METAPHOR

UNDERGRADUATE LITERARY JOURNAL

Metaphor is Weber State University's undergraduate, interdisciplinary journal, in its fortieth year of publication. The journal is staffed entirely by Weber State University students.

Metaphor accepts submissions in visual arts, poetry, fiction, and nonfiction from students of Weber State University.

Publications in *Metaphor* are chosen through a blind submission process. The author, or artist of each piece is unknown until the piece is selected for publication.

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EDITOR'S NOTES

There is no doubt that writing and art are both instrumental to how I identify myself in this world. Life often gives writers and artists subjects to explore the more we live it. In the span of a year, I faced some of the most wonderful joys and the worst heartbreaks of life, so it was really shocking that for most of 2021 I did not write as much as I have in years past. I could not have known, nor did I think, that these moments of highs and lows would prepare me to begin crafting poems and stories once again, even if their purpose was only to heal me months later. Surviving another year of uncertainty would not have been possible without the opportunity to take the position of Editor-in-Chief for *Metaphor.* The people I got to meet and work with made every Wednesday evening worth spending in Elizabeth Hall. In the sunsetting darkness that often overcame the classroom of EH 215, I felt fortunate that those gathered were people who truly appreciated writing and art as much as I did.

Writers and artists are the best people (yes, I am biased). Thanks to the vision the writer and artist invite us into, we all get a glimpse of life through a different pair of shades. The pieces offered to us this year reminded me of the power of language, image, and shock. Often, the shocking image or the unexpected made all the difference in selecting the pieces that have made it to this edition of *Metaphor*. All of us on staff are pleased to have curated and selected the pieces we did. We are also grateful for the pieces that were difficult to turn down because they taught us the value of reading and seeing a person's effort through craft. Whether you are published or if you submitted, I am amazed by your bravery and willingness to share your work with us.

Writing alone is possible, but there is something so special about being part of a community of creators. My experience with the community here at Weber State has further propelled me to explore myself as a writer. Through *Metaphor* and creative writing courses, I have met all kinds of writers and people. Some of these people are no longer strangers criticizing my work; they are friends helping me grow and overcome the limits I set for myself. Find yourself a space with curious people and you will find that you learn more about your work and how it affects those that consume it. Get involved in any way you can. You will thank yourself later.

To the writers and artists of the world: Do not let the power of creation overwhelm you. Simply respect the power and do what you can with it. You got this!

— Brenda Carrillo

ASSISTANT EDITOR'S NOTES

Art, especially writing, is often a solitary endeavor. We artists tend to work in quiet spaces. When we go out into the world, we collect truths and stuff them in our pockets. We may know a few other creatives, but we might not always share our stories with them. And first drafts? Forget it. It can be hard, finding ways to arrange and rearrange those truths, making our ideas into art. It can be lonely.

When I accepted the *Metaphor* Assistant Editor-in-Chief position, I knew I was walking into a demanding position. Last year we braved the first hurdles of the pandemic, and developed skills to help us navigate our new way of living. This year, we endured. What some thought might be a hundred meter dash has turned into a marathon. But unlike a marathon, where the cheer of a crowd can help lift a runner's spirits, many of us were running solo.

Brenda and I wanted to support our community, the *Metaphor* Editorial Staff, and our contributors, with an experience that reflected this unique time in our collective lives. We also wanted to build a stronger sense of community between writers and artists, so that people wouldn't feel so isolated on their creative journeys. I believe *Metaphor* has done that. We curated an abundance of quality submissions this year. We hosted in-person writing events, readings, and editorial meetings. Our virtual presence continues to grow and give opportunities to connect with Weber State University students wherever they may be.

We crafted a killer journal, this journal in your hands, as a love letter to our community. The art you see here, both written and visual, allows us to connect and share the modern heartache and joys we have all been experiencing.

To those who were involved in the creation of this edition: you should be incredibly proud of your work. We are still creating, still expressing ourselves. We have come together as a community of artists.

— Christina Re Anderson

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the midst of another year teeming with uncertainty, we were able to gather the fruits of our undergraduate writing to make this collection of the 41st edition of *Metaphor*. Without our allies and friends at Weber State, especially the English Department and the College of Arts and Humanities, we would not have been as blessed as we were to put together another edition. Gratitude is probably one of the most important ways to experience the world, and so we thank all those that have helped the *Metaphor* Staff do what we love!

We thank our staff members for being dedicated to reading and discussing each piece, even if it meant reading hundreds of poems or pages of fiction to find the gems we ended up selecting. Of course, we are beyond grateful to have an advisor like Professor Ryan Ridge. Your insights and suggestions always helped move us forward during the fall and spring semester. Thank you for setting the example to our staff for how to go about editing and selecting pieces for the journal.

Arin Tooker, our section editor for art and creator of the journal cover, always came into our meetings with something more than we asked. Arin, you went up and above our expectations and helped us find a cover. *Metaphor*'s vision and brand was expressed so beautifully through the art you offered for us. Know that your cover made all the difference.

Additionally, we would also like to thank the Weber State Printing Services for always taking our orders and delivering quality work. And to the members of the English Department, thank you for promoting our journal to the students and inviting us into your classrooms. Thank you to Elizabeth Hall for housing us.

As always, we are grateful for all the Weber State undergraduates for letting us see their work. We are always impressed by the work you all do. *Metaphor* would not be what it is today without writers and artists like you all! Keep sharing your work with us and others. Your art enriches the world and the community here at Weber State.

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POETRY

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It's been a whirlwind over the past few weeks.

I'd like to thank everyone who submitted their poems (including one bold author in Europe who wasn't even a Weber State student). Your works were compelling, and we had a run for our money deciding which we actually wanted to publish. I'd also like to thank the poetry editing staff. Without all of you, there's no way we could've made it to this point.

This year's poetry section was chock-full of submissions, with us seeing so many different styles of poems. We only had a fraction of the necessary pages for publishing, so actually deciding what should be published was a thoroughly involved process that took a lot of time, effort, and organisation to finalise and complete. And you're holding the completed product in your hands!

Herein are the emotions which couldn't be expressed through just a story. There's heartbreak, agony, melancholy, all too harsh to be expressed in anything besides a poem. There's also warm nostalgia, laughter, and love that couldn't be captured in any format except for a poem. I hope that for you, you can meet them on their terms and feel the power of these poems.

—Kay Walker, Poetry Editor

The Storm Arabesque

Zach Gomez

Whitecaps bob in the sea like ribcages
As if in time with a metronome
Her ankles submerge in the swirling surf
Where her home floats upon the thrashing foam

She folds her skirt breezily beneath her at the bench
The lightning crackles as if to bow
And as she plays the ivories on obsidian sand
The storm calms, as if to listen now

She plays dexterously and furiously
Like a brave knight storming a keep
Her breath becomes argentum mist as she
Performs to the tempest and the creeping deep

The sea swells to her ribs and the storm rages once more
The thunder drums and the crashing waves crescendo
Even still, she performs her song
But now, as if a duet, the hurricane matches tempo

The syncopated harmony was
A haunting sort of grace
They were perfect compliments and opposites
And still, a gray tear fell from her face

At last, when the sky turned blue again
The piano was beaten upon the black shore
Their perplexing melody remains
But the storm and girl are no more

Four Uses for Candles

Zach Gomez

I was turning four
Abuela made me my favorite cake—“the white kind”
I couldn’t read the cursive icing but
I knew what it said
Below the loopy, red writing was
A clumsy purple dragon breathing fire
Abuela was even happier than I was
She told me to make a wish
I blew out every last candle
And I ate the piece with Spyro’s face

In the third grade, there was a blackout
Mama let me hold the flashlight
As she rummaged for the candles
I got to strike the match
I was awestruck that
One match lit all the candles
The kitchen looked like a new room
Golden candlelight glowed softly on the walls
Making shadows move from time to time
We played Uno and Clue that night
And it was the closest we would ever feel as a
Family
And I wished on a candle that we could stay like that forever
But this time, the fire kept burning

When I was in high school, Mama drove 255 miles to Abuela’s home
She watched her Mama’s light extinguish
Like a candle with no more wick
Mama bought me a new suit
That I wore that Monday
In the pews, the air was so dry it burned my eyes

Mama said the prayer for Abuela in front of everyone
And everyone lit a candle
And said a prayer for Abuela
And placed it near the smiling picture of her

My son and I filled the mason jars with sand
And my wife placed the candles inside them
We set them on either side of our driveway
Digging into the snow
A Great Value luminaria
We had no money for stringed lights on our roof
And barely enough for each other
But we had candles
My son looked up at the black night and to the other lit houses
He looked at our candles
“Are you sure Santa won’t miss our house?”
I looked at him and then at our candles
“Why don’t we make a wish?”

Raptors

Shondra Ekenstam

There once was a boy, skin warmer than mine, with an echoing laugh, yet his name long lost to the sea of my memories. A wood and metal playground was our castle, our little group of friends ruled this sandbox, Raptors was our favorite game, yes, you can blame the Jurassic, we were in a park after all. We would run all over from invisible moving leather scales, swing from metal rings and bars, jumping into rubber tires, climbing to the highest points. ignoring burns and splinters which we always left with. They were merely wounds, proof we had survived the hunt of carnivorous beasts only we could see. But one day a tyrannosaurs rex replaced the raptors. Made of metal, it ran, jaws open, with tons of power, slamming its body into the vehicle. The vehicle contained his mother, his little brother, their bodies crushed in the grill of its teeth. He never came back, we were saddened by his loss and ours. I heard he moved away to a new place where his laugh is but a whisper. Our friends of the past went their separate ways, the playground torn apart, replaced by a metal and plastic monstrosity. As for the raptors, they are still there but now they are shadows stalking me in my peripheral to catch me off guard. I must be careful to not be caught unawares. As for the tyrannosaur, I am waiting for its teeth to dig into me. With the way people are on the roads today I'm sure I won't be waiting long,

A hanging tree

Shondra Ekenstam

A hanging tree
Overlooked the house
Of my mother's grandmother
Crooked was the trunk
As crooked
As the men who died
Rope burned scars
And waving remnants
Littered the branches
She once told a story
Of our two cousins
Who were hanged there
Horse thieves
She declared
Lost their lives here
Big Momma is what she was called
Lived there day
After day
She fed the it carbon
From two packs a day
Still it withered away
So she burned it
Burnt it to ash
To save the lives
Of ghosts long past

Walnut

Sean Maloy

A little hut in a walnut shell
Sat well alone and lonesome
The little door had little knob,
The little panes a little hum.
We came across the walnut house
And knocked upon the walnut door
Just you and I, our little selves
Who answered but one walnut more?
Or dressed in walnut all was he
And took us in to dine and warm
Our little hands on walnut fire
Admire the quaint walnut dorm.
The day began to fade to night
When in this little walnut home,
A shake and scuff seen all about
The table flew, the cream did foam
The fire light was putted out
The house was tossed around in whirl
And only then was seen the cause
The walnut house found by a squirrel

The Mulberry Grove

Sean Maloy

There is a place in the mulberry grove where the berries fall like so many little sorrows. The ground is stained purple, and the birds will never have enough before they are gone. You can sit and let the berries fall, eat one or two while their sweet tartness lasts, and find some little bits of purple peace in a guilt-ridden fall before the frost. If you are still, the vicious birds will come near, fight for the chance to devour more, stain their feathers purple. The trees have nothing more to give but their fruit, and the flock has nothing more to take. This is the way of things. Year after year the mulberries come, and the birds devour. Year after year some sweetness is saved to stain your lips and fingertips. There is no before, there is no after.

Riverbed

Sean Maloy

There was a time when
rivers flowed throughout
Creation. Unimpeded
they ran from
the very stars to the lands of the dead
never stopping
finding their paths
through our most ancient tales.
Stories flow
from their gurgling waters
and
we have always
listened.

Drink from their primordial form
bathe in their eternal course.
What have we learned
from the wellspring of wisdom?
What have lost to the Lethe?
From the Nile we arose
over the Styx we must
at last depart.
The sins of the world were drowned in the River Jordan
and washed up
along the Mississippi.

I cannot be sorry
the paths of water have carved themselves
onto my very heart.
After all
a river will only ever flow
in one direction.

Moving West

Reed Brown

West
of the tracks, literally
Out my window are black barrels of train cars
pushed against the apartments
I am cut off from my hometown
Ogden
the railroad town
junction city of the west

Now
I really am west
Ten minutes from everything
surrounded by
pick up trucks
men in leather boots
cans of chew bulging
in their back pockets

Swimming
in yellow grass and sage
concrete recycling
industrial parks
next to a field of cows
and a strip club across the highway

Yee-haw

Fester-val

Ravynna Deahl

As above, so below.

Nearly as many people rot beneath the earth
As those rotting on its surface.
We need a new word for death.

We speak of death as if it is an end:
A stripped and barren scape
Where life will never return,
Rather than simply another turn of the wheel.

Death begets life.
Decay nourishes municipals
From mushrooms to magpie,
And no soil is more fertile than that left in the wake
Of blistering ash and molten magma.
We are of what stars are made of,
Flickering in and out of existence,
Just as the world disappears between your every blink.
Every heartbeat, insignificantly crucial,
And connected with everything around you.
Tethered to the innerworkings deep within our nuclei,
To a red dwarf billions of lightyears away.
Both darkened and died since your last breath.

Now, take another.

So Bipolar

Natalie Swanson

I'm the punchline of a bad joke.
The one where someone who is simply in a bad mood that day says:
"I'm sooo bipolar"
while their friends laugh along.

You're sooo bipolar?
What does it mean to *actually* be "so bipolar?"
It means having an invisible disability, with invisible reasons, invisible excuses.
It means the feeling of impending doom. . .
The inconsolable crying. . .
The psychosis. . .
The fear.
It means the pill capsules getting stuck in your throat as you swallow literally thousands of milligrams of mood stabilizers. . .
Every. single. day.
and
Every. single. night.
It means the irrational yet persistent fear that your loved ones will finally decide you are just –
too much.
It means worrying that your fear isn't actually irrational, because your childhood friend decides that your mental illness is too much for *them* to handle.
It means having a "lifelong friendship" replaced by a lifelong mental illness.
It means wanting to acknowledge your diagnosis. . . without being defined by it.
but
It also means hiding your mental illness like a dark secret.
Because I don't want to tell people, "I'm bipolar."

I don't want to be a bad joke.

Out of my Head

Melanie Melgar

Wondering what the hell went wrong on the drive back from Tucson,
Was the heat too high? Did I forget your cousin's birthday?
Something went wrong; since when do you roll your eyes when you yawn?
Didn't feel it when it happened but it's been a year now,
Tried to imagine your reaction
After I stopped trying to win you back, now
You watch my stories and count the bodies lying
Beside me on the bathroom floor. You called
Our relationship a lethal dose of physical attraction
And love, but that's night and day to me.
Wondering what the hell went wrong on the drive back from Tucson,
Did you give up on me? Did I become the black sheep?
Should've seen it coming, I had a feeling but now
Curiosity is killing me like a teaspoon of bleach.
All I see is you and me in different scenarios, but tonight
You're sleeping peacefully and I'm paralyzed in the sheets.

Nonetheless

Margaret Draper

We cry
As simple as that
Not because of our lies
Or constant spats
Merely, an overdue goodbye
Slapped down like a house fly

Flying, but not thriving
Drifting from place to place
Lacking rhythm, only surviving
Easier than retrying, to put your soul on showcase
Again. It's draining. Striving
To save what's gone. Nose diving

But it was our destiny
Not a permanence in our stars
Rather, a brief ecstasy
Kept hidden in a jar
To bring forth occasionally
In private, remembering.

So we cry.
I'd rather vomit
Purge it and purify
Food poisoning, I can drop it.
But here I am, barely getting by
Hoping the wound will solidify

It's a process
Losing you piece by piece
Each tear I regress
Reminds without cease
What I tried to suppress.
I miss you, nonetheless.

Hindsight

Margaret Draper

Sitting alone on a stiff couch
In the center of the mall
When I floated out of the store
My friends forgot my apparition
Unaware of what was brewing
But so was I

A sea of people rush past
Hundreds of nameless faces
I will never get to know
Only one is familiar
A void yawns within
And a girl I used to know emerges

How old are you?
Twelve?
Fourteen?
She has my face
And body
From way back when

Her gaze tears into me
Pupils an icy hand
Gripping my throat
Holding what I bear to the world
My only true commodity
Up for inspection

Am I cool now?
Though I'm not different.
The same insecurities
Poking at my stomach
Or picking at my outer layer
When the paper dam breaks

She tells me yes
I walk with the air she wishes she had
But I am still a failure
To her
To my family
To the strangers passing by

She stands before me
Like the God Anubis
Placing, not my sins on a golden scale
But my faults
What is the verdict?
Her adolescent frame

Vanishes before she can damn me
Entirely.

I brush three sets of teeth

Krystiana Davis

Every night I brush three sets of teeth.
Two for gnashing and one for good measure.

Two for good measure, one for the hell of it;
I have always wanted more than I could chew.

To eat more than I could chew I had to
Learn to swallow. The guilt ate at me.

I learned to swallow what ate at me.
The space made room for something sweeter.

To make room for something sweeter,
A part of myself must be consumed.

I consume parts of myself, chew.
Because I learned how to swallow,

I know how to swallow fear
Every night I brush three sets of teeth.

Home is an Apartment

Krystiana Davis

I
never thought
I would have a space
of my own. Incapable of supporting
the weight of bills with a necrosed will. But, no one
told me that a rented apartment could be called a home.
I call my apartment my home because that's what it is. Home.
A home with carpet and a fireplace and pictures on
the wall not of me but the life I've built for myself.
A home that doesn't feel heavy with the weight of
problems that can be fixed but won't be because
let's be honest, doing nothing
is safer than admitting that the
house has been fucking crumbling
at the sound of thundering boots up the staircase.
"Honey, I'm home" father drops his coat and speaks.
Everyone must hush when he says "Little girl, you
have no idea what you're doing." As I just sit back
and laugh at how wrong he must know he is as I
lay here in my apartment home with my plants and
my books and my love– free of weight, despite the bills.

No One Should Tell A Child How to Grieve

Katlyn Linford

I sat on big red velvet couch,
Flat-pile carpet on the floor.
I stared at all the people
I didn't know
And I didn't know
Where to look.
I couldn't look
At the casket.
I couldn't look at my mom.
I couldn't find my brother,
And he couldn't look either.
I couldn't look for God,
Though my grandma said to try.
I couldn't look to anyone—
Just me, just I
And the blue dress
My daddy bought me.
And they told me
He would see me
When I one day walked the aisle—
But it's easy.
It is easy
To say that to a child
Who is not allowed
To disagree.
So it was just me.
An eleven-year old
Who could not see
How anything
Could ever be
The way she'd dreamed.

Bath and Body Works (2021)

Katlyn Linford

https://www.bathandbodyworks.com/c/gifts/gifts-for-him

Bath and Body Works has a "Men's Collection" now.
I have Peony Body Wash, and Grapefruit Perfume.
I have Rose-Scented Hand Soap,
and Sugar Cookie Sanitizer.
My husband can have "Marble," or "Mahogony," 3-in-1,
Or "FreshWater," "Clean Slate," "Ocean," or "Oasis,"
(So, the men's collection is "Countertop," or "Coffee table,"
Or "Water," "Water," "Water," or "Water.")
I have 10 Fuzzy Socks and 15 Blankets.
I have Nice, Silky Nightgowns
With matching shorts.
My husband can have Fuzzy Socks, but not in front of other men,
And he has 15 Different Beard Oils that smell the same.
(And shhh. . . but once, for fun. . . he put one of my Nightgowns on,
And then slept in it because "Wow, these are so comfy").

My husband loves the Smell of Roses,
But Bath and Body Works has a "Men's Collection" now,
So he will get "Marble" scented 3-in-1 for Christmas,
Forever unsatisfied because someone decided
The smell of a garden in Spring is only for girls.

Taken Flight

Kathryn Redd

These are the dragonfly days, spent flitting between flower and faith as though both could sustain a starving creature when the bleak midwinter comes to stay when so many have supposedly lost their way trudging through the muck of yesterday when a storm of judgment rains down upon the decisions that have yet to be made and everything that is said must be heard through a lens that smudges what you're not meant to see even though it's right there as plain as could be but it's not for you to decide what is to be brought into the world of your memory with no trust that you might fly away as if the chain of words around your waist isn't enough to make you stay when the sun breaks through and clouds that turn from false blue to true gray inviting attendance away from the circle of a vicious forgery of peace brought on by scratching sanctified lies onto the eyes of any who might cast their gaze that way tricked into a pint-sized life stuck between flight and ideas they can't rewrite.

Excoriation Disorder

Karly Nyman

My skin, this thing draped over me like a unique and heavy cloak, has had odd tastes all along. It's had an odd relationship with me, the wearer. The bearer—the tired bearer and the cruel burden alike, a lifelong loop thus enclosed, a two-headed serpent devouring itself.

It's not a relationship anyone yearns to write home about. Not the kind you want a diamond from. You don't want it to meet your family, or your friends, or the clerk at the store, or the cab driver. Not the kind where you lay awake wondering when you grew apart because you didn't, you can't. Not one where you'll ever say "it's not you, it's me" because it's you. . . It's you.

You will have no pretty ceremony where you'll wear white, not when you're like this. You'll bleed right through the satin, the cashmere, the delicate spun-cream lace. You'll sign the dotted line but you'll beg for not a single witness. You're stuck with your skin, the same way you're stuck with you. I hope you kept the receipt for the shoes, I hope you have a spare cut-glass bottle of high-proof whiskey—or a bottle of disinfectant and bandages somewhere close by.

Because if your skin is married to your bones and labyrinthine nerves the way mine is, I'm sorry. But you will never feel a soft touch again.

Pain will be the most intimate caress, mindless exploration of fingertips seeking imperfections to tear away, tear like petals off a young rose, like the ticket stub from the symphony tucked carefully into your pocket once the lights finally dim.

You can't bring yourself to let go, you can't stand to be touched, you shrink away from even being seen. All that exists is the assurance in a voice like over-sweetened black tea, like spilled ink, like tarnished silver, that this, at least, will *never* leave you. Every time you're weak. Every time you fail. Arms will come around you—your own, though they sometimes don't feel like it—and as those familiar hands hold you together, they will gently, sweetly, soothingly pick you apart.

The words of comfort will fall petal-soft, and you'll somehow hear them over the screaming in your head to stop, to resist, that you've done enough damage for tonight—this week—for years and years.

Your numbness is a talented playmate, your skin well-trained to flicker with satisfaction and reddening awareness without a touch from delicate leather strips, your eyes unseeing without need for a silken blindfold, your every sense attuned to minute drips of blood not unlike uniform patterns of soft rope, letting it bind your wrists, your throat, the soft curve of your hips, in such appealing designs even as you dizzily wonder why your safe-word is being ignored.

The patterns of crimson knots are deliberate, meant to draw the eye, meant to emphasize your vulnerability and surrender, but you thought they weren't supposed to be so tight that they cut, that you can't breathe.

You know it doesn't just love you so much it hurts—it doesn't love you at all. You know, under the questing fingertips masquerading as an innocent caress, that it only wants to dig through your skin, again and again, until the patterns there make you unrecognizable.

You should fight back. Eventually, maybe you will. You should break things off, change the locks, never listen again to this voice that so fervently believes you are better off with even more scars. You should leave it outside in the snow somewhere and never look back, hope it quietly succumbs to the cold and just goes to sleep forever. You shouldn't wonder if it's got anywhere else to go, if it's hungry—you know it's always, always hungry.

You should go home to your exhausted skin, so desperate for your mercy, for you to keep your word this time, and only touch in healing, in gentleness, in repentance. Maybe ask—once again—for a second chance, and maybe this time if there is a familiar knock on the door you will be so in love with this new, delicately trusting skin—forgiving, trying, *trying*—that you won't even look up.

Exalting the Tempest

Jade Hills

There was a child shaken and scarred by the storms of the Earth.
She clung to the chest of her mother as they battered outside the window.
Terrified of being trapped and trembling,
While the world tore itself apart beyond the glass.

But then she met you.
And afterwards, all other encounters with enraged nature,
Paled to your existence.

Eyes that remind sailors of the boiling sea,
And billowing winds.
Subtle streaks through dark hair.
Strange lightning against the night sky.
A heart that beats with thunderous applause.
Ascending and falling, never failing.

Then finally, the fog that rolls off your tongue.
The smoke of your own breath,
As an old friend might say.
Freeing itself, full, from your lungs.

And no longer is she afraid of the storm,
She lives for it.

in the belly of 'chinery

Hayley Litchfield

my great-grandfather put me in the belly
of the machine hoping
to teach me a lesson because, “boy,
you don’t know nuthin’ ‘bout ‘chinery.”
he unbolted the panel and pushed me inside.
i got quiet as the machine hummed
and buzzed around me.
would it tell me its secrets
if i listened? so i held
my breath. i heard each cog and gear
click-clacking away—i heard
the order and sequence and sense
that each part of the machine had
entropy in the universe as it turned
around and around,
like the earth orbiting
around and around the sun,
and i saw how the order moved within
the chaos of the noise and stifling heat
of machine after machine after machine.

Seven-Eighths

Hayley Litchfield

English Department Writing Contest Winner, Second Place: Poetry

When my coworker sat down
At the table in the breakroom
Next to me, she complained
About her son's food allergies.
When she found out that I can't eat
Wheat or gluten, she nodded,
As if she was responsible for finding recipes
For my predicament
Then said, "So, you're one of those glutards."

"Glutard."
The word hit me like an air horn
In the face, rendering me useless
Until the ringing in my ears subsided.
I could only assume "glutard"
Meant gluten-free retard.
I tried to joke,
Without cutting my tongue
On the word, that they're only retards
If they do it voluntarily.
She countered, "Nah, I just call
Them stupid motherfuckers."

I learned recently that icebergs
Have a lifespan of 3000 years,
From formation, until they completely melt away.
I like to think of them drifting aimlessly
Around the ocean while ships
Try to avoid the seven-eighths
Of the behemoths that live underwater.

“Glutard.”
I tried pronouncing the word silently;
Tried convincing myself that it was just
an adjective. But, how much of a word
is composed of connotations?
Were seven-eighths of the meaning of “glutard”
And “motherfucker” hidden underneath
The calm lapping of the waves?

Once, the National Ice Center
Lost an iceberg,
The size of Rhode Island.
A whole iceberg, lost—
From the global positioning system.

I hadn’t heard “retard”
In a long time and had almost forgotten
That it still existed.
Do words hide from view until you get complacent,
Until you ram into them headlong later?
Do words ever die
Completely? How would I know?
They don’t have obituaries
For lost words. They’re probably
Just hovering on the tip
Of someone's tongue like a match
That’s been extinguished,
That might flare up again
As a fire eater swallows them for breakfast.

In Memory of My Father

Hayley Litchfield

"It's all about the roots,"
My father tells me
When he explained how old
The trees are in the backyard.
How they stood
In the same spot for
Our whole life.
Unmoving,
Even in the strongest of
Storms—of wind and rain.
"If you don't have roots—"
He shakes his head and smiles,
"You can only do so much
Without them."

So I dig,
I dig in the
Moist brown dirt
To find mine,
My roots,
On my family's tree.
I spend my whole life
Nurturing and
Growing them. They are the most
Precious thing that
I own—that owns me.

My family's aspen tree
Grows from the same
Root system
And has the roots
Of a spiderweb.
Weaving and connecting
Together to make the tree safe
In its ability to
Grow.

When I am old enough,
My roots grow another tree.
I prune and nourish it,
Hoping that my marriage
Will be as strong as my parents'.

I go inside to wash the dirt
Off my hands.
Watch it swirl down the silver drain
In big clumps of mud.
They look like
Blood clots.

When I go back out,
It's too late.
My father stands in
Horrified stillness.
Wiping sweat off his face,
Axe in his right hand,
The blood of his tree coats
The head of the axe.

His tree was dug up
Severed from our roots.
He gathered the seeds
And walked,
Trying to make new
Roots.

I watched,
Day by day,
As his tree
Grew black and rotted,
Ring by tree ring.

So, now, I still tend to my tree,
Even after he stopped
Doing what he taught me.

We

Fern Ferguson

The putrid stench of the rotting sky fills my nose and
I am suddenly alive.

The leather is hot and sticky against my thighs
The AC
Too cold and harsh.

How long have I been driving?
How long have
I
Been driving?

Faint memory of the last hour trickles into my mind,
Like a quiet brook babbling so softly none can hear.
But I focus.

I remember the grating noise of a gentle voice telling me to stay on the I-15.
I remember the thrumming of the music against my ears.

But do I remember?
Do
I
Remember?

Are these memories mine?
They're so far away from me,
As if I'm looking into the sunset and trying to catch a glimpse of a boat beyond the horizon.
The sun distracts, blinding me and making it impossible to see.
But yes,
Surely I do see the boat.

Are these memories mine?
Or are they from a replica,
A version of myself with their own motivations?

Panic air inhale exhale quickly I can’t breathe panic inhale exhale quickly I can’t think panic inhale exhale quickly I can’t exist with her here!

. . .

Does it matter
Her memory or mine
We live as one
Though so distinct
We will never be apart.

Sunday Hike

Erica Williams

I have gone in search of a chapel in trees
to find a church, walls of smooth chalk bark.
Hidden amid tall, skinny saints clothed in robes of white.
Each one holds coins of shimmering gold, raised sky high
clasped ever gently overhead.

I hear whispering through thin branches, hear holy messages
carried to my skinned knees by soft hands of light breeze.
A wood of words, a woods of solitude embraces me.
The chorus sings a silent hymn, peaceful notes I hear within bone halls.
Alone, I seek a priest carrying a splintering, walking stick
reaching long, bare limbs heavenward, heavensent,
preaching a sermon *Save Mother Earth*.

Samantha said, *You do not have to punish yourself for other people's ugliness*.
Mary wrote, *You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles*.
I have walked my worn weary body here to rest.

With ladder rung ribs I ascend and sinner's sinew I lament for my mistakes
choices only I could make.
My survival, a prayer freed cleansing air
one final breath in reverence spent.

Tears fall like leaves, fall like wishes to the ground,
touch me gently pirouetting down.
A release of weight embraced by the cool, damp soil underneath
a carpet of living, decaying, resurrecting things.
Salvation will be held within a seed. I believe.

Ecology of Worry

Erica Williams

My son is a tiger shark whose
teeth grow in rows we must extract.
In the dentist's room—
        a jungle theme and another room
a safari scene and I wonder which animal
painted on these walls is next to be
                EXTINCT.
Yesterday the ivory-billed woodpecker
                GONE.
        I cried.
Are you next?   Am I?

A lone tree, framed by a windowpane,
let me watch it change with seasons.
                GONE.
        Did it cry?
Bemoaning to a friend the tree was dead
she replied—
        you're the only one who'd notice.

I possess words that do me no good:
        a turtle's home—a carapace and plastron,
the nictitating membrane of a lizard's eye,
                maybe one day I'll pass them on
to my children who will care for the Earth
                and the ghost of the dodo bird.

The Mountain Behind

Erica Williams

"I go to nature to be soothed and healed,
and to have my senses put in order"
—John Burroughs

If leaves change from green to red mid-September at noon
If charred black branches curve like ribs clung to the trunk of their tree
Then a single tear of sap rolls down a narrow alley of burnt bark
If they tell me my weight does not matter nor my size either
Then I carry a mind wasting time worrying about frivolous things
If pink red algae grows on the rocky border of the river's edge
If I was blessed by droplets of water thrown in Shiva's name
        Could I help myself any more than a nation at war?
If the deafening chaos between my ears tries to drown me
If the sound of scree scattering down slope sounds suspicious
Then the caw of a perched black crow is a secret divulged
If thoughts & words, clog & burn like spicy smoke inhaled
Then my tongue's set ablaze with silent words I swallowed whole
If I taste the bitter bravery of accepting love's betrayal
Then this loamy soil scent is a soothing salve for my wounded soul
If a decimated pinecone is a million missed opportunities for growth
Then you must remember you are not separate from nature but contain multitudes
        But what if—in this wild hunger—I consume myself in fire?

Reflections of an Adventurer

Conner Wangsgard

As sun breaks slowly, ridge for ridge,
Nighttime frosts turn morning dew, rivulets cascading ‘cross the Crest,
The Mother wakens gently from Her slumber,
Gleams of day a’glowing on Her green and growing breast

The Running Wind, a briar thatch,
The Laughing Brook, a berry patch,
These all bespeak the wooded glories of our Teton solace
The Watching Osprey overhead,
The western wilds of the virgin Jed,
Clouds spinning manic circles for to crown this stony palace

And in the east, a Rising Bison
Guards majestic sacred plains of sage and scrub,
And a Wandering Horse, carrying awe-struck rider
Sees in the jagged cliffs cared for a callow calf and cub

It’s this ragged, yet perpetual youth,
Life springing forth from abject impossibility
That brings me back to the heart of simple truth,
And why it’s the Tetons, ever the Tetons for me

Inception

Conner Wangsgard

It's hot in this room

And the sweltering heat joins with the bellowing beat
Of a new drum; voices rising and slashing
Each other, ideas clashing and impassive fists of passion crashing
Down on tables owned by the idea of a people
And written on me in ink that was brought here from somewhere else
(and, really, weren't we all?—funny how easy it is to forget,)
Are glorious words, words you could almost touch
Visions you could almost taste, placed with urgency rather than haste
Upon me, paltry parchment that wasn't worth remembering yet

And yet, those who lived in homes that they could
Scarce even call their own
—Cholera domiciles worked from birch
A tree of life that the church itself could not have grown—
Tried to found this holy ground in the maples
Without the overreach of anyone, priestly or papal
But that doesn't mean the church didn't have a say in it
And meant to stay in it (though sometimes it had its way with it)

I once heard a friend say that it's dangerous to worship
An idea. That doesn't mean it isn't a damn
Good idea though.

And still every day, the warships float the spray
And I'm still not sure whether it's blood
Or saltwater, and if saltwater
Is it sweat or tears that rears the flood?
But either way a ship can't sail
Without a body of water
So it takes sons and daughters of those
Who stood on the brig with a pail
Trying to avoid sinking, and clean
A deck which is stinking
And yet still throw back into the sea
A purer liquid to float

For years and years to come

So write upon me
Fail if you must, but write, damn it
Because if you don't, the book loses this borrowed page
And the legacy of the whole novel wastes with age
And we can't afford to let this star-spangled verse
Go unwritten. Blessing or curse, pick up your quill
For better or worse, and pen for the ages

And never, never
My beautiful experiment, borne on the wings of my scribbled stanzas today
Be still.

Relentless

Cecilia Gibby

a fog rises in my throat;
dense.
droplets condense together on my tongue,
forcing my voice to trickle down to my stomach,
the flooding of my voice crashes against the
mucosa. the only thing keeping the waves from bursting.
it's begging to escape.
But the fog is relentless

my fingers grasp at my throat,
clawing at the fog.
useless efforts.
my fingers act as yarn
tangling together, endless knots.
the fog seeps through them.
It is relentless

wait for daylight.
it warms the throat,
pushes out the fog,
evaporates dense droplets plaguing my tongue,
releases my trapped voice,
drying and untangling my yarn fingers,
Daylight is bliss.

A Gentleman

Cecilia Gibby

Bitterness is a gentleman.
one that chews tobacco.
He has no regard for my floors that were just cleaned.
no regard that when He leaves i will have to get on my hands and knees
and scrap up that foul ooze.
but His presence is as addicting as His tobacco,
so i invite him again,
forgetting my clean floors.

for Bitterness is a gentleman.
one you simply cannot refuse for if you do
you will never know the pleasure
of the foul ooze.

Celestial Pantoum

Anna Katrina Kearl

For the nights that you are not here
I ponder on the stars and what they might mean
A silly game for a silly girl to play
Reaching for a reality that does not exist for me

I ponder on the stars and what they might mean
How they might feel against my cool skin
Reaching for a reality that does not exist for me
A sensation I have been after forever

How they might feel against my cool skin
Hot and burning, effervescent and alive
A sensation I have been after forever
Better than the bruises you leave on my body

Hot and burning, effervescent and alive
When you kiss me and leave me it is
Better than the bruises you leave on my body
A moment of peace and relief

When you kiss me and leave me it is
Like a mercy from the stars
A moment of peace and relief
For the nights that you are not here

snowfall

Allison Ala

As the sun slips out of sight I think about glitter
About when we used to like it, but now
It's to be shoveled aside in the dark.
You grumble in the morning how
You hate it, but I still see the child
Who built castles out of snow
And warmth out of hatred.
You worry if it comes slow,
Worry if it comes fast.
The mountains, they sit
And watch us worry.
By the fireside, we sit
Worry at the crackle
Of branches
—crack—
Avalanche

etnemeD

Allison Ala

English Department Writing Contest Winner, First Place: Poetry

Down the line it was memory upward taken far, a home and fiend through bridge, play bridge. If a remembering falls, pick up that fight, fight with the dust rust here an iguana leading you shown the sand. Dust instead and rusting lines, a context was there but there no more.

It licks your tongue heavy and here but fell down a spice rack, iguana again but the label peels off of rust breaks the bridge to trust, can't have that for just one memory. Mental, there, desert, here. Astray is everywhere one moment you know where this is but gone, all sand before glass before your word broken before mental space evaporated whole into wrinkled green. You have to ask. Wrinkles turn to knowledge turn to dust dust dust.

June 22nd, 2021 (Who Knows) *After Frank O'Hara*

Abram Turner

I love you. I love you, but I'm turning to my verses
and my heart is closing like a fist.
—Frank O'Hara

I love you I love you I love you but I'm turning
To my verses and I realize I don't have any verses
There's nothing to turn to and my heart wants to close like a fist
My heart wants to turn into a fist
Once it's finished its transformation it can actually express how it's feeling
It can put a hole in the wall
It can break glass
It can show the world how it feels and
It doesn't close it doesn't turn it just sits there
It just sits there and I push it and I prod it
It just sits there.

We've heard this a dozen times before but this time
It's all too real
And I think about the dozen times before
And it makes me so damn mad because
Why can't this just be another time
Why does this one have to be real.
I haven't written a poem in like four or five months
Does that mean I've lost it because I
Don't think I have it in me to lose anymore
I mean I'm only twenty and
I wake up at four o'clock in the afternoon
And I look at my chest and I look at my hands
And I have so many things I want to lose before I lose you
But you're going and I still have my
Hands and I still have my
Chest and I still have my
Name and I want it all gone.

I'll still watch my heart and I'll wait for it to twitch
But right now it just sits there and
It just sits there.

Strawberry Gate

Abram Turner

Maggie's out picking sunflowers and she's looking at me.
"I haven't told everyone about you."
She's not happy to hear me say that, but she doesn't yell or pout.
That's the thing about Maggie.
She looks at me like I'm not there and to me, that means the world.
She touches my tummy and it feels right.

It's four in the morning and Maggie still wants to pick sunflowers. The pollen makes me sneeze but she doesn't stop picking them for me. I've told her how much I love other flowers, but every time,
sunflower.
It doesn't make me angry, but it makes me wonder what she sees in sunflowers.

I'm filling up the gas tank for the hundredth time and she's staring at me from the passenger side seat.
"I don't think everyone is gonna understand you"
She giggles, and looks out the window.
I finish pumping gas and get in the car.
She doesn't stop looking out the window.

I've known Maggie all my life, but I've only learned her name recently.
Whenever I saw her I just called her sunflower girl. She didn’t take too kindly to the nickname because she’s much more than just a flower. She asked me if I’d like it if she called me a flower name, and I said that was okay, because I felt like not much more than a flower. She wasn’t happy with that response, and she didn’t talk with me for a week. That’s how Maggie shows me she’s angry with me. I’m never angry with Maggie, though.

I told Maggie once that I wanted to build a house out of sunflowers and dedicate my life to writing her love poems. She scoffed, rolled her eyes, and handed me another sunflower.

Half of Now and Forever

Camila Becerril

English Department Writing Contest Winner, Third Place: Poetry

I think about Spanish a lot.
I think about the people who speak it, the culture, the way it sounds so similar and so distinct. I think about when teachers used to shame me for my accent as a child. I think about being six and having to translate papers that I couldn't understand.
I think about the Spanish radio a lot.
I think about the time we were listening to it, my sister and I, making fun of the way the advertisements were pronounced.
Heavy Spanish accent, on soft English words.
Laughing about how their tongues wouldn't settle the right way
I remember my dad yelling at us for making fun of our language. I remember him saying,
"¡así es como se dice!"
Angry at us for making fun of something innate. It made me realize I was trying so hard to be something that I am not.
I remember the first time a boy commented on my arm hair,
"You are hairier than me"
he said.
He held up his arm to mine. Our brown hairy arms
side
by
side.
I knew what he was doing.
He was just like me.
I felt my dad's anger then.
I understood where the rage came from.
I saw someone who was also trying to fit in when they only stuck out.
Trying to find a place for themselves where they aren't wanted.
People do a lot of things when they want to belong.
Society made us hate ourselves and he projected his hate
towards my innocent arm hair.
A true reflection of oneself.
The mirror could not have been clearer.
I remember my older sister over-plucking her eyebrows to make them look "nicer".

When my younger sister was 12 she was so self-conscious of her hair she decided to remove it off her body.

She bled.

The long scar along her shin will forever remind her that she

has hair.

I remember teaching people how to pronounce my name

"it ends in 'ah' not 'uh' and the "I" makes the "E" sound" I would say.

I remember giving up

and shortening it instead.

We all shortened our names to make them more digestible. The nicknames became a different persona.

Xitlali was Lali

Arturo was Art

Camila was Cami

Camelia was Lia

Spanish is half of my life. Not the first half or the last.

Half of now and forever.

I remember not being allowed to speak English at home and I remember speaking it in whispers anyway.

Daring to be caught living my double life by my parents.

Spanish was native to my tongue and English highjacked it. Spanish was my first language and now it took a back seat.

"Qué" turned into "what" and Spanish turned into Spanglish.

"God" was in English.

I still feel stinging and pain of humiliation

I consider it the price you pay for daring to dream in a land

Qué no es tuya.

Mako Sica

Moran Harris

I bash my head into the puppy doggy mug
you're ready to evacuate
ejaculate
Fists on the road to show its no more
than a too tight drum
stretched
But we're off
to the Badlands, the mean ass Manlands
to escape Athena, or become her
a women in
drag
Me on the side of the highway
you grasp my Towering Spires for balance
maybe for the
Hell
of it all
My babydoll skirt can't hide this scenic outlook
much too windy
You cum from behind, fish hook
me until im utterly
gutted
All to remind me
that no mother
bore us
Just a spring, from some head.

Yet still, we float back home with ease
to suck the shards from
a lonely morning meant for two.

Laundry

Moran Harris

God kissed
us all, shortly before giving us up
to the swollen
bellies of our mothers
before our eyes met the fluorescence
of a hospital room.
And the lingering dampness
on our peach fuzz foreheads
is what his breath
smelled of that day.
Sadness, joy, regret. Who's to say.

And our mothers
spent years smelling cotton t-shirts
to know which child they belonged
to. No amount of Tide could mask
the lingering scent of emotions. The sweat
we gave. The mark of our God.

And when we go walking in August
at dusk
and the hot motionless
air momentarily smells of fresh laundry
of someone,
we are reminded of
something intangible that belongs
to us all. Something anyone
could just stumble upon.

ART

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Creation is an intrinsic aspect of the human experience. No matter the turmoil across the world, we will still have a drive to create, to put parts of ourselves out into that very world, and forge a better understanding of ourselves and one another. These bonds connect us across time and space, stirring conversation and connection even beyond the bounds of death.

At its core, art is a message from the creator to you, the reader. Our artists come from many walks of life, and each has their own story to tell filled with triumph and tribulation. As you look upon this beautiful collection within these pages, ask yourself what message the artist is sending to you. These are snapshots of their passions, dreams, fears, and everything in between.

We at Metaphor are honored that so many wonderful creators have chosen to share a piece of themselves with our publication this year.

—Arin Tooker, Art Editor

The Red Mist

Shondra Ekenstam

Galaxy

Shondra Ekenstam

PossamMan

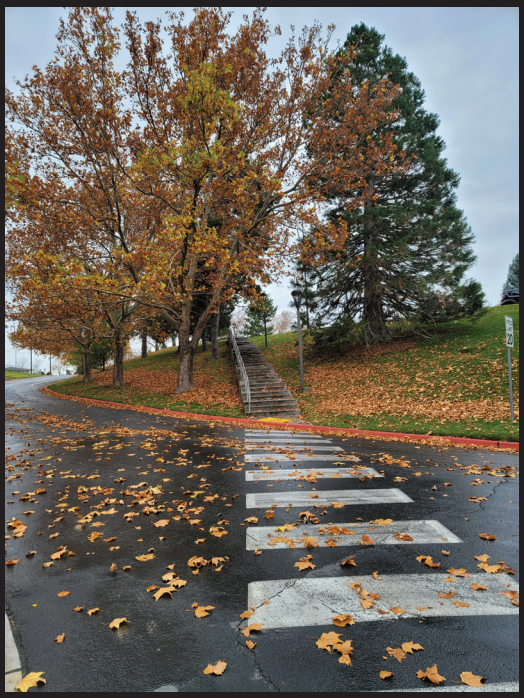
Nataly Kohler

Alturas Lake

Jessica Ethier

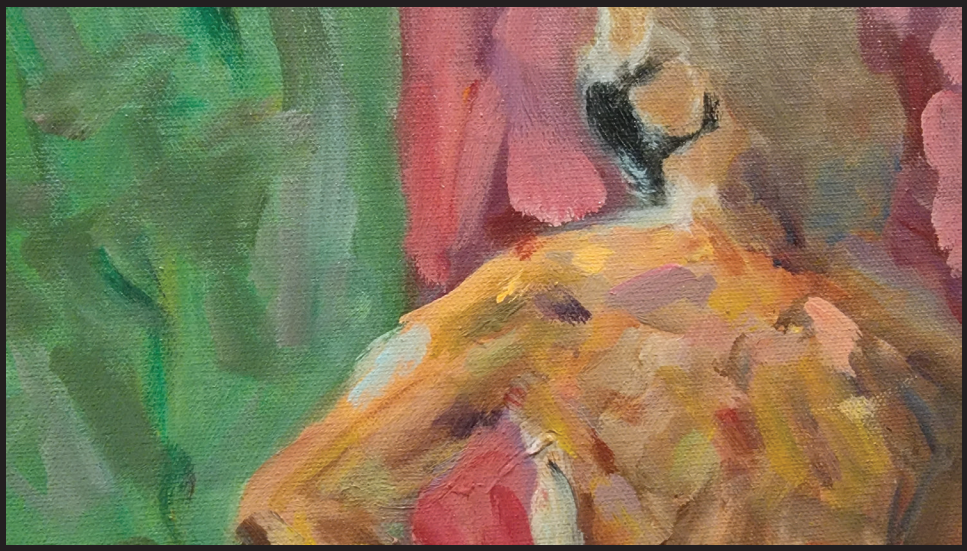
Weber Campus

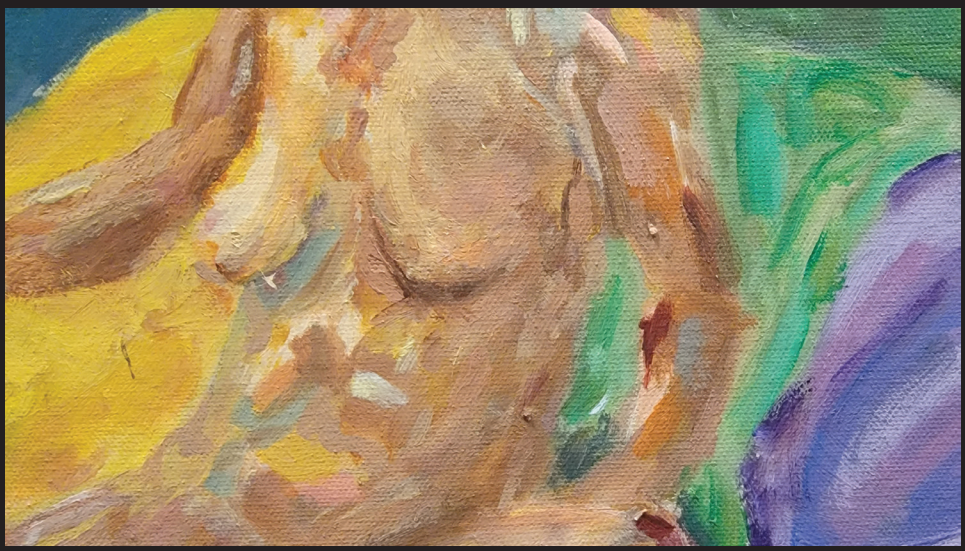
Jessica Ethier



Acceptance

Eric Carda





Such is Life

Christiana Cortes

And there was fire in her eyes

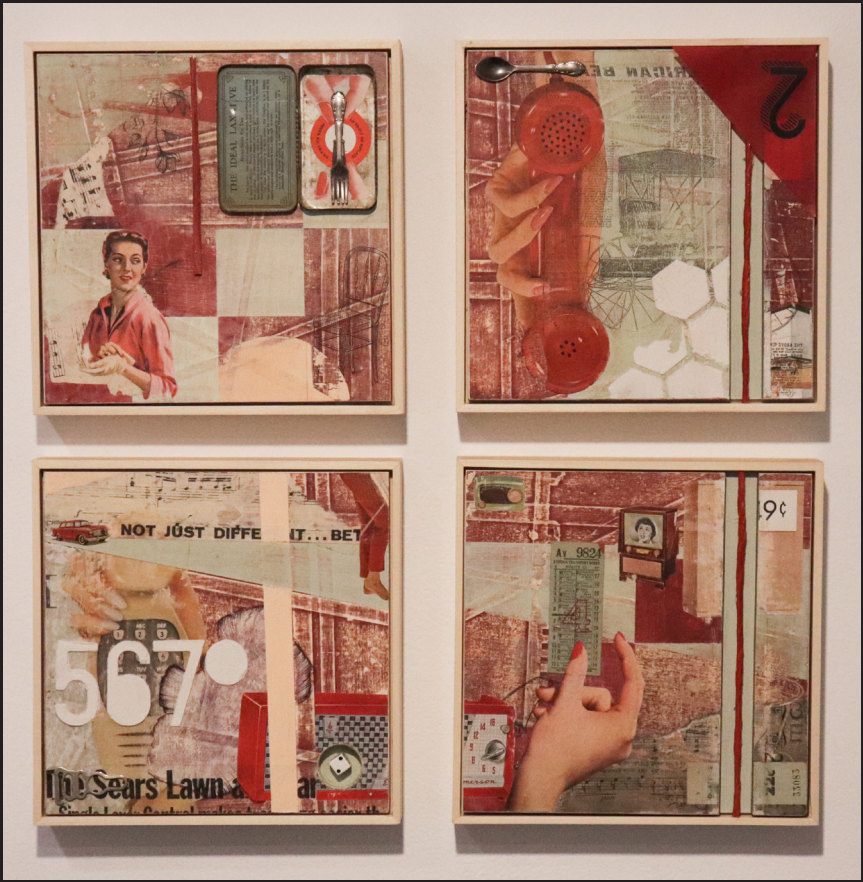
Christiana Cortes

Relic of Grandmother

Allie Finlinson

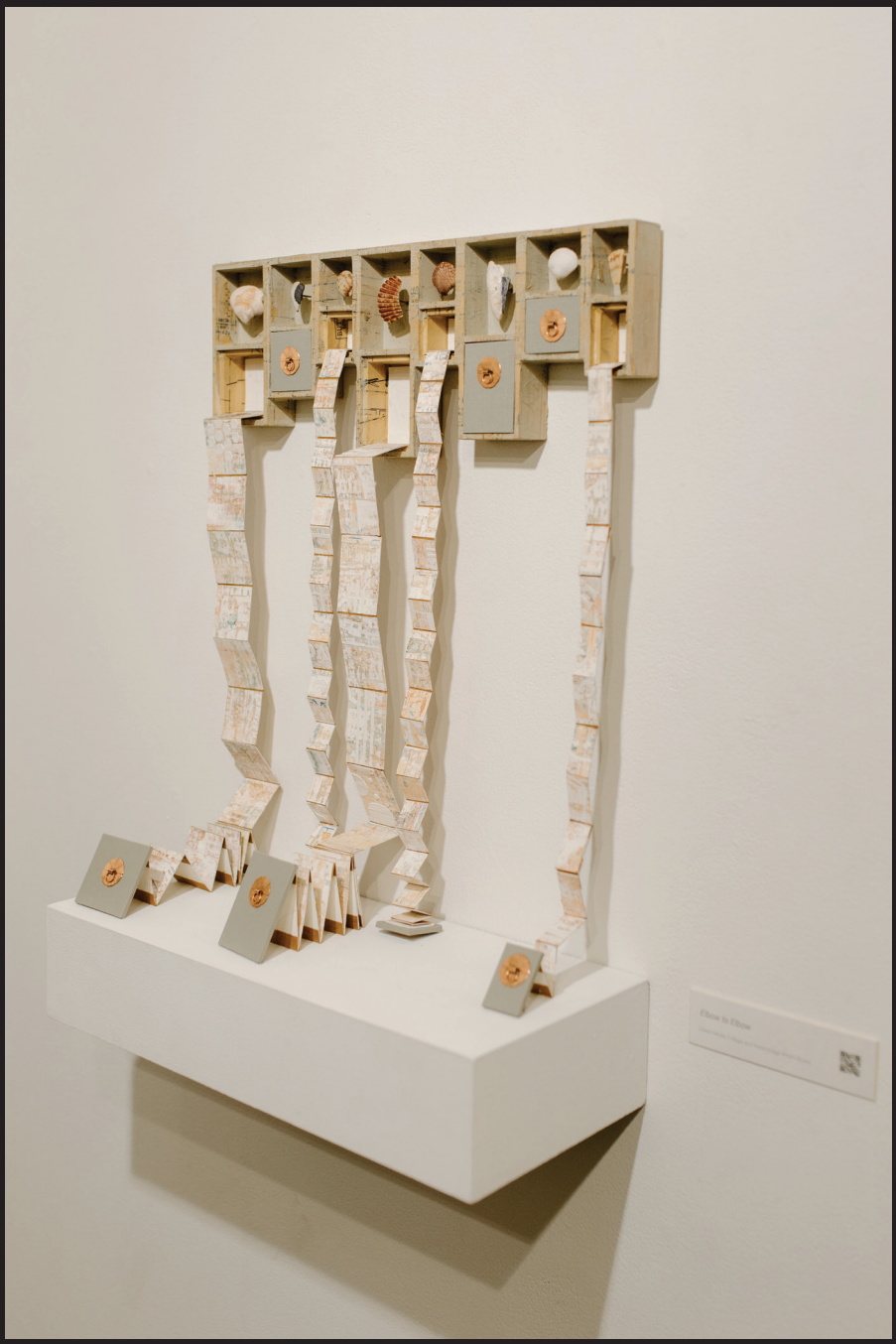
Credit Where Credit is Due

Allie Finlinson



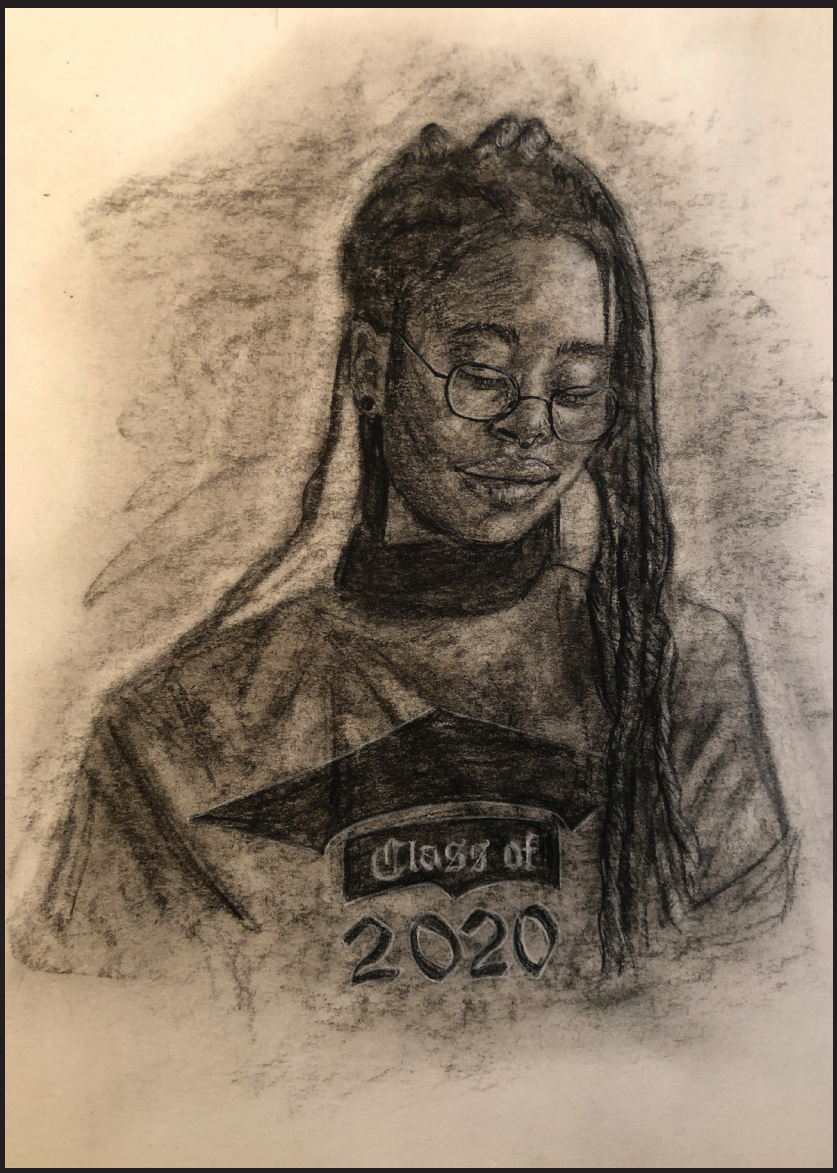
Elbow to Elbow

Allie Finlinson



Charcoal 2020

Alexia Wade



Charcoal Hands

Alexia Wade

New Normal

A.M. Dove Foxley

Desert

A.M. Dove Foxley

NONFICTION

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As we come closer to the end of a pandemic, we get glimpses of a new way of living. This life will look different than it did two years ago. Although we are removing our masks, let's not remove our concern for others, our gratitude for the small things (like not having to tell another person they're on mute), or our trust in humanity. Despite the challenges we have all faced, we had experiences that made us stronger, happier people. The selected creative nonfiction pieces for this volume of *Metaphor* express these experiences in various ways. Some students wrote about finding joy lifting others when they themselves were down. Others have reflected on experiences that have made them more of their true selves, and a handful of writers shared heart-wrenching experiences that prove joy is not based solely on our circumstances.

Helen Keller, a strong woman who faced opposition in her life, once said, "Your success and happiness lies in you. Resolve to keep happy, and your joy and you shall form an invincible host against difficulties." These past few years have strengthened our resolve to form invincible joy. We get to choose! Since it is a life-long task, these stories remind us of what we have learned and the potential we have. Thank you for all the submissions, published or not, that made us laugh, cry, and become more optimistic for the future.

—Courtney Palmer, Nonfiction Editor

Honest Illusion

Stephanie Campbell

I was faking schizophrenia.

At least that was what the voices, what Shadow Man, said. I had looked up the symptoms, and the information had been cemented in my brain, much like a brand upon the flesh of cattle. I'd seen the symptoms, and my mind had run wild. My imagination had gotten away from me. I created Shadow Man, fleshing out his backstory as if he was a particularly nasty villain inside one of my novels. I was a writer, after all. The other voices sang out too, but they were background noise, gentle humming during a grand symphony.

I would utter this every hour upon every day, desperate to break free.

It didn't matter that three different doctors and two nurse practitioners had diagnosed me as schizophrenic.

It didn't matter that my therapist said fakers didn't worry about faking it.

If I had created the illusion, created the apparition, schizophrenia could be my fault. If it could be my fault, I could feel guilt and punish myself for being a schizophrenic. Shadow man could convince me to go off my medication too. Fakers didn't need to be on it. Only the watchful eyes of my family could make me take the pills.

There was another reason it was all my fault.

My doctors told me, my therapist told me, my family told me–I was not supposed to talk to Shadow Man. He always criticized me, told me I was bad, my art was terrible, that I was going to burn. But, as much as I hated him, I loved him too. His arms were protective, and sometimes he was funny. He always fought for me when someone was cold. Call it the folly of a girl who had spent her whole life feeling alone. Now I always had friends, friends and enemies rolled into one. My mom says as long as I continue to talk back to the voices they would be there, but the silence could be the song of the Devil in a concert of Hell.

Another reason to feel guilty for being schizophrenic.

My moods twist and turn like worms in a fisherman's can, and I'm not going to lie, Shadow Man at least provided some consistency as he was always there. My moods bounce between happy and sad, rapid cycling over months. I danced between art and walking and animals over and over again, not sticking

to any of them long enough to be a success. I would swear over and over again that my interests wouldn't shift, that this time it was permanent, and I would change my life. Shadow Man would agree.

It was never permanent.

I sit in class, fingers curled around a pencil, and a girl looked at me funny.

"You don't deserve to be here," says Shadow Man.

I finish a painting, staring down at the mess that I created.

"You'll never get any better," says Shadow Man.

I would visit my disability lawyer.

"You're faking it for money," says Shadow Man.

I would go to my mom, every hour on the hour, desperate to shatter the delusion. "You're not faking it," she'd say. I'd believe for five minutes, ten; if lucky, maybe an hour, but then. . .

I was faking Schizophrenia.

In Her Hands

McKinley Thomas

I wonder how she felt. Her parents were furious, but she made the choice anyway. They told her that she could go back to normal and get her old life back. I'm sure the physical pain caused many sleepless nights, but I wonder if the decision caused more. Every day the decision pressed on her as she wondered if I would be okay in her hands. Her father, especially, pushed for adoption. She was twenty-five, but she was alone. Two years into her career as a high school teacher, she battled with herself, wondering if she would have enough. Enough for food, diapers, clothes, health care, dental work – the list itself is exhausting. That's not including the baby-sitter she would need to hire every weekday for the next few years.

The baby-sitter. I remember her tall stools from which I ate Ramen noodles and the carpeted living area, where I won countless games of Go Fish. She was a kind lady with gentle wrinkles on which she let my four-year-old hands apply the eyeshadow and blush. The wrinkles seem more vividly etched on my memory than on her cheeks. Arriving early in the morning, I would lay in her dark bedroom watching cartoons until the day broke. She was not my mom, but she filled the hours until I could see my mother again. I remember my childlike run into the arms of my exhausted mother every day – down the brown, carpeted stairs where she would stand with the door open, thanking the baby-sitter. As she picked up my energetic, toddler self, I'm sure she wondered if I would still be okay in her hands.

At home, dinner was not much. She hates cooking. From the microwave to my stomach I shoveled in a can of whatever. I never knew how much came in that paycheck, and I never knew if it was a lack of money or my mother's distaste for cooking that brought home those cans. I was always grateful to have plenty of cans of whatever to eat, and I now cherish those moments in our small kitchen together more than I probably did then.

The kitchen. It housed the majority of our necessary facilities: the stove, the refrigerator, the table, the clothes washer and dryer, the computer desk, and whatever other odds and ends could be craftily concealed or, more often, left strewn about in the small space. Nearly escaping the catch-all kitchen, but not quite, was a small, open-flame gas heater. I would drag my blankets

to the tile and sit there on cold winter nights, pleased with myself for making such a cozy personal couch in such an unexpected place. While I enjoyed my little hideaway, I'm sure she wondered if I would be okay on those cold winter nights.

She went to bed early every day (closer to the afternoon hours than the night). She was sick often. She had been healthier than ever during her pregnancy, maybe some kind of omen that we needed each other. She was sick: crippling depression and anxiety from the weight of an unexpected baby, now growing and entering elementary school. I didn't know what "sick" meant back then.

I still wonder how she felt, sitting in that hospital room. She couldn't have been anything but terrified. She opted out of adoption to the dismay of her father, who now plays the loving grandfather in my life. I am twenty-two now, living away from home. She still works at the high school, and she is married. Many years on cans of whatever have evolved into supple dinners. Somehow, there was always enough. We traversed the trying days and the long nights together, and I have always been just fine in her hands.

Bitchin'

Maggie Draper

August 11, 2021 12:00 PM. I had my appointment for my first tattoo before I knew what I was getting. I'd been trying to decide on an idea since I turned 18 the year before, but every idea I came up with felt insincere or too insignificant. An acorn to represent resilience was too generic, an antler in honor of the Irish goddess of change felt too Republican, and a bouquet of flowers was much too trendy. All of those could come later, but my first had to be special on the off chance that it was the only tattoo I ended up getting. Afterall, a low pain tolerance and a genetic fear of needles does not serve a person well in that situation.

I began spitballing ideas with anybody willing to listen, though I purposefully avoided the side longed stares of the people I had gone to church with so many years before, even if I did still call them friends. Instead, I found solace in my coworker, Anna. She had plenty of her own tattoos and never shied away from telling me if my newest idea would come out bad or exceed my limited budget.

"How'd you decide on the moth?" I asked her the week before the fateful day.

She shrugged as she traced her fingers along the intricate black moth that graced her lower thigh. "I liked the look of it."

Not only did that seem incredibly irresponsible, it was also the exact line of thinking that led to people hating their tattoos later in life. At least, that's what I'd been told by people who didn't have tattoos. Anna didn't seem too concerned about it. Although Anna never seemed overly concerned with anything.

"What if I got a ghost walking a dog? I could get it on my ankle, so it wouldn't be too hard to cover up."

"Oh, that's cute." For the first time, Anna genuinely seemed like she approved of one of my ideas. "Is there meaning for it?"

That immediately became the million dollar question. Every friend or family member I told about my plan inevitably seemed to need to know what it meant.

"It's to honor my dog." I told my older sister.

In the same hour, I'd explain to my friend, "The ghost represents how I felt throughout my high school years. It's meant to be a bookmark on that part of my life."

Funnily enough, the only person who didn't bring up the infernal "why?" was the tattoo artist. She drew up a quick sketch of a ghost walking a dog, just like I asked. With a pounding heart, I laid on the pseudo-operation table and prepared for the overwhelming regret that was sure to come.

After a brief ten minutes, the tattoo artist straightened up and popped her pink bubble gum. "Alright, hun. You're done."

I blinked. While there were moments where I could feel each individual poke of the needle hitting my barely cushioned ankle bone, it hadn't been all that bad. I leaned forward to take a glimpse at the dark ink swirled with my scarlet blood, and my heart immediately swelled with adoration.

I still count that day as one of the happiest days of my life. As soon as I was allowed to take the protective wrapping off it, I showed it to all the people closest to me and a couple of strangers for good measure. Just as before, even if they had already heard one of my long-winded descriptions of the deep meaning of the ghost and her companion, they always asked me "why?"

All those old reasons I told people no longer seemed like the truth. The little ghost on my ankle wasn't just a symbol of my high school personality or my love for the supernatural. The thin lines were the very thing that I had been convinced damned me to Hell, but they made me feel so alive, so in love with myself. And I have to wonder: will the person asking me what the silly cartoon on my ankle means understand how it felt to be a battered bird released from a glittering cage of supposed righteousness, to finally breathe after years of suffocation? Can they understand the significance of the first act of rebellion against what had been inked into my identity since birth?

Before knowing the freedom of total self love, anybody who asked "why?" deserved a five page essay on the deep inner workings of my soul, of the barest parts of my identity. Now, when people ask what the ghost on my ankle means, why I got a witch's broom permanently marked on my back or speculate on the significance of the UFO on my hip, I have the perfect answer.

Simply put, I respond, "Because it looks bitchin'."

Saltines: A Short Memoir

Katlyn Linford

It was 4:00 am. I was nearly twelve, asleep on the bottom bunk of the screeching metal bed my sister and I shared. I was gently shaken by my mother.

"The care center called," she choked, and my heart filled with an emptiness capable of holding oceans. I did not cry that day, but my mother did. My mother did.

* * * * *

"Dinner!" Mom called, and I raced alongside my brother, pushing and shoving through the narrow halls of our trailer park home. I climbed onto my chair, giggling, pigtails bouncing around.

On my plate were six measly saltine cracker sandwiches filled with peanut butter and jelly. A can of sprite stood frosty on the side. My dad smiled a kind of sad smile I didn't understand and joked, "At least we aren't making you eat broccoli." My brother cheered, and I followed suit, raising my pudgy fists high above my head.

We prayed for our church mouse meal-- my eyes squeezed tightly so God would know I wasn't peeking—and each took up a papery cracker sandwich. I babbled on about my day, about how kindergarten was way better than preschool, and that I learned how to jump rope. I gobbled down the memory.

When dinner was nearly finished, my dad leaned over the chipped-wood table, smiled a mischievous smile and asked, "Do you wanna see a trick?" My brother and I nodded with excitement, and my mom furrowed her brow as he took a large slurp from his can of Sprite and began spraying the sticky soda at us from the small hole between his two front teeth. Pandemonium broke loose. We all took up our Sprite cans and spewed soda at each other and all over the linolium flooring. We ran around the table, laughing and screaming, as if we had no care in the world; as if our savings were not as dry as the crackers in our throats; as if life were as rich as the peanut butter stuck to the roofs of our mouths. We didn't care, because my dad always said that life is not about the dry or sticky situations. Life is about the strawberry jam.

A year later, we moved six blocks to a bigger, better house. I started soccer, and my little sister started bothering me. I ate cheesy chicken enchiladas and roast beef sandwiches, and I cut my hair to my chin.

When I finished third grade, my dad started chemotherapy. I got a broken bone, he got brain surgery. I was diagnosed with acid reflux and found myself crying in my bedroom, eating saltine crackers and asking God to let the crumbs on my bed sheets become the miracle treatment that might cure my hero.

When I was ten, my parents started flying out to Maryland for new treatments. They flew on wings of hope and landed on mediocre results. One week every month for almost a year, my four siblings and myself slept in my grandmother's basement.

The guest bed was gigantic. There was a couch in the corner where my sister slept; my younger brother sprawled out on the carpet that smelled like old cardboard; the one-year-old in a play-pen in my grandparent's bedroom. I lay beside my older brother in my deceased aunt's California King, eyes wide, silently listening to the water heater's click and clang. I turned my head to see a single tear rolling cautiously down my brother's cheek. I swallowed hard and quietly cleared my throat.

"Conner?" I whispered. He turned to me.

"Are you scared?" I asked.

He gave a kind of half smile and, with a voice cracked by loneliness, replied, "Yeah. . . You?" I nodded, and we closed our eyes on the fears we were too selfless to voice—even to God.

After school the next day, Conner and I raced from the car up my grandparent's driveway. My little sister in tow, we pushed and shoved down the narrow porch leading to the front door, yelling the whole way. My grandma made us an after-school snack—Ramen noodles with a side of saltine crackers--and my parents came home three hours later. My dad kissed my cheek, and I kissed the C-shaped scar on the top of his head.

* * * * *

It was 4:00 am. I was nearly twelve, asleep on the bottom bunk of the screeching metal bed my sister and I shared. I was gently shaken by my mother.

"The care center called," she choked, and my heart filled with an emptiness capable of holding oceans. I did not cry that day, but my mother did. My mother did.

The week before the funeral, I could not stomach more food any more than I could stomach dad's death. So, for a week, I ate almost nothing but dry, feelingless saltine crackers. My mom's friends took me shopping for a blue dress, (my dad's favorite color), and I smiled a kind of sad smile while they told me everything would be okay.

I don't remember much about the funeral. I remember standing far away from his casket. From everything I knew about the afterlife, he wasn't really there, so I didn't want to see him. I told my mom it was because the flowers smelled bad, which they did.

I remember sitting in the limo behind the hearse, staring out the side window, because if I looked through the windshield I could see the casket. I remember the first time I caught a glimpse and audibly winced as my stomach flipped, and flipped again, and again, and again.

For years after, it was like I was in a parallel universe where dads die and it's a requirement to cry oneself to sleep at night. I craved emotional nourishment more than food, and yet, emotional eating became my norm. I acted in school plays, acted like I still wanted to play with my friends, and I didn't close my eyes when I prayed because I had been brave too many times to be scared of God. Even now, seven years later, I feel pain in my shoulders whenever I think about how it felt to be completely enveloped in his fatherly embrace. Even now, I think of him when I drink sprite or eat saltine crackers, and it's a melancholy emptiness I can never adequately express.

What I'd like to mention about grief, is that the stages psychologists assign to it (denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) should read more like a shampoo bottle, ending with "rinse," and "repeat." I'm here to tell you that it doesn't get easier to grieve, and it doesn't go away; it repeats and repeats, and even if the cycles begin to lessen, you will cry just as hard seven years later. The difference is that I know listening to his favorite songs makes me smile through the tears. Peanut butter is just as sticky now as it was seven years ago, but I know now that milk washes it down.

When I was sixteen, a boy asked me to the winter dance at my high school. Then, every day for three months, he sent me texts that had a unique "Three Things I Like About You." Soon enough, I sent them back, and we changed the title to "Three Things I Love About You." We kissed for the first time on a mountain under a rainbow while watching the sunset, and I closed my eyes when I prayed that night because I wanted God to know how scared I was of losing him.

I remember the first time I cried, hard, to him and told him about my aching shoulders. He wrapped me up in his arms and didn't tell me it was going to be okay. He just held me. And maybe I am too young to know what love is, and maybe it's crazy to you that I plan to marry him, but that boy spreads strawberry jam on his morning toast, and he hates peanut butter, and that's all I'll ever need.

Joys in Disaster

Sarah Hameed

The birds were singing outside on that balmy Sunday in September. Instead of doing what my friend Alex and I were both best at—letting the days go by, the routines take over, and time run its course of inevitable torpor—we both took Sunday off to break away from our ruts of routine and engage in acts of kindness after the pandemic shifted our worldview. Alex, a few years older than me, is the type of friend that when your life feels complete, comes along and makes you realize what you resisted seeing. We walked around our city, Tempe, and handed out water and food to the homeless. And they helped us, too: conversation, laughs, humanity.

Normally I would have walked through the streets quickly and to my destination, but it occurred to me wandering through the streets of the city that there were colorful stories on every corner. I chimed, "Hi," to the first man we approached, my voice coming out too merrily in an attempt to hide my anxiety. I let Alex take the lead and watched as he effortlessly carried on the conversation.

I felt guilty after that first encounter because I did not contribute other than staring awkwardly at the man and failing miserably at hiding my nervousness. I was out of my comfort zone, talking to people I would otherwise not. Alex sensed my discomfort and said, "Whatever needs to be done, we will do it together. We will walk this path together."

A few minutes later, we came across a man who walked up and down this short street, dressed head to toe in black. He had a sharp nose, deeply set pitch-black eyes, and dark hair that fell over his eyes in thick curls. I couldn't determine his age, nor could I tell whether this man was in his thirties or fifties. He had a number of chains around his neck. He held a plastic cup in his hand with a sign on it, displaying that he was accepting the charity of others. I realized that this was a man who did not pay much attention to society's judgments—and these judgments did not seem to bother him in the least.

The next man we came across was different than the previous in that he did care about the judgments of others. He had a broad face, a sagging belly, and short, stubby fingers. I offered him a few Gatorade protein bars and water bottles, and he kindly accepted. He opened up to Alex and me, saying how

it's embarrassing to be out here like this and people look at you. He had this need every time he looked at me to say that he was not a bad guy, like he had to continually prove himself. It was as if he had to perpetually make that statement as a way to pay for the food and water. I couldn't help but appreciate the moment of kindness and vulnerability, and at the same time I couldn't help but feel overwhelming exhaustion that I had never experienced before. He talked with Alex some more and then he turned his inquisitive gaze to me. There was a shadow of despair in the bottomless depths of his eyes, a wave of sorrow that I had never seen before. As we finished our conversation and continued our journey, Alex said, "Some people are like that. They carry their own fears and biases on their shoulders, crushed under all that weight."

"That's why we need people," I responded quietly. "That's why we need faith and love in a society because they forge a stronger society. Faith and love remove the fear and anxiety trapped in one's heart." As I said these words, the realization dawned on me that even though our purpose was to help the community, we were simultaneously building that community and connection between ourselves.

I offered the next man we came across a water bottle, a nature valley peanut butter bar, and a warm bean burrito from Taco Bell, all of which he politely refused. When I asked his name, he introduced himself as Lenny and said he was wandering around with nowhere to go. And in that dim light in the alley where the sun flickered across the walls, Lenny seemed even taller, his hair falling to his shoulders in disorderly waves.

Alex and I continued roaming the narrow alleys where homeless people of all ages toiled in their small, dingy tents. As I walked through the alleys, I began to wonder how society reacts in times of disaster. I began to wonder how it would feel not to know where I would sleep every night. I was curious to know how the problem of homelessness got so bad and why there were no effective solutions to the problem. My mind was busy with these questions as I strolled in the opposite direction from the posh area where Scottsdale girls and boys gathered together, getting drunk on a late Sunday afternoon, isolated in their own paradigm. Gradually the surroundings began to change, what I was familiar with began to change. As we moved southwards, the buildings became more dilapidated, the walls falling down, and the children more raucous and unruly. The smells changed, too, getting heavier, and more pungent. There was a ramshackle little building atop the steep street, the paint on the walls barely visible. In front of the building a group of women sat chatting. When they saw us approaching, they eyed us cautiously, looking half amused. They were around my grandmother's age, and all of their belongings were encompassing them like a shield for protection. I wondered whose grandma was that with the gray eyes and hair like clouds, and I wondered whose grandma was that with a grade school art teacher's smile, and most of all, I wondered what grandchild abandoned their grandmother.

In that very moment, time seemed centered. I tend to always put too much thought into the past and even more thought into the future, but somehow never even touch the present moment until now. Alex and I introduced ourselves and we said that we were going into CVS, and asked if they would like

anything. A shadow of disbelief crossed their faces. One of them stood deadpan for a moment, weighing whether I was mocking them or not. “Nobody ever does that,” said the woman who had hair like clouds. When she spoke again, she flashed me a warm smile. As I was in CVS, I began to think it would have been a good idea to ask what flavor ice cream they liked best.

As we turned a corner and approached the train tracks, I noticed a wandering man wearing a tie-dye shirt, pushing his way through as if he was met with great resistance, strutting directly towards me and regarding me with a hazy gaze. His movements were deft and focused, and he exuded an aura of self-sufficient competence. He was headed to catch the train and we handed him a few waters for his trip. His body language was as open as can be and his gestures were theatrical, yet his expression was inscrutable.

After the street cats, Tempe’s homeless suffered the most. There were more than a dozen bodies all curled up in the fetal position in this abandoned park as if expecting to be born into a better life. They were all fast asleep in separate dreams, burdened with loneliness. We left water and food for each of them. I had this silent hope that when they woke up, they would know that people care about them. This goodness is not something that vanishes, the meaning of that connection goes beyond that tiny encounter.

The next man we came across had a square face with a protruding chin, ice blue eyes, and a sharp nose. He could have been handsome were it not for his lazy eye and the permanent scowl on his face. At some point in the conversation, the man asked, “Where are you guys coming from, and where are you guys going?” as we handed him water and food. I couldn’t help my philosophical self from responding, “Those are profound questions. If I only knew the answers I would have solved the mystery of our purpose in this world.” The man chuckled at my response.

The last man we encountered stood outside a bar and raised his arms high and wide to the sounds of the football game, as if he wanted to halt not only the game, but also the flow of time. Oblivious to his surroundings, the man did not hear us coming up. He was so excited to see us as if we had been childhood friends. Of course, the conversation centered around sports, and he even talked about golf, and how difficult it is because of the constantly changing variables. He even mentioned how the wind could affect the ball in a round of golf, and I was so pleasantly surprised to hear this because most people are not aware of it, that I could not speak for a moment. His name was Rinaldo. He was dressed in black pants and a grey shirt. His eyes were light brown and were brimming with energy and something that I recognized as compassion.

A strange calm came over me as we winded down for the day. I felt more at ease than I had felt at any other time in the pandemic. Earlier in the day, I looked at the city the same way I had always seen it, and later that day as I was gazing at the fading colors in the horizon, I looked at the city again as if there would be some type of visible change in the structure of the city. I couldn’t see any difference. Nothing had changed, and yet nothing was the same anymore. It was a feeling, a type of love that cannot be explained—only experienced. Even though it cannot be explained—it explains all.

FICTION

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Do you believe in the theory that if you gave a monkey with an infinite amount of time a typewriter it would eventually regurgitate *Hamlet*? Well, I think if you did the same for a person, they'd come no closer to writing *The Iliad* than they would Shakespearean tragedy. What makes the written word so special is that every human being has something new to tell. Storytelling is ultimately a summary of our singular and unique human experience tangled in our imagination. It is therefore intrinsically the most raw depiction of ourselves. Fiction is not a mirror. But it is a pool we can look into to find wondrous things.

Storytelling takes grit. Good fiction arises from the collision of passion and methodizing. Not as formulaic as math, yet requiring a foundation of principles, it takes a culmination of craft to effectively tell a story. I must emphasize that any story you cherish was a labor of love to make into being. It is from this diligence that we find pieces of ourselves through others. That is the ultimate beauty in storytelling.

Metaphor received a vast array of fiction in its many variations. The fiction section did not fall short for interesting, complex stories with rich language and compelling characters. It is my hope that reading these stories inspires you in whatever path your imagination takes you.

—Avery Knaub, Fiction Editor

Stars

Zoe Ellis

You picked a beautiful spot to die; the clear star-peppered sky above you, the ocean beating its fists on the cliffs below you. The air is thick with salt mist and you breathe it in with shaking breaths. I had tried to warn you about that boy. I told you he only wanted your stardust, and from his knife in your gut and your locket nowhere to be seen, I'd guess I was right. But now is not the time for I-told-you-so's.

I fall to my knees at your side as your beautiful hands start to pull the knife from your middle. I try to stop you, say it's all that's keeping your blood in. You pull it out regardless, your blood slowly painting your dress. You know you're dying. No earthly power can save you now.

"Look at the stars," I tell you.

You shake your head, your bright eyes digging into mine.

"Please," I choke, "look at the stars. Look at our sisters." You let your eyes drift skyward.

I tug the locket from my neck, breaking the chain. The snap brings your eyes back to me.

"No," you breathe.

"I have to."

You shake your head and wrap your bloodied fingers around mine.

I kiss the cool, clean skin of the back of your hand.

"Look at the stars," I say again. I open my locket and start to sprinkle the stardust over your body. It twinkles faintly, matching the pattern of stars above.

"Let me die. My life isn't worth yours."

"I disagree." I take the knife from beside you and place it against my wrist. "Please, look at our sisters. They're calling you home."

With your galaxy-filled eyes focused on a cluster, I let the knife bite. I slit each of my wrists. My blood mixes with yours and the stardust soaks it up, becoming brighter as it does. You shine so brightly, I close my eyes. I lean my forehead against yours.

"Look at our sisters. Go to them. They shine for you." I feel you leave me and I look up in time to see you flying through the air. A backwards falling star.

I collapse to the ground that just held you. I shudder as the pebbles dig into my cheek and I realize how cold you must have been. I lose the feeling in my fingers, my nails a strangely beautiful shade of blue-ish purple. I'd never thought dying would be this slow.

I match my breaths to the crashing waves and try to focus my blurry eyes on your destination in the sky. You really had picked a beautiful place to die.

The Blanket

Zach Gomez

Papa came to the place where I am buried. I crossed my arms and narrowed my eyes as the biting winds blew through me. I could not feel the wind but I still felt cold. His breath smoked from his mouth. The winter chill bit at him (hard I hope). He grabbed a red patterned blanket that was resting on the passenger seat and wrapped it around his shoulders. The truck purred and puffed as Papa walked the footpath towards the graves. The passenger seat was empty. I tried to swallow that feeling of suffocation, of drowning.

Papa hesitated near the mud brick wall that surrounds the graves. I kept an eye on him the way someone looks at a watch. He looked so worn down that the red blanket on his shoulders looked like it was the only thing keeping him in one piece. He took a breath and slowly made his way to my grave.

He meticulously navigated the graveyard which is as cramped as doctor's writing, and just as crooked. Even the newest memorials lean. Crows called from the branches of the wintry trees. They watched him closely. "Caw caw!" They screamed.

He smushed the yellow grass beneath his cowboy boots. I turned away from him and watched the crows. Their beady eyes all focused on the stranger.

My grave is marked by two pieces of old fence posts nailed together; call it a family tradition. Indigo paint filled the depressions that formed the shape of my name in the planks.

I am not called by my birth name here in the afterlife. I outgrew that name in death. We get death names, just as a child gets a birth name. That's just one secret of death. Still, when Papa came to my cross and said my old name, the one Mama gave me. . . I shuddered. It felt as though, well, someone had walked over my grave.

"Hey, boy. It's Papa." His voice was dull and cold and fragile. "Er, um. . . It's freezing out here. It's uh. . . just me. Just me again. Mama's not here."

I studied the crows. The crows studied Papa. Papa studied his boots.

"Caw caw!" went the crows.

"And uh. . . speaking of her. . . Mama couldn't make it. Again. Er, um. . . well. . . I guess you probably know why. . . " He stammered. ". . . why uh, Mama doesn't come." His face was grave. In all of his hasty visits, he never once mentioned her. My curiosity got the better of me.

I materialized just beside my grave and finally saw him. Really saw him. It was strange how old he looked. His eyes were yellowing and his lower lip stuck out so far that a bird could have perched on it.

Papa took a deep breath and it rattled like old bones. "She hasn't been herself. Hasn't been since that day you didn't come home. There's hardly any life in her—like a fire that's down to its last coal."

He balled his hands so tightly that blood cracked from his bone-dry knuckles. He swallowed again before he spoke.

"We buried you too quick. I thought it would help. Help Mama snap out of it. I thought the sooner you were gone, the better for us it would be. Selfish." He shook his head and let it hang.

"Caw caw!" went the crows.

I folded my arms again. Is Mama still haunted by me? I tried to remember that day but there's only blotchy memory. The river. . . my cousins. . . root beer. . . swimming. . . catching snakes. . . it's not perfectly clear. What was he trying to tell me?

"But lately. . . Mama's been getting forgetful. She leaves the truck running, leaves food to burn in the oven-the smell of burnt food is always in our curtains. She's forgotten all of her English. Only speaks Diné."

He shifted his weight on his boots. He wiped his fat lip with the back of his hand. He sighed. "If one good thing came out of it, she's forgotten you."

My ghostly throat welled up and throbbed with emotional bile.

"Caw caw!" went the crows.

"She's forgotten that you're gone. But she's forgotten that pain too. And maybe she hasn't really forgotten—not completely."

Papa took off the blanket from his shoulders and admired it, obstructing my cross with it. Sunbeams squirmed through the tiny spaces. The designs were beautiful. Mama's work, no doubt about it.

"It's kinda like how this blanket doesn't let all the sun through. But some sunlight still makes it. Mama's forgotten a lot of things. And those things are lost to shadows. But you aren't one of them."

He took a deep, long sigh. I stared at Papa. I felt. . . lighter, not entirely but enough. I felt like the smoke from his truck—rising until it disappeared into the January sky. The wind carried bits of snow and they glistened in the wind.

The crows were dead quiet.

"Time has helped but it's not on her side. She finished this blanket and then asked me where you are. It took me by surprise. So I asked her why. And she said that she made this for you. And I told her that I would make sure you got it. She wasn't entirely convinced but she let me take it anyway. I think she wanted to give it to you herself."

He reached out and ran his weathered, sandstone fingers along my old name. I shivered.

"I hope to bring her next year. Maybe. . . she'll be ready then."

He held up the blanket to the sun and admired it. It flapped gently in the breeze. He folded it reverently. He placed the beautiful blanket at the base of my rickety cross and he disappeared like smoke. And for the first time in death, I wasn't cold.

Letters from New York

Taylor Jenkins

October 16th: Greetings from the Big Apple!

Dearest Richard,

It is early October, a Monday, to be exact. I landed safely in the city, but someone stole my bags right out from my hands. You needn't be worried about that too; I can take care of myself. To be quite frank, I'm not sure why I'm writing to you. I'll call it nostalgia, or possibly regret from our past. Nonetheless, I walked through Central Park today. Though the sky was gray, the trees were alive with vibrant oranges, yellows and reds. I saw a woman feeding pigeons on a bench, yet she had no food to give herself. Another man played the violin, but the sounds screeched and tore through the peaceful afternoon. Everyone here is so creative and unique, I doubt I'll ever return home. Of course, as I recall, you told me to never return. Perhaps I won't, and I'll make a whole new life and family here in the city.
That is, unless you miss me.

Love,
Rebecca

December 30th: It's Been a While! Let's Talk!

Dear Richard,

I haven't seen an inch of snow. It rains so much, it's starting to become a little disheartening. How I wish I was home with you, wrapped in a blanket in front of the fireplace with Max curled up on my lap. Is he doing well? I hope he isn't chewing on my mahogany table anymore. He had a bad habit of doing that. But I guess we all had our bad habits, didn't we? The city is so loud all the time. Everywhere I turn, there is the clanging of construction crews and loud cursing of New Yorkers. Cars honk their horns and babies cry and everything is utterly chaotic. I can hardly think. It almost makes me forget what we were ar-

guing about the day I left. It must've been something silly and small; it always was. As much as it pains me to admit: I miss you. Much like I've said before, I'm sorry for everything I did to you. Though I'm not sure what you were upset about, it was probably something I did. It's always my fault, just like it was with the affair. Please write back to me soon. I fear I may go mad in this city alone.

Warmest regards,
Rebecca

February 14th: ~~Wish You Were Here!~~ Glad You're NOT Here!

Richard,

It's Valentine's Day without a single response from you. Thankfully, the city has taught me not to care for tawdry details like that anymore. You let me go. You didn't even put up a fight when I declared I was leaving, even though you fight for everything else. Dinner, movies, whether or not we should have kids; all small arguments in the grand scheme of things. This will be my last postcard to you. I met a new man. His name is Thomas and he is a lawyer. He's much nicer to me than you ever were. He doesn't yell at me for drinking too much or for smoking indoors. Simply put, he doesn't try to fix me and instead encourages my behavior. He loves me for who I am, which is more I can say about you. We live together in a wonderful penthouse suite, far above the scum of the city. I don't care to know how you're doing; to be honest I hope you're rotting away in a graveyard somewhere. Perhaps that will teach you a lesson for taking me for granted.

—Rebecca

February 20th: It's Always Sunny in Florida!

Dear Rebecca,

You write with the same conviction and anger you speak with. I see that New York hasn't changed you, and if anything, has helped morph you into the woman you truly are. Despite your hatred towards me—your confusing and blatantly wrong hatred—I'm glad to hear that you're doing well. I was concerned that you wouldn't be able to find a place to live, but clearly you have. It seems you and Thomas are a nice fit. I suppose I should share some good news as well. I'm engaged; in fact, I have been for a month now. She's much quieter than you, and doesn't think happy hour starts at nine in the morning. We have plans to move, so you can send as many postcards as you want, but I won't answer them any longer. Regardless of our tumultuous relationship, I wish you nothing but the best. I hope someday you can be happy.

Sincerely, Richard.

P.S. You'll be receiving some divorce papers in the mail soon. Try not to get too upset when you read them. I know how much you like to overreact.

March 1st: I LOVE New York!

How dare you say those things to me! I am the epitome of grace and humility; everyone knows so! You think I care about your life? I don't! Your new wife will realize how evil you are and leave you in a heartbeat. My boyfriend is a lawyer, so if you think you can just divorce me without any repercussions, you're wrong. I'll sue you for everything you own as payback for my time slaving away as your wife. It doesn't matter how far away you move. I'm going to follow you like bad karma.

See you in court.
—Rebecca

Whenever I'm Not a Woman

Lauren Wynn

My eyes scan the shelf for the third time, finally landing on the plastic container of peanut butter directly in front of me. I had missed it in my haste to leave this aisle, to leave this store. To get home.

I blink, mentally shaking myself. There's no need for me to rush. The baby's asleep, cradled in my sister's arms back home where I left them. But my desire to leave remains nonetheless. I'm only here out of necessity.

I march down the aisle and over toward the dairy section. I open a refrigerator door, teal-tipped fingers curling around a quart-sized container of milk. The cool paper chills my fingers. I place the item in my basket, then regard my palm and the smudged black ink on it—the remains of a grocery list. My eyes dart between the list and the contents of my basket. Apple sauce. Cereal. Bread. Milk. Peanut butter. I nod my head approvingly, though to whom I know not.

The girl at the register rings me up, her expression bored as pink bangs fall into sleepy eyes. She looks as though she's only a couple years younger than I am, in her late teens. She doesn't appear to hold much care as she scans each of the items in my basket and tells me my total. It's as if she's only partially present, the other half of her floating somewhere far away. I can't blame her.

I thank the girl as she hands me two brown plastic bags and my receipt. I take careful care to tuck the piece of paper inside my wallet, and even more caution as I put the wallet back inside my ratty rainbow-colored purse. It used to belong to my sister, a gift from our mother on her sixteenth birthday. She outgrew it, but despite being only a year younger, I never did.

My sneakers make little sound as I walk across the tiled floor, their soles nearly frictionless after years of use. I keep my eyes up, glancing inside the grocery store one last time as I exit out into the cold night.

It's dark—that's all I can think. There's no moon tonight. The parking lot has a single light-post, but it's all the way in the back of the lot. There were still a few rays of sunset-light in the sky when I arrived. I wasn't thinking then, and parked at the front of the lot, considering only my own convenience. My car was alone in its row when I arrived, but now a bulky vehicle resides beside it, parallel to the driver's side door. My chest constricts, as if my heart and lungs have become encapsulated in a box far too small.

"Hey pretty lady," a voice rasps to my left. I flinch, snapping my gaze away from my car and in the direction of the voice. It's a man. *Of course it's a man*. He's hiding in the shadows, clothed in only darkness as far as I can tell. Somehow his eyes still manage to shine like deep black pools.

I suck in a breath and look away, praying that he's too drunk to move. That his intentions aren't what I think they are. That if I walk away and ignore him, he'll leave me alone.

He doesn't.

"Hey," the man slurs. "Hey, I'm talking to you." He stumbles forward, emerging from the shadows to show a form twice my size and a foot taller. His nearly all-pupil eyes are bloodshot. I pull my plastic bags into both hands, one thumb chipping nervously at the paint on the opposite nail.

I glance at my car, half-shadowed by the other vehicle sitting there. My gaze shifts toward the lit store, to the girl at the register, reading a magazine. As far as I know, there's no one else in there but her. And as far as I know, there's someone sitting, waiting in the parked car beside my own, or just outside of it, waiting for me to walk toward my car. My phone is in my purse, but it will do me little good. No good if this man intends to seize me.

Words swirl around my head, but all that manages to come out is, "I'm not looking for any trouble." My voice is an uneven almost-whisper.

"Trouble," the man coughs. He staggers forward. A hand lands on my shoulder. I flinch, wasting no time in removing the offending limb from my body. "Since when is it trouble to call a girl pretty?" He spits on the ground. "I betcha have no trouble with the boys. I certainly won't give ya no trouble. Girls these days. Can't take a damn compliment."

He sidles into the store, leaving me frozen, forgotten—terrified.

My eyes sting as I remind myself that I still need to get inside my car and go home. That when I get there, there will be another parking lot I'll have to walk through. A staircase only half-lit and camera-less that I will have to climb in order to reach my apartment.

Without breathing, I rush toward my car, glancing beneath it before I open the passenger door with fumbling fingers and crawl over to the driver's seat.

I don't breathe until the doors are locked and I begin to drive away. I'm shaking, biting nervously at my nails, further damaging the teal polish. It's only as the parking lot disappears behind me that the man's parting words circle my brain. *Can't take a damn compliment*.

I like compliments. When they're from someone safe—someone that I know or know can't hurt me. I like compliments, whenever it's not dark. Whenever I'm not alone. Whenever I'm not a woman—a woman alone in the dark with a man.

I blink, and a tear falls onto my lap.

The Last Star in the Galaxy

Lauren Wynn

Little Clara stared up at the night sky through her bedroom window, watching as the world above her went from purple to darkest blue to black. She was waiting, waiting for light, waiting for hope. There was no moon, but as time slipped by, a single star popped into existence, like an eye opening after a long, restful night.

Clara sucked in a breath, clutching the faded blue blanket closer to her chest. She stared in wonder, mouth agape, as the single star seemed to shimmer far above her. She knew that there had once been thousands of stars, but in her few years of existence, she'd only known the one.

With trembling lips, Clara whispered the rhyme her mother had taught her, voice low and reverent, hands clasped as if in prayer.

"Star light, star bright,
First star I see tonight;
I wish I may, I wish I might,
Have this wish I wish tonight."

She shut her eyes and her mouth in unison—too afraid to watch, too afraid to breathe—as she thought with all her mind and hoped with all her heart that the star would grant her wish.

When she opened her eyes, the star was gone.

Clara let out a little whimper as children often do, pressing the worn fabric of her blanket to her soft cheek, preparing for the tears to come. But before her eyes could do more than water, a voice called out in the darkness.

"Love, do not cry. I heard your prayer, and I am here."

Ghosts In The Graveyard

Katie Casey

This is how it begins:
You are It. All of your friends are dead, but their restless spirits roam the planes still. You have become crypt-keeper, holy warrior, seeking to uncover their whereabouts and lay hold upon these dark wraiths.

~

This is how it begins:
You are dead. So are all your friends. There is one among your number, however, who still walks the mortal plane. They are It. Other. Outsider. They cannot understand the joy, the freedom, the whimsy of no longer being bound to a mortal form.

~

Walking along twisting mazes, a Churchyard becomes a home or a park, tombstones are pillows and under-beds and behind-closets. Death is everywhere, and you, It one, must right a wrong.

Memento Mori, O brave It, and find the lost souls.

~

It is coming. Quiet footsteps echo through the converted churchyard, and the fear of discovery grips your heart. If you are found, your fate is sealed. No longer will you have the time to roam the world as you please, to haunt your favorite places with no fear of repercussion. No longer will you be able to fly on the breeze. No longer will you be free.

Memento Mori, sweet ghost, and remain silent and still as the grave you've escaped.

~

You turn a corner and see the shadow of an incorporeal form. You reach to grasp their form, regardless of whether your hand will slip right through their misty soul. Too late, they spot you.

"*Ghosts*!" The shade screeches, loud enough for all the land to hear! "Ghosts in the graveyard!!"

Through dark, arcane magic, the mere touch of your hand brings the spectre back to life! You wish to make your friends whole once more, but the curse of mortality is one they don't wish to bear again.

~

You hear the shriek of your comrade, your spectral companion, and know that you have been found out. It has come for you and will most certainly find you all. You watch in horror as It grabs at the air, and you know the touch of It's hand will force you back to the cold dark plane of humanity once more, the horror you just escaped. You see a welcoming glow.
Salvation.
To move on to paradise will be an awfully big adventure, you decide, and herd your friends quickly quickly quickly around grasping claws toward the Gates.

~

You reach blindly, trying to catch and ground each friend, bind them to life once more, but they run, run, quicker than air to the heavenly gates gleaming beyond the doorway marked at the beginning. Choosing salvation over cold humanity again, again, again, and all that remains is you, sweet It, alone in the cold once more as the spirits vanish.

Perhaps, in time, your movements will quicken, perhaps your words will charm, perhaps your friends will choose to stay beside you. Until then, though, all you can do is run and reach and sneak.

~

You watch from your new serenity as It slouches down, defeated, alone in the cold.
Perhaps you and your ghostly companions will allow another little game some time in the future. Play a risk, chance mortality, if only to stop the sadness you feel watching your defeated former friend.
For now, though—

~

For now though—

~

This is—

~

This is—

~

A Decade Later

Katelyn Shaw

The keys dangled in my hand. They jingled louder as my hands trembled. This moment would ultimately change everything, so I heavily weighed my options. The motorhome ran. But it didn't run great. I didn't want to be here anymore. But I didn't know where else to go. I had a plan. But I rarely followed through. I coasted on self denial, believing my lack of initiative was because I could always do things later. Mom knew this, so she once again opted not to waste the tears on a fake goodbye.

1974, Dodge Motorhome. Original paint job, rusty bolts, and subpar engine. Great fixer upper and even better deal: $1,500 OBO

later, adverb. at a time in the very near future; soon or afterward.

I had sat in the driveway many times before debating the same thing, but I had always chosen to walk back through the front door. Today was different though. There was something in the air. The wind whispered escape. I listened. The rattling keys were silenced by the roar of the old engine. Mom ran out holding the pan she had been washing and waved it, trying to stop me. I just wanted to prove to her that I could do something I said I would. My later became today.

A yellow door with a circular window. The rest of our neighbors have rectangular windows. We wanted something 'unique.'

The white and yellow lines on the road passed quickly by as I tapped my fingers sporadically on the steering wheel. I had driven a couple hundred miles without even knowing how I got there. Although I'd left the confines of my little town, my chaotic mind pushed all my mistakes to the surface. The memories nearly drowning me. The small town I grew up in had anything but a short memory. The women thrived on the gossip that wounded others. And I was one of the lucky ones that had a tainted past that defines me.

Highway hypnosis or white line fever: a strange phenomenon where a person can safely drive great distances with no recollection of having consciously done so.

The worst piece of gossip to ever plague the town: "I heard she pushed him in."

My phone buzzed, bringing me back to reality. Mom's face popped up on my screen. I knew if I answered it, she would convince me to turn back, so I let it ring, and ring, and ring, until it stopped. She would try seven more times before she finally gave up. She figured I'd come home sooner or later. The guilt from screening her calls quickly subsided, as the white lines and radio lulled me back into a trance.

Modest Mouse: "Float On" released February 14, 2004 for the album, 10 Years Pure.

I wished for years that I could just disappear and fade into the background. Feeling nothing was better than the alternative of feeling everything, so I found things to shut it all off. Things that gave me the clarity of numbness. Dad left a year after the accident and the third time I had gotten arrested. Their love broke, and I wasn't enough to keep them together.

1. Drunk and disorderly-Misdemeanor
2. Drug possession- A few days in jail
3. DUI- Large fine and community service

I told myself that I didn't know where I was going, but I recognized the fruit stand that signaled the turn off for our hidden place. We came here often when I was younger. They piled us into the car and sang cheesy road trip songs the whole way, while I begrudgingly mumbled the words with them. I was indoctrinated to believe it was the perfect beach to watch the sunset. I had forgotten how true it was. I hadn't been back. I couldn't face it. But later, once again, became today.

We called it D Street Beach. It's hidden below bluffs that most never ventured beyond. Mom always said "With sand like this, who ever needs a pedicure."

The history of my past rushed up to the shore with the water, nearly touching my toes. I wanted the water to swallow me, trapping me in a rip tide just like it trapped him. The world didn't end that day, but mine did. My downward spiral started shortly after his death. A lonely lifetime spent as a lifelong disappointment. Although they never told me as much, I knew they blamed me. Mom never looked at me the same, and Dad never looked at me again.

James Russell Wilson drowned Sunday, March 31, 2010, at the young age of 16, cutting his bright future short. He left behind a sister and two loving parents. Services will be held April 4, 2010.

I blamed myself too.

After the fourth drink, I dialed her number. It rang. Sorry ran off my lips. I stepped into the water, letting it wash over me. The world quieted. The water covered me, and stilled my body. I took a deep breath and let it all go.

Rose Tinted Waters

Fern Ferguson

Far from the rose-tinted windows of the city, Samara sat atop the waves, watching her fiancée categorize fish she couldn't name. He dove under the water, image rippling across small waves and making her smile. She stands from her seat on the boat to grab another drink, when the sun disappears.

She turns in confusion, looking up to see a yacht barreling over the edge of their small boat. Her screams are overshadowed by the sound of debris.

Underwater, her fiancee is surrounded by a rose tint as he looks up and sees her mangled body. . . floating above his head.

The Land of the Midnight Sun

A.M. Shiner

"What is it you're trying to accomplish, Scott?" Oates demanded.

"You know quite well what we're trying to accomplish."

"Yes, yes, first to the south pole and all that, but why are *you* so determined on reaching it?"

Scott glanced up at the surly-faced soldier. "I'm getting paid, Oates, what more is there to say?"

Oates huffed. Around them, a flurry of men conveyed supplies from ship to sledge in a clamor of shouts and yapping dogs that constituted organized madness. "You can't just *pay* someone to obliterate themselves by running into this white nothing."

"No," Scott agreed, "but I don't *intend* to die. I intend to see what's been left unmarred by the human eye and return to my family with a tale to tell. What more could possibly drive a man?"

"There is nothing to see out there, only a sea of snow, the bite of hunger, and the madness of cold."

Scott only smiled, "If you so ardently detest the journey, old soldier, why embark on it?"

Oates bared his teeth and turned on his heel, but as he marched through the ranks of busied men, his voice carried through a blistering wind. "Might be I'm as pig brained daft as you, Scott."

The next morning, Robert Scott's team of sixteen men, eleven Siberian ponies, and thirty-two sledge dogs began to transverse the Ross Ice Shelf—a flat, barren expanse of frozen snow as horizonless as the sea. And as the men's sledges sliced across its frozen waters their tracks crested like waves behind them.

This expedition to the south pole was a mad dash—a race that the British Empire was desperate to win, after all, they had already lost the north pole to the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, and now, they were about to lose the south.

But as Scott's team crossed 425 miles over the ice shelf and began a journey with a total trip length of 1,766 statute miles, the distance between

New York City to Wyoming (Ward), Scott was optimistic. Summer had just begun and the sun would remain high over the horizon, circling his expedition with perpetual sunlight for the next six months.

It was a good omen, wasn't it? A land flooded in endless sunlight.

And as the team neared the next stage of the journey—the 125-mile trek across the top of Beardmore Glacier—hope flooded their vision as blinding as the sun and strengthened their every step. Daylight burned through the night leaving no darkness that could ensnare the mens' thoughts with premonitions of the nightmares lurking on the horizon.

And indeed, dear reader, there were nightmares to come.

When they reached the Beardmore Glacier they shot the ponies. But fear not, it was all a part of the plan. The ponies had carried their food and soon, the ponies would be the food. It was all quite sensible.

Mountains erupted in sharp bursts from the ice around them, their dark peaks capped in mounds of glittering snow. After splitting into three teams of four, the men used harnesses to drag their sledges behind them as they commenced picking their way across the icy slopes of the glacier.

Once they had reached the end of the glacier, Scott would select three men to travel with him the remaining 350 miles to the south pole. The rest of his men would return to Camp Evans where they would prepare to assist Scott's small team on their return journey across the Ross Ice Shelf.

Scott was the first to deviate from his plan. "I've determined who shall accompany me to the pole," Scott announced at camp on a sunny evening. The men, sunburnt and exhausted, had just finished the last morsel of the pony's stringy meat.

Scott stood beside a tiny fire blowing white smoke, the sweet scent of cooked meat still thick in the thin air. "Of course, good ol' Edward Wilson will be joining us," Scott clapped the fur-clad man on the back, "After all, I do believe our chief scientist would be rather cross if we abandoned him now."

Wilson, his eyes sharp and clear as the sky itself, offered his friend a faint smile, "You got me all wrong, Scott, I'd be happy to head back to my old cot in a heated cabin, even if it is one full of men who ain't had a wash since, well, only God knows when." He chuckled and the rest of the men joined him, jostling with each other over who was the biggest culprit.

"To continue," Scott interrupted, hesitant to break their merrymaking, "We shall also be joined by Edgar Evans and our cheery old pessimist Lawrence Oates," to which he turned to Oates.

Oates remained silent, a first for him, and stood away from the group. Impervious to his companions' mirth, he glowered at the horizon.

"Oates?" Scott said, "Did you hear me?"

Arms crossed over his chest, Oates scowled, eyes locked on the unknown. "Yes," He gruffed suddenly, "I understand."

"Right," Scott shifted his attention back to the group. "As for the rest of you, my most gallant men, I must applaud your courage thus far, and trust you shall locate the barrel of ale awaiting your return."

The men cheered. Whooping as they clanged utensils against tin mugs.

"Alas, before we dismantle all seriousness." Scott said, grinning despite himself, he admired his men who had traveled so far, but somehow maintained a stalwart vitality, "There is one final matter to address." At this, the men quieted, but a murmur of elation continued to dance through the group.

"Many," Scott began, "have made false claims of reaching the South Pole—an imprudence that threatens to stifle our own accomplishments." He met his men's eyes, drawing their thoughts back into sobriety. "And now, we find ourselves required to alter our course of action." The fire crackled and popped in the silence that followed.

"We will need to bring a second navigator to confirm our latitude and to testify confirmation of our success upon our return." He turned to a stout man with a hooked nose that had earned him the nickname "birdie". The man's beard was a splash of deep red that contrasted deeply with the pure white surroundings. "I have every confidence in Henry Bowers here, he has time and again proved himself a hardworking, capable fellow."

Of course, that's all good and all, but there were three issues with this change. One, they had only four sets of skis for the next long stretch, meaning Bower would have to travel on foot; two, their tent was a *four*-man tent; and three, they had packed rations for only four men.

One might be tempted to question Scott's judgment for these reasons, however, after reassessing their gear, Scott came to the conclusion that even with a fifth man they would have a month's extra food. It wasn't his judgment that would later fail them. It was the condition of the Antarctic and the wrath of the last frontier, the most uninhabitable place in the world. Hope was a foreign entity that thrived only in the optimistic heart of man. And this frosted hellscape was where hope went to die.

However, as Robert Falcon Scott, Edward Wilson, Lawrence Oates, Edgar Evans, and the tacked-on Henry Robertson Bowers "Birdie" set off across the great nothing, hope would not die easily.

Three hundred and fifty miles across the bottom of the earth, Scott's team attached harnesses to themselves and man-hauled sledges carrying hundreds of pounds of equipment across a landscape where only the bright blue sky and even brighter snow stretched in all directions. Crammed into their now too small tent, the men slept and woke under the sun's unrelenting glare.

"That damned sun!" Wilson exclaimed, tossing in his fur pelt sleeping bag and jostling Birdie and Scott on either side of himself. "How's a man to get a decent night's rest when even the sun refuses to lie down?" It was his first burst of complaint, but one of his companions shared, even if they never admitted to it.

Birdie nodded, to himself, "But it ain't as bad as Cape Crozier."

Wilson groaned, "Don't remind me of it."

"Be grateful the sun's on our side now." Birdie slurred, sleep stealing his thoughts. "We'll be back at camp long bef. . ."

"Before the dark hits." Scott finished for him, "We'll be back at the cabin with the potbelly stove warming a fresh pot of tea while Clissold's mince pies crisp up."

“Don’t forget the flaming plum pudding,” Oates muttered, “I’d give up my good leg for a bite of the stuff.”

Wilson’s breath crystallized before him as he licked his chapped lips. “Aye, it'd be worth the cost.”

Scott chuckled lightly, weariness creeping upon him. “But most of all,” he continued, “We’ll all return to base camp with a grand victory to share. Then, we’ll be getting the deepest, longest sleep a man can fall into.”

Time seemed to cease as the group trudged on. The snow beamed back the brightness of the sun, blinding. Thoughts of the glory and honor their expedition would bring to the British Empire should have invigorated their stiffening limbs, but it was the thought of home. Or more specifically, the thought of the promotion and praise awaiting their return and the extra money it would allow the men to send home to their families.

Perhaps that is all that any man truly desires: a work to be done, the satisfaction of seeing it complete, and the promise of a home to return to. But there would be no satisfaction and promises of anything more than a heart-rending cold.

Birdie was the first to spot it. In the distance, the striking crimson and gunmetal-blue cross of the Norwegian flag.

Amundsen’s team had not only been the first to reach the southernmost point of the planet, but they had done so a full month ahead of Scott’s team and would nearly be back at base camp by the time Scott’s group had arrived.

Scott’s team didn’t know the extent to which they had failed. All they knew was the Norwegian flag as it waved over a tent Amundsen had left behind.

The group stared at it in a long, mounding silence. Drinking in the sight of those colors like a poison that—

“I say,” Oates said, interrupting their stupor as he sagging against the sledge, “that man must have had his head screwed on right,” he gestured at the prints of dog paws doting the snow around the tent, “they seem to have had a comfortable trip with their dog teams, very different from our wretched man-hauling.[1]”

Birdie scowled at the man before his lips curled into something that resembled a smile. “Nevertheless, dreary Oates, we’ve arrived at the pole. That alone is a feat enough.”

Scott didn’t seem to hear them, “We’ve failed,” the indomitable optimism that carried the men thus far shattering. “. . . *I’ve* failed you.”

Wilson squeezed his friend’s shoulder. “You couldn’t have prevented this, Scott.”

Scott dragged his gaze away from the fortress of his foe and set them on his men, men who had endured the cold and crushing isolation for nothing. “I had been so certain of a victory . . . I never feared the threat of defeat. For that, my dear comrades, I must apologize.”

“Keep your apologizes,” Evans snatched up the sledge ropes where they'd fallen and prepared to pull, “We’ve come too far to succumb to self-pitiful misery.”

[1] Direct quote from Captain Lawrence OATES & The Oates collections. Gilbert Whites House. (n.d.).

They knew he was right and having at least arrived the men did the gentlemen thing—they took a photograph beside the foreign flag and left behind some of Wilson's sketches.

Later, Scott wrote, "We have turned our back now on the goal of our ambition and must face our 800 miles of solid dragging – and goodbye to most of the day-dreams![2]"

Edgar Evans was a big man with a hard face. The type of man who loved women and liquor in equal measure. Evans was the first to die.

After tumbling down a crevasse while crossing the Beardmore Glacier, the big man suffered a heavy concussion and a deep cut on his hand that never healed properly. From there, he only further deteriorated in both body and mind. Frostbite bubbled and blackened Evans' fingers, nose, and cheeks before his nails dislodged and snapped off.

Evans collapsed at the base of the glacier. The rest of Scott's team were forced to leave him there, going on ahead to set up camp. When they returned to retrieve him they found Evans on his knees, his eyes wild. The man's clothes were disheveled and his hood pushed back from his face. His bare hands were frozen black.

They organized him and placed him on the sledge.

"Tighten the furs around your neck, Evans." Scott encouraged as the men dragged their companion's failing body through the snow. "A hot cup of hoosh and a good night of sleep will straighten you out right quick."

"Aye," Birdie agreed, "The other team should be about to resupply us soon. A pint of ale will warm you up hotter than a virgin's cheeks on 'er wed-din' night." This earned a weak chuckle from Evans.

They made it back to camp. Evans slipped into comatose. As the evening's stew began to simmer, Evans' chest stilled.

The glacier may have weakened him, but it was nature's freezing breath that killed Evans. Nature's unyielding cruelty had only just awakened.

They thought they were prepared. Scott's team had spent years researching the Antarctic climate before embarking on this dash to the south-pole. The temperature should have never dropped any lower than -20 degrees Fahrenheit.

But they could have never imagined that they had wandered into an anomaly.

Later research would unearth a phenomenon. Every fifteen years, the temperature in the Antarctic summer plummets drastically. The year 1912 was the fateful year Scott and his men waded into the white oblivion, but it was also when the death toll struck. A year that broke every careful prediction Scott and his team had made. And this twist of nature left Scott's team in a bitter struggle as they began their voyage back across the Ross Ice Shelf, enduring weeks of -40 degree temperatures.

The snow crystalized under their feet, turning the landscape to the consistency of desert sand. A powered texture of snow that increased the friction on their skis, pulling their daily progress down to a mere five miles.

[2] Direct quote from Scott, R. F. (n.d.). Diaries of Robert Scott. Turning the Pages™ - British Library.

"I don't know what to think," Scott scribbled into his crimson leather journal, fingertips numb and sloppy with cold, "but the rapid closing of the season is ominous . . .

The sun shines brightly, but there is little warmth in it.[3]"

After a month of grueling days that never ended, Death set it's greedy eye on Lawrence Oates whose feet were not only frostbitten but gangrene.

March 15th, another painful morning as Oates hobbled through on the deadened knobs of his feet, his left foot swollen and fat into his boot. Frost flowering over the group's eyebrows and lashes, they rested for lunch. Huddled around a snapping fire, they heated rations in pannikins—unable to fully warm themselves.

"I'm slowing us down," Oates grumbled, blistered hands motionless in his lap.

Birdie had been feeding measured portions of their rapidly depleting coal and petrol to fire, but he stilled at Oates' words, "We're all a might worse for wear, this harsh weather ain't helping either."

"Which is why you can't afford to haul a corpse along. Leave me with my sleeping bag and go. It's the only sensible decision."

Scott lurched to his feet, "We leave man no one behind—not even a gloomy chap like you, old soldier."

Scott steeled himself for a strike of disagreement from Oates, but the man's sun-baked face only cracked into a strange death smile, "Your valor is commendable Scott, but here," he gestured to the packed snow of sledge tracks winding into the endless Antarctic waste behind them, "it only weighs your step."

"No, old soldier," Scott sunk to his haunches and plucked a steaming pannikin from the crimson eye of coals, "it strengthens my step."

"You will be remembered as a fumbling fool," he spat, dried blood lining the crevices of his cracked lips, but nevertheless, Oates accompanied the group for a few more grueling miles before making camp that evening. At this point in the journey, the entire group was not only burdened with the dual torment of cold exhaustion and nibbling frostbite, but a lack of nutrients that left them suffering the effects of scurvy. Old wounds burst open, their gums swelled, receded, and bled while a deepening sense of fatigue gnawed into their bones.

In that bright night, Oates's condition worsened as a blizzard ravaged the group's tent. Barely able to stand, Oates pushed to his feet, "I am just going outside," his eyes were dull and resigned, "I may be some time.[4]"

Shivering with bruises and leadened limbs, even Birdie withheld words.

Oates's body was never found. The group trudged on.

"What do you see, Scott?" The wind was screaming, blasting all the warmth from the men's fading bodies.

[3] Direct quote, Scott, R. F. (n.d.). Diaries of Robert Scott. Turning the Pages™ - British Library.

[4] Direct quote, Captain Lawrence OATES & The Oates collections. Gilbert Whites House. (n.d.).

"Nothing, Wilson," Scott admitted, squinting into the perfect oblivion. They had seen nothing but bright white for months. "Nothing at all."

With only eleven miles to go from a supply depot that would save their lives, the remaining team members found themselves locked in the thralls of another blizzard. Scott's team made failed attempts to travel through the storm, but in the end, they became trapped inside the thin fabric of their tent. The storm raged on.

The men waited nine days for the storm to pass.

It never did.

This is where the journey ends.

"We are weak, writing is difficult, but for my own sake I do not regret this journey, which has shown that Englishmen can endure hardships, help one another, and meet death with as great a fortitude as ever in the past." Scott's fingers numb as he scratched out words that spiral like snow drift across the page, "We took risks, we knew we took them; things have come out against us, and therefore we have no cause for complaint, but bow to the will of Providence, determined still to do our best to the last. But if we have been willing to give our lives to this enterprise, which is for the honour of our country, I appeal to our countrymen to see that those who depend on us are properly cared for. Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance, and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale, but surely, surely, a great rich country like ours will see that those who are dependent on us are properly provided for.[5]" R. F. SCOTT.

"Wilson," Scott patted his friend's chest where he lay wrapped in his sleeping bag beside him, "Look, it's getting dark. The sun's finally lying down to rest." Scott laughed hoarsely, all the rations depleted, there wasn't even water left to ease their descent into death. "Isn't that something, Wilson?"

Wilson said nothing, did nothing, he would never do anything again.

"Finally," Scott said, his hand still resting on the man's chest, too heavy to move, "A decent night's sleep." He closed his eyes, feeling warm as he lay between Bowers and Wilson, his already dead companions. "This night . . . I don't reckon it will ever end."

Only the sky's frozen tears fell on them. The dog sledge team that was supposed to assist them never found the group. And Scott's team remained frozen and unsaved in an icy wasteland.

Far, far away the midnight sun finally dipped beneath the horizon and dragged all hope of the group's survival down with it—smothering it into a sky of stars.

[5] Direct quote, Scott, R. F. (n.d.). Diaries of Robert Scott. Turning the Pages™ - British Library

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Hermana Mamá or "Sister Mother"

Alyssa Dove

Mami's kind to the illegals who pass through our backyard, hitching rides on the trains. She lets them shower in our bathroom and gives them food we buy with food stamps. But you can be kind and crazy too, you know. Like how Mami blames Lydia for what Rafael did when she was nine. Nine. I just don't understand Mami. Mexican women like to believe that their men are innocent. Well, maybe it's a white woman thing too. I don't know. I've never asked Emily if her mom thinks her dad is innocent. How do you ask someone that? The truth is you don't. You just keep on walking and wondering.

———

But anyway, Mami is generous to complete strangers but she can't ever forgive her own daughter for something Mami's own husband did to her. Well, I guess it's hard to point the finger at Rafael since he's in jail now. I guess it's easier to blame someone who's right there, someone you see every day. But Lydia doesn't complain or get revenge. She takes care of us kids while Mami hides in her room listening to some dramatic Mexican song about love and despair. Once in a while you'll hear Mami cry out, "Lydia! *¡Tú eres la hija del diablo!*" You are the daughter of the Devil.

———

Mami's mind fell apart when Rafael went to jail. She got in a dark place and we only saw her when she left her room to use the bathroom. *Hay que orinar, aun cuando estás triste*. I guess she forgot our lives kept on going and the world kept moving forward. Or maybe she just didn't care anymore. They don't cancel school if your mom loses her mind and forgets she has kids. And they don't give everyone the day off of school if someone's dad goes to jail. Tests are too important. So Lydia did what Mami forgot or either chose not to do. She cooked the food and killed the spiders. She dressed and washed the younger kids. She sang *arrullos* to us at night too.

———

Los pollitos dicen
Pio, pio, pio,
Cuando tienen hambre,
Cuando tienen frio.

The chicks say
Twit, twit, twit,
When they are hungry,
When they are cold.

———

Lydia started to become our mother, but in some ways she still acted like a kid. Like how she joined us kids for rock fights. Oh man, rock fights were fun but I'm sure any kid who wasn't from there would call the cops or something. Maybe Lydia was just there to make sure we didn't get too many bruises 'cause you know rock fights could get real nasty. All the neighborhood kids would meet at the park and bring the biggest rocks they could find. But the best rocks for rock fights were small enough for you to throw with one hand but big enough to make sure the other kid didn't throw one back at you, you know? We lived by the tracks so we got all the good rocks from the railroad. I don't really know who started the whole rock fight thing, but rock fights are what we did in the desert 'cause Heaven knows we ain't got snow.

El estúpido sol no te da estúpida nieve.

———

Or like how Lydia helped us derail the train. Gosh, we wanted to move so bad. There were tarantulas, not little black spiders, but big nasty tarantulas in our apartment. Who wouldn't want to move, you know? We all thought any place would be better than here. The place wouldn't even need a toilet and us kids thought it'd be better than feeling a hairy tarantula walk across your foot. So with the spiders and everything, we really wanted to move and we thought that we could force our family to move if our place got destroyed. We started a plan to wreck the apartment.

Lydia helped come up with ideas and she suggested that we set the place on fire. We figured that it would be better if it looked like we weren't involved in any way 'cause then we wouldn't get in trouble. We decided that derailing the train would be the best way to avoid trouble 'cause trains got derailed by themselves all the time, right? All we'd have to do is help a little. We tried putting larger rocks and sticks on the tracks but the stubborn thing wouldn't fall and smash our place. We got so desperate, you know? We finally put a boulder on the tracks and the train's wheels jumped off the rails. We ran so fast. *La más lenta se mete en problemas*. No one wanted to be the one the train guy pinned everything on. No way.

———

I came back with Lydia in the evening to look at the derailed train. It looked pretty sad just sitting there with no place to go. Who knew just a few wheels off

the tracks would stop the thing completely? What a wimp. *Las cosas débiles se paran fácil*. I felt big and strong next to the train.

"What do you think, Lydia?"

"I think Mami better not find out about it."

"*¡Pero claro!* But what else?"

Lydia looked back at our apartment complex. "It didn't come close to crushing our home," she said.

I looked too. She was right. The train hadn't gotten close enough to even scrape paint off the wall.

"Maybe the train was just more stubborn than us," I said.

Lydia laughed. "*Quizás, pero tú me pareces mucho más terca, Anel!*"

We sat there staring at the train until Lydia said it was time to start dinner. Dutiful Lydia, worried about feeding us kids like a mom when she should've just been our sister.

———

Mami called out when she heard the front door close.

"Lydia?"

"*Si*, Mami."

"*¡Tú eres la hija del diablo! ¡Tú eres la hija del diablo!*"

Lydia shuddered but kept walking to the kitchen. I don't know why she kept answering Mami, she said the same thing every time she spoke to her. Maybe Lydia was hoping Mami would change her mind and love her again?

Devil child or no, Lydia still made an extra plate of food for Mami. She left it by Mami's door, hoping the smell would draw her out of her bedroom. Not for the sake of Lydia, she'd probably get screamed at, but for the sake of the younger kids. It's not good for small kids to go long times without seeing their mom. *Los niños sin su mamá no crecen*. Children without their mother do not grow.

———

Mami lived in her room like that for a year and a half. She locked herself up in her dark place and made it her own kind of jail, incarcerated like her husband. Mami probably would've stayed there longer but, luckily, our neighbor Karate had experience with jailbreaks.

———

Karate was some ghetto-ass lady who lived downstairs. I don't know if Karate was her real name or just some nickname she had 'cause of the way she danced. But anyways, me and my siblings and her kids were usually on the same team for rock fights 'cause we were neighbors. They were fun to make trouble with. But I'd never seen their mom until I heard Karate screaming curses at a car that got too close.

———

I peeked my head out our apartment door just in time to hear her yell, "Come back here, you *pollo*! Come back here so Karate can whoop your ass!"

The lady was wearing a tight zebra print dress with bangles on her wrists and she was totally drunk. She ran her fingers through her teased up hair, smiled at some invisible mirror, and started shuffling back to her own door.

"Damn right," she mumbled to no one but the sidewalk.

———

I told Lydia what happened, expecting her to laugh or something but all she could say was, "She was wearing zebra print? Like a zoo zebra?"

"*¡No me digas!* What other kind of zebra is there? Lydia, the lady was freaking yelling at a car and all you can think about is her dress? Dude, she's crazy!"

Lydia sat thinking a moment. "Maybe her and Mami can be friends." she said.

"Yeah right, so they can be crazy together?"

"No, really. Maybe this lady can fix Mami." Even with Mami always calling her a devil child, Lydia was still trying to find a way to fix her.

"What makes you think that'll work?"

"*Porque, las locas saben ayudar a las locas.*"

"*¿Qué? Estás loca*." What was Lydia thinking? There was now way Mami would be fixed just 'cause some random lady asked if she wanted a drink.

"Just trust me, okay?"

"Fine."

———

Somehow Lydia got Karate to come say hi to our mom, she probably promised her a beer or something. Lydia led the lady to Mami's door and Karate knocked.

"*¿Qué?*" Mami asked, hoping it was Lydia so she could yell some more.

"It's me."

"Who the heck is me?"

"Apparently, you're Guadalupe."

"No! Who are you?"

"A badass woman who likes to party!"

"Go away! *Aquí no hay fiesta*."

"That's obvious," Karate rolled her eyes and scrunched her nose. "Girl, you need to leave your freaking room and come with me."

"Why?"

"*La vida no ha terminada*. Come on."

"No, life's over for me."

"Nu-uh. We're gonna go party."

———

It took Karate eighteen visits with the same conversation but by some miracle the ghetto-ass lady eventually got Mami to go party. She really did. I don't know what changed, but Mami let Karate dress her up really nice and take her to a party. Mami never stopped going after that. The crazy lady had rubbed off

on her and Mami's life was now a total party. Mami started drinking like Karate too. Some people get mean when they're drunk but Mami was a happy drunk, so it was better this way. Lydia was right, *las locas saben ayudar a las locas*. The crazy people do know how to help the crazy people.

———

One month after Mami started partying with Karate she traded out our living room stuff for a bar. Us kids came home from school and she was drilling in a counter with leather-padded stools. She probably bought it at some second-hand store.

"What's going on? Where's the couch? Where's the t.v.?"

"We don't need a couch, *pollitos*," she smiled at us. "We're gonna party. *No necesitas un sofá cuando estás bailando*." You don't need a couch when you're dancing.

English Department Writing Contest Winner, second place: Fiction

Enlightened

Nathan Wainwright

From the start it had been a possibility that I would be put to sleep. I had been in the hospital bed for about a week, feeling like shit. Plague had descended upon the Salt Lake valley and I was not among this Mormon god's protected fold.

Every action was laborious and painful. The room was cold and if I wanted more blankets about my chest it took all my strength simply to pull them up—despite how thin that hospital bedding was. If I pulled them too high, my toes poked out and soon turned to ice. It took another monumental surge to reclaim enough cotton to cover them, and then I'd have kicked them too far down.

Lucky for me, I was rarely alone. The people around me spoke about labor shortages, but I saw no evidence of this. There was almost always either a nurse or doctor there to assist me, and if nobody was in the room all it took was a button press and somebody typically came running to my aid. If I was too cold, I only had to ask for an extra blanket and it was done. If I was too hot. . . Well, I was never too hot. It made me wonder, though, how bad off I must be to warrant such attention.

Of course, asking for help seemed to be an unscalable mountain all its own. The aches and pains and general soreness I felt throughout my body were nothing, just a dewdrop on a blade of grass compared to my inability to breathe. I'm telling you—no, asking you—commanding you: Reader, open your diaphragm wide and let as much air into your lungs as you can take. Hold it for a moment. A moment longer. A moment longer. If you are a smoker or a once-smoker, you won't get as clean a breath as others, but it will still be fuller than mine in this hospital bed. Feel that breath as raw life inside of you, and let it go.

Now, another command: Never again take that automatic ability for granted.

To make any request of a doctor, I first had to take the great step of removing my oxygen mask they kept on me in order to force my body to accomplish what it once accomplished on its own. I also wore a finger pulse oximeter

clipped on my right hand. I can't even pretend to understand the numbers and measurements blipping and changing on the screen beside me, but I understood a little too well the expression the nurses wore whenever they came in and inspected the monitor. Every time, without fail (not only the first time, the second time, the third time, but every single time), their faces would go pale and they would mutter something I wasn't supposed to hear about how I should not have been conscious, or even alive by this point.

If my breathing hadn't been so hampered I'd have been able to solve all my issues on my own. I wouldn't even have needed these god-awful blankets. But each time I focused my breath—exactly like Mama had taught me when I was very, very young—I could feel that tiny flame that flickers at the base of my spine and knew that it would never be enough to warm me. And each coughing fit that this sent me into made the nurses heads snap towards me like they expected me to drop dead right then and there. And I would raise a feeble hand to show them it was nothing.

Honestly, it's incredible that I remember any of my hospital experience. And, true, it's all blurred and mixed and hard to sort through, but I remember most of it quite clearly. However, my memory does fail me in one aspect: I do not remember Mama even once coming to visit. And I know she visited me. She must have visited me.

Unfortunately, I only remember the missionaries. They dressed like Papa on a Sunday, in their white shirts and black suits. But they visited me on a Wednesday.

"Friend," the first man said to me, "We know you are Buddhist and so you probably don't fear death—"

I didn't have the energy nor the breath to inform them that I feared death just as much as anyone, so I sat still and let the man continue.

"—You think you'll be reborn and get another chance at life—"

Sure, I thought idly, another chance to complete the things that I hadn't gotten around to in this life, or the life before that, or the life before that. At this point I wasn't even sure if I truly believed in rebirth at all. The only thing I really believed was that I was dying and I was scared. Still, In the back of my mind somewhere, I'd always imagined I'd follow in the first Buddha's footsteps and meditate beneath a bodhi tree for forty-nine days. It wasn't the fact that I might not accomplish this that bothered me, though. It was the fact that I'd never shovel the walk for Mama (who was so old and gnarled that she shouldn't be doing any physical work whatsoever) just like I'd done every snow day of every winter I'd ever lived through.

"—but friend, this life is all you're going to get, and we're worried that if you don't accept God and his son Jesus Christ, you may not be saved." The first guy finally stopped talking. His partner nodded and added nothing.

I nodded too, said nothing too.

The first missionary glanced at the second, looked back at me. "If you don't mind, we'd like to give you a blessing before we go to help you through these hard times and help you find peace."

I shook my head with more energy than I'd been able to muster up in days.

"It doesn't hurt," the first missionary said with a small smile, as if I thought I'd be burned by their holy anointed oil. "And it's only for your benefit."

I shook my head harder, but could only manage for a moment before I had to catch my breath.

The first missionary glanced at his partner again, looked back at me. He still smiled, but it was wrong—like when Papa used to walk in to find Mama and me meditating in the midday sunlight streaming through the front window—like it took as much effort for him to bend his lips as it did for me to breathe. "Ok, well. . . Can we leave you with a prayer?"

Softer now, I shook my head. If I had felt like speaking, maybe I would have explained that I appreciated their concern, I really did, but I was more at peace without a prayer than with one. Papa had said many prayers for me, given me many blessings. None of them did much of anything. Even Mama's meditation only helped for the chance it gave me to spend time with her.

"Ok. . . " the first missionary said. The two of them stood. I could tell they usually didn't leave a visit without a prayer and weren't exactly sure how to make their exit. They both moved to the door, and as they walked out the second missionary turned back and spoke for the first time.

"We'll pray for you anyway," he said.

I just smiled and watched. It really was all that I could do.

As soon as the missionaries left, the doctor entered. He took a metal stool from across the room and slid it over to me with an awful screech. He sat on the round black cushion with his legs wide and almost faced me.

The doctor had an air of put-togetherness, and I could quite clearly imagine him that morning carefully pulling a razor across any night-grown stubble and patting his cheeks and chin with a fragrant aftershave that burned ever so slightly and admiring his glowing face in the mirror above his bathroom sink. Maybe then he'd be running a comb through his short-cropped hair and applying some gel to keep it all swept back and tucking whatever remaining dangling strands carefully where they belong. Yes, I could see the beautiful man before me, even despite the glazed look in his eyes, the frazzled-up hair, the untucked shirt sleeves.

He sat on his stool and held out a paper so I could read it. I didn't read it. I just watched him. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling and he said absolutely nothing. He just held out this paper that I didn't read.

Finally the doctor lowered his gaze, making sure to level it just beyond my shoulder. Perhaps he saw something that I could not, perhaps he meant for me to look and see it too. I did not look and I did not read the paper. I just watched him.

And then, finally, he spoke. "You need to sign this paper to allow us to induce a coma." His voice was deep and full of the possibility for music. Right now, however, it was quiet and emotionless and there was not even the hint of a tune on his chapped lips.

I let the quiet voice finish falling to the hospital floor. Then, with careful and deliberate motions that cost me dearly, I removed my oxygen mask and asked, "Will this save me?"

I returned the mask to my face and tried to breathe deeply.

"Well," the doctor started, still watching that something that he must have seen behind me. With a small shrug he continued, "It's. . . hard to say for certain. To put it into simple statistics, it's probably fifty-fifty."

Again, with laborious motions, I removed my mask and asked, "And if I don't sign it? What are the odds then?"

The mask went back on.

For the first time since entering my hospital room the doctor looked directly at me. I almost wish he hadn't, for the shock his sudden look gave me was almost enough to send me into a fit. I managed to maintain my breathing at least for his next words.

"If we do not induce a coma, you will die."

So, I let them put me under, let them open me up, let them stick a tube down into my lungs. I wish I could explain it beyond these simple terms, but to be honest, that's exactly how I understand what they did to me to save my life. And it did save my life. I guess that's enough.

When I finally woke up, Mama was there. She was the first thing I saw, though to me she seemed to be so far away, stretching high, high above me, beyond my bed, beyond the ceiling, beyond the clouds even. So far away, but she was there.

"How long was I asleep?" I asked, though it took a few tries to get it out right.

Mama looked down from way up high and I could make out her smile so clearly despite the distance. "Forty-nine days, Quentin," she said

I closed my eyes and felt tears begin to fall. I tried forming another question, but once again I had to work hard to say much of anything. "What did I eat?" It wasn't the question I'd meant to ask.

"Nothing, Quentin. They fed you through a tube."

"Were you here? Were you here the whole time?" I asked, so, so afraid of an answer I didn't want to hear.

"Yes, Quentin. I was here. I was here the whole time."

When I reopened my eyes Mama was closer, still smiling, bending over me. I knew Mama was old, but I guess I'd never really noticed just how old, how gnarled, and how strong. Very much, I realized, like a bodhi tree. I let myself relax as Mama bent down to hug me.

On December 8th of 2021, I awoke from a forty-nine day coma. Forty-nine days apart from myself. Forty-nine days meditating beneath the bodhi tree. Forty-nine days of my life that I would never get back. I took a great big gulp of rocky mountain air and felt the flame stronger than I'd ever felt it before. When I let it out, the tears came with it. Mama reached down and wiped them from my cheek.

"Don't cry, Quintin," she said lovingly. "You're alright. You're alive."

I wasn't crying because I had returned to the world, but because I had escaped it.

English Department Writing Contest Winner, third place: Fiction

The Mail Thief

Christina Re Anderson

I was enjoying my third crime-free day curled up in the living room reading *Les Misérables* when my Uncle Johnny came in and started harassing me. He wore a hoodie with a palmetto tree emblazoned on the chest and was still in his uniform pants. They were cheap fabric, and the thick polyester trapped all the smells of his duty; noxious liquid paper, sweat and cheap burgers. It was revolting, but he wore those pants all the time, nose blind and uncaring. They were his second skin.

Johnny would strut around with his pistol on display all hours of the day, too, if they'd let him. Probably tattoo his badge on his forehead.

"Happy New Year's Eve," he said with glee, "Rent's due tomorrow."

"Wait, it's a holiday! Isn't there a law against that or something? I should get an extra day." I needed an extra week, really.

"You follow the law. I just enforce it." He cracked his knuckles and turned to leave. Our conversations always ended on his terms.

Under my breath, I grunted, "Ladies and gentlefolk, the poster child of the Columbia Police Department."

"What was that?"

"Nothing. . . sir," I replied, wishing I had an indoor voice. I sat up straight, "So, say I don't have enough to cover all of the rent just yet—"

"—Better figure it out." He said, not letting me plead my case. "This isn't a charity, or one of your shelters. We all pay our due."

After he left, my Aunt Lilah came in from the kitchen and sat with me. She was the sugar to his vinegar. She pointed to the television, which my younger cousin had left on.

"Oh, I saw that video. Absolutely awful."

In California, abandoned debris blocked the train tracks. Bandits, the newscaster said, had looted train cars for weeks, and the police hadn't caught them. They left whatever they didn't want behind, on the tracks, for anyone else to take. It was estimated at over two million dollars in unclaimed wealth.

"I can't believe people are just leaving all that free stuff out by the tracks," I said, engrossed by the hip-high piles of Amazon packages. It was a dragon's horde without a dragon.

“It’s not free.” Lilah snorted. “People paid for that stuff, they’re waiting for it. Medicine, prom dresses, baby seats, all sortsa stuff. Just lost. Stolen. What’s this country coming to?”

“Good question,” I said absently. It was everything I wanted and couldn’t have. Would never have.

My thoughts drifted to the math of rent again. . . it wasn’t adding up in my favor.

Aunt Lilah squeezed my shoulder and pulled my thoughts back. “We’re proud of you, hun. With your new job, and working your way through college. I know it’s hard. Hopefully this helps.” She shoved a twenty-dollar gift card into my palm.

I wanted to give it back and bully her into a rent raincheck. I wanted to scream that she had no idea what it was like, since none of them had ever gone to college. Some crazy part of me wanted to confess I’d lost my job just before Christmas, simply for having the flu and missing a shift. But I knew she was just as powerless against Johnny as I was. And if they knew I didn’t have a job, they would put me back on the streets.

Instead, I patted Aunt Lilah’s shoulder and said, “I’m going to work now, actually.”

———

I microwaved a ToastieCheezers PieWich™, threw on my sneakers, and walked twenty-five minutes south to the upscale suburbs known as Windsor Pointe. South Carolina was suffering a cold snap, and the brutal wind made me wish I had a heavier jacket. I had sold my hoodie the week before at the consignment shop, along with many other things. After my aunt’s charitable contribution, the gap in my rent envelope was still two hundred and seventy dollars.

I got into my stride. Someone abandoned their home, probably for a party, with the porchlight off. I snatched their mail. Another person left trash cans out at the curb, and it had been three days since trash day. I snatched their mail. At the next house, a hound bayed at me. Pass, not worth it. But the next house I hit, and the next. There were a lot of cards, belated Christmas checks. I didn’t look at them but I knew. I felt the heat of them in my messenger bag.

There were signs everywhere telling me not to go out and snatch mail that evening—I ignored them all.

The signs were:

1. On my two previous outings, I had a gnawing feeling someone was watching me. I didn't see anyone. The roads had been empty except for the occasional dog walker. But there was a strong scent of peppermint oil that kept finding its way to me. I first detected it on Thursday when doubling back past a cluster of mailboxes on Periwinkle Lane. And then on Saturday, I smelled peppermint while tying my shoes.
2. Aunt Lilah says it is bad luck to break anything at the turn of a new year. That morning, New Year’s Eve, I clumsily swung a blanket over my shoulder and broke Aunt Lilah’s lucky cat statue. She probably wouldn’t have given me the gift card if she knew about it.

So—I was broke, I had bad luck, and I felt guilty about the statue. Oh yeah, also:

3. There were actual printed signs posted in Windsor Pointe, where I often stole letters and packages. I didn't see these, the most obvious signs of all, until I was in too deep.

When I saw the homemade wanted poster with my description on it, I dropped the last bit of my ToastieCheezers PieWich™.

The poster read:

MAIL THIEF
Unidentified Man/Woman, early 20s
Seen wearing jeans, black hoodie, and ball cap
REWARD for any information which leads to an arrest
Contact the Columbia Police Department, Detective Angela Ford

Shit.

I ripped the poster down and shoved it in my messenger bag. I yanked my hat down low to hide my face, then hid it in my messenger tote. I crouched low behind a life-sized plastic mold of Santa Claus riding an alligator and thought about the wanted poster.

They didn't know much. They didn't know I was a woman. My love for comfortable, formless clothing worked in my favor for once. And they didn't know my name. Early 20s was vague, although true. Really, they didn't know anything except someone was taking mail, which I expected people to figure out weeks ago.

I knew I needed to leave and rethink my strategy. But I still needed rent money, too. I counted the mail in my bag; ten cards, two boxes. My bag was full, but that was probably only a hundred-dollar haul, tops. The posters were everywhere. If I could take some down maybe whoever posted them would be too lazy for another round of canvassing. But I saw at least six signs, and I knew this ritzy neighborhood with its community pool and designated running trails was a monolith.

If this street had signs, they all did.

———

I was making my exit from Windsor Pointe, right by the former model homes that were now the gaudiest residences on the street, right next to the community pool, when something caught my eye. A package sat just outside someone's front door. It was heavy for its size, and its weight shifted awkwardly inside the box. Whoever packed it didn't secure whatever was inside very well. I hoped it wasn't fragile.

The wind shifted and a peppermint oil scent rolled over my awareness.

"Hey, stop!" a middle-aged white guy belted from the end of the driveway. I hadn't seen him approach, but there he stood, legs planted and arms in front of his chest, like he was expecting me to bulldoze him. An athletic asian woman closer to my age sprinted up and joined him. The neon orange puffer vest she wore reminded me of hunting season.

I bolted. I ran away from the driveway, away from the community pool, away from the sign saying: "Thank you for visiting Windsor Pointe!"

It was the wrong direction, but it was also the only way I could go.

I gripped that package under my arm like a football and tore off for the nearest backyard. I heard them following me, barreling into recycling bins. I threw the package over the first fence into an adjoining yard, then scrambled after it. An automated flood light popped on, I kept running. I made it to another fence, threw the box, then I cleared it. That light popped on again, casting long shadows from my back, the vigilantes only seconds behind me. Vigilantes? Maybe community watch. I wondered if they had guns. My side stitched; I hopped the next fence. I landed in peanut butter thick mud, a broken sprinkler head flooded the yard, and I fell down to my hands, but I tore on anyway. I found the package in the mud and yanked it free. The older man yelled at me, cursing and threatening from the other side of the fence. If he could breathe, then he'd stopped running. Stopped chasing me.

But I heard *her* smack into the fence so hard it shook right down the length of it. She cleared it. She was in the same yard as me now, me at the far end, her in that peanut butter mud. I struggled to gain purchase on the white vinyl fence, my hands mud-caked, my clothes and shoes slippery. I heard the sprinkler water slapping her as she ran through it. I cleared the fence. I veered right, to the back of the yard, away from the house. That hound bayed, and I knew it would get me. I extended my legs and arms, willing myself away. Pulling and pushing and praying my way out of that yard. My joints felt dislocated and wide.

My heart sang a warning: *go go gO GO GOGO!!!*

I cleared the fence.

I ran in the woods Windsor Pointe backed against. I kept running until I didn't hear anyone chasing me. She had faded back, just like the older man. The only sounds were my ragged breath and the loblolly pines swaying together in the breeze, sheltering me. My side stitch throbbed. I stopped; leaned over and puked. I rolled around on the earth, holding my side. When I gained my breath I lay on my back and stared up toward the sky. It was much darker here than in Windsor Pointe, and I leaned into the shadows. Still, light glinted on the package.

Even though my hands were wrecked from my escape, I unwrapped it then and there. Might as well see what all the fuss was about. What I could have been shot for. The cardboard box inside was duct taped. I ripped and clawed at it impatiently. Sweat dripped off my nose and dotted the cardboard. I threw the tape behind me and yanked back the lid and

POP!

An effusion of crimson dye erupted from the package into my face. Baking soda assaulted my eyes and rammed up my nostrils. I choked and sputtered. It was on my hands and in my mouth and even in my ears.

That was it. Just a dye bomb. Permanent. Dye. I chucked the box, then saw something was written in sharpie on the bottom of it, a promise from my pursuers:

We will catch you, Mail Thief.

Puppetry

Rose McCormick

Nory was born voiceless. Two hundred and seventeen seconds pounded in her mother's heart. The nurse with the snappy tongue helped Nory find her voice. She stuck a tube in Nory's mouth and sucked stuff out. Another one flicked Nory's foot. Again. Again. Again.

Nory cried out. Then Nory would not stop crying. Maybe Nory cried because she liked proving that she had a voice, or maybe because she knew she would look like a smushed blueberry in her newborn pictures. Nory's dad laughed and called her "little blue," which made Nory's mother get clouds in her eyes. Nory watched those clouds closely and often, but she never saw them rain.

Nory put one foot in front of the other, and she got good at it. "Walk a straight line," Nory's father would say. Once, Nory walked a straight line right onto Daddy's stage, the one splashed with purple and gold lights. Daddy's puppet Monty was taller than her. Nory held up her arms expectantly. Daddy held Monty, so why couldn't Daddy hold Nory? The people laughed. Nory flinched and noticed the people, so Nory cried. Monty said something about Nory, and the people laughed again. Nory kept crying until Daddy snatched her up and pushed her into Mama's arms, away from the people. Then Daddy left and made the people laugh again. In their dusty apartment that night, Daddy's voice hammered at Mama, sounding so different than when he and Monty were talking to the people. Nory cried in the dark, burrowing into Mama's shoes and dresses.

But Nory liked when Daddy made his puppets talk just for her. Monty shouted funny compliments. Rosabella sang off-key. Clayton liked to eat dirt. Roger was old and salty, but he made Nory laugh the most. When Nory liked her first boy, she whispered it to Roger. Roger must've told Daddy. Daddy was mad.

Nory's daddy started calling her his little puppet.

Nory wanted to see her friends and wear mascara, but Dad knew better. Nory didn't want to play soccer or stay home alone at night while Mom worked, but Dad had decided. Dad would lean down and put his hand on Nory's back, saying, "What did I tell you?" Nory the puppet would repeat:

"I'm not smart enough so I need to stay home and study."

"People will see that I'm a bad girl."

"I need to suck it up and stop being a coward."

Then Dad would pat Nory's head like he did to Clayton and take his hand off her back. By the time Nory was grown up enough to say so long, forever to Roger, whose charm had faded as much as his old red bowtie, Nory found that her voice sounded just like his.

Nory put one foot in front of the other. She didn't always walk a straight line. She tried not to speak much, too afraid of hearing a voice that was not hers leaking from within herself. But eventually, Nory started whispering. Whispers turned to tentative murmurs, murmurs to soft short sentences, and sentences to determined little stories, until finally her voice was bursting through her cells, glowing in kaleidoscopic colors and running like a sail on windy sea.

Nory's daughter was born screaming; Nory had never been prouder. She loved that little girl's voice. It kept her young until, one day, she was old.

"I was born without a voice, and I've spoken with someone else's. But I want to die with mine." Nory pushed off the ground with her foot, liberating her stories in tune with the even rhythm of her porch swing. Her young grandson listened with pen in hand and infused the ink with her voice. One day, the little scribe spelled out her last words, as Nory slipped away to be born once again. She took her voice with her, but the boy held onto her echo.