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blended

blended

The Literary Arts Magazine of Olympic College

2026 Olympic College

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Editor's Note

Blended Literary Magazine's mission has always been to allow all students a place to make their voices heard, and to share their unique perspectives. We want these different facets of the human experience to shine, and to provide a safe space for different cultures and beliefs to mingle and blend, even when the world tries to stifle them. We believe that this is even more important in today's political and social climate, where division has become the status quo, to allow those who would be silenced a chance to speak and share their brilliance.

This year has been a phenomenal one for *Blended*. We have seen record breaking submission numbers with pieces from all different genres, themes, and messages. Because of this, there was fierce competition for a spot in this year's issue, meaning there were many fantastic submissions that we wanted to include, but just couldn't find the space for. But, this also means that the pieces in this issue are the best of the best. However, we weren't content to let so many phenomenal pieces go unpublished, so this year we have decided to publish a special online only edition of *Blended* to feature as many of these submissions as possible. Make sure to check it out once you are done reading this issue. We are very grateful to all those who submitted for allowing us the opportunity to publish such wonderful works of art, be they online or in print.

One thing that often happens with *Blended* is that, despite zero coordination between those who submit to the magazine, certain themes and motifs emerge, linking all of these pieces together. When given a space for different voices to sing, the result

is a harmonious magazine. Some of these themes have stuck out to us in spectacular ways. We'd like to highlight love, the human experience, and what we go on to create thanks to our experiences. Because of the current state of the world, you may notice that a part of the human experience that seems to be represented in a lot of our pieces this year, is pain. Yet, you may also notice that a clearer, stronger note of love shines through this triumph in each and every one of these pieces. The ability and privilege to love, and not only to love, but to love freely, to love in spite of challenges, and to be loved back, is a part of the beauty of this magazine. Give love, not only to people, friends, family, but to your art, your creations, and what you give to the world both personally and outwardly. At the end of the day, all of these pieces come together to represent the student body of Olympic College. We want it to be known that love will always, always, be stronger than hate.

We'd like to give a special thanks to our amazing editors-in-chief, Christina Camarena and Candice Morrow! As well as our talented designer who is credited for the layout of this entire issue, Jessica Aceves de la Cruz, and our amazing staff, Rory McAvoy! And of course, one final, whole-hearted thank you to everyone who submitted their work to the magazine this year. We hope you and many more will submit to next year's issue.

The block contains two handwritten signatures in black ink. The first signature, 'Grayson Schulz', is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline. The second signature, 'Allen Morrow', is also in cursive, with the first name being more prominent and the last name following in a similar script.

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I Didn't Like Pink

Isabelle Williams

I didn't like pink,
not because of the shade,
but the weight of the rules
that color had made.

Pink meant be quiet, be gentle, be small,
be sweet when you're hurting,
be nothing at all.

It meant cross your legs, don't walk alone,
text when you're home,
keep keys in your hand,
learn fear like it's sewn to your bones.

I learned early how streets memorize me,
how glances linger longer than they should be.
How night feels louder when you're a girl,
how fear learns your name as it circles the world.

How safety is a system of rules I rehearse,
not a gift I was given,
but a lesson I learned first.

So I hardened my edges,
dressed sharp, dressed strong,
learned how to shrink joy
so I wouldn't be wrong.
I mistook armor for power,
silence for grace,
and survival for strength,
keeping my heart closed.

I didn't like pink,
because pink felt exposed.

Women's Literature

Top Left:

McKenna Sullivan

Top Right: Yajaira

Gaspar Manuel

Bottom Left:

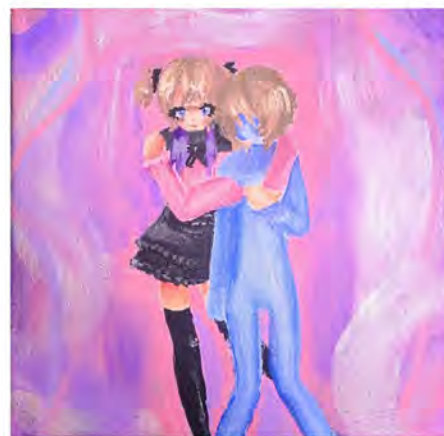
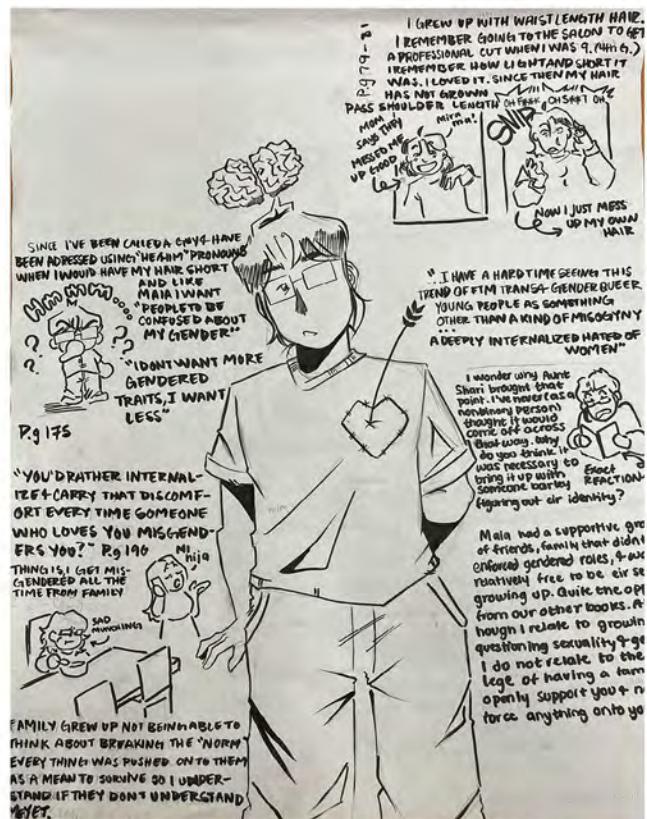
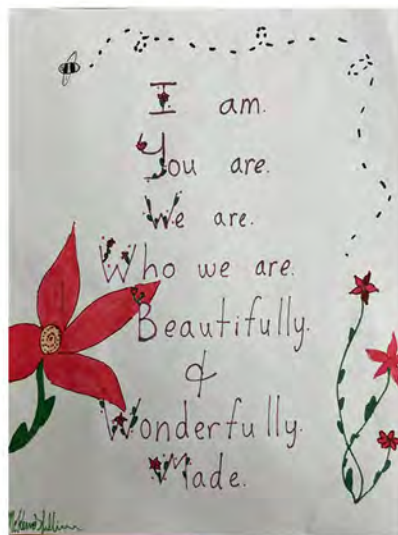
April McQueen

Bottom Middle:

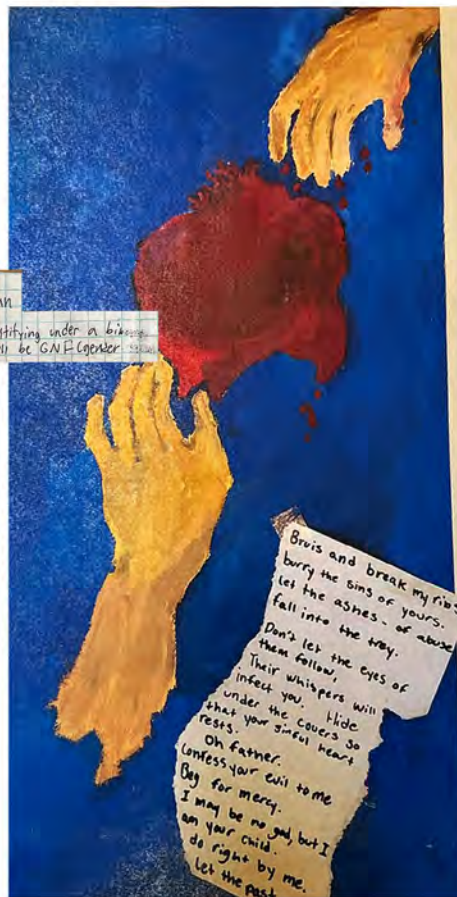
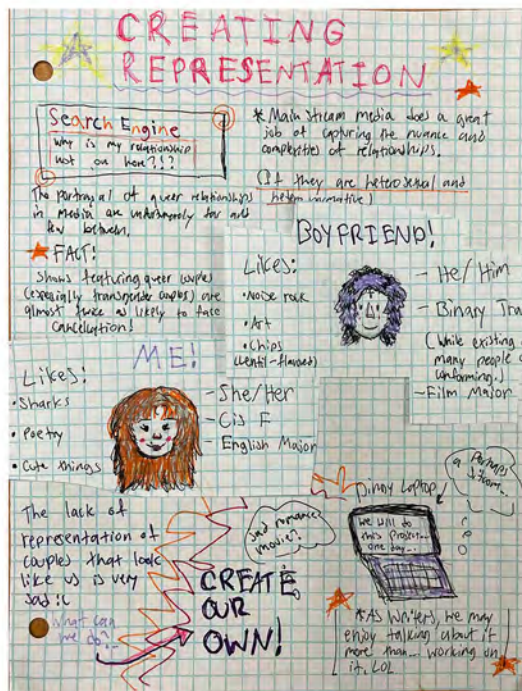
Jordan Richesin

Bottom Right:

Siena Kraetsch



Art in response to
Gender Queer: A Memoir
by Maia Kobabe



Women's Literature

Top Left:

Allie Paige

Top Right:

Ash Hirsh

Bottom Left:

Angeline Hamilton

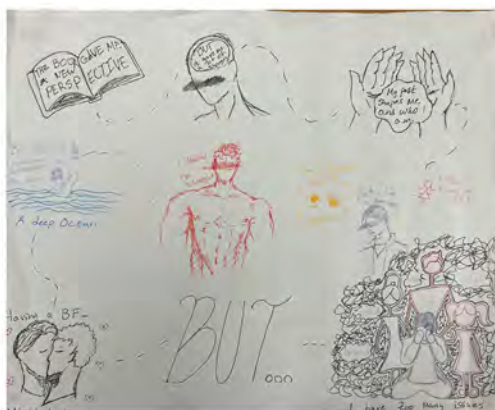
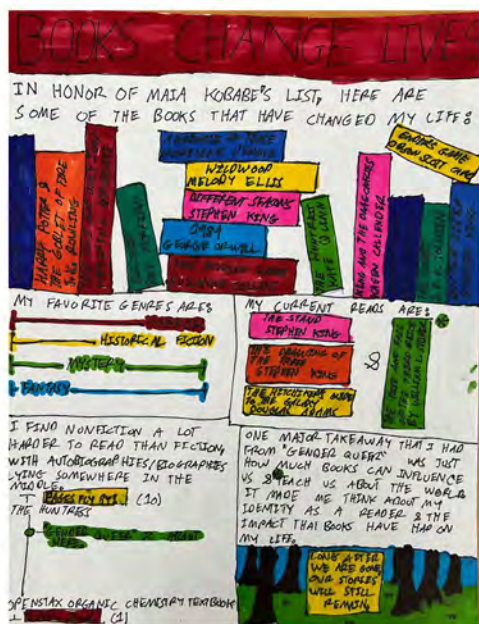
Bottom Middle:

AJ Marquez

Bottom Right:

Ruby Isham

Art in response to
Gender Queer:
A Memoir
by Maia Kobabe



Daddy-Daughter Dance

Allie Paige

“You’re funny, girl, but that’s about it. Mostly, I think you’re really sad.”

Hipbones hold me down

cage me in with an iron claw but it’s not you anymore, it’s the weight
of me

It’s the fact that the calcium has outgrown my skin, has stretched over and thinned
out

It’s those chemicals in the bubbles and clear residue on the stage floor, leaking streaking
soap marks that don’t sanitize a single thing

It’s every ball game every recital
bruises in my throat

I want to be under the sprinklers when the mist comes
When the lights dim and the piano-forte blooms

I want to breathe again

The way I did the first time
you let me break the surface

When you used your hands like fishing hooks

Now he uses his hands like life-preservers, all red and white and soft in the middle
Instead of fishing hooks

That get under my lip, that break my jaw and keep it locked in place
If not for you, then for somebody else

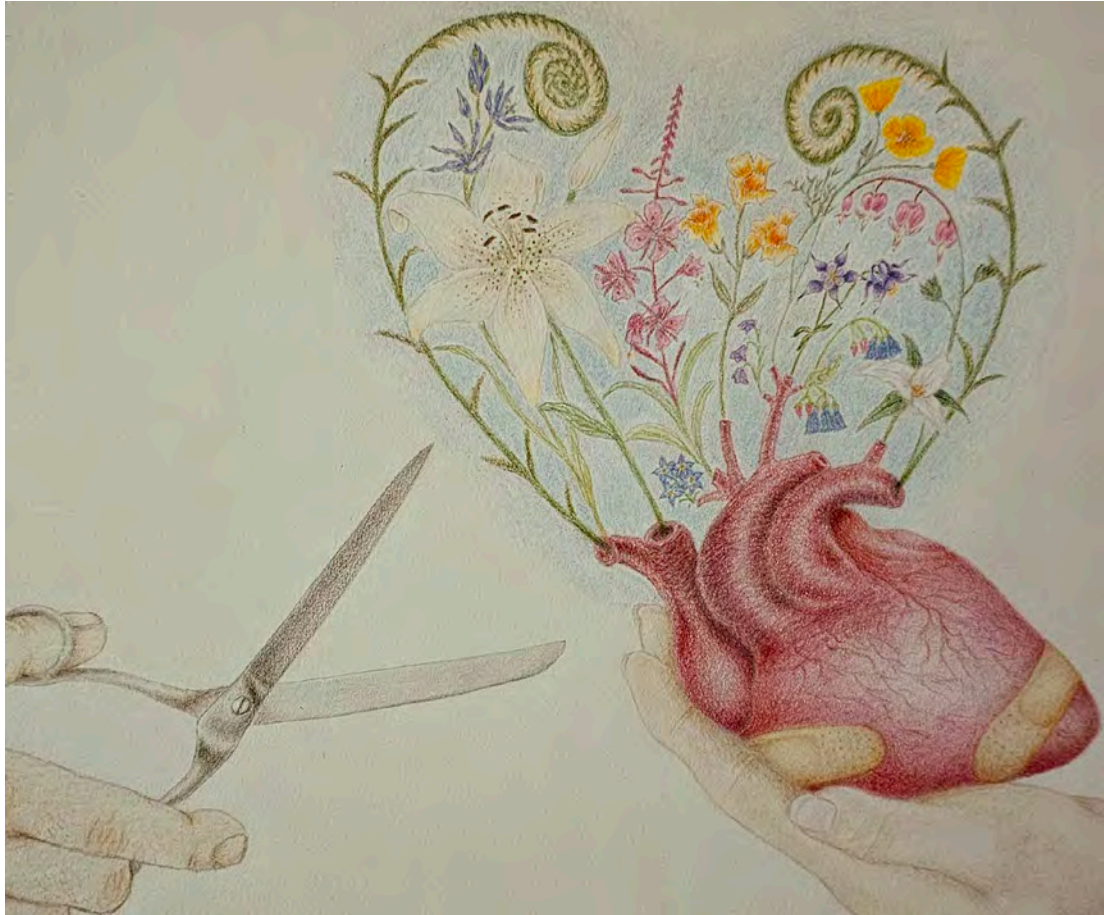
For that broken thing in the sky you blame it on
For that man in the mirror
Or that one in moon
Never the one looming
over my bed

Never the one in my room

Take me back to the house I grew up in

Take me back
cut me open

“Okay, girl, if you can’t face it, embrace it.”



Vulnerable Resilience

Shara



Spine Segment Oil
Kacie

Spoiled

Rory McAvoy

The room smelled of crayons. Waxy and colored, like the walls around me. I don't remember drawing some of these things. Cats and dogs, people and places, all foreign. I always wake when they begin to melt. The smell begins to nauseate me after a while. A faint lullaby pours through the window in a familiar tone. My bed faces the floor, held to the ceiling with nothing but song. I begin to sing along, curly tendrils of hair spinning alongside me. The song skips a note. My chest tightens. My animals watch me, smiling. The two big bears are sitting together, as always, while the little ones watch me sing. I tie up my bow and brush out my pettiskirt. The hem of my dress is a perfect length. Today is the day, I think, carefully navigating the bedroom. No messes. I curtsy to my audience of plush toys, and a shadow falls over their faces. The littlest bear flinches, and I reach out to them until He grabs my leg, and I trip. My teddy bears cover their eyes. Soft, plush ears are muffled so they cannot hear me fall. The rotted floorboards beneath me give out in a heaving sigh. I push myself up with my knuckles and scoff at His gnarled face, almost dog-like. A snout full of teeth. Drool dripping from His jowls. Empty, pooling eyes. My knuckles are raw and bloody. I suck on them gently like mother used to; I mustn't get my dresses dirty. I curtsy for my toys, so they know the dance has ended. That the time is almost here.

"I'd like to rest now." I scale back up to my bedroom, overwhelmed already. The window shuts angrily, the curtains falling into a red pool at His feet. He can bug me as much as He wants, I can just close my eyes. I dream of a vile snake who will come and eat Him. I think of a trap that will open the floor shy of His feet. But the room has forgotten. I blink one eye at Him. A light shines from the wall: three short flashes.

"That means it is time for tea."

"I won't leave you." The lullaby distorts as He speaks, a terrible gnashing of chords.

"But I want you to." My cheeks flush.

"Why won't you let me help, Woz?"

"No messes. Not today."

I climb out of bed and set up the tea set. Complete with a pot, porcelain cups, and a doily that has lost its lace. I have had it for years, I think. He will watch me drink. I want Him to go. His eyes follow me to my armoire, covered by the white cloth of fallen tapestries. The key resides there, intertwined with the smooth fabric. I always keep it there, wrapping it up in its cocoon each night. He always watches me, always follows. This time, He was closer.

"Must you stay?" My lacy sleeves feel tight on my skin, as if I wasn't meant to move in these clothes. One of the flowers has come unstitched on my glove. First the doily, now the glove. My skin prickles as He crawls near.

"I want to watch you drink the tea." I ignore Him, my focus now laid on the embroidered glove. I must fix it for tea. Everything must be perfect, no messes. A sewing kit appears next to the armoire. It isn't mine, but maybe it used to be. The needle inside is bloody and bent. The

only thread remaining inside is red and never-ending. A second needle remains. I know what it is for, but not why it is still here. I begin to work the thread between my fingers as He watches, quiet. I can see Mother again. My hands control the needle gracefully. She sings to me, I hear her laughter, feel her warmth. You silly girl! She calls out to me. The glove becomes tighter around my fingers, almost constricting. Still, I continue to sew, drawing her closer and closer. The thread keeps coming. You must be imagining things. Her tone has changed. My breathing quickens. Why would you lie like that? The needle pokes into my palm, but I continue the motion, begging her to stay. My fingers can no longer move, can no longer stop. The thread tangles and twists, threatening to rip my hand from my body. The flower falls to the ground. The needle is bloody, and so is my hand. I stand and watch the crimson color spread underneath the glove, staining it completely. But there is no time. I catch my breath and adjust the cloth on the armoire so I can see it again. The key fits as if both pieces were brand new. As I turn the lock, the key dissolves into sugar in my hand. For a moment, I am back in her arms. I used to feel safe there. I didn't know he was awake. Ants begin to call their troops to clean up the mess. I shake my head and grab the tea pouch, protecting it behind my back.

"You'll spill it," He says. "Let me." He extends a thin appendage out. My lips quiver as I shake my head no. Nothing can touch it, not even breath.

The stove is much taller than I am, crudely positioned so I must stand on the tips of my shoes. He slithers by, underneath, and looks up. I let Him.

The kettle is rusted from so many years of my ritual. I pour the tea leaves into the bottom and go to grab the water. He licks his lips. My toys bring me a bowl, the water inside seething with heat. I thank them, and they turn away. Except for the little one, they stay to watch. Bears usually do. Lovingly, I pour the water into the kettle and begin to stir. The stove is so hot that I feel my skin blistering. The fingertips of my gloves burn off into black ash. I am careful not to stir it too little, or too much, just enough. The rhythmic spinning of the leaves calms me, if only for a moment. In between breaths, a loud crash rings through my ears. The armoire has fallen.

"My things..." I run to the scene, my armoire heaving on the ground. Cracks begin to show in the polished wood, red wine seeping between them. I gasp and try to pull the cloth away, but they have already been stained. The liquid pools at my feet, threatening to sneak under my skirt.

"Was this you?" I run from the scene back to Him. He gazes at the scene. Then stares bloody daggers at my little bear. Their button eyes begin to cry. My feet pound into the carpet as I run towards the toy. I grab them by the neck, and then I am back in my bed. We are there together. I wet their synthetic fur with my eyes. At least they were there for me.

The air is thick and clogs my throat. The bear is dead. Stuffing lies strewn about on the carpet. Crayon flowers wilt and grow dark for his funeral. The other animals have gone. They are scared. He looks at me, proud of what I have accomplished here. I brush tufts of fur from my gloves. They fall to the ground in snowflakes, cov-

ering the bear's body, my crime, from prying eyes.

"No messes," I whisper, but I miss the gaze of my bear.

I take a seat at the table, drawn by colorful markers. Stickers and Band-Aids hold the worn-down porcelain together. I place a cloth on my lap so that when I spill, it will not make a mess. There's a scream as He tries to get close. It is not mine. The tea grows in the kettle. It throbs like a heart.

"May I have some too?" He stands on top of the table, tainting its color. It groans beneath His weight. He isn't allowed near the tea. He knows that.

"You can't have my tea." The light blinks 3 long, on the hour. It's almost time. His eyes glow red. He will hiss at me, and I must try not to spill the tea. I must not spill the tea. I can't spill the tea. I mustn't. I can't. I won't.

"Just a little sip," He begs, as though the tea was not the tea, not what he really wanted from me.

I flinch. His voice suddenly sounds familiar, and I can no longer remember if I am still in my bedroom but there is warmth on my cheek and hands on my arms.

"No," I say, smoothing my skirt so the pleats are perfectly aligned. The table hums. I cannot look Him in the eye. His mouth is always open, panting and heaving for something. He will take it from me if I don't hurry.

"You'll prepare it wrong. Let me help you," The colors blush away under His feet.

"I've prepared it perfectly. It's clean." A small beetle drops from the pot onto my glove. Neither of us acknowledges it. Mother said tea was

only for good girls, like her.

"It's spoiled," He snarls. The beetle clicks, and I flick it away. "Why can't you open your eyes?"

My bow is particularly itchy today. Mother was able to tie it better than I ever could. Maybe if I try harder, if I tie it right, she'll believe me this time. The music box bravely continues to play its distorted tune as I place two cubes of sugar into both teacups. Just how she used to. Careful not to drop any as He hurls insults at me. The porcelain shakes in my hand.

"She's not coming back, Woz." He flashes me a twisted smile. I clench my fists around the handle of my cup. I am sweating, but the cup is cold. Too cold. I can hear the tea bubbling.

"Don't ignore me, Woz." He speaks. Why does He call me that? That isn't my name. I don't know my name.

My clothes itch and don't fit right. The girl in the mirror has hollow eyes that weep wax. The girl in the mirror coughs up blood every morning. I don't know who she is, but she is not me.

The kettle begins to shriek. Flies and maggots crawl out of his sunken eyes.

I am clean. I am perfect. I am pure.

The screeching reaches its height. I carefully, methodically, lift myself up and walk to the stove.

Each step feels like a needle in my brain.

This time will be perfect, I think, stepping over teddy bear stuffing.

Perfectly perfect, I think, walking through puddles. She will believe me.

He waits for me at our table, cup ready. Drunken demeanor begging me for some sustenance, some of my precious tea. I cradle my trembling

hand at my chest. There is a gash there I hadn't noticed before, leaking into the ruffles of my dress. I wipe it away, but I can still feel it there, so heavy and painful. It is too late to worry about it now.

We sit there together, the silence almost louder than the screaming a moment before. The kettle looks at me, daring me to pour it out.

"Go ahead." He says with his tail twitching in anticipation. I shudder as it brushes along my hair. I reach for the pot, the smell of the sweet tea burning my nostrils. Usually, it is comforting, pure, and untouched. But as I pour the first cup, I realize this batch has spoiled. My body stiffens into porcelain. Still, I pour both cups halfway full of the mixture. I remind myself, stir it counter, not clockwise, like you were taught. Sweat drips into my eyes. I could not breathe anymore. Maybe I did not need to.

"Well, this looks delicious!" He exclaims. His fingers, much too long, latch onto the cup. The cup that is not for Him. Spiders crawl down what could be His wrists. He is always drooling. Always hungry.

The tea smells sour and rotten. Scarlet liquor falls between the cracks in the glass, dripping onto my doily. My face is wet. I miss my bear.

"Shall we make a toast?" He speaks. I hear her voice in the background. The room is falling apart in front of my eyes.

"A toast," I repeat. "To you."

The light blinks again: three short flashes. But she is not there for tea.

Draw from life

Imayn Nakenge



Water Vapor

Aster Vegas Smith

There's a sweet river of air and water flowing today. It falls down from the heavy sky, and its tide makes roads ripple and shimmer. The weather app says that the river will flow all weekend long, and as if things couldn't get any better, Echo, my best friend, will be here in just a few minutes. It's perfect. It's so perfect. A classic September storm. Could anyone ask for more?

Echo and I had planned to hang out today about a week or two ago. Today was carefully chosen, as they have been busy preparing for their move back to college next week. They decided to spend all of Friday with me, which means we could do anything — like an errand they didn't tell me about. That's a common theme, though at least it always turns out making things more fun. That's how it goes with Echo; somehow, everything is better when they're around. Life becomes so bright; it's just like when the Sun is shining through a rainstorm and its light illuminates the water. Each ray is outlined against wispy, light clouds, and glistening rainbows appear beneath thick, dark clouds.

Since this may be the last time we see each other until Thanksgiving break, I'll have to do something special today. It's an awful thing to think about, even worse to talk about, though I know we'll be stressed out about it regardless if we say anything or not. So I'll wait for the right moment.

Anyways, a great example of our friendship

is when Echo texted me in the middle of the night asking me if I wanted to come over and hang out with one of their friends. It was originally just going to be those two, but alcohol has a way of influencing the mind. Echo had made a few jugs of powerful “prison wine.” It was yeast and Welch's grape juice fermented in the plastic bottle it came in — I'd describe it as recreational poison with an acrid, chemical aftertaste. I drove over and ended up even drunker than Echo was when they texted me. Since their strict family was gone for the night, we went wild. Hours later, I crashed on the couch, too drunk to even walk down to the end of the hall. That night, or early morning, I experienced an incredible dream on the couch that seemed to linger all day.

In the actual morning, Echo fed me spaghetti their mom had made the previous day and showed me their paintings for the first time. While I was in the metal barn where their studio resided, I remember they told me, “I'm too fucked up from last night's hooch to make you pancakes, Simon, so here's some stuff I've already made.” That was actually the last time I saw them — September 5th.

I receive a simple “here” text from Echo, put on my blue rain coat, grab my cornflower Fjällraven backpack with the poetry journal in it, and spin out the door. The currents of water coursing down the apartment's drains mix with the sounds of the rain against concrete and roofs. It harmonizes with the sound of Echo's ancient red Volvo sedan purring on the street. It's an arrhythmic, smooth, comforting environment. The cool air tastes like dirt and saltwater, but it's clean and nourishing like apple cider. I breathe it all in, my chest filling up with atmosphere.

I run down the steps and open Echo's car with a satisfying click of the handle, tossing my backpack onto a usual pile of mystery blankets in the backseat. I gracefully drop myself into their crimson chariot like I've done many times before. A few empty water bottles and CD jewel boxes rattle against my shoes as I settle in.

"Hey Echo!" I unzip my rain jacket and feel the car's warmth rush against my chest.

Echo's eyes look me up and down like I have something on my face, "Wow, you're excited today. Or were you trying to figure out how many percentage points of a push-up you could do before I got here. Actually, let me guess: is it the rain..."

They turn, drawing out their last few words to fish for something in the messy backseat, shuffling stuff around. Echo turns around, smirks, and finally says, "or something else?"

Good on Echo for not going with a cheesy line. "It's definitely not my poems, unlike last week when I was talking about jellyfish, if you weren't too drunk to remember. I've been having trouble feeling inspired.. But it's raining today. Anything can happen, right?"

"Well shit, what am I gonna do without you talking about jellyfish? I mean, good luck getting anything poetically inspired from me. I'm not a mysterious little naked woman in a forest like the ones in the stories you read." Echo is, a little embarrassingly, correct about those stories. They finish their automotive diving and pull out a black and orange CD case that I hope isn't an awful metal band with an indecipherable name, or dad rock. I also hope it is so that I can tease them back about their music taste.

"That's not terribly loud and abrasive music, is it, Echo? On a rainy day of all times?" I reach over to try and grab the CD out of their hands, yet they move their arm back with the finesse of a fencer and begin to mischievously giggle.

"Oh no, of course not, I would never, ever, ever play 'loud and abrasive music' in the car with you!" I lean over to Echo and try to grab it again, this time with purpose. Their long arms sway around and behind their head faster than I can come fully in reach. They keep it away from me but I'm pretty sure it's some goddamn Incubus CD. The running joke is that I hate that band more than any other, though neither of us can remember where it came from. Unfortunately for me, however, my glasses fall onto their lap from this little game before I can tell if Echo is truly as guilty as they seem.

"Hold on, Simon." Echo slows their giggling, sets down the CD by their legs, and picks my glasses up. They lean towards me and quickly move to put them back on me. I flinch a little bit from the sudden advance, startling Echo. With it an icy drip runs down my spine, a feeling familiar to someone not too long ago. They take a breath and stumble words out, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. May I? And then I'll show you the CD."

I nod, and Echo comes closer to me. I feel the warm plastic slide back on my ears and rest on my nose. A wide-eyed expression appears across their tilted head, their eyes looking at something in mine. Then, the moment resolves, and I feel their right hand brush against the skin below my ear as they pull away their hands. I shift my back an inch as it happens. Normally I shiver at any physical

touch, and they know this, but I feel nothing more than a tingle on my skin.

They present the CD to me: Superunknown, by Soundgarden. I look at Chris Cornell's howling visage, look back up at Echo's guilty face, smile, and say, "I like that album. I'm not being sarcastic, either. It's a good choice."

Echo takes the disc out and puts it into the slot. It gets spit out, as expected, so they keep trying. I place one hand between my legs and the other on the car seat. The worn beige leather of the seat is smooth and soft, even softer than the lining of my cargo pants. The warm car air smells faintly of gasoline with a hint of sweetness somewhere mixed. Echo then succeeds with the disc and puts the case in the door.

The emergency brake lever clicks, Echo pulls off the curb, and informs me, "I have a haircut in Silverdale in like, a half an hour, but then we could do whatever after that. Don't worry, it won't take very long." I hear an apology hiding behind their words.

"You think we could go to the mall, then? After?"

"Sure. We go there like every time we hang out and I also go there when I'm alone but that's how it goes. You know how I love the mall, even if it's an empty shithole."

"No lies told there."

I watch the rain and the windshield wiper blades dance close in tempo to the music. They turn right on the road and I feel the car lurch with every gear shift.

"So what are you doing with your hair this time, Echo? Are you going to dye it a different color or will you keep it red? Whatever you do,

don't go platinum blonde — I don't think it suits you. Though I guess we'll find out if you have to rebleach your hair."

"If you still need inspiration, maybe write about that. Your dear friend had to look fugly with bleach blonde hair for 15 minutes in order to glow. And then, they walked out of the salon with hair so vivid that all the bald and unfashionable people in the world wept."

"And you say that you are uninspiring. That you aren't even a little poetic."

"Unspiring? Not even a little poetic? I'm flattered; you always find the best words to describe me, Simon. All for your humble jester, ever willing to please!"

They say my name like it's the most important word in the sentence. Delicately, much unlike how I have seen them treat themselves. I think that, one day, that sarcasm is going to get them in a lot of trouble. Trouble with me potentially, yet trouble with themselves most assuredly. The irony and satire is already eating away at the corners of their eyes.

"Don't be like that, Echo. You showed me your paintings, remember? They were beautiful... I didn't realize you are so prolific, and you paint with so much care to detail. I've never seen such bright watercolors."

"Well I don't think I'm anywhere as good with my paintings as you are with your poems. How 'bout that? You're in your head all the time and you can write about it perfectly. I'm in my head all the fucking time and all I can do is draw stuff like shitty flowers and mountains. Sometimes I don't think it's fair."

"I think you're too hard on yourself, Echo.

My writing takes forever to get anything down, especially this past month. What I do is talk too much about it. You don't. Your paintings speak for themselves and come from a part of you that you don't show me often. You don't struggle to express yourself, even if you're under the impression you do; you're just stopping yourself. You hesitate, but you don't have to."

Echo is quiet and still for some time, gently nodding their head. "Yeah... I mean I guess. Thank you, Simon, you're a good person. You're also super gay but that's alright."

Then, for the first time since sitting in Echo's car, there is a comfortable silence between us. In the quiet that follows, all ambient noise is suspended midair. In the peace that follows, all excitement and frustration is lying on its side. The music, the rain, the wind, the engine, our breaths rising and falling: we watch the river flow all around us on the road.

Echo breaks the silence with a chuckle, "Wait, actually... Nah, I'm totally going to do platinum blonde. As a matter of fact, I'll do it all over! I'll see if she does my pubes, too." They lift up their Strokes t-shirt and reveal to me a small trail of hair across their exposed, pale midriff. I see how it leads down to a hidden place in their ripped jeans. A small, silken shiver traces each nerve in my spine, gently and sharply. I stare and feel every creative trouble melt away. In the few seconds after they let go of their shirt, something unrecognizable swirls in my body. I think Echo likes the weather, too.

Echo takes the scenic route to Silverdale. In fact they always take a scenic route if they can find

it. I figured out how much they love good views quite quickly after I met them last year. They'd always point out when the Olympic Mountains are visible and stare at them all wide-eyed and wondering. Unfortunately for Echo, fog and low clouds cloak the mountain range today, a topic that comes up in conversation twice. Besides that, we mainly talk about music, specifically how people wish grunge was still big in Seattle. I mentioned how my parents were around at that time, how my dad was even friends with Ben Shepherd — Soundgarden's bassist. That's all in the past, though. With that I am reminded of how little time I have with Echo before they go. But they manage to hit every roadside puddle on the way to the salon, unknowingly distracting me from thoughts of their imminent absence every time water spray goes hissing and flying over. I pause my words each time to look. It never gets old.

We pull into a smaller strip mall across the street from the Kitsap Mall, which is also beside another section of strip mall. These shops are tiny compared to the ones right next to us like T.J. Maxx, Michaels, and whatever the other is. Silverdale is mostly several different malls. They park in a spot directly in front of the salon. I grab my backpack and Echo starts this bit, one of my favorites, where they're in a rush like the White Rabbit. We bolt out of the car without zipping up our rain jackets.

I've never been in here and probably won't ever again witness these few old ladies and their phenomenal haircuts right at the source. One of them has a purple pixie cut, another has green curls, and another has frizzy hair treated with a blue rinse — I'll get that when I'm old and gray.

The ladies all treat Echo with great familiarity and a light banter ensues. It's briefly broken and then continued when a middle-aged woman with regular, boring hair comes in suddenly, bringing a box of chocolate and a story. Much detail is inferred from her words, and I struggle to follow the plot. Perhaps my gossip game might be in need of improvement. Then again, she wasn't even speaking to me.

I sit in a padded chair and listen to these conversations in between daydreams and attempts at attempting to write a poem in my journal, my pencil tightly gripped. Suddenly I am taken aback when I hear a name, Damian. The name jolts my brain and reminds me that Echo isn't out to the whole world yet — some still call them Damian. I see just a little bit of redness fade from their complexion whenever the name is said. To my eyes, it might as well drain the color from the whole room.

Echo has all these connections around the region from their Christian family of hick fucks. That's why they aren't Echo to most people here. The masculine epithets they weather fit them awkwardly and loosely. Really, I think it's so funny how us trans people talk about gender in depth with cis people, and yet we rarely do that with each other. Maybe I should, though, since I'd definitely consider Echo's gender to be more complicated than mine. Echo is... So much, at least to me. I'm just a guy, plain and simple. And everybody knows me as Simon these days instead of... No, nevermind. I don't even like to think of my deadname. Not even Echo knows it.

The pencil is even tighter in my grip, tension across my body slowly growing. I force my hand

down to the page. Nothing comes out. I have no words for the injustice Echo is inflicted. I set my journal down and look out the window towards the river streaming outside. I watch it for a little while, feeling tension recede with each beautiful gust of wind shaking the downpour. I find that the Michaels logo on the neighboring strip mall catches my eye. It looks like a good idea, and perhaps an alternative to my wordy creative frustration.

"We should go into Michaels once you're done." I turn myself back towards the interior of the salon, and something stunning arrests everything in my body as I look at Echo. Their short, wiry hair is dyed all across a deep, dark blue. It's as if they went out into the rain and were stained with droplets of sky. Blue sits upon their head like dew upon a morning flower, eagerly blooming. Echo has never looked more beautiful than in this moment, adorned with a color that is not theirs. It's my color...

"Sure." They disobey the hairdresser's insistent command of a straight head to sneak a rogueish grin to me. It makes me so dizzy. A feeling, a rush of pure chemicals, swims around my body and becomes violently entangled in my stomach, like a selkie caught mid-shapeshift in a fishing net. A desire has been dredged up from the bottom of me, a place I have long since avoided. I am trapped here in the second of Echo's glance, and I don't know what to do.

I pick up my journal again and place it down as soon as I open it. Nothing comes out still. I don't know if this moment is of inspiration or something else, but I feel something inside me that spits on any words I have to describe Echo's

beauty, nor their injustice. I don't understand how there are no words. If there is nothing I can say, is there nothing I can give? The feeling overwhelms me, surging in my throat, water reaching close to my eyes. Whether this selkie of mine is seal or person, I don't know. All I know is that it is valuable, and it is running out of time with Echo.

The hair stylist finishes their touches as Echo flatly admires themselves in the mirror. They pay, I pack up my journal, and we walk out. We linger outside the salon in front of the torrent of rain. Echo speaks first, "So we're going to Michaels, huh, Simon? I thought you didn't do any arts and crafts, and that you told me that the interior of Michaels is 'dry and uneven.' I mean, it totally is, I'd even say it just sucks balls plain and simple, but they have good paint there that's sometimes on sale. I even know someone who got away with stealing a bunch. And we could go to the mall afterwards if you want to and uh... Yeah, what do you think? You have that thinking look on your face, so serious. It's a severe look for someone as nice looking as you. I mean, is it the hair? Does it look like shit or are you... are you feeling ok... Simon?"

"Echo."

"That's me. Yours truly."

"I want to do something special with you before you go. We haven't brought this up but... I'm terrified about you going off to college; I know you're unhappy there. I know that people there call you by your real name and know the real you, but it's so empty and it's so far away. I know it sounds silly going into Michaels, I just want to try something new with you before you go."

Their face is a mix of relief and curiosity,

briefly considering another smile and wit, but reconsidering. "That's sweet of you, Simon, and I'm glad it wasn't what happened in the car or something else I did. I mean, I guess it's my fault that I'm leaving, but... No, that's dumb. You're right, I am hard on myself." They shuffle awkwardly in their coat, their words stiff with honesty. They release a loud sigh, make a silly noise while shaking their head, and say, "Alright, we're going to Michaels?"

Echo stretches out their left hand to me chivalrously, then pulls back after seeing my nervous look. Instead of lingering in the disappointment they feel towards themselves, they flash me their classic grin and proclaim, "I'll race you there!"

We dry our feet on the mats and catch our breath. The air and atmosphere is just as dry and uneven as I remember from the last time I was in a Michaels — whenever that was, probably in high school. I would think that Michael having eaten Joann would make the place somewhat nicer. It hasn't. I'd like to imagine the place as a prairie in drought.

Echo looks around valiantly as if they have never been here before, exchanges a polite greeting with a worker, snatches a red Michaels basket, and tells me, "The first thing we need to do is find popsicle sticks. Whatever you're thinking of making, we can make it with popsicle sticks, y'know? Pipe cleaners, too. I have a hot glue gun at home we can use, so don't worry about equipment."

I nod, and with a beckoning motion they lead me down the aisles, speeding through the displays.

We arrive directly and immediately at the place where popsicle sticks and pipe cleaners are found. Echo dramatically spreads out their hands to the popsicles sticks and picks up a box of multicolored ones, rattling the box to their ear like a birthday present.

“Now these are useful because you don’t have to paint them a different color so we should get these. And another thing,” They pick up a bundle of red pipe cleaners and brandish them as if they weren’t completely quiet, “these pipe cleaners, you see, I’ve done some cool stuff with these. One time I made a little rose for class and...”

I space out while watching them talk about their success in elementary school art class, admiring their hair once more. I keep hoping that the blue falls down their head like water all over their clothes, bringing an end to the drought and dryness. I have to ask them about what they were planning with their hair, even just to prod at them.

“Why did you dye your hair blue, Echo?”

Echo pauses, caught off guard by my question, “Well, I admit that I was planning for you to be there with me when it happened. I guess I just thought it would make you happy?” They swallow so nervously that even the most foolish person in the world could tell there’s more to it. They see the skepticism in my eyes and admit further, “That’s not all but I’d much prefer to talk about it later, like when we’re alone. I still feel like I look stupid with this, but I like it more than how I usually feel after a haircut. Ah, fuck it. Anyways...”

As they finish their story, I imagine not about our creative project or whatever things they’ve

made out of pipe cleaners, but what Echo would look like if hair wasn’t the only blue on them. What it would look like, what it were to feel like, were I to color every inch of Echo’s soft, slender body Simon blue. I wonder how they would feel if I dyed my hair red instead of my natural brown, if they’d look at me and wish that the flames on my head burned all over me. Wish that they were over me like how flames caress an animal roasting on a spit...

“Simon!”

I snap out of my daydream and focus on what Echo is trying to tell me, “Huh?”

“I think this is all we need: the multicolored sticks and a few bundles of pipe cleaners for options. We can go check out if you don’t feel like wandering the store.”

“Sure, we can go.”

Echo leads me towards the checkout section, though more leisurely than before. Whatever passion took me over, it’s fading. I’m left with a familiar dirty feeling. I’m walking with Echo feeling guilty and disgusted at myself. It reminds me that I’ve not been comfortable in my body since I broke up with my ex early this year. Yet the passion lingers, a reminder that I’m more than my discomfort. A reminder that I can be uneasy with food and still be hungry. Now, I’m standing at the noisy checkout line with Echo feeling okay with myself.

Echo pays at the self checkout, placing our materials into a crinkly plastic bag that repetitively reads in red text, “Thank You.” They tie off the top of the bag as we walk over to the exit, “You too!” They say to the workers back. I realise all their outfits are red, and the logo, too. It reminds me of

Echo, that this is their kind of place and not mine.

We zip up our raincoats and walk the short distance back towards the car. The river has slowed down some since we went into Michaels. I remember what the weather forecast said, that it will be raining vivaciously tonight. I plan on being there with Echo right in the middle of it, working on our project, enjoying each other's friendship.

"Hey, Echo, can we go straight to your place?"

"Oh for sure." They pass the Michaels bag to me, perhaps as if to joke, "thank you, Simon, for changing your mind about going to the fuckass Kitsap Mall. Enjoy the rest of your government-mandated hangout time."

I get to choose the music for the ride to Echo's: Norman Fucking Rockwell!, the Lana Del Rey album I'm currently obsessed with. I left my copy in their car the last time we were together. I look at the album cover as we drive from the highway into the woods. Washington's forests are enchanting places, vast and green, hiding all kinds of creatures. Cloaked in mist and rain is when the enchantment is most alluring.

The emotional mixture of the music and the woods remind me of how I've yet to fully decide what Echo and I will be doing tonight — beyond our project. The album's cover reminds me of something else: the drunken dream I had when I crashed on Echo's couch last week. I woke up in the morning awash with every vivid detail that night, yet couldn't get myself to write any of it down. I've been thinking about it ever since, especially how it's gone so unrequited in my creativity. I hate to waste a dream like that... Echo

was there. Now that I think about it, there was something in the dream that can, in fact, be made using popsicle sticks and pipe cleaners. It felt so real in the dream, so that might be why I wanted to go into Michaels; I wanted to make it real.

But is that what's really important? What about Echo, the companion in my dream? Is this what I told them it was, something special I wanted to do with them, or is this idea of mine just using my best friend for creative release? It's silly; what monumental creativity even awaits an evening of popsicle sticks and pipe cleaners? It sounds like one of Echo's terrible euphemisms. Come to think of it, it might be. I think I'd like it to.

I rustle in my seat, bristling with energy. I see Echo's gentle expression as they gaze off into the wet roads. I see now that a little bit of blue fits them perfectly. The only question coming to mind is how well a little bit of red will fit me. Maybe I'll dye my hair sometime, too, but I'm planning on a different red for tonight. I can't say I know what I'm doing, but I can say I know what I want with one thing: tonight, Echo is going to feel what rain makes me feel.

The rusty wind vane spins as we approach Echo's parents' quasi-rural homestead, complete with some goats, turkeys, chickens, and a small garden that smells like a large farm. They pull into a dirt parking spot adjacent to the tarnished metal barn their studio resides in. It's funny how they live so close to me, and yet it feels like I'm out in the country. They wouldn't consider this country, but it feels like I'm stepping into a folk ballad every time I come here.

I look around and notice that there aren't any other cars. Echo didn't even tell me they were going to be home alone again. I grab my backpack and Michaels bag and we shuffle out of the car, up a few steps, and through the door of the house. The interior of this wide, single-floor home has a style that echoes the outside — rural and country. Hick as fuck is a term that comes to mind, again, but only because Echo's parent's are sinister, transphobic republicans. Regardless, the home is comforting, and is realistically just a big kitchen/dining room that bleeds into the living room and hallway. To drunk-off-of-prison-wine me, it was an infinitely long hallway with a hotel floor of doors. It starts with the bathroom and ends with Echo's room, so nothing important between the first and last.

There is so much stuff everywhere that I can't begin to describe it, though I'm sure it all has its purpose; Echo's family manages their little homestead and that requires lots of things. Echo's parents aren't poor, but money spreads thin in families. That's why Echo's parents won't let them change their major even if they wanted to. Speaking of family, I don't know why their parents and siblings aren't here. But honestly, I don't care enough to ask. I didn't even ask last week when I was here, I just asked Echo to pass the bottle.

"Alright, we have all the house to ourselves so... We could hang out here or in my room for a little bit if you want. Or we can go straight to the barn and get to work on our project. There's some water bottles there if you're thirsty while we work. And if you're hungry, there's some leftover meatloaf from yesterday you could chow down on."

I look at Echo and then to the dining room table — there's a pile of paper, a mess of coats, a bag of dog kibble, an empty Welch's bottle, and a rake propped against a chair, just to name a few things. None of this inspires me to sit down and eat meatloaf. That's not what I'm hungry for.

"I don't want any food. Thank you, though."

Echo nods and says, "So, straight to the barn?"

"I cannot wait any longer."

I sit facing the rain a couple yards away from the threshold. Echo is leaning into a cabinet grabbing scissors and glue gun ammo. Echo calls this their studio, but it is also an entire garage. Besides a table, some chairs, an easel, and said cabinet all stained with paint, nearby there is an entirely unfinished frame of an old Jeep — there's also enough cabinets and shelves to contain everything needed to work on it. Echo's father begrudgingly let them set up the studio as long as it didn't interfere with his work on that same Jeep. As far as I know, Echo has worked in this spot for over a year.

Echo finds what they are looking for and sits down at the table a few feet away from me. My eyes wander from dark clouds to Echo ripping open and spilling out the bag of pipe cleaners and popsicle sticks. They grunt like a powerlifter dropping weights, and look at me proudly.

"So... Are you ready, Simon, for a dangerous evening of arts and crafts?" Echo takes the cordless hot glue gun and aims at me from their hip like a noir femme fatale. "Just one thing I need to know, Mr. Simon: what are we making?"

I look out at the river again and focus on its

gentle, arrhythmic music against the metal barn. I close my eyes and remember last week's dream of Echo and I, just like I have done every night since.

At first, I recall the feeling of lying down on the couch, the whole world spinning. I am shirtless, cold, and drifting to sleep on a scratchy wool blanket. A nauseous feeling festers in my stomach, wine the only taste in my mouth.

When I close my eyes, I see the night sky above all full of stars, and around me stretches the inky ocean. Echo is in front of me looking out at the horizon. I move towards them and feel my legs give way to the movement of the waves right onto the wooden floor. Echo rushes over and helps me stand back up, smiling as brightly as they do. They move behind me, their arms wrapped around my waist, comforting my whole body with their touch.

Then, I realize what they were looking at: a skyline as bright as Seattle illuminates the land beyond. I recognize it as the oil refineries off the coast of Anacortes, the city I used to live in as a child. I never got to see them up close — how could I have? But I was there in Echo's arms, on a midnight sailboat to the refinery, water vapor rising from the machinery.

I woke up with sleep paralysis, and experienced a lucid dream where the entire room around me was evaporating. Echo was there with me, oblivious to what was happening. I couldn't even open my mouth to say anything to them as they evaporated into steam, floating away from me. I began falling as the ground and everything else disappeared, soon startling awake mid-descent.

"Can I tell it to you as a story?" I am able to see the wide-eyed and wondering look in their face

as I begin to reveal my dream. I tell it softly and calmly, poorly hiding a feeling of water behind my eyes. The churning feeling in my stomach is quieted when I am finished, the fishing net cut and the selkie freed. I am left with nothing but words and raw emotion.

Echo lets the quiet sit in the air, only then saying to me, "Wow, that's... That's beautiful, Simon. I mean, what a dream. I didn't know that me going back to college was so rough that it got into your dreams, too." They pause and look out at the river before turning back to me.

"Y'know, a friend told me something you might like to hear. He said, 'life is but a vapor.' I don't know if he came up with that but it stuck with me. I think he was mourning something. Although the thing he didn't mention is what vapor turns into: clouds! That's where rain comes from and you love the rain. It's like your favorite thing right, Simon? Do you think... Do you need a hug?"

They stand up and spread out their arms. I stand up and rush towards Echo, holding them as tightly as I can. I can smell sweat and rose deodorant as I quietly sob against their shoulder. Their arms eagerly accept me. One of Echo's hands rests wrapped around my side, the other on the back of my head, their head nestled next to mine. Nothing hurts, nothing is unwelcome. When I withdraw, I sit back down at the table to collect myself. They grab some paper towels from the top of the cabinet and hand them to me. I wipe away the tears, blow away my nose, and sigh, relieved of my burden.

"Feel better?"

"Yes, I do... Thank you, Echo. Just... Thank

you.”

“Do you still wanna make the boat?”

“Yes. I can’t say that I lack inspiration anymore, not after sharing this story with you, but we have all the materials here. Why not? It could be really fun.”

“You’re a poet and I’m a painter. Is gluing popsicle sticks together fun? It might just be. Is it particularly meaningful? Who the hell knows. We’ll find out together, right?”

“I think so.”

Echo dumps two fistfuls of popsicle sticks and a pair of scissors before me, instructing me as if they are an expert with a Youtube channel. What I need to do is cut the rounded ends off, and they’ll work on welding the sticks together into the shape of a boat. The pipe cleaner will be for the sails. That’s some time away, though.

I begin my work with light shoulders and a clear mind. The air in the room is no longer so emotional. I feel the stick’s smooth grain against my fingers, the way the tension snaps each time the scissors cut. I choose sticks of each different color to cut to be sure there is enough, as there is only so much of each color. I decide cut all the blue and red sticks first, though. I hand a few to Echo as I go.

“Blue and red? Y’know, I haven’t seen either of those colors in a long time. Especially not on my hair, and especially not having to do with either of us.” Echo shakes their head at their own silly antics and smiles. They don’t even look at me when they say it, their eyes fixed on gluing.

“You’re silly, Echo, but I think you already knew that. I do think it’s one of your best qualities, besides the times when you manage to be

charming.”

“Oh? Charming? Silly?” They speak through a grin and look up at me, “I’m surprised it took you so long to point that out. What’s next, you’re going to say that I’m artistic and my hair is blue? Next thing you know you’re going to make a Titanic reference and ask me to paint you.”

Hearing those words come out of their mouth reminds me of my fantasies in Michaels. My heart immediately begins racing faster. I realize that they may have thought the same about me. I feel stupid for not considering that it may be the reason why they dyed their hair blue.

“And you said that I’m the one who’s super gay. You’re the one thinking about painting me. You literally dyed your hair blue and you know full well that it’s my favorite color. I bet, if you painted me, you’d paint me red.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Simon. I never said I was or wasn’t anything. I never said I was or wasn’t going to do anything at all. I only said that you’d be there.”

Our eyes catch each other for one moment and one moment more.

I continue to cut into the popsicle sticks with my scissors, carefully shaping away each curve and line. My hands sweat onto the scissors, Echo’s red scissors. I then find there are enough red and blue sticks to create the entire boat. If I’m wrong, there would be nothing wrong with purple. I like the idea enough that I cut a few purple sticks and hand them to Echo.

I watch as they look back down to the blue and red beneath their hands, now supplemented with its color union. I watch as hot glue comes out of their gun and drips onto the wood, their utter

focus on the task disrupted by their breath. Echo arranges the pads of sticks together, smoothly aligning the red walls with the base. Then, they coat the bottom of the blue mast with hot glue and place it down to the center. There is at least one purple shade in each part.

Our eyes catch again.

“Let’s take a break and watch the rain. I think I need to have a moment before we finish with the sails.” I stand up before Echo can respond, my blood rapidly rushing. The levee in my body stands ready to break. They follow close behind me. I see the river flowing down from the night, wind thrashing the water sideways. A cool draft of air embraces us as we stand at the barn threshold.

“Echo, I think I figured out why, but I wanted to know the real answer of why you dyed your hair blue.” I can hear the music of the rain. Our eyes meet.

There is not an apprehension, not a single concealment as they say to me, “I wanted to show you how I feel about you. There, I said it. And I’m serious. I’m so serious. I just didn’t know what to say and I haven’t for a long time. I still don’t.”

“Yeah, you’re telling me...”

Echo reaches out their left hand. I reach out my right hand. Our hands meet and fingers interlock. Their hand is warm, soft, secure.

“We can finish the boat some other day; I’m not interested in doing any more tonight. That way you have a reason to come back before the break to see me.”

“Simon, I don’t need the goal of finishing a shitty boat to come and see you. Besides, I’m sure this night is far from over.”

I finally know the exact thing to say.

“I love you, Echo.”

“You’re telling me.”

I place my left hand behind their neck, and they place their right hand on my arm. The blush on their face intensifies as we move closer together. We kiss, and as we embrace each other, I feel their love like the current of a vast, violet river.

Gender Dysphoria

Avery



Under the Knife

Kahleia Jean

I was beautiful.

Every time I looked in the mirror I saw me. I knew I was pretty, not because my mother told me every day, but because I *felt* pretty.

Freckles dazzled my face like little stars in the sky. Green eyes the color of emeralds and the softest hair that made even minks jealous.

I was beautiful.

Everything I saw was me.

Undoubtedly me.

A smile grew across my face and felt like a warm winter day.

On one particular afternoon I'd spent about a total of fifteen minutes getting ready. That included; brushing my hair and teeth, getting dressed, eating, and getting my bag into the car. At eleven years old one did not think of anything else.

That day at school I chased the boys around and they gave me a tug on my braids. I knew they liked me.

But one day a new girl came. I never had the rush of butterflies in my stomach as I did that day. Someone new was coming. A potential friend.

When she walked in, the butterflies flew away. It felt like a worm had made its way down my throat. As I felt the cereal in my stomach, I lurched forward.

She had knitted braids that looked like a freshly baked loaf of bread. Pink bows that decorated her hair and long black eyelashes that reached her eyebrows when she looked up.

She wore a white sweater and faded pants. I looked down at my clothes. *I* wore old rainbow leggings and a t-shirt with a cat.

The hope that once filled every nerve and cell crashed, taking more than it gave, just like a sugar rush.

That afternoon at recess, all the boys ran from her as she chased them. Tugging her hair in line, just like they had done to me the day before.

She was beautiful.

The next school day I had put on my nicest outfit and even woke up earlier to take my mother's make-up and put it in my bag. When I got to the bathroom I attempted to put on "mascara" which was the black stuff on the new girl's eyes.

When I looked in the mirror, I looked like me...just prettier? My skin was on fire as I walked in the room having all my classmates stare holes into my head as I was late, which was a first for me.

During *that* recess, all the boys were teasing me about my "new" look. But they tugged my hair as it sat in a high pony.

I was now beautiful.

My mother quickly scolded me when she picked me up from school that day.

But a couple years later she started to buy me my own make-up, little stuff at first but *make-up*.

When I had started the first day of high school, I woke up and saw myself in the mirror. I saw...me. Well, an updated version of me.

I no longer wore leggings the color of the rainbow and I no longer just put on *any* shirt.

The boys no longer chased me but asked me for my number.

I was beautiful.

My eyes wore a dusty brown of eyeshadow and my lips bore shades of light brown and cherry red. The once soft hair was replaced with blond fried hair. Crunchy to the touch, but a sight to see.

My face was covered with liquid and powder,

the freckles were no more than a speck in the eye.

I felt beautiful until I woke up late one morning and didn't put on my normal routine.

That's when I saw a girl who made everyone's head turn. She wore short shirts and tight jeans.

She *was* beautiful.

After school I bought shirts that were tight and small. At first it felt awkward. I was on the farther end of skinny.

But all fear went away when heads started to turn my way. I was given chocolate at lunch and was followed all around as I roamed the school.

I *was* beautiful.

I felt all the way until my last year of high school. When I was no longer able to just be "skinny". Girls were to be "thick" and have big butts. As I looked at myself in the mirror...I was as flat as a squished bug.

I ate more and went to the gym more to fill out. With time *I* was the girl everyone looked at, even though I wasn't the biggest or the most gorgeous.

I was....okay looking.

That was until I stopped lifting weights and eating. My size dropped and I couldn't maintain my hourglass shape.

Mirrors distorted my body, like I was in a fun house. Turning me into this horrifying beast.

Everything was in the wrong place, and it seemed like the spotlight was shone on every girl with curves, leaving a girl like me in the freezing shadows.

My chest was small and every male on TV made fun of how flat chested girls brought nothing to the table.

I ate horribly. Pizza. Cheetos. Soda.

I *was* disgusting.

Until one day my friend had walked in my

room with a larger chest than she had the week before.

Stunned, I asked her for her secret.

Within two months, I was ready for my appointment.

As I sat on the table a couple weeks later, ready to take the drugs that would put me to sleep. I saw knives and gel pads sitting next to my head.

I *was going* to be beautiful.

I *had* to be beautiful.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and when I woke up and looked in the mirror a brand new *me* was staring back at me.

I *was* perfect.

Except the girls at my work had luscious lips. While mine were thin and barely there.

As rubbed my paper thin lips against each other I picked up my phone and dialed a number I heard so many times.

A couple weeks later I was at the doctors again, this time awake as they filled my lips to make them pompous and prominent.

I had the chest. The lips. But...the guy I was interested in had a girlfriend. And her hair was dark brown with light highlights.

I stared in the mirror and turned around. My hair was fried and dyeing wasn't an option.

As I stared I saw how flat my bottom was. Within one swift moment. I had called my doctor and hair stylist.

Before the year was over I had new hair, a new bottom, new lips, a new chest, new eyelashes, and long acrylic nails.

I had paid thousands of dollars to make myself beautiful. I *was* beautiful...right?

I tried to look back on the girl who used to be me. *She* didn't care what brand she wore, what makeup she bought, or basically anything.

I stared into the mirror forcing myself to

remember who I was.

The hair she had was soft and gorgeous, like a silky cat's. I reached for the hair glued on my head, it crinkled to the touch. Like an old piece of paper ready to disintegrate.

My fingers brushed down my face, even the skin I had was fake. It was lifted, sliced and sewed up again like a possessed doll.

The hairs above my eyes were gone, replaced with ink. Eyelashes stolen from a wild animals' fur were ripped and reattached to my eyelids.

I outlined my lips. The lips that looked like they got stung by a bee.

Younger me would be horrified with the monster I'd become. Frankenstein's monster come alive.

Who was the contorted girl that I saw in the mirror? Whose every limb, nerve, and follicle was ripped out and replaced with plastic?

The reflection of the girl I used to be was foggy like a scratch up disk. I couldn't change it back. The person I was... is gone.

A warm streak made its path down my cheek. I *used* to be beautiful.



The Silent War KE

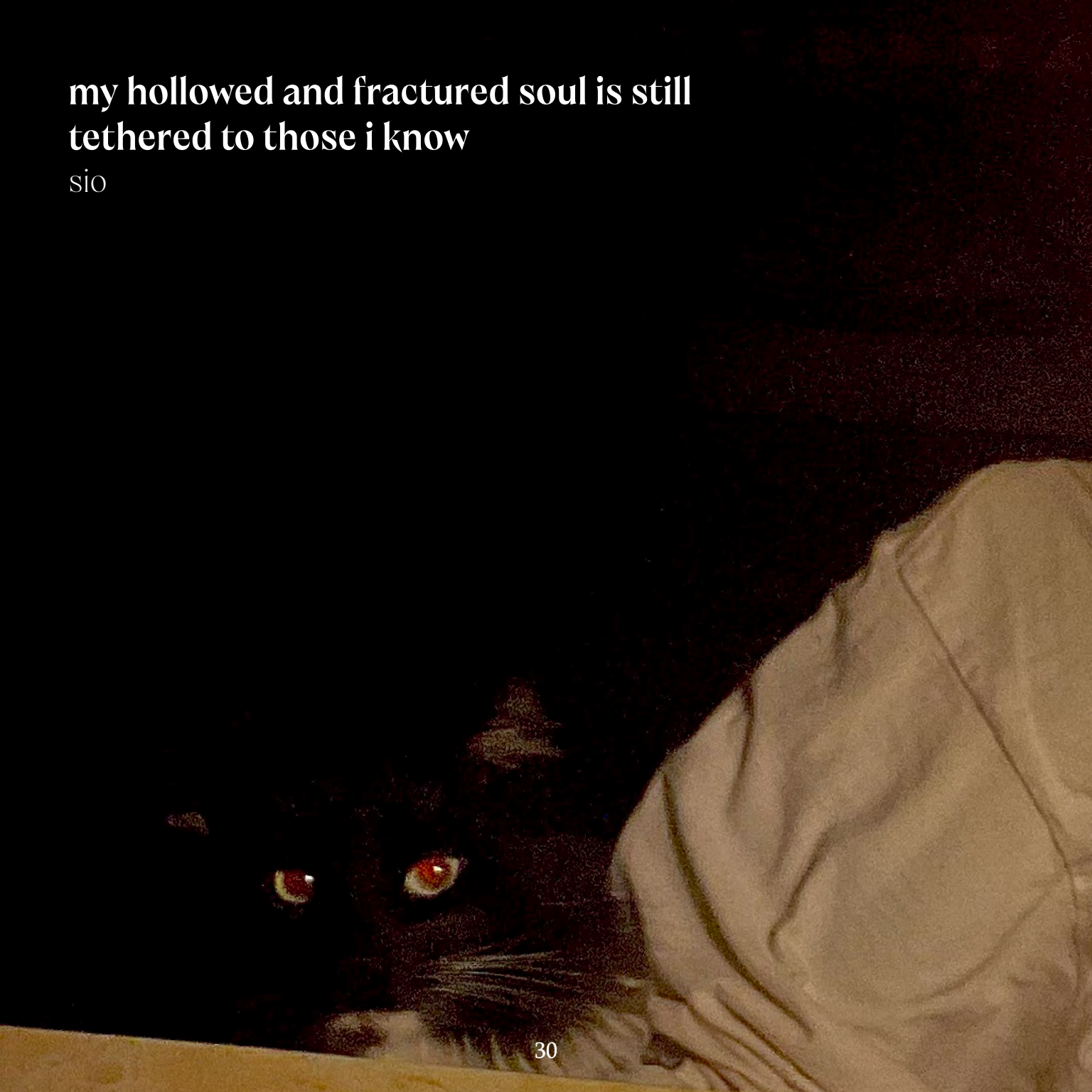


Untitled

Ethan

my hollowed and fractured soul is still
tethered to those i know

sio





I Tried to Fit

Isabelle Williams

I tried to fit,
not because I was small,
but because the world
had written rules on my walls.

I measured my worth
in pounds and in inches,
in photos I hid
and the fear that convinces.

I tucked my hips,
pressed my stomach tight,
wished my thighs were lighter,
my shoulders more polite.

Mirrors whispered lies,
expectations and fear,
and every reflection
was someone I didn't hear.

I tried to fit,
but fit was never mine,
just a shape I traced
against a fading line.



Intertextual
Jez White

a mother of three who loved to sing and write poetry

J Clayton Thompson

it was one week and one day into the new year
she was on her way home
a neighborhood that had already seen strife
where George Floyd was murdered a few years before
where her children drew sidewalk art with chalk
where she drew her last breath
because of a cowardly man with a gun
who should have been her protector
but was instead her assassin

the same year the country mourned George Floyd
Renee won a poetry award
and I can't help but wonder
that if the people who were chanting "All Lives Matter" in 2020
had really meant that
then perhaps she would still be alive today

and that should have been the end of it
- her killer apprehended
- her killer facing justice
but the Minneapolis nightmare continues
and the lies and cover-ups continue
and the homeland feels less secure
because our rulers have no heart

the people that claim the moral high ground
have turned their back on the poor
and the helpless

their God does not know them
and they do not follow him
instead, they follow a hateful ruler
who once bragged he could shoot someone
in the street and get away with it

we knew then who he was
and tragically
they do too.



you are lost, aren't you?

Avery Dunham

Reflection

AJ Marquez

What would you do if you lived inside the reflection? In the moment but never there. Never seen but ever present. You see everything that is happening and yet no one notices you. What would you do? Stuck where no one can see you, lonely in solitude, yet surrounded between reality and shadows. Staying inside a glass pane, waiting to break or to shift the light. Many people look out the window, looking for something, someone, never stopping to gaze at the reflection. You hide in their fears, in the dark, in the in between. Mistaken for a monster in the mirror in the middle of the night. You live in puddles, in irises, in the light, in the distant dark. Not bad, or evil, or malicious, just there. Ever present and observing. You see people cry, rejoice, sit. You live where there is sorrow, where people look at themselves. But no one wants to, so they look past, at dreams, and at desires. While you sit waiting with hate and sorrow. Living in the dewdrops of the un-smelled roses, waiting in the puddles to be splashed. What would you do in the reflection? Do you want to be seen? Or do you love your melancholy solitude? Sometimes, on a rainy day, people will look at you, realize your existence. Maybe, you are there after all.

Woodland Wonders

Kelly Pickering



Inside CECOT

Morgan Jage

An immigrant signed the declaration of independence,
Yet they claim “greatness” exists without them?
These are the people who have built your houses.
Cooked your food.
And immigrants are tax payers,
Who do not receive benefits.

People came here with stories, grief, and grace
Not threats, not theft, just looking for a place.
And how can we lose sight
Of the fact that these are people too?
With mothers who cry,
With fathers who try,
And all they do is look for a better life.

Borders cannot make someone more/less human.
Papers cannot measure a life’s worth.
There is no “illegal” soul.
There is only a system,
That has forgotten its own birth.

But justice isn’t chains and walls,
Nor is it the echoed threats,
It’s not silence forced through fear,
And it sure as hell
Isn’t vanished rights,
That disappeared.

What does justice look like in the shadow of CECOT?
Where men sleep beneath the weight of silence,
Where guilt is assumed, and names are erased?

Where these people become merely
headlines, handcuffs, and hunger.

Justice starts with due process, not mass punishment.
It's the truth spoken aloud,
It's restoration to the condemned.

Justice is rehabilitation, not revenge.
It's a nation that invests in schools before cells,
And in community before control.

But until then,
We must fight for those who can't,
Let stories live, let truth be told.
Let justice be not blind but wise,
With open hands and watching eyes.

Control

Jaylee Rogers

I got your letter today
Standing in the kitchen reading it I got emotional
I was emotional at dinner
An unstoppable sadness that overwhelmed me
I'm angry at myself for not taking down my Christmas tree
I told my father something my mother said
But he didn't like it and I shouldn't have said that
If my mother says something behind my father's back
I am never to say it to his face, an unspoken rule we have
My mother tells my father things to do to lower his cholesterol he's clearly not interested
My mother speaks excitedly anyway
My mother asks what to get my father for their anniversary
Do I tell her to get him a ring like he got her?
Do I keep secrets from both of them?
My mother will order a ring on Amazon
I told her to get rid of it, but she is waiting until her show is finished
Same show I gave up on
I want to say so much but that's a hard conversation
I haven't contacted my representatives because I'll stutter in the message
I have math to do I should be doing math I should be cleaning my room
I should be reading my water-stained book or coloring or writing you a letter
Doing all the things I never do because Instagram and robots are better
Because my bed is better
I know you love me and I know I will always love you
All I find is myself wanting to cry
My math isn't due until Monday, I should do it today
I stack dishes and never do it my father's way
He always has a reason I'm doing the dishes wrong
I should go out and get a job
I should watch all the performative movies I never watch
I can't breathe



Old St. Hilary's Church
Aisle D. McCarter

Bertrand's Bane

Amber Mersino



Scan to listen
to the audio

“Bushtit! Page 390...” Bertrand carefully placed a Post-it note to mark the page of his *Birds of the Pacific Northwest* field guide. *Birdseed used: Bird Lover's Blend ATTRACT! Spotted at 0700...* he took note of all the particulars, jotting the new entry in his birding journal.

“What, dear?” Eleanor glanced up from her Reader's Digest and set down her magnifying glass.

“Bushtit, Eleanor. Finally, something other than another blasted finch!” He hammered the top of his book with a gnarled finger. “Do you know how many different finches there are in this damn thing?” He didn't wait for her answer. “Fourteen, Eleanor. FOURTEEN.”

“That's nice, dear.” She patted his hand and picked up her magnifying glass again to return to her book, flipping to the crossword puzzle. “What is a nine-letter word for ‘weasel cousin’?” She waited as he glared out the window. “Bert? Weasel cousin...?”

Suddenly, an Eastern grey squirrel landed squarely on top of the feeder from a nearby tree, scattering seeds and birds alike.

“Oh, that damned squirrel...” Bertrand fairly snarled the words through gritted teeth.

“No, dear, I don't think that's right. There are only eight letters in ‘squirrel’...” Eleanor, counting the letters again to be sure, did not look up from her puzzle.

“He chased off my Bushtit! Gluttonous bastard, he must have half the feeder in those cheeks too! At this rate, my warbler won't have anything left to bother showing up for.” Bertrand found himself growing impatient with his search. The finches were all frustratingly brave, but the Wilson's Warbler he sought from page 441 was proving to be quite shy and elusive.

Eleanor, having given up on ‘weasel cousin’ for the moment, was writing the answer to ‘laughing wild dog’ with some satisfaction. *H-Y-E-N-A...* She set her pencil down, remembering a conversation she had with the charming man across the fence. “You know the new neighbor, Roger? Well, I was just chatting with him yesterday and he mentioned a special seed he started using. Oh, what was it... ah yes, Squirrel Away, I think? He says it doesn't bother the birds a lick, but the squirrels don't like it much because it's spicy. I'm sure he could tell you where to buy it, shall I phone over?”

Bertrand scowled. Roger was an insufferable know-it-all. “No need to feed that man's ego, he'll just stuff his cheeks full of it, worse than that damn squirrel. I can pick something up at the hardware store.”

“That's fine, dear, but really... you should try being a little nicer to Roger. Now, about that ‘weasel cousin’...”

The late afternoon sun had just begun to dip behind the tops of the towering cedars that sheltered their charming neighborhood. A light spring breeze weaved through the foliage; the gentle waving of branches beckoning their feathered tenants to leave their chatty foraging and return

home to their nests. Eleanor was in her yard, soaking the mulch at the base of her favorite tree, a weeping willow with 3 sets of decades-old initials carved into its weathered bark. She ran her fingers fondly over the letters and the heart that encircled them, then reached under her shirt collar for her necklace. The locket that once had flowers on the outside was now nearly smooth from daily wear. She opened the dainty clasp and held it up in the speckled light that filtered through the leaves to better see the faded pictures of the two young men in their uniforms. She closed her eyes, remembering that day as clearly as if it were yesterday...

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Eleanor yawned, awoken by a knock at the door. She rubbed her eyes, still tired from staying up so late the night before with her friends, her mother having indulged her with rare lenience as a gift for her 18th birthday. More persistent knocking pulled her from her bed, and she headed towards the front door. "Keep your shirt on, I'm coming!" She opened the door to her handsome young neighbor's face beaming at her in the bright morning light.

"What's crackin', sleepyhead?" Bert ruffled her feathery hair, leaving her looking rather like the angry-faced little grey fluffball of a bird he'd spotted earlier that morning. The resemblance made him chuckle as he dodged her swatting hand. "Truce, truce! I've got a birthday present for you!"

Eleanor's face was transformed by excitement, and she smiled. "What is it?"

"It's a surprise, but I didn't wrap it... so you have to cover your eyes tight, NO PEEKING. I'll lead you there." She clasped her hands tightly over her eyes and Bert waved his one good hand in front of her face. Satisfied, he took her by the elbow and carefully guided her down the front path to the sidewalk, around the set of mailboxes and

through his front gate, crossing his yard to stand in front of a lovely willow tree.

"Can I look?"

"Not yet..." Bert took a silver locket from his pocket, opened it with his thumbnail and hung it from a nearby branch in front of her. "Ok... now."

Blinking in the bright light to adjust her eyes, Eleanor gasped when she saw the beautiful necklace and she plucked it gingerly from where it dangled. She looked at the pictures, one was Bertrand and the other was her brother, Wilson. Bert was discharged early after losing his hand, and had moved in next door a year ago, but her brother had yet to return home. No letters had come from him in weeks, and she missed him dearly. "Oh, Bert, it's lovely!" She hugged him tight. "Thank you!"

"There's still one more..." Bert said quietly, looking over her shoulder with a twinkle in his eyes.

Eleanor slowly turned to the tapping on her arm. "...Will?!"

"Surprise! Happy birthday, Rigby," Wilson said with an impish grin.

A sob caught in her throat, and she threw her arms around her brother's neck in disbelief. "H-how? When?"

"It's over, I'm home for good. Bertie here picked me up at the airport early this morning..."

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Tucking the old locket safely back under her shirt, Eleanor smiled at the memory and a silent tear meandered down the tip of her nose to help with her watering. She reached down for the hose, carefully adjusted the nozzle and misted the delicate snowdrops nodding their pale velvety heads among the new buds of the soon-to-be vibrant array of tulips she had planted last fall, a faint rainbow shimmering in the gentle spray.

In the yard next door, Roger was stacking

freshly split firewood, whistling along to the warm, crooning, “I did it my way...” of a Frank Sinatra record, drifting out of his open kitchen window.

Bertrand was walking out empty handed from his fourth and final hardware store when he received a call checking to see what on earth was taking him so long.

“Bert, I just finished watering the flower beds. When will you be home to finish the weeding? You’re not still looking for that birdseed, are you?”

“I’ve come to the conclusion that it doesn’t exist. I think Roger may be blowing smoke up your a—” Bertrand’s sentence was cut short by his wife yoo-hooing over the fence.

“Evenin’ Roger, ha-looo!”

“Wait, Eleanor no, you don’t need to—” Bert gripped his phone, annoyed, but completely helpless to stop her.

“...Yes, he’s out shopping for it now... Wonderful, thank you, Roger.” Eleanor, with honey-suckle-sweetness, spoke back into the phone to Bertrand. “He says he buys it at Queenie’s Pets, dear.”

Of course it would be there, Bertrand thought, grumbling under his breath. *Probably between the stained-glass bird feeders and cashmere dog sweaters.*

“This stuff had better work...” he said as he hung up the phone, imagining the smug look Roger must’ve had on his face.

Early the next morning, they sat at their little table by the window to watch the newly filled birdfeeder. Eleanor clicked away with her knitting needles and Bertrand opened his field guide, pausing for a moment at the inscription on the first page:

“Dearest Bertie,

Who could’ve guessed that falling into that fox-hole to land on top of you would give me the gift of the best 50 years of my life? You know, I never stopped falling, and you never stopped giving me a soft place to land. If only we had another 50 years, maybe we could finally find the rest of these darned things. Don’t let Rigby get into too much mischief, and promise me you won’t give up on the birds. Whenever you see my warbler, you’ll know I’m with you. The fence didn’t mean that much to us, did it, old friend.

~Wilson”

Bertrand looked out past the fence to the house that he would have preferred to stay empty, then back to the fluttering around the birdfeeder. He sighed with disappointment at the American Goldfinch from page 521, but dutifully made note of it in his journal. *Spotted at 0630, bird seed used: Fancy Pants Squirrel Away.* It was almost painful for him to buy anything suggested by Roger, but if it worked... He gazed back to the window, then stiffened in his chair. “Eleanor, here comes that puff-tailed little tree-pig!”

Eleanor glanced up from her knitting just in time to see the squirrel dive head-first into the feeder, filling his cheeks even fatter than before. “Oh my... I think he likes it, Bertrand.”

Bertrand’s face turned as red as the peppers on the expensive bag of birdseed he had wasted his money on and he and the squirrel locked eyes for a moment. Two dark, calculating eyes glittered back at Bertrand, challenging him to come through the glass. They blinked twice, now satisfied that the blustering man was sufficiently trapped, and one more little handful of seeds was stuffed into his very taut cheek before he wiped his face off on the feeder and jumped down to scamper off with his

spicy prize.

“Roooger!” Bertrand growled.

“Now dear, don’t blame Roger,” Eleanor chastised, frowning slightly over the rim of her glasses.

“No, I think I’m going to name that little bastard Roger. And this means war. Did you hear me, Roger? WAR.” He shook his fist at the window. “Not spicy enough for ya? Oh, we’ll see about that! Let’s see what they have on good ol’ Amazon...”

“Ok, dear. Have your little war,” Eleanor rolled her eyes, shook her head a little and snipped at a stubborn strand of yarn.

Bertrand’s lip curled back in a smirk. “Oh, ho-ho! Here we go, *Flaming Squirrel Seed Sauce?* Add. To. Cart.”

“Add some sewing scissors too, would you Bert? This old pair is giving me fits.”

“And done. Should be here by this evening.” Bertrand, distracted by his scheming, did not notice the Black-capped Chickadee from page 384 of the field guide rummaging through the seeds in the feeder.

The next morning Eleanor sipped her tea and thumbed through her thick quilting pattern book, deciding on her next project, possibly a gift for Bertrand on their upcoming anniversary. She schooled the mischief from her face, quietly searching for the one covered in finches.

Bertrand sat perched on the edge of his chair with his nose fogging the glass of the window, waiting for any sign of his fluff-butt nemesis. His fingers still stung from mixing the flaming squirrel sauce with the birdseed that morning. The cuts on his hand from his afternoon of gardening had caused a rather unpleasant experience which peppered the task with a few more expletives than

his lovely wife deemed acceptable. A pair of Dark-eyed Juncos (found on page 470 of the field guide) frolicked unnoticed in the feeder as Bertrand scoured the yard for any sign of Roger, the squirrel.

“Where are you, ya little devil...?”

Eventually, a tenacious little face peeked out from behind the birdfeeder, nose and whiskers twitching furiously.

“I think you’re being watched, dear,” Eleanor said, as she looked through the window, and smiled at his pluck.

Bertrand faced the squirrel, and they stared each other down. Slowly, the squirrel reached out his tiny paw and grabbed a big handful of seeds, stuffing them into his cheek. He rubbed his face on the feeder, wiped at his tingling mouth vigorously with his paws, working himself up into a proper frenzy as he squinted, looking for Bertrand through the sudden singing in his eyes.

“Would you look at that... Eleanor, I think it’s working!”

“Congratulations, dear.” She wasn’t smiling anymore, and her cold tone combined with the pathetic swiping of those little paws instantly made Bertrand feel more than a little guilty.

Roger whipped his tail, angry and staring hard at him through the window, his eyes running with tears and swollen half shut. Methodically, the squirrel packed his cheeks full to bursting and glared at Bertrand with saliva dripping down his chin.

The old couple watched in horror as he fell off of the birdfeeder and attempted to bound across the grass, stumbling and stopping to claw at his stinging face. The hairs on his tail stood straight out and he screeched a muffled warning to his mate as she tentatively approached in concern from the shadows of the flower planters.

“Oh, Bertrand!” Eleanor gasped. “He has a wife, poor thing!”

Suddenly, a hawk swoops down, snatching the thrashing squirrel out of his writhing misery, a gooey string of seeds trailing from his open mouth.

“Red-tailed Hawk, page 159. Food: extra spicy squirrel...” Bert was dumbfounded.

Eleanor smacked at him repeatedly with her big pattern book, “BERTRAND CORNELIUS!”

He knew the foolish words were a mistake the moment they fell from his lips, and the flash of scathing fire in his sweet Eleanor’s eyes sent him scuttling in regret. He didn’t dare say another word, but he knew he had better make it right, somehow... This was a side of Eleanor that he had never actually seen before, and Bertrand felt miserable. He crept sullenly back onto his chair and flipped the pages of his field guide back to that very first page, silently promising Wilson that he’d figure out how to fix things.

As the days passed, Bertrand looked out at the birdfeeder that had been cleansed of the offensive seed and refilled with the Squirrel Away brand that they all actually seemed to enjoy. The feeder was being shared rather harmoniously one particular afternoon between a big fat Western gray squirrel munching away, and a vibrant American Robin.

Page 411... Bertrand wrote solemnly in his birding journal and looked out across the yard, a pang of guilt making him wince as he noticed a small female squirrel cautiously foraging with three precocious young kits in the shadows of the flower planters.

Eleanor sat across from him, stab, stab, stabbing a brown wool blob, aggressively needle felting, and occasionally slanting her eyes at him in disapproving silence.

He couldn’t stand it anymore. He disappeared into the kitchen and rummaged around in the pantry until he eventually emerged victorious with a bag of shelled walnuts.

Eleanor paused her stabbing and watched through the window with curiosity as her husband tromped outside to the woodpile and pried a carefully selected chunk of bark from a log. He created a makeshift bowl from the bark and filled it full of walnuts. Ever so carefully, he set it in the protected corner of the flower planter and laid a few branches over it for cover, looking to the trees and back, making several adjustments until he was sure the buffet would be safe from aerial attack. He surveyed his work, brushed the bits of wood off of his hand onto his jeans and hoped that the late squirrel’s missus would accept his apology.

Roger’s pleasant voice floated over the fence, “Ho there, neighbor!”

“Afternoon, Roger.” Bertrand sighed and turned towards the low spot in the fence between the two yards. A familiar sadness wrapped its talons around his heart and squeezed as he gazed at the tops of the boards, worn as smooth as Eleanor’s locket by arms resting there during a lifetime of shared conversations. It really wasn’t his fault, Bertrand realized, that as pleasant as he was, it was just the wrong voice floating over that fence. As usual, his sweet Eleanor was right, maybe he could try to be a little nicer to Roger. He stepped up to the fence and leaned over, seeking some inspiration to help him break his awkward silence. “Lovely sunflowers you’ve got coming up there.”

“They really are, aren’t they?” Roger chuckled and shook his head. “The birds really seem to love them too.”

They both startled in surprise as a bright flash of yellow flitted by the tall flower and alighted onto the fence post right next to Roger. There it

stood, watching Bertrand intently with its black eyes, as still as a golden statue, a black cap crowning its tiny head.

“Wilson’s Warbler, page 441...” Bertrand said in a hushed, reverent tone.

Turning from him, the bird hopped onto the sunflower, plucked a seed and flew off to land in the willow tree. He swallowed the lump in his throat and looked back at Roger. “You know, Eleanor and I would love for you to come over for dinner.”

“I’d love to, Bert.” Roger beamed, “I have some cucumbers ready for picking that I could bring for a salad...”

As Eleanor watched the two men chatting at the fence through the window, she smiled softly and murmured, “Well done, dear. Well done,” and continued her wool stabbing cheerfully as a charming little acorn formed in her hand.



Ethan



Be Different

Shara

🐾 Is this poetry(?) 🐾

sio

I grabbed a framed painting
watercolor
blue & greens of a deer
the glass wedged in the wooden frame
a broken hill.
I took it home
I'll be a ghost before
too long 🐾
Why am I creating (?)

When I pick up a pen
a brush
a stylus
a hook
a finger

When I sew,
coasters, cozies, stuffed animals
mostly recycled & redesigned clothes
a needle & thread
elastic & beads
scissors & glue
my voice and instruments
🐾 My girlfriend thrifted a handmade wool skirt
Tag said
Do I (?)

Dry Clean Only

8

She's more than an 8.

Now, after careful decal,
The waist sinches.
I do it out of passion (?)

As I stood in what used to be
cluttered decayed barn
stepping on broken glass only remembered
covered in shiny vinyl
I look out across the yard
A firepit stands anew
fresh gravel tilled & blocks
grey, glued accordingly.
Those who made it, mostly the one,
made it for others.
A wedding ceremony to come in 293 days
She dared territory she never knew
for them
She's sewn the impossible
for others
She sits beside me
knitting another afghan for one
who is dear to us.
Love, an irresistible muse.
Do I love to create (?)

When I used to paint
in long hours 🐾
suffocating breaths
That's what filled my stomach,
my parched throat.
until I emerged
an undeniable call to nature
to begin to work at 8 a.m. soft.

to drag on through the day
doodling, drawing, creating
hedgehogs out of pages.
When I spun cats from yarn, hooked
I no longer not because of anything
Time moved by fast
but as they twirled
was it just a gift to others (?)

When I spent hours
carefully threading ponys
with elastic
was the joy in the giving (?)

The moving pictures, hours of work
crunched
I did it because I knew it
Each detail in little squares
So vivid in my blurry head
Was a release creative enough (?)

As I scribbled ○ an art I abandoned
2,560 days ago
Away from my narratives ○ & my fantastical worlds
Who am I to create (?)

Doing math, 10 days after my 20th birthday but 30 before using VIP tickets brought 112 days
before,

I tried to make every day following infinite. 🐾
The same distance each passing static day. 🐾
When 21 days into writing a forgotten art, I sprawled drunken thoughts onto a ordered lineless
paper
all I could think
was if this was poetic enough (?)

found, or forgotten
would I drape full of prose (?)

The sporadic details of events carefully placed by fate
tell a flow only eyes can conceive

Rudely interrupted by lights. 🐾

Even my suicide note (?)
was poetry.

In death, did I want to be
remembered for creating (?)

My eyes see the world
🐾 weird & offputting, she
calls me

For all intent & purposes,

I think I'm pretty normal.

"We all disagree,

I think we should disagree"

~The Strokes. 2001. *Is This It* (?) 🐾

What's wrong with being normal (?)

My cat is normal,

just like me out of his teenage years

who sticks by my side at a distance

he scopes the sewing room

ensuring all the things that he's smelled before

are the same

as I blast the record player with songs about sex

if not sex, then whatever my girlfriend graciously gave me.

but as he sniffs every familiar box

fabric & thread

He gives me company 🐾

Go, he does,

right to the outside of the door

to guard patiently until im done

🐾

my cat & I.

if we are one of two sides

Is my cat creating (?)

I sniff every familiar thing, every familiar twist & narrow
With eyes that now see the lifted veil
each sliver new, each interaction
 something to be said.
Is this poetic enough for you (?)

When I put words to the page, my hands flow
I come to a limbo, much like in
sewing, drawing, painting, animating, gluing, singing
playing
Am I lyrical (?)
Does my epic, my drama end (?)
Called upon Greeks, heretics answer
Mind swarms as synths bury
 earworms 🐛

rereading the words on your lips
 I begin to think of everything
 the strumming on my fingers
the vocal chords reverberating within
 my asphogaus
 even as my head shake
 my planted feet trembling
Am I creating the poetic influence (?)

As I lay
an unearthed marvel
creature struck by lightning
I hoped to die by fire
 slowly
alone, I cried myself to comfort
 as thoughts swarmed through my favorite medium
wasting away alcohol
 with a mixture & a swig I had hoped before the lights I was being poetic

Heart 🐾 7320
 Lungs 🐾 7321
 Ribs 🐾 7322
 Throat 🐾 7323
 Liver 🐾 7324 days

why do all of these hurt (?)
 Is the hurt a part of the creation (?)

Things changed before my suicide.
 Risen, stitches around my neck
 I stumbled down the hallway
 grappled the walls & Mr. Pinky

i create to (?)
 fall
 nap
 sleep
 live
 I create to live.
 creating is breathing.

A creation of our making
 sense of the world
 our own grief
 our thoughts
 entangled in what I once associated with high intellectual art
 to steal & legally obtain
 collections & collections
 left unread
 to connect & grow.
 Sorry
 I need to create



Sacred Promise

Jeff Hoyle

Scan to listen to
Home by Jeff Hoyle



Wasted Wave

Kai Mefferd

A wave rushes to the shore
A white cap in the watery roar
Son of sea, born a moment ago
Abreast his brothers, forward they flow
Towards a sandy finish line

A wave rushes to the shore
A rock juts towards him at the fore
Son of sea, fear in the undertow
Abreast his brothers, forward they flow
And impale him on the stone

A wave staggers to the shore
A fraction of what he was before
Son of sea, he falters and slows
Abreast the trough, alone he flows
Lagging behind his brothers

A wave washes up on the shore
A mess of green kelp and briny gore
Son of sea, he seeps into sand
Abreast the clams, he wets the land
And evaporates in the sun

Swimming in a dream

Corissa



This Poem is Not About Coffee

Angeline Hamilton

The coffee is still in the cup.
It is still warm, fresh, and earthy.
It is still a weight
Within your calloused palm.

The coffee is still here.
You have not drunk it down
Not savored its every last drop
And you are contemplating
Throwing it in the trash
Away
Forever.

The coffee cannot help
Its small size
Or its bitter taste
But it keeps you going.

You complain, but there you are
Every day
At the same shop,
Sniffing the cold winter air,
Purchasing more of your
Same old
Coffee.

The shop will close, I said to you.
That was two minutes ago.
The shop will close- can you see
The signs in the window?
They are glowing bright red.

But you turned your back on me,
You turned your back with your

Same old steaming cup of coffee and said,
“Good. I hated that shop
Anyway.”

The coffee is still in the cup.
It is your last cup, I told you.
Your last cup from the shop
That you will never admit
Has served you well.
The last cup from the shop
That got you up in the morning.

“I can make my own coffee,”
You said, but I saw your red cheeks
And I knew.

You can get a coffee pot, and drip it
Into your well-worn mug
In the dark of the morning,
But you will never feel the heaters
Of that coffee shop again.

You will never wrap a sleeve around
A pulsing little cup of capitalism
That someone else
Took time and energy out of their day
To make for you.

You can sip at your coffee on the way to work,
But you are not a professional,
And it will not taste the same,
And it will break your routine into
Three hundred million little pieces.

The baristas welcomed your complaints
As you rolled up every day, ready to
Do battle, and call for the manager,

But you walked away sipping at your cup
All the same.

The winter is biting and cold,
And the new owners-
They are not into coffee.
They are not into complaints.

They will call themselves a coffee shop,
But I can already hear the rats
scuttling in their backroom,
And I can already see the health violations
They will cover up
Until you don't what the truth is

So it's best you stay out-
For your safety.

So savor this. Savor your last cup
Of coffee, as the warmth travels down
Your gullet, and let that warmth
Hang heavy in your stomach,
Let it hang and hang and hang
Until there isn't a drop left

And taste the bitter beans mixed with
Sweet sugar on your tongue,
Taste it until it is gone, because tomorrow,
You will have no shop to turn to
No barista to complain to
And no coffee to drink.

This poem is not about coffee.

An Altar for the Abacus

S. Torstenbo

Mountain trees devour the sun
Amounting these hours to none
A life spent in progression of increasing degrees of awareness
Of strife bent on regression and greasing machines of unfairness
They insist its natures way
As if an appeal to prior conditions could justify
The real and dire positions that must defy the sensibilities of warm-blooded sapiens
Saturated with sympathetic substance
They spill it on the sand to disguise the abundance
Hoarded vainly in their war-whore's den
Afforded mainly by the corpses of men
Lords claiming "merit" pours their cups o'er the brim
Scorn the poor too sore to settle score on a whim
God never lets us turn tables on him.

The market is coercion, just watch the signs flip to minus
They ensure that it's the hardships that define us
"It's for your own good", says the knife in the back of me
Tough love is apathy wrapped in slick packaging
Unbox the merchandise, its one million kids on ice
It's the price that others pay for you to have a single thing that's nice
How and whence the sneaker came was never once a mystery
Thousand cents is meager game but it's saved with outsourced industry

Avoiding eye contact with the pressing implication
Ignoring *I bought that while possessing this information*
I'm somnambulant in ecstasy
It hollowed out what's left of me
If they're sleeping on the sidewalk I'll sidestep grotesquery
Like the secret to good fortune is a safe guarded recipe

It's the predictable product of a culture bred with avarice
An altar for the abacus
Despicable conduct is a vulture's kind of glamorous
We laud, clamorous, they're greater than we mortals
Later they might lecture us on demonstrating morals as the lucid fill the streets
Dispatch the police for a crowd not clad in sheets

Double-take the revelation
Bummer break for this occasion
Know to never stake your hopes on progress in this nation
Rifle butt to temple bone
"Fuckers should have just stayed home,
Keep opinions to yourself and learn to love your station"
Foundation
Blend your pallor
Rise and grind, player
There never was valor as a lesser slime slayer
Still, someone's gotta slang burgers and trash bags
The revolution stymied in fervorous hashtags
The herrings are just as red as the hands we always catch them with
Left on read with demands in the catcher's mitt
Somehow the ball gets misplaced
This place is a disgrace and *never once met its own standard*
Liberty and equality are only that to which we pander

Brutality spied through hollowed eyes
Hallowed lies
The tallow lights on opposing sides
Burning as our country dies.

The Angel

Keturah Savage



Preservation

Goose Steagall

Angel's slide thru in my dreams , with words of wisdom –
Though too often it seems, I'm too caught up to listen .
They're trying to pull me back- from this dark side I've been in –
But I've been here posted – in this 3 dimensional prison .

But maybe I'm tripping – maybe my vision,
Isn't tangible for those that I sit with.
We're all trying to elevate , yet we're chained to the surface –
Throwing hands and egos , as if our energy's worthless .

A false sense of destiny , an aimless Saunter-
A skewed idea of loyalty, forbids us to ponder.
Looked at sideways if we question the motive-
Moving fast, going nowhere, but refusing to notice.

Opportunities slaughtered by complacent minds –
So much inspiration shaded , not encouraged to shine.
Deserted hope flees this wasteland, it's so Unalive –
The picture is clear, if we just open our eyes.

But the gears just continue to grind –
A repeating cycle , since the beginning of time.
Self-destruction and an endorsement of strife-
Has us committing emotional genocide.

It's easy to criticize, if it sounds too idealistic-
So we prohibit ourselves and enforce self-imposed limits.
But so much is attainable, therefore, realistic-
If we disengage from this dysfunction that opposes our existence.

We need to spit in the face of defeat and defiantly rise –
To be Ambassadors of Hope, in these pivotal times.

**Your
Favorite
Artist's
Favorite
Artist**

Beau



Siren

Daija

I remember the night you saved me
As I was drowning in the sea
I was frightened by your eerie self
But you began to sing to me
Your tone was indescribable
And the lyrics were a blur
But your voice lead me through the water
As you swam me to shore

Your nails were holding me tight
Creating crescents in my arm
It was a sacrifice you made
To save me from harm
Voices echoed in my head
The warnings of my crew
“Never trust their beauty.”
But this beauty was you.

You left me that night
Swam into the deep blue
I swallowed sand and stones
Hoping I would sink to you
I grabbed my cutlass
My view starlit
Recalling your love for rubies
I gave you scarlett

Phenomenon

Jessica

Each little pitter and each little patter finds a key.
Each splash, each wave, each creak of branches they come faster.
Each drop a memory is unlocked.

Here I am inside: warm and dry.

Out there, outside, it is dark and wet, a contradiction of good and ill.
Is nostalgia supposed to be happy or sad?
Am I the one who must decide?
I can choose to shut each little window one-by-one or all at once.
Throw the latches. Toss the keys. Yank the curtains. Turn away.
I can choose not to look. Maybe a peek. Just a glance.

Here I am outside: warm and dry.

In there, inside, it was dark and wet, a contradiction of good and ill.
Who was this other beyond the window?
They looked out but didn't see me. I look in, and can't see them.
When they tried to look beyond the rain, how close did the illusion come to be?
And when I try to look, where have the missing pieces gone?
How many do I find inside, each heavy with expectation?
For each of them, one of me. For each of me, another them.
The rain comes harder. The roads are slick. The skies are darker. The winds are howling.
Am I them? Were they me?
Thunder barks. Lightning startles. Winds tear.
Then who am I? Who have I been? Who will I be?
The last drop falls. The winds sigh. The setting sun winks goodbye.

It is dark and it is wet.

I am good and I am ill. Here I am, just me.
There they are locked deep inside.

Untitled

Emmy Girard

Must I title this?

Our world is

Of Titles

and generalizations

Even **Untitled** is a title

The emotion beneath the mask
face, obscured by

The **Title** that is the face-

all that is seen is the word that defines

The thing- for that is all it becomes

how can a word reveal

the truth when all that is seen

Is

the word, not

the meaning

the **title**, not

the being

the makeup, not

person

I am a **title**, an idea

Of a person, at least

That is how I am

We are

The world is

~~Seen~~

Perceived

We are **titles**

And now

I have written

Title

Too many times

Please, remind me of what it means

Young Fear, Old Confidence

a thousand roads ago,

I buried

my voice

in silence

Afraid

I looked down, hid

Afraid

Turned to shadows, away

Afraid

Then

slowly

I stepped forward

Afraid

And looked up

Afraid

I spoke

Wondered

Challenged

feared

Now

I lift my head

Test my limits

afraid

I grow

Because

I am

afraid

I fear

So I grow

I live

I love

I thrive

Because

I am

Afraid

And proud of it



Lost
Ron

The crook and the left

Allie Paige

The crook had left

The crooked left

To go and join
A circus

He told me he's down with the sickness
but not anything else (Congress
ought to vote on it)

Everything
gives me carpal tunnel

Including holding a sign or
signing a petition (Everyone
knows there's no-longer meaning
in anything
that has been written)

Untitled
Ethan

Writing Poetry

Kiyomi McKenzie

I love you but
I hate you
I think you're beautiful
but you confuse me

You're calm but emotional
and you drive me insane
You make it hard to think
or even talk but maybe
you're meant for me

I want to tolerate you
for the sake of me
because again I do love you
maybe you're partly me.

Depths Calling

Shara Kiser

Glass shatters, bonds are breaking.

Stand at this ledge, toes to the edge.

Grasping the rail, yet barely touching.

Sands slip like sanity from the ocean.

Feel the grit. Hold on tight, not too soft.

Time's elusive like water's deep.

Wade in to tempt fate. How deep?

Thoughts dashed - waves breaking.

You can't break what's soft.

Swallowed whole. Can't find the edge.

Brought to the brink. Drink in the ocean.

Roiling memories. Chaos is touching.

Lightning echoes of love, so touching.

This head is spinning, sinking deep.

Fight back through the roar of the ocean.

Deafening sound. These chains are breaking.

Memories cut flesh like knife's jagged edge.

Blood runs velvet, soft.

Delicately marred, is healing soft?

Howling wind feels raw and touching.

The mind plays it's tricks. Is that the edge?

The abyss breathes deep.

Reel it back in, these tethers are breaking.

Dream-like slow motion, run in the ocean.

Calm is the ocean.

It renews, all things soft.

Your mind is not breaking.

A stone heart is touching.
Strings drawn from the deep.
Pull flesh from the edge.

Scarred is the edge.
Am I the ocean?
I won't go that deep.
Time has a way to make you seem soft.
Fractures and ruptures in need of touching.
And only brittle things are breaking.

This cliff has no edge. The quiet is soft.
The force of the ocean forever touching.
I know what lies within these depths and only brittle things are breaking.

Wild West Balladeer (The High Plains Lovesong)

Aster Vegas Smith

Wherever love is grown
is the only home I've ever known.
To that love I am forever led
as to a soft pillow below my head.

It's love I find far from the mines
that deep down sparkles and shines.
It's love that's free from wheels and deals
that always gives me the fullest meals.
(sweet like wine every time)

And when moss rolls off the stone,
and when meat can't fall off the bone,
I'll just look where the wind has blown,
look around, and that know I'm home,

For the wildest west I see
sprawls right out in front of me
where all the love I breathe
runs far, fast, and free.

So here on the great plains I'll be
with my lovesong dream to infinity.

"Isn't the world
full of wonderful things?"
- heard from *Hello, Dolly!*

"and I am not alone
I hear the rocks and stones
echoing my song!"
- heard from *Hadestown*



Mount Rainier
Emalee Baysden

Forget Me Not

Melinda



The Shed Spider

Kyle Kastli

It was a hot summer day in the middle of June. The sun was beating hard onto me, including the overgrown backyard that desperately needed a trim. The trees above did little to stop the harsh rays, barely creating enough cover to hide under. Unlike me, the birds enjoyed themselves and basked in the sun, flying high into the sky, a gentle breeze blowing through their wings. Like the birds, my neighbors also seemed to be enjoying themselves. I could hear them laughing and talking beyond the tall brown fences that enclosed my backyard. I caught the faint sniff of burgers that they must have been having, seemingly enjoying a barbecue that made my mouth water from the smell alone. As I took in the surroundings around me, I almost forgot why I was back there in the first place.

My mom had asked me to get some chairs from the little shed at the back of the lawn. I've always hated that shed. It's small. Just small enough where you can't stand up straight and the door never easily opened or closed. You'd always have to lift it up slightly and slide it. Unless of course, the door got stuck, in which you'd have to try to shake it loose, causing the metal to screech violently. This in turn would cause your ears to ring a few seconds after the screeching had stopped. The walls were just as bad as everything else. They were rigid sheets of rusted metal that held onto the heat the sun gave off. One wrong move and the walls wouldn't be afraid to both cut

and burn you at the same time.

The inside was also its own problem. There was no light inside, which meant you'd have to rely on whatever sunshine got inside from the gaps in the door. Along with no light, the shed did little to stop the sun, but rather the opposite. The air inside was thick and hot, making it hard to breathe as if it were some kind of sauna. If that mixture wasn't bad enough, a bitter smell clung in the air from something hidden in the back, so strong you could taste it on your tongue. But of course, it was a small shed; everything was shoved inside half hazardly, which meant I couldn't tell where the smell was coming from. Chairs were upside down; the cushions littered all over the place, a lawnmower on its side, a bunch of yard tools spewn about, and a hose that sprawled out over everything like a snake. All of it somehow dirty, despite being fully covered from the outside.

I awkwardly shifted into the doorway, making sure not to hit my head, with just enough room for me to stand inside. One by one, I slowly started to pick up the cushions from out of the mess. These cushions were large, and I wondered how they were able to fit through the door in the first place. Not to mention, these cushions were on their last legs. At least one side of the cushions had a rip, the size of them depending on if they were for your back or your butt. The back cushions had tiny cuts, only spanning a couple inches. The cushions for your butt, however, had massive rips that span the whole seat like the Grand Canyon. This meant that only one side of the cushion was usable. It would be better to just throw them in the trash, but for some reason my family still kept them.

After complaining about the cushions in my head, I luckily managed to squeeze the cushions out and throw them onto the grassy floor. Then even slower, I grabbed the metal frames of the chairs and hauled them out. I got two chairs out when I saw something out of the corner of my eye. My biggest fear, a spider. At that moment, the spider looked as if it was as big as my hand, resting on its web like a king. It was sprawled out in the corner; obviously like it had been there for some time. What if it jumped out at me, or shot venom into my eyes, or even came up with a plan to take down my family. My mind swirled with possibilities from the mundane to the craziest. A jolt ran through my body, my stomach dropped, and every muscle in my body tensed up. I slowly reached for a nearby rake that happened to be missing a few of its prongs. As I did, my eyes never left the spider, like it was going to vanish the second I did. As I grabbed it, I readied myself to strike at it, but before I did, I stopped.

Time froze and the Earth stopped turning. It was just me and the spider in this cramped room. I don't know why I stopped. Why I didn't swing that rake with all my might in a flurry. Why I didn't scream like a child who lost their favorite piece of candy. Why I didn't run out with my teeth clenched. I should of, I had every right too. I mean, I hated this shed and its stupid door and cramped walls. I hated spiders with their creepy long legs and how they crawled. But even then, I stopped and stood there, staring at the spider. And for a second, the spider looked as if it were staring back at me.

My grip on the rake loosened, shoulders relaxing, and my heart finally started to calm

down from what felt like a racecars engine. I saw its expansive web stretching around the corner. Its silver silk glistening slightly from the rays of sun, swaying lightly with a simple gust of wind that snuck in from the doorway. A small insect laid trapped in the web's embrace, ready to be the spider's next meal. The spider was along the middle of the web, adding its finishing touches. The web and its legs move in perfect harmony, knowing just what to do and when. Really staring at it, I could see that it wasn't that large at all. It was small and fragile. The spider almost looked beautiful. Up close, I can't see why I was ever scared at all.

As I watched the spider, I realized how calm it was compared to me. It sat there, steadily spinning its web. I started to wonder what the spider's days and nights might look like. Perhaps this shed with its dusty walls and messed up door that I've always hated was its whole world. Maybe this spider loved this shed as much as I hated it. This spider would wake in the morning wrapped in the shadows, tucked away in the corner. It would start its daily routine, straightening its web like how I would clean my messy room. It would spend hours repairing its web, checking for any tears that are only noticeable to it. It would eat its morning breakfast, like the insect that's trapped in its web.

Maybe instead the spider explored the darkness in the shed. Traveling between the tools and on top of the tip over lawnmower. Crawling over carrot seeds that littered the ground that my mom had spilled from days past. Wandering along the roof like it was in some kind of James Bond movie. It would move as if it knew the shed better than me, like it was the back of its hand.... or legs

more like. Or maybe its life wasn't some crazy action movie, and instead something simpler. Maybe this spider just rested on its web the whole time, still except for the rogue gust of wind that would jostle its web.

Now standing in this cramped shed, I realized how quickly fear can twist something small into something huge. I had grabbed that broken rake ready to smash the spider into pieces, but actually looking at it, it changed everything. It wasn't the monster I made it out to be in my head; it was just living its peaceful life in this shed. It wasn't invading my bedroom or leaving webs for me to walk into. It had its own life in its own place. The longer I stood there, the more I understood how often we react before we understand. How fast we jump to the worst conclusion because it's easier. Because fear can drive us. But when I finally paused, and really looked at the spider, it wasn't my enemy. Maybe if we gave more things that same moment of attention, they wouldn't seem so scary in the first place.



Old Tractor

Tara-Marie Buckley

Summer Birdsong

AJ Marquez

Tired, the last week was a typhoon of studying.

Sleepy, the irritating sound of the alarm.

They fall back asleep.

The morning sun arises, they sleep

The birds arise with the morning sun and call out to them

They finally arise and decide to join the birds

Sleepily changing into woodland gear

They blunder into the woods, soaking their shoes with dew

The scent of soggy moss and fresh earth fills their thoughts

They travel to the babbling brook and enjoy the serenity

Traveling to the brick prison is a far off thought.

They stay in the moment

They enjoy the sorbet sunrise

They sing with the birds of summer

Summer Ends

AJ Marquez

Odd, I wake up in the morning
My alarm has yet to ring
I check the clock to find it's too early
I try to sleep and fail
I roll out of bed, somehow awake
I stroll outside, hoping
to be greeted by a brisk morning
Chills shoot down my spine
as the air snips at my nose
The cold shocks me awake
no more lazy mornings with evenings of fun
I check the calendar and am filled with dread
two weeks to school
My sleepy mind still knows the routine
It has been a year
but I must return to knowledge

Swan

Tara-Marie Buckley





Trumpeter Swans
Tara-Marie Buckley

Lightful.

Aster Vegas Smith

the Light is creeping in!
Look, you, from the peripheral view!
sickness burning, burning, burning away... know the Light!
the Flame is come to burn away the leeches,
to cauterize the ceaseless exsanguination
of bleeding hearts, to burn away the festers
rotting this artificial, plastic abyss
that has become our souls

and dripping from lady liberty's Torch: utter immolation!
for tragedy has struck:
columbia and uncle sam are murdered
their sad corpses stink up the house...
a foul sickness has upended their love! snuffed out their Light!
Fire will put it to rights and clean up the darkness
and now burn all, all away, now, now and *forever*

renounced and up in the air like flakes of charcoal
peeling from the logs!
that crepuscular hour is come
so burn their crosses,
burn the hooded cross-burners,
burn the plastic plantations,
burn the murderers of my kind
all to as darkful a place,
as deathless, as Lightless as they are...
burn the great white, red and blue abattoir, and then

because of our wildFire, see new Light come to us!
it is there in the Light through the cracks in the door,
open it up! look out and see!
SunLight shines across our dirt fields...
here something Lightful shall grow,
once sick, now most fertile ashes... ah, spring!
oh life, once and for all!



Kyran Gibson

Blended

Kyran Gibson

I may come from anywhere, but I am local in Bremerton

Jiahao

In Taiye Selasi's TED Talk "Don't Ask Where I Am From, Ask Where I Am Local", she challenges traditional notions of identity, arguing that people have diverse life paths and that a person cannot be defined by their country, language, or birthplace. Selasi mentioned three R's: relationships, rituals, and restrictions which help form personal meaning in a place.

Because a person's birthplace or country of origin does not define them, just as the Earth doesn't care about the boundaries humans have drawn, a person's birthplace is not a matter of choice. Through relationships, rituals, and restrictions (three Rs), a person develops a sense of belonging in a place. If someone is from another country but lives in the United States, has integrated into society, has family and many friends there, and has deep connections with the community, then they are undoubtedly a local.

Regarding rituals and restrictions, the United States has been profoundly influenced by immigration throughout its history, and some immigrants inevitably face language barriers. Sometimes they are afraid to speak English, fearing they will make mistakes and be misunderstood. However, they eat, go to school, work, and celebrate holidays like other Americans, and they frequently drive or walk along certain roads every day. They live normal lives just like

the local residents. Applying the concept of the three R's, they are locals.

I want to talk about why I feel so strongly about this. Selasi's speech resonated deeply with my personal experience. Since moving to the United States, many people have asked me where I'm from. Some people are unfriendly to me because I'm not American, and sometimes communication is difficult due to cultural differences. Sometimes I worry that my English isn't good enough and that I'll be misunderstood, causing unnecessary trouble. But I've lived here for a long time; I'm familiar with all the roads, the locations of most stores, and I don't even need a map. My family and many friends are here. Selasi's TED Talk helped me to find ways to assert that I am local here. I can now confidently say "I belong here."



Life
Ron

Drowning

Coyote Söm-Draki

Swirling water
hand on my back
unwelcome
“Coyote, we’re waiting.”
the clock falls.
“Coyote?”
the hands stop in place.
shattered glass, frozen time-
glinting together on the floor
The summer heat Pressing
Voices call.
“are you there?”
confusion , running feet
the hand in my imagination slides lower.
I kick him he falls I can’t see

broken glass.
rushing.
What clock?
“Wake up!”
sitting up in bed, eyes blinking.
I wanted to kill him.
Broken Coyote.



Morning Catch
Ethan

A Diary Entry

Sara Kan

Throughout our history, wars have displaced people and people form new cultures from being dispersed. We form new challenges with each other from the new existence that we create for ourselves from having experienced the confusion and fear that every war-torn society has endured. Some cultures disappeared completely from these conflicts while others chose to adapt in order to survive. Despite who we have become by those before us, our existence is proof that we are inherently resilient as people. They tell us that money is the root of all evil, but my life has proven that fear has even more deeper roots with evil than money.

I am from a family where the generation before me experienced war firsthand. My parents both had a beautiful childhood only to have it all instantaneously taken away. Somehow, they seem to have stumbled upon a nightmare that made every single day of their existence, from then on, perilous and fearful. The term “Angkar,” all of sudden, controlled everything in their lives. Existing families were torn apart, and you were forced to marry and create families from complete strangers. My parents do not fully understand the reason behind the existence of “Angkar,” and generations after themselves really cannot fully understand it either, especially since we were blessed to not have to endure it firsthand ourselves.

Although I know that I have a much easier life despite having many of my own challenges in life, I will never be able to fully understand the extent of my blessings. I was born in a country drenched in freedom so pure that the lifestyle created from it took away its value. This was some-

thing that my parents described having in Cambodia to some extent prior to the Khmer Rouge obtaining power in their homeland. Although they were not rich, they never starved and had solid relationships with others to where they could trust their neighbors and shared the abundance of their harvests. So having this “perfect” lifestyle flip for them one day was not something that made any sense.

Yes, my ancestry is Khmer. The dangers of the history of my ancestors involved having many centuries of God Kings, which is a lifestyle that can corrupt any society that chooses to practice this. The issue with having a supreme ruler or power is that hard work and integrity are not always rewarded, and the pursuit of justice seems to sometimes be hidden from those who need it the most by the accepted lies and the established status of our men and women in power. There is a lot of danger in not being allowed to question those in power and being falsely accused of crimes that you are forbidden to prove your innocence with.

I was blessed to have grown up with a church family and have wandered away from the church only to return to it. My challenges that I faced away from the church only strengthened my relationship with Christ and solidified His place as my Redeemer. Though, I have also been disgusted by what some claim to do in the name of Christ. Since when was breaking up families, constantly taking and coveting what rightfully belongs to someone else, and always obeying your parents Christian? The last time I checked, to honor and to obey are not the same things. We can still disobey others without the disrespect and shame that we may place upon another by our disobedience.

I can go on and on about the things that I find that will create more conflict and confusion that challenges our society, but who is willing to listen?

Also, actions tend to speak louder than words anyways. It seems like our world is safer for ourselves with our silent acts of love than our shouts towards others to change so that we may be free from the oppression and injustice that seems to be so prevalent in our modern society. Every witness will have to speak at some point in their life, and maybe beyond as well, about what he or she has witnessed. No lie ever gets unpunished. Time has shown that. One generation lies only to have the next generation get slapped by the truth and revolt against the pain. My hope is that those who can safely speak against the existence of the dominant voices of injustice and inhumanity that plagues our days would do so. Hope has never failed me, and my life is the living proof that can testify to that.

We all share a different background because of our own personal experiences, even if we come from the same family. Though, I find that the nature of people is basically the same. We want acceptance. We want fairness. We want comfort. We want to be loved. Though, the key to finding or getting all of what we want tends to come from how honest we are with ourselves. How can others accept us if we are rude? How can others provide fairness to us when we won't share our gifts with them either? We are all gifted in some way, and it tends to get overlooked when we choose to compare ourselves with others. So, is fairness even necessary? How can we be comfortable and still grow at the same time? And ultimately, we all want to be loved, whether we want to admit to it or not. Though, that is really a paradoxical thought. What we have ever received was always a reflection of who we are. Are we loved because we chose to love first or did love come out of nowhere and expect you to love it in return? That's not up to me to decide for anyone... not here and not anywhere. Be blessed and be well.

Bare Beauty

Samantha
Galvez



Free Water

Ed Jacobs

“I don’t pick teams or administer bans”
– Supercell, Aesop Rock

It’s 1:00 p.m., October 19th, 2025. The rain mists away lazily, in that way that only Washington rain does, cleaning the cold air under dismal, grey clouds. I’m sitting under a camping tarp next to Nate and four pallets of water bottles. Surrounding us and all across the Manette Bridge are signs and music. No Kings. I’ve heard Rage Against the Machine more in the last hour than in the last couple of years. I gotta say, it’s good to hear Tom Morello play guitar in public again. He’s not here in person, but undisputably in spirit.

Nate, wearing his blue scrubs, is here in case of medical emergencies and I’m here to hand out Nate’s water. I’ve made several trips over the bridge shouting “Free Water! No ICE, Just Water! Free Water!” It’s time to make another run. I know I can hand out an entire pallet of water in a trip, so I muscle one onto my shoulder and start the walk.

I begin at the roundabout this time, haven’t hit there all day. “Free Water! No Kings, Yes water! Free Water!”

Among the backs of a dozen or so people, a man turns around. His black jacket sits like a shadow among rays of light, and as he turns, I note that his face is clean shaven, skin sagging in the way that mine will sooner than I like to think about. Neatly cut white hair sticks out from beneath a black ballcap adorned with barely visible black let-

tering. The words on his cap read, “*Make America Great Again.*”

I was raised in a Catholic house. I went to Catholic Mass every Sunday. And until middle school, I attended Catholic School. Sacred Heart Catholic School in Jacksonville Florida was on Blanding Blvd, down the street from the Drive-In Theater and Solid Gold Strip Club. Students there wore uniforms. White collared shirts and blue slacks for the boys, white shirts and pleated plaid skirts for the girls. PE was similarly uniform, red shorts and white “*Sacred Heart Jaguars*” shirts. Go Jaguars. I don’t remember why, but I was in line behind a tow-headed boy in his PE uniform. Shorter than I, but louder. He *felt* larger. I don’t remember the context or the subject, but I remember him tell another boy:

“Don’t act so gay.”

I hadn’t heard the word before, but context clues relayed that “gay” was bad. I laughed in an attempt to endear myself to the large short tow-headed loud mouth.

“I bet you don’t even know what that means.”

He was correct. My blank stare and silence betrayed the fact.

“It means you like to have sex with other men.”

I figure, in hindsight, that the two of us could not have fill a sheet of wide lined notebook paper with our combined insights on the topic of sexual relations. But we both knew that Jesus thought marriage, and therefore sex, was between a boy and a girl. So gay was weird. Potentially a hell-worthy kind of weird, I wasn’t super clear on the particulars. In this way the word gay entered

my lexicon as it did many young boys of the time. It meant “stupid” or “weak”.

My parents have always been Team Conservative. I grew up listening to Rush Limbaugh ranting in the background while Dad, half listening, quoted Three Stooges, Pogo, or sometimes Yogi Berra. “You can observe a lot by watching.” I grew up believing “the Dems” just wanted to give our money away to people eating Cheetos and watching Maury Povich. Those damned Yankees wanted to ruin everything good about the South. My great great grandfathers fought for the Confederacy, and so we were Good Southern Folk. You don’t change teams just because you lost, do you? Go Reds.

That’s not to say that we were luddites. I remember Dad announcing that we’d passed the threshold for becoming computer nerds when there were more computers in the house than people. Dad always loved technology. He was so into amateur radio as a kid that he got his dad into it. Every Sunday after church we would get a “one-ringer” on the phone and that meant that Grandpa was on their prearranged station so he and Dad could talk.

I think Dad hoped amateur radio would connect us like it did him and his dad. While I attended Clay High School, he figured a way to log into the computers on the Russian Mir Space Station through radio waves. We would hear the digital signal on his radio as the station crested the horizon. We logged in on his 386 desktop computer and got back a login confirmation. It wasn’t much, just text on a screen that we printed out, but I had talked to a space station. Just like Star Trek. I took the printout to school, certain that my peers would

be astonished by my technical acumen. No one at school knew what the Mir Space Station was.

Dad said, “That’ll happen, my Son my Son.”

Catholic school was brutal. I don’t mean the teachers. Teams were formed in kindergarten that didn’t dissolve until high school and If you weren’t in, you were out. I wasn’t in. Being a quiet introvert didn’t help matters. My parents wanted me to go to Bishop Kenny High School to continue my ride through the Catholic educational ecosystem. However, as a result of my pleading and the relentless bullying, I ended up transferring to the secular Lakeside Junior High School. Go Gators.

Now no one knew me and I preferred it that way. Better unknown than shit on. On the bus, I met Chris. Black Hair, thick glasses. He wore a Jacksonville Jaguars hat, even though he never watched sports. A huge fan of Gothic Horror. His parents were Mormon. Chris and I became fast friends. He introduced me to two of my greatest loves, Dungeons & Dragons and Final Fantasy. We spent weekends together playing video games and TTRPG’s. We discussed our favorite sci fi and fantasy series. I was a Star Trek guy, he was not. After Lakeside we went to different High Schools, him to Orange Park and I to Clay. Go Blue Devils. Even afterward, we hung out on the weekends. Late night AD&D, Doom Marathons, and Sci-Fi Channel’s Saturday Anime kept us together.

I met a wonderful woman named Leah in 2005. Yeah, we’re fast forwarding a bit, but stay with me. We fell in love and decided to get married. At the altar, standing next to my brother, James, as a groomsman, was Chris.

After the ceremony, a fine Catholic affair,

my now wife and I made our way to the reception. James and Chris had ornamented my car with cans and written “Just Married” on the back window in what I hoped was washable paint. In the car, Leah asked me how long had I known that Chris was gay.

Chris wasn’t Gay, I told her.

Chris came out to me about a month after our wedding.

The man in black and I stare at each other for what seems like an eternity. I consider texting Nate that there was a MAGA here, but decide against it. His eyes turn to the torn open plastic of the Costco water pallet I’m carrying, then proceed to a young man next to him. The boy, darkly festooned in a matching hat, turns around to see what has caught his father’s attention.

Sidney was my daughter. She loved Batman, especially reruns of the 1990’s Animated Series. When she was six or so she got a Batcave playset for her birthday, along with some My Little Pony figures. The playset was fantastic, with knobs that controlled a working elevator and a Batcomputer that unfolded with the press of a button. The set came with Batman’s sidekick Robin and a villain, the Joker, for them to battle. Sidney asked me to tell her a special Batman story with her new playset before bed and I obliged. I told a simple story about the Joker kidnapping Twilight Sparkle and then Batman and Robin coming in on their Batcycle and Batmobile to save the day. This became our routine until she found another toy to love.

When she got older, we would often attend football games. At the time, Leah was playing with

the local all-women’s football team as an offensive lineman. Go Dixie Blues. Sidney loved to watch the Blues play football. Her mom and the other players were like heroes to her. This was, for Leah and me, one of the first indicators that Sidney was probably queer. It was a collection of things, really; the way she looked up to the women on the football team, the way that she wanted to be Batman for Halloween every year, how much she loved to play sports. These things felt surface-level, and they were, but they also belayed a deeper truth; an instinctual, gut understanding of our daughter that my wife and I shared. So, I steeled myself for the inevitable coming out and assured my daughter that we would love her no matter what.

I was not prepared, though, when she told her mother that she was pansexual. I was further ill prepared when they came out to me as Non-Binary. “I know,” I said, “Your mom told me.” I thought they were the same thing. I didn’t know the difference.

They/Them wasn’t a huge leap. I assured my child, now Finch, that no matter what, we loved them. I had a lot to figure out about the new reality I found myself in. I learned that niblett was a non-binary niece or nephew. I started removing gendered language from my greetings. I focused because, godammit, I wasn’t going to fuck this up. I’d heard too many stories about the people that did. Explaining to my Fox News watching, Rush Limbaugh loving parents wasn’t the trial I had expected. They did the most that they were comfortable with and we let float the edge cases. Not having their grandchildren wasn’t an option they were willing to consider, team loyalty be damned.

We continued as gracefully as we could until I saw Finch with a colorful beaded bracelet that spelled out the words “He/Him”. I asked if that was accurate. He nodded, faux non-committal.

“So is it still Finch then?” I said, truly curious.

He shrugged, “I was thinking I should be something else.”

I nodded, rolling that around in my head, before saying, “Your mother and I are only paying for one legal name change.”

It took a few weeks, but he settled on Jaimie.

I’ve read that some parents mourn the loss of the child they thought they had when that child comes out as queer. They mourn a future that they expected, maybe that they felt they deserved. I’ve never felt like that. Jaimie has his own interests. He doesn’t like Final Fantasy and the Dungeons and Dragons he plays isn’t the same game I played in the 90’s. He listens to classic rock and wears an Amigo the Devil hoodie pretty much everywhere. I don’t think he knows what the Mir Space Station was. I was never the amateur radio operator that my dad was, but he still took Chris and me to meet George Takei at the local Star Trek convention. I’ve never felt that Jaimie owed me a future. I’ve worked and fought and climbed and bettered myself to gift him with one to make his own. It’s a poor gift that you give with strings attached.

A week or so after he decided on his name, I visited Target with my eldest son Jaimie and my youngest son Grayson. Grayson’s hyper-fixation at the time was lightbulbs, so when we passed near the LG Color Changing LED Smart light display, Grayson ran off to it. I shouted at Grayson, “Stay close to your brother.”

Jaimie half turned to me; a mirror to the boy, the son, in front of me on the bridge. I was worried for a moment that I had done something wrong. Then, I saw his smile in profile, he tilted his head down a bit and ran after Grayson. I don’t think Jaimie noticed that I saw him react. I don’t know if the reaction was joy or something close. Pride maybe.

Cars pass, honking in what I hope is solidarity. The crowd creates a thrum of bass that I can feel in my chest. I look the man in black in his eyes, searching for something that will tell me what he wants. He returns the look with apprehension. What a pair we make, two sons with sons. I can see the calculations going through his head. I don’t know why he decided to come to the Marnette Bridge today. I don’t know what he expected to happen. But he’s here and his son is here, seeing a thousand people unified in cause. This is what the other team looks like. I hear my Dad, likely right now in his easy chair at home, quoting Pogo, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

The boy tugs his Dad’s shirt tail. The man looks down to his son, then up at me and asks, “Can I have a water?”

“Of course.” I answer. “It’s free.”



Tookwaytoolongonthis

Yuri S.

**Royal
Hawaiian**
Winston
Griffin



Yarn

Jacqui Bridgman



Do You Know Anything About Rob

Jacob Tennesen

Rob? Yeah, I know him.

I didn't know this until yesterday, but I'd been seeing him around for about five months or so, so his name's Rob, unless he's a liar. If he's a liar, that wouldn't be good for me, since I've been seeing him around for about five months and I gave him five bucks one time, and he said to me

"Yeah man, I've been homeless, my girl kicked me out and my fuckin' car got totaled and all this shit man, it's life dude just, fuck it."

I get it, I say the same stuff to myself sometimes but not all the time since I'm a pretty positive guy. And since I'm so positive I gave him five bucks not just because he asked for it but because I think, sometimes, if you have it, if it's convenient, if you like the guy well enough, if he's not too rude, if you're not saving up for something nice, or big, or lunch, or whatever, that you should break off a piece for another man. Women too. I'm all about equality.

I say that because about the time I went to the women's march with my girl, well, my ex-girl, but it's not because I was being all misogynistic and shit, that's just not me, but when I went to that march and shit I totally kicked ass. Not like, domestic violence, but, like, feminism. I was walking and she was walking and I really didn't like it that much because my feet hurt like shit, maybe it was a bunion on my foot from that time I dropped a cinder block on my shit and it healed all fucked up – did I say anything about that yet? Basically I was working on building this little ring around the campfire; I like to say independent contracting on my resume so they think I'm a real smart guy – not that I'm not – but really it was for my good buddy Paul. Nice guy, big house, he's got this real nice

Dodge, I think it's a Charger or a Fiat or an Aven-tador or something nice like that, anyways, I was helping put that stuff around it because it keeps the flames inside the circle and all that, but my hand slipped and I dropped one of them blocks on my foot and totally fucked it. Three months later after I went to the doctor and stuff it healed all crooked and there's this big ass lump and – Okay, sorry,

I gotta get back on track. Anyways, what was I talking about? The march! Yeah, march madness was totally sick, I saw the Celtics, or some kinda green basket ball guys, but I put 20 down on them but I lost it and got all pissed off. Rhonda was all like – Oh shit, you don't know her. She's Sharon's aunt's cousin's daughter. No, like her second – no. Her aunt's cousin... that's Levi. He knows Big Meech. You know, Big Meech? The big guy that works down at Hungry Burger. No, that's Burger King. No the other – like, he's got an afro? Really big. No, it's not – you know what, fuck it, man, I'll just show you later. I'm saying Levi was down there, maybe you know him? Skinny, long nose, black hair, kinda looks like Pinocchio with jaundice. Okay, sorry, but you know him, right? Cool. So, Rhonda's his daughter. I know, right? And we were watching the game, and she's going off on me like

"I know you got \$20, I know you got \$20!" And I did but I wasn't gonna tell her, so I'm pressing her like

"What the fuck do you know? You pock-et-watchin' me? Huh?"

And I – yeah, now I know it wasn't cool, but – yeah I know already, quit fuckin' badgerin' me! Okay, so – dude, what? You gotta go? For what? What do you – oh. Oh shit, my bad man, I don't – yeah. Yeah, okay, well, I'll see you then. Dap me.

...

You're just gonna leave me hangin'?

...

Not cool, bro.

Monte Lyrics

Perry Wilson



Scan to listen
to **Monte** by
Perry Wilson

I need to learn to let go
Of what it means to be me

Usually we don't agree
But now we don't have to be
Strangers

Face off
Like moon and sun

We want an easy love
That's what we both deserve

Gotta love myself
Gotta love myself
Gotta love myself
Gotta love myself

Running my mouth
Till my legs don't work

I'ma take time
To induce my peace

Freedom called
I'll be right back

I'ma dissect
Where my mind at
Is it down bad

Trauma
Turned to drama
When the spotlight

On me
When them thoughts want a fair fight

All black like a silhouette outside
I was down on myself tryna find life
Slow pace when I walk on a fine line

No face, no lips, no voice
Pure bliss

Done some drugs that I regret
And now I'm
Tryna forget
How I got here
I need to learn to let go
Of what it means to be me

Usually we don't agree
But now we don't have to be
Strangers

Face off
Like moon and sun

We want an easy love
That's what we both deserve

Come and hold me down
Come and hold me down

Come and hold me down
Come and hold me down

Come and hold me down
Come and hold me down

Come and hold me down
Come and hold me down



Master Copy

Aisle D. McCarter

The Final Act

Elizabeth Socorro Ramos

My vow to love
doesn't remain at life and end at death.
Have my vows rest
on my stagnant chest
As you close my casket.

A bench resting on my grave
Always by your side
As your tears
With time
Grow to a smile
As you look to the sky
Exhaling
As you speak on the moment
We first laid eyes
The sensation
Of the red string tightening
As our clammy hands
Nervously intertwined.

My hands cupping your face
Once more
As my thumbs trace your smile lines
We created together.

My touch reminding you to keep loving.

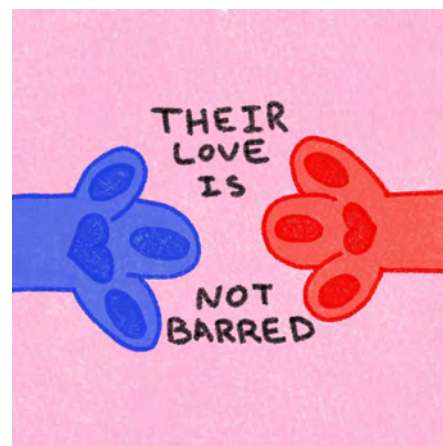
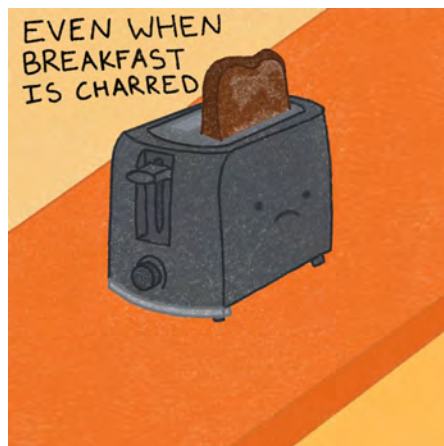
The selfless act of love,
Finally letting go.

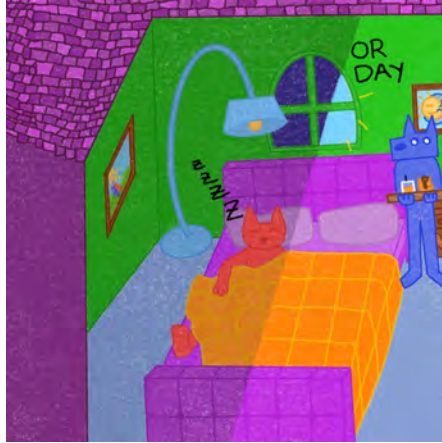


Dog and Cat Love Each Other

Carmen Olsen







Disneyland

Onaytonie



Naked Matter

Aster Vegas Smith

Naked Matter, or, a Loving and Thoughtful Poem regarding Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, or, a Shameless Imitation of Sufjan Stevens' Naming Conventions, or, the Writer's Good Ideas, Subsequent Daydream, and Most Recent Entry in their Long History of Connecting to Fictional Characters, or, Of Red Geryoneis — Geryon-Matter.

Scientists discuss different types of matter; philosophers theorize how matter connects together; and the artists, like Frank Ocean, sing about matter in colors like *Pink Matter*. What do they say to each other? Not the artist-scientist-philosophers, and not matter itself, the singular minds of each. And what do we have to say about matter? I think I know something about this matter. You do, too, red-mattered Geryon, all grown up from your original three-headed self.

I think

I know what the scientists and the philosophers will have to say about matter. Matter is regulated, a social construct, interpretable, supernatural, innate, ubiquitous. All together, matter is what matters most. We all know what matter is but we all struggle to enunciate, and so we struggle to understand what it means. Matter exists in multitudes and connects to myriad colors and forms that all matter. It is everything. And yet what does any of that say to how *I* feel? Is mind really over matter?

I'd instead like to hear what the artists will have to say about matter. Right now, I'll put on some Frank Ocean and Sufjan and feel the colors. You're an artist, too, one who helped awaken me to the shades of matter, Geryon. I realized I could see the many colors in each of my friends and all the people walking down the street. You sparked it, as I learned to love red matter from the red of your wings, your red body, your red heart. I only liked red before and part of *me* is red. Just think of all the other colors!

I see the most important matter when I'm alone in the mirror. It reminds me of you, because I hide like you used to, trapping my body and sex in enough fabric to ignore everything. Hiding from myself afraid of my naked body afraid of your naked body afraid of curves or nipples or genitals or hair or weight or voice or gender. It's hard being a red monster but imagine being a multicolored monster. I'm sure you understand the burden of matter. It exists whether we spend hours doing things about it or not. But I do wonder...

When you flew over the volcano, were you free, naked-winged, without your overcoat?



orion running man

Steve

Smith's Legacy

Grayson Schulz

Forge

Born amidst a symphony of pounding steel and the rhythm of a working song. Metal, angular, precisely shaped like an eagle of geometric perfection, my wings spread wide. I am an axe head, yet to be mounted to my haft, still radiant from the forge's fire. There is a chorus echoing throughout this grand chamber, the air is alive with the music of countless smiths. A dozen crucibles of flame, and two dozen gilded anvils surround a central furnace of immense heat shaped in the likeness of a laughing bearded face.

A not too dissimilar bearded face squints down at me, turning me this way and that, holding me with his bare hands, seemingly unbothered by the scorching piece of metal between his callused fingers. With the look, not of a blacksmith, but of an artist examining his canvas, he scrutinizes me from every angle, then grunts, and returns me to the anvil. With profound care, the hammer resounds yet again, gently shaping my fledgling form. The day must have transitioned to night, though, in this palace filled with luminance and the constant thrum of deep voices, time slips between the fingers of the mind, leaving only the timeless heartbeat of a dwarven forge.

I am mounted upon a haft of sturdy ironwood with a rounded pommel of steel and brought before the grindstone. My edge of hardened adamantium is about to be honed, when my creator stops, peering at me with that same artistic eye. I see, across the forge, lines of immaculately crafted armors emblazoned with sigils of bronze and gold.

And beside them blades like myself mounted on their weapon racks, simple yet elegant, but none embellished like those suits of shining mail. These are weapons of utility, bound for the hands of warriors. A worthy fate, one I was not destined to receive.

I am brought back to the anvil, unsharpened, and he draws a small chisel from his apron of hardy leather, the tool looking miniscule in his toil-worn hands as it bites into my steel flesh as though it was softened clay. Along my blades he engraves a simple pattern of intertwining bands, stops, ponders his work, then keeps going. The simplicity branches out into a whole landscape, weaving into shapes of monolithic mountains, many pillared halls, and towering bastions, each line traceable back to that original pattern.

The music of the great forge falls to a mellow echo, as all but a few devoted craftsmen, my creator among them, have retired to the comforts of the tavern and sleep. He paints his pictures throughout the night, feverish, not daring to stop lest the image fall from his mind into the chasm of forgetfulness, his voice ever proclaiming a wordless ballad of joy that fills me with more than just his emotion. I feel it seep into my very core, permeating each carving with a sensation of timelessness. I feel the everpresent clawing of entropy lessen as he imbues me with arcane vibrancy, weaving an enchantment of resilience into my tapestry of steel. The carvings complete upon my blades and pommel, he inlays the etchings with silver as bright as the stars I have never seen, and gold as radiant as the sun which has never reached these depths beneath the mountains. Bronze and brass become the flames within black gold forges, subterranean rivers flow with ripples of brilliant sapphire, and the mountain peaks are blanketed in quartz snowfalls.

With a solemn finality, he sets a brilliant ruby into my pommel as if I were a crown and not a battleaxe. Then, he gently carries me, as if he was afraid I would shatter at a breeze, back to that grindstone. This time he does not hesitate, and sparks fly as I become both artwork and weapon of war. When my last edge becomes deadly sharp, he holds me up to the firelight, the scenes in polished metal and crystal glow as if lit from within. He speaks one word, his gravely voice held in a low whisper.

“Masterpiece.”

Coming of Age

I sit upon a pedestal like a king upon a throne of polished stone, but none among the multitude of dwarves are looking at me. They instead are fixated upon the young dwarf standing before Khallurnn, my creator. I remember watching from my place of honor above the mantelpiece when the smith and his wife had brought him home, so small, his face smooth and without even a single strand of hair. I remember the near half century of his childhood, forty-four years of growing pains and incandescent joys amidst an ever shifting, ever hostile world. Now he stands, shorter than the average dwarf, but with the shoulders of a hardy ox. Today, he comes of age. All the members of House Firegreave who could come are here, within their council hall beneath the mountains.

“Jhurnn!” booms the voice of his father loud enough for all the crowd to hear, “it has been forty-four long years, and you have weathered them all like a wall of sound stone and sturdy mortar. You have built yourself into a dwarf worthy of the legacy of House Firegreave.” The rows of family members, clad in their ceremonial armors, strike their chests in unison, the clang of a hundred

mailed fists against breastplates sounds through the hall like a choir of bells.

“You have proven yourself a skillful armorer, you bear your best work upon your shoulders now. It is worthy of you, and you of it.” I remember resting in my belt loop as the smith guided the swing of Jhurnn’s hammer amidst the hiss and clang of the steam bellows. The music of the forge had changed since my birth in fire, steam engines heated by arcane flames kept the forges stoked, and clockwork hoppers maintained a steady flow of coal to the crucibles, though still the songs endured. I remember the electric excitement in his eyes as each piece came together, and the individual plates started taking the shape of a single chest plate. I remember the pride in the eyes of his father, which shone brighter than when he had looked upon me in the moment of my completion. I am his masterpiece, but this is his son.

“You have proven your worth with the axe, and have bested your first opponent in the sparring ring. You answered Nurazkathnn’s call during the last siege of our home by our Thaedrourk rivals, dragging the wounded to safety, saving the lives of several who are here today because of you.” Four dwarves standing near the front of the crowd raise their weapons in salute. Jhurnn tries his best to keep a straight face, but I have seen enough of the young dwarf to know when he is suppressing that wide, vibrant grin.

I remember that battle, one among countless conflicts between the two rival clans. I remember the smith, standing on the battlements alongside warriors from other Nurazkathnn Houses, Thunderhelms, Embershields, and Onyxhafts. I remember the unfamiliar boom of these new weapons of war, these cannons that crashed into the crenelations, cracking stone and spearing soldiers with shrapnel. I remember the smith firing bolt after

bolt from his crossbow into the ranks of besieging dwarves, and the howl of pain as one of his clan brothers was struck in return. I remember Jhurnn, who had been hauling fresh supplies to the wall, helping his family however he could, rushing to the wounded dwarfs side without a heartbeat's hesitation. He heaved the armorclad dwarf back towards the rear, his still-developing muscles must have been screaming. But again and again, the young dwarf returned, bringing fresh bolts, casks of revitalizing ale, and helping the wounded return to the safety of the inner citadel. He still bears a scar on his cheek where a shard of metal had caught him, he wears it with pride.

"Now, my son, now you are ready to be considered a true dwarf." These words, steeped in countless ceremonies just like this, still hold a potency that belies the almost tearful pride beneath. "It is customary at such a moment, for you to receive a token of this achievement, I myself was given the helmet I wear now, as was my father before me." The gilded helm shines in the light of the oil lamps, a flowing orange crest of horsehair cascading down his back. His tone is different now, and the most staunchly traditional dwarves shift slightly in their seats, the rings of their chain-mail clicking together softly in the near silence of the hall.

"Centuries ago, my grandfather passed his best work to my father, and now, I choose to do the same. I am an armorer in the traditional style of our house, but I have also devoted myself to being a weaponsmith as well. To my son, my greatest creation, I give not only my grandfather's helm, but also my greatest work of art, my axe." He reverently raises me from my podium, and extends me towards his son. Jhurnn is utterly stunned, the presenting of such gifts completely blindsiding him along with some of the crowd. The hall blazes

alight with a slurry of emotions. There are excited whispers from most, overshadowing the low grumbles of the vehemently traditional dwarves who begrudge even the slightest breach in ceremony.

"Are... are you sure?" He says, his voice quavering ever so slightly.

"I always intended to give these to you, always. These were yours from the moment you were born." Khallurnn removes his helm, and straps it to his son's head. Then he holds me out, and both of them grasp my haft. "In these times of trials, I want you to be prepared for whatever may come." He says in a voice intended only for his son, and together they raise me high in salute, my tapestries of metal and gemstones glimmering.

"I present to you, the newest dwarf of House Firegreave. Jhurnn, son of Khalurnn, of House Firegreave, of Clan Nurazkathnn!" he proclaims, speaking Jhurnn's full and proper name for the very first time.

"Hail! Jhurnn, son of Khalurnn, House Firegreave welcomes you! Clan Nurazkathnn welcomes you!" The hall echoes back, as the ringing of countless blades being drawn from sheaths sounds, and every dwarf salutes him in return. Then, as soon as all weapons are stowed again, and I am slid into the belt of my new wielder, the ceremonial air of solemnity shatters. The crowd erupts into cheers and Jhurnn is jostled by the masses each trying to shake his hand or slap him on the back in congratulations. Then, someone within the hall lets out a call no dwarf in their right mind can refuse.

"Now, we drink!" the hall roars in agreement, and becomes a torrent, a river rushing out of the hall and down a broad corridor. A raucous drinking song starts up as they spill out into the much longer and narrower, though no less opulent, feasting hall. Golden chandeliers hang on their chains of

brass, and the walls proclaim the history of the house hewn in granite. Tables sat ready to receive them, piled high with food and kegs of Broadbarrel's best flanked by legions of tankards. I watch with delight from my belt loop as Jhurnn sings and drinks with his House brothers and House sisters.

For just a moment, the anxieties of the world, the shortening tempers of their rivals, the looming threat of wars are all forgotten. For one instant, there is laughter and peace, amidst a world changing, perhaps too fast for its own good.

Trenches

Dried and drying mud encrusts my blades, and blood stains my golden inlays a mournful maroon. The air in this damp, dirty tunnel is stifled with the pungent, choking fumes billowing from the drill tank burrowing its way ahead of the single file line of dwarves. Jhurnn trudges along at the head of the company, holding his rifle with hands he is desperately trying to keep from shaking in front of his men. His breath is heavy and ragged beneath the shroud of his gas mask, which covers the look of grim resignation on his face. They are bound for ruin, each dwarf in his squad a volunteer destined for a suicidal charge into the maw of devastation, a devastation that has surpassed the age of blades. He has left his grandfather's helm behind, the vibrant orange standing out in the dirty brown of no man's land, as sergeant, he can't afford to make himself any more of a target, not while his soldiers still need him. And yet, despite leaving one relic behind, he refuses to abandon his father's legacy, in spite of the risk of me becoming a war trophy in the hands of the enemy.

Though he carries me into war, I have been supplanted, my crown of blood grimly born, stolen by a new monarch of the wartorn grave. The rifle,

the distant swift death from afar, has claimed my throne. I have gone from a weapon of war to a sidearm of desperation. But I remain faithful and strong, and I will stay sharp till the end comes, whatever end that may be.

"Get ready lads." he says to his soldiers, then softer, in a whisper only I can hear, "For Ahrunn, for Tyrna." as he fingers the golden ring on his finger. The drill tank sputters black smoke and accelerates toward the surface like a breaching whale. A plume of mud and shredded barbed wire bursts from the half-frozen ground as the steel spearhead of the drill emerges. Cannons are unveiled from its sides and sound their trumpets of war, accompanied by the cracking percussion of rifles. Jhurnn charges out through the rift and slides into a shell crater before firing on the ranks of enemies, clad in muted browns, shooting their machine guns in concert with blasts of unnatural energies, showering his clan brothers and sisters with death. He hears a guttural shriek, and a sickly thump behind him, there is no time to mourn, the only way this mission becomes anything other than a one way trip, is speed. As the drill tank starts tearing through the first trench line's defenders, Jhurnn fixes a bayonet to his rifle, slams in a new magazine, and racks a round into the chamber. So small, yet deathly potent.

"Nurazkathnn!" The cry rings out, dampened by the thunderstorm of artillery and machine gun fire, as he leads the charge out of cover towards the trench. I am jostled in my belt loop as he pours on as much speed as his stubby legs allow, even in over a century and a half, he still hasn't grown an inch taller. I hear the whine and hiss of bullets, and see the muzzle flashes of the enemy, I watch, helpless, as his kin are cut down around him. I yearn, oh how I yearn for the days when warfare was not this blood soaked massacre. It has always been a

crimson affair, always costing all sides dearly, but never on this scale.
Never.

His squad crests the trench and comes face to face with the survivors of the tank's barrage, their eyes brimming with a haunted iridescent haze, lying in wait with rifles raised. The shootout is brief and bloody, the dwarves level their guns and both sides slam their triggers as fast as they can. Dwarves charge in and hack away with axe blade bayonets, but their opponent's guns resound in return. Jhurmn is struck, his chestplate rings like a cracked bell, and I hear rounds rip through flesh, but not just his. The ragged defenders fall silent in the mud, but so does Jhurmn, with holes in his leg, weeping red. He roars with rage and pain, but is snapped back to reality by the shouts of men in an eldritch tongue, and the sound of more mud-soaked boots pounding down the trench. His rifle bucks in his hands, quick on the draw despite his wounds, but after three shots that don't find their mark, he hears the soul chilling click of an empty magazine.

Rising to a knee on his good leg, he draws me from his belt, and in what is surely a white hot agony, he stands and rushes forward alongside his clan brothers and sisters. As they clash, he finds himself facing down a gaunt man bearing only a wickedly serrated blade, and a ring which shines with the same ghostly blue light that crackles in his eyes. He raises his hand and the light grows blinding before a bolt of sickly energy races for my wielder. He swings me and I connect with the blow, I feel one of my blades crack as an unnatural coldness sends blackened ice filigree down my haft. It nearly knocks me from his hand, but his grip is strong as tempered steel. I streak through the air, falling like the hammer of judgement, swatting the cruel blade away like a gnat and

cleaving through flesh and bone. He kicks the corpse off my blade, and staggers, leaning against the trench wall. With me still clutched in one hand, and his pistol drawn in the other, he hauls himself up and faces the tattered remnants of his force, then glances over his shoulder towards the next line of executioners.

"Clan brothers and sisters, dwarves of Nurazkathnn." he gasps rather than shouting, grimacing in pain. They look at him, many have taken off their gas masks to catch their breaths, revealing their exhausted, grim faces. He takes off his mask in return and looks each of them in the eyes, "We are all that stands between the enemy, and their machinations of darkest midnight. The very world as we know it hangs in the balance..." he looks down to my cracked blade, the arcane permafrost clinging to the rent, and breaths a heavy sigh. "The diversion must work, we must keep their attention, just long enough for the real blow to land. Stand with me, for our Clan and kin behind us, we must stand, there is no one else who can take this burden." He lifts me high like a banner.

"Nurazkathnn stands!" roars a young dwarf, barely 44, and the rest join her, raising up the battle cry over the thunder of artillery. Jhurmn turns towards the oncoming enemy, as the countercharge rushes them. Their rifles, their machine guns salvaged from the enemy, and the drill tank's cannons roar with them. His pistol cracks in his hand, and I clash with bayonets, crumpling the shoddy metal, and sundering sinew. For the briefest moment, hope blooms like a cave rose, as it seems they might weather the storm. Then, a flash of lifeless light streaks across the wasteland, and the drill tank detonates.

A shard of metal wreathed in frozen flames punches through his chestplate and casts him to the ice cold ground like a broken thing. He falls,

gasping, coughing, the wound freezing over as his blood turns to ice. I have fallen beside him, knocked from his grasp. He reaches for me, and with his last act, places me upon his chest, clasp- ing my ironwood haft with hands stained red. He wheezes and looks to the gloom shrouded sky, the battle raging on around the dying dwarf. Then he inhales sharply, as the clouds are illuminated by the detonation of the enemy ammo depot, he smiles. In his last moments, I know his thoughts don't dwell on the mission, or his soldiers. In those final seconds, he tries to speak the names of his son and wife one last time. But the words never escape his lips, and his eyes grow lifeless before the light of the fireball fades from the sky.

New Worlds

I watch from my wielder's belt as she looks out one of many small windows along the outer wall of the wide yet claustrophobically low ceil- inged room. The starlit sky rushes past as if the night is careening towards day, until the bright illuminated curve of the horizon fills the portholes, the cloud veiled continents of her homeworld visi- ble below. The breathtaking view from orbit belies the damage countless wars have wreaked, and yet, there it remains even still. Almost one and a half millennia have passed since that day. That was not the final battle in that dreaded war, but it had been a crucial step, his death had not been in vain. If only he could see the world his sacrifice, and the sacrifices of millions of dwarves, men and elves, has bought.

Khallai traced the silver inlaid mountain along the side of my blade with her thumb, an engraving that had once borne the vitality of en- chantment now felt dull beneath fingers which had never known the touch of magic, profane or oth-

erwise. The war against the darkest midnight had been won, never again would their abyssal designs threaten reality, but magic had been a necessary casualty, and the effects of its death were the rea- son Khallai now looked upon the world from orbit.

Below the rolling cloudscape lies a land scarred by nations' attempts to use technology to hastily fill the roles magic once covered with ease. I remember how the skies had become choked with the inky black smoke of rapidly industrializ- ing cities, and how forests disappeared overnight. Even the mountain halls were not isolated from the suffering. I remember the waves of sickness that spread from the contaminated surface-grown food, and how the gates were sealed to slow the invad- ing smog.

Now, the Clans join the other nations in a mass exodus away from the ruin of the old world and out into the galaxy to find new homes. They are leaving, not because the homeworld is doomed, but to save it from destruction. Not everyone would leave of course, there would always be those who tended to the great forges of the Clan, and some nations lacked the resources or drive to go to the stars. I was not surprised to hear that sev- eral of the noble families of the elves would stay behind to repair the centuries of damage. Even after millennia, they still were obsessed with their forests.

Khallai crosses the gently curving floor to the other set of windows, being careful to pace her steps so as to not fling herself into the ceil- ing in the centrifugal half-gravity of the station. The room is packed with dwarves in their flight suits, sitting or standing in the staging area for passengers of their interstellar colony ship, the atmosphere thick with anticipation. Out this new window, I can see the shipyard section of the station, which appears to rotate in the center of the

window, even though it is really the habitation ring that is spinning. From this perspective I can see the central axis of the station that connects somewhere above us. The zero-G shipyard flanks the colony ship on two sides like a great set of tongs held wide. Mechanical arms, clamps, and umbilical tubes linking the ship and the boxy industrial hangars, where its components had been first assembled before final construction.

Then there was the ship, which we both admired in silence, Khallai out of awestruck reverence, and I in veneration of this titan. It was absolutely monolithic, and could have easily filled the greatest of the dwarven halls, a massive slab of titanium with two pairs of gimbaled engines, one fore, one aft. Its angular geometry was all the beauty afforded it. One day perhaps, dwarven shipbuilders would make interstellar vessels as much works of art as myself, but in these days of pioneers, sacrifices needed to be made. Most of the colony ships built by other Clans were skeletal, meant to merely ferry the dwarves and their supplies to and from their new homes. The Homeward Hearth though is more than just an interstellar passenger barge, it will land on the planet itself to become the central hub of their new colony. The Clan might have sacrificed several years to build this much larger vessel, but it would be worth it, especially on an alien world with dangers and challenges no doubt missed by the initial explorers.

As Khallai watches the spinning ship, she notices that many of the mechanical arms, which had been combing its hull, have started retracting. Just then, a gruff voice crackles over the intercom. "Clan brothers and sisters, this is the Captain of the Homeward Hearth, final checks have been completed, please make your way up the ramp to the boarding zone, and watch your 'eads, the grav-

ity gets weaker closer to the center." he finishes, as the hall begins to buzz.

Khallai checks her pack, and my leather blade covers, then she joins the flow of dwarves making their way up the stairway that leads from the spinning rim of the hab section to the central axis. I watch with some amusement as a few of her kin bump their heads on the padded ceiling after putting just a bit too much force into their steps. There is laughter and someone starts singing a traveling song that some of the crowd carry on, all the sounds of a drinking hall, yet in this place of padded walls and exposed ventilation pipes. As the gravity starts to fade completely, they are forced to pull themselves along the handholds on the floor and walls that replaced the stairs about halfway up. The dwarves tumble along the passage, not used to the freefall of zero-G, they kick their legs and flail their arms. A particularly large dwarf man collides with Khallai after pushing off a wall too hard.

"Watch it clay-for-brains!" she laughs, the absurdity of this weightless chaos bringing many dwarves to flood the passage with laughter and joking insults. They made it to the central corridor and then to the rotation point. The space beyond rotated, even though it was really them who were still spinning. The station crew help them through and aid them in getting oriented properly.

Khallai finally made it to her jump seat in the Homeward Hearth, where she strapped me down along with her few belongings and attached the power cable that extended from the chair to its port in her flight suit, providing power for temperature regulation and waste control systems. Despite the fact that their destination was light years away, the trip would only take slightly more than two weeks, aided by time dilation, and this chair would be as much room as she would be spared for the journey. The cabin that would eventually be her dormitory

aboard the ship turned home base was currently storing supplies, as was every other empty space. Building materials, food, equipment, satellites, beer, all the essentials had been brought because while it might have been relatively quick to make trips back and fourth, the fuel necessary is rarer than rubies and incredibly hard to synthesize. They have to do this in one trip.

When all 230 passengers had been seated and the crew were strapped in at their posts, the screens at the front of the room lit up, showing multiple camera views outside the ship. I watch as the docking tube disconnects, and the clamps and umbilicals separate, then, I feel the slight acceleration as the Homeward Hearth's thrusters rumble to life and send the ship forward. The motion is slow at first so the jets of superheated gas wouldn't vaporize the station, but slowly the force pushing the dwarves against their seats and me against the straps that hold me in place increases. The aft camera shows the station slowly disappearing in the distance, though the planet itself seems to have barely moved, then the Captain's voice comes across the comm again.

"Prepare for Erreibucla drive activation, and hold onto your beards!" he says, his lighthearted quip attempting to hide the deep tension beneath, it would have sent a chill through my veins if I had any. This was the part that would determine the fates of all aboard, the Erreibucla drive, or slip drive as most called it, would propel a bubble of space around the ship at faster than light speeds while the ship itself stayed below the speed of light. But if the drive experienced a malfunction as some of the early prototypes had, the ionized atoms of all aboard would be cast into deep space. I don't dwell on that possibility, my wielder and I just focus on the image of our home, floating in the sea of stars.

The momentum from the main engines cuts, and casts us into weightlessness again, and then a deep rumbling begins, vibrating through the core of the ship from both the fore and aft. We all watch the only home any of us have ever known, and as the tremors reach a boiling point, that blue orb simply shrinks. There is no sensation of motion, but the planet becomes nothing more than a sapphire set in a tapestry of silver stars. Then something peculiar starts to happen, the pale white light from our sun starts to take a reddish hue, and the stars ahead of the ship begin to shift to a vibrant blue, and become brighter and brighter as if they were the ones rushing towards us. We watch intently as the red-shifted light of the sun dims and the stars around it twinkle out as if it was the approaching of dawn. Finally the light of the sun disappears entirely as the Homeward Hearth breaks the speed of light, the luminance of the sun now too slow to catch up with the outbound dwarves.

After only ten minutes, the Captain's heavily bearded face appears in the blank screen that once showed their old system. "We have officially reached our cruising speed of twenty times the speed of light, and the Erreibucla drive is holding steady." he beams, though it is hard to tell beneath his mountainous mound of facial hair. There is a raucous cheer from the crew and passengers, clapping and hollering fills the cramped space. "We are bound for our new home, we 230 passengers and 50 crew, members of every single house in the Clan, we will be the first to step foot on this new world, but we will not be the last. It will be hardest for us pioneers, tough as bedrock, but we are dwarves, we are Clan Nurazkathnn!" Another cheer arises, and there is excited chattering as crew members start drifting down the rows of seats, handing out plastic packages with sealed straws to

each eagerly awaiting pair of hands. Khallai takes her pack, filled with a smooth amber liquid, and the Captain resumes.

“I propose a toast,” he lifts his own bag of beer, “to Karlenn, our first Clan Father and the dwarf for whom our new home is named!” Each dwarf raises their drink and there is a chorus of several hundred caps being popped off their straws.

“For Karlenn and our new home.” roars the hall and a symphony of slurping ensues. Not even a minute later, cries for another round start ringing out from many mouths, including Khallai’s. There must be a camera and microphone on this side because the Captain chuckles.

“We won’t have any drink left when we get there if you lot drink it all now. When we start brewing our own locally, the rationing can end, but until then, we must make this last.” he says, looking mournfully at his empty bag. “Blunted axes, this is going to be a rough trip.” she grumbles along with every other dwarf, but there are no serious doubts. I have learned many things about dwarves from my millennia of silent observations, and one thing is certain, these stubborn folk won’t give up even if they have to go ten years sober.

Wedding Day

In the 1679 years since I was first forged into being, I have experienced many lifetimes worth of joys and woes. But days such as these are moments I will never grow tired of, no matter how many times I have borne witness to them, for today, Khallai will be married. I adorn the belt of her dress, a dress not woven from silk and lace, but forged from silver, gold, and the brightest steel, befitting a daughter of the Clan of armorers. Her

cuirass is gilded with silver and gold filigree, and her ruby studded helm is open faced, revealing the chestnut-brown beard cresting her chin and its many golden adornments. Her skirt is a flowing river of scale mail, with patterns of burnished bronze engraved into each segment, painting countless complex patterns across the canvas of her dress. But most spectacular of all is the train of silver chain mail, white as the light of the three moons of their new world, and shimmering with innumerable gemstones that send showers of light scattering across the room.

She stands alongside her hearthkin-to-be, a dwarf from a different house within the Clan, Nalbornn of House Thunderhelm. They had both arrived in the first wave of colonists and were both engineers within the same section of the fledgling colony, helping maintain the excavation vehicles that were in the process of carving out the first of many halls in the alien mountains. I remember the day they both pledged themselves to each other, they had been dancing around the question, flirting in the dwarven way which is mostly gift giving and drinking. I still remember the joy and relief in her eyes when he had finally made the first move. The 49 years that had followed were rife with challenges that would have torn many other couples apart, but that dwarven stubbornness was a surprising boon, both had been too hard-headed to give up on each other. It had saved them.

Now, I had no doubts that they would be as unbreakable as adamantium, dwarf marriages usually were. They are a cautious people when it comes to long-term commitments. Some of my previous wielders took almost a century to tie the knot, but they never once regretted their decision. After so long observing people, with the way he looks at her, I know he will be worthy of her.

“Ready?” she asks gently, her outward air of

calmness hiding the thundering of her heart, which I feel pounding against her armor. He nods, and pushes open the doors into the first great forge built on Karlann Prime. Family members line both sides of the aisle, Thunderhelms on her side, and Firegreaves on his, ceremonial weapons in their hands. She clasps her hand in his and they walk between them, each side raising their blades in salute as they pass, a declaration of support for the new couple. Khallai's breath stills as she passes the Thunderhelm elder, a hard-faced old dwarven woman who, with a slight nod, raises her mace.

They proceed to two separate anvils, and each taking up a small bar of gold, begin the process of making their vows, not in spoken word, but with the works of their hands. In a plasma crucible she melts the gold and pours it into a ring mold, selecting her tools and jewels as the liquid metal hardens. The Houses gather round, watching both in respectful silence as they work away at the forges. She grips the red hot gold as she delicately shapes the ring, widening and smoothing out the band, then comes the detail work. She sits at a jewelry bench set up for the occasion and I lose sight of the ring, the table blocking the view from my place on her belt. But I can still see her face, and the spark in the bronze shields of her eyes remind me of the same spark I saw in Khalurnn's in the moment of my completion, and yet, this is different. He had looked at me with the love an artist feels for a prize creation, but she looks at her creation with the intertwined love of both a craftswoman and the love borne for the dwarf it was meant for.

So much time between the two, my creator and my current wielder, and yet, Khalurnn would recognize the ceremony immediately. In fact, in my almost two millennia of being both relic and weapon for House Firegreave, the culture and traditions had barely changed. Honor, loyalty,

and most importantly, skill, all these core tenants of dwarven life had continued unchanged since the moment of my creation, and yet, this was not a stagnant people. We were in a forge upon an alien world, filled with modern marvels of technology, most developed by dwarves themselves. They didn't resist the changes of the ages, they embraced them, but they also kept an iron grip on their past, the traditions of their forefathers. Like all things the dwarves built, their culture was meant to endure.

After an hour of working and weaving gold, both dwarfs set down their tools and stand in front of the blue-hot central furnace. They hold out their rings to one another, and if an axe could cry, I would have. The ring she had forged for him was broad, with three interweaving bands that came together in the center to form the shape of a mountain, crested with flawless quartz snow and with slopes of silver, almost exactly like the one on my blade, except for the verdant emerald set in the center of the mountain, his favorite gemstone. It is not just her favorite part of my design, it is a symbol of acceptance, inviting him to join the House for which I am a symbol. The significance is not lost on him.

They slip on each other's rings, her ring bears a complex interweaving pattern that links a dozen small rubies together before reconnecting at the centerpiece ruby, her favorite gemstone. The elders of both Houses look pleased and approach.

"Kallai daughter of Kallann, of House Firegreave, of Clan Nurazkathn, do you invite Nalbornn son of Thralbornn, of House Thunderhelm, of Clan Nurazkathnn to join House Firegreave as your hearthkin?" asks the silver bearded Firegreave elder, his eyes intent but not unkind.

"My hearth is open to him." she says, almost breathlessly, her eyes on Nalbornn.

“Nalbornn son of Thralbornn, of House Thunderhelm, of Clan Nurazkathnn, do you accept the invitation of Kallai daughter of Kallann, of House Firegreave, of Clan Nurazkathnn, and leave the name Thunderhelm behind with the blessings of your elders?” asks the Thunderhelm elder, her ancient lips bearing a smile despite the solemnity of her words.

“I gladly accept. May I be worthy of her.” he replies, as his hand squeezes hers.

“Then with the authority of the Houses Firegreave and Thunderhelm, we present Kallai and Nalbornn, hearthkin of House Firegreave!” The two raise their held hands high and both families clap, but the explosive energy of those gathered has yet to release, they are waiting for her signal. They walk back down the rows of family members who salute them again, and then, as they reach the doors once more, their clasped hands still held high. Kallai grins as she makes them wait for just a heartbeat before she utters the words which are the bride’s right alone in a dwarven wedding.

“Now, my Hearthkin, we drink.” she says, as she drags him by the arm to the feasting hall, a gleeful smile on her face, their families following close behind singing and playing music on previously concealed horns and drums.

Dwarves, they never change, not in the ways that matter, even as the world shifts around them. But then again, neither do I. For 1679 years I have faithfully served and will continue to serve until my metal rusts away, and my haft splinters and rots. This is my vow to them, to Khalurnn who forged me, to Jhurnn who fell with me at his side, to the generations of wielders who faced war and famine, and to Khallai. I will be their symbol, their masterpiece, their weapon, their legacy, for as long as the dwarves endure.



Saturn

Maximilian Carp

Eclipse

Daija

She was the sun
shining so bright
pulling everyone to her
I was an asteroid

from her
no one could take
even a step away
for that was too much

hot
for I got close enough
to see the stars
freckled on her cheeks

floating away
losing warmth
the further
I got

distance
leaving your heart
with an icy
burn

spaced so perfectly
I could get lost
making constellations
in her beauty

Regálame

Paola Henao Usuga

REGÁLAME.

Regálame el cielo estrellado bajo el que has de hurtar mis dulces besos y
encontrar la luz de mi alma.

Regálame la calidez de tus abrazos y atráeme a tu pecho para anidar mi corazón
en tu regazo.

Regálame tu sonrisa para que se dibuje en mi rostro la semejanza de la tuya y
puedas contagiarme de felicidad infinita.

Regálame tus besos rebosantes de amor y pasión para que en perfecta sincronía
bailen al compás de nuestros corazones.

Regálame el aroma de tu piel para que mi cuerpo se impregne de ti y así pueda
llevarte conmigo con tu presencia omnipresente.

Regálame una a una tus palabras y concédeme el placer de escuchar tu hermosa
melodía, para que al cerrar mis ojos pueda yo recitar tus sonetos de amor.

Regálame tus pensamientos para inmortalizar tu recuerdo en mi mente y así
pueda extasiarme con la imagen de tu mirada ausente..

GIVE ME.

Give me the starry sky under you will steal my sweet kisses and find the light
of my soul.

Give me the warmth of your hugs and attract me in your chest to nest my heart
in your lap.

Give me your smile so that it draws me in my face the similarity of yours and
you can infect me with infinite happiness.

Give me your overflowing kisses of love and passion so that in perfect synchrony they dance to the rhythm of our hearts.

Give me the scent of your skin so that my body soaks with you and so I can take you with me with your omnipresent presence.

Give me one by one your words and bring me the pleasure of listening to your beautiful melody, so that when I close my eyes I can recite your love sonnets.

Give me your thoughts to immortalize your memory in my mind and so I may be filled with ecstasy by the image of your absent look.



The Elephant Trunk Nebula

Steve

My Dad's Calloused Hands

Elizabeth Socorro Ramos

Orange zest trapped under my nails
Long enough for it to be there
Short enough to struggle
To pry open the skin.

The calloused offering hand
Taking the fruit to his own
Aroma filling the dining room
Spritz and droplets missing my multiplication tables.
A treat for my hard work.

Orange zest trapped under my pedicured nails
Long enough for it to be there
Too long and sparkly to dig deeper.

The calloused offering hand
Opening his blistered palms
I yanked it back
Walking away
As the bitterness reaches my tongue
And my raging need
To do things on my own.

Now split in two,
The silence of the calloused hands
stillness of the regret
And the silent apology as mine
Meets the rough palms of his.

Orange painting the white of my dress
As the shaky old calloused hands
Split through the peel
while a smile reaches his eyes
As he pictures the orange trees

He once climbed to reach
And bagged himself.

I know he would do it all over again.
For me.

Contributor Bios

Isabelle Williams: Isabelle Williams is a Running Start student who enjoys writing poetry as a way to process personal experiences and observations. She serves as Vice President in Student Government at Olympic College and is interested in pursuing a career as a Family Nurse Practitioner, with plans to earn her MSN and work in the Seattle or Bellevue area. Outside of writing and school, she enjoys spending time at the beach, being near loved ones, and has a soft spot for cats.

Allie Paige: I don't know, I just work here. @doodleclown on IG. (Spin around and say my name three times into a mirror, if otherwise.)

Shara: I am a full-time mom who enjoys working, as well as being a student at OC and of life in general. I am constantly learning and love expressing myself through art and music. These have been integral instruments of healing and peace throughout difficult times of my life. My hope is to inspire others on their journey to fulfillment.

Kacie: I am from Washington state, currently living in Annapolis, MD. Art has always been a part of my life since I was a child. In the last few years I have started oil painting. My subjects are bits of nature in all its forms. I try to keep to realism in style.

Rory McAvoy: My name is Rory, and this is my second year at OC and my second year submitting to blended! I am very excited to share this specific story I wrote for a fiction class at OC. This story is very special to me and open to interpretation from many different angles. I hope everyone can find a little bit of themselves in it.

Imayn Nakenge: I have always loved art and making things in general, which is why I draw so often and even write and crochet in my free time. When I create something casually or focus on a finished piece, I feel calm and excited at the same time because I'm doing something I love. Art and creating things put me in a headspace where ideas grow freely, and I feel like I can do anything.

Kahleia Jean: Kahleia Jean is an emerging writer whose work focuses on psychological and coming-of-age narratives. She is particularly interested in themes of identity, body image, and internal transformation. This is her first prose contest submission.

KE: I am a student in the welding program at Olympic College and this is my 3rd quarter taking classes. This is my first submission so go easy on me. I have always loved Art. It is very therapeutic for me. The movement of the brush on canvas, the feeling of it, has always helped ease my brain waves. I like to express my thoughts feelings and ideas using the abstract and love working with texture. I like art that is meant to be a sensory experience so I make mine with the intention of them being felt. Generally, I don't name any of my artwork, though I did for this submission, because when somebody sees it I don't want rented experience it organically and name it what it means to them. Art is meant to touch the soul and I don't want to take away from anyone's interpretations of my work. Hopefully, this is the first of many submissions here... I don't just paint so this should be fun.

Sio: I do not take commissions for big horrific things that make people cringe. I invent them. I exist. I exist again. Existing.

Jez White: I'm Jez White, a Psychology student at OC. My work explores themes of connection, mental health, and creativity through any medium I currently feel inspired by. I've been an artist for over 10 years, but this is my first attempt at collage and clay.

J. Clayton Thompson: I am an older white man, and a new college student. I've performed poetry at Lollapalooza in 1994 and self-published a couple books as well. I haven't written in a long time, but current events require me to speak up. I want to make the world feel a little safer and make marginalize people feel a little more seen with my

writing. I am pursuing a degree as a Substance Use Disorder Professional.

Avery Dunham: My name is Avery Dunham. I am an OC student and artist. I focus a lot with mental health in my art and in my everyday life. It's a struggle I've been through and one I express that through my art, and hope for others to know they aren't alone.

AJ Marquez: I am an aspiring actor who wants to share my creativity with other people and inspire those who wish to start creating.

Kelly Pickering: I am a Running Start student who has a passion for the outdoors! I have always enjoyed our region's beauty and decided to create an art piece showcasing the smaller side of forest life.

Morgan Jage: My name is Morgan and I am an 11th grade running start student at Olympic! My passion for activism has always existed, and I started protesting at the age of 6. Currently, I have helped create a non-profit organization called BICO (Bainbridge Island for Change Organization) to resist the current administration.

Jaylee Rogers: My name is Jaylee Rogers. I am a student here at Olympic College studying to get my Associates in English. In my free time I enjoy creative writing, mostly poetry. I find that poetry is a way that I can escape and create something others find beautiful.

Aisle D. McCarter: I am an adult student enrolled in art classes. I have always wanted to study art, but various circumstances prevented me from doing so earlier. I place great value on learning at any age and hope to continue pursuing it in some form.

Amber Mersino: I am a second-year student at Olympic College, seeking the inspiration for my next career. I retired my Veterinary Technician's license in 2024 and decided to take a wide range of classes here at OC to explore new interests and help forge a new pathway in my life. I have not solidified my major just yet but discovered through My Creative Writing Fiction class with Professor Morrow how much I really enjoyed writing. This is my first publication of any sort, but eventually I would like to expand this short

story into a collection, all centered around the various residents of this neighborhood. When I'm not writing, I am most likely to be spotted behind a potter's wheel, hiking a lovely trail in our beautiful PNW, or watching a K-drama with my cats.

Jeff Hoyle: I am a filmmaker, author, and musician currently pursuing a Bachelor of Filmmaking. I believe that creative expression is the truest form of authenticity. Whether it be on the screen, the page, or the speakers, my art seeks to excavate the deepest truths of existence. As I skirt the edges of the mysteries, I aspire to reveal them in relief.

Kai Mefferd: My name is Kai, I'm twenty years old (pushing thirty), and I used to write a lot. Mostly fantasy or gritty noir stories. I hardly write at all anymore. When I do, it's usually an assignment or quickly erased.

Corissa: I have recently been taking time to prioritize my mental health, and one way I've done that is stepping back into my art mindspace. I've also been purposefully spending more time with those I love, and growing in my relationship with God. I'm looking forward to seeing what He has planned for the next steps of my life :)

Angeline Hamilton: I am a sophomore at Olympic College and a senior in high school hoping to attain my AA/AS degrees, transfer to a four-year university, and eventually become a forensic pathologist. My hobbies include reading Stephen King, playing with my cat, Compass, and writing short horror unfit for public consumption.

S. Torstenbo: I am a man who loves death metal and cats. I live in Port Orchard with my wife (human) and son (cat), on weekends I run a Dungeons & Dragons campaign for my friends. In my poetry, I take inspiration from the lyrical styles of extreme metal and hip-hop with aggressive vocabulary and an application of critical theory. I am studying Technical Design and plan to graduate this spring.

Keturah Savage: Being an artist, and growing up drawing I have always tried to push myself to progress my skills. It is hard to create outside of your comfort zone, but I find that pushing myself through these boundaries helps me grow as an artist, and also as a person overall. Drawing, to me,

has been an amazing creative outlet, and has allowed me to create beauty in a world where I am always searching for greatness.

Skyler “Goose” Steagall: Hi my name is Skyler and I’m pursuing my Human services degree at OC , Majoring in SUDP and Peer Support. I am 29 years old and I am a poet. I’ve been writing poetry since the age of 8 and I can honestly say that one of my poems literally saved my life when I was a teenager.

Beau: Hello, my name is Beau Chambers and I am a second year running start student. Portraiture is one of my favorite things to draw because of the way a subjects face and pose can convey a special meaning to the person looking at it. I loved creating this piece because of all the diverse textures and how the heavy makeup creates a stark contrast that draws you in.

Daija: No bio

Jessica: To say I’m nobody would be running away, wouldn’t it? Besides, I want to be somebody. I’m a disabled veteran and I have a very hard time with very many things. I’m not who I used to be. I just do my best to not be afraid to live, and one day I’ll know enough about this new person to fill the box in properly.

Emmy Girard: My name is Emmy. I love writing poems and short fantasy stories, and my favorite place to be is either up a very tall tree or swimming in an ocean or river. I enjoy rock climbing, mountain biking, backpacking, whitewater rafting, and practicing jiu jitsu. For art, I paint and sketch. I’m interested in learning falconry and traveling internationally.

Ron: I am 48-year-old veteran full time student working on my digital media certification. I did 22 years in the military and 7 years as a contractor before finally walking away from government service. I found taking photography and other art classes to be extremely enjoyable and therapeutic. I know spend most of my days studying for classes and being obsessed with photography and the technical aspects of it. It’s like retraining my brain to see the word different.

Kiyomi McKenzie: I started writing poetry just this past fall quarter in my Creative Writing class. I was anxious

and worried about writing poems since I have never done it before and it seemed really difficult. After practicing for a while I was able to make poems off the top of my head and out of anything, I felt really creative and inspired. I love to rhyme and now I feel confident in my poetry.

Aster Vegas Smith: My name is Aster (they/them). I am a writer, community theatre performer, avid student, and hopeful dreamer. I’ve also been known to sing, play guitar, and talk. By the time you’re reading this, I’m a college sophomore now attending The Evergreen State College in Olympia. This is the first time I’ve been published. I hope you enjoy my work — especially Water Vapor.

Emalee Baysden: My name is Emalee Baysden, I am a running start student and I’m currently a junior. I’ve been doing art most of my life, I mostly work in pencil but I love trying different mediums and styles.

Melinda: I really like flowers and a professor told me to submit something for this so I thought I would give it a whirl. I did forget me nots because I can often forget even the simplest things about me making me feel rather lost. I hope you enjoy the flowers.

Kyle Kastil: My name is Kyle Kastli and I am 21 years old. I’m a big nerd and love superhero’s. I love the movies, shows, and comic books. I had gotten into comics around the end of high school in 2023 and I fell in love. I love being creative and hopefully some day in the future I can write my own comic book for people to read!

Tara-Marie Buckley: An enthusiastic photographer, digital artist, and design professional with a strong appreciation for hiking and nature.

Kyran Gibson: I am a Washington local, born and raised. I like to shoot photographs in and around the Puget Sound area and Olympic National Park (usually when it’s a bit nicer out.)

Jiahao: Hi! I’m Jiahao! The work I submitted this time is inspired by human geography class . Thank you for your reading!

Coyote Söm-Draki: My name is Coyote. I’m a Running Start student and a self-proclaimed forest gremlin. Someone

who writes poetry, crafts costumes, enjoys jumping off things taller than life wishes, climbs trees gravity warns me against (hey, it's just a suggestion). I talk to my fishes, I'm a being most singular, would prefer to be dragon than human, so I fully embrace the title of 'peculiar'. Normal's overrated, can we agree-- or at least dodge the question?

Ethan: I am Ethan Jingco. I am a nursing student that likes to learn and practice photography on my free time. I particularly like bird photography. My favorite bird is the Dark-Eyed Junco.

Sara Kan: I am a returning student at Olympic College. I completed a CR in Nursing Assistant from OC several years back, and am now working on an AAS-T in IT Security degree. I hope to graduate this coming spring, and plan to continue on to a bachelor's degree in computer science or cybersecurity. My hobbies include writing, reading, crocheting, sewing, cardmaking, and many other arts and crafts. I also enjoyed gardening when I had a garden.

Samantha Galvez: Hello my name is Samantha Galvez, art is one of my favorite hobbies that has stuck with me from an early age. I started college as an undecided student, then I switched. my career plan to an associates in business. If I were to have gone to a university I would have gone somewhere with the best art program, for now I have been using my elective classes to take art classes.

Ed Jacobs: I am Ed Jacobs, a writer and Olympic College Student. After a 20 year Navy career, I have decided to use my G.I. Bill to pursue my degree in Creative Writing. I am married to a wonderful woman and WSU engineering graduate. We have four children together.

Yuri S.: No bio

Winston Griffin: Aloha, my name is Winston Griffin. I'm a sophomore at Olympic College. Transplant from Hawaii. I was lucky enough to find OC in Shelton to be the perfect place to start college at 48 years old.

Jacqui Bridgman: I have been crocheting, knitting, spinning, dyeing, weaving, and petting yarn for three decades. Fiber arts is my happy place.

Jacob Tennesen: I'm a student of Olympic college, currently studying business. Despite this, I have maintained authorship as a hobby of mine even absent of academic pretenses. I hope, through my writing, that I'm able to share sides of the world that aren't given the proper time of day otherwise, and that others can be moved to observe and engage with alternative perspectives and circumstances through art at large.

Perry Wilson: I have been making music since I was seventeen and have always created as a form of catharsis.

Elizabeth Socorro Ramos: Hi chat! I've made it my resolution in 2026 to keep writing even if it's not poetry. I even plan to share more of my writings surrounding love, politics and blurbs of whatever comes to mind. You'll be able to find more of my creative output on Instagram @lvlylizz - Keep going and keep loving!

Carmen Olsen: I am a 22-year-old student from Washington currently in OC's Direct Transfer Associate program. I work as a paraeducator at a public school for 18 to 22-year-olds with disabilities. In this program, I help teach them job and life skills. In my free time, I strive to do anything creative, whether that be painting, writing, or video editing.

Onaytonie: I am an acrylic artist whose work centers on storytelling, resilience, and cultural expression. Inspired by lived experience and Black American culture, I create paintings that explore growth, healing, and the beauty found after adversity. My work has been exhibited in galleries, museums, and community spaces, and collected internationally. Through color and texture, I aim to create art that feels honest, reflective, and deeply human.

Steve: Steve here. Astrophotography is my passion. I believe it is a true blending of art and science, and helps "center" me when I think about how big the Universe really is.

Grayson Schulz: I am a 23 year old student at OC, and have been working towards my Associates of Arts degree since winter quarter 2024, once finished I am planning on transferring to another college with an excellent writing program to further my wordsmithing craft. I am an avid

listener of audiobooks and novelist with a particular interest in science fiction and fantasy and writing dwarves in both settings.

Maximilian Carp: My name is Maximilian Carp, and I'm a first-year history major with plans to transfer to UW and eventually attend law school. I've been fascinated by astronomy since childhood, devouring Carl Sagan's Cosmos and countless documentaries. In high school, I founded an astronomy club and hosted Saturday night public observation sessions with my telescope. I still image planets the old-fashioned way. Using Cambridge star charts to manually locate targets since my telescope has no computer guidance. This Saturn shot from June 24th, 2025 took about four hours of setup and adjustment to capture just right. My telescope is a 10" Newtonian telescope on a dobsonian mount. My camera is Canon EOS Rebel t6 that I mounted to my telescopes eyepiece.

Paola Henao Usuga: My name is Paola Andrea Henao Usuga, I am from Medellin, Colombia. I was born in 1983. Always I have passion for reading poetry, and for that reason I always tried to write poems about love and hope. I am living in Bremerton, WA and I came to United States in December 2024. I am studying English as second language at Olympic College and I'm so happy because I learn English and I improve my pronunciation. I send my poem in Spanish because is my primary language but I translate my poem in English, I hope the meaning of this poem and both language will be the same.

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