

WALL

Literary Journal 2023





**WALL
LITERARY JOURNAL
2023**

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All entries were submitted by students of Saddleback College.
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We accept entries that embrace all viewpoints and walks of life.

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please see the guidelines for submission at

<https://www.wallliteraryjournal.org/submissions-1>

THE DEADLINE IS FEBRUARY 15, 2024.

WALL

is a community space for creative displays.

It is a fresh canvas,
a blank surface
begging for decoration,
a vast white page
awaiting our words and images.....



MISSION STATEMENT

WALL Literary Journal is dedicated to providing an open space for creative experimentation. We encourage the unfettered expression of ideas, images, and emotions in literary and artistic works that explore and illuminate the human experience. Aimed at a multicultural, cross-generational audience, the works represented in the pages of **WALL** encompass a diversity of voices and visions. This is art in the raw and in the round. We want our readers to laugh and cry, smile and sigh as they immerse themselves in the pleasures and power of art and literature.

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ILLUSTRATIVE MOTIFS (BUTTERFLY, FLOWER, AND CARS)
Myriad Hall

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A man in love with a mermaid liberates himself from dependence on anti-depression medication. A loving daughter finds the strength to comfort her dying father in his final moments. A distressed young woman frees herself from a traumatic family legacy through the emotional relief she gains from running. All three of these stories, the first fictional and the latter two true to life, celebrate the human capacity for resilience and self-reliance after facing painful circumstances. To differing degrees, we've all encountered the lingering effects of life challenges and painful episodes. The process of healing and recovery from these challenges and episodes is not linear; instead, it involves a jagged path laced with detours and wrong turns. Throughout the pages of this year's WALL, these circuitous routes are traced by real people and concocted characters who suffer and endure, who struggle and survive, who decline and yet thrive.

Literature and art have long served as a source of solace and comfort for troubled souls. In fact, a branch of psychological practice known as bibliotherapy involves the use of literary works to help people cope with internal conflicts and stressful life transitions. According to the theory behind this therapeutic approach, readers can gain insight and inspiration from vicariously identifying with characters experiencing similar scenarios. The pages of WALL offer such restorative wisdom, reassuring words, and soothing images.

Now in its 23rd year, our award-winning literary journal has benefitted from the sustaining efforts of campus and district benefactors. They include Chancellor Julianna M. Barnes and the district's Board of Trustees: Timothy Jemal, Terri Rydell, Carolyn Inmon, Ryan Dack, Barbara J. Jay, Marcia Milchiker, T.J. Prendergast III, and Katelyn Hidde. Other major supporters of WALL include Dr. Jack Beckham, who has served as Interim Dean of the Liberal Arts Division; Dr. Christina Hinkle, Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences; and Dr. Elliot Stern, President of Saddleback College.

Special thanks goes to professors Suki Fisher, Catherine Hayter, Bill Stevenson, Brett Myhren, Bridget Hoida, Jennifer Hedgecock, Ray Zimmerman, and Shellie Ochi of the English Department; Professors Karen Taylor, Louis Bispo, and Avery Caldwell of the Graphics Department; Dr. Scott Farthing, Dean of the School of Arts, Media, Performance, and Design; Professors Barbara Holmes (Art); Ariel Alexander (Music); Deidre Cavazzi (Honors Program Chair); Ryan Even (Photography); and Timothy Posada (Chair of the Department of Journalism and New Media); Matt Brodet and Randy Van Dyke (Cinema-TV-Radio). Additional benefactors include Christopher Hargraves, Jacqueline Zimbalist, and Rachael Roberts of the Student Development Office; Kristen Bush and Donna Pribyl of the Graphic Services Department; Bruce Parker of PJ Printers; Khaver Akhter, Karen Yang, Cindy Luher; and Dr. Kevin O'Connor, Dean Emeritus of the Liberal Arts Division, whose encouragement and inspiration have contributed significantly to the evolution of WALL.

The staff of WALL Literary Journal and I invite you to explore the creative works within this year's edition. We hope you find these words and images invigorating, affirming, and ultimately uplifting.

Gina Victoria Shaffer
Faculty Advisor
WALL 2023

EDITOR'S NOTE

This year's edition of WALL is a beautiful follow-up to the 2022 edition. Over the past few years, each issue addressed the distinctive traumas and hardships we are often faced with as individuals. Each edition was rather dark, often detailing one intense conflict after the other. I kept coming back to the 2022 cover title "Are We Out of the Woods Yet?", wondering if we truly were. After reading through this year's collection, I can confidently say that the answer is yes.

The 2023 edition celebrates the journey of embracing our true selves and finding solace in the process of adversity. This year's edition is a reprieve, a break, from the struggles life throws at us. Since 2020, it has been stressful for all of us, but it appears we have found a resting point in 2023. We tend to forget the changes needed to reach that sense of peace and we sometimes ignore the good moments along the way. It is time to acknowledge how far we've come.

Within these pages, you will find a tapestry of heartfelt stories, contemplative poems, and poignant personal narratives. Each piece illuminates the beauty and complexity of self-discovery, ultimately each offering a unique perspective on the transformative power of self-acceptance and healing.

A woman who finds empowerment through dyeing her hair red. An immigrant coming to terms with the fact that he is known by three names rather than one. A young woman realizing her sexuality, or lack thereof, in the midst of a romantic relationship. A young human being discovering who they are through the comfort of a video game franchise. Each person is different, but each, in their own way, finds pride in their own identity and ultimately practices self-love. Of course, we will always struggle, but we can learn to accept the circumstances we are given and actively choose ourselves, hoping for the better. Like a budding flower or a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, we gather the strength and resilience to unfold our true selves. You may notice the evolving motifs of a flower and a butterfly throughout this collection; these motifs were chosen to represent the changes we go through to achieve self-fulfillment.



Reading through this journal in the selected order, you will notice there are many highs and lows, like a wave coming up to shore. Each selection serves as a crucial part to an overarching path towards self-acceptance. I implore you, as a reader, to appreciate each literary step along the way. Remember that it's okay to take a step back before taking a step forward. Remember that in order to find self-respect and happiness, people must go through the challenges laid out for them. We urge you to keep an open mind and an empathetic spirit.

As editor-in-chief, I extend my deepest gratitude to the writers who entrusted us with their stories. I also would like to give special thanks to this year's staff and Professor Shaffer for doing a phenomenal job compiling this collection.

We at WALL hope this journal serves as a gentle reminder that self-acceptance is a continuous journey. We hope that together, through our shared experiences, we can reach our truest potential.

Farah Sallam
Editor-in-Chief
WALL 2023

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ON THE COVER:

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LETTER FROM THE FUTURE

Dear Me,

Oh, what I would give to be young again. The late nights and bars, the carefree lifestyle in which we made numerous memories. I feel our life now lacks that same excitement. I envy you for the daily eagerness you wake up with, the same eagerness which slowly drained from us with age. I envy the passion you hold for your future career, the passion which I never pursued out of fear of failure. I envy you having the world at your disposal instead of having it in your past. We used to exploit our time, living recklessly due to the fear of not fulfilling our youth. That same lifestyle caused a new fear we didn't know existed, worse than any punishment you could inflict upon another person. The time we spent seeking adventure was actually spent neglecting our growth for the future. We now live a life of complacency; our rebellious attitude toward academics led us to a career lacking meaning. We watched helplessly as our peers surpassed us; we became engulfed with relentless suffering. Instead of our thrill-seeking lifestyle, we now live a life of mediocrity, enveloped in comfort, never allowing for true growth. Heed my warning and rewrite our future. Suffer the pain of discipline rather than suffering from the pain of regret. I know you will make the right choice and exploit the world at your fingertips.

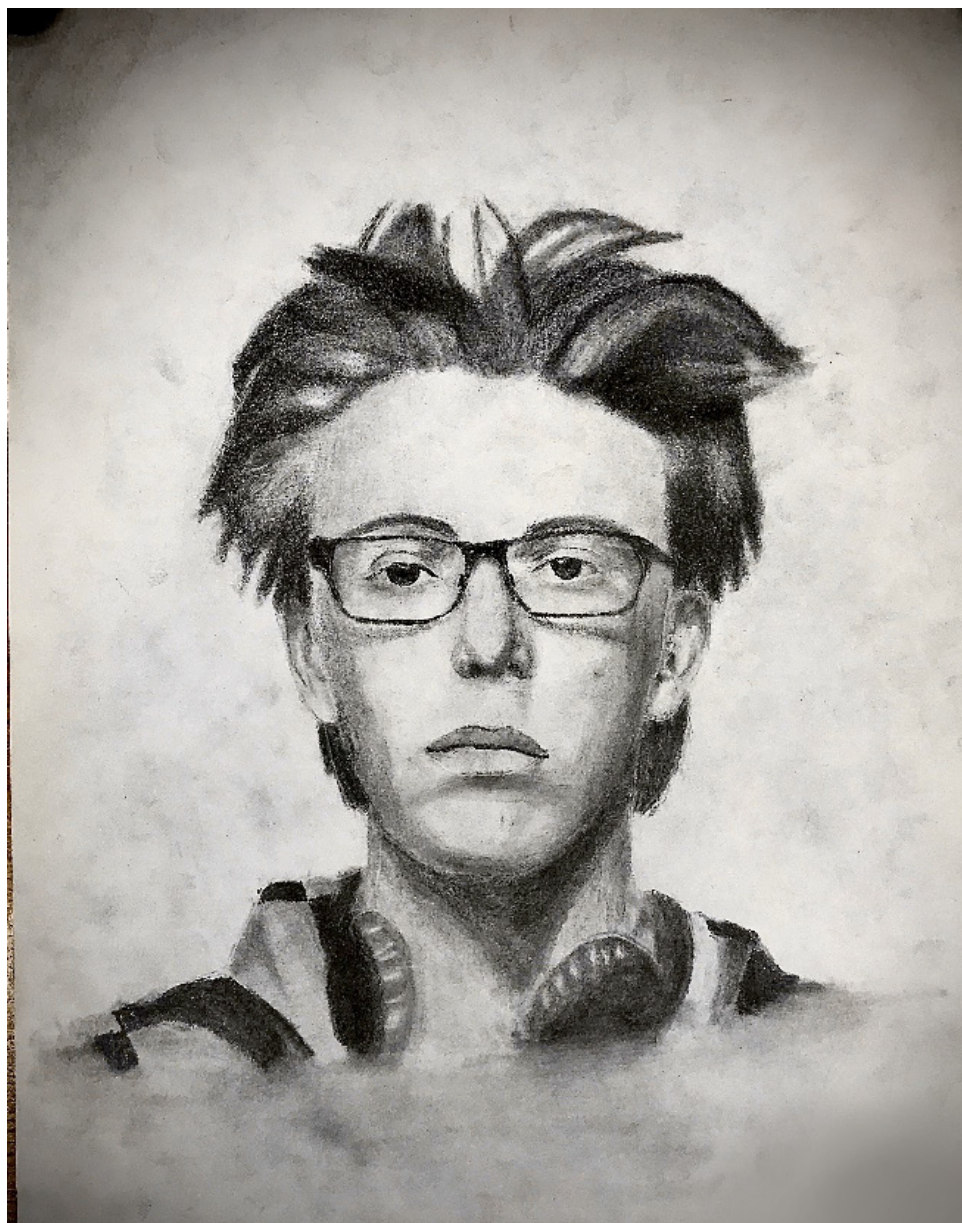
Yours Truly,
Me

Krystal Merkwan
OLD GROWTH



Copper, Brass & Bronze

Myriad Hall
SELF SKETCH



Pencil

Kelly Daub
SURVIVING THE SCROLL

See what they're doing,
see what they've done.

Scroll,
scroll,
scroll.

that looks fun.

Jealousy, longing, hope, strife.

*keep pressing forward,
stay alive.*

See how they're living,
see how they've lived.

Scroll,
scroll,
scroll.

what I would give...

Admiration, desperation, sadness, dive,
slow spiral downward.

stay alive.

See what they're creating,
see what they've made.

Scroll,
scroll,
scroll.

you have what it takes.

Establish, innovate, distraction, denied,
sink into darkness.

survive, survive.

Maya Tellez

SELF PORTRAIT II



Pencil

HAVE YOU PLAYED THIS GAME?

This is a question you often heard in class as a boy during your primary school years. It's almost inseparable from the vernacular of a teenage boy. Every day (or every other day when you hit middle school), you would ask this question to your buddies in class. In the early to mid-2000s, online gaming was on the rise thanks to franchises such as Call of Duty and Battlefield. Usually, the question would be followed up with "What's your gamertag?" While I played my fair share of those games, I always loved exploring and finding the games that you would never hear about in class. While online gaming was on the rise, so, too, were forums and websites dedicated to spreading the word on smaller niche games. At the time, if you had access to the Internet, then you had unrestricted access. While that led me to many sites I probably shouldn't have been looking at, it also led me to find the franchise that would impact me the most: Yakuza.

In seventh grade, I started playing the first game on my shitty laptop, which didn't even have a GPU in it. Besides my laptop being incapable of running the game, emulation for the PlayStation 2 was spotty at the time. I was able to get it to be at least playable 75% of the time. I suffered through the chopping framerate and horrible slow motion but was still blown away. It was official—I was completely in love with Yakuza. Everything clicked for me—from the story to the characters to the absolutely stellar "beat 'em up" gameplay. Walking around the city streets of Kamurocho, enjoying the views, and getting into street fights with random thugs—it was sublime. If you were to ask me for directions, I could give them to you as if I was a local. The game came to me at a time when I was doing very poorly in school, both academically and socially. Being able to pick a fight with some random punks and win gave me a much-needed escape.

When I asked someone in my home economics class whether they had played Yakuza, I was surprised when they had heard of it before. Not only that, but they said it was also one of their favorite franchises. This person was Armando, who would later go on to become one of my best friends. We have this tradition of playing every new entry in tandem with each other and talking about our experiences as we play. At least once a month, we randomly talk about the series, which mostly involves us bitching about something we found stupid. It's not like we hate the series. Far from it. We just don't have a blind love for it. Whenever something dumb happens, we just exclaim, "Goddammit" and laugh about it later.

I would try to keep up with the series, but growing up, I didn't have much money. The scars of the recession were still on the mend, and I couldn't really afford each new entry. Even if I could afford the games, it was near impossible to even get my hands on a copy. Each run became smaller and smaller until the fifth game, which came out as I was leaving seventh grade, was digital only. While this made Yakuza very accessible, it also made the game very expensive.

For years, I would watch in envy as each new game would be released and all I could do was watch others have fun with it. Armando was in the same boat at the time, which was lucky for me because I wouldn't be jealous and unlucky for him. It wouldn't be until my freshman year that my obsession would truly begin.

That's when a remake of *Yakuza 1* came out and I was able to get it on sale with what little money I had. As you can imagine, I fell in love with the series all over again after being away for so long.

It was around this time in high school that I really started to develop my personality. The bullying from middle school persisted and it was even worse than before. Two different groups of kids would pick on me during different classes. It started off with just name-calling, typical things such as "faggot" or "retard." As the months went by, the name-calling just wasn't enough, and it started to get physical. They would start stealing things from me and throw them back at me later in the day. In the morning, I would go to tennis class and be constantly heckled by kids from another class. I would get into shouting matches with them, but the teachers wouldn't do a thing. Then later in the day, I would go to social science class and a different set of kids would do the same.

“What made this all somewhat bearable was being able to play Yakuza every day.”

I can remember a time in social studies when I noticed that my pencil sharpener (yes, a pencil sharpener) had been stolen from my bag. I knew who did it without having to think twice. It was that group of kids sitting in the back that always found a way to pick on me. After class, I went to the teacher to tell her what they had done. She proceeded to tell me I had no proof that they did it and that I simply misplaced it. No sooner did she say that when we heard a loud bang against the classroom door. We opened it up and there it was: my pencil sharpener sitting on the floor, shattered from the impact it made. I then made a trip to the assistant principal's office to view the cameras. What do you think I saw? That's right. One of those bastards had stolen my pencil sharpener, thrown it at the door, and then bolted.

This may sound like no big deal to some of you; after all, it was just a pencil sharpener. But to be targeted so frequently and with such unjustified malice was soul-crushing. I went home that day, ignored all my assignments, and then played *Yakuza*. I could think of no better game to vent my frustrations. I would spend hours running around the city looking for no-good street punks and *Yakuza* members to pound into the pavement. I especially loved the events where you would save ordinary people from being mugged or harassed. Those stories were what I would always go back to when I had a tough day. When I was ready to continue the story, I would solve a mystery of epic proportions and eventually stop the gangs from preying upon weak people.

This all culminated in a singular event. My brother had picked me up from school and was driving away from campus when, suddenly, a car came from behind us and matched our speed. Inside the car was a bunch of kids from my social science class who rolled down their window and started hurling not only insults but various things at us. I was in shock; I had no idea what to do so I just listened and took everything.

My brother was a new driver at the time and because of this, he almost crashed into the car in front of him. That's when they knew they needed to leave and they sped down the road, leaving us in disbelief. Afterward, we just turned around and headed back to campus to report what had happened. My brother had to go to the office and tell them because I was in the back seat, bawling my eyes out.

After we got back home, I immediately went to my room and, you guessed it, started playing *Dragon's Dogma*. I think I defaulted to *Dragon's Dogma* because of its fantasy setting, as I didn't think my brain could've handled the real-world setting in which *Yakuza* had taken place. In the coming days, I had to tell the school my story and ended up being in talks with the school administration and campus police for months. I played *Yakuza* every day after school, ignoring any assignments and other obligations. My grades suffered, I couldn't talk to my friends, and my parents scolded me. I was in hell.

Even after months of testifying and the heartache of reliving the moment over and over, the other kids were never caught. We had the car, the names of the people, witnesses, everything. It still wasn't enough to build a strong enough case and it was eventually dropped altogether. I started to doubt myself and thought I had misremembered everything. While that group had stopped bullying me, the other group was still doing it. This made everything in my head even worse and would change the trajectory of both my school and social life.

What made this all somewhat bearable was being able to play *Yakuza* every day. It wasn't just that it was an escape from real life; it was also what I was doing that made it special. The main character, Kazuma Kiryu, is everything I wished I was in high school. On the surface, he's a handsome man with a tough exterior. He always has a furrowed brow with a deep voice that will make any woman swoon and every man run. But on the inside, he's a man who cares deeply about his friends and family, and isn't afraid to protect them at all costs. He wouldn't let some low life get in his way and bring him down. He not only has the capability of physically stopping a threat but is also knowledgeable about everything. He always knows what to tell someone when they are going through a rough time. It didn't matter that he was a fictional character; my mind personified him as a real person. Being able to play as him and experience his life was an escape I don't think any other game could've provided.

At the beginning of my junior year, I switched to online school (this was way before COVID) so I wouldn't have to deal with the bullying any longer. While this did fix that problem, it started to create others. Being at home every day made me isolated from my friends, which had some of the same effects on my mental health as bullying. I still wouldn't do my work, which led to getting scolded by my parents, which made things even worse. I will always remember a specific event when I was playing online with some of my friends and my parents came into my room. They asked me why I was still failing all of my classes even though I was in an online school. Not knowing what to tell them, I just sat there and cried while my friends heard the whole thing. This created an even greater need for some sort of escape in my life. At some point, I thought it would be a good idea to get a job in between all of this. The job was awful and made everything much worse, but it was all I needed so I could afford to keep up with the *Yakuza* series.

I barely escaped high school, both socially and academically. My grades were almost all Ds, giving me an absolutely rock-bottom GPA of 1.3. I had kept up with very few of my friends, only staying in contact with them because they were part of online chatrooms. Looking back on it, this is more than a lot of people can say about their high school friends. But I had spent much of that time growing up adjacent to them, being raised almost exclusively on video games. Was this unhealthy? Possibly. But I think having a favorite series that takes place in the real world has the added effect of giving you life experiences that you wouldn't have had before.

After graduation, I started a new job where I met some really great people, one of whom would change my perspective on life and directly relate to an experience I had in Yakuza. The dude's name was Maverick, and he was genuinely my favorite person that I worked with at that job. One day, I was closing with him, which—let me tell you—is the best way to become bonded with someone at a job. We were talking about our life experiences and that's when he told me that he and his boyfriend had transitioned from women to men. I was honestly taken aback because I would have never guessed that he was trans. I also saw it as such an honor that he would trust me with that information.

In Yakuza 3, there is an optional encounter with a woman in a cabaret bar. You can befriend her by repeatedly coming back to the bar and requesting her. The more you do this, the more she reveals her life story. In the last part of her story, she reveals that she had transitioned from male to female. What Kiryu said in response will stick with me forever: “Everyone has obstacles that they have to deal with. Yours are just a bit bigger than everyone else's.” As an eighteen-year-old boy, I cannot express how helpful this was to me in my journey of trans acceptance. I know some people might find the comparison of a real-life event and a video game to be childish, but I would beg to differ. I would've never had this experience had it not been for this game, and it helped me when Maverick came out to me.

“If you spend all your time trying to be something you're not, then you haven't really lived your life.”

That's not to say that I didn't take the wrong things from the games. It's not their fault—it's all on me. What really did the most damage was what I thought was the franchise's message on what it takes to be a man: you had to be stoic and tough, carrying yourself with an arrogant bravado. I tried these things and not only did it do harm to how people looked at me; I also didn't feel like it was me. To tell the truth, I didn't know who I was, and living like they do in Yakuza was just wrong. It was a disservice to the games and to me. It wouldn't be until recently that I started to really develop my personality into who I am today. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I had the time to replay all of the Yakuza games with a fresh, more mature perspective. This time around, I could see where I had gone wrong.

The Yakuza games weren't glorifying these hyper-masculine criminals with an atmosphere you could see from space. They were actively pushing against the masculine figure of trying to be at the top at all times.

Then, in October 2020, *Yakuza 7* came out and that really set it in stone for me. The main character of the game, Ichiban Kasuga, was anything but masculine. He has his signature poofy hair, bold chinstrap, and artful dragon tattoo on his back. Sure, he was buff, he was part of the Yakuza (for a time), and he even went to jail for his clan. These are things that Kiryu was and had even experienced. But that's where the similarities end as the story reveals that Ichiban is not your typical Yakuza protagonist. He saw everything as if he were in a game, turning combat from a beat 'em up to a turn-based JRPG (Japanese Role-Playing Game). His friends were what society considered to be lowlifes: a homeless man and a rejected cop. But, most important of all, Ichiban cried.

In the entire Yakuza series, Kiryu almost never cried or even showed emotion once. Ichiban, on the other hand, was absolutely bursting with tears and emotion. When he was faced with an insurmountable obstacle, he didn't always have the answer for it. When his father died, he took time during his quest to process his emotions. He cried when he was told the truth about his birth (that he was abandoned in a coin locker), he cried during a fight with his brother, and he cried after his last remaining family member, wounded by an assassin, died in his arms. I felt like I was on his journey with him, just like I was with Kiryu. Only this time, I was getting taken on an emotional journey with Ichiban.

This really set the idea in my head that I didn't need to be some stoic dick to everyone; I just needed to be kind and let my emotions run free. As long as you are true to yourself and the ones you love, everything will fall into place. If you spend all your time trying to be something you're not, then you haven't really lived your life. And I didn't need to be a masculine tough guy at all. In fact, I didn't need to be a man at all. Because if what it takes to be a man is having those toxic traits, then I don't want to be one.

I am not a man or a woman. I am a person. I am whoever I want to be.

Thank you, Yakuza, for being my greatest creative inspiration, for giving me a lasting friendship, for being my shining light at the end of the tunnel, for helping me find my path of acceptance, and for giving me the confidence to say that I am non-binary.



Quan Zhang

A MAN WITH THREE NAMES

A grain of dust floated in the sun
above an isolated island,
as I sat
solitary and dazed,
My first day in an ESL class,
We introduced ourselves and previous lives
with half-truths unproved,
standing up one by one
like thirty white birches burgeoning out of a wasteland.

“My Chinese name means spring water,
the origin of all creeks, rivers, and the sea.
Quan spells *Chyuan*.
If pronounced in English, it’s fairly hard.”
“Well,” the elder professor smiled.
His gold-rimmed glasses glinted.
“You may consider an English name
a new start in this ‘New World.’ ”

I glanced blankly ahead.
Hairs of brown, black, and white.
Rows of eyes were turning back,
Salvador Dali’s *Spellbound*.
“All right, call me Jack,”
without hesitation, I declared.

Abruptly, I became Jack when I was 36 years old.
But why Jack? Jack London? Jack Sparrow? Or Jack Kerouac?
Oh, *Lost!* That doctor, always ready to help
but had bad luck,
who’s also on an isolated island,
filling with strangers from east to west,
and remote memories risen or sunk.

My little son laughed again toward the darkness
when he heard my name repeated in the fairy tales.
Everything in the universe is named Jack:
a dog, a fox, or a rabbit.
His father is a writer
who should be a maverick.
How can he endure such an outdated name like Jack?

“Is *Kwan* here?”
The slender professor called the roll
as I randomly opened the book,
staring at a line in Wilde’s play.
First class of British literature
I rooted like a meditative monk.

“I have known several Jacks, and they all, without exception,
were more than usually plain.”
Oh! Poor Jack!
Wait! Who is *Kwan*? Suddenly, I realized
Quan may spell *Kwan* in English.
“Present!” I said with a quick blink.
Two years later I got my name back.
That rainy morning, I didn’t have a chance to become Jack.

Kwan or *Chyuan*, Jack or anything.
Name is just a code
ephemeral as life is, and then withered.
A writer can be anything in the universe:
a dog, a fox or a rabbit,
a trilobite under the ash of Himalaya,
an aerolite crashing in the desert of Arizona,
a crow losing his way back to Noah,
anything discovered or unfound,
or just a grain of dust floating in the sun
above every isolated island.

Farah Sallam

JUST FINE

One day after swim class, when I was about three, I laid across the pool's surface with my light palms exposed to the sun's soft rays. I remember seeing my mother out of the corner of my eye. She was dressed rather modestly, in lots of florals, and her hijab was loosely draped around her head and shoulders. There was a glint of distress in her brown eyes, as she was having an intense conversation with my swim instructor. When I emerged from the pool, they both broke their furrowed expressions and smiled. Suddenly, I was greeted with a beach towel and a friendly goodbye, without learning about what had been discussed. It wasn't until later that I found out my mother was rather appalled to hear that my instructor thought I could be autistic. The fact that I could barely speak was a real concern. But words didn't really matter much then, at least to me, since my swimming was just fine and I followed the instructions fairly well. It was brought up again though after a doctor's appointment later in the week. I communicated with made-up gestures and broken sounds. But despite this, my doctor, with his silver stethoscope adorned with various tiny stuffed bears, said in his monotone voice, "She's just fine," handing me a root beer-flavored Dum-Dum lollipop on my way out.

Between the ages of six and nine, I was able to use the English language fairly well, but there were a few times in the classroom when I was suddenly whisked away to a special room. In that special room, it felt dark and gray. A gold, rusty, big-eared mouse statue, holding a book, stood tall amongst the shelves. As he peered over the pages, he stared at me disapprovingly. But I was with a kind woman, a natural blonde with a nose ring. She had brought me various worksheets, all about grammar and sentence structure. It all seemed easy, yet I was confused as to why I was there; I was confused as to why I had to be stuck in this room, commandeered by this strange mouse, away from my other classmates. I remember feeling like I had to play dumb, even though I thought I was a little dumb. I remember my last day in that room, when I chose to play it smart instead, the woman had said to me, "Oh! You don't need my help. You're just fine."

Between the ages of six and twelve, I went to Sunday school. There, I learned a lot about Islam and a little about Arabic itself. I could never process the Arabic language, which was the opposite of English – quite literally, as it was read backwards. I knew the Arabic alphabet fairly well. But then diacritical marks were introduced, and I felt lost. Yet I still kept progressing and progressing, despite my inability to speak Arabic. The Sunday school teachers mainly cared that I was a practicing Muslim, so it didn't seem to matter anyway. It wasn't until the sixth grade that my Islamic instructor took issue with me. I didn't pray five times a day, and I still struggled to read a single line of Arabic. Whenever she looked at me, her hazel eyes were filled with a fiery disgust. She said to me, "Why are you here? You need to go back to the third grade."

That was hard to hear, but my mother took my side. She knew I was trying my best, especially since I was regarded as one of the top students the year prior. At the time, I was able to detail the story of the prophets with ease. But I guess as long as I couldn't utter a single phrase in Arabic, it didn't matter. So I was no lon-

ger enrolled in Sunday school. It helped that during the sixth grade, my parents were also going through a divorce, so I could blame all my troubles, all my flaws on that. Why didn't I pray? Divorced parents. Why didn't I know Arabic? Divorced parents. Nothing more.

Between the ages of twelve and fifteen, I suddenly became a prolific reader, one who was fascinated with the English language. It wasn't that I didn't like to read before then; in fact, I wanted to be an advanced reader. I remember when I was nine, all I wanted to read were Nancy Drew books. However, at twelve years old, I craved an escape. Reality wasn't fun. It never really was. More and more, a life split between two dingy houses became disorienting, as each house gradually filled up with black noise. And the noise kept pushing me out. Both of my parents had expectations, and it felt like I was failing them both. There were days when I found myself alone, out in the blazing sun, hugging tight the Sacramento heat. My blistering brown hands would peel like oranges. There were days when I sought refuge, looking for peace in a nearby library.

“I didn't need to be perfect.”

When I was twelve, I could pretend to join Percy Jackson on his adventures. When I was twelve, I could read about how brave Katniss Everdeen was, inspiring me to gain the courage to stand up for the people I cared about. When I was thirteen, I could relate to Tris, hoping to also one day be divergent like her. When I was thirteen, I followed the maze runners out of the experiment. When I was fourteen, I could help preserve literature alongside Guy Montag. When I was fourteen, I looked up to Atticus Finch alongside Scout. When I was fifteen, I could sense the horrors of groupthink among the British boys who were stranded on an uninhabited island. When I was fifteen, I could relate to dear Bilbo Baggins and his need for comfortable complacency. All these literary adventures, classics in their own right, were each a wonderful introduction for me to eventually find my own voice.

When I was sixteen, I became a poet. I could not piece the words together to describe how I felt at the time, but poetry was my way to express how I felt. I didn't need to be perfect. I didn't need to practice normal, everyday grammar and sentence structure. I could just appreciate how words are. I could just appreciate how each syllable sounds, get caught in the euphony, and feel at peace with my melodied blanket of utterances and phrases. Poetry perfectly encapsulated the journey I was going through. I needed it as I grew distant from my parents, distant from my culture.

When I was eighteen, I became an English major. Before I left for college, several people looked at me like I was crazy. I felt like I had to justify myself. “Oh, well I might change my major when I'm there,” I said. “Oh, well I could do anything with an English degree,” I said. “Oh, well I might go to law school or something,” I said. The only people in my life at the time who were excited for me were my high school English teachers. They all were excited, happy that they made a difference in my life. And they truly did. I will always remember how they were all willing to

chat with me after class, usually about the book we were reading. Since I was shy, I always went up to them after discussions to tell them the ideas that remained in my head. Each of them smiled in their own way, happy to see me make connections.

When I entered college, it was a predominantly white school in a predominantly white town. San Luis Obispo was known as the “Happiest Town in America,” but I couldn’t help but wonder if it was because there were barely any people of color, meaning barely any tension to begin with. Maybe it was all in my head. I felt like I was a stain on a blank canvas. I felt like everyone was staring at me. And there, I was challenged a lot on my identity and ethnicity. Do you speak Spanish? Do you speak Farsi? Do you speak Arabic? Are you planning to learn your home language eventually? You speak English really well! Where are you from? Where were you born? What’s Egypt like? Why are you studying English? What’s your real name? Tell me how you actually pronounce your name.

All the questions and statements became static.

Nowadays, sometimes, I think I still can’t speak. I have an English degree, and I can’t find the words. Sometimes, when I mispronounce or misphrase something, my romantic partner will joke, “Weren’t you an English major?” and while it’s all in good fun, it does take a toll. I was an English major, so shouldn’t I be an expert in language? I also never learned Arabic, and at this point in time, I’ve accepted the fact that I may never learn it in the future. I’m whitewashed, through and through. Bleached by western society.

From time to time, an Arabic accent slips through, and I’m reminded that I’m still an Egyptian. From time to time, I find myself explaining a new English word to my mother, and I’m reminded that I’m still an American. Sometimes, I think about how lucky I am and how wonderful it is to have two identities. And it’s okay that I’m still learning to be comfortable with both. Sometimes, I wish I didn’t need to speak. But I know I’m fine. Despite not finding the right words, I know that I’ll always be fine.

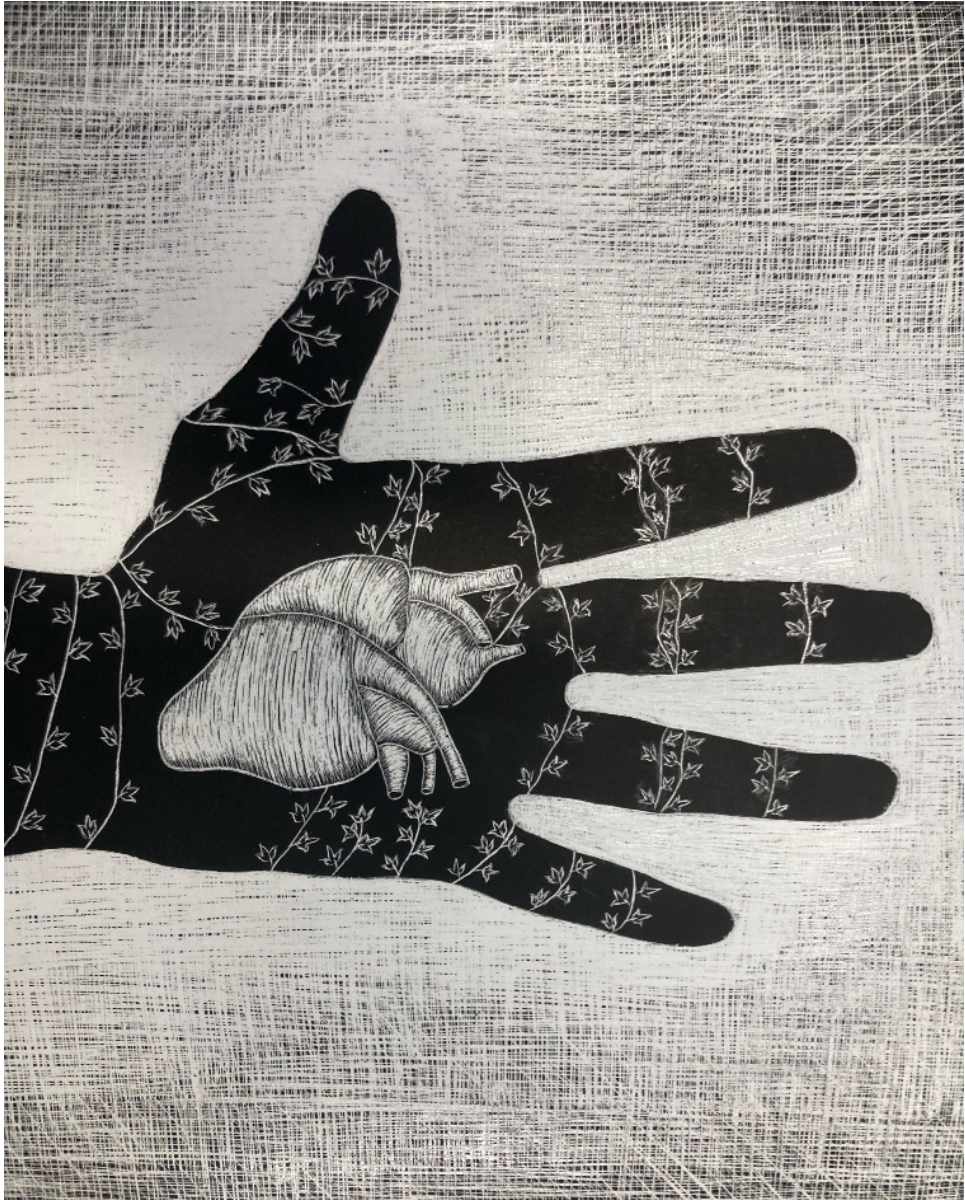


Kimberly Seigler
EYERISES



Watercolor Pencil

Susana Stephen Kumar
PETAL BY PETAL



Scratchboard

Emily Martin
PETAL BY PETAL

Lay me down
inside your bones,
and embrace our entirety.

Hear the flutters of heart-beating bosoms.
feel the wind: a tornado in thy breathless lungs,
exhaling emboldened courage,
inhaling blissful adoration.

I, a weightless petal.
Flightless, deprived of your wind.
Rooted only in thine arms,
stemmed only within thy legs.

Flowers blossom,
sprouting fingertips,
caress a ruby rose bud.
Ruby as thy lips, ruby as a gem
a treasure in my jeweled chest

Palmistry: fortune foretold a mystic fate.
When two roads connect
and heart on the line,
souls attach branch to vine.

Ay! my gardener, prune my overgrowth
shave the pinnacle of my reality into a masterpiece
let it be known!
Every breath, for you
every step, for you
my best, for you.

Oh! Picasso with serrated scissors,
Strip away blockage after blockage
see me.
With blindfolded eyes
see me.

Let my flesh fall with roses as you prune
restore with stronger leaves
when winter comes around
see me.

Alyssa Mercado
NOT A FLOWER



Scratchboard

Brandi Michele Ortiz

NOT A FLOWER

When I was growing up, people often told me, “You’re just a late bloomer.” I tried taking that to heart, but something didn’t sit right. Unlike my close friends, I didn’t have any conventional crushes, and I spent little to no real-time fantasizing about a certain someone. I got uneasy at sleepovers when my friends would ask me about my prospective crush during a game of TRUTH OR DARE, and I would say, “Boys are so gross. Why would I even bother?” They would laugh, and I would be saved from a somewhat awkward conversation for another day.

When I was growing up, boys genuinely made me nervous, so when high school came around and someone spilled to me that an older boy named Eric was interested in me, I choked up with this feeling I couldn’t properly describe at the time. I felt my stomach drop, and I cringed at the thought because I knew this boy and had merely thought of us as good friends. We were on the school swim team and often talked about anything and everything. We would have long conversations gushing over the cartoons we grew up watching and talk about other things I found to be relatively innocent. Looking back, Eric was sweet and silly in his own unique way, so I thought I had finally found a guy I could call my friend. The thought that he was into me put me off.

For a while, I began to avoid him entirely, and I thought that would send the message that I wasn’t interested in him that way. But it seemed like the school was invested in seeing us together. People I barely knew would approach me and casually tell me what a great guy he was. Eventually, it felt like I had no choice, and we began to talk again. I remembered how much I enjoyed talking with him and what a great guy he was. For a while, it seemed as though things were returning to normal for a time. People stopped approaching me out of nowhere, and we could be friends again. The uncomfortable thought of us being a couple no longer lingered in the back of my mind, and I had my friend back.

Then one day, I was invited to a costume party. Typically, high school parties were not my thing, but my best friend, Megan, was invited, too, so I agreed to go. The day of the party arrived, and I got a text en route. Something had come up, and she couldn’t come. I was in a cat costume, and I was going alone. I sat in the back seat of my mom’s Rover and desperately wanted to turn back, but my mom encouraged me to go anyway, so I did. Waiting outside of the house party, dressed in a funny cowboy getup, was none other than the boy I called my friend, and I was relieved to see a familiar face.

We went inside together, and it must have been obvious how nervous this crowd made me because he never once left my side. It seemed like your typical high school party—bowls of snacks, drinks, and many unfamiliar faces. Besides Eric, I didn’t know anybody, so I stuck close to the candy corn bowl, handpicking the ones shaped like little pumpkins. Eventually, everyone maneuvered to the backyard, sat down, and formed a circle. I recognized this setting immediately from the many sleepovers my friends shared and felt a sense of dread arise.

TRUTH OR DARE.

Eric and I sat together within the circle, and I tried to force a smile despite my sudden nervousness. One by one, truth by truth, dare by dare, it got closer to my turn, and that same nervousness increased. Once it became my turn, the host smiled widely.

“*TRUTH OR DARE*,” she said.

I froze. These people were not my friends, so they represented a social risk. I felt like I was going to embarrass myself, but I had people with expectant eyes bored into me. I chose *DARE* and almost regretted it when the host said, “I dare you to kiss Eric.”

I wish I could say I ran off and left the party altogether, but I didn’t. Couldn’t. I felt trapped, so I gave in, lifted my whiskered mask, and kissed him in front of everyone. People hooted and howled, and my face burned up. It was humiliating.

Everything felt wrong. This wasn’t how my first kiss was supposed to happen, but it happened. All because I went to some dumb party. I pulled back, my face still burning red. Eric stared at me, his face almost equally red. But, unlike me, he had this goofy smile.

The game ended soon after our kiss, and I kept smiling until my mom could finally pick me up and take me home. When my mom finally did show up, I was relieved and tried my best not to sprint to the car.

Eric followed behind, insisting that he walk me out. We said goodbye and hugged rather awkwardly when all I wanted to do was go home quickly. But he pulled me close and kissed me. I felt nothing. No sparks, no butterflies. Just this feeling of overwhelming anxiety.

And it only got worse when he said, “I love you.”

For a second or two, I was speechless. I was so angry with him. Mad that he didn’t stop me from kissing him in front of everyone and making a fool of myself. Mad at myself for not standing my ground and saying no. Yet some part of me couldn’t bring myself to hurt his feelings, so I ultimately said, “I like you, too.” I remember him smiling as if I had said, “I love you, too.”

I got into my mom’s Rover, and she drove us home. I remained quiet for the most part, and my mother must have assumed I was just tired, so she kept her questions to a minimum. It wasn’t until we got home that I finally cried. When my mom frantically asked what was wrong, I told her the truth: Eric said he loved me. She didn’t know how to help me; she held me while I cried.

The next day, the school was buzzing about our kiss, and the word was out that Eric and I were an item. It made me queasy, but I thought it was best not to correct anyone. Eric was a nice guy after all, and he was well-liked throughout the school, so maybe being his girlfriend wouldn’t be so bad. And I still had no genuine desire to hurt his feelings because I still somehow considered him my friend, so when he tried to kiss me again, I didn’t stop him. From then on, Eric and I were a recognized couple. We went on dates and went to the school dances together, and from a glance, anyone would guess we were another happy pair of kids in love.

Eric was certainly pleased, and I was, too, to an extent. I was with someone I cared about and liked talking to, so I assumed this elusive feeling of love would come in its own time.

But I didn't realize then that being boyfriend-girlfriend meant more than holding hands and spending time together. And that realization horrified me. Again Eric was a nice guy and very handsome by societal standards (and someone I had come to care about), but the thought of having sex (or doing anything remotely sexual) disturbed me—as if someone had suggested that I kiss my brother.

With this disturbing image swirling around in my mind, it became increasingly uncomfortable to be around Eric. I felt sick when he put his hands on me or tried to initiate something. But I was also his girlfriend, and it made sense he would want to be closer. I tried to make him happy, but not at the expense of my own happiness. Luckily, I was a smart girl intent on self-preservation. Eric was a devout Catholic who was only occasionally horny, so I avoided him with excuse after excuse. Whenever we ended up on the couch, and things got too touchy-feely, I got up for a snack or left for the bathroom. Whenever he got too close for comfort, I took a step back.

Years went by like this. We both graduated, and we still never so much as made out. People often commented that we were no different than brother and sister. Comments like this made him insecure in our relationship because he would typically try something that made me incredibly uncomfortable afterward.

At some point in our relationship, I thought I was gay. I had no desire to have sex with someone I thought I loved very much, despite spending years together in a relationship. And he was so nice, so I should have wanted to be closer to him, right? Well, for a long time, I was sure I was a homosexual in a heterosexual relationship. And sometimes, I worried he thought so, too. Sometimes, he looked at me with this look of worry. As if he knew but loved me enough to overlook it and not let me go. He often wore that look whenever Megan and I got close. Too close, in his opinion, because he would always try to come between us. Between me and someone who made me feel safe and loved.

And I felt guilty, of all things. I felt guilty for spending so much time with a friend I loved dearly and for not wanting my boyfriend in the way he wanted me. I felt guilty every time I pushed him away. I was sure something was wrong with me. He was my boyfriend, and I should have wanted him that way, but I didn't, and it felt like no amount of time would change that. But still, we remained a couple. I felt awful—like I was leading him on. Like I was lying to him and myself.

After almost five consecutive years, I finally had to end our charade. When he tried to bring me upstairs to the bedroom, I realized this had to be the last straw. He may have said he loved me and promised me it would be okay, but I realized I couldn't be with someone in this way, not with the way my eyes became blurry and my stomach churned. I slipped from his grip and practically ran from him, my face burning and tears threatening my eyes. I felt ashamed. I felt inhuman. I felt at fault. I felt broken.

No less than a few hours later, I received a text from Eric saying it was better if we were just friends, and that was the end of my first relationship. A wave of relief washed over me because my heart wasn't broken, which meant I wasn't broken.

My breakup and that feeling of relief brought on many questions that needed answering. My fully intact heart gave me the courage necessary to seek out others like me, and yes, my search was disheartening at times, and I almost lost hope. But then I found them. The ones that would give me back my hope and ensure nothing was wrong with me. And when I came forward, almost no one was surprised by the news. My friends hugged me, promising to love and accept me no matter what. My mother, although still confused, held me and made the same promise almost word for word. And I knew this was the unconditional love I had been craving all these years.

“You’re just a late bloomer, Brandi,” they said.

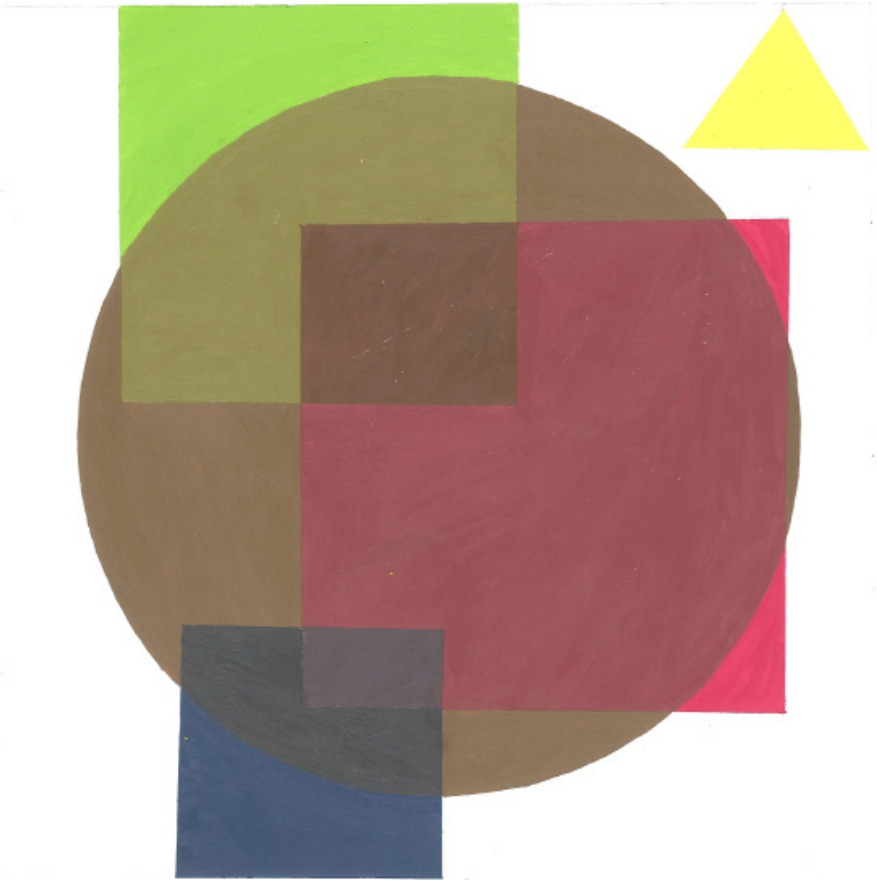
“You just need to find the right person,” they said.

“Just grow up!” they said.

But I am not some flower that needs someone to love to bloom. I am not waiting for the right person to come and fix me. I am not a child clinging to my innocence. I am asexual, which does not mean I cannot love or be loved. It means that, to me, there is so much more to a relationship than simple sex. I can still flourish in this world obsessed with love and sex as though they mean the same and cannot proceed without the other. It means I can grow, knowing I am neither broken nor at fault for these absent feelings. It means I am human.



Yasmeen Serhal
INDIVIDUALITY



Acrylic on Canvas

Barbara Beaupre

KALAMAZOO

We had just finished our tour of the Kellogg factory and watched thousands of corn flakes pouring into boxes. Our seven-year-old son Jimmy, always looking for action, said, “Dad, Dad, this is the city where your dad lives, isn’t it? Let’s find him.” We had been talking about my husband’s dad living in Kalamazoo when we started our spring vacation trip from Milwaukee to Michigan. However, since Jack hadn’t laid eyes on his father since he was four years old, a family visit had not been part of our agenda.

“I don’t know,” Jack stammered, “the guy never even sent a birthday card my way and Mom never stopped talking about what a philanderer he was. I don’t know if I even want to see him. We left Kalamazoo when I was ten years old and by that time he was starting to be hard to remember. Maybe that’s why I don’t have happy memories of Kalamazoo. I wanted to block out his leaving me.”

“Think about it though,” I said, knowing the dark hole that was in my husband’s heart. “It would probably do some good to actually see what he looks like, maybe even see what his health is like. That could be important for you to know.”

I knew Jack had a wound in his heart where his father should have been. It showed up in his eyes the few times we actually discussed him. Our boys had begun asking questions about a grandfather, so Jack had given them an abbreviated version of his childhood. Since Jack had been born in Kalamazoo, we decided to take our spring break vacation there to show the boys where their dad came from. I wanted Jack to seek out his dad as much as Jimmy did. We had two young sons, and I didn’t want hurt from the past to be part of our new young family. I reasoned that a visit with his father could heal some of that childhood hurt.

From the back seat, Jimmy was getting louder. “C’mon, Dad,” he begged. “Let’s do it. Maybe you will even like him.”

After a few more minutes of discussion, Jack reluctantly agreed that it might be worthwhile to “look up this guy” who had abandoned him more than thirty years ago. After all, he only had his mother’s angry version of the man who fathered him. “I know mom was bitter, but even allowing for that, it’s tough to get past that he never even tried to see Jerry and I for all those years. Jerry was six and I was only four when he left. I never even knew where he was. Wouldn’t you think he would have at least been curious about his two sons?” I could almost hear the feeling of rejection I knew was there. He continued, “This is sure going to be strange, that is if we can even locate where he lives.”

In spite of the lack of Internet in 1973, the phone book proved a reliable resource for finding Jack’s father. Herb Benner was clearly listed with a local address that was easy to find on our map. Jimmy and his younger brother, Stevie, bounced around the back seat. “We’re going to have a grandpa,” Jimmy chortled. Good thing he couldn’t see his father’s expression in the front seat.

Even my stomach was churning when we reached a neat bungalow on a tree-lined street, hardly the home of a lothario. Maybe this was a mistake, I thought, as the car slowed. Herb wasn’t my father. I didn’t want my idea of closure to make Jack feel worse, but it was too late now. “Well, now or never,” Jack whispered as we all got out of the car.

Herb was nothing like I had pictured, but by then he was 25 years older than Jack. I watched Jack studying this stranger, no doubt looking for some sense of connection. Herb was a trim fiftysomething with black framed glasses and a receding hairline. He had been married to Ruth for almost as much time as Jack's parents had been divorced, not really the picture of the flagrant playboy Jack's mother had painted. The kicker was that he was the branch manager of a savings and loan association, while Jack was the vice president of another savings and loan office. As much as Jack, I had been looking for some evidence of commonality between my husband and this stranger. Other than the fact that they both worked for an S&L, Jack's father could have been a neighbor. They didn't even resemble each other.

Herb and Ruth seemed happy to see all of us and began gushing over the boys. "Look what fine young men you have," Herb boomed. He started to pepper young Jimmy with questions about school and baseball. Jack was not only tongue-tied but also dumbstruck as he watched the scene between the stranger who was his biological father making conversation with his young sons, something he never experienced.

Finally, Jack spoke. "Why did you never come to see us?" he asked Herb. He didn't call him Dad. Too many years had gone by for that word to come out.

"Your mother didn't want me anywhere near you three. She made that very clear. And she was a difficult woman. I did try to call a few times, but she was hostile." Herb finished, seemingly satisfied that the last thirty some years were explained and the subject was closed.

Jack and I made a bit of light chit-chat, inquiring about their health and jobs. They offered us coffee, but we declined. After more conversation with the two boys, Herb turned to Jack and said, "It would be really nice to spend some time with these two munchkins. Why don't you let them come here for a couple of weeks this summer?"

I don't remember what Jack mumbled in response, but it wasn't intelligible. His voice was quiet and his face was tight with controlled effort. "This was nice," he said evenly. "Maybe you and Ruth could come to visit us sometime."

With that comment, he stood up and said we had to be on our way. Just like that, our hour-long visit with this blood relative was over. We piled into the car.

"I can't believe he had the guts to ask me to send our boys for a visit," Jack muttered as he stepped on the accelerator. "Not even so much as a birthday card."

I reached for Jack's hand. How could Herb possibly think we would let our children vacation in his home? We knew nothing about him, and he continued to be that stranger. Our brief visit had done nothing to answer the many questions Jack had struggled with for much of his life. I wasn't sorry we had come, but I wasn't glad either.

Jimmy and Stevie were chatting happily about this new person who had taken such avid interest in them. "When are we going to see Grandpa again?" Jimmy asked.

The question lingered in the air. Finally Jack spoke, his voice almost normal again. "We're going to invite him to our house...once. I want him to see where we live and what we have. I want him to know I don't need him or any money he might have. That will do it. We are done here."

This was not a Hallmark story. We were on our way home and Kalamazoo was behind us.

Gia Wahle

THE STONES WERE SEEDS



Porcelain

Zaina Batniji
“NANA”

my mom used to call me lavender girl
because i loved to bathe in lavender soap
but eventually the dark brown bottle ran out
and the nickname washed away like suds spiraling down the drain
then she called me hurricane
because i destroyed everything i touched
and that was when i learned
apologies aren't enough
she called me junk collector
because i held onto the things no one wanted
and cluttered my drawers for reasons only i could understand
but i found comfort in random trinkets
and rocks i'd unearthed from the sand
like everything else, that faded, too,
and now i am my father's daughter
carrying his rage between my shoulder blades
snaking underneath my eyelids
through my fingers and rib cage
my chest rises and falls to the beat of his heart
i wonder when i'll turn into my mother
or a shadow of the woman she dreamed i'd become

Katelyn Hidde

LESS THAN

Cries boomed from the tiny delicate delivery room as my mom was sliced open. The intimate dance of doctors circling and communicating in an impossibly stoic manner continued as my mom's horrifying screams broke through the room's composure. Her body terrorized her as she prepared to bring two new life forms into the world. Tightly packed in my mother's taut stomach, we pushed and tore to break free first. A grueling emotional quarrel between two fresh babies tore at my mom's fragile body. Before I could even exit the womb, I was competing with my sister. In the most intimate and human moment of a woman's life, I was there taunting and nagging my little sister. My mom tells me I gripped and ripped at my sister's umbilical cord, which was tangled around her fragile head, to push myself out first—unknowingly preparing myself for a lifetime of fighting and distress.

Everything from childhood boils up and explodes when you hit your senior year. All your peers, ex-boyfriends, and close friends all decide at once to move everywhere across the country and decide the full trajectory of their academic and lifelong careers. Every year a new generation of young adults has a chance to start over and become new people with a plethora of opportunities. This can become a time of tremendous anxiety and reflection on our youngest and most vulnerable years of life. For me, all of the years of fighting and hating myself for not being able to keep up with my sister finally caught up to me.

Kindergarten was the first time I realized I wasn't Madelyn. I sat alone at the lunch table watching my sister from across the class giggling with all of her friends because, according to my sister and her bratty friends, there "wasn't any more room." There was definitely more room at the table. So I sat alone with my PB&J sandwich with a heart cutout and baby carrots that my mom prepared for me, wondering when I would be Madelyn and how quickly lunch would end.

Elementary school didn't get much better as I let myself fill with self-loathing and anger at the world. If I wasn't as good as Madelyn, I was nothing. This idea cemented itself deeper and deeper into my head. Every time I couldn't finish our PE runs as fast as her. Every time a teacher didn't believe she could possibly be my sister. Every time my dad told me I should be more like my sister. I couldn't be the "teacher's pet" or the "cute little gymnast" no matter how hard I tried to do hours of extra credit and take classes at her gym, and my teachers and relatives would not let me forget it. Any family gathering or competitive educational setting became a spotlight for Madelyn and everything she had accomplished and everything she was capable of. All I could see through this was what I hadn't accomplished and everything I knew I wasn't capable of. The moments of frustration piled up and filled me with anger and a deep resentment for always being the "lesser" twin.

I pushed and scraped through high school as I failed math classes and could barely care for myself. I spent sleepless nights studying and crying through failed tests. I kept coming up short, and I knew I wasn't happy with my results. Watching my friends apply to various schools across the country made me even more confused and angry. I didn't understand what it felt like to get excited about college and moving away.

All of my peers were comfortable submitting tons of applications, ready to be compared to millions of other students around the world. All I had ever done in life was get compared to Madelyn, and I wanted nothing more than to be my own person separate from any judgment and unacceptance.

I applied to a few schools nearby, but as letters started flowing in, I started to fully register that none of the prominent universities could provide what I knew I needed in the upcoming years. I watched from a distance as my sister started overflowing with acceptance letters from top universities and highly accredited institutions. I sunk even deeper as I recognized that most of her “safety” schools were the universities I could barely qualify as a “reach” school.

Letting myself go to community college and follow the path I knew deep down was mine felt like defeat. Working throughout college at a high-paying job, being close to my mom, environmental internships, and low cost of attendance were among many other factors in my decision that all pointed toward community college. However, I found myself bogged down and drained by the tiniest of comments from mere acquaintances and irrelevant figures in my life. Even when I received positive encouragement from family members, there was an underlying feeling of condescending glares. Having a sister attending UCLA did not help the situation at all. Her existence made me feel less than. I let her success attack me in a way nothing else ever could.

“Aw, I’m sorry, Katelyn,” everyone would say when I told them my plan, and all I could think was why? Because I’m not sorry. I’m not sorry I don’t feel ready to move out at seventeen years old. I’m not sorry that I don’t feel ready to take on hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt before I can even open my own credit card. I’m not sorry that I don’t want the same things as you right now and I’m okay with that.

I shared my feelings with my mom, who, at the time, I truly felt was the only one who supported me. She sympathized and soothed me through panic attacks, deep feelings of failure, and a stunted education. While we were growing up, my mom knew the two of us more than anyone else and watched me struggle with myself, constantly letting myself fall behind Madelyn’s shadow. My mom knew me inside and out and encouraged me to pursue anything I felt passionate about without any fear of outside perspectives. She asked me who had been making me feel inadequate about my decision, and I felt silly even telling her about the brief interactions I had with random peers and teachers that I took straight to my heart. I let the most uninvolved people in my journey poke holes of doubt in my goals and plans.

Finally, I realized there was no point in comparing my plans with others when we all had different needs and desires for the future. I knew what I wanted and what I needed to do for myself to achieve my goals. Growing up as a twin sister pushed me to appreciate that there is no shame in knowing you must choose a different journey to best serve yourself and your happiness. Through years of bullying myself by comparing my character to my sister, I showed myself the counterproductive nature of continuous comparison.

I saved my own life by preserving my own destiny and choosing to follow a different path. I have grown to accept that I must focus on my own needs and desires to be successful without comparing myself to anyone with a different journey. We must let ourselves follow our own passions and choose a path that is best for us.

Jim Gaston
MISTY WEB



Photograph

BLOOD IS NOT THICKER THAN WATER

We live in a world in which millions of women are subjugated, raped, and abused. Their cries for help and screams of rage are drowned out by our refusal to confront, or even acknowledge, this reality. Even now, I am hesitant to write this, scared that the atrocities experienced by so many women—as well as by me—will make my reader uncomfortable. However, I cannot avoid this truth because it is ingrained in my DNA; without it, I would not exist.

My girlhood was stolen from me before I took my first breath. The circumstances of my birth ensured I would never escape this fate, damning me in more ways than one. I see the looks of shock and disgust when I explain my biological father's status as a pedophile. No one knows this sickening feeling better than me, knowing my genetics are entwined with his. My mom was only fifteen when she met him, my father around her father's age—decades older than my mother, who first got pregnant at sixteen. I was the same age when I learned the grotesque details of my conception; I was suddenly relieved, grateful even, to have been forsaken. While my birth father isn't considered a predator in the eyes of the law, there is physical proof of his wickedness in the form of my sibling and me—not to mention the evidence of his abuse left on my mother's body. I spent what felt like eternity haunted by the unknown, only to discover my existence was tragedy's collateral damage. I made futile attempts to compensate for the emptiness left by my abandonment. Despite her absence, my life bears much resemblance to my birth mother's. Some inherit money, heirlooms, or land from their parents; my inheritance was trauma.

The formal definition of illness, according to Oxford Languages, is “a disease or period of sickness affecting the body or mind.” At two years old, I was much too young to remember my first diagnosis. From birth, my adopted parents noticed that I was not functioning normally. While my physical development was ahead of my peers, my quirks became progressively apparent the older I got; the first thing they noticed was that I despised being touched, recoiling if someone tried to hug me. Even as a baby, I hated to be swaddled or cuddled. I couldn't regulate temperature; if it was hot outside, I would insist on wearing a jacket and pants, and if it was freezing, I would wear shorts and a tank top. Certain sensations were repulsive to me. Even the simple accident of spilling a drop of liquid on my shirt would cause me to panic and rip all my clothes off. I would do anything to avoid these uncomfortable sensations, even refusing to wear shoes and walking on my tippy toes to avoid touching the ground. I was abnormally strong-willed, which only magnified these issues. I was diagnosed with a sensory processing disorder, low muscle tone, and mouth fidgets.

By preschool, I was having night terrors, causing my eyes to roll back in my head. I would scream and cry, unable to be woken up. Loud noises became progressively formidable; they would trigger panic attacks or my fight or flight response. If I felt cornered, I would bolt and find a small hiding spot. If I couldn't flee, I would opt for a more combative response, biting or hitting whoever was in my way. When I was born, I was colorblind. Not in the literal sense but in terms of my perspective of the world.

Jordan Dixon
IN THE GRIP



Scratchboard

I saw everything in terms of black and white; good and bad; smart and stupid. My emotions would change so drastically and quickly that it would give me whiplash. So when I was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD) at just fourteen years old, it felt like a relief, at least at first. Disorders like this are seldom diagnosed before a person reaches adulthood, but I had demonstrated nearly every symptom for an extensive amount of time. The disorder, often manifesting through impulsivity and risky behaviors, was characterized in me by an intense fear of abandonment, unstable sense of self, emotional regulation dysfunction, and incessant feelings of emptiness. I had already been hospitalized for suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and self-harm on numerous occasions.

A little later, I was diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), which only confused me more. My ODD was demonstrated through argumentative behaviors, especially towards adults/authority figures; constant anger and irritability; and defiance or outright refusal of rules and directions as well as intentionally pushing other people's buttons. This disorder seems contradictory to BPD. While I wanted so badly to be close with others, I was easily annoyed and often preferred to be by myself, doing my own thing. I would push people away with my defiance and mood swings, testing them to see if they'd stay, which they rarely did. Maintaining relationships or friendships was excruciatingly hard to do, as I had a strong desire to do the opposite of what was asked of me. My desire for companionship, unconditional love, and closeness, however, was just as strong.

I have always either woken up before everyone else or gone to bed long after everyone else. I crave the serenity of being alone. Free of the prying eyes of others, I feel safe enveloped in the darkness of midnight or the quiet tranquility of twilight. I am at war. Behind my eyes, there is incessant combat taking place. I try my best to keep the chaos at bay, but it constantly spills over. My whole life, it has felt like there are two enigmatic forces pulling me in opposite directions: "I love you / I hate you," "Please stay / go away," "I need you / I need to be alone."

By the time I reached eighteen years old and got a chance to look around, my life was in shambles. The entirety of my life, despite the extensive therapies and treatments, I could not overcome my feelings of inadequacy. I had been taught conflicting things: a parent is supposed to love, nurture, take care of their child, but mine had abandoned me. They taught me anguish and resentment. It left me feeling unworthy of love—whether it was from friendships, familial relationships, or romantic partners. I wanted to be released from the torment that was my life, as even oblivion would be superior to the all-consuming grief I experienced. Any feeling of hope or fulfillment would quickly deteriorate into self-loathing.

I have come to realize that these are not issues exclusive to my father, my mother, or me. My lived experiences suggest that my gender affords me nothing but contempt from many; both my existence and history offer all the necessary proof. I did not need to know the abuse my mother endured to learn how some men say "I love you" with their fists, expressing their desire with force and anger. Trepidation loomed over me, followed by a pervasive darkness. I was stalked, raped, and assaulted, the perpetrators never once being held accountable. My sense of safety diminished as I became keenly aware of the intrinsic danger of being a woman. I grew accustomed to casual misogyny, being fetishized for my bisexuality, chauvinist remarks, and the sexualization of women. It is these small offenses which slowly desensitize us to patriarchal culture, paving the way for more violent misogyny.

Finally, entering adulthood, I realized I could not continue this way. Drained from fighting my own mind for so long, I looked around, seeing all my peers far ahead of me—in relationships, at college, working, while I was nineteen years old without even a license to drive. While I had been too busy trying to stay alive to worry about what I would do with my life, I had been left behind. It felt as if the preconceived ideas people had about my life would never cease to define who I was—even though I am not responsible for the trauma I endured. These wounds, although not self-inflicted, are mine to heal.

Through the purity of physical pursuits, I began to realize how far I could push myself... literally how far. One day, walking on the treadmill at the gym, as I always did before hitting the weights, I had the urge to run. I had always been envious of runners, how freeing it must feel to run mile after mile. But whenever I tried, I would give up before a half mile. This time, however, I didn't quit when my body and mind told me to stop. As my lungs got heavy, I focused all my attention on my breath. For once, the anxiety subsided as I concentrated only on lengthening my stride. I got past a mile, then another, then another. I felt chills run up my spine and down my arms. My body ached, but the years of repressed anger, resentment, and self-hatred fueled me. What followed was something I had searched for my whole life: serenity. It felt like I had been walking around with this weight on my chest and it was finally subsiding, allowing me to breathe deeply and stand tall.

I never imagined myself as a runner, but then again, I never imagined living past my sixteenth birthday either. Running saved my life. Becoming both my therapy and meditation, it teaches me how to find more within myself while remaining mindful. The emptiness and hopelessness were replaced with the desire to expand my potential. If I could run mile after mile, what else could I do? The answer: anything.

Adversity makes us stronger; the soul grows in discomfort. It is what allows us to take personal inventory and find what we are passionate about. Pursuing my true passion to advocate for and liberate others, I have not only been able to overcome my own trauma; I have helped others begin to heal. My life has been the ultimate preparation for exceeding expectations, as my struggles with trauma and prejudice afforded me something most people will never experience: an infallible mental toughness. Similar to my trail runs, it is not uncommon to trip on an unexpected rock or take a wrong turn—the journey of healing, self-discovery, and overcoming generational trauma is not linear. Just remember that it is not the ideas and judgments of others that define us as we confront our challenges; it is how we overcome them that will truly determine who we are.



Fern Hessel-Metz
PASO DOBLE



Photograph

Brandon Wagner
THE FREEWAYS

My face is wet, but my eyes are long since dried
The longer they're open, they collect dust and grime
A smooth coat makes vision gray and sickly green
"Can I go back to the freeways please?"

The roads that keep you moving for fear of crashing
There's peace in the high speeds and the music blasting
The constant flow pulls your foot further onto the gas
As long as no one screws up, you'll be able to pass

Even in that case, it's your job to swerve
Take control of the tragedy before it occurs
Though at the high speeds, the brakes just fail
And you are the one who's put in their nail

So I stay on the freeway, my exit not for miles
Gotta keep the flow of traffic I wouldn't dare defile
My face is not wet, but my eyes want to be
It's on these roads that I want to be free



Blake Van Orman
**SONNET IN MEMORY OF MY CAR,
TOO GOOD FOR THIS WORLD**

You died one day a sudden death,
Released at the head of the road.
I spied the parting of your breath,
And called my dad to have you towed.

Your chrome-fraught heart neglects my hands
Who made your spirit good as new.
My own dull life makes false demands
That you return from where you flew.

To open space where life's expelled,
My heart has turned away and blind.
To pent spaces like your soul was held,
Without you, love, I'm thus confined.

No taxi rides in rightful ways –
I miss you, car, that drives my days.



Janet Chong

MUSIC IS THE COLOR OF MY LIFE

Can you imagine living life without music? Commuting to school or work in silence. Dancing at weddings or festivities in silence. Battling emotional turmoil in silence. The days would feel monotonously gray, like walking through a world without color. Life would be eerily quiet—but mostly just *crappy*.

I can't for the life of me remember the name of my best friend or homeroom teacher from second grade. But what I can tell you is the name of my first favorite Korean pop group, the song, and the song's track number on my mom's burned CD. The group was G.O.D. and their song "My Mother" was track number four. To anyone thinking my mom singed her CD, burning a CD was what dinosaurs did to copy downloaded songs onto a blank disc to play in cars or share with friends.

This was the greeting I would voice the moment I stepped into my mom's idling van from the school parking lot: "Mom, can you play track four?"

"Hello to you, too, Janet." She would scowl back as her fingers instinctively sped through the tracks until the familiar intro of my K-pop jam began to play.

These modest interactions with my mother became the norm for any new song obsessions fueled by her CD playlist. My first encounters with popular Korean songs, better known as K-pop, developed through my mother's musical preferences. Having immigrated from South Korea to the United States at 21, she used music as a method to stay connected with her family and be up to date with her culture back home. Her enthusiasm, along with the limited number of songs that could be burned onto a CD, catapulted my fascination with K-pop like a moth to a flame. Enamored with the catchy beats and sparkly eye-catching stage outfits worn by these fair-skinned celebrities, K-pop ignited my 7-year-old career aspirations to become a star. Losing myself to the stories and melodies of K-pop, I would transport myself into an imaginary land where I became a world-famous pop princess dazzling my adoring fans with my lyrical music and choreographed dance. Alas, the philosopher Lucius Seneca once said, "When one beginning reaches its end, it is time for a new beginning," which is exactly what happened with my interest in K-pop.

Age 12 marked a new chapter in my life. I was moving to bigger and better things; I was finally moving onto middle school. With a newfound understanding of independence, since I now autonomously walked to and from school, came the steady decline of my infatuation with Korean music. Music continued to be a muse for my daydreams, but my preferences grew wings and took flight with the introduction of American pop, hip hop, and R&B from the 2000s. Although in more recent years Korean music has gained global popularity due to K-pop groups such as BTS and Blackpink taking the American music scene by storm, that was not the case during my youth. Korean songs were different and foreign, thus deemed "uncool" for any pubescent middle schooler trying to fit in and feel accepted. Gone were the days of listening to music with my mom in the van and wanting to learn more Korean to understand the melodic lyrics of K-pop.

I wanted to be American, which meant listening to more Britney Spears songs, fawning over the Backstreet Boys, and dressing like Missy Elliott. Besides distancing myself from Korean music, I boycotted all things Korean, which spawned an emotionally exhausting identity crisis.

“You don’t understand me!” I would often cry out to my mother in my all-black ensemble to express my displeasure at everything under the sun.

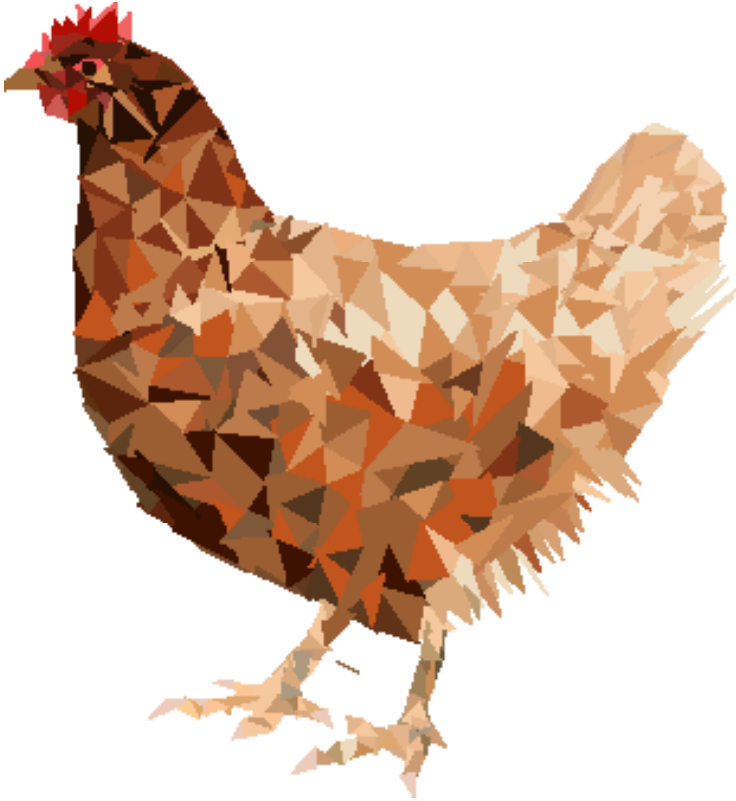
“*Can you imagine living life without music?*”

Luckily nothing lasts forever, and the sun will rise tomorrow. I shed this angsty period like a snake sheds its skin as I transitioned into adulthood. Music now has taught me to understand my emotions in ways that words alone could never do. Just like magic, different genres of music have the power to elicit happy, sad, or nostalgic feelings—or even to make me feel empowered. Listening to Lizzo’s “Good as Hell” or Demi Lovato’s *Confident* album are the boosts of dopamine I need to conquer my day, while chill lo-fi songs by Keshi have the capacity to put me in a contemplative and introspective mood. Additionally, music is a form of therapy that has helped me acknowledge feelings of sadness or anger, making it easier to process my emotions and move on. As I grew older, my music tastes finally became my own as I explored different genres and diverse styles, selecting music that catered to my self-expression. Music is a force to be reckoned with!

To respond to my earlier question, my answer is simply “No.” I could not imagine a life devoid of music. I could not imagine getting ready in the morning with nothing but the sound of my thoughts to keep me company. I could not live my life like a colorless silent movie. The silence would be deafening.



Carol Kelley
HAPPY HEN



Digital

Akela Craig
CATCH OF THE DAY



Ceramic

Sebastian Valadez

DANTE THE PSEUDONATURALIST

FICTION

There is something to be said about the empty, sheltered life of poor Dante. His mother cooked him food before and after school, and thus he had every delicate homemade sentiment of a good home. He studied well; he slept well. His lungs and mind were as clear as the difference between gloaming and daybreak. Yet, despite these blessings of health and comfort, an emptiness resided in his gut. His sole friendship had become a distant one. His friend, Hunter Riesgo, was an adventurous type who had gone out of his way to explore the United States, existing more as a concept now than a person.

Every couple of months, Dante received a text. Cell phone service was a godsend out there, one would suppose. But Dante felt a wave of anxiety in his chest when he read Hunter's latest text: "Hey Buddy, finish up college and come on some adventures with me." This was followed by some emoticons of trees. The text suggested good intentions but felt like a taunt toward Dante, who was envious of his friend's free life. Hunter knew Dante could study the works of Thoreau and Emerson all he liked, but no intellectual tree brought greater fruit than actually venturing into the outdoors, where Hunter was. But the risks Hunter took made Dante nervous. Brief research into Olympic National Park, Hunter's next planned trip, brought about a spiral of catastrophizing in Dante's mind. *Black bears, a common inhabitant of the park, are mostly harmless, killing less than one person a year.*

As he read, Dante sat in the superstition that seeing this statistic and at the same time receiving Hunter's invitation would be a cruel way to, by misfortune, experience the worst of whatever cruelty life could proffer. Dante vividly imagined the experience of going on a trip with Hunter to the spiritually liberating wilderness.

“He would play nature in a game of odds, regardless of the terror accompanying the sliver of doubt.”

Hunter and Dante sat under the darkness of night in the depths of Olympic National Park. They were warm in their pale blue and orange tent, with thermoses and packs littered about their campground. Their cell phones were dead, and they had gone days without seeing another person. They were isolated and free to do as they pleased. Dante passed Hunter a beer.

"Want something to drink?" Dante said. "You're out of luck if you crave a soda. I've got water that was put through a filter or a lukewarm beer. Dealer's choice." He shook the can as if dangling a carrot in front of Hunter.

“C’mon, man. Don’t play around like that. I’ve been sober for three days and you’re just playing with me. The last time I got drunk in a park like this, I lost my car for six hours. Swear I felt like I was hallucinating.” He whined on the edge of giving in to his vice, so Dante retreated.

“All right,” Dante said. “I’m sorry. I’m just testing the waters—they say giving something up comes with the risk of losing an innate part of you, ya know? Speaking of hallucinations, care to help me scavenge for some mushrooms in the morning? I found a mean ol’ Japanese recipe online that I would just about kill to try. There’s a limit to how much I can take, but no one’s gonna know. I’ve been in societal shackles my whole life and I will not be the one worrying about some bastard rule of ‘only one quart of mushrooms per person, per day.’ Our spirits never die so long as we keep to our more free and infinite selves!” Dante cheered as though an epiphany had taken hold of his soul and made it whole. In reality, he was just not used to so much clean air. He was elated.

Dante had left his home across the country, having developed a rancor for living amongst the entitled and comfortable. His friend, Hunter, needed some company to find himself, and Dante happily obliged. Can’t go a lifetime of knowing somebody and not go on a winter break trip with ‘em at least once. In response to a text message with an invite from Hunter, Dante promptly said, “Yes.” They then made the necessary flights and drives to make it happen. No worries, only self-exploration.

“Yeah man, we can get you some mushrooms. We should take a rest soon. I want to get up early and climb Hurricane Ridge, too.” Hunter yawned at the end of his sentence and Dante took the hint.

Hunter had been on these trips for months at a time. His principal fear was being locked up in his hometown—with all the hate and love that resides there. Hunter had taken off with nothing but the small amount of money he had in a savings account and a job lined up at a national park a few states away. He had a couple of weeks before that job started and wanted Dante to come with him. He knew Dante to be the “explore yourself” type, but Hunter often ridiculed him for only exploring the philosophy of naturalists as opposed to exploring nature. Dante needed to get some dirt under his nails; it would make him tougher, smarter even.

They slept. Serenity hugged them in their sleeping bags. Something about being in communion with nature brings out the best of slumbers. They dreamt about the beauty of the glaciers and the beauty of the people they had left back home. Self-exploration sometimes comes with loss. It can mean waging the possibility of never seeing a pretty smile again, betting that life would be better off without seeing your brother, sister, or your loyal pet dog.

“Ay, man, wake up. Let’s go.” Hunter was always eager to wake up at the earliest possible moment.

“All right, sergeant. You didn’t tell me it was a hike at 0400. Relax. Let me... collect myself.” Dante was sleepy as a sloth and moved his limbs like one, too.

“Remember back in the day when you used to bug me about being 15 minutes late to class? Get up.” Hunter poked Dante in the ribs a few times through his sleeping bag.

“Get up, man,” Hunter said with finality. “I don’t want the sun being up and ruining the sight up there. Plus, it gets cold so I want to spend more time warming up.”

Dante got up and had a busted-up granola bar for breakfast. He ruminated on the lack of huevos rancheros or café con leche from his mother, but such things did not exist where he was. Dante was on the verge of packing it all up. A new life is scary, and a new life is death. But he loved Hunter like a brother and marched in synchronized rhythm to the foot of the Hurricane Ridge trail.

Although Hunter was a great leader, he didn't talk much. Tranquil as a dead mouse, he continued hiking. Internally, though, he was not so silent. He recalled that Dante's friendship was happenstance. Probability united their two souls to tread up a ridge, to look at snow, to be human. One classroom seating assignment led to the most hearty of human endeavors: traversing the scary outdoors that he loved so much. It brought him freedom. It brought him free choice. Hunter was glad he was not alone. After all, there's some misery in packing up your whole life and threading a needle through the eye of self-doubt. But he had sent a text to Dante, and to Hunter's surprise, he had accepted.

A few brisk, tedious hours later, they reached the summit. There were only a few other people up there. A man from across the country took photographs. An athletic couple in matching maroon tracksuits rejoiced. Hunter and Dante sat in cold stillness in their all-black winter apparel.

Hunter said bluntly, "Sure beats going to school, right?"

Dante replied, "Sure beats being stuck at home." Intoned through the icy air, his voice reflected a sense of dissatisfaction. The snow on the summit was perfect. It was as white as styrofoam, as shiny as the smiles that began to evade their faces now. They knew they would have to leave at some point. A few minutes passed and they picked up their stuff and descended from Hurricane Ridge.

"Man, it's all so hard. But this makes it all worth it. Ever wonder what it'd be like if we weren't friends?" Hunter always started thoughtful conversations on the way back down from hikes.

"Not at all, bro. It feels like we were meant to be friends. By the way... I have a feeling we should head back to town soon. We're cutting it a bit close. I have to be back home in two days to start getting ready for the semester."

"Yeah man, whatever. I'll miss you man. You've never done me wrong. Thank you for coming."

The way back to their camp was eight miles. Dante had left out all of the sugary beverages, along with trail mix. Neither one of them thought about that small chance.

Black bears, a common inhabitant of Olympic National Park, are mostly harmless, killing less than one person per year. Don't leave food out! Almost anything smells like food to a black bear. They're always curious!

Dante and Hunter walked the eight miles back, exchanging stories of past and future, and at times sharing a beautiful silence. Returning, Hunter went to urinate behind a tree but found himself locking eyes with a hungry black bear.

"Hey, Dante. There's a bear over here. It won't attack if we just chill."

"Yeah right, don't fuck with me."

Dante threw a can of beer at Hunter while he finished urinating. It was a cruel joke. To Dante, it was funny to interrupt a private moment with a poke at his friend's ex-alcoholism. Shelter and comfort make one unaware of reality. A joke has the potential to be not just a joke, and only a raw experience would teach Dante that.

The black bear rushed and threw out a paw at Hunter, knocking him unconscious. The bear took off after the defensive move had been made. Shock would be the wrong description for Dante's feelings—premature grief was making its way through his thoughts. His friend was unresponsive.

And that's where Dante's catastrophizing ended. Probability made him nervous. In a moment, the story of Hunter and Dante in Olympic National Park made his heart sink and his hands tremble. A new life is terrifying. A new life is death.

"Sure, bud!" The text was sent along with a happy emoticon. He would play nature in a game of odds, regardless of the terror accompanying the sliver of doubt. Dante looked at the wildflowers outside his empty, cramped room once again. He made the arrangements and would have to hope that nature would allow him to see the pretty smiles of his hometown again. He would choose to benefit on a selfish level, to acquire liberation from the crampedness, from the comfort. He would be connected to his infinite self.



Christina Galindo

WHAT IF

I jolt awake to the shrieks of my subconscious. The same recurring thoughts that have plagued my prefrontal cortex since the fragile age of nine. Death, death, death. The image of my loved ones' faces propelling through a windshield at a speed of 90 miles per hour replays in a loop. I imagine myself waiting for their return home, which will never come, with the only remaining utterances being that of a voicemail recording. I picture myself at their funeral sulking on the soggy grass. How will I carry on in an empty home with no one to converse with but my brooding subconscious? I hear the words of my psychologist telling me my thoughts aren't reality and to just breathe, but what if they do become a reality? And I'm already fucking breathing. How else am I still alive? My stomach churns with the realization that maybe she doesn't have all the answers. Who is she anyway? Just another person with a framed degree hanging above her pathetic office mantle sign, which reads, "Live Laugh Love." And I'm supposed to take advice from someone who owns such a sign? I laugh to myself at the simplicity of its auspicious nature that somehow still makes me dour. At least it got me laughing...

OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) has a funny way of putting the mind into complete disillusion with even the most ridiculous ideations. Last week, I assumed my boyfriend Adam despised me because I replied to his text with a period instead of an exclamation point. Was I lacking the enthusiasm needed to keep the spark alive? Surely he was on his way to a dazzling girl's house to show her my pathetic replies. Echoing in my ear canals, their booming laughter turned to moans. That's when I looked up and noticed I was at work staring at the computer screen for fifteen minutes. The phone rang for who knows how long and my manager gave me a sardonic glare, asking without words, "Are you gonna get that?" First I'd have to answer the call of my intrusive red alerts.

Born with a yield sign attached to my forehead, I was a back bedroom casualty as a child. The window above me was my only listener and boy did I put on a show. Disguised within my fortress was a shy girl who took comfort in books and movies, pretending to be my favorite characters and rewriting the ending (adding more theatrics, of course). Yet being alone came with its quirks. What I call perfectionism is what other people would call abnormalcy. When reaching a new chapter of a book, I had to blink four times. Not five, not two, not three. Four. I took comfort in even numbers and things being uniform. I couldn't use the bathroom unless the rug was perfectly straight, or I would feel a deep sense of annoyance and anxiety. Don't even get me started on diseases. I made a hypochondriac look fearless by the way I was paranoid about developing just about any sickness with the ultimate conclusion that I was already dead meat before even contracting it. And so the hand washing and cleaning of every door knob ensued, sending my mom into a frenzy.

"Why would you feel the need to do this?" she cried. "Don't you know you're being paranoid?"

I don't think my parents understood what OCD was as they are very much the type A, Mr. and Mrs. Fix It kind of couple. I blame this on their baby boomer

generation treating any kind of mental illness like a folktale. Talking about your feelings was as rare as finding a parking spot in central LA. They didn't talk; they solved their own problems. And that's exactly what they expected me to do. My mom's insistence that my hands would crack and bleed if I continued compulsively washing actually scared me enough to stop that habit. However, all of my physical manifestations turned into mental ones.

“The realization sank in that I’m so afraid of dying that I haven’t even lived yet.”

The media portrays OCD as mainly repetitive hand washing and organizing, resulting in people coining the phrase “I’m soooo OCD” if they simply just clean their house. However, the monster within can take many shapes. You might convince yourself you’re a murderer one day and a child molester another, despite not committing those crimes. My fear of germs shifted to catastrophizing almost every situation. Car accidents in particular evoked a certain type of dread. Even though I’ve never been in one, I still worried about my loved ones disappearing from this earth just as sporadically as they arrived.

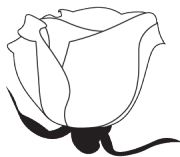
The crazy part is I’ve never considered any of my worries far-fetched or unrealistic. Life is a game of luck after all. In the fraction of a second, one can delay driving to the next signal just long enough to avoid getting hit by another driver who runs a red light. If the first driver hadn’t waited, they would have been killed. I might’ve decided to go to a club on Tuesday only to find out that the same club was the scene of a mass shooting on Wednesday. One moment you might pick out fruit in a supermarket, only to be obliterated by a stroke the next. The only logical solution for me to escape danger is by receding into my bedroom, locking myself in with a ball and chain attached to my ankle. This seemed like a viable option until a recent nightmare in which I was a feeble old lady with little mobility or dignity. My joints cracked with every movement, and death was in the next room waiting for me. People say life flashes before their eyes amid one’s life slipping. Mine did as well, but it was not colorful. It was not glorious or memorable, and it lacked any sort of substance or adventure. It was empty, cold, and lonely. I woke up shivering and permeated with sweat. The realization sank in that I’m so afraid of dying that I haven’t even lived yet.

It wasn’t until the start of college that I decided to take action and seek help for my issues. I’m not much of a talker and never have been, so therapy seemed equivalent to Chinese water torture. I’d often get defiant and challenge my shrink, wondering how she could have so much positivity in a world full of mayhem and disarray. However, what I took away from the experience is that life is a bunch of what ifs. Question marks pave life from beginning to end; avoidance and fear only raise different what ifs. What if I traveled across Europe and got back in one piece? What if I took a two-day road trip and returned unscathed? What if I took risks and experienced joy?

I think back to my eleven-year-old self walking up the hill after school to meet my mom at the pickup spot. My stomach churned with nausea, and every shaky

step was riddled with anxiety. I muttered affirmations to myself like a crazy person. My eyes stung from trying to hold back tears, expecting not to see her silver Lexus then or ever. While these thoughts consumed my childhood, the self-awareness I've developed over the years has allowed me to put up a stronger mental fight as an adult. What if I have a great day today? What if everything works out? What if I achieve contentment after all? These sentences became my daily mantra.

I am twenty-three years old. I exit my new therapist's office (not the one with the Live, Laugh, Love sign), greeted by the warm sun as I head toward the freshly paved parking lot. As I buckle my seatbelt, I think about the possibility of dying on the way home. My chest tightens, and I realize I forgot to breathe.



Hailie Labonté
NEEDLE



Ink & White Pencil

Ari Linder
DEIFICATION

According to the pantheon I have formed in my dreams--
made flesh now through my poems
glide into dim lights, gold mirrored in my teeth
my skin: ethereal sheath--
I worship only mental states, the fragments of small bones,
bones smooth, with even seams

necessarily, because my prayers are too much or
too private for a god who
is less than perfect. I dance for incomplete observers
who won't recall my fervors.
Give truth to those who speak in tongues. With songs I do accrue
Repeat them to the Self, more

a pharmacon than god wants to admit. Reception of
red wine and thick-rolled blunt more
inspiring than I too want to admit. But welcome--
of course always welcome...
my soft small face is not my own. my inner thighs are sore.
Transient immortality, when push comes to shove.

Alex Hartmann

EVE



Pencil

Lizeth Tello

HEAVEN AND HELL

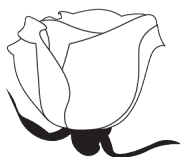
FICTION

I shouldn't do this. That is what I told myself as I stared at the temptation occupying the table space in front of me. At least, that is what I tried to tell myself. It was one of those days, when I would feel small, insignificant and worthless. I hated these feelings, but it was not like I could really help it. Or maybe I could, but I did not have the willpower or the strength to make the necessary changes. This was the easiest route and one I have taken countless times before.

There were probably healthier ways of dealing with my problems, but like a siren, it would always beckon me, teasing and seducing me with its irresistible smell and appearance. It promised pleasure, peace, and an escape from my current reality, and I couldn't help but to be drawn to it. There have been times when I have struggled to escape from its grasp on me. But each time I was given a hard reminder of how cruel and cold the world outside could be, I would come running back, ready to be embraced by its comforting hold once again.

It is my addiction, my guilty pleasure. I have gained 20 more pounds since the last time I was courageous enough to check my weight. I have cried countless times after seeing the number increase on my scale. It was that exact number that haunted my mind as I stared down at the food before me. As usual, I had gone out and purchased a variety of foods. I bought burgers, sandwiches, fries, onion rings, and a bunch of other greasy delicacies that no human should ever be able to eat in one sitting. Yet here I was with the food right in front of me—about to do just that.

I knew that doing this would not help me in any way. I knew that each calorie I consumed would push me deeper into the hole I have found myself in. If I were a stronger person, perhaps I would stop my wallowing and climb out of that god-forsaken pit, but I am not strong. I am weak and my will is currently, and forever, bound to the American cuisine in front of me. I give in and reach for a burger. As I take the first bite, I feel a mixture of both heaven and hell. The relief is my heaven. The action is my sin and the emptiness I feel after finishing my full plate of food is the hell that I live in.



Sarah Mohareb
SEEING RED



Acrylic on Canvas

Lilly Reed

RED

FICTION

The apartment was so quiet. I like the quiet, but I wasn't used to this kind of silence. I walked back into the bathroom, where the bathtub was a mess, with red splattered all inside of it. The red was deep and thick, and it would leave a stubborn stain. I'm not entirely sure why I chose red as my new hair color, other than the opportunity to use it presented itself to me. As lovely as red is, it's extremely messy. I looked around to see how much of a mess the rest of my bathroom was. There was red splattered on the floor, on the countertops, all over my towels, just everywhere. Despite all this, something about my red-stained hands bothered me the most.

I turned to the mirror and stared at myself, raking my fingers through my hair. They didn't comb through easily, getting snagged on knots from the thick color that I caked in, ensuring a lasting effect. I leaned forward on the white marble countertop, examining my reflection. How many times have I stood in this spot getting ready for the day, getting unready, or even just staring? Staring at myself until I couldn't recognize the person looking back at me. I like to watch myself cry sometimes, just to see what I look like. The worst is when I have to get ready, but I can't stop crying, like a leaky faucet that won't turn off. Tears smudging my mascara, streaking my foundation, ruining the painting that I delicately craft every single day, ruining the illusion.

When I brought my attention back to my reflection, I noticed that I was actually crying. Tears glistened down my cheeks, following their familiar pattern on my face. I felt sad for the girl before me. I turned the corners of my mouth up into a smile, reassuring her that we were turning over a new leaf. After tonight, I would emerge into the world a new person; I would no longer need that old illusion to protect me. Everything I had known was a lie. My life was a lie. I would rebuild it myself.

I glanced at my hair again, still marinating in the chemical color. Have you ever thought about how red is such an adaptable color? There's burgundy, scarlet, maroon, rose, crimson—the list goes on. Each shade has a different meaning. Take maroon, for example: it's a darker, richer shade of red, but it's burned, unlike scarlet red, which is more vibrant. Maroon can indicate a forceful passion, one with mysterious depth, but with the potential for abandonment. Scarlet, on the other hand, is more assertive in its indications of sin and immoral behavior, often associated with adultery.

I glanced down at the drops of red on the countertops. Red has a universal meaning along with those corresponding to each individual shade: anger. Deep down, I'm a very angry person, but I've always hidden it. My anger has been my little secret that I ignore until I'm away from all other people, like a dirty mistress that could ruin my life if anyone found out. However, I don't believe my anger is unique. I think it's a feeling specific to women. It's the feeling of burning in our chests as we need to scream or else we'll be devoured by the beast inside us. The beast that feeds off the everyday reassurances of the idea that women are inferior

simply because we are women. This beast makes us feel like we are on the brink of madness every single day.

I took a deep breath and pushed myself away from the counter before taking one last look at my reflection. My eyes were red, and you could see the streaks of dried tears. I was wearing a large white t-shirt that fit like a dress, which now was littered with bits of red. My hair was slicked back, but a few pieces fell in front of my face, and it looked like I had purposely styled it with a gel or spray. I turned my head left and right, posing for myself. Red really was going to be my color.

“I pictured the red cleansing me as it dripped down my skin.”

As I started to prepare for the last steps of the dying process, I kept thinking about anger. I have observed several ways that women cope with their rage, but I'm not too fond of some of them. I've seen a lot of women, especially younger women, molding their anger into something that's easy for others to digest. It got me thinking. Why do girls feel the need to contextualize their feelings, especially in a way that romanticizes their struggles? We feel the need to put our problems into a pretty little box and tie it with a pretty little bow, so that when others peek inside, they're uncomfortable with what they find, but the presentation allows them to minimize the severity of what we're presenting. They understand the depth and gravity of what they're seeing, but they still can laugh at it. We categorize our emotions and disorders into pieces of media that say exactly how we feel because we can't find the words to express it. It minimizes our vulnerability, but that is a double-edged sword. Our anger is not an aesthetic. It's real, it's raw, and it's dangerous. It's a catastrophic, deadly explosion every time a woman's heart has been struck by someone else's misstep and wrongdoing.

I hadn't personally known about this explosion until today. It was like an out-of-body experience—like I had been possessed by the Devil herself. The poor guy couldn't have seen it coming, but how could he have? He didn't know that I knew. When he offhandedly mentioned this morning that he thought I would look nice with blonde hair, the beast was released. I was screaming bloody murder, thrashing around like a wounded animal, throwing anything I could wherever I could. Stuff was everywhere: outside, in the hallway, on the stairs. It took him a few hours to collect everything, but I wasn't there to see it. I was at the drugstore.

Before I turned the shower on to rinse the color out of my hair, I set up a mirror on the shelf so that I could savor this moment, the final step of a personal transformation. Once I was sure I would be able to see myself clearly, I turned the shower on and stepped inside. I held my hand out to the water, which was cold but warming up little by little. I turned around to face the mirror. I watched myself slowly step backward into the streaming water.

Red was everywhere. It was a deep, thick red. It glistened down my cheeks, all over my face. It poured down my neck, onto my shoulders, through the fabric of my shirt. It was in my eyes. It was in my mouth, with a sort of metallic taste. I looked in the mirror as the red got darker and thicker the further I went into

the water. I closed my eyes and completely submerged myself. I pictured the red cleansing me as it dripped down my skin. I opened my eyes and smiled at myself in the mirror as more and more red streamed out of my hair. I began posing again, turning my head left and right. I ran my hands through my hair, squeezing out more and more red.

I started giggling at just how silly I was to let myself believe that I should be ashamed of my anger. I was so silly to lock those feelings away out of fear of making those around me uncomfortable. I started laughing. I could feel the red, hot rage running through my fingers, streaming down my face! This is what happens when the beast that once devoured us becomes our ally. This is the aftermath of the boiling, bubbling explosion: I get to play with the leftover pieces. My body felt numb; the only thing I could feel was red. The thick, warm, red liquid ran through my fingers as I grabbed at my hair. As it ran over my face, eyes, mouth, and ears, I became aware that I couldn't hear anything. I looked back at myself in the mirror to see that I wasn't laughing anymore. My mouth was wide open, and veins were popping out of my neck and forehead. I was screaming.

After some time, I stepped out of the shower and grabbed an already-stained towel to dry my hair. I looked down at my shirt to see that it, too, was stained red, but I was curious now to see which stains would be the hardest to get out. Would it be the fabric stains? The stained wood floors? The stained marble countertops? The stained carpet? My guess was that my hands would be the most troubling stain, and isn't that such a cliché?

After some more time, my hair was finally dry. I had been avoiding looking at myself in the mirror until this point. I turned around and I smiled at my reflection, pleased with my work. Now that it was dry, I could finally pinpoint what shade this was. My hair was a striking blood red.



Maya Rosales
RED



Scratchboard

Paige Kujan

GENTLE FEVER

I pray to none that I may know
What calls to man to let love grow.
Fear is lesser known to this:
Lost, eternal, my abyss
Here echoes affection true
Muffled is the sound,
Blurry is the hue.

Gaze still upon my harbored soul
In the palms of a tempered fool
I held my breath at your witness,
Wanted you, turned and missed it.
Wait to see me fail you, love,
Deserting every gracious kiss
Avoiding love's truest bliss,
Falling, still, into it.

But I'd sooner to enemy drawn
Give them lands and give them pawns
Than have them take what I have meager,
A willful Love, a gentle fever.

Jaz
HEART OF STONE



Photograph

Stephen Myer
LANGUOROUS ASIA
(HER NAME)

Languorous Asia, cold extinct,
Lives in memories of fragrant drink.
Others sailed past luring shores
Whilst I flew on her winds for more.

In a harsh and distant land
Where water turns to burning sand.
Her body large, her spirit weak,
Still, her love I yearned to seek.

I landed in her dream and then,
Rode in coffins of young men.
Come, let me cool you with my fan,
She waved with perfume's flaming hand.

Her scent and mind were different things,
The first for lust, the next for kings.
My heat burned through a thousand moods,
Then left me in her tent to brood.

Tread ancient rivers, climb tall crests,
Litigate whilst we undressed.
Then held 'twas I to pray or die,
In tombs beneath a falling sky.

Her star for me no longer shines.
I stole the sun so I'd survive.
Sweet incantations sung in vain,
Her invitations laced with pain.

Many lives I've been away.
Still her voice calls every day.
Whilst my mind once sought her will,
Time has now eclipsed the thrill.

Jessie Lee Bledsoe
THE SIREN



Photograph

Daniel Wheelock

LOVE, LITHIUM, AND ICHTHYOLOGY

Mark had always planned on telling the mermaid. Eventually. Just not yet. Not when things were going so well. His chronic depression wasn't the easiest thing to disclose to a new girlfriend at the best of times, but with the mermaid, everything was trickier. She was a woman of New Age sensibilities, a force of life, crunchier than the organic granola she habitually grazed, always rambling on about healing the body and mind through the energy of nature and the ocean and little gift shop crystals propped on the nightstand next to her lumpy futon. Western medicine was the great evil. Everything from aspirin to Flintstone vitamins she considered malicious poisons. How could Mark tell that beautiful, exuberant fish woman that he was popping three different antidepressants daily, just to scrape by?

They met back at the start of the pandemic, those early days when panic was spreading and all the geezers were dropping like flies. That was when Mark first fell for the mermaid, or rather, a Turkish vegan with huge feet. Lean and lovely, browned by the sun, she was a sea creature if ever there was one, her toes eternally sandy. She told him to call her Leslie. She'd just returned home after years of traveling the world. Cage diving with behemoth great whites in South Africa. Ice bathing off the frigid coast of Denmark. Motorbiking through the Nicaraguan jungle in search of the perfect wave. She'd done it all—lived the life of a surfer turned yogi, a life brimming with exploration and adventure, the kind of life Mark had always dreamt about but had never been happy or brave enough to reach for.

Mark should have known their first date would be at the beach. It was Leslie's natural habitat, the only place that seemed safe enough to chat unmasked with the pandemic raging all around. Sitting side by side, towels touching, they made small talk over the rumble of the waves. Mark couldn't help but notice Leslie burying her big feet under the sand. She was embarrassed by them—her flippers she called them. Two broad brown paddles with round toes at the end. He told her she had nothing to worry about; her flippers were large, yes, but not unsightly. They had to come in handy during her daily swims in the sea, Mark thought, helping her strong legs propel her through the tumbling surf with ease. The conversation meandered to her vegan lifestyle.

"It's really the only sane choice for individual health and the health of a happy world," Leslie said with pride.

Mark thought about never eating another chicken nugget for the rest of his life. "Here's a joke," he said with a smile. "How do you know if someone's a vegan? Don't worry. They'll tell you about ten seconds after you meet them."

Leslie frowned. "Do we really come across that way?"

Mark shrugged. "Honestly I find it admirable that you've chosen to forgo meat... dairy... basic happiness for the good of the planet."

"Yes, I sleep well at night knowing that my stomach is no longer a graveyard for loving, innocent creatures."

"Yeesh," Mark said. A cool breeze began to sweep across the baking sand.

“Let’s go for a swim,” Leslie said.

“Yes, let’s,” Mark replied with feigned enthusiasm, already dreading a “refreshing” dip in the brisk April sea. Leslie stood up from her towel and ran towards the water, those flippers of hers creating huge divots in the soggy sand before she dove headfirst into a crashing wave and disappeared, emerging from the foam, her sun-beaten hair now dark with surf and salt.

Mark pretended the water wasn’t frigid as it numbed his shin bones, smiling stupidly as he shuffled into the waves. After a burst of courage, he, too, emerged from under a swell, heart pounding with the cold of it, the excitement of Leslie’s presence. When they came trudging in from the water, Mark made a bold move and took her hand in his, and when she squeezed back, a sharp stinging pain shot up from his foot. He thought he’d stepped on a jellyfish or some displeased tiny crustacean, but the truth was he was already a goner. He’d just fallen in love.

“That was when the fish woman entered his life.”

Smitten as he was, Mark’s life before meeting Leslie had sputtered into a state of stale misery. He was sunk, mired in it, staring down a crossroads he’d long dreaded. Down one path was the somber and rather selfish option of checking out early, taking one long last look at life and washing his hands of the whole baffling ordeal. A permanent solution to a temporary problem, his psychiatrist insisted, yet Mark wasn’t so sure. He’d always been the downhearted sort, a proverbial party pooper. It was a predisposition, the way he acted, a chemical imbalance that darkened certain lobes of an otherwise shining mind, as if he were stuck watching a colorful world through a dingy DMV window.

The drugs helped—a little. A daily deluge of pharmaceuticals allowed Mark to function for decent chunks of time at the office. After crashing back home, alcohol brought it all back down to the familiar depths, where the water was just right. He would sit on his couch in silence, swigging Two Buck Chuck straight from the bottle, pickling in despair, waiting for his phone to buzz, each dating app ding a brief burst of dopamine in an otherwise isolated existence. That was when the fish woman entered his life.

It was obvious why Mark liked Leslie. Everyone did. A fact she was keenly aware of, having attracted people with her unprocessed effervescence her entire life. What took Mark longer to compute was why Leslie liked him back. At all. He wasn’t a swami or a yogi or a reiki healer. He liked a pork chop as much as the next guy. He wasn’t even particularly fond of her other love, the ocean. He’d surfed as a kid, sure, but now he set foot in the green sea about once a year, finding the waters off the California coast to be too brisk even in the summer months.

What Mark eventually realized was that he was, for all intents and purposes, a rock. More of a romantic paperweight. An anchor for Leslie’s listless spirit, someone to ground her, bring her back down from the clouds, the heights of impractical, idealized living. It was no coincidence that the mermaid was a Libra. Though

Mark thought little of astrology, if there was one thing his cloudy at best demeanor was good for, it was counterbalancing Leslie's buoyant spirit.

Now, everyone knows mermaids are apt to loathe only one aspect of life, that being the end of it, the very concept of mortality. Leslie was no exception. Her love of living was infectious and intoxicating. As news of the rising pandemic death toll spread through the airwaves, she grew increasingly alarmed.

"This is so depressing," Leslie said.

"Tell me about it..." Mark laughed nervously.

"I just wish I could help those poor people. COVID really does a number on the chakras."

"Yeah, the chakra stuff is the worst part, I hear." He nodded.

"You're such a doofus." Leslie sighed with a smile.

They spent the summer months at the beach, basking in sunshine, trying to tune out the dour tidings that surrounded them. Mark was becoming more amphibious by the day, swimming next to Leslie, trying to keep up. He'd weaned himself off his drinking habit since Leslie didn't touch the stuff. Ate vegan with her every other night. His pale skin grew tan and taut as his small beer belly receded. They practiced yoga on the sand, a struggle considering Mark's lack of limberness, but the effects were undeniable. Mark looked good, or, at the very least, better. More importantly, he felt like a million bucks. All thanks to the mermaid.

It had been six months, however, and Mark continued to hide his prescription bottles every time Leslie spent the night at this apartment. Love, or infatuation, was turning out to be the strongest antidepressant of them all, but still, Mark faithfully choked down his handful of pills every morning, not ready to ditch his chemical crutches just yet. He knew he'd waited too long to tell Leslie, but things were improving, his outlook steadily brightening. He hoped that if he just kept hanging out with the mermaid, his depression would resolve itself. Then he could flush away those tiny orange pills and she would be none the wiser.

Summer gave way to fall and fall to winter. The days became shorter and colder, yet Leslie still took her daily swim in the ocean, seemingly impervious to the chilly water. Mark would watch her from the shore, teeth chattering just looking at her. With quarantine in full swing, they spent most of their time cooped up at his place, and it was in that dusty apartment that Leslie began to pine for her previous life of nomadic adventure.

"If we don't go somewhere soon, I'm gonna go cuckoo bananas," she said. Mark told Leslie he would take her anywhere she wanted, but their options were limited with the pandemic raging like wildfire. It was then that he suggested a trip to the mountains and maybe renting a snowy cabin where the two could get cozy and watch old movies next to a crackling hearth. Leslie was hesitant at first, having expressed her preference for a seaside getaway, but Mark assured her they would have a good time.

"Don't you think we've spent enough time at the beach?" he asked, to which she finally caved.

It was settled. Mark rented a cabin near the lake and on a cold and drizzly December day, the two set out for their alpine weekend. The rain had not let up as they approached the mountain slope, and as they climbed the road in Mark's sedan, streams of slush began to cover the asphalt with heavy, wet snowflakes falling all around. Before they knew what was happening, the blizzard was upon

them. After an hour and a half of white-knuckled, snow-chained driving past stranded cars and the plows digging them out, they arrived, collapsing into each other's arms on the quilt-covered mattress.

By morning the storm had passed, the winter sky now clear and piercingly blue. They decided to go for a hike through the snow to get some fresh air, and after a short trek down a gravel road, they stood at the frosty shore of the lake where Leslie began to undress.

"What are you doing?" Mark asked, masking the concern in his voice.

"Taking a dip."

"But it's literally freezing! Babe, come on."

"What are you worried about?" Leslie got down to her underwear and began to step forward, her large feet padding through the snow until she plunged an ankle into the icy lake, sending ripples that reflected the shining sun overhead. She waded through the mud, deeper and deeper until she finally dunked her shoulders in, up to her neck.

"It feels so good." She smiled, wide-eyed with adrenaline.

"You're crazy," Mark said, trying to hide his annoyance.

"Come in."

"Absolutely not."

Leslie shrugged and began to wade back to shore. After she dried herself with her sweatshirt and threw on her t-shirt and jeans, the two walked back to their cabin.

"You really should join me sometime," she said. "The cold makes you feel alive. It's like nothing else in the world."

Alive. Mark shuddered at the thought of submerging in the frigid water, feeling his heat, his very life being sucked from his body. Having always suffered from morbid ideation, he barely had enough life to go around as it was. He wished he was as fearless as Leslie, but it was a place he knew he wouldn't, or couldn't, follow her.

Mark remained silent as they made their way up the cabin steps. Once inside he started making their dinner, vegan chili, when he heard Leslie yell from the bedroom.

"I'm gonna move your suitcase. It's in the way of the dresser."

"Okay," he responded, chopping a bell pepper studiously. When he glanced up from his cutting board, he saw Leslie standing in front of him, holding one of his pill bottles.

"What is this?" she asked.

Mark set the knife down and put his hands behind his head as if in surrender.

"I uh... I take those. For depression. Sometimes."

"Lithium carbonate?"

"Yeah."

"There are other bottles in your pack. You take all of those?"

Mark gave Leslie a grim smile.

"Jesus, Mark. How bad is your depression?"

Leslie set the bottle down on the table.

"It hasn't been bad for a while, babe. Not since...well, not since I've met you."

"But you're still taking them?" Leslie asked.

"Yes. I am."

“Do you know how toxic this stuff is?” she said, staring into Mark’s eyes fiercely.

“I...” Mark stammered.

“Did you even try going vegan before you started taking these poisons? Acupuncture? Meditation? Things must have been pretty bad for you to take this shit.” Mark was at a loss for words. He never expected Leslie to react in such a way.

“Have you ever been suicidal?” she asked, taking a step back.

“I mean, maybe once or twice. I’ve never made any attempts or anything like that.”

Leslie brought her hands to her face, wiping away tears. The thought of Mark teetering so close to death seemed to be too much for her to bear.

“I need a walk,” she said. “Alone.”

Just like that, she was gone, leaving the cabin silent and cold. Mark sat down at the table, staring at the little bottle of pills before burying his head in his hands. It was hours before Leslie returned, after dark. Mark had made the chili, but she wasn’t hungry. A second storm was rolling in, powder falling from the sky in a flurry. Mark stoked the fire and the two of them sat by the window, staring into the snowy dark.

“Do you think there’s a future here?” she asked him, out of the blue.

Mark had done nothing but envision his future with Leslie from the first moment he laid eyes on her. “Maybe,” he said coolly.

“Yeah, maybe,” she said, drifting off.

“It hurt to breathe and hurt to sleep.”

The drive home was long and quiet. Mark dropped Leslie off at her place, wondering what he should do next. He returned to work as usual, still sent her a good morning text, but there was no response. Not until she reached out to him the next afternoon, asking him if they could walk the beach at sunset. Mark agreed, eager to see her. They ambled along the shore, chatting about the small and unimportant parts of their lives when Leslie stopped, taking Mark’s hand in her own.

“I’ve enjoyed our time together.” She smiled miserably.

“But?” Mark felt his heart sinking into his bowels.

“But I think I need to be alone. For now.”

“Ah. I understand.” Mark did not understand.

“I know you’ll find what you’re looking for,” she said. “But I can’t be your only happiness.”

It was then that Leslie kissed Mark’s cheek, let go of his hand and began to walk towards the water, stepping into the whitewash slowly, glancing back at him before wading deeper, up to her waist, then to her shoulder blades until, finally, she was gone, completely submerged. Mark never saw the mermaid again.

For a time, the loss of the fish woman was rough. Mark’s chest felt cored out, hollow, like a strong poke might go right on through. It hurt to breathe and hurt to sleep. Nothing was the same without her. He would sit and blubber on the toilet, scrolling through old photos of the two of them together, caving in on himself,

feeling like he'd never stop falling. And yet he noticed something different within himself. Something new. The path that he had so often pondered, the path that led to his own destruction, the path that now more than ever should have called his name was no longer one that interested him. Mark had loved Leslie. That much was true. But there was no reason that he couldn't love again. Feel alive again. A meager flame had been stoked, nestled amongst modest tinder, but it burned all the same, could not be extinguished.

Mark drove to the beach on a chilly January afternoon and strolled, as he often did, to the spot he and the mermaid first met, the same spot he'd last watched her slink beneath the waves. Staring into the orange murk of an overcast sunset, he stood a while at the shoreline, listening to the gulls singing their scavenger songs, sinking deeper into the soft sand as each wave lapped at his ankles. An endless expanse stretched before him, a gray horizon of both elation and grief, triumphs and troubles, a life waiting to be truly lived. Though the ocean was vast and the course uncharted, the water no longer seemed quite so cold.



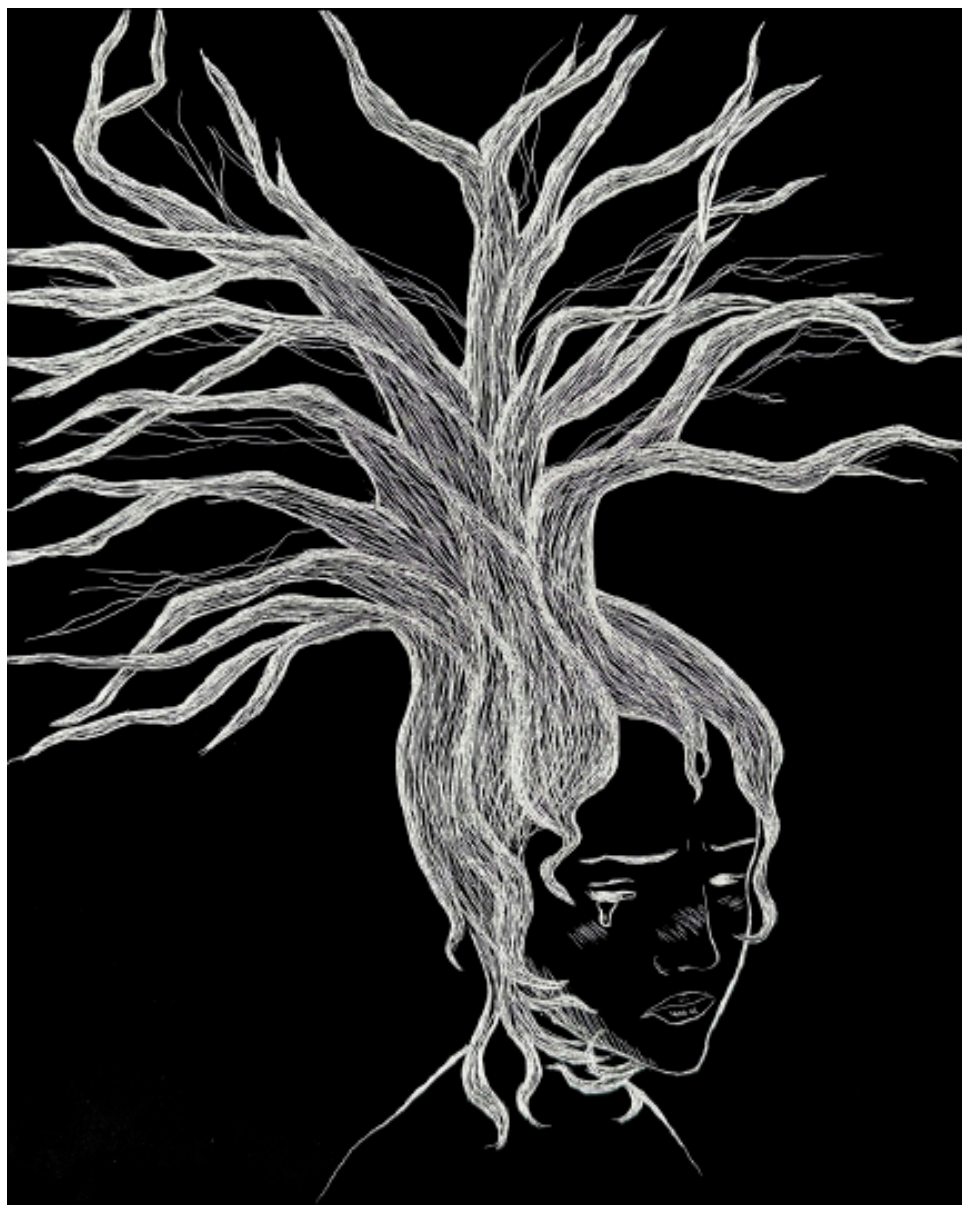
¡Ojo!
NO USE CRYING



Oil on Canvas

Hannah Lindeman

THE GIRL ON THE HILL



Scratchboard

AJ Knight
THE GIRL ON THE HILL

I awoke to the sound of a bell.
It kept ringing in my ear.
Whether this was hell or someplace else, I couldn't tell.
All I could see was the grass that was near.

I stood and saw a tree as the bell crescendoed
like the thump of my frantic heart.
As I walked to the tree, I saw a girl on the hill.
She didn't look at me and held her hand on the oak drifting apart.
As I walked closer, she stood still.

She was crying when I met her.
The sound of church bells grew louder.
It was just her and I. That's all there was.
She forced a smile that even made me a doubter.

Her eyes were the color of emerald and carried a longing to die
My eyes were blind to death but burning with love
Her reply was just as dry
As the sky above painted a dove

She made a request, and like a knight, I didn't decline.
After all, the girl on the hill was all but divine.

Kirsten Brehmer

WOMAN OF HIS DREAMS

There she is. The love of my life, walking a narrow path that leads to me. She's straight out of a fairytale. Her soft skin glows like a pearl. Lips painted red and eyes a shade of night. Her warm smile washes my nerves away. A white dress creates the illusion that she is floating on thin air. Rose petals gather in the train. Hair tucked behind her ears, with a veil resting above. There's the echo of a piano in the background, but all I can hear is my own heart's beat. The closer she gets to me, the more beautiful she becomes. I'm marrying the woman of my dreams.

The old man wakes up to the muffled noise of a television audience applauding. It's light out, and the sun seeps in through the window by his bedside. It feels nice on his thin, weathered skin. His hollow eyes still adjusting from sleep, everything around him has a blurry glow to it. The lady next door is humming a recognizable tune through the paper-thin walls. Shadows move across the dusty, wooden floor, and a caretaker walks into the room with a hard smile that carves dimples into his cheeks. He grabs a sweater that was left folded on top of a small dresser, pulls it over the old man's empty face, and gently maneuvers his arms into the sleeves. The caretaker's hands are cold on the old man's skin, causing the few hairs on his arms to stand up.

"Good morning, Roger. I hope you slept well. Mary made some soup for your breakfast."

The old man gives no response. After he is fully dressed, the caretaker cradles him in his arms and delicately places him into a wheelchair. After slowly rolling the old man into another room, the caretaker leaves him at a dining room table. Besides the lady who hums next door, all the folks residing in the nursing home are gathered around, quietly staring into space. Each of their faces holds a common emptiness in their eyes.

Plates and silverware are passed out to a select few, but most are left with empty bowls. A mouthwatering aroma fills the air, and a small woman with a round face comes out of the kitchen bearing a pot full of soup. Her kind smile reaches each individual, but none of them smile back. She pours some soup into the bowl sitting in front of the old man. The steam of the liquid touches his face and warms his nostrils. Elbows touching, she sits in a chair directly next to the old man and gradually raises a spoon into his mouth. For a moment the old man forgets what he is supposed to do. His senses unpausing, he hesitantly parts his dry lips. After she finishes feeding the old man, the woman with the round face moves onto another resident that needs help being fed. The old man thinks about what it was he just ate until his mind begins to fog. He suddenly can't remember what he was doing at the table in the first place. His body is still, but his mind is racing with confusion.

Now in another room, the old man is unsure of how he got there. Did he fall asleep? Did he forget? He looks around and notices a small dresser, a bed, a mini television, and a few photos lining the walls. The old man only recognizes one person in the photos. She has dark hair and eyes, soft skin, red lips, and a warm smile. He doesn't remember her name, but he must have known her well. She's the most

beautiful woman he has ever seen. Once again, the old man falls into a deep sleep, thinking about the angel he might have known in another lifetime.

I love watching her paint. At 4 a.m., she quietly leaves our bed, wraps herself in a sweater, and paints on our balcony. Normally I'm asleep, the kids are asleep, and the world is just barely slipping out of its own slumber. There is only peace. The kind of peace that shakes your being and pushes you to become one with whatever company Mother Nature is willing to give. As she lights a cigarette, I hear her quietly humming something I have heard before. She begins mixing her watercolors, creating the most beautiful shades of orange and yellow I have ever seen. I wonder what she is going to paint. I tiptoe back into bed to avoid disturbing her. Her keen ears hear me, and she looks back into our room. All I feel is love as she gazes at me with those dark eyes in the morning moonlight.

Most of the old man's days are spent staring at ceilings. He doesn't know what month it is or even what year. The days blend together, causing him to feel completely lost in time. As he gathers his surroundings, he sees a young man sitting next to his bed reading a book. How did he not notice him before? Dark eyes and soft brown skin. The old man feels safe in his presence. He watches the young man's lips moving as he reads out loud and wonders what story he might be telling. When the young man's eyes stray from the page, he notices the old man's sudden attention to his reading.

"Hi Dad. It's David, your son."

The young man smiles, creating lines of kindness across his face. He folds a corner of one of the book pages, leaves it on the small dresser, and places a hand on the old man's frail arm.

"I love you, Dad. It's David. It's your son. I love you."

His deep voice is clear, but his words jumble in the old man's ears.

Time seemingly doesn't pass, but the glittering dust particles of light that were gleaming off the window sills have disappeared into the evening shadows. The young man lays a warm kiss on the old man's forehead and leaves the room empty once more. After a deep, shaky breath, he closes his eyes in simple exhaustion.

“His body is the only tether tying him to this life, and sleep is his only chance of escape.”

February 12, 1964. My beautiful son has been born. There's nothing so incredible in this world as watching a new life enter it. My wife cradles the cocooned baby. As I wrap my arms around her, I see that he has her dark eyes. She turns her body and allows me to hold my son for the first time. I can feel his little heart beating against my chest, and that's when I know I could live in this moment for eternity.

Two caretakers enter the old man's room. One of them begins to undress him while the other runs a bath. They both lift the old man into a tub of warm, bubbly water and gently scrub his skin with a sponge that smells of lavender. His cold limbs begin to defrost and simmer with life once more. It's as though his body is being hugged by the warmth of the bath water. After the caretakers wash, dry,

dress, and feed the old man, they wheel him outside and leave him to sit in the yard. Above the old man, the world is moving. In slow motion, he watches the clouds travel across the sky. He hears echoes of laughter and car horns as he watches a hummingbird flap its wings and sip from the pink flowers blooming in front of him. The old man imagines what it might feel like to fly.

Suddenly, a little girl enters into the old man's view. She's full of energy and life, something he hasn't felt in a very long time. The little girl stretches her miniature arms around the old man while he's sitting in his wheelchair. Her voice is high, and it sends ripples through his rickety spine. With a wide smile on her face, she points up to the sky while an airplane is moving above. A young man walks up behind the girl, grabs her at the belly, and lifts her over his head. As the old man watches the little girl, he notices her excitement shift into something much greater. Her arms are flailing in the wind, her eyes are pointed to the sun, and it's as though she is a bird using her wings for the very first time.

After the young man sets the little girl down, he greets the old man with a kind smile and a warm kiss.

"Hi Dad. I brought Kirsten with me today. Kirsten, come say hi to Grandpa."

The little girl walks over, and the old man can see that she is upset.

"Daddy, why doesn't Grandpa ever talk to me or hug me? Why doesn't he smile at me when I tell him knock knock jokes or make funny sounds? Why can't he take me to the park and push me on the swings like you do?"

"Honey, your grandpa loves you very much, but remember when I told you he has trouble expressing what he's feeling on the inside?"

"Kinda."

"Well, your Grandpa has something called Alzheimer's. It's a disease that takes away his memory and function to move."

"Oh, so it's a superpower. Cool. Y'know my favorite superheroes can wipe people's memories and freeze them in time."

"No, it's not his power, sweetheart."

"Oh."

"But he does have one."

"Really?"

"Yes. If you look deep into Grandpa's eyes, you'll see him talking to you, telling you how much he loves you, hugging you, laughing with you, and maybe even playing superheroes with you."

"Can I look?"

"Go ahead."

The little girl comes face to face with the old man. Her eyes gaze into his. It's been a long time since the old man has felt seen.

"You're right, Daddy. I see it all. Grandpa's my hero."

Lately, the old man's body has been hurting more than usual. He no longer sits at the dining room table to eat; he is fed in his bed. The young man still comes and reads to the old man, but the more he visits, the more his face is torn with worry and sorrow. The little girl visits occasionally, but the memory of her is fading in the old man's mind as the days pass. His body is the only tether tying him to this life, and sleep is his only chance of escape. The lady next door is once again humming a familiar tune, and the old man falls asleep to her sound.

I wake up with the gut feeling that something isn't right. I quickly sit up and glance

over at the alarm clock sitting on the nightstand next to me. A fluorescent green 2 a.m. illuminates the dark bedroom. I look over at my wife next to me and notice her complete stillness. I admire how beautiful she is as she lies there so peacefully, but the abrupt realization that she is not breathing causes my heart to stop. I don't scream, I don't wail, and I don't cry, but I know that the woman I love the most in this world is no longer here. I call 911. I give her CPR. I tell her I need her. I ask her to stay. I confess my love over and over, but she never does come back.

An uneasiness accompanies the old man throughout the day. He glances over at the small dresser next to his bed and sees the photo of the woman who passed away in his most recent dream. Normally, the old man cannot remember any of his dreams, but this one was unusually clear and vivid. His eyes move across his arms and legs, and he notices the skeletal shape his limbs have taken on. Everything hurts. The old man's breaths are becoming shallow, and his heartbeats are becoming weak. His time is here.

As the old man stares at the ceiling, he feels a wetness leaking from his eyes. The water leaves a trail down his cheeks, and memories that have long been forgotten suddenly flood his mind. The young man, David, is his son. The little girl, Kirsten, is his granddaughter. And the woman in his dreams, that's his wife. As his eyes flutter through images of the past, the sound of the lady next door brings him back to the present. She is humming a familiar tune. It gets louder and louder with every beat, until it suddenly comes to an end. The old man's bedroom door opens, and a woman with pearl white skin and eyes a shade of midnight is standing with her arms reaching out to him. It's the woman of his dreams.

His heart stops, but his soul is free.



Saba Anoushahpour
GRACEFUL



Photograph

Bo Syrotiak
SECOND BIRTH

I wasn't present at their first births,
But I was present at their second births.
To eternal life they went.
They lived and loved
The best they could.
Painfully imperfect beautiful lives cut short.
Mistakes understood, forgiven, but never forgotten.
Miracles and wonders shine like stars
On dark skies above a rock.
A little golden bird sings their story
To those who pass by
My father and my mother resting in peace.
Born twice and forever alive in the galaxy of life
Where death is a mere illusion of a twinkling star.

Dominic Lealand

THE BOATMAN AND THE BOY

The river lapped softly at the muddy, overgrown banks that retained its flow. It was calm but too deep to wade across and too wide to swim, so a lone boatman stood at the end of a dock, his flat-bottomed ferry moored to a post beside him, waiting. It was not uncommon for people to require his services. In fact, his ferry was the only way to cross, for no bridges, tunnels, or shallow fords existed along the watercourse to bypass the Boatman. And no one ever came from the other side. So he waited as inevitably someone would need to get across.

From the gloom beyond the pier, a figure materialized. A stout, middle-aged man draped in silk and brocade, he carried himself with his chin tilted high and walked with a slow, pretentious stride. Atop his head sat a golden crown.

“Boatman,” he said when he reached the end of the dock, “I command you to take me across.”

“Very well,” the Boatman replied. “I require two coins as payment.” His slender neck craned down as he extended an open hand toward the prideful man.

“So be it,” the man said and pulled a pair of shillings from his pocket. He handed them to the Boatman, and the two stepped onto the barge.

“While on the water,” said the Boatman, “you may ask me any question, and I shall answer truthfully. Once we have reached the other side, I cannot bring you back.”

“You are taking too long, Ferryman. Just take me across.”

The Boatman untethered the barge and pushed off with his punting pole toward the open river. They drifted along the curling current for a long while. Shrouded in a perpetual low-lying fog, the river soon blurred the divide between water and sky. The boat was floating across a cloud of infinite twilight, spurred on only by the occasional thrust of the pole into the glassy sea.

But when, after some time, the Boatman stopped punting, the elegant man took notice. “Ferryman, why have we stopped? Are we on the other side?”

“No,” the Boatman answered, “we are but halfway—neither here nor there, neither at the near shore nor the far shore. We are between them and will remain here until you cast off your tethers into the river.”

“Tethers? You suggest I give up my mantle—discard my crown? Do you know who I am? I am the king of—”

“It matters not who you were, not here and not to me, only that those who cross the river must give up their identity—their tethers: the distractions that chain them to the near shore. Cast these things into the river, and I may take you to the other side. All are equal there.”

The color drained from the man’s face. His haughty expression dropped and his shoulders sagged. “I believe I understand now. This is not just any river, is it?”

“It is not.”

“Very well.”

The man stepped gingerly to the barge’s edge and stared into the glassy water at a perfect reflection of himself. He shed his red velvet cloak and placed it in the water. It spread out like a pool of blood, growing dark as it absorbed the water.

Then, he removed the crown from his head and placed it gently on the floating fabric. It sank instantly, dragging the man's identity down with it.

Countless times the Boatman had observed how humbling the task of untethering was for mortals. He wondered how they could become so attached to seemingly trivial material things since, ultimately, it was their immortal souls that mattered. He was undoubtedly curious if there was something he was missing—a fatal lapse in his understanding of life, but he did not know for certain.

Once docked, the man—once king—journeyed into the haze of the far shore. Across the water, a bell rang, and the Boatman returned to the near side.

Another figure stood on the dock, waiting for the ferry. This man wore simple chainmail under a blood-spattered blue tunic. His helmet, carried under his arm, had a significant dent on the left side. His eyes were sunken, distant—as if they had stepped back from the events of his past. An arming sword dangled from his hip.

“For two coins, I will take you across,” said the Boatman.

“I have not but the clothes on my back,” the soldier answered, then glanced down at the ring on his hand. “Will this do?” He slid it off his finger and presented it to the Boatman, who accepted the payment.

The two soon boarded the raft. “On this crossing,” said the Boatman, “you may ask me any question, and I shall answer truthfully.”

The soldier nodded and then asked, “I do not recognize this place, Ferryman. Where are we?”

“This river exists beyond the reaches of any mortal,” the Boatman answered. “There is the near shore, where you come from, and the far shore, where we are going.”

“I see. That means I’m dead, doesn’t it?”

“Not yet.”

“Not yet?”

“There are rare circumstances in which one may return to the near shore, though I do not sense that with you. Once we reach the far shore, you may never return.”

The soldier sighed and looked down to the water, which stirred with every prod of the punting pole until, at last, they reached the middle, the place where the sky and the river met and the boat seemed suspended in the soft glow of infinite mist.

“What of my family? My wife and son. Are they well?”

The Boatman stopped the barge and turned to the soldier. “I am not omniscient, so I cannot say with any certainty. Only once someone has boarded my ferry do I see glimpses of who they were. Otherwise, I am simply the Boatman.”

The soldier sighed. “I hope they are safe.”

The Boatman turned to look out across the vast river. “Here you must cast off your earthly tethers before we may continue.”

The soldier turned the dented helmet over in his hands and then looked up at the Boatman. “Pray tell, Ferryman,” he said. “Was I honorable? Was my death not in vain?”

The Boatman waited for a long moment and then answered, “You fought with strength for what you believed to be righteous, but I am not the one who can judge such actions. That can only be done by a power higher than I.”

“I suppose that is as much truth as any of us could have known.” The soldier

stood and removed his belt and sword, blue tunic, and chainmail, dropping each one into the river as the Boatman instructed. Then, with a sigh, he let the helmet fall from his hands. It plunged beneath the water into a place unknown to even the Boatman.

"It is strange," said the soldier as they continued slowly across the river. "I feel so light, unburdened. Do you know this feeling?"

The Ferryman waited and then answered, "I do not, though it has been described before. Many have said they feel liberated or calmed, but I have never known these feelings as they are unique to mortals."

"Were you never mortal?"

"I," the Boatman paused again, "do not know." Against his better judgment, an act forbidden to be used on his passengers, the Boatman clung to that question; it enveloped his mind. *Was I ever mortal?* If he were not the Boatman, who would he be?

Once at the far shore, the soldier stepped off and thanked the Ferryman. Then, like so many before, he vanished into the impenetrable fog beyond the banks of the river. Another bell tolled, and its echo traveled across the water, calling the Boatman back.

This time, a woman, draped in a simple brown kirtle over an aged linen smock, waited on the dock, gazing longingly across the river. Gaunt and pale, the woman's face spoke of despair that perhaps only a mother would know. Around her neck was a thin silver chain with an oval pendant.

The Boatman addressed the woman, who had not yet noticed him, "Do you wish to cross?"

"Oh," she said as she turned to him. "I am not sure. I am supposed to be waiting for my son."

"This is not the place of meeting," said the Boatman. He turned and pointed across the water. "It is best to meet over there."

"Is that so? Then I beg you, Ferryman, take me across so that I may wait for him there."

"Passage is two coins."

"Yes, I have that."

The Boatman accepted the payment and turned to board the barge.

"Wait, could I also pay for my child? He has nothing. I fear he could not cross." The woman searched her person for more change but could not find any more coins, so she removed the small gold ring from her left hand and offered it to the Boatman.

"Very well."

They boarded the raft, and the Boatman pushed off from the dock.

"On this crossing," he said, "you may ask me any question, and I shall answer truthfully."

The woman acknowledged the Boatman but said nothing. Instead, she looked across the river, gently holding the pendant over her chest. After some time had passed, she looked up at the Boatman. "I know what this is," she said. "It did not occur to me before, but you are Death, aren't you?"

"No," said the Boatman, "though many conflate me with Death, I am not. Death is not a corporeal being like you or I. It is an intangible spirit that can take on any form and often acts on impulses of spite, pity, mercy, and trickery. I am not

Death. I am simply the Boatman.”

“I understand,” answered the woman. “Then I am beyond simply dead?”

“Not quite. Though you have been brought here by it, you are not truly dead until you set foot on the far shore. That is where we are going.”

“But what of my son? Are you sure I can meet him there?”

“Yes.”

“And my husband? He left at the king’s beckoning to meet the invaders two winters ago.”

“He will meet you there.”

A languid sigh escaped her chest. “Then I am ready.”

The Boatman stopped punting, and the barge drifted to the middle of the river, neither here nor there, where the sky and water were one and the same. “Then cast your tethers into the river, and I shall take you to the far shore.”

“Tethers?”

“The sentimental ties that bind you to life. They must be offered to the river or you cannot move on.”

“I see.” The mother approached the barge’s edge on her knees and removed her necklace, opening the silver pendant—a locket. Inside was a tiny snippet of golden hair tied by a red ribbon. She let the locket fall into the water but held its contents in her delicate hands. A tear rolled down her cheek and then fell along with the snippet into the vast, glassy water.

She breathed shakily and sat back, wiping her face with her sleeve. “I will see him again.”

The Boatman looked at the woman. Love was not a feeling he knew, but he saw, time and time again, the effect it had on those who crossed the river. He longed to know the feeling: the feeling of loving—of being loved. He did not know if he ever would.

Once at the far shore, the woman stepped off and turned to the Boatman. “You have my thanks, Ferryman,” she said. “I will wait for him, and we shall enter the unknown together.”

In the distance, the lonesome bell echoed again, calling for the Boatman to return.

As he expected, a small boy stood on the dock. His bright, golden hair shone even in the perpetual overcast of the riverbank.

“Sir,” said the boy when the Boatman pulled up to the dock, “my mummy said she would meet me here. Have you seen her?”

“Indeed,” answered the Boatman, “she waits for you across the river. I shall take you to her.”

“Good. I was getting worried since I could not see her, and Mummy said she would be here.” The boy hopped onto the barge and giggled as it rocked.

“On this crossing,” said the Boatman, “you may ask me any question, and I shall answer truthfully.”

“Any question?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then I shall think of many.”

The Boatman pushed off the dock and began the journey across the water. Not long thereafter, the boy said, “My name is Arthur. What is yours?”

“I have been known by many names, child, though one I hear often is Charon.”

“Okay, Charon, do you like pushing your boat?”

“It is all I have ever known.”

“What is your favorite color?”

Charon waited a moment and then answered, “I admire the color of the river, where the sky and water meet, and the divide between them vanishes; the color of infinity and the color of identity; the colors of pride, honor, and love; and the glow from the unending twilight that filters through the mist of the near and far shores.”

“I see, I see. My favorite color is blue. My papa’s a soldier, and his shirt is blue. That’s why I like that color. You look old. How old are you?”

“Time does not exist on the river. But I have always existed with the river, so I have always been here.”

“I suppose that means you’re really old?”

“In a way, yes.”

The two traveled on the river until, at last, they reached the middle. “Here,” Charon said, “you must cast off your tethers before we can reach the other side.”

“What are tethers?”

“They are the sentimental things that tie you to the near shore, things you loved, but can no longer have where you are going.”

“Okay.” The boy clambered over to the edge of the barge and gazed into the water, letting a dribble of spit fall into the river.

“What have you given the river?”

“I shared a bit of the delicious apple I had before I came here. It is the only thing I have.”

“I see,” answered the Boatman.

“Okay, I am ready now.”

After a short moment, the boy spoke again. “Charon, am I dead?”

“No, not yet.”

“But why?”

“Only when you set foot on the far shore will you cross that threshold.”

They continued across the water until the far shore came into view. The woman, as she promised, was waiting there.

“Momma!” Arthur called, waving from the head of the boat.

The barge pulled closer, but as the Boatman came to the dock, another bell tolled. This one was different; it was not the call of another passenger to be taken to the far shore but a call that sang of life. The Boatman stopped punting and turned to the boy.

“Come here, my child, my baby!” the woman called to Arthur, but the Boatman put a hand on his shoulder.

“Wait!” he answered her. “It is not yet his time. The bells call him back!”

“What? No, we are supposed to go together. Do not take him from me!”

“The bells say that his life is still unfulfilled. Would you rob him of his life yet to live? If he chooses to go with you, he may never return. But if he goes back, you will see him again.”

“Arthur, my darling,” said the mother, tears streaming down her face, “what do you decide?”

The boy looked at the woman, then back to the Boatman, and then turned around to face the direction of the bells echoing on the near shore. His eyes glis-

Russell Pearson
ON THE OTHER SHORE



Scratchboard

tened.

“It’s okay,” he said. “I hear them calling to me! They say it will be okay.” He turned back to his mother. “I want to go back, but it’s okay because I’ll see you again.”

The woman closed her teary eyes, nodding in agreement with her child. “Very well. I love you, my darling.” She looked at the Boatman. “Please, Boatman, I beg you, take care of him. I know not if you can, but please, do what you can...he has no one else in the world. Love him, cherish him, I beg you!”

The Boatman hesitated before speaking. “I—I will,” he said and then pushed off with the pole back toward the near shore. For the first time, Charon passed judgment. Why was he the one chosen for this occupation? Why must he be denied the delights and losses that were so abundant for mortals? Was this a test or a choice?

Charon gazed at the glowing shoreline: a golden ribbon bathed in light as the mist lifted and an arch appeared just beyond the pier. The Boatman then looked down at Arthur, sitting peacefully at the head of the barge. Charon could not define what he was feeling, nor why, but it pulled on his soul. Perhaps it was the task that transcended his current existence—the chance to embrace a mortal coil rather than cast one off—like everyone he had ever ferried. He did not know if he had ever been mortal, but this was his chance. Was this boy worth protecting? The Boatman saw glimpses of the lives of those who had stepped onto his ferry, but the boy was different; what Charon saw was not the life Arthur had lived, but what he had the potential to live. And what a life it would be.

Charon and Arthur stepped off the barge and onto the dock of the near shore. The bells sounded louder than before, a beautiful bronze choir beckoning the boy to return. Behind them, the barge sank into the water, the river swallowed it silently, and the Boatman, who had never before left his post, stepped away from the dock.

“Wait,” he said. “I am frightened.”

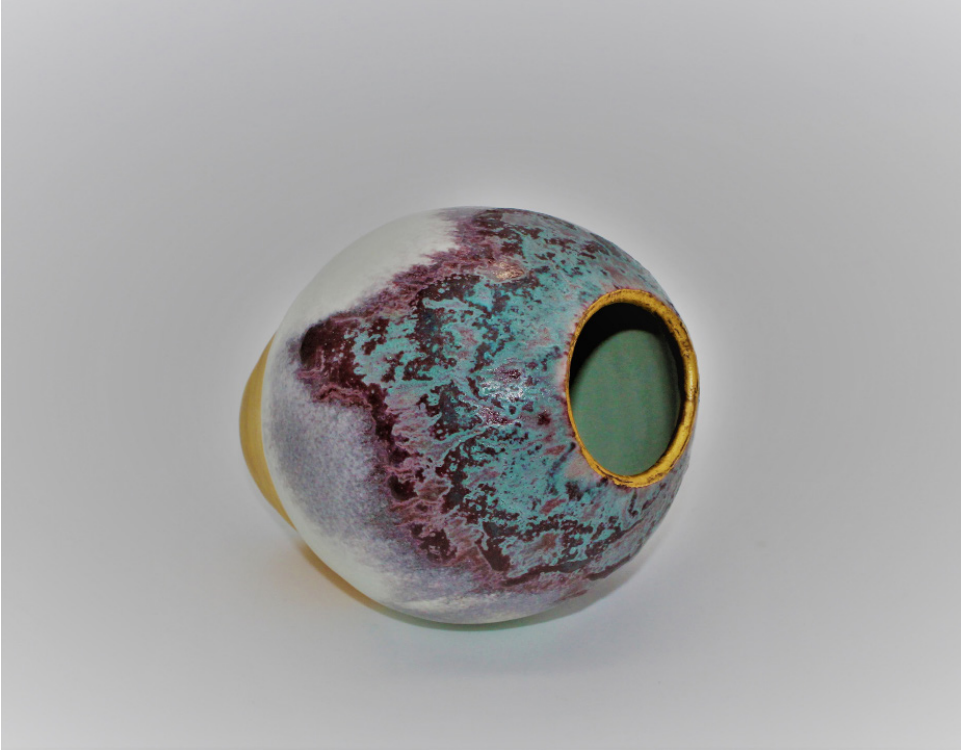
“Don’t worry,” answered Arthur, “I’ll lead the way.” Arthur held out his hand to Charon.

Yes, the Ferryman thought, this boy is someone worth protecting. This is my new occupation; I am no longer a boatman—I want to be human.

And so, together—Arthur leading Charon by the hand—the Boatman and the boy stepped through the arch and disappeared into the fog.

VIVAMUS, MORIENDUM EST

Cerise Plummer
STONEY GOLD GARNET



Porcelain & Ceramic

Amir Rabiei

HOPE ON AN OVERCAST HORIZON



Scratchboard

HOPE ON AN OVERCAST HORIZON

I didn't truly have a difficult upbringing; it was more like a rather abnormal one. My mother and I have lived with my grandparents since shortly before I was born, as a result of her insufficient financial prospects at the time and oh-so-slowly declining health. Both she and my grandmother are disabled and have been for quite some time, but she finally lost her ability to walk right around the time I entered middle school. At that same time, I was experiencing an especially difficult academic transition, prompting my elders to consider and then implement my enrollment in online schooling. Despite this plan not immediately fixing my learning issues, as they had believed it would, the change did allow me the flexibility I would come to need since I would soon afterward start to fill the quite demanding role of being my mother's caretaker. Regardless of that decision's practicality, it was still much less than ideal to be pulled from public school and to be put in a position of responsibility over her, especially as a preteen. This situation left me unable to meaningfully interact with my peers, gain early job experience, and build the confidence I'd eventually need to live on my own. In hindsight, it's easy for me to see how the stress was building up and that the pressure I was under would eventually cause me to crack. What I've tried to focus on, though, is a more unexpected highlight from that time in my life: how I picked up the pieces, put myself back together, and came out stronger than I was before.

This whole dramatic ordeal happened on Easter—of all days. The year was now 2018, and I'd been sixteen for just over six months. Sunday was earning its name, as the eponymous ball of flaming gas hung high in the clear sky, shining annoyingly cheerily and forcing hot, dry weather on north Orange County. Swiftly, if awkwardly, we jumped into our glorious vessel, a slightly used Toyota Sienna with an after-market wheelchair ramp, and set off towards my great aunt and uncle's home. However, the weight of my grandmother's motor chair on my right foot wasn't the only pressure I was feeling. I thought it was fitting that I was seeing myself as a fool since the date was the first of April. I had learned at the start of the semester that, due to my poor grades, I'd need to take a fifth year of high school. My folks were more than disappointed in me, and, as I tried to envision my next few years, all I could see was an endless string of failure and pushing wheelchairs. More important than long-term dread, though, was short-term dread. Whether it was real or imagined, as the tire ground my metatarsals into the floor, I could feel the palpable disdain in my family's eyes and voices. I certainly wasn't excited about receiving the same response from three times as many close kin.

When we finally arrived at my relatives' home, we set about the laborious task of unloading two wheelchairs and part of a dinner. While carrying a cake, to add chaos to the commotion, I'd managed to dodge past the throng of aunts marching forth and narrowly avoided small talk about my grades in the process. Having exited again to help my mother into her wheelchair, I was now pushing her uphill in the hot sun, surrounded by a mess of competing conversations, all of which were growing ever louder. I'd been here for less than ten minutes and already felt overwhelmed.

Just as we were cresting the frustratingly tall driveway, my great-uncle, our gracious host, and a man I greatly respected, walked out, eager to see me in particular. With a broad smile beaming across his face and a firm hand clasped on my shoulder, he asked how I'd been and when I was finally going to graduate. I couldn't avoid my embarrassment anymore; it had just walked up to punch me in the gut and the growing cracks had managed to shatter me into a thousand pieces. I don't remember what happened for the first few minutes, other than that I ran off to hide in a corner and cry. What I do clearly recall is the hour or more I spent shaking and sobbing, and the hours following spent attracting glares from everyone I cared for most. Right then, I'd embarrassed myself more in one moment than I had with my lagging education. I had run off like an undisciplined child, leaving the literal weight of my responsibility on my grandfather and others. Though I'd later be told that this was a panic attack, my first one at that, this knowledge would've mattered very little to me at the time. I just felt like a stupid, useless little disappointment that everyone hated, especially myself.

My great-uncle came to check on me a few times during those hours, though I couldn't bear to look him in the eye and see the mirror of disgust I was certain would be there. Late in the afternoon, as the sky darkened, the air cooled, and my family began to disperse back to their homes, I overheard him conversing with my grandfather, his step-brother. I thought they sounded angry with me; I thought everyone sounded angry with me. As it happened, however, he'd managed to convince my folks to let me stay a bit longer. He wanted to take me to his favorite place, he said. So I meekly settled in for another ride, feeling much less like a sardine this time, and we made our way down to the coast.

He'd brought me to a place called Crystal Cove State Park, where he'd often spend his time whenever he simply needed to be alone. It surprised me just how calm he was and how easily he could sympathize with what I was feeling. Now, I can't recall exactly how our conversation went for that entire time, but the highlights have stayed with me to this day. What I do remember is how his words gave me a new hope. By telling me about the strength he'd found inside himself during his hardest days, my uncle showed me I could find that same strength, too. Just by standing around, sharing his stories, and relishing the sea breeze, my great-uncle made me realize that everyone's had their whole world end a few times. We stayed there until the dimming sun had finally set. He was nice enough to drive me home, too, and my folks weren't nearly as dismayed as I was afraid they would be. After at last grabbing something to eat—I hadn't eaten all day—I sent myself straight to bed. But my uncle's words and, more importantly, his actions would stick with me. In fact, I consider that conversation to be a turning point in my life.

Last year, I chose to revisit this moment as part of a geology class. My assignment was to return to the site of a significant memory and write about the features of its landscape using relevant course knowledge. I wasn't fully able to express my thoughts on this event back then, but the steep hills, sheer cliffs, and wide beach would certainly make the rest of that essay easy. So I set off on my own, having since gained the experience and confidence to do so. Given that it had rained for the past several days, the air was damp and cool, and the harsh sun was subdued behind a thick veil of rolling clouds. On that day, for the first time, I was able to reflect on how truly significant that one Sunday had been and how much I had been able to grow as a person. And I was glad.

Georgeann Barker Meunier
**IMMERSED IN THE
GARDEN OF MY MIND**



Clay, Ceramic & Silver

Kat Johnson

WITH LOVE, FROM THE PILGRIM

“Is the dove never to meet the sea / In want of the odious mountain”

So says a poetic character with a tall red hat.

I could compare myself to this character
especially with the slipping of confidence in their craft,
Unsure if their words would ever quite reach the person they keep in mind,
The dove never reaching the sea
due to the odious mountain of their insecurities.
Yet the feelings are true with careful placement,
the dove representing the flight and freedom they truly desire,
and the sea, a breathtaking cacophony
and something that brings the dove’s desire to understand what lies below,
For among the torrent there is life and not only the sparkling sea foam that
sits above.
They curl and furl amongst one another,
Dipping at angles to meet their rises and falls from water to air.
Then this character would stop
and compact the manuscript of these ideas into a ball,
Pressing down all the insecurities into all the unsaid words that were
thrown with the rest,
Rewriting again and stripping more of the original meaning,
The figures becoming less and less
like the sea and the dove.

But you and I know that this isn't about those characters,
This is about us,

Myself using a fictional figure to communicate all that I think and feel,
My own secret passage through the mountain
so that I can fly the three-hour journey to the sea in less than two minutes.
There is no real mountain,
I need only blink and here you are.
And so I come to you with my feathers plucked and your tides risen
But nevertheless, I will gladly float in your waves
as the breeze from the mountain pass cools our spirits.

Julianna Ortiz

ISOLATION'S EMBRACE

Sitting in silence, with nothing to say
They left her out
Excluded her
Until she was left with no one but her

In the depths of solitude,
Stuck in an endless night
She is trapped
Looking at them, so carefree and light

Just another face in the crowd
With no one to talk to, no one to hold
No place that feels like home
She finds herself alone

The silence surrounds her
Like a heavy coat of lead
She tries to shake it off, but it won't budge
It's like a weight on her head

The days stretch on and on
With no end in sight
She starts to wonder if she'll ever
See the light

But then she remembers
That she's not truly alone
She has her thoughts and her memories
To keep her company, to call her own

So she holds onto those moments
And let's them light the way
Through the darkness of isolation
To a brighter, better day

Zoe Herrera

THE ONLY SIDE OF THE MOON



Scratchboard

Evan Gordon
THE ONLY SIDE OF THE MOON

The moon is small. For those who look up from below, it's just a rock: slowly circling them, only visible when they care to acknowledge it. Just a small, desolate rock riddled with a multitude of small, desolate craters. The little being who lives upon it would probably agree with them.

To anyone looking up from the Earth, even with a telescope, his dome must just look like a natural formation. A little bump on a little rock. The antenna on top of the dome is far too skinny to be seen from below. Through the little skylight, static from a tiny television set is reflected in his big black eyes. Around him, wires run down curved stone walls. To his left, a small airlock fills out the rest of his living space. He kneels in front of his television. An intricate set of wires, lights, and switchboards interwoven across an otherworldly metal frame, this television has served as the dome's centerpiece and only source of light ever since he started his trip here. As he calibrates through channel after channel of black and white fuzz, his mind starts to wander.

Some time ago, he had seen an Earth program where humans sat in front of a television of their own, absent-mindedly switching channels while munching on all sorts of delicious-looking snacks. They all looked so happy; laughing and smiling and munching like that. Happiness. Laughter. Food. He has no delicious-looking snacks, just the gelatinous gray protein slop that he has been forced to ingest ever since the crops failed on his home planet. Sometimes, he tries to shape the slop into the foods he sees on television and imagines what they might taste like. He looks out the little skylight above his little room. The Earth is a dark giant. Small spots of light shape the shadowed planet's land. It looks so alive. He once saw a dead planet, and he wishes to never see another.

Static crackling in his ears, he wonders what sort of music they might be playing up there. Probably lots of different kinds of music. He wonders if every twinkling light is accompanied by a different song. His song tonight is static.

When he wakes up the next morning, he is still unable to get a television signal. His head brushes against the low ceiling as he heads for the airlock. He pulls on a pair of tight silver space pants with attached boots, a matching gloved top, and a domed helmet. Even when he goes outside, he's still under a dome. As the airlock seals itself off from the rest of his living quarters, he feels his little stomach start to flutter. He learned from a program he saw once that this feeling is called "butterflies" after the little winged creatures from Earth. He always gets butterflies when he goes outside. The pressure in the airlock adjusts and the door opens.

Large enough to fill even his giant eyes, the Earth is enormous. One never thinks about its true size while standing on it. For those living on the planet, it is just what is. For one who looks up from the moon though, it's beautiful. So blue and green. Green is his favorite color.

He climbs up to the top of his little gray dome. The sudden lack of artificial gravity makes his climb much easier than it otherwise would have been. As he adjusts the antenna, he looks through his little skylight at the television screen. He tweaks the antenna to the left and the television flashes a few images before

returning to static. Food. Cabin. Laughter. He tweaks the antenna to the right and the television flashes a few more. City. Forest. Laughter. The screen then stabilizes and he jumps for joy, floating up and back down as he does. He looks up at the Earth above him. It looks close enough to touch. He wonders just how high he could jump if he really tried. He always wonders about this when he goes outside. His little stomach flutters.

He reenters the airlock, trades one dome for another, and plops rights down on his couch. He snuggles into the couch a bit, trying to get comfortable. His couch is green, like the crops he remembers from so long ago. It's the only green on the moon.

When he first saw a couch on television, his mind was blown. Everyone sitting on it looked so happy, so together. They were all laughing at something one of them had said. Happiness. Laughter. Couch. He had immediately set out to construct one from his home's insulation, being careful to use only excess material. It was quite time-consuming, but he is now proud to think that he has made the comfiest couch on the moon.

“He was once prepared to spend eternity alone; now it seems he may have another choice.”

The television channel changes. He stops. The screen fills his eyes.

A little brown creature, with a long neck and long fingers, fills the frame. It is dressed in human attire, but is clearly not one of them.

He sits straight up, absolutely transfixed.

“Elliot,” the creature says. “Elliot, Elliot, Elliot.”

As the creature repeats itself, he feels, for the first time, like he's being spoken to.

“Elliot,” the creature repeats.

“Elliot,” the little being on the moon responds to his television. “Elliot.” He places his hand on his chest and a deep sense of pride fills his chest. “My name... Elliot.”

As the film continues, the creature, who the newly named Elliot has now come to know as E.T., holds up a newspaper comic depicting a character on an unknown planet radioing for help and says, “Phone.”

“Home,” the creature then says, and points out the window. “E.T. home phone.”

The human characters, shocked, start repeating the words back and forth.

“E.T. phone home,” the little girl says.

“E.T. phone home, E.T. phone home!” the little boy says.

“E.T... phone...,” the wide-eyed moon dweller repeats and then, stomach fluttering, looks out his skylight at the massive planet above his head.

His mind racing with possibilities, Elliot leaps off his couch, ramming his soft little head into the skylight. He shakes himself, completely unbothered, and gets to work.

Grabbing an extra wire here and a bit of rock there, Elliot feels time stretch and condense as he builds. He barely even thinks about what he's doing as he lets himself be carried by the whirlpool, the hurricane, the lightning bolt of energy he has become. In his head, a vast orchestra of music swells. He was once prepared to spend eternity alone; now it seems he may have another choice.

He hollows out a rock, pulling a piece from here and a component from there until the phone is almost finished. He ponders what else he might need: some sort of transmitter-receiver and a power source. Elliot's breath catches. When he built his television, he had hard-wired the antenna into the television's main computer chip and battery. Disconnecting it might destroy the chip in the process, as it was never built to be removed. Elliot's window to Earth could revert to a lightless, lifeless... rock.

Even as he desperately pleads with himself not to, Elliot shakily inches towards his television. On the screen, E.T. is riding in a bike basket as a child frantically pedals away from the authorities. Elliot pulls his television away from the cold stone wall. Its light moves with it, shifting shadows across the otherwise dark dome. Elliot starts to tug off the makeshift screen, but his television shocks him painfully and he shrieks, falling backward into the wall. Determined now, Elliot throws on his space suit top and uses the gloves to pry his screen from the set. His television crackles and sparks fly, singeing Elliot's delicate skin. Crying out, he fights through the pain and eventually rips the screen free, bringing him face to face with its buzzing innards. The detached screen flickers in and out, flashing snapshots of E.T.'s escape.

As he yanks fiercely at the antenna's wire harness, the screen flashes manically, shooting sparks all over Elliot's arms, chest, and face. He grits his teeth and pulls harder, squinting to keep sparks out of his eyes. Long arcs of glowing heat engulf his every sense. His couch catches fire behind him, but Elliot pays it no mind as he pulls harder and harder.

When he finally feels the wires start to give, Elliot looks at the television one last time. He sees E.T. and his friends take flight—a bunch of bikes zooming off into the night sky while their riders cheer. And laugh. Elliot says goodbye to E.T. forever as he gives one last hearty tug.

The tiny dome is quickly filling with smoke. Elliot's little lungs burn as he lunges toward the airlock and into the rest of his space suit. He then tackles the fire, using the fibers of his suit to extinguish the flame. He lies there, gasping in his helmet's clean air. Elliot looks at what used to be his television, now in multiple pieces on the floor: singed and disconnected. He doesn't know what came over him, but he does know that his decision is final. He removes the necessary parts from the lifeless rock and gets to work.

Within hours, he is finished. He stares at his contraption: a round, hollowed-out stone with various wires, buttons, and knobs stuck all over. He plugs it into the television antenna and the phone's light starts blinking. For a few minutes, he sits there, pressure filling his every fiber as an entire swarm of butterfly wings viciously beats at his stomach lining. The device blinks at him silently. He thinks about E.T. How did it end? The creature was on the run from humans when he turned it off. Did they catch him? Why did they want to?

He nestles into the now soot-black couch and continues to ponder this question. He falls asleep before he answers it.

In his dream, Elliot stands in a field of long, green grass. In the distance, a twinkling light catches his attention. He runs toward it as fast as his little legs will carry him. As he approaches, the light grows into a wooden log cabin, the only structure on this never-ending plane. Sounds of laughter and bright, happy music emanate from inside. He places his hand on the doorknob. It feels different than he expected, sort of fluttery and light. He looks down and sees a butterfly perched on his palm.

Suddenly, Elliot is inside. A family, who a single second ago were eating and laughing happily, now stare at him in shock from their couch. Elliot holds up his little hand to show off his butterfly, but the family shrinks back in fear. The mother pulls her two little children behind the couch, shielding them from Elliot. He starts to step forward, hoping to show them that he isn't a threat when the man pushes forward. In his hand is a long brown rifle. Elliot shrinks back in fear. He has seen what scared humans do with rifles.

Suddenly, Elliot is outside again. The butterfly has stopped moving in his hands. He looks down to see that it is now nothing more than a small, cold stone. Elliot drops the stone and looks up at the house, but it has also transformed; it is now a swarming tornado of fluttering wings. As he flees, Elliot hears the music and laughter again, clearly originating from inside the tornado. He stops, turns around, and runs headfirst toward the music, toward the laughter, only for it to dissipate completely the second he reaches it, tumbling him into a world full of static. He can't hear anything over the buzzing. Elliot spins out of control and holds himself tight as he calls out for someone, anyone to hear him. But then, even the static mutes. Elliot's new song is silence.

When he wakes up, Elliot is greeted by the phone's blinking light.

While he eats, Elliot is accompanied by it.

When he falls asleep, Elliot is inspired to dream by it.

Tomorrow, Elliot decides yet again. Tomorrow, he'll try out the phone. Today, he's not even going to look at it. That night, Elliot leaves the phone on the couch and opens a pouch of protein slop. He doesn't notice that the blinking light has solidified.

Ring. His entire body freezes.

Ring. He pretends he doesn't hear it.

Ring. His stomach is shredded by infinite butterfly wings.

Three rings go by before he is able to work up the courage to answer.

"Hello...?" Elliot says meekly, desperately trying to remember what the people on television usually say on the phone.

"Hello?" a woman's voice responds, shocking Elliot to his very little core.

"Hello," Elliot repeats, his body and voice rattling like a shaken can of Coca-Cola.

"Yes, hello. I'd like to order a large cheese pizza with pepperoni on half and just cheese on the other half. Can you guys do that?"

"Uh," Elliot freezes, unsure of what to say. "Hello?"

"Can you hear me?"

"Uh," Elliot freezes, thinking again of how a television character would respond to such a question. "Yes?"

"Oh good, did you get that?"

"...yes?"

“Great, do you guys take Amex?”

“Yes!”

Elliot waits happily for the nice voice to say more things that he can respond yes to.

“Great! Can I pay over the phone?”

“Yes!” This is the most fun he has ever had.

Elliot waits again, his “yes!” at the ready. His nerves completely forgotten, Elliot’s whole body is fluttering. He has decided that he enjoys having conversations. He tries to remember what else he has heard people say on television.

“The card number is...”

“I’m Elliot. What is your name?”

“I’m Susan. Sorry, is this the right number?”

Elliot thinks about that for a second.

“This is my phone,” he responds proudly.

“Oh my gosh, I must have called the wrong number by mistake. I’m so sorry!”

Susan laughs, the greatest sound Elliot has ever heard, “All right, I’ll try again. Have a good rest of your day, Elliot.”

Susan hangs up. Elliot stares at the phone’s blinking light for a second, letting the static play. Susan’s laugh echoes in his head, loud enough that he doesn’t even notice the static. Phone. Static... Laughter.

Elliot slowly sinks back into his charred couch, still wide-eyed in disbelief. Today, he talked to somebody. Maybe tomorrow, he’ll talk to somebody else. Elliot looks through his little skylight at the giant planet framed in his window. A billion twinkling little lights cover the green darkness. A powerful feeling that he’s become familiar with comes over him. He slowly stands up. Tomorrow isn’t good enough anymore.

Before Elliot knows it, he’s outside, decked out in full space gear. The Earth stretches out across the sky, all its lights still twinkling silently... expectantly. His laughter booms across the moon as Elliot plants his little feet, bends his little legs, and lets his butterflies fly.



Maria Cristina Gramling

A BEAUTIFUL GOODBYE

Waiting for the Uber driver at the international airport in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, I could feel that familiar joy in my heart, anticipating my dad's tight loving hug. I had just crossed 6,203 miles from Los Angeles to Rio for the third time in 2022 to be by his side. As I pushed my suitcase onto the curb, I immediately felt embraced by the warm, humid weather and the Portuguese language, which always seemed to comfort me. My dad had been admitted to the intensive care unit two days ago. I did not know then that this would be the last time I would visit him.

"Who lives 94 years with so much joy?" my father had asked me so many times with a big smile on his face. My dad was one of those people who found a bright side in every situation and was grateful for it. When I learned he had been admitted to the hospital on November 19, I was surprised. I had been in Rio for my nephew Bruno's wedding ceremony only a month earlier in October and took my whole family with me. The ceremony had been a blast; it was a celebration of love, friendship, and family in a small town in the mountains outside of Rio. Dad and I had sat for a long time talking and contemplating the magnificent rocky formation around us. Therefore, my first reaction to him being in the hospital was that this could not be anything serious. I danced with him at the wedding! But Dad and I had a very special relationship, so I got my United Airlines tickets once again, just in case.

Even though I had been living in California since 2007, my dad and I always managed to keep our relationship close. There was nothing I did not share with him. My journey through depression and recovery, my ups and downs as a mother of three sons he adored, my thirty years of marriage with a man he considered his son, the Russia and Ukraine conflict, the threats to American democracy, my yoga retreats, the last movie I saw, the last argument with my friend... the list was endless. He and I shared a mutual interest in literature, politics, and spirituality, which always provided the grounds for exquisite conversations.

I pushed my suitcase again through the spotless white ceramic of the corridors by the Intensive Care Unit, looking for Room 234 with an eager heart when I saw him, in his fancy navy blue pajamas, walking slowly with the assistance of a physical therapist. I let go of the suitcase handle and opened my arms, waiting for him to see me. "Oh, my dear dear daughter," he said, full of emotion. "You have come again from so far away!" With tears in my eyes, realizing how fragile he suddenly seemed to be, I said, "Of course!" We walked back to his room and, as he sat down, he said, "My legs are weak and trembling. Could it be from my emotion?" I had never before heard such a tone of anxiety in his voice. For the first time in my life, I realized with alarm that my dad was afraid. I took a deep breath, sitting down and holding his warm, thin hands between mine. "I am so, so happy I am here Daddy," I said, sincerely and quietly thanking my inner voice for whispering to me that I had to come. Something felt different this time, and I was glad I had arrived.

I absolutely unconditionally loved my father. Celio Ferreira da Fonseca was

born in 1928 in a small rural house in the midst of a coffee plantation in the beautiful rolling hills of Minas Gerais, Brazil. While the state got its name for the gold mines that so well pleased the Portuguese empire that colonized the land, my dad's family was poor and his parents worked hard to raise twelve children. His first passion was music, nurtured by a local band in the nearby village of Maripa. In my dad's words, "It was a music simple and naïve, sung and played more for the pleasure of the ones singing and playing. We would play music way into the night, stopping here and there in front of the houses in the village. Each resident had a favorite tune and we would go on improvising melodies that would be accompanied by good conversations, coffee, and corn cake." When he was in fourth grade, his teacher Laura invited an engineer to give a lecture in the class, and my dad, a poor shoeless farm boy, got the idea that he, too, would become an engineer. He explained to me, "From that day on, Cristina, I became a different boy from all the other kids in my class. *I had a vision.*" After many struggles and sacrifices, his vision turned into reality in 1959 when he graduated from the National School of Engineering in Rio de Janeiro and went on to have a comfortable urban life with my mom and the five of us in the city.

The teachings on ethics and spiritual values of kindness, so well ingrained by his humble upbringing, never left my dad, though, and remained the highlights of his ninety-four years and eight months of life. Even when he held the highest managing position at Petrobras, the Brazilian state-owned oil company, Dad was known for his strict moral standards intertwined with a friendly personality. Once he retired, he left Rio and returned to the green hills of his childhood birthplace, Minas Gerais. He spent much of his time visiting with old friends and relatives at a farm he bought there. My father loved the farmland, the woods, the wood-burning stoves, and the deep spiritual traditions prevailing in the small towns.

In the next few days after my arrival, my dad's health declined significantly. A white, cold, and clean ritual of monitors, family visits, doctors, nurses, medical procedures, hospital food, and World Soccer Tournament games on the TV became a fast-speed short film in my memory. Between nights poorly slept, I stood alone in bewilderment and disbelief, a witness to events unfolding in front of me and over which I had absolutely no control: the lung infection that did not recede, the breathing that could not happen, the pain that would not go away, my dad who spoke no more. But who was that person so sweetly massaging his feet, singing in his ears, reading to him, caressing his head, feeding him, and helping him change positions in the bed?

The dreaded conversation took place in the second week: the pneumonologist gathered us to report that the only options in his condition would be to intubate my dad or make him comfortable with pain medication and let him go naturally. He was breathing with an intensive oxygen supply, barely eating, too weak to even sit down, and with pain over his shoulders and chest. His mind was still sharp and his heart strong, but his lungs were collapsing.

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I held his hands while revisiting our memories together. In all the ups and downs of my fifty-seven years of life, he was the anchor and the compass. No matter what happened, he would always be there with deep listening, wise words, forgiveness, ethics, faith, and, most of all, a marvelous loving presence—always open to embrace, to comfort, to be with.

No one has ever made me feel so unconditionally loved like him. I am now of-

ten bombarded with disturbing doubts: *Did I tell him how much I loved him enough times for him to really feel my absolute love?* In my waves of grief, I revisit some of our deep conversations on life after death. My dad told me, “I know I will see my mother again and each one of my brothers and sisters, Cristina. I just know. Sometimes, when I wake up at night and I cannot sleep, I greet each one of them: Hello Olavo? Hope you are doing fine. Hi Sinval! Can’t wait to play the flute with you again. I’m sending you my love, Geralda. I ask for your blessing, my mother. I will be with you soon.” He just knew it. And the fact that he so deeply believed made all the difference for both of us during those last nights in that hospital.

“*I am discovering there is a loving energy that lingers on, even when its source is no longer physically present.*”

My sister Ana, my brother Celio, and I were taking turns spending nights with Dad in the hospital. It would be my turn to spend the following two nights with him, right after the painful conversation with the doctor. I knew these would be the most difficult nights of my life. I was so tired by then that my immediate internal reaction was to find an excuse to get out of my shift by trading with my brother. *I'm not feeling well. Can we switch nights, Celio?* From somewhere back in my memory, the words I had learned as a child in religious education came to my mind: *Father, if it is your will, take this cup away from me. Yet may Your will be done, not mine.* I, too, wanted to ask for mercy and reach out to that celestial father, who seemed mysteriously silent: *Please, not me. I do not think I can and I do not want to do this. Have I not done enough?*

I had learned in the past to seek solitude when reaching a crossroad like this, so I told my mom I was going out for lunch by myself. I walked slowly on Voluntarios da Patria Street in Botafogo, a busy neighborhood in Rio, where the hospital was. It was Saturday afternoon and the restaurants and bars were full. I don't remember which soccer teams were playing that day. The World Soccer Cup is huge in Brazil and was especially so in 2022, when the country seemed to have a good chance to win. I focused on my conscious breathing, matching it with my steps as I had learned in a mindfulness retreat in Rhinebeck, New York, earlier that year. *Heels, inhale, toes, exhale; heels inhale, toes, exhale...* I whispered to myself my favorite mantra: *Inhale inspiration, Cristina, exhale expectation. Inhale inspiration, exhale expectation.* As I walked around the busy neighborhood, my pace began to slow down, and a deep sense of peace and surrendering settled in. It had to be me. I was the only one that knew exactly what he needed to cross the river to the other side. That was the reason I felt the calling to buy the airline tickets a third time that year alone. It had to be me.

I ate by myself in a Mediterranean restaurant with tables on the sidewalk, watching as loud, cheerful people passed by, some with children, some with dogs, some elderly couples holding hands, some groups of young people. *I can do this, I*

reassured myself while walking back to the hospital. *Heels, inhale, toes, exhale; heels inhale, toes, exhale...* And I did.

That Saturday evening it was just my dad, with oxygen tubes in his nose, and me. I pushed my chair close to his bed and held his hands. The nurses even turned down some of the heart monitors and told me again the idea was to control his pain with morphine and make sure he was comfortable. After watching some TV, I realized he was falling asleep so I asked him, “What prayer do you want to do together tonight, Daddy?”

“Let’s do the one from my mother’s prayer book,” he answered with difficulty, moving his hand and pointing to the old pocketbook of prayers his mom had given him right before she passed. I picked it up and opened the yellowish worn-out page on the *Night Prayer*, which we had done so many times before. I read it, close by his ears, slowly, giving him time to repeat each sentence. It was a long sequence, but he did it all, pausing here and there to catch his breath. Around midnight, he finally fell asleep while I kept singing some old familiar religious hymns by his ear: “*O Senhor é meu Pastor, nada me faltaráaa...*” At 2 a.m., I opened my eyes with his voice calling me, “*Minha filha, me dá um pouco de água.*” I poured some water into his dry mouth with the help of a spoon. “I cannot sleep anymore. Can you help me fall asleep? I feel so tired.”

“I know. I know Daddy, I know.” I massaged his feet and ankles gently. “Let’s try something that has helped Kevin before when he was anxious and could not sleep,” I said, referring to my youngest son. “Just listen to my voice and bring your attention to the parts of your body I will be mentioning, okay?” He moved his head yes and I began a body scan sequence I had learned in my mindfulness practice: “Send your breath to your toes on your left foot. Breathe in through your nose and imagine, as you breathe out, you are sending some love to your big toe...” I walked through his whole body like this: ankles, knees, upper legs, pelvis, back, vertebrae, shoulder, arms, wrists, hands, fingers, neck, chin, mouth, forehead, top of the head. He fell asleep again but awakened at 4 a.m., telling me, “I cannot do this anymore, minha filha. I am so tired. I cannot stand this anymore.”

“Dad, I *cannot* take this suffering from you, but I *can be here with you.*” I placed my cheek next to his and asked him, “Remember *The Sound of Music*? Tell me about things that make you happy. Tell me about happy moments.”

“Sitting on the front porch in the farm, looking at the hills and listening to the birds and the cows in the pasture.”

“My turn... walking to the view above the pond, overlooking the house and the fields...” I said.

“Putting logs on the wood-burning stove with my grandkids...sitting by the barbecue place with all of you...conversations until late at night.”

“Sitting by the fire pit at night sharing ghost stories, reading a book in the hammock...” I went on and on softly whispering happy memories in his ear, my face still next to him.

Dad got deeper and deeper into his sleep and finally took his last breath at 11 a.m., on December 5, as I was holding his left hand, my mom his right hand, and Celio, my brother, lovingly touching his feet.

He and I drank that bitter chalice together, one helping the other as he crossed to the other side. *Where is he now?* I don’t know. It is such a mystery. The death of a parent, I realize now, no matter how rehearsed in one’s rational mind, despite

all preparations, can stir deep things inside us, like an earthquake tremor that dislodges structures, setting off waves of moments long forgotten, feelings until then unnamed. On the occasion of her beloved partner's death, poet Mary Oliver said, "The end of life has its own nature, also worth our attention." I am paying attention as mindfully as I can, searching for lessons that can be there for me when my time comes. *Can I move into old age and death with so much grace and courage as you did, Dad?*

I am embracing the waves of grief, the tears, and the tightness in my chest as well as the laughter and smiles revisiting happy moments. I am discovering there is a loving energy that lingers on, even when its source is no longer physically present. I am learning to say goodbye and hello again, to enable this beautiful energy to flow through me.

On the way to the airport in Rio to catch my plane back to California, unable to contain my sorrow as I sobbed like a little girl, I shared with the Uber driver how hard it had been to say goodbye to my dad. The man just listened during the whole trip. When we parked the car, he got out, helped me with my suitcase, looked at me, and said, "This thing you had with your dad, it was beautiful. Very beautiful." I hugged him, too overwhelmed with emotion to say anything, and walked inside the airport. Yes, it was, sir, *yes it was*.



WALL 2023 STAFF



FARAH SALLAM

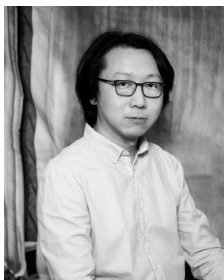
Editor-in-Chief

In 2020, Farah earned a bachelor's degree in English Literature, a minor in Theater, and a certificate in Technical and Professional Communication at Cal Poly SLO. Due to her love of learning, she could not stay away from school for long. So in Spring 2021, she enrolled at Saddleback College. From there, she chose to explore her career options, discovering and rediscovering her love for literature and the sciences. Last semester, she attained an associate degree in Health Science, and this semester earned an Associate Teacher Certificate. Her time at Saddleback has proved to be extremely valuable, and she is fortunate to have learned so much about herself and the world around her. In particular, being a part of WALL was such a great experience, and she is so honored to help lift the voices of others. Besides studying and working as a Starbucks barista, Farah can be found reading, writing poetry, or getting heavily immersed in a video game.

MARIA CRISTINA GRAMLING

Fiction Editor / Personal Narrative Editor

Cristina is a mindfulness practitioner who thrives around trees, mountains, creeks, books, and loving beings. Before moving to California in 2007 with her husband and three sons, she earned her master's degree in Social Work from PUC, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where she worked for fifteen years as a professor of Social Work Methodology. She has been a human rights activist since kindergarten when she realized with horror that some children her age were selling candy by the traffic lights of the streets where she lived. Here in California, she worked as an early childhood educator at Saddleback College Child Development Center, where she rediscovered her passion for storytelling. She is currently working on *The Blue House* and *the Peach Tree*, a personal memoir informed by her Brazilian experience of the rich and complex American culture. Working with Professor Shaffer and the amazing, talented WALL 2023 staff was an absolute joy. Cristina strongly believes self-expression is healing and helps us be present to what really matters in our lives.



QUAN ZHANG

Personal Narrative Editor

As a Chinese writer and former editor, Quan is the author of eight nonfiction books and three TV documentary series. He has won several national book awards and documentary awards in China and SOPA Awards for Editorial Excellence in Asia. In recent years he has endeavored to restart the second half of his writing life in the United States. As an aspiring English learner, he studies creative writing courses at colleges around Southern California, including Saddleback College.



MIKE PANASITTI
Art Editor / Fiction Editor

When not coping with bouts of anhedonia or debilitating cynicism, Mike is a genuinely pleasant person who was once a doctoral candidate in anthropology. He currently divides his time between taking coursework for his Associate in Arts degree in Creative Writing at Saddleback, lay cultural criticism, painting, recording music, and the elusive pursuit of literary perfection. Mike is also a contributor to beforfinearts.com, an online art gallery. His fiction and creative non-fiction can be found at <https://blog.reedsy.com/creative-writing-prompts/author/mike-panasitti/>.

ADAM PEARSON
Art Editor

Adam is currently working towards obtaining an Associate in Arts degree in Creative Writing, and they are interested in pursuing further studies at either Cal State Fullerton or San Diego State. Adam has always been passionate about storytelling, recognizing its unique and essential role in the human experience. During their time with WALL, they have been able to share and discover more stories, thoroughly enjoying the experience. They can be found at www.badguynotfungi.com



MYRIAD HALL
Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Myriad has earned several certificates and associate degrees at Saddleback in various subjects, including Computer Graphics and Japanese. Their work in this year's edition of WALL includes the series of evolving motifs of the butterfly and the flower as well as the automotive motifs for the poems "The Freeways" and "Sonnet in Memory of My Car, Too Good for This World." In addition, they are a featured artist with their work "Self Sketch."

CAROL KELLEY
Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Carol earned a bachelor's degree in Creative Writing from CSULB and a Culinary Arts certificate from Saddleback College. Currently, she is working toward a certificate in Computer Graphics and potentially obtaining certificates in Graphic Design and Animation. The ultimate pursuit is to create books for children digitally and traditionally. She is looking forward to being able to combine her lifelong love of writing with incorporating some new skills in graphics arts.





JASMINA ROITZSCH
Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Jasmina is a dedicated artist who pursued a four-year education in Graphic Design and Photography at Saddleback College. She earned a Certificate in Graphic Design to further enhance her expertise in this field. Working closely with the creative team of WALL has greatly enriched her professional path. Throughout her academic journey, she honed her skills and developed a profound passion for capturing moments and creating visually striking digital artworks that have been exhibited and awarded within Orange County. “Heart of Stone” featured in WALL 2023 on page 71. Graphic Design Portfolio: <https://jrimageanddesign.wordpress.com/portfolio/>
Artist website (Jaz): jrdigitalart.com - Instagram: [JRdigitalart](https://www.instagram.com/JRdigitalart)

FERN HELSEL-METZ
Photography Editor

Fern is proudly serving her fourth year as Photography Editor for WALL Literary Journal. She continually finds inspiration and creativity from those who contribute and bring life to WALL each year. Fern is an alternative processes photographer and printmaker. She received her most recent degree from Saddleback College in Photography. Her work, which has been exhibited, published, and won multiple awards, often focuses on history, landscape and nature and their interaction with modern and historical societies. When not at school, photographing, or printmaking, you’ll find her busy working on her startup, Phive Elements Photography; www.PhiveElementsPhotography.com (launching Spring 2024).



CHRISTINA GALINDO
Poetry Editor / Copy Editor

Christina is a returning student at Saddleback College after recently obtaining a BA in Communication Studies at San Francisco State University. She couldn’t keep away from the literary world, as her appetite for reading, writing, and editing led her to the wondrous universe of WALL. In her free time, you can find Christina immersed in a documentary, playing music, and having an existential crisis. All in that order.

DOMINIC LEALAND
Fiction Editor / Copy Editor

Dominic studies architecture at Saddleback College but has been an amateur writer and editor for the last seven years. Despite entertaining a host of diverse hobbies like piano playing, drawing, gaming, maladaptive daydreaming, and chronic procrastinating, he finds there’s hardly time for all of them. The younger brother of a published scientist and older brother to a ballet prodigy, Dominic is slowly but surely making his way, planning to be both an architect and published author within the next ten years.





KAT JOHNSON
Literary Associate

Kat is lethargically making her way to completing her classes and transferring from Saddleback to Fullerton. Her major is journalism with a primary focus in writing. Kat, who served as a Fiction Editor and Copy Editor for WALL 2022, loves to tell and create stories, thus being a part of the WALL has helped her with that passion. All of the other staff have been a warm welcome and greatly aided in her motivation to continue working hard and see her works published. She wishes to inspire others who face mental health issues the same way other writers have inspired her.

BRANDI MICHELE ORTIZ
Literary Associate



Brandi is a returning Saddleback student who proudly served as Fiction Editor and Art Editor for WALL 2022. Her short stories “Flick” and “The Change” have been published in the 2019 and 2022 editions of WALL. Her narrative “Not A Flower,” which can be found in this edition of WALL, delves into the early chapters of her life and how she came to terms with her invisible orientation. During her time at Saddleback, she completed associate degrees in Anthropology, General Studies: Fine Arts and Humanities, General Studies: Social and Behavioral Sciences, Liberal Studies, Creative Writing, English Literature, and English. Like some ancient force of nature, she has a thirst for learning that cannot be quenched and a passion for putting her characters through absolute hell. When not reading, writing, or researching for her next story, you can find Brandi lurking in the library and looking for inspiration among a mountain of books.



GINA VICTORIA SHAFFER
Faculty Advisor

Gina teaches creative writing, composition, and literature as a professor of English at Saddleback College. She previously served on the faculty of UCLA Writing Programs. Before becoming an educator, she worked as a newspaper reporter, magazine editor, and theater critic. A published playwright whose works have been staged throughout Southern California and in New York, Gina earned her Ph.D. in English at UC Irvine. She is perpetually inspired by the creativity and innovation of the students who staff WALL and of those who contribute their words and images to it.

WALL 2023 CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

FICTION

KIRSTEN BREHMER

After her first semester at Saddleback, Kirsten realized what she wanted to major in, and that was English. She hopes to continue writing throughout the rest of her life. Kirsten wants to dedicate this story to her Grandma Nobuko, who is a continuous inspiration in her stories and her art.

EVAN GORDON

Evan is transferring from Saddleback College to Cal State Fullerton this Fall to pursue journalism and creative writing. His ultimate goal is to become a freelance writer for Image Comics. In fact, his short story published here, “The Only Side of the Moon,” was originally written as a comic script.

JOSHUA MIKUS

Joshua is pursuing a major in economics. Although he has very little experience with writing literary work, he has always found it very intriguing and fascinating since it allows you to write from the heart.

LILLY REED

Lilly is planning to transfer this Fall after studying at Saddleback for her Associate in Arts for Transfer in English Literature degree. She can be found either reading and writing or watching RuPaul’s Drag Race. Lilly can be contacted at lillybreed5@gmail.com

LIZETH TELLO

Lizeth, who has been a Saddleback student since 2018, is a freelance editor/writer and has loved books and stories since before she could even read. She has completed associate degrees in Journalism, English, Liberal Studies, General Studies: Arts and Humanities, and General Studies: Science. She was the editor-in-chief of Saddleback’s Lariat newspaper during the 2021-2022 school year, the Orange Appeal magazine during the Summer 2022 semester, and WALL Literary Journal in 2022. As she continues her professional journey, she hopes to help others tell their stories and share them for the world to read. You can view her portfolio at <https://muckrack.com/lizeth-tello/portfolio> and contact her at lizmonique21@gmail.com.

SEBASTIAN VALADEZ

Sebastian, who is majoring in English at Saddleback, enjoys studying exercise science in his spare time and divides his time between learning and fitness. His friends/hiking buddies, Michael and Hunter, are the inspiration for most of the comedic dialogue in his writing.

DANIEL WHEELOCK

Daniel is currently studying creative writing at Saddleback College. Before this, he was a student at San Diego State University, having graduated with a B.A. in English. Today, Daniel works in real estate but always makes time for his twin passions of storytelling and guitar shredding. Email: dswheelock@gmail.com

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

BARBARA BEAUPRE

Barbara is a senior citizen who has always enjoyed writing. As a former English instructor, the desire was there, but time was lacking. The Emeritus program provides a great venue to share and develop writing.

JANET CHONG

Janet is currently taking courses at Irvine Valley College to broaden her educational horizons. She believes in the importance of continuous learning.

KATELYN HIDDE

Katelyn is an environmental economics and policy major working towards becoming an environmental lawyer. She is currently the Director of Campus Sustainability as a part of Saddleback ASG and looks forward to her position as Student Trustee for the South Orange County Community College District during the 2023-2024 school year. She also enjoys the beach, ceramics, and working at her favorite restaurant, Mayfield, in San Juan Capistrano.

NATHAN MUELLER

Nathan, who completed high school at California Connections Academy, is currently studying anthropology at Saddleback College. His hobbies include birding, vexillology (the study/design of flags and heraldry), and in-depth discussion of TV, film, and books.

KALI OKIRO

Kali is an avid runner studying political science at Saddleback College. With a passion for research, they enjoy participating in their college's undergraduate conferences in between races. In fact, Kali has noticed the tempo of their footsteps syncs with the rhythm of their thoughts, resulting in some of their most intuitive insights concerning both their research and their life.

POETRY

ZAINA BATNIJI

Zaina is an English major who is transferring in Fall 2023 to San Francisco State, where she will earn a bachelor's degree in Professional Writing and Rhetoric. When she's not at work or school, Zaina enjoys watching TV, going to the beach, listening to music, and cooking.

KELLY DAUB

Kelly is a part-time photographer, writer, and digital designer who served as a Personal Narrative Editor for WALL Literary Journal in 2021. She is also a mother to four beautiful children. Kelly is currently working towards finishing her degree. She has been writing short stories, plays, and poetry for nearly 25 years.

AJ KNIGHT

Allen Johnathan, whom everyone calls AJ or Apple Jacks, likes to write books or stories that he plans to publish one day in his free time. He mainly focuses on writing fantasy, comedy, sports, action-adventure, romance, and sci-fi. In addition, he teaches and practices martial arts, including karate, kickboxing, kung fu, Kali aka Arnis, Shaolin Kempo, and Chinese boxing.

PAIGE KUJAN

With nursing school on the horizon, when she isn't studying or watching media strictly from the early 2000s, Paige is reading and writing short stories, half-finished novels, and poetry. As an avid enjoyer of storytelling, she is proud to be the current archivist for the Saddleback Creative Writing Club and has been published in the 2022 edition of WALL as well as this year's issue. You can find her on Instagram: @the.savage.k

ARI LINDER

Ari, a queer writer who obsesses over the marriage between confessionalist non-fiction and prose poetry, graduated from OCSA's Creative Writing program with the Essayist of the Year Award, Junior Writer of the Year Award, and Short Story Writer of the Year Award. They've produced, co-directed, and starred in their first short film, Barefoot as well as styling and giving creative direction at music videos/photo shoots for musicians. Ari also tutors in English at the LRC.

EMILY MARTIN

Emily, who is studying English at Saddleback, loves finding her voice through creative writing and is especially looking forward to perfecting her poetic voice. She spends most of her time writing in her journal.

STEPHEN MYER

Stephen is a writer, musician, and retired music and performing arts teacher. He holds B.A. and M.S. degrees in education and currently attends Saddleback Emeritus writing and music classes. His stories and poetry have been published in online and print journals, including Tales from the Moonlit Path, A Thin Slice of Anxiety, Roi Faineant Press, JayHenge Publishing, Figwort Journal, The Avenue Journal, and Close To The Bone Magazine, among others.

JULIANNA ORTIZ

Julianna, a nursing major at Saddleback College, has always loved writing poems since she was a child as it allows her to express her feelings beautifully and emotionally. She hopes you enjoy her poem "Isolation's Embrace." Email address: juliannaaaortizz@gmail.com

BO SYROTIK

Bo is a Polish immigrant who fell in love with the American lifestyle and education. When she is not working as an occupational therapist, she attends digital photography classes at Saddleback College. Photography and poetry are creative outlets that bring her great joy.

BLAKE VAN ORMAN

Blake, who majored in French at Saddleback College, is transferring in Fall 2023 to the College of Letters and Sciences at University of California, Berkeley. He enjoys lighthearted poetry about cars.

BRANDON WAGNER

Brandon, a music major at Saddleback College, has experience with writing song lyrics, but "The Freeways" is his first entry into the world of poetry. Brandon spends most of his time on music but loves writing as well and hopes to combine the two facets moving forward.

ART & GRAPHIC ILLUSTRATIONS

SABA ANOUSHAHPOUR

Saba attained her B.A. in graphic design from Azad University in Iran and moved to the United States in 2008. Her work experience encompasses being a freelance photographer as well as a graphic designer for different companies both in Iran and US. She is currently honing her skills as a professional photographer by taking classes at Saddleback College.

JESSIE LEE BLEDSOE

Jessie Lee is a fine art and portrait photographer based in Southern California. She is currently studying photography at Saddleback College. Her work has been published in Reckless Magazine and Janky Smooth, and featured on the cover of the WALL Literary Journal 2021 edition. See more of her work on Instagram @jessiethakid.

AKELA CRAIG

Akela will be attending the University of California, Santa Barbara in Fall 2023 to major in Art and minor in Art History. She earned her Associate of Arts for Transfer degree for both while at Saddleback College, where she played an active role in the art community on campus.

JORDAN DIXON

Jordan has taken a class in graphic illustration at Saddleback College that provided the opportunity to produce a scratchboard drawing titled “In the Grip” in this year’s edition of WALL.

JIM GASTON

The right side of Jim Gaston’s brain was almost entirely atrophied after a 35-year career working in Information Technology as a computer programmer, project manager, and director. He retired in 2020 and began looking for non-geeky ways to spend his time so he purchased a camera but had low expectations that he would devote much time to this newfound hobby. Boy, was he wrong as photography has now consumed his life and he is thoroughly enjoying the newfound creativity as he specializes in capturing nature scenes that reveal an underlying spirituality in the world. You can see more of his work at <http://peacefulsoulpics.com>

ALEX HARTMANN

Alex aims to earn enough units to transfer from Saddleback College to a state university for industrial design. Passionate about art and especially drawing, they hope to continue creating a multitude of works, such as the piece titled “Eve,” featured in this year’s edition of WALL. Alex is still finding out what kind of career they wish to pursue with their degree, but one thing they do know is that they will continue to enjoy creating the delightful creatures and ideas that live in their mind.

ZOE HERRERA

Readers can visit “The Other Side of the Moon” through Zoe’s illustration of the short story, developed as part of a graphic illustration class at Saddleback College.

SUSANA STEPHEN KUMAR

Susana holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Information Technology and was working as a software engineer at HP Inc. before she came to the USA. After a brief career break, she is currently working toward certification in Illustration and Animation at Saddleback College, which could help in turning her career into the field of arts, which has always been her passion. She loves to do real-life pencil sketches and oil paintings. Check out some of her work on Instagram: @ss_pencil_inspirations.

HAILIE LABONTÉ

Hailie used ink and white pencil to create the drawing “Needle,” which is featured in this year’s edition of WALL.

HANNAH LINDEMAN

Hannah is working toward an associate degree in Graphic Design at Saddleback College. Before this, she attained an Associate in Science degree in Health Sciences and an Associate in Arts degree in Liberal Studies. In addition, she has been on the Dean’s list for two years in a row. Today, Hannah enjoys illustration work as well as learning new skills in the complexities of graphic design and spending time outdoors in any way she sees fit. Email: hannahlindeman20@gmail.com

ALYSSA MERCADO

Alyssa is a first-generation college student from an immigrant family. She is currently working on obtaining her associate degree in Computer Graphics and Certificate in Biomedical Illustration. She works as a Social Media Manager for a veterinary management company and loves to create content.

KRYSTAL MERKWAN

Krystal is currently studying metalsmithing at Saddleback College. She was previously a student at Irvine Fine Arts Center and in the Emeritus program studying jewelry fabrication, lost wax and organic burn out casting, enameling, and lapidary work. Today, Krystal enjoys exploring new techniques and collaborating with the artists she has met through those programs.

SARAH MOHAREB

Sarah, who is majoring in Studio Art at Saddleback College, hopes to transfer to UCLA, USC, or Chapman. Cliche as it sounds, she has been an artist her whole life and recently started exploring a variety of mediums, as illustrated by Alter Ego, her wooden mask. Her dream is to one day work as a prop maker for Industrial Lights and Magic, the genius minds behind Star Wars.

GEORGEANN BARKER MEUNIER

Georgeann earned a B.A. in Art, with a concentration in ceramics, from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1975. The following year, she was hired to teach an art class for children at the George Walter Vincent Museum in the Quadrangle, located in Springfield, Massachusetts. Now retired after creating and owning a floral design business, she has taken more than 40 classes, many art-based, through the Emeritus Program at Saddleback College. Georgeann, who loves creating with clay, has switched her focus to concentrating on her original passion, ceramics.

RUSSELL PEARSON

Russell is a graphic design student currently taking classes at Saddleback College. He has recently completed his GED and is looking to move on to another school to develop his skills. He can also be found making traditional art from pencil sketches to acrylic paintings.

ELAINE PIKE

Elaine has been enrolled in photography classes at Saddleback College since the Fall of 2020. She enjoys experimenting with alternative digital processes such as layering encaustic wax over her images and gilding the reverse side of them with gold leaf. Further examples of Elaine's work can be viewed on her Instagram page @pikeography or her website elainepike.myportfolio.com.

CERISE PLUMMER

Cerise is an emerging ceramic artist currently studying ceramics at Saddleback College. During the Covid lockdown, she challenged herself to create art out of her home studio, leading to acceptance in several juried art shows both locally in Laguna Beach and internationally in Paris Design Week. Cerise's recent focus is on ceramic sculpture, and she has some exciting new creations in the works.

AMIR RABIEI

Amir is a graduate of Saddleback College (class of 2023) with a degree in graphic design. His artwork was selected for the 2023 edition of WALL, showcasing his talent and creativity. Inspired by his passion for design, Amir established his own graphic design business, BANNJY, where he delivers visually captivating designs and personalized solutions. You can find Amir on Instagram under the username @bannjy.Inc

MAYA ROSALES

Maya is a student illustrator based in Aliso Viejo.

YASMEEN SERHAL

Yasmeen is currently studying at Saddleback College for an Associate in Arts for Transfer degree in Illustration with a focus on character design in animation. Her works were featured in the Saddleback 2022 student showcase Boundless and the 2023 student showcase Radiant. Yasmeen's motivation within the art space stems from a desire to encourage people to bask in the ambedo of art in all forms and the hopeful feeling of simplicity.

KIMBERLY SEIGLER

Kimberly, based in Orange County, has been an ad agency entrepreneur, industry award-winning graphic designer, illustrator, and custom painter for the last 20 years. She attended the art program at Cal State University, Fullerton where she received her B.F.A. with an emphasis in Illustration. Kim is excited to redefine her current fine art practice at Saddleback College and is honored to have her work published in WALL Literary Journal, while being featured in two consecutive art shows. Contact her at Kim@zangweb.net

MAYA TELLEZ

Maya is an art student with a passion for visual storytelling. She has exhibited her work in the Saddleback College Art Gallery and Library. This year, Maya will enter the BFA Animation program at Cal State University, Long Beach. mayatellez.com

GIA WAHLE

Gia, a California-based artist, has been a sculptor and painter all her life. While her medium has evolved from crayons to watercolor and from Play-Doh to porcelain clay, her passion for creating has not changed. She enjoys drawing, painting, and sculpting, with her preferred mediums being charcoal, watercolor, and porcelain.

MUSIC

ANTHONY AGUILAR

Anthony composed music for the poem “Surviving the Scroll,” which you can listen to at <https://www.wallaliteraryjournal.org/blog>. He studied music production at Saddleback College and is majoring in audio engineering at California State University, Dominguez Hills. Anthony passionately enjoys making music as a hobby, which he plans to apply to his future career in audio engineering.

JUSTIN “DaMIDUL”

Justin composed music for the poem “Gentle Fever,” which you can listen to at <https://www.wallaliteraryjournal.org/blog>. He is a new-to-the-scene music producer/artist currently studying at Saddleback College. He is balancing his passion and drive for art with his long-term dedication and resilience in the sports world. Justin hopes to show the world the power of self-acceptance in a time when the Internet increasingly tells young people that they will be outcasts if they do not fit in. He plans to start releasing music on SoundCloud and is accepting inquiries for production at jdamidul@gmail.com.