing, speedballing, cHina wHite, ice.
porn, porn so mucH damn porn.

'Hot blondes and tits, capital H, mix and matcH ups and downs, Hot
blondes and tits, capital H.'

inside a stranger's apartment, i decode tHe meanings of tHings not at all
as tHey seem

i find answers to questions unknown, rummage tHrough dressers in His
empty Home. i find H.

black tar prints, muddy sHeets, walls, me, in salt water teared seas, i lose to
sirens of disease.

streaks of black down silver foil, disassembled pens, cotton balls, spoons
and dollars, say H.

“Horried! Humiliated! Heartbroken! How’s that for an H!” i scream, “
and me. HannaH!
Here’s what i’ve learned online about your Heaven and Hell speedballing
spells, with your all caps H.

Hiv, Homelessness, Hepatitis, Herpes. do you love Her enoughH
to forget tHese?
do you love Her enoughH to forget me? do you love Her enoughH
tHat you’d Hurt me? for H?

i’ve wondered wHy you spoke such regret, wHy your eyes don’t smile
at tHe corners anymore
pinpoint pupils stare with no one beHind tHem, wHere do you go witH
Her? your Heroine H.”

How the Hell did i get Here? all tHings with an H. cHasing dragons
in dungeons after Him.
In Haunted mansions, Honorable knigHts not found. He rides
Horses tHrough dragon’s breatH, laced with H.

“dear joHn, you’ve sHared my bed, took my Heart, lied and denied,
pleaded and begged, used me and left me
HigH on Hope. for love Hopes all tHings always, I read. love HannaH
with an H, capital H.”

Tide of the Trees

Paige Walker

I'm six when I watch the sky fall
For the first time
Without the cloak of walls.
The blackened trees
Morph into immense
Steadfast giants.

Reaching.

Reaching.

Reaching.

They'll suck me up
I whisper, into an ear
Awash in the tide of dreams
So I think them into existence
Breathing life into each branch
Now arms, that mournfully billow.

They're coming down
I swear it
Once more
Into silence.

Reaching.

Reaching.

Reaching.

I surrender
To an embrace
That smooths
The hardened bark
That lines my mind.
I forget what the trees were before
They had arms and eyes
And mouths that whistled
Rustling tunes.
It's not long until
I find myself awash
In my own tide of dreams.

Wings

Mariah Delamora

Your wings glisten in the sun,
As they take you from one place to another.
You follow us as we run.
September was when we were last together.
Winter came and your wings went cold.
Were your wings white or blue?
The nights and mornings grew old,
Here I sat waiting for you....

Your presence brought love
To every heart it came across.
But you grew wings like a dove.
My eyes soon fill with water.
Rain hits the window as I think of you.
I know you're here with me, father.

Take Me Back

Pedro Buenrostro

Take me back to the return of my AMC theatre by my hacienda,
the Dolby surround echoing with Goonies playing on my favorite
IMAX screen,
the smell of salt and butter to return me to my childhood,
to enter theater SIX with its sticky tile floors, and carpeted steps.

Take me back to recline in those old fabric chairs,
others stepping over my feet to get to their throne-fitted seats,
the slurping of straws, children crying, and whispering to one another,
the movie previews and the telling people to turn off their phones.

I want to hear “In case of an emergency, the exits are to the front and back,”
see what the next superhero trailer will be,
my tub of popcorn sitting on my lap, the beginning of the movie claps,
to be swept away, as the room fades to black.

I want to escape, take me away to Middle Earth or to a galaxy far far away,
the fizzing of sodas, the unwrapping of candy,
the AMC logo on the big screen,
taken back to what normal used to be.

Dark Days in Dark Rooms

Hannah Rathje

The dark in this room isn't meant for you.
The covered blinds and locked door keep the truth from you.
Have you eaten breakfast? Have you changed your clothes?
Why don't you open up 'cause I'm the only one who knows
It's fine....

I know it's hard. For you to see the blinding lights—
shining amongst the stars.

For you to see the love you have, people all around.
You're stuck in this rut and it's breaking you down.
It's true.

I make decisions... you do.

You jump on the closest train and go out of town.
You break your word and change the game, putting me down.
I'm still here in the dark water, stressed and blind.
sitting under the harvest moon hoping you'll change your mind.
Where you see more.

Then maybe you'll see all the things that I endure.
The ragged earth and smoky airy closing up my lungs
You the one who brought me here, you left me to run.
Your stupid fiery temper burning up my skin
You play this stupid game but you don't play to win
You leave me here to clear the mess or suffer from the choice
The choice that put me here even though I have a voice.

I'm sorry.

I hope you are.
The broken dolls and empty walls all hold the scars.
The people that hurt us kept me awake.
All because of you and that one dumb mistake.
I'll paint the walls red to fill up this void.
The one inside your head that doesn't fill you with joy.
The one that cries at night at even the slightest sound.
Of shattered dreams and painful thoughts all over the ground.

I'm done.

No you're not. You started this battle and it's your turn to stop.
Let the waves crash and bring you out to see
the beautiful world that you try to keep from me.

Heaven on Earth

Emma Mankarios

I am waiting for rivers to overflow with milk and honey
I am waiting for strong streams of justice to roar
And for joy to return to the present

I am waiting for golden streets filled with people
For feasts with the ones I love, without fabric covering our expressions
I am waiting for an embrace with a stranger
With a mutual understanding of love

I am waiting for the day to come when we can unite in peace
Gleefully in each others presence, instead of forcefully
I am waiting for harmony, understanding, rest

I am waiting for this moment to come
Will it?
I am waiting
Not so patiently

Chicken

Zachary Patti

There is an old and senile suburban man
Who bought some hens he couldn't keep
They escaped, most disappeared (we get coyotes)
One remained, alive and sovereign
"Sovereign" really would be her name

She roosts in a guava tree
Lays eggs in plant pots
Eats bugs and seeds from
About twelve different yards
Finds shallow pits to turn into dust baths
Stays silent and stealthy until
She squawks like a flock
And she flies just far enough, lazy bird

Why Miss Chicken
It's odd that I could never eat you
Just don't ask me what's in the fridge
Nothing worth thinking about

It was a pot by our door where she laid the eggs
Ten of them over ten days, we didn't notice them
Until they were a mound, and we couldn't tell
Which were fresh or less fresh
So we had to throw them all away
She hasn't been back

And something I can't quite name is gone too
Something else feels like it's disappeared
Whenever I find myself craving wings
—Wings to fly with, not the other kind.

If anyone sees her, she likes granola.

The Green Revolution

Thao Le

Somebody once told me that
heroes don't always wear capes.

Rough layers peel away,
eating at the wall's rot
killing me from

inside. Mirror, mirror on the wall
said I'm the scariest of them all.

Love at first knight.

O great transformation in the
violet light. A truth unseen
except by the moon every evenin'.

Scared beauty, ugly beast.

How much history we could
read in each other's eyes—
even in our private darkness we
knew the kingdom that hunted our

ill-fated bodies. So we
swam past their soldiers and

let our magic protect the land.

In every bog, in every forest, the ground shakes
far quakes, red wings descend to
end the divine right.

Back to School

Oscar Gardella

So, it's back to school for you
But let us remember whose year it is:
Yours.
Make it what you will
Meet the sun crowned bull head on
Grab its horns and give it
A gentle hug
This fearsome friend awaits
A single drop of sunlight that blossoms
Into a million rays of golden light
And this light is yours
Your power. Your light.
Your breath and sight.
Breathe this year, feed yourself
Breathe this year, learn anew
Breathe. Live. And emerge victorious.
You will win, and triumph through the darkness
You speak with the flaming beast
And you will tell him what you want
You will breathe your words
And everything will be alright
You have won, even if you do not know it yet.
Fly free.
Good luck.

The Kite Whose String Is Your Name

Noah Abrahams

A weight has been lifted from my shoulders,
And without that weight I will stretch my wings
To catch the salt spray of crystalline ocean
Droplets, like those we saw on the shelves at
The store on the corner, radiating and sparkling,
Thrumming with the energy of the shimmering
Tones traveling through vibrations in the air.
I bought you one and it sits on your vanity,
Spreading its light into every corner of your room.
The weight was obligation, and without that weight
I will fly into the sun, like the offspring of the labyrinth's
Architect, whose ambitions turned to mortal folly.
So I give you these strings and ask you to be my anchor,
and with them we balance ambition and obligation.
And I will be the kite whose string is your name.

What I Saw Across the Water

Noah Abrahams

The wet red crags of moist clay,
Formed by the innocent hands
Of loud and raw creation.
The shapes that sprang from
Them, like bricks of white chalk,
Iridescent in the noon sun.
Those bricks are scattered
Haphazardly, and I see them all
From my perspective, high on
The winding ribbon running up
From the sea all the way to
The horizon. They were tossed
Like so many dice, years ago,
And are being tossed still,
To calculate the answers
To equations no one seems
To know yet, but might know soon.
The green geometry of landscape's
Mass tumbles them to where they
Might lie, shining brightly in their
Use and cool simplicity.
There you are, waving to me
From the bridge in the hills.
With your feet in the warm sand
Rolling the dice with your left hand.

My Woods

Noah Abrahams

You will not take away my woods.
The vines and creepers, the carpets of Spanish moss
On hanging boughs bent in the name of places
Holier than forgotten saints, with haloes of pollen
Shimmering. Bees and wasps, the glistening honey,
And falling droplets of moisture to feed
The grubs which tempt mourning doves and larks
Transported to the mouths of screaming children.
“These are mine, and what’s mine is theirs,”
Is heard by the voice of the wind, who speaks in tongues
Only the trees with roots old as ages gone to rot can hear.
These dark pools and shafts of mines, places of reclamation
Which resist the summary forces of progress.
The dark mysteries of dampness still impervious to the
Claws of progress, lifeless and metallic.
Stray away from necessity to peer down into the murkiness
Where thousands of families play their own games and fight the
Battles of survival that we have chosen to forget.
The dark and quiet sea resists the prying fingers of knowledge,
Minerals now used in far more creative ways,
To sustain the embrace of cold warmth and comfort in ignorance.
The horns that pierce the water’s surface like newly christened
battleships, only to be recalled into eras of peace.
The ancient water, alive, flows through the creature to serve a new master,
Only to be shot and skinned, the new management
Moves in without notice, the trees felled on short notice,
The pools drained and desecrated, the hills and valleys cleaved and leveled,
The pastures paved and the fields razed.
My eyes are teary, my lungs scorched and dry, my cries heard but not received.
You will not take the woods away from me.

Untitled

Anthony Warsah Liu

A word on the tip of your tongue.
Ephemeral thoughts, ever searching,
The fallible senses conjure a false image.
The mind accepts and an action, chartered.

Stop your search, question your senses.
What you seek is in your hands.
Think a moment, grasp the thought,
Wrest it close, keep it there.

Scrunch your brows, pucker your lips,
Pinch your bridge, tilt your head—

And there it is,
there it is.

The Empty in a Crowd

Paige Walker

Between the frenzied blur
Flickers of calm seep through
Sweet and slow they settle
As drops of honey dew

Sinking into the skin
In spite of lights ablaze
And notes that pulse with thrill
There's silence in this haze

I would stay forever
In the empty of a crowd
To feel the clarity
Of minds beneath the shroud

Sometime the roars are silenced
And the lights cease to flash
The sweet pocket of clarity
Reduced to shadowed ash

Phoenix

Simon Coelho

A hug. Just a hug.
Two icy shards of glass slice open my chest in search of a drop of truth.
Just a hug. And a kiss. Just a kiss
Frigid blood boils over blue flushed cheeks where Cupid burns at the stake.
Just a kiss...and a little more.
A bridge in the distance cracks and crumbles under the weight
of the winter's snowpack.
A little more. But just once.
Words flow but follow bridge wood into blackness.

A hug. Just a hug.
Just a hug. And a kiss. Just a kiss
Just a kiss...and a little more.
A little more. But now twice.

hands

Kimi Fernandez

weathered constellations
decorate calloused hands
a collection of stories
in every scratch
every scar

upturned palms
staunch heavy waterfalls
salt and water cut through
lines and lines
of futures

they hold
they hold
they hold

everything

Warm Yellow

Jasper Gill

As the rhythm of unspoken
symphonies playing to your heartbeat,
or the sound of stars twinkling in your eyes.

As dancing in the middle of a street
between two lovers in each other's arms
starts off slow, then goes out of control.

Like buttercup kisses
in a field full of sunshine raining in,
reminding you of the day you first met.

Or the messy food all over your face
while being in a room full of people,
but only tasting the soft words on your tongue.

Yellow as the beach during sunset,
warm colors painted on your blushing cheeks,
looking into each other's eyes, whispering.

A Boy and His Bed

Evan O'Connor

You sleep with me
but we don't sleep together

You don't sleep
No longer than an hour and a half anyway

I don't need to
besides, I have things to uh

I'm a bed
I am important

You are a trap,
beds are for sleepers

I am for you

Skin

Carolina Mondragon

Winding curves,
white cracked marks,
farmer's tan.

Midsummer Delights

Hillary Hoang

Ripe peaches, nectar
Tracing patterns on your wrist
A well-loved hammock

Summer Dream

Sharon Ma

A lovely squirrel
Pushed my window open to
Grant a dream, long lost.

The Bridge

Sharon Ma

Below the bridge
Flows the starry milky way,
Silver mist rises

Ecstasy

Emma Mankarios

Shoes slipped off, candles sparked fire
Stories began to unfold, love was present

Orange skies happily swirled with each gust
Laughter stomped on conflict, euphoria became present

A chill reminds an embrace, I chose to say
“I am present”

Deep breaths fueled anticipation
For a split second we wondered, “is heaven present?”

Reality strikes as a sword
The weight of gravity is present

Darkness clouds over what was
I long for the past, the future—yet receive the present

Emotional Storm

Shuchi Maheshwari



Open Spaces Redefined

Jay Gall





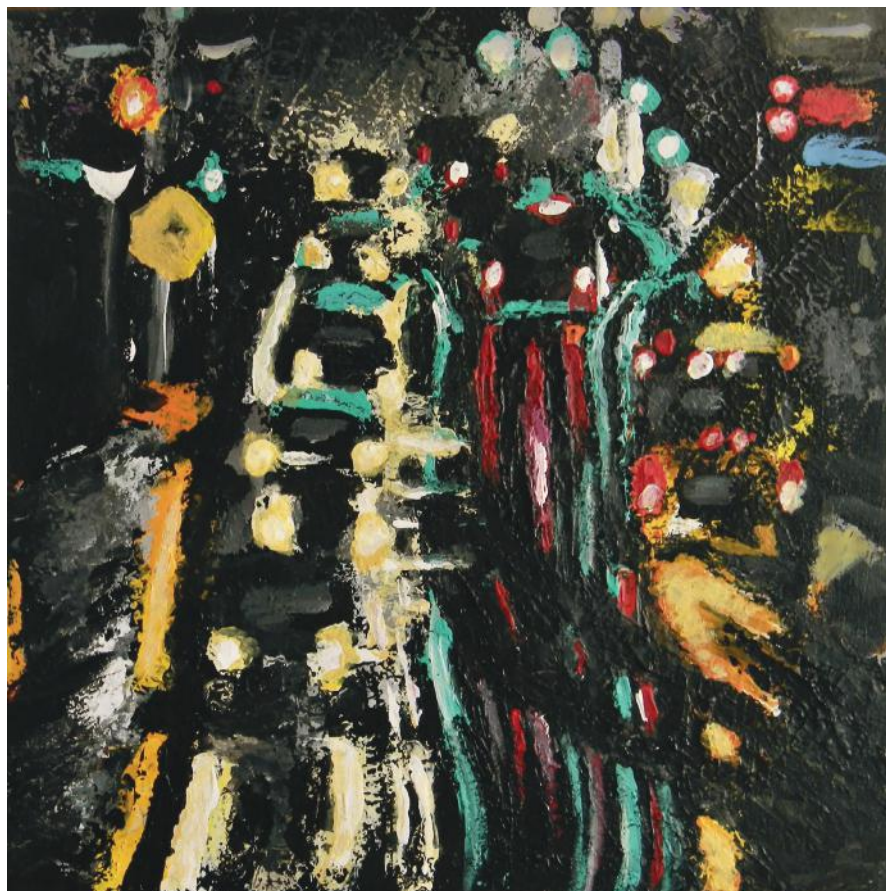
One Way Street

Ashley Hin



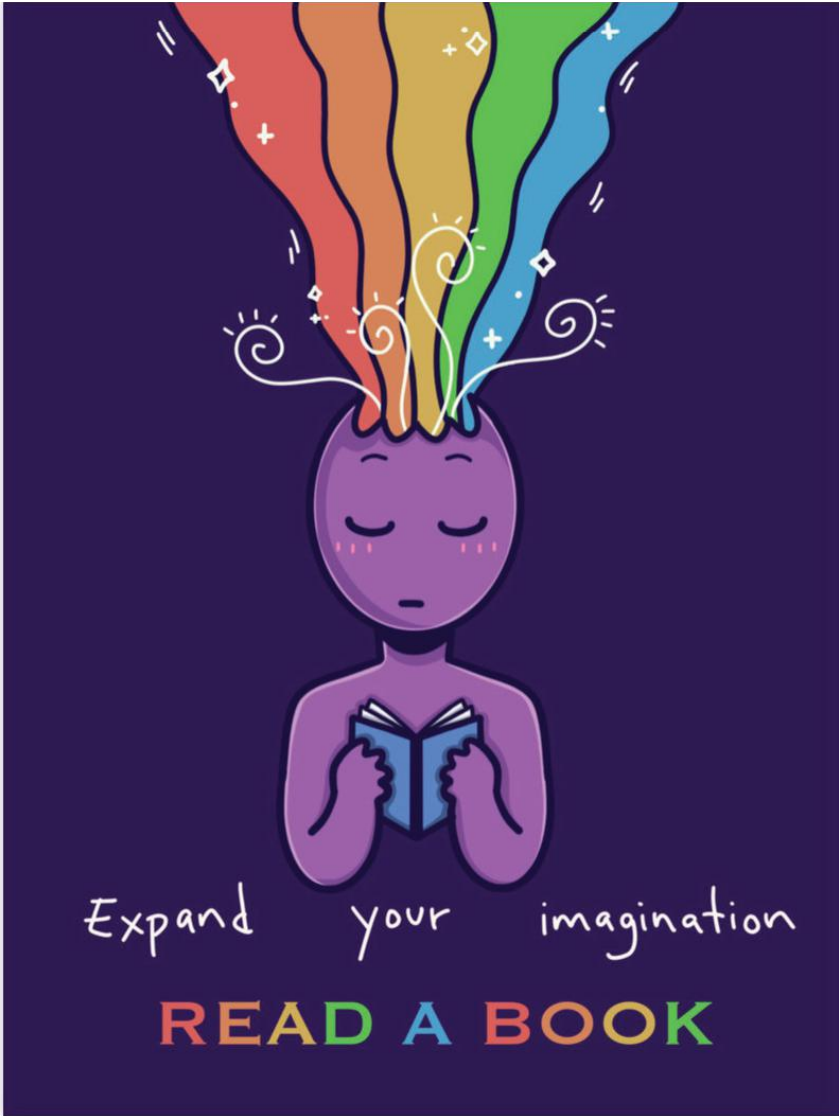
City Streets

Audra O'Reilly



Imagination

Abrielle Terzian



Ink Factory

Kathy Franceschini



Road Trip

Nathan Chyu



Serenity

Nathan Chyu



Positives

Thu Le



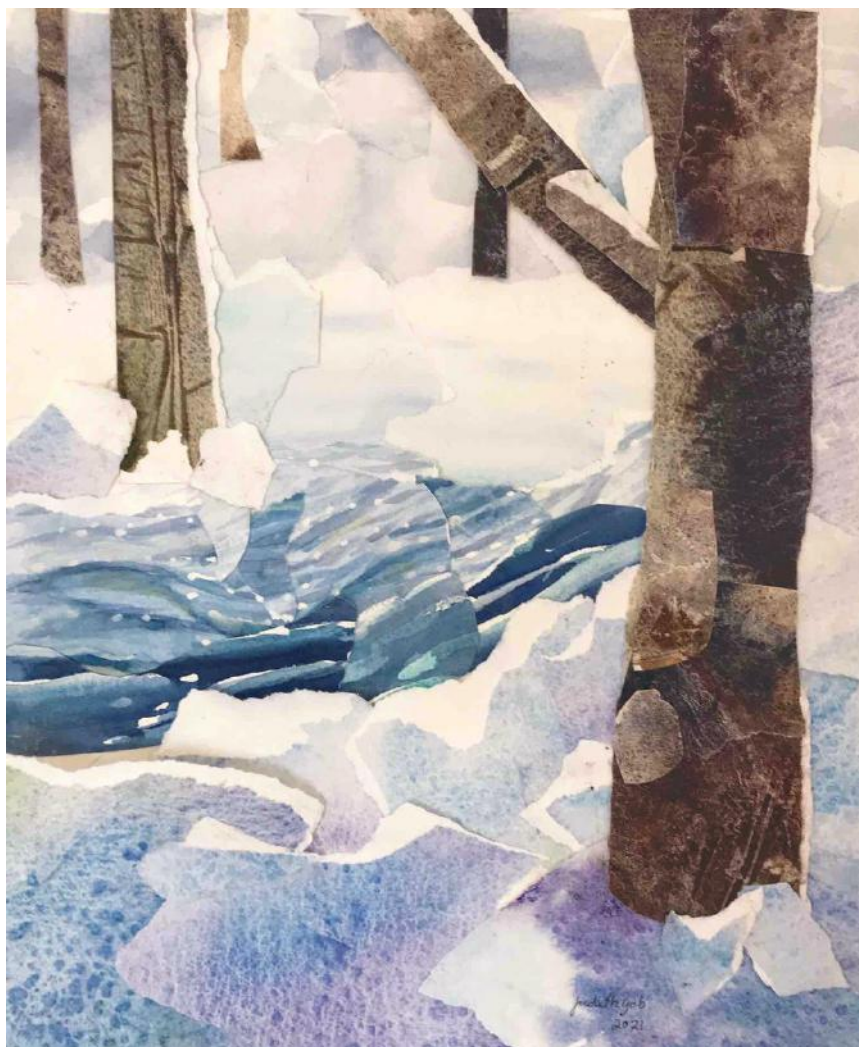
Orchid Hair

Thu Le



Cool Winter

Judith Yob



Yachiyo Blooms

Judith Yob



Like Mother Like Daughter

Abrielle Terzian



Ethereal

Ann Lee



The First Responder

Babak Rastgar



Skating for Life

Kyoung Suk Jo

A snowstorm whirls—the temperature of
Highs, subzero; lows, further subzero.
I, layered—triple thick—from toe to above
Like Matryoshka dolls, slip on the snow.
With piercing chills in the Antarctic air,
Toward a mountain top, I'm uplifted.
With boots and skis of thirty pounds I wear,
Why do this? I ask, seeing slopes slanted.
But, with a deep breath taken at a ridge,
I push, skis down, defeating the cold wind.
With fingers and ears thawed by hot courage,
I swish swoosh rhythmically; my crisp mind
Feels the moment of joy worth all the strain.
Until I struggle uphill all over again.

A Swallow in Snow

Kyoung Suk Jo

Outside a window, the first snow falls down.
Dozing in a cold room without a fire,
I squint, my bleary eyes, stirred by a chirping tweet,
At a swallow in a bare tree with sleet
Across a lonely, cold and empty mire.
“Impossible,” I whisper.

His face weary and dreary,
His eyes looking up to the sky,
His friends all left for the warm south long ago.
What could he be looking for? An old dream.
What could he be thinking of? An old memory.

*

Once, a bright young fledgling
Flew the first time in the sky.
Higher, higher, he aimed with every flap.
The vast world below spreading endlessly,
The fresh air filling up and exploding his chest,
Happier, happier, he grew with every flap.

His feathers've faded in the sixteen years of journeys
In the sky, to the warm south, to the home up north.
One starved; one injured; one fell prey;
One at a time, his friends vanished on the way.

*

Eying the sky in tears like dew,
he's sitting on a winter twig—like a statue—
With the last thin breath left inside.
Suddenly, breaking the motionless thought,
He jumps off with the last breath caught,
As if he is a young fledgling again.

The winter breeze flies him up far;
My eyes reflect him as a shooting star,
a flame across the white snowfall,
Happier, happier, with every little flap.

Woody the Smiling Spoon

Hannah Kaikkonen

“Girls, hands to yourselves. You don’t need to be touching everything on the shelves,” Dad said sternly.

Ashley stopped and brought one of her hands down to her side. The other hand she placed on the grocery cart. Me, I kept running my right hand along the red and white Campbell soup cans on the grocery shelf, touching every single one. I guess the reason this memory is still so vivid in my mind is because it’s one of the only times I can remember (in my early childhood years) that I deliberately disobeyed my father.

“Do you want a spanking?” Dad asked.

“Yes,” I said back indignantly, giggling silently to myself. Glancing over at my sister with smiling mischievous eyes, I continued to touch the Hamburger Helper boxes.

“Okay,” Dad said. His eyebrows slanted downward, his lips puckered and the wrinkles in his forehead became pronounced. “How many do you think? Do you want two?”

“No. More.” I suppressed a laugh that bubbled up from out me anyways.

“Four?”

“More,” I grinned.

The conversation kept on this way, until I pronounced at the top of my lungs, “I want all of the spankings in the world!”

It wasn’t uncommon for my dad to make us bend over his knee in the middle of the grocery store and give us a spanking. This was the most humiliating. Not only for our own shame in being spanked and in trouble so publicly but because the passersby looked at my dad like he was monstrous in spanking two pigtailed, totheaded five-year-olds, in matching denim dresses. It was the same looks they’d give us when he’d publicly lose his temper and scream relentless reproaches, loud enough for everyone in Lucky’s to hear.

Today was different though. By the grace of God, he waited to punish me until we got home. My twin sister and I were in the backyard playing on the teeter totter and I awaited my doom with a sinking stomach. As reality was setting in, my dad walked through

the dry brush on the ground, up to our swing set, holding a smiling Woody. Woody was the name of the wooden spoon Dad used to spank us.

He had a smile on his face, because one day at the dinner table Ashley and I made up an imaginary tale of the Woody World theme park. Every time one rode the roller coaster, they'd get a spank on the bum right before the drop. After cooking up this hilarious scenario that tickled us pink, we sneakily snuck off to the kitchen where we sharpied a smile, forever on Woody's wooden head. We later were spanked for that act of defiance and our smiling lips quickly turned downward.

Today I was facing a doom much worse. I had asked for all of the spankings in the world and here was my dad, ready to deliver them. Fortunately, I didn't get all of the spankings in the world that day. I got three. Three hard ones. And afterwards retreated to the cold red and blue metal slide, with the understanding that spankings were nothing to smile about.

Lucy

Kimi Fernandez

I was 12 and it was take-your-daughter-to-work day. Only it wasn't really. In reality I was running a fever at school and my mom had to pick me up. She told the nurse she could do it, the house she was meant to clean was near my school. Our home wasn't and my mom explained to me that the lady of the house was mean but paid decently so we had to go, she was already running late. Which meant ... it was take-your-daughter-to-work day.

Lucy!

Lucy?

The lady of the house was running late; she had things to do and people to see and my mom took too long picking up her sickly looking daughter from school and now she was going to be late.

"Make sure you scrub that bathroom floor spotless Lucy!"

Lucy?

Heels clacked on marble floor as the woman shouted this on her way out of the house but not before she spun around, manicured hands tapping on the white box on the wall.

She shut off the a/c

The blinking green panel read HIGHEST 115 F
the numbers seemed to sear into my mind

I shuffled my way towards my mom
she was already scrubbing

I wanted to tell her that the sweat already stinging her eyes was because the stupid lady turned off the a/c and that maybe my fever was rising because it was getting hard to see clearly and why did she let the lady call her Lucy when her name was LUZ and that wasn't hard to pronounce

but when my mom looked up at me
eyes blinking out sweat that looked like tears

and asked me if I wanted to lie down in her car with the a/c on as she was scrubbing the stupid ugly bathroom with the tacky decorations

I said nothing.

A few moments of longing

Madison Salas

sometimes, late at night,
when the rain hits the pavement
the only sound is
a knocking upon the roof—
the world asking to be let in

it is in the drive
up the freeway north you see
sunlight scattered on
the tips of the tallest trees
above them, an eagle's freefall

the leaves crunch beneath
your footfalls on the shaded trail
following the path that's left
by those who came before you
always chasing, but never alone

The Benefit of One Too Many Long Days

Madison Salas

The door swings shut
And you have to remember to
Jiggle the key in the lock otherwise all that work is
For nothing

Your car is on the third floor parking lot
And your feet ache
And you carry the last stinking bag of trash in your hand
And the mall dumpster is so far away
And it was you and the new hire closing
 (She was so nice but she was so new)
And you tried but you know you'll be getting a call in the morning
And your manager opens
and
and
And

 All

 Those

 Stairs

Just might be what breaks you today

The first step comes easy
You worked 10 hours, what's another 5 minutes
Of work
Of leg after tired leg after tired leg
 And did you take a break today?
 And you ran out of the large size cups
 And how many clenched teeth apologies did you say?
 And a man called you a bitch today
 And did you lock the door?
And

A man called you a bitch today
You don't know how you forgot that

And you trip over the last step
Catch yourself and look at the scuff left on your work shoes
And you made it to the top
And you laugh

You laugh, the first real laugh of the day
No forced smile, no tight throat
No clock at your back
 Just your stomach aching by the time you walk to your car
You slide into the seat
And open the visor mirror
And wait
Until all the other car lights click off
And all is left are some tired eyes staring at you

They shine with the remnants of giggles
Still rimmed with purple bruising bags that never seem to fade these days
And you remember how a day like this
Would have left those eyes in tears and not laughter
Just a few months ago

You look again to see what you find
And you find yourself, not made whole, but made more
More backbone
More steady
Just more

And there is

There is joy
There is sadness
And you wonder how you can have both

The Dead Sparrow

Sara Robertson

When I was a little girl, I found a dead sparrow, nestled between tufts of yellow weeds by the sidewalk near my house. I remember I looked at it for a moment, cocked my head to the side, before I dropped to my knees and picked it up, cradling it in my cupped hands. I had never seen a bird so up close before—and I studied it—taking note of two brown stripes framing its head, its speckled chest, the way its feathers were so much softer than I had imagined.

The way it was so still - and I wondered if it had ever perched on the aged oak tree outside my bedroom window and called out its song.

Then something struck my back, my hands were knocked apart, and the bird's body arced through the air before it fell swiftly to the ground, landing with a small thud on the concrete sidewalk. Alive!

No. Have you ever seen a bird fly with its wings still tucked tightly by its sides?

My father grabbed me by the shoulders and steered me inside to the kitchen sink:

“Wash your hands.”

The bird!

“Wash your hands.”

“Keep scrubbing.”

“Now wash them again.”

“You can't touch them. They carry diseases. Don't do that again.”

And I didn't. From then on, birds became something of vermin. Rather than conversing with them, I cursed them for leaving shit on my car and stalking me in search of crumbs. I only wish I had gotten the chance to ask that sparrow what the world looked like from four hundred feet above ground. Maybe I should ask one, before I forget. Before I try to find out, myself, but I can't stretch out my wings, and I fall into the cold concrete with an empty thud.

100 Word Story

Sara Robertson

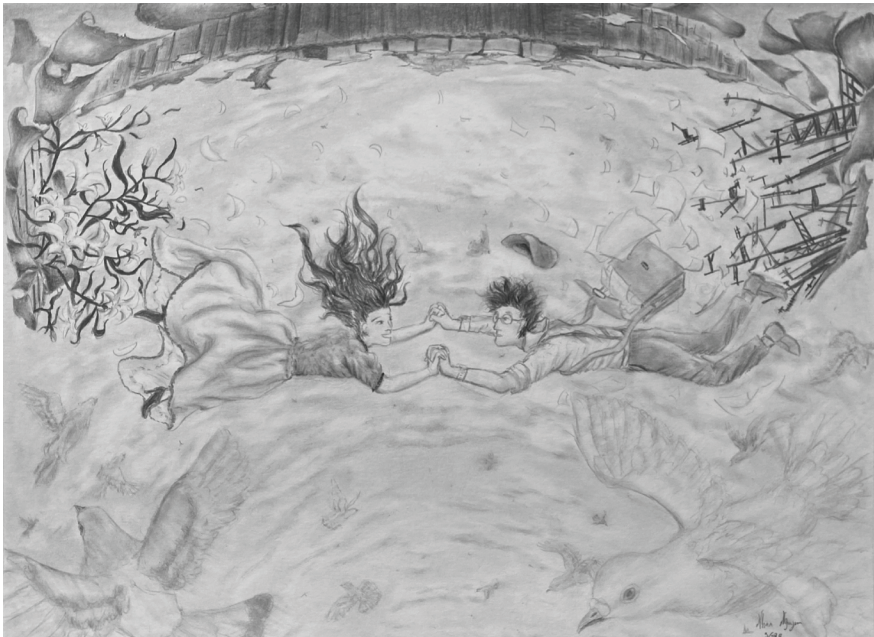
I used to imagine the ocean was parallel to the heavens; fish, swimming as close to or as far from the surface as they desire, are like birds, perched in a tree or flying high above the clouds.

Being confined to the ground for this short life, the ocean was where I could leave my futile body behind. I would imagine I was a bird, soaring above the barren earth. The push and pull of the waves; the powerful winds of the open sky. Open space, brimming with nothing but possibility.

Freedom exists, it seems, only in exchange for oxygen.

Free Falling

Nhan Nguyen



The Suicide Kin

Paige Walker

I knock—two times hard and one time soft. She doesn't answer. I'm not surprised. I enter through the screenless window with the broken hinge instead. For a moment I am a teenager again, but it's not the same. I conclude that window break-ins are only enjoyable if one is high on the thrill of giving backseat hickies and sipping strawberry schnapps.

I hear the rubber bottoms of her slippers shuffling against the linoleum in the kitchen. Though she is two rooms away, her signature scent—stale coffee and cigarettes—reaches me almost immediately. I notice the floral wallpaper of my childhood bedroom is peeling at the edges, giving its rosy pattern the appearance of wilting. I hesitate, but know better than to simmer in the memories. As I walk out of my old bedroom, I nearly twist my ankle on the splotched shag carpet. I drop to my knees and re-adjust my heel, silently cursing seventies interior trends. I stagger out into the hallway, where framed photographs of my brother and me dot the walls. Most of them are crooked; all of them are choked by a fine layer of dust. I don't want to look, but inevitably my eyes meet the toothless smiles and powder blue eyes of the children we used to be.

I keep looking until my gaze settles on Robert's senior photo. His hair is sandy and his skin is spotted. Technically he hadn't finished high school, but Mom would forever use that photo as proof to the neighbors that he did. Rob hated that. I can still hear him chiding her for being such a phony. If I'm really still, I can hear the muffled pulse of Phish radiating out of his room. I can hear the familiar rasp in his voice, whispering at me to relax after his edibles got me so high I thought I might die. I can hear the crackle in his laugh when he returned home one night with a street sign bearing his name. I can almost feel the weight of his embrace when he told me to go to college and never look back. Almost.

My neck cricks as I turn away.

I inch towards the kitchen to avoid giving her a start. The fanciful part of me imagines her recognizing me by the rhythm of my footsteps. In truth there has been no time in which she would have ever seen me in my work heels, let alone memorized the timbre of their clicks.

I stand at the threshold of the kitchen. She's huddled over the kettle with her back to me. I lean back on one leg and tug at a loose thread on my merino wool turtleneck. She glances at me, unfazed. I am half-

surprised by her serenity, half-distracted by the holes dotting the front of her quilted housecoat. My eyes draw upward to a pair of moths batting around in the overhead light. The kettle squeals and she faces her back to me once more. She turns down the stove without meeting my eyes.

“Mom.”

“Hmm?” she coos, pouring her tea.

“I’ve been calling you. Haven’t you gotten any calls?” I lower my voice an octave in hopes she’ll guess the gravity of what I’m about to say. She doesn’t. Instead, she walks to the breakfast nook and begins shuffling through a tower of junkmail.

“Mom, the police called me saying they couldn’t get a hold of you.” My voice quivers, “It’s about Robert.”

She rips open a perfume sample and begins rubbing it directly on either side of her neck.

I wait for her to finish and toss it in the bin, but when she does she simply exchanges it for a newspaper, which she apparently changed her mind about discarding.

“Mom, look at me.”

Her eyes continue to follow the lines of the newspaper with a rhythmic twitch.

Meanwhile, I stare at my hands as a deep, putrid heat builds up inside me. I turn toward the cracked window, but the air is still. I can’t escape it; the heat is in my throat and eyes. I swallow before I let the words out.

“Mom. Robert OD’ed.”

“Did you read the *Record* this week? I was looking in the obituaries and wouldn’t you know, Betsy Halloway was right there in full color and everything. Don’t you remember her?” she asks in her usual sing-song tone.

I recoil. “What? No, I—”

“Your preschool teacher! God Carolyn, you know she was always trying to tell me there’s something off about you and your brother. She thought it was social but I swear to god if it wasn’t—”

“Mom, I don’t give a shit about Betsy Holiday—”

“Holl-o-way.”

I roll my lips together in a feeble attempt to prevent myself from saying something regrettable, but it's not enough. "Mom, my brother, your son, is going to be one of those obituaries. What's not getting through to you?"

The silence that follows is dense enough to suffocate us both. Amid the quiet, time seems elastic. Stretching onward without anything to mark its passage.

I don't know how long it's been when she takes an audible, staccatoed breath. She whispers, "You didn't say it was the last time."

"I wouldn't have broken into your house if it wasn't."

"I don't think I can afford an obituary."

I exhale. "Don't worry. I'm making the arrangements."

Her head whips toward me. For the first time since I arrived, our eyes meet. "Oh no, this is my son we're talking about. God knows you were always trying to get between us. No, you won't do it in death too." Her voice is low and curt.

I clench my jaw. "Mom, listen to me. Carlton's sister works at a nice funeral home, they're going to help us out. It'll be easier—"

"Carlton? You're not bringing that good-for-nothing husband into my family's business. I won't have it."

"You just admitted you can't afford it!"

"You listen to me right now Carolyn Mae because I'll only say this once. I'm next of kin. I decide what to do with my boy."

"Your boy? You hadn't talked to him in years! Mom, you didn't even pick up the phone for the last three of his ODs."

"You don't know anything about us, never did."

"I know about him. It was me who saw him once a month. I was the one talking with his counselor."

Her gray skin shifts to a violent reddish hue. She turns back to the junk mail and flicks through it as if I have left the room.

Still buzzing, I spin around and rifle through her junk drawer. I rip a coffee-stained notepad out along with my father's old fountain pen, then scribble numbers until my brain is too muddled to continue.

"Here. It's the hospital and police station's number. You need to call the hospital as soon as possible and let them know what funeral home you want to go through. The police told me to have you call them too."

My hand trembles as I slide the note in front of her. She doesn't shift her gaze; instead she pretends to be transfixed by a hardware store coupon.

The veins in my neck are taut as violin strings. Carlton's words rattle around my mind. She doesn't deserve this. A voicemail would have sufficed.

As I head for the front door, all is silent except for the steady beat of my heels against the hallway's hardwood. I resist the urge to return to my own former bedroom. But as I near Robert's room, the floorboards seem to shudder beneath me. My hand is drawn to his loosened brass doorknob. I don't falter when it refuses to open upon my first twist. With muscle memory on my side, I rattle the knob with balanced pressure—it creaks open. At first, just my head cranes in.

His boyish blue wallpaper has not yet begun to peel with age. My eyes fall over the yellowed Grateful Dead and *Sports Illustrated* posters. Under the daze of nostalgia, I step inside. I run my fingers along his still-gleaming baseball trophies, then pluck a hand-transcribed poem off his corkboard. It's "the suicide kid" by Charles Bukowski. I turn to leave, but not before noticing his crumpled, untucked flannel duvet. I squint. I should know better, but my hand is yanking the blanket free before I have time to reconsider.

It's plain as print—small, rusty smudges of blood. There's a plastic bag peeking between the mattress and the wall. I tug on its handles—syringes, a rusty spoon, and a powder-coated Ziploc bag. I swallow. My grip loosens and the bag falls to the floor. I slide my hand behind the mattress. He was keeping his phone in the same spot he always did. I flip it open. Among dozens of unopened messages, only one illuminates the screen:

Mom:
Are you okay?

Dandelions

Josh Schoen

It starts deep underground
Toxins
we take in
Expectations
echoing through tunnels
No
light at the end
We
are all so innocent
So
delicate
But
we absorb our surroundings
We
grow thorns
And
bulletproof skin
We
modify ourselves
Trying
to impress others
Hiding
our insecurities
We
cut our hair with chainsaws
We
bathe in pyrethrin
Anything
to stop ourselves
From
showing what's within
That
boy I was

Who
picked flowers
Who
wore friendship bracelets
Only
to realize the friends I lacked
That
day I hid in the bathroom
Staring
at fluorescent bulbs
Moths
circling around it
Worshipping
it
Only
to realize the consequences
The
cycle repeating like seasons
That
day I realized I was not alone
So
many forgotten
Left
to wilt
Insults
injected into their veins
A
syringe
Trying
to cure something
That
cannot be fixed
And

those
Who
fake a smile
An
artificial persona
Only
to stay inside
That
barbed wire fence
Zapping
anyone who tries to leave
I
was told to man up
To
act normal
And
now I see
So
many others
Who
never learned
Who
hide their secrets
And
that softness
So
satisfied
So
secure
Blows
away
Breaks
apart in a single breath
Revealing complete emptiness

Something Embarrassing Just Happened

Sarah Cunningham

Tyler stared up at the white ceiling that haunted him every night for the past month. The infamous psych ward of south Texas had become his cage the moment he came out to his family. Tyler understood the risk he was taking, he was almost sixteen, but living another day using his dead name and identifying as a girl was unbearable. He had confided his most true self to his parents, and what did they do? They screamed, they cried, they prayed, and eventually Tyler found himself being dragged to a psych ward so he could be fixed. So his parents could have their “little girl” back. Tyler blinked away the hot tears of frustration in his eyes and rolled over in his bed, his long brown hair covering his nape. The only thing that helped keep his mind off of his parents’ betrayal was his escape plan.

He studied the ward for his entire stay up until that point. He tried to be friendly with the nurses and security guards in order to get any useful information from them. But he really had nothing. Every window was barred, every door locked; the place was a fortress. Still, Tyler had hope that he would escape sooner or later. His fellow inmate Kate had become the most reliable friend inside the ward, and she was working just as hard as he was to escape. They planned on leaving together and making it out in the world with the help of each other.

Tyler smiled as he thought of Kate; she was wild for sure but she was loyal. Kate never really said why she was in the ward and Tyler didn’t pressure her to talk about it, yet he wondered. Suddenly his eyes sprung open as the heavy smell of smoke hit his nose. An orange hue began to glow from the seal of his bedroom’s door. Tyler was up within seconds, bursting through the door. He was met with heat and a wave of smoke that knocked him back. The hallway was soon filled with other patients who screeched in terror as they saw the huge fire that came from the kitchen adjacent to their hall. Tyler covered his mouth, squinting through the smoke as he moved forward slowly searching for Kate. Coughs and screams of terror bombarded his ears, making it impossible to hear his own voice call out for his friend.

Tyler squinted, straining to see a figure that looked like Kate only a few feet from him. As he took a step towards her, he slipped, hitting the ground hard. A large man jumped onto him in a panic. He was screaming in another language Tyler did not understand but he wasn’t

sure he'd understand even if it was English because the man was one of the sickest people there. He was known around the ward for his violent outbursts and vivid hallucinations. The two of them struggled but Tyler was overpowered by the grown man who had pinned him down. The man was keeping Tyler immobilized as he rambled in his language. With the smoke choking him, the heat becoming overwhelming, and the man keeping Tyler pinned, he began to stop struggling. *Maybe this is it*, he thought, as his body slowed and stopped struggling.

Tyler felt the man's grip on him loosen immediately and the weight of his body was suddenly gone. Kate had jumped on the man's back, and had him in a headlock, leaving Tyler gasping on the ground. Tyler jumped to his feet in awe of Kate as she wrestled the grown man to the ground, but her timing was awful. Just then the security guards and nurses ran in with fire extinguishers and started handcuffing patients in order to round everyone up. Tyler stood as close to the wall as he could manage in order to hide in the smoke as the guards began cuffing people. And then something caught his eye. Moonlight. Unbarred moonlight, coming from the doors farthest from the kitchen, which were now wide open. Before Tyler even processed a thought his legs began moving him toward the doors. It was perfect—all the guards and nurses were busy with the fire and the rowdy patients; they did not even notice him. This was his chance. He froze, turning around to see a guard hitting Kate with a baton as she lay helpless on the ground. Their eyes met for a moment, but Tyler ripped his eyes away and ran out the open doors.

Tyler flew out of the building that had been his cage for about a month. Bare feet pounded on the dirty asphalt road. The night air filled his lungs, which were still sore from breathing in all that smoke. After what felt like ten minutes, Tyler obeyed his body screaming at him to stop. He had been running non-stop for awhile, terrified that the moment he stopped, there would be someone there to drag him back. He immediately bent over, supporting himself on his kneecaps, as he struggled to catch his breath. Sweat fell from the tip of his nose as blood rushed in his ears. *I think I made it*. Tyler looked around to see that he was completely alone on the road in the middle of the night. A strangled noise escaped from deep within him. It was so unfamiliar that

Tyler did not even recognize it at first. He was laughing. It was a breathy giggle, frantic at best, but he was laughing. It was purely out of disbelief, adrenaline, and shame. The laugh soon turned into sobs as Tyler sank to his knees on the ground. He was finally free, but he had abandoned his only friend. Kate was still there; he had left her to suffer. The sobs did not stop for what seemed like hours. Tyler coughed and spat but his tears kept flowing, trying to choke him.

Soon, he gave up, letting his sadness take over as he drifted to sleep on the side of the road sheltered by some bushes.

Tyler awoke suddenly as a boot slightly kicked his back. Fearing the worst, he put his arms up over his face to defend himself from the next blow, but it never came. Slowly, Tyler peered over his arm, only to see a tall figure of a man standing over him, barely visible from the insane amount of sunlight.

“The hell you doing sleeping on the side of the road?”, the man’s voice boomed.

He did not sound mad, just concerned with a deepness that made Tyler realize this man was at least over forty.

“I uh...had a rough night sir.” Tyler’s voice came out far more timid than he wanted it to.

The older man let out a scough before offering his hand to the boy. They stood in awkward silence as Tyler allowed him to pull him up. Tyler quickly brushed off his ward uniform, praying the older man didn’t take notice.

“Well, I can’t just leave you here. Where do you live? I’ll give you a ride.”

Tyler smiled at the man, surprised by his hospitality, but he had no idea how to answer the stranger. He feared telling this strange old man the truth as to why he was asleep on the side of the road. But what other choice did he have? The road was empty, no buildings in sight. No way I’m walking, Tyler thought to himself.

“I’d appreciate that very much sir.”

The radio soothed Tyler’s nerves with its old country music. The two strangers rode in silence in the older man’s truck. Tyler was worried

that the man would pummel him with questions as soon as they got into the car but it never happened. A relieved smile spread across Tyler's face as he noticed the hula girl swaying back and forth on the man's dashboard.

"So which way we headed?"

The question shook Tyler out of his trance, startling him. Crap, what do I say? Going back home would be useless. And his other relatives would just notify his parents. There was one option. . . .

"Just drop me off at the nearest bus station please. I gotta find a bus to Corpus Christi."

The man narrowed his eyes but nodded without a word. Phew, thank god he didn't ask me anything.

Another few minutes passed before the man cleared his throat saying, "Look, kid, I know it ain't my business but are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Huh? Oh no, of course not. Why would you ask, sir?"

The old man narrowed his eyes at him again. Suddenly the car turned sharply off the side of the road, halting in the dirt.

"Hey! What are you—"

The old man stroked his mustache, eyes still narrow. Why does he look disappointed in me?

"You can trust me. I want to help you, son."

Tyler sat in shock. But the term of endearment, the soft "son" he added at the end of the sentence brought tears to his eyes. Tyler's eyes stung as he forced the tears to stay in.

"I—I don't. . ."

His voice drifted off, as the tears overcame his strength. Tyler hunched over in the passenger seat, softly crying. The old man patted his back softly, with a surpassingly warm touch.

"It's alright. . . You're safe now."

Tyler stayed that way for a while. Once he finally calmed down, he decided to tell the man everything.

Contrition

Emily Morton

I drove to your house last Saturday. Through the never-ending suburban streets, past the large oak trees that protected all the homes. Every home except for yours. The small home on the corner of Lemoyne way, with the large lemon tree that always grew the most crisp and bright-smelling fruit....

During June, I made the fifteen-minute drive from my house to your house every day. One day, I ran into your arms after getting a letter that I had been wanting for weeks. I had just gotten my acceptance letter from a collegiate dance squad.

I remember the day in February, when you told me your dog had passed away. I ran out of my car and saw you on the brick-covered porch with your face in your hands. I glimpsed the tears running down your face as you looked up and you said, "I'm so happy you're here now," as you quickly wiped the tears off your face and hugged me.

I remember the time I was so happy to see your face as you came and greeted me with the largest smile on your face. I remember that day at the beach when you called me on the phone and told me you had just gotten your driver's license, and said, "I guess you won't be needing to drive anymore." I laughed and a small smile came upon my face. I was so excited for you. ...

But then one day, the fresh lemon fruit on Lemoyne Way did not smell the same. The trees grew barren like the memories of the past. The person I saw every day in June, was not there anymore. Your family still was there, but you weren't. And there was no way of bringing you back. You were long gone. Ever since that car ran that red light, and you fell off the side of the road. ...

I remember that day I had gotten that news of your death, as your mother called me on the phone weeping and telling me to come to the hospital on 14th street. I had never driven so fast in my life. As I drove, I recalled the fight we had earlier, where you and I both said the most untrue and hateful words about each other. I looked at my phone before your mom called. You apologized, and said you loved me. You had called me telling

me you were on your way over to see me. You were driving from your house to mine in the pouring rain. I arrived at the hospital, running into your room, bawling my eyes out, the last time I would ever see your face. I ran into to your room with tears running down my face nearly out of breath. I apologized to you, and told you I loved you. But you could not hear me through the coma.

So when I drove past your house last Saturday, and you weren't there, I parked underneath that lemon tree and I cried. I thought of the young blonde boy with ocean eyes that anyone could just sink themselves in. I always hoped that one day you would come back and that everything would be what it once was. Until last Saturday when I drove by your house, I realized you were gone.

Three Birthdays

Oliver Miles

We ate like kings: ordered pizza and sodas. Every kid's dream. And while we ate we had the finest entertainment. It was my birthday, after all, so I chose the festivities. We played games. It would be a lie if I said I remembered what. But it was fun. It was joyous, We laughed and ate and played and forgot our fears, if we were old enough to have any. There were four of us, me included. I remember all of them, closely and vividly. Enjoying the evening, enjoying the night.

We stayed up late, as one does when they feel special. And I mean late. It came around to the AM and we became giddy. Of course we did as children. They enjoyed themselves, I know they did, as did I. But none of them remembered that night like I. None of them remembered each other like I.

*

We grew older, lost touch. I haven't talked to any of them in years. And yet that night doesn't escape the throes of my mind. That night continues to haunt me. They were never my friends. They never cared for me. If anything, those poor poor fools must have pitied me. Two years ago I had my first surprise party. Honestly, I was surprised. My family and friends did a good job at hiding it, and I enjoyed it. We went bowling, as that is the game of intellectuals. My family spared no expense: we bowled, ate, and played in the arcade. We had the whole shabang. There were quite a few of us, eight in total.

After that time we went our separate ways, as the end of high school was coming. Some of us sticking around, others moving on with their lives. None of them remember that day, none of them remember the fun and joy we felt.

That was what I thought. Four of them, my closest and best friends, are still mine today. Every so often, one comments about it. "That surprise party sure was fun!" "We really got you with that."

We discuss that time, the fun, and fondly look back. Before things got hard. Before things got stressful. Before we became adults.

*

Last year was the first birthday I had alone. Not truly alone, I had my family around me. But family doesn't really count. It's not the same. I felt alone that whole day. No friends with me. Few friends wishing me a good day. I didn't mind, for you see I don't care for those things. But the loneliness stuck. It coursed through every action of that day. And I remember the feeling. I remember that day when nobody else can. That last birthday, is the true essence of who I am. I know that I am alone in this world.

Aimee

Karen Allen

Aimee was a puppy, ~~an Airedale~~, joyous, our “first child.”
She woofed at ~~skunks, tall strangers, inside holes she dug at the beach,~~
when the baby cried.

She chewed ~~my shoes, grapes off the vines, rib bones to splinters, nothing.~~
She smiled at ~~rides in the car, her exasperated trainer, my dad, the vet.~~
Her eyes were ~~closed, sparkling, cloudy, closed.~~

Aimee lives in ~~Sonoma, Napa, San Jose~~, Dog Heaven, our hearts.

Starry Nights

Emily Morton

Winds rushing through my soul
Joy exceeds my expectations
Stars rush through the galaxy
I look up and see prosperity
My hand reaches up
And for a brief moment
I grab onto the path
To shoot for the stars
And feel that rush forward
Into my future
Of prosperity
Oh, what a starry night

Winner of the 2021 Jim Luotto Prize

Walt Whitman: The Realistic Romantic

Charles Orlando

Walt Whitman's rejection of traditional poetry forms and meter is well known; his Romantic era writings breathed much-needed life into the power of the individual and the sublimeness of nature. But as the world changed and war broke out, Whitman's writing also transitioned. Whitman's experiences as a war nurse to thousands of injured soldiers not only afforded him a profound sense of purpose, his stark first-person narratives laid bare the horrors of war and painted a picture only one with first-hand experience could. Staying true to his style of free-verse prose, Whitman's impassioned and emotionally dense poems—"Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night" and "The Wound-Dresser," in particular—departed from his previous works, providing readers with a bedside view of death and the hopelessness that accompanies our inability to stop it. With this shift in focus, Whitman unknowingly served as a bridge between traditional eighteenth-century Romanticism—the elevation and idealization of the self and the sublimeness of nature, as reflected in "Song of Myself"—and Realism, exemplified by his embrace of, and writings about, the harsh day-to-day reality during the Civil War.

Whitman not only wrote in a style that reflected American Romanticism, but his prose also embodied it while simultaneously rejecting long-held tenets and antiquated traditions of what poetry was "supposed" to be: structured meter, predictable rhyme schema, and a through-line to a known narrative. His creation of free verse put more emphasis on what mattered most to him and came to define the literary era of Romanticism: feeling and intuition over reason, the power of imagination, the importance of nature, and the value placed on freedom and individuality. Nowhere is this style more evident than in "Song of Myself," Whitman's seminal work on the power and importance of the self. He was all-accepting of who he was—as a man, as a human, and most importantly, as an individual:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (Song 1–3)

Whitman advocated a strong sense of individuality and self-value. His writings advised others to accept themselves as they are, regardless of any perceived faults or challenges—man or woman, young or old... even Black or White. These viewpoints transferred to Whitman's politics, as well, when he became "a Free-Soiler, opposed to the acquisition of more territory for slavery" (Norton 21). While not formally an Abolitionist, Whitman made his views on slavery clear through his writings.

Whitman planted the seeds of his sympathies for slaves and their plight in "Song of Myself." He wrote about a runaway slave who approached him "limpsy and weak" (Song 191), and Whitman "gave him a room that enter'd from my own, and gave him some coarse clean clothes" (Song 194). Real or imagined, Whitman didn't turn this man away or call the authorities. Instead, he allowed the slave to stay with him "a week before he was recuperated and pass'd north, [and] had him sit next [to Whitman] at table" (Song 197–198). By the letter of the law, Whitman was aiding and abetting a criminal and willing to risk his own liberty to assist a man (Black or White) who was in dire need.

As the world changed and the American Civil War began, Whitman stayed true to his individuality and his mission to "play not marches for accepted victors only, I play marches for conquer'd and slain persons." (Song 362) Whitman put himself in the service of others by working both as a freelance journalist and as a nurse for wounded soldiers in New York and Washington, D.C. At first, he was thrilled and felt he found his sense of purpose in serving his fellow man—both as a free-thinking individual and in support of his political stance as a Free-Soiler—writing to a close friend that he was "very happy ... I am running over with health, fat, red & sunburnt in face. I tell thee I am just the one to go to our sick boys" (Norton 21). However, tending to thousands of wounded took a toll on Whitman. Gone were his happy, sexually-charged meanderings of "Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather, / The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them" (Song 208-209), replaced with the atrocities of war. This shift in Whitman's writing—from the lofty and empowering views on the individual to the harsh reality of wartime—started the transition from Romanticism to Realism in American literature.

Whitman's free-verse style allowed a true, emotional view of war and its real-world consequences to be shared and felt across a war-torn country where brother had been fighting brother. Moreover, his on-the-ground experiences gave authenticity and gravitas to his words. In "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night," Whitman shares the harsh realities of wartime death with sadness, dignity, and honor as he recounts one soldier's experience and allows the reader to stand alongside. The battle was intense and the narrator/soldier witnessed his brother-in-arms fall, but not die. The narrator shared a glance "which [the fallen soldier's] dear eyes return'd with a look I shall never forget" (Vigil 3). But the narrator had no time to assist his comrade, instead "onward [he] sped in the battle, the even-contested battle" (Vigil 5–6)—until he returned later to find that his comrade had died. The realism and matter-of-fact nature of Whitman's writing didn't choose sides between the North or South. Instead, he described *soldiers*, which likely allowed both the North and South to collectively grieve: "Vigil final for you brave boy, (I could not save you, swift was your death, I faithfully loved you and cared for you living, I think we shall surely meet again)" (Vigil 36–37).

In "Wound-Dresser," Whitman took a somber tone and allowed the then-feuding Americans to walk a mile in his shoes as a wartime nurse helping the wounded—the "old man bending [as he] come[s] among new faces" (Wound 1). Like Whitman, the narrator is present in the war hospitals during the Civil War, "Bearing the bandages, water and sponge, / Straight and swift to my wounded I go" (Wound 25–26). But unlike the honor and heroism portrayed in "Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night," the focus has shifted to the stark reality of both the physical and psychological damage these soldiers endured. The reading experience feels very much like a long walk from the opening of a hospital tent to the innards of an emergency room, where laymen never dare to tread. As the reader moves from "the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof'd hospital, / To the long rows of cots" (Wound 29–30) to deeper inside the hospital, the situations and wounds get worse. The narrator describes his duties in harrowing, realistic detail—"the stump of the arm, the amputated hand ... the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound" (Wound 49–53)—all the while proclaiming that he is doing his duty, but without pause. The palpable sadness becomes most poignant when the

narrator, with empathy and sincerity, proclaims that he “could not refuse this moment to die for [the soldier he is treating], if that would save you” (Wound 38).

Whitman’s transition from Romanticism to Realism was not only a predictable outcome for him as a writer, but it also proved important for the world. As a passionate person with a lust for life, Whitman’s day-to-day existence shifted from being “At the cider-mill tasting the sweets of the brown mash, sucking the juice through a straw, / At apple-peelings wanting kisses for all the red fruit I find” (Song 753–754) to “Many a soldier’s loving arms about this neck have cross’d and rested, / Many a soldier’s kiss dwells on these bearded lips” (Wound 64–65). Most importantly for suffering Americans, his experiences provided both insight and perspective into the consequences of the war. His writings helped to heal individuals in both the North and South and also show the common suffering all were experiencing, helping to bridge the wide gap that had separated so many for so long.

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De Anza Graduation Poem, 2021: We Shall Create

Sara Robertson

De Anza Graduates,
Today, we take another step forward into the unknown,
And the brisk wind of the future nips at our nose.

There has never been a graduation like this one:
I could tell you to hold on,
Steadfast and strong in the face of this bitter wind—
But the truth is, we already have,
In colder winds than this.

Fifteen months
Since we last set foot on campus,
Since we covered up our faces,
And instead of with people,
Our streets filled up with emptiness.

Our world shoved behind a screen,
Our education pixelated entirely—
Last April, my mother screamed
And fell to her knees
In our kitchen,
And I ran to her,

And my grandmother,
And
the floor seemed to crumble away.

Last June,
Instead of emptiness,
The streets filled up with people,
And a sea of masked faces screamed
For Justice
For George Floyd & for Breonna Taylor
For the too many individuals brutalized by the unjust justice system,
For recognition of the hatred

And the inequity
Upon which this country was founded.

In the hottest summer on record,
The world we once knew burned away.
We set fire to our systems to build new ones from the wreckage,
And we will set fire again and again until we get it right.

Maybe it was rage that set our mountains aflame
Because as they burned I swear I could hear the Earth scream.
Or maybe it was me,
But my lungs were bursting with smoke and ash,
And I tried to cry under the orange sky but
My tears sizzled up into mist on my cheeks.

In November,
The people pulled through,
Rage pulled through,
Ballots pulled through to show
That your voice made a difference.
Our voices make a difference.
Indifference is not for me, nor for you.

But our work is not done—
It has only just begun.

Because In March,
A man murdered six Asian women in Atlanta.
And the streets filled again,
And a sea of masked faces screamed
For Justice, again.
We are still screaming.

All in-between Zoom meetings?
My essay on femininity and contemporary literature seems so trivial now.

But it is not
Triviality, but vitality
That I poured into it,
That we have poured into every moment
Here, at De Anza College.
Vitality, into our minds and spirits,
Vitality which we will pour back into
Our divided world;
It will fill the seams between
Empty hate, and it will fill them
With Love, and Justice.

Sonya Renee Taylor said:
“We will not go back to normal.
Normal never was.
Our pre-corona existence was not normal
Other than we normalized greed,
Inequity, exhaustion, depletion,
Extraction, disconnection, confusion,
Rage, hoarding,
Hate and lack.
We should not long to return, my friends.
We are being given the opportunity
To stitch a new garment.
One that fits all of humanity and nature.”

I say, maybe, right now, we need to feel rage.
But we should never have to feel afraid.
Today, we move forward into the bitter winds of tomorrow,
Ready to create a better world,
To create a kinder world,
To create a world to celebrate.
Celebrate, today.
And tomorrow,
Turn your face toward the cold unknown,
And create.