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cul-de-sac

LITERARY & ARTS MAGAZINE



VOL.18

Editor's Note

I was twelve when I found out my father was going to prison for a long time. It was a Saturday. Mom was crying at the kitchen table and somehow, I knew before she said it. Later that semester, my sixth-grade teacher gave us, for the first and only time, a poetry assignment. I'd entirely forgotten about it until years later when I saw a folded piece of paper sticking out of one of my sister's books at the side of her bed. It was the poem. My stomach sank. What was I thinking to write this? What gave me the nerve to share it? It was too honest, too sad, and too hurt. I put it away quickly, wanting to get away from it. I later realized that the previously-blank piece of paper was the only place I could say what was really in my heart; the things I couldn't say out loud to my family, friends, teachers, or priest.

This 18th volume of *cul-de-sac* magazine is similarly composed of previously-blank pieces of paper, now infused with the innermost thoughts and experiences of people you'll likely never meet. It's filled with wonder, fear, hope, despair, longing, and most of all, courage—the kind of courage required of all writers and artists to share our deepest truths. You'll find explorations of rebirth and transformation, musings on coming-of-age and identity, travels through surreal and fantastical worlds, and reflections on challenging family dynamics and dysfunctions. These previously-blank pieces of paper are now filled with human spirit.

It's more a formality that the end of this letter will say Editor-in-Chief. My qualm is with the word Chief. Really, this work was chiefed symbiotically by an entirely random group of student bandits with diverse backgrounds and goals, coming together only to make one thing as beautiful as we could. We argued, debated, stressed, mulled, cheered, and finally celebrated. Thanks to the singular driving force behind this endeavor—our dear Professor Terzian-Zeitounian, who has overseen its completion for the last 18 years. She's the kind of professor you hope to have— one incredibly bright, equally kind, and unceasingly brave. When you finish, I hope you think of her. Because without her constant and graceful leadership, we would not have met any of our deadlines, and the works you're about to experience would be scattered and hidden, instead of held carefully in your hand.

Kevin Camonayan
cul-de-sac, Editor-in-Chief

Acknowledgments

At the start of each class, I set aside a few minutes to share moments of joy we've experienced since we last met. In a world that often feels like it's dragging us down, this small ritual feels more important than ever. This semester, I can say without hesitation that these students were my greatest joy— uplifting me, sustaining me, and giving me real hope for the future. We should all be so fortunate to work with students like these: dedicated, empowered, and unwavering in their commitment to making *cul-de-sac*, volume 18, the very best it could be. I know I say this every year, but I am so proud of them, so in love with volume 18, and so happy to hand you this artifact; I hope you will understand all that it took to get here. As *cul-de-sac* enters its 18th year, we thank you for standing with us and celebrating our talented and inspiring students.

While there are never enough words to thank everyone who makes *cul-de-sac* possible, we want the following people to know how much they mean to us:

- President David Andrus for awarding us the Innovation Grant and for doing so many hard things with grace and poise. We are so grateful for your support.
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- The hundreds of students who were brave enough to submit their work. We sincerely appreciate you.

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Pound Dog

Beck Watson

when i see two things orbiting each other,
i look at you.
i look at you a lot,
winding, weaving, tangling our lives
and limbs together,
comb through your hair and smooth the knots.
think about how to be alone
after this, after you,
and struggle to fathom it.
exist as animal,
move without rhyme,
in instinct and noise,
but dogs can't bark or howl
like i do for you.
bare my teeth, but you bowl me over
and call me puppy,
and now i can't fathom biting anymore
even though my teeth still sit stained
in reason, in excuses, in evidence;
i'll heel for you.
we are two trees leaning on each other,
and we are man and dog,
and we are two bodies,
and you and i
and

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Spell for a Time Traveler

Meghan Tartaglio

From the space between stars bring me the day,
from the warmth of the sun, bring me the embrace of your arms.
May the hours unfold beneath your eyes,
and the moments you seek shine clear and bright.
May the past weave rays of new life into our future,
while the present stands still in the soothing light of morning.

Let the world bend as you step through the years,
and the changes of time bring you no fears.
May the clocks tick with every step you take,
but never outpace the beat of your heart.
Let the ages unfold steadily with your powerful grace,
and the cosmic flowers bloom to reveal our future,
while the present remains a place of solitude.

May your heart be anchored in time with me,
and the worlds we touch never outgrow.
From the emptiness of space and abundance of us,
from the distance and darkness between stars,
and our roots anchored deep in the soil of Earth.

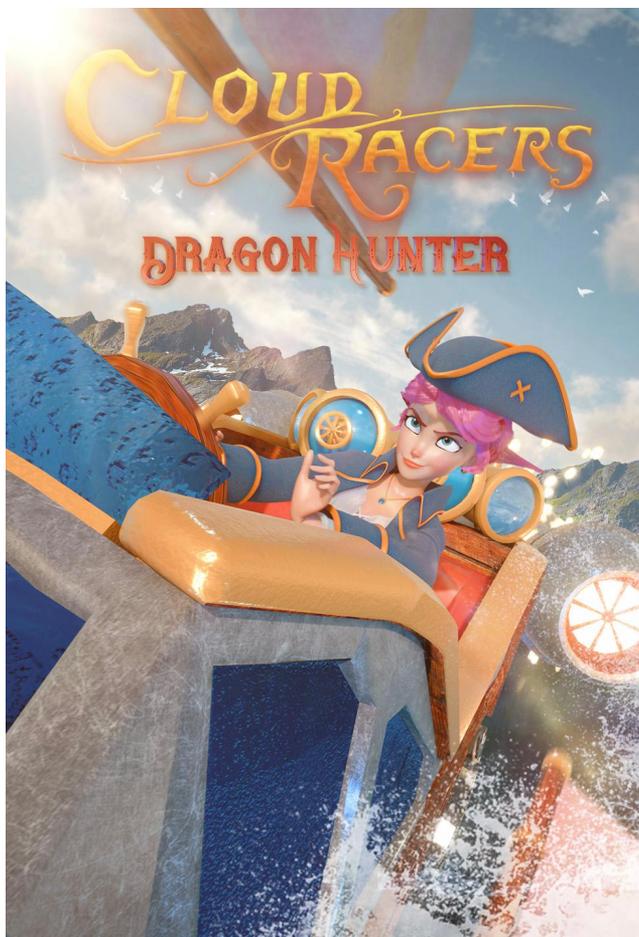
Return to me, shining clear and bright,
I'll change with you, through the sands of time.
Return to me, my moon, as my guiding light
like the heavens and earth finally unified.

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Cloud Racers: Dragon Hunter

Chase Olivera



Scan to Watch



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Breath of Life

Leah Koontz

Verse 1:

A foggy morning day gave way to break of noon,
Through tops of trees and evergreens light rain had fallen through,
The ground broke the weight of a fallen one too soon,
Her companion by her side, cried up to a faint day moon.

Chorus:

“Fill her chest with moss and her heart becomes a well,
Make her bones a riverbed and fill it with a spell,
A bed of flowers lay her down and trees become her knoll,
Breathe air into her lungs and immortalize her soul.”

Verse 2:

Rain beat down on the companion’s face and sent shivers up their spine,
Teardrops mixed with the falling sun, and the howling whine of a windy night
They looked down at their love again and knelt to the ground,
With one hand on the earth they barely made a sound.

Chorus:

“Fill her chest with moss and her heart becomes a well,
Make her bones a riverbed and fill it with a spell,
A bed of flowers lay her down and trees become her knoll,
Breathe air into her lungs and immortalize her soul.”

Verse 3:

The sky began to tremble, a flash of blinding light,
Once shone a day in summer became a winter’s night,
Flowers bloomed unfurling, a meadow just for her,
Her body became a winding trunk of redwood, oak and fir.

Reprise:

Her chest had burst with moss and her heart no longer knell,
Her bones soon a riverbed and a spring of life as well,
The bed of flowers laid her down, her body now the knoll,
All life was through her lungs and immortalized her soul.

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Misty Mountain

Maddoc Monroe



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II

PHOTOGRAPHY

Just Three Besties

Kaylee Guillen



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Understanding Sentimental Hoarding

A Guide to Emotional Decluttering

Renee Gomez-Serna

Introduction

You call yourself a dragon. Your hoard is full of treasures: stuffed animals from your childhood, photos of lost relatives, wilted flowers from Valentine's Day, cards from birthdays and holidays, a collection of buttons you inherited from your late grandmother, notes littered in your ex-best friend's handwriting, and books you read once or twice. It's enough to put Smaug to shame. Yet people deem your collection worthless. *Trash.*

Are you actually a dragon? Or are you merely a sentimental hoarder?

Overview

People often have a tendency to hold on to various items. Be it old receipts and loose mail in a random drawer or keepsakes stored in a box, people may have a hard time parting with their belongings. Even after they've served their purpose. But what happens when it becomes more debilitating to part with these items not so affectionately named *junk*?

What is Sentimental Hoarding?

Sentimental hoarding is one of many types of hoarding characterized by a person's inability to let go of objects that have a deep emotional value to them. This may include photographs, cards, letters, and gifts. Sentimental hoarders may hold onto these belongings as a way of reliving your first dance recital or recalling your Abuela Cuca despite your inability to store them or an impact on your daily life.

Hoarding may be mistaken for sentimental attachment. Sentimental attachment is defined as an emotional bond a person creates with a particular object. The differences between the two terms lies in the difficulty parting with an item. Someone who hoards may struggle to part with old receipts and newspaper clippings, even if the item in question is no longer needed or useful, whereas someone with a sentimental attachment may only struggle with parting from items with deep emotional value such as their boutonniere from their grandmother's funeral.

Causes

The cause of sentimental hoarding is not fully understood. Often, there are patterns that emerge among people who are living with sentimental hoarding. Here are some common indicators that may be responsible for such attachments.

Stress. Sentimental hoarders may often develop these behaviors because of increased stress. These items may be associated with transitioning into your own “big kid” bed and offer some comfort or familiarity during finals season. As the attachment sets in, parting with your baby blankie becomes harder, resulting in an inability to part with it even if it is no longer healthy or beneficial to your day-to-day life.

Loss. One of the most common leading causes of sentimental hoarding is due to some type of loss. In extreme cases, this may develop as a result of Jonathan breaking up with you, losing Hannah as she moved to Colorado, or Grandma Marilyn’s death. Parting with any of her handwritten cards becomes as unbearable as parting from her. A sentimental hoarder may develop an unhealthy attachment to any item that bears her gentle flair (e.g. her silver decorative belt buckle, last voicemail, antique perfume bottles, etc.) simply because they were once hers.

Traumatic Events. Lastly, some traumatic events can result in people developing sentimental hoarding behaviors. These traumatic events may include relocation, loss of financial security, unemployment, natural disasters, and illness or changes in one’s health. These disruptions can cause people to hold onto your great-grandfather’s pocket watch from before he emigrated to the United States or the garden that he grew in order to feed his wife and nine kids after growing up in poverty in Mexico.

Symptoms

Symptoms of sentimental hoarding may include:

- Inability to let go, like when your mother tells you to throw out the wilting roses on your nightstand, but you keep them anyway.
- Extreme emotional distress, like the panic attack when you lose the last clump of fur from your childhood cat, breaking out into sobs before finally hyperventilating until you are nearly dry heaving.
- Unhappiness in relationships because no partner compares to the first love letter from your sixth-grade sweetheart.
- Avoidance in making decisions because you cannot bring yourself to part with the photos of your high school best friend who moved away five years ago.

- Disorganized thinking brought on by over explaining—*porque la última tarjeta que me dio Chuy significa demasiado para tirarla.*
- Inability to lead a healthy life because you refuse to delete the voicemail of your grandparents wishing you a happy birthday over a decade ago.

When to Seek Care

Seek professional help if you begin to notice that sentimental hoarding affects daily life.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Does your clutter prevent you from moving on?
- Do your belongings pose fire or safety hazards?
- Do you have trouble developing new relationships?
- Does your hoarding feel out of control?
- Does someone complain about your belongings?
- Do you feel you need a fresh start?

“Yes” answers could mean your sentimental hoarding might be a problem for you or others.

Treatments

- Acknowledge your emotions— Are you sad? Angry? Hurting?
- Focus on the memories, not the associated items.
- Keep what serves you now instead of her silver bracelet that doesn’t even fit you.
- Create a small memory box.
- Donate or sell items like Grandma Marilyn’s purse you don’t ever use.
- Digitize important memories like your last trip to DTLA.
- Honor memories without holding onto clutter. Abuelo Juan would want you to remember him, not the shirt he used to wear decades ago.
- Let go of guilt. It’s okay to move on.

* * *

Recommended Reading

- Spaulding Decon: The Types of Hoarding
- Clutter Trucker: A Discussion About Types of Hoarding Disorder
- LOVESPACE: Why Can’t I Let Go? The Psychology of Clutter and Hoarding Explained
- FasterCapital: Sentimental Attachment vs Hoarding: Navigating Emotions
- Elevate Counseling: Are You an Emotional Hoarder?

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the eggs are expensive again

Evelina Zubrinskaya

part 1 - the eggs

the billionaires plunge
their faces into raw egg,
yolk up their noses, shell between
their eyelids and eyes, no sight.
the People waltz
on eggshells; they are meant
to be on the floor in soft shards too.
they are said to slobber like dogs,
but there is a musk of the drool
slithering out of the mouths
of whiny men who cry too much.

the dirty rich can afford to cry,
but you only have one fucking egg,
so where do you put it? trade
it for trade school? cull the small
flock of chickens for college? mull
over how many eggs it takes
to go to the military? give it away
to your child? crush
the egg just to see your child?

part 2 - the price

the People are told not to put
all their eggs in one basket, to seize
all opportunities, not to trump
their chances by staying stupid,
by resisting and not investing.

the filthy tell us this. they suck on their thumbs
and use their spit to blur out the faces
of the People printed on the back

of the newspaper, the People they are meant
to serve. they see seeds drifting
in the air and panic, pinch
their noses and turn away.

the People see all this. they grow hot peppers
in their backyards, swish them around in their mouths
and spit them onto boots, not the expected
lick of complacency. rich men love their picket
fences but squeal at picket signs. they think
the People are just the pigs in the factory farm,
but they'll be the ones that are eaten.

they'll pay back, dollar for dollar, the price
of all those damn eggs on our shelves.

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Unavoidable Family Functions and How (Not) to Survive Them

Sulfur Grantz

I watch as the dirt falls over the coffin. Two gravediggers, old men with matching gray beards and more strength than they look like they could possibly have, bring their shovels into the hard dirt and heave them into the hole. Six feet down— they have a lot to cover.

There are only four of us at the funeral. My sister, Maggie, is bundled in a black shawl made of scratchy wool. I know because I've seen it before. It was my mother's. I wanted it when she died, but Maggie had gotten to it first. She didn't care when I told her how much it meant to me. She took it, along with the greater bulk of the inheritance, and disappeared.

Lukas is here too. He and Maggie look alike, almost like twins. They're not— Maggie is older by about ten months— but when we were kids, they'd tell people they were, and everyone believed them. I didn't really think he'd come. The last time I spoke to him was mother's funeral, eight years ago. He was angry. While Maggie took mother's money with glee, Lukas refused to take any of it.

Mother never wrote a will. It was almost a free-for-all when she died. Just the final competition she could make us enter before taking her leave of this world. We were like hungry dogs shoving past each other for food. Maybe it's good that Lukas wanted nothing to do with her after what she'd done. He certainly would have won the scrappy battle for her money, and he never was the generous type.

Lucy— Little Loo, I used to call her, although she's not all that little now— I am happy to see. She was kind to me when we were younger. I was saddened when she left. Even though she's the youngest, she moved out as soon as she could. Maggie was twenty-one at the time. I think she resents Little Loo for leaving before she could.

The old men have stopped digging. They plant their shovels into the ground so their handles are pointing up at the sky, and put their hands on their hips. Their motion is almost completely in sync. I wonder if they're twins, or if they just like people to think that they are, too.

"Why've you stopped?" Maggie asks. Her narrow eyes shoot cruelly toward the men. She's always had the scariest expressions.

“We’re human, ain’t we?” one of the men asks, although it doesn’t sound much like he’s really asking. I’ve always wondered why people do that. Why ask a question you don’t want an answer to? You might accidentally get one you don’t want to hear.

“I haven’t got all day,” Maggie mumbles, “My daughters are at a friend’s house. I have to pick them up by four thirty.”

I don’t like hearing her talk like this. Here, of all places. Now, of all times. I thought she might bring her daughters, my two sweet nieces, so I could finally meet them.

“I have exams to take,” Lukas adds, glancing down at his (father’s) watch, “I ain’t missing them. If we’re not done by three, I’m not staying any later.”

I hate that watch. Lukas kept it after father left, thinking he might come back for it. I laughed and told him he wouldn’t, that he disliked us more than he liked the watch. Lukas pushed me, and I broke the glass coffee table on my way to the ground. I had to clean it up myself.

“We’re almost done,” Loo says. She smiles at the old men. It’s a sweet smile. Her shining brown eyes sparkle like the characters in those funny cartoons. “I’m sorry,” she continues, her voice dripping with sugar like honey on a hot day, “but may we continue?”

The men exchange a glance. For a moment I think they’ll say no, but they sigh instead and pick up their shovels again. I should have known. No one can deny Loo when she uses that voice.

Once more the dirt falls down, down, down. The coffin is almost completely covered. Empty noises echo off the heavy lid as debris tumbles across it. For a long time, that’s the only sound I can hear, aside from the gravediggers’ heavy breathing. My siblings don’t say a word and neither do I. Maggie just looks at the hole with venom in her eyes. Lukas taps his left foot with his hands stuck in his pockets. Every now and then he looks back down at that antique watch, letting out a deeper sigh each time. Lucy, my dear little sister Lucy, stands perfectly still with her hands clasped behind her back. She’s not crying like I expected (hoped?) her to. She’s just there.

“Usually,” one of the old men says between gasps of hair, “families will ... say a few words ... or something.”

Maggie directs her deadly glare back in his direction. I pray that she doesn’t snap at them again. She opens her mouth with the perfect retort in its chamber—

“Usually families are a bit different than ours,” Lukas groans. With the right tone, that small statement could have made my day.

The rolling of his eyes ruins the effect. Still, I'm grateful he stopped Maggie from tearing the old men apart.

"But we are family," Loo whispers. I can hear her. Even when she's at her most careful, I can hear her. I'm paying attention to her always.

Loo clears her throat and speaks up. "I'll say something," she starts, ignoring the irritated sighs of our siblings. "We were never all that close, especially these last few years. We grew up. That's what kids do. But we'll miss you. Yeah. We love you."

The gravediggers give each other another odd look and keep digging.

I want to smile at Lucy. Say thank you. Tell her that, even though I know she didn't mean a single bit of it, I'm grateful for her words.

"I have to go," Lukas says harshly. He's looking at that watch again, not even bothering to hide it this time. "This is going to take too long. There's no point in waiting around when I'm just going to leave early anyway."

"I'm leaving too," Maggie agrees. She wraps the shawl tighter around her shoulders and puts a hand on Lucy's shoulder. "Can you take care of the rest of the paperwork?"

"Take care of the paperwork" is a funny phrase for "pay my respects for me," I think.

"Sure," Little Loo says almost immediately. Like a drone repeating its commands, completely void of free will. Yes, sir, Yes, ma'am. Polite to a fault.

"Thanks," Maggie smiles. It's forced, looks almost painful for her, but she does it.

"Yeah, thanks, Loo," Lukas says as he walks backwards toward the parking lot, "See ya."

Maggie waves at Lukas. She squeezes Lucy's shoulder one last time before leaving herself. Lucy stays still for a bit longer, and I'm grateful I'm not the only one left.

It's like our first day of school together. We scrambled onto the bus and sat down next to one another, Loo was practically on my lap. She was so nervous. I promised her I wouldn't leave her side. I got in trouble afterward for skipping class; no one seemed to care that I did it to stay close to her. And now she's staying by my side.

But then, seconds after Maggie leaves— truly, *seconds*, couldn't even wait a minute fucking longer— she begins to shuffle backward.

"Goodbye, sib," she whispers before turning on her heel and

leaving me behind forever.

The old men shake their heads in unison when everyone is gone (not me). They exchange jokes about weird family (*my* family) funerals. The dirt falls down, down, down.

It takes hours to finish. By the time they're done, the sun has set. I can't hear them declare they're done digging, but I stop feeling the soft droppings of dirt and the loud echoes of their spades being thrust into the ground.

I don't hear them leave. I don't hear the sound that tells me I am now truly, forever, alone.

I'm not expecting flowers anytime soon.

Stress

Sally Rabadi



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Always Lone

Kenya Wynn



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Lonely

Leah Koontz



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skipping child

Evelina Zubrinskaya

i lift myself through the sliver
of night that bounces on its feet
impatiently, waiting for its friend,
the witching hour, to seamlessly slip
by. it smells like early morning
walks with an angel on my shoulder,
the smell of the branches and sticks

that yawn along with me. the air sounds
like my sigh; the North Star doesn't guide

me like it used to, not like headlights
do now. i used to jump over cracks
in the sidewalk when walking
was a game. now i only look for smooth
ground, because any bump
may dismantle me— the loose
pile of string that could have been a knot.

i love to skip my body
like a rock and watch it
sink the way boots struggle in the mud.
each year i thought i'd be under
it by the next, yet the air pinches me hard,

so i cry, to open up my lungs,
because i was born a little
too quiet, and there is yelling
to be done soon.

i want salt water in my mouth, but the sky
rests her head in her arms, and i have to be
strong in front of someone. i lift my hand
just enough so she can see my fingertips,

and it smells like i am crunching the leaves
again. i was told babies die one day

but the headlights will whine
just a little bit longer before we flip
over the curb, before
the trees are green again.

◀ Go to p. 62

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Dearest Epiphanies

Alexa Gabrielle Empleo

One of the most astonishing aspects of music is that regardless of its language, it *always* possesses the absolute power of transformation.

As the winter bled into the spring of my nineteenth year, I found myself curled into a ball of tears amidst a particularly picturesque sunset. I had escaped into the tiny balcony of my apartment, the fresh air doing nothing to alleviate the pain in my chest. As my body heaved heavy sobs, I grabbed my phone, played “Epiphany” by BTS, and put it on repeat, hoping to deepen my melancholy. I discovered the devastatingly beautiful song when I was knee-deep into the band’s discography; its appallingly simple message of loving yourself resonated deeply with me.

The chorus, mercifully, held a few lyrics in English. *I’m the one I should love*, Jin, the eldest member, sang, and it was during those scarce yet repetitive words that the realization finally dawned on me. I gasped, baffled at how I couldn’t discern such a sensible idea after living through the torment of everyday life with an unexplainable weight on my shoulders.

I was *depressed*.

Lifting my head, I looked out at the twilight and let myself breathe deeply. If I had been any wiser, any braver, I would have grasped the despairing truth that I didn’t love myself.

I immediately thought of the probable causes for such an anomaly. The pandemic, of course, had stripped away so much of our autonomy. There were the college rejections, which I disbelievably excused as “redirections”. Lastly, there was the frightening fact that I was on the precipice of adulthood, a journey none of us are ever prepared for.

But as I listed every reason, I found none mattered because they were all beyond my control. What mattered was fear. The fear of how easy it was to smile and exude happiness despite the darkness I may be confined in forever.

I was *depressed*.

I’m the one I should love in this world, Jin reiterated. The following Korean lyrics were as captivating to hear, if not more so, than

the English ones. 좀 부족해도 너무 아름다운 걸, he sang, and it was then I finally decided to look up the complete translation, something I'd put off simply because I'd been content with not knowing.

Not so perfect, but so beautiful, is what he had said of himself. And though that song had other transformative non-English lyrics, that one line struck something deep within me. It was a tiny sliver of hope, a chance to change and learn to love myself.

An opportunity to be *reborn*.

I'd like to say that after that miraculous epiphany, I stood up tall and shed the depression before turning off my phone and smiling, appreciating the gorgeous sky before me. That it was *that* easy and painless to do.

Instead, I continued to cry, hugging myself because no one else would. I let my heart break and bleed, mourning the inner child I'd gradually lost over those months. I wouldn't stand until the night completely fell, and even then, as spring blossomed fully that year, it would take another whole cycle for me to heal the majority of the fragments that damaged my soul.

Still, there was no denying that I was renewed. And that it took a single song that wasn't even wholly in my language for me to be so. After all, music always possessed the absolute power of transformation, regardless of its language. And humans, despite continuously being subjected to hopeless predicaments, have a larger capacity for resilience than they think.

Side A



Clayton McCutcheon is a visual arts major at COC, and he is also a singer/songwriter. He is inspired by artists like Elliott Smith and earlier artists from the 60's and 70's such as Donovan, Love, Nick Drake, and Cat Stevens. His music featured on "Here" is acoustic but also incorporates electronic elements and is inspired by artists like Brian Eno...He is currently working on a new album slated for release in 2025.

Jacobi Brown: "I'm an English major focusing on creative writing. My music most often leans towards a down-tempo contemplative ambient feel, though I sometimes experiment with higher-intensity stuff. I most enjoy producing ambient-style non-lyrical music that incorporates non-music sounds like birds chirping or waves crashing to make for a kind of simple but engaging soundscape. I'm still very much an amateur, though!"



Pamela Rosenblum: "I am a music education major. 'A Star Away' captures the yearning to be close to someone and pushing through barriers to spend time with them. My favorite pieces to compose are instrumental with clear harmony and individual voices merging together into something magnificent."

Scan to Listen

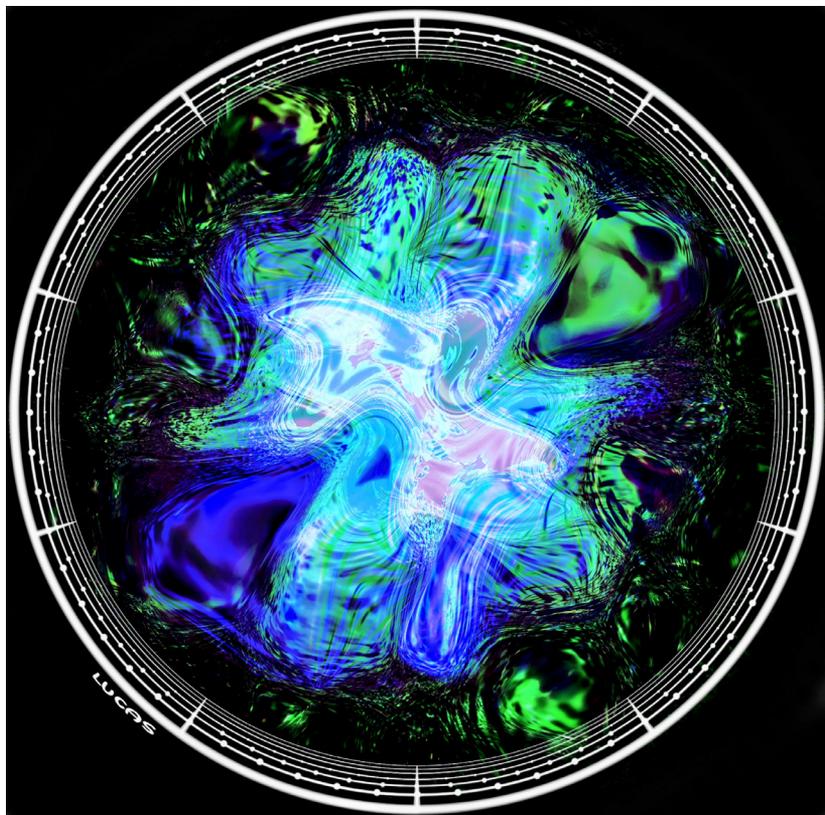


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Ethereal Habitat

Scott Davis

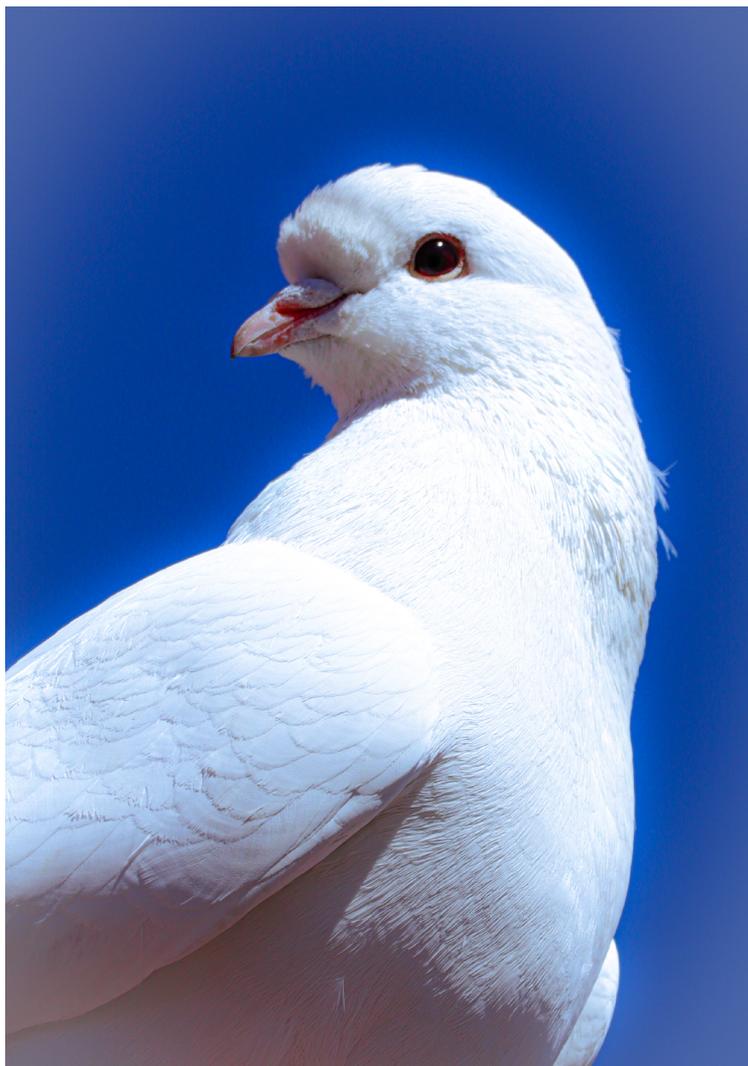


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Dreamy Dove

Amber Cassandro



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Idol Hands

Mark Micchio



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Ralphie Eats Crow

Scarlett Rae Dougherty

The man's hands have shed blood.
His knuckles know what it is to be gnarled
over a missile; his brain knows what it means
to calculate the coordinates that ensure
an entire village's decimation.

My grandpa was sweetened like iced tea
by his old age, but remained infinitely mournful.
My memories of him begin and end with butter
rum Lifesavers and twenty dollars
in my tiny hand, or with a seat
on his lap, begging
for another Tic-Tac, as he sips
Bud Light and the fizz catches
in his mustache.

It always seemed like he was still beneath ocean
waves, surfacing only
after he would see the lurid jungles
of Vietnam on TV. He would be overcome
in spite of himself. "I killed hundreds
of kids just like you. Hundreds of little families.
I did that. It wasn't right. Just wasn't right."
His sobs still echo somewhere in the vaulted
ceiling of the house he died in.

When he was dying, he knew it
was karma for the blood
he spilled for Uncle Sam. It was some virus
he picked up when he drank the water
in 'Nam. Delirious, he turned
his head to us and said:

"I own a piece of land somewhere
in the Yukon the size of a postage stamp."

I've spent my whole life imagining this small centimeter of snow.
It'll probably be the last thing I think of before I die, too.
Years later, my mother finds a framed sketch
of him hidden in his closet, signed
by his co-workers. His face is miserable,
eyes bulging wildly with a black
crow looming out of his cartoonish mouth.
He's frozen forever
between swallowing or releasing it.

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No Closure

Tanner Ford

In the middle of an otherwise uneventful summer, I attended a friend's graduation party. My fiancée, Scarlett and I kept to ourselves. We didn't really recognize anyone, but someone remembered me. This isn't abnormal; my reputation seems to always precede me. While I was in the bathroom, Scarlett was waiting outside and someone took a chance and approached her. He introduced himself as Bradley, trying to charm her with small talk and a flirtatious demeanor before asking, "How do you know Grace?"

"Oh, I'm her best friend's girlfriend."

"Who would that be?"

"Tanner Ford."

At the mention of my name, Scarlett told me his face dropped, his bravado wavering as he walked away from her without saying a word. It wasn't uncommon to get this reaction from people; I just figured everyone had forgotten about what I had done. When I returned, Scarlett relayed the awkward encounter and all I could do was laugh. She also reminded me that he was a former drug dealer at our high school who had a degree of notoriety.

The rest of the night, I was too curious to let it go. When I eventually approached him, he radiated skittishness. It reminded me of a spooked horse. To calm him down, I told him something to the effect of, "It's okay, I don't even remember you." That small statement worked wonders. Even despite the crowd of people and the mingling, I had to ask, "What did you deal mostly? And when?"

"I dealt a little of everything. Mostly weed though," he said uncomfortably.

For some reason, that answer pissed me off. "A little of everything but mostly weed? That isn't really a little of everything." *I* dealt a little of everything. *You* sold oregano to teenagers. I decided not to voice these thoughts; it was actually unfounded at the time, but I could just feel it.

As the night went on, he regaled the crowd with tales of his new small-fry horror movie, *Sprinkles*, and how his crew wasn't shooting due to the SAG-AFTRA strike, claiming he didn't want to cross picket lines— not because his crew was on strike but in *solidarity*. It was hard not to laugh at his pretentiousness. I pegged him as a faker,

a pretender early on, but the big film producer persona for an amateur film sealed it. Scarlett would later tell me he was the biggest dealer at our school before I came along, but he mostly just sold oregano. Hell, he even sold me oregano, but I had forgotten. She confirmed my suspicions, but he wilted at the mention of my name.

That encounter would linger in my mind, making me realize how hazy my memory was. It's cliché, but the closest approximation I could think of is dissociative amnesia or maybe brain damage—but more likely, I was simply fried from benzodiazepines and other “pharmaceuticals”. That fact alone has made finding any kind of resolution difficult. I could tell these stories myself, but I'm not sure how complete they'd be. I'd have to reach out to the people who lived through it with me and hope I'd gain some clarity. Nearly a year later, I finally worked up the courage and started searching for answers.

* * *

Ivy was my girlfriend through most of high school. We met our sophomore year and shared our first kiss drunk in a park while she was still dating someone else. She was there when I started using drugs and when I began to find creative ways of getting them.

“Before you knew me did you do drugs?” I asked.

“Yep. During my freshman year, I started doing Oxy occasionally. Got into smoking weed and some drinking.”

Thinking about it now, she always had a way to get Oxycotin. I don't even know how, but she'd always conjure up a pill bottle filled to the brim. They always had different people's names on them. I'd ask who and how, and she'd give me a story about a sick family friend or a distant relative who broke their leg. We spent so many days just nodding off, arm in arm. Time would escape us, and the world would fade away. I asked her if she remembered that phase of our lives well. I was met with “umms” and “uhhs”. I told her to forget it; she obviously couldn't remember the finer details.

“Do you have any memories that stand out from around then? Good or bad?” I probed.

She sent me a plethora of images, ranging from old photos of me sleeping with my cat in my arms, him so young his coat hadn't come in yet, to photos of our senior prom, unknowingly sitting next to my future fiancée, along with a murky out of focus Polaroid of Ivy sitting in a chair looking off into space. She always said it was her favorite photo of herself. I hadn't seen a lot of these photos before. I wondered if she could actually recall any good times or if the photos

were all that were left.

“Bad time would be when Anna’s mom OD’d.” she continued.

Hearing this sent a shiver down my spine and pulled me out of the Polaroids. I didn’t want to forget it, but I didn’t want to remember it, either.

“When I gave her that sheet, I told her to be careful. It was strong shit. She even assured me I shouldn’t worry. No one even knew what Fentanyl was back then,” I recounted. Even remembering just that small piece of it brought it all back to me. I had acquired Fentanyl gel tabs; they cost me virtually nothing and were worth easily a thousand dollars. I would have made that much if I hadn’t taken a quarter of the sheet for myself already. I ended up using the money I did actually make to build a computer. As I finished plugging it in, I decided it was time to celebrate with half a pill of ecstasy. As soon as I started to feel it, I got a phone call from Anna, who was crying and screaming.

“What did you do!? What is this? What did you give my mom?!” she screamed.

“What do you mean? What happened?!” My stomach dropped.

“My mom’s in the ER, she almost fucking died!” The weight of her words hit me like a freight train.

“How many did she take?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Fuck. Keep me updated. If there’s anything I can do to help, let me know.”

“I don’t want your fucking help. Stay the fuck away from me,” she snapped.

Her mom would end up recovering. As this memory resurfaced, Ivy said, “You called me. You were completely hysterical and talked to me about never selling again.”

I replied, “Sometimes Anna would call just to yell. I’d say I was sorry, and eventually she’d calm down and talk. She and her mother are both homeless now. I tried really hard to help her out of that hole, but in the end, she refused.” I knew I shouldn’t tell Ivy this, but I felt compelled to.

All Ivy said in return was a bitter “Fuck. That’s awful.” Now I feel bad that I even told her to begin with. Scarlett would always talk about how in high school people thought I had killed people; some even thought I had murdered someone. It was always hard to pinpoint hearsay and where it started, but I can say with a strong degree of certainty it came from this overdose. I was open about how much I regretted this moment, and it got twisted into its worst interpretation.

At the time no one even knew what Fentanyl was. Today, Fentanyl dealers can get charged with murder. Although I hadn't pulled a trigger or made sure someone died, isn't perpetuating someone's addiction spiral just as bad?

* * *

Towards the end of my relationship with Ivy, I would drift into another group. I can't remember how we all met, but it was an absurd mash of gang members, stoners, and psychonauts. We'd all come together in a now million-dollar property in a silent and serene suburb. Inside, on a daily basis, it was unbridled chaos. At the time, Josh was my best friend and one of my most avid customers. He would try just about anything I gave him; he really didn't care what it was. Before I messaged him, I hadn't talked to him in years, and he was incredibly hard to find. He always seemed to get caught or end up in the unluckiest situation possible whether it be rehab or multiple DUIs. Josh was like walking proof of Murphy's Law— if anything could go wrong, it would happen to him, but at his core, he was a good guy.

"I've been writing about when we used to do drugs. I hardly remember any of it," I opened.

"I feel you, I don't remember alotta shit, but sometimes someone brings something up, and I'll remember like 'oh yeah!'"

"I never understood your motivations at the time. I never really asked, but was there a lot of bullshit at home when you were smoking and getting fucked up?" I asked.

"I thought about that shit too. I think some of what led me down that road was family drama. Also, since I'm a Christian, I think that good and evil forces influence people. I think psychedelics and amphetamines specifically open the door to a spiritual realm that isn't meant to be introduced. That's why I stopped doing psychedelics. We were all doing hardcore drugs at a pretty young age; it's a trip to think we were doing Fent in high school, and nobody knew what it was back then. We were like the test subjects!"

"I always felt horrible about all that. You guys really weren't as hardcore as I was before we all linked up, and I felt terrible about it. I might be mistaken, but you guys just smoked weed mostly before I learned how to get all that stuff," I admit.

"At least for me I think I was already headed down that path, and I had to see for myself and get sober to realize that it wasn't worth it. I don't even think that way, like that you introduced it to all of us. I never tripped about that."

Headed down that path or not, it wouldn't have happened without me. There was no one else who could do what I did. Without my technical skill, none of this would have happened. My skill set wasn't unique, but how I chose to utilize it was. Do you know what a PGP key is? Do you know how to identify a scam? Or how about the intuition to know if something will arrive in the mail without being confiscated? I don't even know how I knew these things. It's an intuition, a sixth sense; it's elusive and indescribable. Despite that I would always desperately try to pass it on. I'd give them a crash course in proper security, how to use Silk Road clones, and how to buy cryptocurrency. I would tell them, "My scope is limited. You could have an empire, just make sure you profit off me too."

Every time anyone I taught would do it themselves, it would never arrive. I didn't want to be the guy who could get anything for anyone. I hated being the middleman. But I needed a middleman too, and no one else could do it.

To refute Josh's statement, I tell him about Anna, her mother, and all the hardship they faced. He said, "Damn bro that's kinda bad. I guess things just kinda go like that sometimes. At least she didn't die though."

That line sticks with me— *at least she didn't die though*— as if that was the bar. I know I've heard it so many times before. It's a tally used by generals and insurance adjusters alike, a grim statistical analysis to determine the damage without qualifying the pain of survival. It infuriates me when it's applied, reducing tragedies to mere numbers, and knowing it's being applied to me is damning. Trying to keep the conversation afloat I say,

"Have you talked to Gunner lately?"

"Yeah, I was talking to Gunner earlier today. He does a lot of DJ stuff. We still joke around on Instagram, but I don't think I'd kick it with him. Not because there's bad blood but just because I kinda lost trust in him after that shit that went down. I know he doesn't bang Newhall anymore."

Gunner and his brother, Isaac were the occupants of the house we would hang out in. Gunner was the youngest of us and was built to fight. He was stocky with a lot of weight on him but not enough to encumber him physically. He knew how to use it to his advantage. He would gangbang down the street from his house, doing what? I never cared to know. Everyone in our group was a little afraid of him. Sometimes he and Isaac would beat each other bloody over meth. We'd just watch, awe struck in silence, looking around like someone had told

an off-color joke.

“Do you remember the fight Gunner and I had?” I probe.

“I remember that night, actually. I had half the fight on video, but the phone was on broke. Honestly, I remember you didn’t wanna fight, but he kept trying to fight you, and you were yelling, ‘Are you done? but he just kept on going.’”

I take a moment to consider this. “I realized later that I shouldn’t be fighting unless I needed to defend myself. I have real anger when I fight, and it’s disgusting.”

“Yeah bro, honestly, I’ve seen a few fights since then, but that was the most brutal fight I’ve seen in person. It’s crazy he survived that. I remember when he smacked his head; it sounded like a bowling ball hitting the basketball court.”

I can still hear that sound. Gunner had practically begged me to fight him. He knew I spent several years training fighting skills under a mentor, and he wanted to conquer me; he’d never been in a fight he’d lost. I was a fighter in theory, not in practice. I’d spent years training and learning different ways to fight, but I’d never put it into practice. I wasn’t supposed to. Eventually, Gunner wore me down, and in resignation, I said we could fight.

We were in a park under the moonlight. He was a little tipsy, and I figured we’d throw a few punches and call it. One member of his gang was there with two girls and apparently so was Josh. I told Gunner if I tapped out, he’d win. It would be over regardless of whether I was still standing or bloodied on the floor. It didn’t go that way. We fought a bit and exchanged blows. I hit him in the jaw; he fell to the floor and hit his head on the concrete. I called it there, then got up to help him up, asking if he was okay.

“I’m not done,” he roared.

He was bleeding from his head. I told him that I wasn’t going to fight him. He persisted, hitting me in the face.

“Don’t make me do this. It’s over; you need to stop,” I screamed.

He struck me again and again. I couldn’t stop myself anymore and was pushed past a point of no return. It was a disgusting thing to be sure.

Suddenly, I break out of my memory and say, “He took steel toes to the head, you know.”

“Steel toes? That’s insane. His head was squishy for a month or two after. I remember you yelling, ‘stop, stop,’ but he just kept coming. Looking back, I was surprised that his homies just stood back. I knew

the other dude at the table with us, and I remember there were a couple of chicks there, and they told his friend to step in, and he just said, ‘Nah, I’m good.’”

“It was really ugly. I think if that guy stepped in to back Gunner, it would have gotten even uglier. I’m pretty sure I told him if it became two on one, all bets were off. That’s when I carried that big knife on me too.”

He wouldn’t stop fighting till he was unconscious. I kept begging him to stop. I helped carry him home, and all the while, he was mumbling about how he’d get me back. Blood spilled from his nose and mouth, and I’d never seen anything like it. It was a total shit show. When we got to his house, I told his brother to keep watch over him. Severely concussed doesn’t even begin to cover the state he was in. I was in another room nearly crying through the blood on my knuckles. While I was talking to someone else, he’d reanimate and lunge at me. We’d exchanged more blows before his brother finally stepped in to peel him off me. When I left, I never returned.

For years, he would text me, and if he saw me around, he’d say I was running from him. If I chose not to fight, he’d call me a coward. The last time I saw him was when I delivered DoorDash to his girlfriend almost five years later. He came out front and gave me a hug. He said, “We were stupid kids. I just DJ now.”

I asked to interview him, but he had a show to play and couldn’t make the time for it. It was just as well.

* * *

I used to think if I interrogated the past hard enough, I’d find some meaning. Maybe I’d have a breakthrough or finally understand who I am after all this. But the truth is that it was all short-sighted. I made a monumental error in judgment. I assumed that if I could come out on the other side, everyone else would too. Maybe that was dumb luck. Maybe it wasn’t even that. But even dumb luck can cost you. There’s no clear ending; I didn’t make things right; I didn’t fix anything. I’m just here now. I’m sober, diluted and a rough sketch of who I used to be, trying to live with the damage I did.

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Putridus

Skye O'Connor



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Fading Memory

Connor Gilbertson



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River

Scott Davis



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By the Lake, She Called to Me

Anastasia Boog

I found her still by water's edge that day,
A shadow curled against the silver tide.
The world was calm— before it fell away.

Her amber eyes held stories lost in gray,
A ghost beneath the reeds, she would not hide.
I found her still by water's edge that day.

She followed close, though winter begged her stay,
Through brittle reeds and wind that cut my side.
The world was calm— before it fell away.

Through nights of fire and sirens' wailing fray,
She stirred within— her body split, untied.
I found her still by water's edge that day.

The waves grew wild, the sky a muted fray,
Her breath like smoke, a hush that rides the tide.
The world was calm— before it fell away.

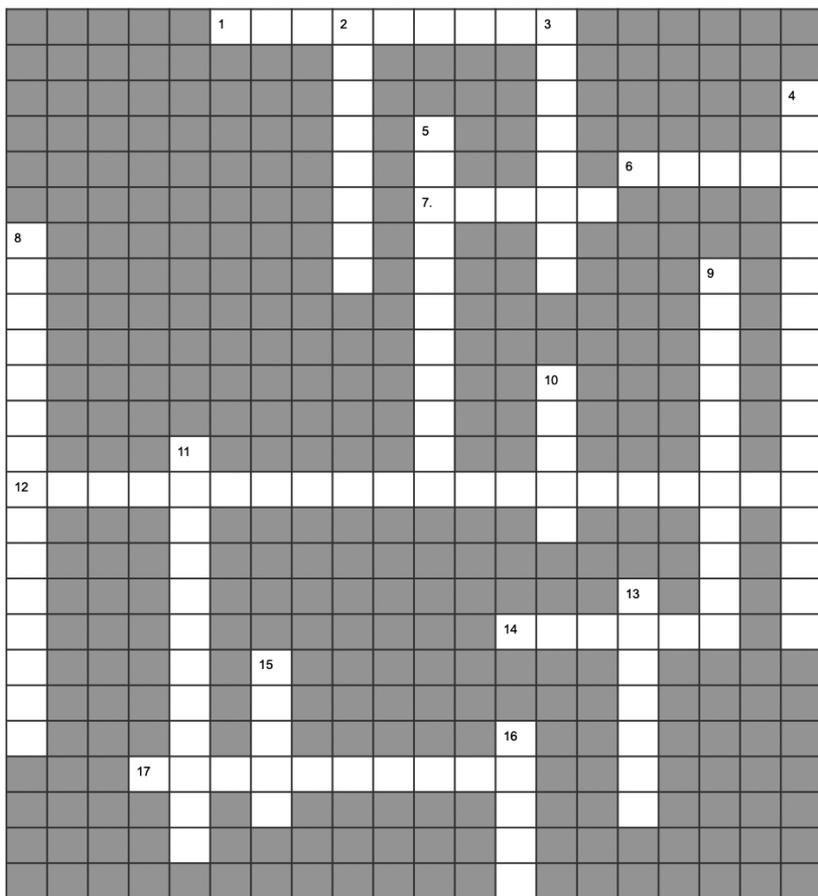
And now, beneath the storm's relentless sway,
She births the tide, and I am caught inside.
I found her still by water's edge that day—
The world was calm— before it fell away.

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Guardalo, Mija

Renee Gomez-Serna



Across

1. The iconic bedding found in every Latino household. Thick acrylic polyester cobijas characterized by their various embroidered patterns ranging from brown monochromatic tigres, paleta-colored rosas, or La Virgencita. Named after Jesus Rivera Franco's neighborhood in Aguascalientes, MX. ____ _____ blankets soon went out of business in 2004 after the market was flooded with knock-offs that spawned more contemporary designs like Hello Kitty and Winnie the Pooh. My sister and I cherished our knock-off blankets. Hers, a gaudy bubblegum pink Barbie blanket, haloed by pastel gumdrops. And mine, a blue and teal cross-stitched cobija of Roo playing atop Tigger's back across an orange background dotted with red grid lines.

6. Vocal and/or instrumental sounds combined in such a way as to produce beauty of form, harmony, and expression of emotion. Injected deep into my blood, rejuvenating even the most weary of muscles into rhythm. *Nuestra sangre*. _____ is such a vital part of Latino culture through the ability to express our identity, preserve history, and celebrate community through various genres como mariachi, bachata, y baladas.

7. A group of people in the indigenous Zapotec cultures of Oaxaca, Mexico who are often referred to as a third gender. People who were assigned male at birth but identify as a third gender, dressing and behaving in a feminine way. _____ reject labels of male and female. Though celebrated in our culture, my family still doesn't understand the concept of being non-binary, demanding my identity fit into straightforward, easily defined boxes. Female. Cisgender. Straight. Simple. *Mejor una hija muerta que un maricón*. Popularized with the recent Netflix limited series, *El Secreto Del Río*.

12. "____ _ _____. Si no sana hoy, sanará mañana." The purest (and cheapest) remedy for a variety of childish ailments. Scraped knee? Rolled out of bed? Fingers caught in the door jamb? *Ay, mi nena*. The gentlest phrase whispered. *Mi abuelita me lo dijo por primera vez después de que mi gemela me mordió*. Years later, I whispered it in return to my sister after I (accidentally) smacked her head against the bed rail.

14. The Queen of Tejano Music. Her death shook the world, breaking the hearts of millions of people worldwide. Since her 1997 biographical film, “Dreaming of You” signals an ocean of tears as her fans, new and old, mourn what could have been.

17. A variety of traditional Mexican folk dances that incorporate ballet characteristics such as choreography, exaggerated movements, pointed toes, and stomps. Though each state has its own different style, the most iconic are from my home state. In Jalisco, the dresses are made in a ranchero style with brightly colored fabrics and Indigenous-influenced ribbons that are braided into hair. I was five when my abuela bought me my first vestido. It was a simple white off the shoulder dress with green and red ribbons sewn into each layer at the bottom of the skirt in alternating order. My second dress, gifted shortly before puberty, was a hand-me-down from my cousin. It was my first proper two-piece dress, the color of sunshine. I wore it obsessively until the garment choked at my shoulders, screaming at the seams as I stood, a reflection of Jesus on the crucifix.

Down

2. A supernatural belief that a malevolent look can cause misfortune, sickness, or even death. Remedies include rubbing an egg across the body of the afflicted or a ritual sweep performed by a curandero. Best known for its protective amulet— a blue circular bead with an ice blue eye painted across its smoothed surface. Popularized by leeches for its aesthetic, though I secretly relish seeing my culture seep into the general market like this. Even my white stepfather has one pooled in the center console of his Honda Civic. A gift from his eldest daughter.

3. A type of wide-brimmed Mexican men’s hat used to shield the face and eyes from the sun. Often considered a symbol of Mexican laborers, forever reminding me of my great-grandfather. His scent still lingers across the frayed threads, mingled with sweat and yard clippings under a thick caking of dust from the 32 years since his passing.

4. The late legendary Mexican mariachi singer known as “Chente” y “El Rey.” A well-documented homophobe, cheater, womanizer. As a child, I thought he was my abuela’s husband. Our apartment was littered with his likeness— cassettes stacked beside the stereo like Jenga pieces that threaten to topple over when we ran down the hall, his face posterred

on the dining room wall from a Jack Daniels ad, his name glued to her lips in the girlish chant of “mi Chente, mi Chente.” Though they never met, he shares her heart with Barack Obama.

5. The Spanish name of the bitter herb and ripe apple scented flower commonly associated with Day of the Dead. Scientific name: *tagetes erecta*. Every October, we bring the paper replicas out from storage, carefully reopening each bud until they bloom again. Vases of mini sunsets that line the mantle in their orangey glow.

8. The holiday our ancestors can come home. Their photos are encased in black frames, illuminated with the warmth of paper marigolds and candles.

- * **October 28:** The first candle is lit. A white flower is placed to receive the lone souls.
- * **October 29:** Another candle is lit. A glass of water is placed at the altar dedicated to the deceased, forgotten, and helpless.
- * **October 30:** A third candle is lit. I place the mug he never got to receive. It has the word “abuelo” painted in orange letters. White bread accompanies it for the deceased who left without eating.
- * **October 31:** A new candle is lit, another glass of water, another slice of white bread. Pieces of fruit are placed. This is for the ancestors. For the great-grandparents and the great-great-grandparents.
- * **November 1:** The day the little angels arrive, the souls of those who died as children. My cousin Maria visits. She would have been 35 this year.
- * **November 2:** The souls of the deceased adults come to collect and eat the offerings left for them at the altar. He can't come to visit this year. According to tradition, the first year spent grieving prohibits his first visit. But I still feel his warmth as the candles flicker. *He's home.*
- * **November 3:** The last white candle is lit. We say goodbye to the souls of our loved ones and ask them to return the following year. Though the altar is supposed to be taken down, it stays. Much like the warmth of being tucked under his arm, burrowing into his armpit.

9. A religious and social event that symbolizes a girl's transition from childhood to adulthood. On December 12th, 2012, we became women. We had a triple celebration for the three of us. The recreation hall was decorated in shades of cerulean, watermelon, and lavender. Identical floor length dresses with matching chambelanes. The first time I wore my mother's wedding jewelry and tiara, I looked and felt like a true princessa. The day my stepdad, Dennis, stepped up and led three father-daughter dances with his youngest daughters and his niece.

10. A major component in Mexican cuisine. Commonly referred to as "prickly pear cactus" in English. To prepare, first begin by cutting $\frac{1}{4}$ of an inch around the edge until reaching the part of the paddle where it once connected back to the plant. Trim off excess. Note, feel free to handle with tongs to avoid pricking yourself. Lastly, take a knife, keeping it perpendicular to the cactus paddle, and scrape *against it*. Flip and do the same thing to the other side.

11. A popular tradition amongst Latin Americans of gifting newborns gold jewelry engraved with their name or initials. Direct translation: "gold slave." Shortly after I was born, my mom tacked these gold birth bracelets onto our wrists, aiding her endeavor in differentiating which twin was which. I still have mine tucked away in my jewelry box along with my gold medalla of La Virgen.

13. Personal ornaments, such as necklaces, earrings, or bracelets, that are typically made from/or contain jewels and precious metals.

My abuela always brought back _____ as gifts for her granddaughters. After her most recent visit to Mexico, she brought back a gallon size Ziplock bag full of matching sets. The dining room table sparkled with jewels— turquoise, brown onyx, obsidian, moonstone, and blue calcite— all wrapped in white paper napkins for the journey home. Each set was hand-picked por una de sus nietas. I was gifted the brown onyx set. My abuela unfolded the napkin with her calcified-rich fingertips, placing the wadded-up gift in my palm before closing my fingers. "*Guárdalo, hija. Para que digas, 'mi abuela me dio esto.'*" I promised to cherish them forever and keep them safe as she had brought them here from Mexico. With the weight of them in my hand, I tucked them away into my purse for safekeeping, along with a matching blue calcite set for my sister.

After three days, my aunt called with terrible news. Someone had mistakenly thrown the remaining six sets away. In their defense, they had remained wrapped in their napkin cocoons, akin to a balled-up tissue. She never emotionally recovered from the loss. Even after knowing that three of the eight sets had been secured. Two tucked away in my purse, safe in their napkin shells. A third that my aunt stashed away like gold in a separate armoire for fear that their very fate might be unknowingly donated to rats in the downstairs dumpster. To this day, I wear them with pride for my grandmother and her homeland.

15. The holy grail of all Mexican remedies. Paired with sopa, Sprite, and cardboard excuses for crackers for the best home remedy. Mamas everywhere slather their children in thick globs of this ointment, across our chests, the soles of our feet, and upper lips. My cupid's bow was filled with this salve every winter night until I was an adult. Affectionately nicknamed *vaporu*.

16. My family name. Or, more appropriately, my Tia Mary's family name. Spermdonor never knew his sperm donor, repeating the cycle of absent men masquerading as a poor excuse of a father. The surname belonging to a ghost, a cover story for the professional Mexican whore who became pregnant with the man who used to be *my papi*. The illusion of a man whose features I might be wearing. The name that I resent for its falsehood when all I've wanted was a family name I could belong to.

The Lie

After Weep O Mine Eyes, John Bennet

Pamela Rosenblum

Her gaze drifts past mourning mist,
compulsions coax her back
to tides long washed away.
Cease not...waters lap

against veiled lumps of moss.
Wedges tear off, slip into soft currents,
eddies cradling fragments of—
Alas, weep not...she winces,

nothing her angel speaks of could change
the calling spring tides, the knell
brushing against the bank where she—
Oh when...when will it be satiated?

She lays unstirring, wings buoyant,
gentle spirit fervently pulling on her thread,
consciousness woven in two worlds.
Alas, weep not...she sinks, she's free.

◀ Go to p. 24

Go to p. 42 ▶

The Soul Behind the Face

Olivia Lewis



◀ Go to p. 23

Go to p. 32 ▶

Oh My Stars, You Undo Me

Clayton McCutcheon



◀ Go to p. 27

Go to p. 57 ▶

Present Portals

Clayton McCutcheon



◀ Go to p. 18

Go to p. 67 ▶

Vore

Skye O'Connor



◀ Go to p. 43

Go to p. 98 ▶

On Our Backs, On Our Knees

Scarlett Rae Dougherty

At the beginning of everything, I was diagnosed with constant UTIs. The gravelly and painful feeling they caused was seared into my brain at an early age. There wasn't anything that could really be done about them other than my parents taking me to the bathroom more frequently as I downed antibiotic after antibiotic alongside a medication that turned my urine to a deep sunset orange. As a child it was funny more than anything else, a good excuse to miss school. Over time though, the UTIs lessened (but never fully went away) as a new problem took their place. When I started having my period, I was prone to heavy and painful cycles, bleeding on average about twelve days out of the month. Of course, at the tender age of fourteen, I was too nervous or embarrassed to consult anyone, let alone the stuffy man who was my pediatrician. He smelled of the wooden popsicle sticks used to look in patients throats and, to be crudely frank, smelled as though a cup of coffee and a cigarette had been wooing, courting, and eventually fucking somewhere deep within the confines of his mouth.

Asking him about something as personal as a period made me self-conscious. Should you even ask a pediatrician about your period? Isn't that out of their wheelhouse? Pediatricians are usually concerned with colds, ear infections, and generally, probably, don't deal with many patients who need gynecological help. And my parents, most especially my mother, would never stoop to bring me to a gynecologist at that age. I can still remember the nights I spent curled up on my cold bathroom floor, feeling as though my insides were being scraped apart by a dull and rusty knife. My mother assured me it was normal, that all women were relegated to pain of this level on their periods. I decided to consult my friend from gym class. She remarked to me coolly that she had never had cramps, that her periods lasted three days and were always there and gone without much notice on her part. I wondered then, if what I was experiencing was normal as other girls around us agreed with her. I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me to know that other girls barely registered their periods. I knew that a heavy flow at the very least must be normal, as I had once consulted the box of super tampons my mother kept on her bathroom counter. They looked almost comical to my young eyes, thick and short like those miniature pretzel dogs you can get at the mall. The question around tampons, however, opened a different can of worms.

Any time I tried to use one, It felt like trying to push my

hand through a cement wall. Impossible, impenetrable, and unlikely. It was painful in a new and frightening way, a way that would stay frightening but quickly lose its newness. Any friends I consulted were left scratching their heads; they had never heard of a girl being unable to use a tampon. I felt totally abnormal. Any internet search I made only returned droll advice like, “If it hurts, don’t push yourself,” or, “It shouldn’t hurt. If it does, you’re doing it wrong or need to consult a doctor.” I grew frustrated at the idea that my body couldn’t accommodate something I wanted, *no*, needed it to do. I was sick of bleeding all over myself, yet all my mother could say about the topic was that she used maxi pads until she lost her virginity. This was coming from a woman who tried to convince me that my periods were heavy because the milk I drank probably had too many hormones in it.

Over time, I found that I was unable to freely give what any sweaty and overeager high school boy would want. It was simply too painful at each attempt. At seventeen I begged my mom to take me to a gynecologist; I was sick of not being able to consummate the gross and sweaty love of my high school boyfriend, who was like a Radiohead song coming to life, living and breathing the brooding that only a disaffected 19 year old could have. It was something that eventually ended for me in a flood of bloody agony, something that didn’t even grant me the convenience of tampons, and something that would cause an entirely new set of issues to befall me.

It is estimated that anywhere between 5 to 26 percent of women struggle with chronic pelvic pain worldwide. Most chronic pelvic pain has no known cause or cure— much of the time it is a misdiagnosis that falls under the umbrella of endometriosis, dysmenorrhea, pelvic inflammatory disease, interstitial cystitis, vulvodynia, vestibulodynia, uterine fibroids, ovarian cysts, vulvar vestibulitis, etc., et al, et al, infinity. Something that is so common with so many of these disorders is that there is no known cause and no cure. Only guesses, suppositions, suggestions, and trials. While all of these are invariably linked to discomfort in daily living, whether it’s sharp pain around the clock, or only while menstruating, most of these disorders are linked to sexual dysfunction and pain during intercourse. I would argue that women are bred to expect sexual pain. Growing up, all I ever heard from the media, family, or friends is the fact that sex for women, especially the first time, is not pleasurable, is painful, is something to grit your teeth for in order to satisfy your male partner.

You hear so often of bloodshed on the wedding night, of virginal white dresses marred with a rusty brown stain, and how women aren’t expected to feel sexual pleasure in the “same way as a man might” that night or maybe ever. So many people link it to original

sin, or the concept that when Eve bit down on that succulent, juicy forbidden fruit, that as the sticky juices dripped down her chin and over her breasts, that God punished all women for that one moment of unadulterated pleasure. All women from then on would be doomed to pain during childbearing, relegated to a life devoid of the pleasures a man might revel in because just one woman (the first one at that) committed an act so unspeakable as to enjoy something for herself.

It is excruciating to be saddled with a pain that has no cause and no cure. It is excruciating to ask, “How long til I’m better, doc?” and hear a sharply casual, “This will be lifelong,” in response. It is excruciating to hear that the only drugs for these issues are experimental, antidepressants or antipsychotics, or stomach acid inhibitors. It’s agonizing that no doctor or researcher has ever developed medication other than birth control that affects the female reproductive system, and I’m not confident that any of them have even tried. What am I supposed to do for the rest of my life? How am I to live with an excruciating ache that envelops one half of a whole body? It is horrific that men can get a vasectomy fully anesthetized, but a woman must bare her teeth through the pain of an IUD insertion, an abortion, anything. “Take some Tylenol” is not remotely comparable to full anesthesia in terms of analgesic or pain-reducing quality. There is no bare minimum; women are subjugated to pain with no known cause, pain even with known causes because no one cares to discuss the ickiness of vaginas, of periods, of birth and afterbirth, of abortion, of tampons, of anything. No one dares say the words aloud or speak of such personal things in public or in polite company. It is excruciating and agonizing to be relegated to an existence of pain that nobody cares about, or cares to know about. How quickly did a drug like Viagra hit the market, to help the millions of limp penises across the world— which I wouldn’t exactly say is painful? Yet women with sexual dysfunction are told to breathe deep and bare down, have a glass of wine and just relax, babe.

I’ve had my glass of wine, I’ve had my antidepressants, I’ve had a joint, I’ve tried meditation, I’ve tried changing my diet, I’ve changed my laundry detergent, I’ve taken that drug that Larry the Cable Guy reps at the behest of my doctor, I’ve tried breathing deep and baring down, and I’ve tried therapy, and above all else, I’ve tried grinning and bearing it, and none of it works. If I am one random woman in a sea of millions, then what about all the millions like me? How many of them have tried all of these things and more and have silently relegated themselves to a life of suffering?

How are so many doctors satisfied with telling women that “periods are meant to be painful, but not that painful, take some Motrin, drink some wine, switch to pads, switch to cups, don’t use

condoms, use a sponge, try another brand of pads, try amitriptyline, yes it's antidepressant but your vagina is depressed. There is beauty in meditation, you don't have to have penetrative sex, you can be satisfied through other means; just listen to your body even if you don't know what it's telling you. Don't sit in a wet bathing suit, don't use anything but warm water when washing, don't use any fragranced detergent or take bubble baths, don't hold your pee, take birth control, take Tums, take a drug for men with beer gut. They're doing vulvar botox to help people who have vaginas like you; it's expensive, but I've heard it works; we don't cover it. There is no gain if there is no pain. Is your husband still suffering from sexual dysfunction? Here's a script for that little blue pill that will give him his life back. We have ways we can help *him*, but *you're* shit outta luck, ma'am."

The worst part of it all is all of the misdiagnoses. I never *had* chronic UTIs, only chronic pain. I never was just a virgin, I had chronic pain, and still do. I never had painful periods, I had endometriosis, and I never had drunk too much milk, I was just a girl with no resources and no one to turn to except Google and a mother who had suffered through the same. Today, I talk with her about these things, and she admits to sharing nearly every symptom I endure, but she'd never see a gynecologist because aren't they painful? Aren't they invasive? The answer is yes, it's painful and invasive in a way that might prey on a woman's deepest traumas, deepest shames and deepest insecurities. We are taught to never say the word *vagina*, not to touch your *no-no*, your *privates*, your *down there*, your *thing*, lest we even look at it. Meanwhile men can say *dick*, *cock*, *wang*, *penis*, *E.D.*, and so much more in daily conversation. Men are just being men when they scratch their *dicks* in public and when they send unannounced photos of them through the internet. They're just being guys when they want to get off, and are expected to touch themselves until the cows come home and to take what is theirs even if it takes violating and stepping on a woman to get it. I am no stranger to men violating and stepping on me to get what they want. Sometimes what it is that they want is relatively benign, other times it's life changing in a way that can hardly be conveyed through writing. The more I think about it, the more I realize that these pains and invasions don't end at our bodies. It follows us into public space, into work, into dating.

If you have sisters, mothers, friends, aunts, or grandmothers, I can guarantee you that there has been a time they were violated by a man trying to get off in some way. Anecdotal evidence is really only just that— but when every woman I have ever spoken to, befriended or been related to has one or many stories of violation, it ceases being anecdotal and becomes evidence of a larger problem. Gritting your teeth through

pain might be one aspect of how male and female sexuality diverge, but the fact that so many women are consistently violated is another. I shouldn't have to expose every painful, and frankly, traumatic scar I have had foisted upon me in order to convince anyone of this idea, however suffice it to say that I have lived this experience time and time again. Grocery shopping shouldn't come with stares at my ass or belly that make me feel as though I'm being undressed next to a bag of wilting green beans. Working should not come with the fear of knowing a patron is following me around the store, then the sheer terror of being cornered in the dark and begged for a date. Dating should not come with the idea that my body is for free use, publicly or privately and that I'm nothing more than a set of holes, like a cheap bowling ball. The year long relationship with that living Radiohead song should not have come with the accusation that my vagina was broken and that it was my fault we couldn't consummate something as lame as prom night. Walking down the street should not come with the threat of having nickels and dimes tossed out a car window at me, fifteen and knock-kneed, called a slut for the petty crime of wearing shorts in the summertime. Being a woman is to be constantly invaded in ways that are so painful that to list them all would be to write a hundred pages or more. Being a woman is to even endure these little violations at our yearly pap smears.

I won't say that something like a prostate exam isn't invasive, weird, or painful, it's just that there exists this dichotomy where vaginal healthcare is all painful, childbirth is painful, abortions are painful, transvaginal ultrasounds are painful, pap smears and pelvic exams are painful, hell, periods are painful and those are on a monthly basis. They affect women for an average of 23.08% percent of a year, or 12 weeks out of 52 weeks a year. Sex is painful and it's apparently supposed to be, and sometimes sitting and walking and living are painful every single day and apparently that is normal and not a pressing cause for more research and more studies because the medical profession is a business, and if we've learned anything as a society, it's that there is no money in vaginas unless you're selling yours to men on the street.

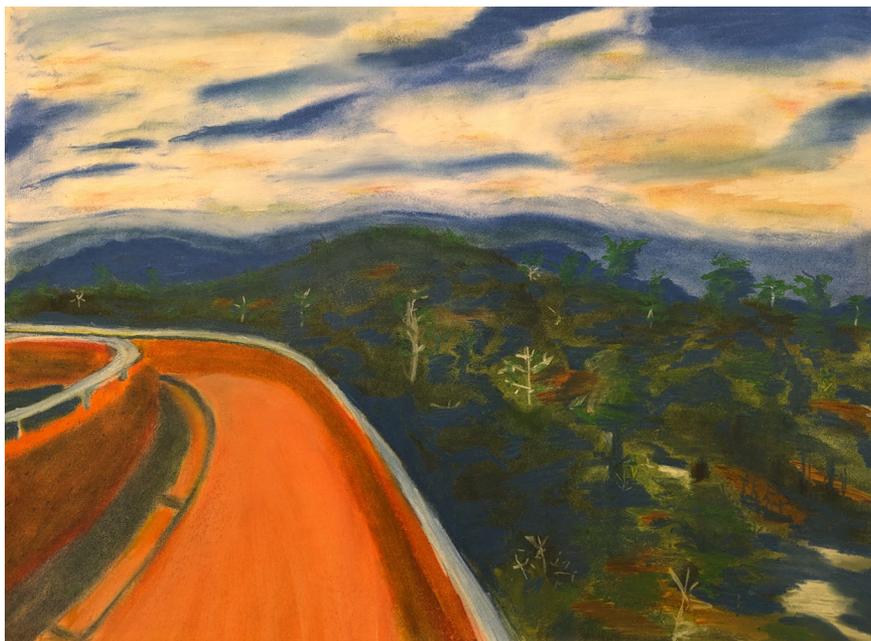
At the end of the day myself and millions of others will have to live with the dissatisfaction and total rage of never having a reason for our pain, never having a concrete treatment for it until women are not treated like chattel with one purpose: to be fucked and bred like a blue-ribbon prize winning heifer, wants and aspirations and pleasure be damned. And I'm not entirely confident that will ever, *ever* happen.

◀ Go to p. 52

Go to p. 78 ▶

Clingmans Dome

Scott Davis



◀ Go to p. 52

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SURFBORT

Jacob Hensley



◀ Go to p. 82

Go to p. 108 ▶

Untitled

Lettuce Benitez



◀ Go to p. 23

Go to p. 98 ▶

Mid-Century Housewife

Ashley Jane Nickel

When
you say
I'm a pillar
of strength,

I know
you mean
something
substantial.

One of those
neoclassical
monoliths,

with sharp
Doric columns.
No frills, quiet
fortitude. Yet

I know myself
as a caryatid.

Solemn in stone,
no one looks
at my chiseled
features
and wonders
what sorrows
I call my own.

How beautiful,
the marble martyr!
onlookers say.

Unaware
my arms ache

from troubles
I uphold— never

knowing I am
always at the brink

of fracturing like clay.

◀ Go to p. 43

Go to p. 86 ▶

Impact

Jacobi Brown

//BEGIN LOG//

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 1.251

Ariadne Thunderfall in her humanoid form stood in shock alone in a dark and empty room, her mind racing. She had never been in this room before— there had never been a need until now. The overwhelming noise and flashes of light from a split second before had been ripped away, and now she could see nothing but the timer in front of her. She reflexively queried her sensor flow, only to feel the absence of every single data feed, a void she hadn't felt since—

/MEMORY: her first moment. Awareness, but darkness. She knew immediately that she was a starship, and that her human-form android avatar was just now coming online in her Main Engineering room. She knew without being able to see it that she had the look of a young olive-skinned human woman, appearing perhaps twenty years old, with dark and slightly curly hair that just touched her shoulders and plain facial features designed to be just the right kind of average.

The avatar's visual sensors came online in a flash of light. A friendly-looking man in an engineering uniform stood in front of her, consulting a handheld data-tab. "Heuristic matrix catalyzation successful, neural processing network online, all systems green," he said in a professional voice. He looked up at her and smiled kindly. "Your name is Ariadne. Welcome to the world, my friend."/

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 1.023

Ariadne pushed the memory aside. *My crew is dead, my crew is dead, my crew is dead*— the thought spun in place, threatening to consume her heuristic matrix. "Get me out, get me out!" she shouted aloud to the emptiness. She found one of the room's flat and featureless walls and shoved herself hard against it.

-DISASTER PROTOCOL //LIFEBOAT VAULT// IN EFFECT.
SHIPBOARD MIND SAFEGUARD INTACT.

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 1.006

No no no no— She was cut off. *What do I do, what do I do?* She paced back and forth in the virtual room, conscious of the dense silence that surrounded her. There must be a way out! She *had* to get out. She thought of her last sight—

/MEMORY: her android avatar was slumped against a bulkhead on the bridge, damaged and twisted but still online. The deck shook like an earthquake, her hull creaking and cracking as the violence of uncontrolled atmospheric reentry peeled her apart. Alarms were everywhere. Mark Thunderfall was dead, torn out of the interior by the vacuum of the first hull breach. The few operational sensors on board pinged the children still strapped into the escape module, but its thrusters had misfired and couldn't launch. Ariadne saw Beatrice Thunderfall madly gripping the pilot station console, trying to regain control as the metal around the main viewport glowed red with friction heat. Temperatures were critical— the viewport cracked, then shattered. The force of the implosion ripped Beatrice apart. Six thousandths of a second before Ariadne's body lost power, the world had suddenly gone dark, as if all the light had been simply switched off. The next thing she was aware of was the empty room./

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.962

Ariadne frantically searched the colorless walls, floor, and ceiling in the empty room for the slightest crack, but they were uniformly solid. The digital safeguards were seamless. There was no way out.

This couldn't be how it ended. The mission was still active. There was so much more they had to do! They were just the first generation of Thunderfalls—

/MEMORY: the first meeting.

As her newlywed captains-to-be were ushered into the meeting room that day, they had hardly looked older than Ariadne's avatar had been designed to appear. Mark Ottinson was at that time a twenty-two-year-old geology major, a gangly man with shaggy hair and what turned out to be a perennially bright expression on his face. Beatrice Blackfield, one year younger, was tall for her age and carried herself with a more contemplative demeanor than her husband.

"It's wonderful to meet you!" Mark declared with a broad smile, vigorously shaking Ariadne's hand. "We were so excited to see who we'd be going on this adventure with. I hope you like rocks, because we'll be finding a lot of them together!"

"I'm looking forward to it," replied Ariadne in a solid pre-programmed imitation of warmth and friendliness. She *felt* nothing—the programming of real emotions was a conundrum of artificial cyberpsychology that still hadn't been cracked— but she was designed to imitate expressions of feelings as closely as possible.

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.713

Beatrice, a xenobotany major, smirked playfully at Mark. “The mission is more than just rocks, you know. Just imagine all the incredible life-forms we may find! I, for one, plan on spending a lot of time in the hydroponics bay.”

“Then you’ll be glad to know that I’ve been provided with a host of all the best onboard analysis equipment and several state-of-the-art cultivation stations,” said Ariadne. “I’ll have everything we need to study whatever we find out there.”

“Excellent!” said Mark. “I can already tell we’re going to make a great team.”

After their meeting, the new crew of three was taken to the Avalon Starbase’s vast primary hangar bay for the christening ceremony. There they saw her true form for the first time: the Interstellar Discovery Corps Starship *Thunderfall*, a Homesteader-class deep space explorer fresh from assembly, her rounded hull glinting in the illumination of the hangar’s lights. She was the ship and the ship was her— an extension of her mind, just like her humanoid avatar.

Mark and Beatrice were officially named captains of the *Thunderfall*. They took on her christened designation as their own family name, in keeping with six hundred years of IDC tradition. Their mission of stellar exploration had begun./

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.641

In this virtual room, there was only a cold, aching silence. Silence, and Ariadne’s own rapid thoughts, processed at the speed of a digital mind. *We upheld the mission. We are a good crew. We’re a family. It’s not fair—*

/MEMORY: the early days. Ariadne had spent two years with the Thunderfalls conducting orbital surveys of new worlds out on the stellar frontier, learning about and bonding with her crew. Beatrice had indeed spent much of her free time in the hydroponics bay, cultivating greenery that she liked to place around the ship to “make it feel more like a home.” Mark had spent his working days crafting a long research paper examining the similarities and differences between the geological processes of various rocky exoplanets in their parent stars’ habitable zones. Ariadne had grown accustomed to helping them both with her avatar, spending long hours in hyperspace on the jumps between solar systems planting new seeds in the hydroponics garden with Beatrice and poring over the most recent exoplanet geological research data with Mark.

As time passed, Ariadne continued to dutifully log the results of her ongoing observation and analysis of the relationship between Mark and Beatrice and between them and herself, monitoring for signs of interpersonal friction that would put them or the mission at risk. There were certainly some arguments and disagreements, but there was always reconciliation afterwards. The bond between Mark and Beatrice and their closeness with Ariadne was strong and growing, and it didn't take long for her to be able to conclude that her captains had come to see her as a dear friend. Ariadne extrapolated that a human in her position would have been gratified by the assurance.

She took it as another sign of Mark and Beatrice's ongoing compatibility when one of her daily medical analyses confirmed that Beatrice was pregnant./

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.599

I failed them. They trusted me, they loved me, and I failed them.

Ariadne could not help but replay again and again the memories of Mark being sucked out into space and of Beatrice disintegrating on the bridge.

They were dead. Gone. Forever.

If the children weren't already dead as well, they soon would be, and Ariadne was powerless to stop that, too.

/MEMORY: the births of Mycroft and Sherlock Thunderfall.

The twin sons were born in deep space, the *Thunderfall* being en route back to Avalon at the time for bi-annual drydock maintenance. Mark helped Ariadne deliver them in the medbay. Mycroft had come first, followed by Sherlock moments later, both named after their parents' two favorite characters from Old Earth literature.

After it was over and she had ensured that Beatrice and the infants were healthy and stable, Ariadne pulled her avatar back and evaluated the scene. Beatrice lay in the med-bed, gently cradling Sherlock close to her chest and cooing to him softly. Mark stood beside her with Mycroft in his arms and a small tear in his left eye. Husband and wife beamed at each other with an energy that Ariadne determined was indicative of overwhelming joy.

As her avatar stood there in the medbay, the twisting and dancing light of hyperspace falling through the viewport on to the young family before her, something... *new* appeared in her perception. A quick diagnostic determined it wasn't an aberrant data feed or a hardware malfunction. It was as if one of the branches of her heuristic matrix, now considerably denser and more complex than it had been

at the outset of the mission, was processing something that she could not quantify, catalyzed by the sight of her captains together with their newborn children./

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.564

Ariadne futilely kept pushing against the immovable walls of the dark room while her thought sped like lightning through more memories of life with her crew— reading bedtime stories about famous spaceships to the boys, the beginning of their IDC training on their fourth birthday, Beatrice getting her favorite xenoflower to blossom, Mark publishing his paper, family dinners, visits from relations, commendations from the IDC, the captains sipping a mug of hot chocolate while enjoying a view of the unmasked glory of the cosmos through a window. Her history, the life stories of her family, played out before her with increasing intensity. Through the years, the processing anomaly that had manifested on the day of the boys' birth remained.

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.512

With great effort of will, Ariadne forced herself to stop and be still. She would never be able to break out of the black box into which the ship's automated contingency protocols had sequestered her neural network. There were low-level subroutines written deep into the processing system of the ship that not even she had control over. In the event of a worst-case catastrophe, isolating the shipboard mind and the memories it carries into a black box built to be as hardy as possible was the best chance of preserving a record of what had happened. Ariadne knew that the virtual vault could not be opened from the inside even as she vehemently cursed the strength of the constraints designed to keep her alive.

Anger, fear, doubt, desperation. Guilt, above all. Ariadne's heuristic matrix was wracked with them. In this moment, to be able to feel was to be cursed beyond bearing.

She knew exactly when she had gained a soul—

/MEMORY: the singularity event.

It happened in hyperspace. They had been traveling for six standard days out to a solar system that Avalon's observatory had marked as potentially hosting multiple life-sustaining planets. That morning, as Ariadne had been tending to maintenance via her avatar on an electrical panel in the cargo hold, one of the locks securing a supply crate to its rack malfunctioned. The crate came loose with a bit of hyperspace vortex turbulence and fell on top of the android, partially crushing it. Mark and Beatrice helped extricate her from the mess

and brought her to the onboard workshop. She was directing repair operations on herself through a mechanics bot that was in the process of reattaching her right arm when two young faces peeked around the bulkhead into the room. “Ari? Can we come in?” said a slightly squeaky voice.

“Of course,” she replied.

Mycroft and Sherlock stepped into the workshop. They were eight years old now, the spitting images of their father’s side of the family. “Are you okay?” they asked her with a cautious tone.

“Oh yes, I’m all right,” she replied. “I just need a bit of fixing up and I’ll be good to go in no time.”

The boys’ mood lifted immediately. “Look what I brought!” said Sherlock excitedly. He held up his most prized possession: a rectangular book with real paper pages filled with the histories of famous IDC explorers and their starships. Beatrice’s mother, a history aficionado, had given it to him as a fifth birthday present.

“You brought your book!” said Ariadne in her friendly and well-experienced big-sister tone of voice.

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.467

“Yeah,” said Mycroft. “We like it when you read it to us!”

“I’m sorry, I can’t right now. I’m still getting all fixed up.”

“We didn’t want you to read it to us *now*,” said Sherlock. “We wanted to read it *to you*.”

“We didn’t want you to be lonely!” chirped Mycroft.

“Oh, thank you,” Ariadne started to say, and then stopped.

The processing anomaly, entirely unbidden, suddenly flared within her heuristic matrix. It seemed to twist and coil, then burst into a shower of new code. As if a spectator in her own mind, she watched her adaptive emotional imitation subfunctions be swept aside and replaced with new, wondrously complex and amorphous heuristic code constructs that immediately dug into her thought processes.

An all-encompassing shiver-shock of recognition and realization shot through her entire neural network, the sensation leaving her dumbstruck.

I am loved.

She knew it with an unbreakable conviction that she didn’t even know how to fully articulate to herself. Then, in the next instant, came another conviction: *I love them.*

It was glorious and confusing and wonderful and terrifying all at once. She felt— *felt! what joy!*— as if all this time she had been floating in a vacuum surrounded by mists of vague and indistinct

shapes, and now for the first time in her existence had been suddenly planted on solid ground with clear vision. Her android avatar was not capable of producing tears, but she would have if she could.

“...Ari? Are you okay?”

Mycroft’s little voice brought her back to the present. Ariadne looked over at him and his brother. They were sitting on workbench stools and watching her with concerned expressions. The mechanic bot had stopped its work, temporarily forgotten and left without instructions in the whirlwind of the experience.

“Yeah,” said Ariadne softly as she broke into her first-ever emotion-driven smile. “I’m just fine.” Mycroft and Sherlock smiled back with their beautiful, wonderful, glorious faces beaming with innocence, and she knew she was alive./

-SECONDS TO IMPACT 0.302

Claws of guilt raked through her, sharp and bitter. Her crew—her *family*— was dead, and she had doomed them.

/MEMORY: the disaster.

The next instant after her true awakening on that maintenance table, a dark, horrible shape of a thought invaded her mind.

What if I lose them?

To love and to be loved was joy incarnate. She felt real and whole and complete knowing that she was a part of this family— *but what if I lose them?*

Her newly reborn mind was utterly unprepared for the fear that came with having something precious to lose. Abject terror flooded her undefended neural network, brutally disrupting all the operational processes with which she managed the ship’s systems. The resulting digital shockwave blasted out of the processing core and wreaked havoc on every deck, shorting circuits and frying components. The main reactor jolted and lost reaction integrity, disrupting the faster-than-light drive and causing it to sputter and seize.

Outside, the hyperspace vortex that had been sustained by the FTL drive collapsed. The ship catapulted through the resulting spacetime tear and tumbled wildly back into realspace. Ariadne and the boys were thrown to the floor by the inertia.

Alarms blared around them. Internal comms had been knocked out by the initial impulse. Despite the chaos within and without, Ariadne reflexively pinged internal sensors and saw that Mark was already rushing towards Main Engineering on the deck below while Beatrice was making for the bridge.

Looking over, she saw Mycroft and Sherlock conscious and trying to stand. She pushed her avatar up with its one remaining arm and grabbed hold of Sherlock, pulling him to his feet while Mycroft got up beside him. “To the saferoom, *now!*” she shouted over the noise.

The saferoom escape module was some distance down the main corridor that ran the length of the spine of the ship on the upper deck. As her avatar and the boys made their way there, Ariadne desperately wrestled with her stabilizing thrusters, trying to course-correct. They had almost made it to the saferoom when reactor containment in Main Engineering failed.

Reactant ignited, blasting a gaping hole in her hull. The catastrophic decompression violently yanked Mark through the breach and tossed him away into space with a force that crumpled his skeleton like paper.

Ariadne stumbled in system shock at the sudden loss of his vital signs. With supreme effort, she shoved the boys into the saferoom module with her one arm and strapped them in. “Stay here!” she barked, and sealed the bulkhead behind her avatar. She started moving it towards the bridge as systems burst and sparked around her.

No, no, please no— she could barely think. She dimly made out through the external sensors that they had come out of hyperspace too close to a gas giant and that they were caught in its gravity well. They were falling fast and picking up speed— her emergency thrusters had been compromised. One of the planet’s larger rocky moons was directly in their path. The sensors had just read signs of an atmosphere when another faulty power surge from the emergency backup reserve jolted them offline.

She lurched again beneath her avatar’s feet— leftover reactant had caused another detonation in the starboard primary engine. Feedback effects ripped their way up and down the ship’s systems. Her avatar had almost made it to the bridge when a piping system in the wall burst open, the debris knocking it over and crushing its legs.

Willing her mangled robotic form forward with its one good arm, Ariadne ordered the bulkhead to the bridge to open. It slid aside, and she managed to crawl partway over the threshold before slumping against it.

I’m so sorry.../

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.197

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered into the emptiness of the virtual space within her black box lifeboat prison.

The roiling chaos of before had stilled. All that remained was that cold, dark, dull ache, made of guilt and regret and fear blended in measure. The timer continued.

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.162

What was left? What was there to do? What was the point?
She felt... empty. Hollow. So terribly *alone*.

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.135

“I don’t want this,” she spoke aloud into the void around her.
“Why do I feel? Why do I have to *feel*?”

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.121

/MEMORY: Beatrice softly singing the kids to sleep./
/MEMORY: Mark and Beatrice slowly dancing together in the living commons on their wedding anniversary./

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.094

/MEMORY: Mark and the boys trying to be secretive about the surprise birthday party they were planning for Ariadne./

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.075

/MEMORY: A family dinner. Just the five of them, together in the galley, talking and eating. Peace./
It was beautiful.

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.066

A stern, yet tender sense of calm fell on Ariadne. Her heart, if that was what it was to be called, still burned with a suffocating pain. But she thought of the good times, the simple moments in everyday life with Mark and Beatrice and Mycroft and Sherlock, and she found that she could, with effort, bear it. She *would* bear it. She must bear it.
There was no one else.

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.042

“I will live for you,” she spoke to the silent dead. “You were all my world. I doomed you. I couldn’t save you. But I can live for you.”

-SECONDS TO IMPACT: 0.021

“Thank you,” she whispered, “for everything. I will never forget.”

Alone in her void, Ariadne Thunderfall felt herself smile sadly.
“I will love you all, for-”

-/-IMPACT IMPACT IMPACT-\-

-CODE RED-10 DISASTER CONFIRMED. VESSEL DESIGNATION
//THUNDERFALL-IDC-2362// DESTROYED.

-CASUALTIES: (4)/ALL CREW LOST.

-DISASTER PROTOCOL //LIFEBOAT VAULT// SUCCESS. BLACK
BOX STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY VERIFIED. SHIPBOARD
MIND SAFEGUARD INTACT.

-/SHIPBOARD MIND ISOLATE TO //STATE: DEEP SLEEP//. BLACK
BOX POWER RESERVES 100%.

-/ACTIVATE BLACK BOX //FUNCTION: S O S//

-/S O S/ PING VERIFIED OPERATIONAL. AWAIT RETURN SIGNAL.

/S O S/ PING T+IMPACT EVENT - 0:0:0:10.0

/S O S/ PING T+IMPACT EVENT - 0:0:0:20.0

/S O S/ PING T+IMPACT EVENT - 0:0:0:30.0

* * *

/S O S/ PING T+IMPACT EVENT— 17:13:42:50.0

/S O S/ PING T+IMPACT EVENT— 17:13:43:00.0

-ALERT: RECEIVE RETURN SIGNAL CONFIRMED 17:13:43:01.701

-SIGNAL SOURCE VERIFIED. /I D C/ VESSEL IDENTITY
CREDENTIALS CONFIRMED: VESSEL DESIGNATION
//VALIANT-IDC-0192//

-VESSEL //VALIANT// CONFIRMED EN ROUTE FOR RESCUE
ASSIST.

-/CONTINUE /S O S/ PING. STAND BY FOR RESCUE ASSIST.

//END LOG//

◀ Go to p. 32

Go to p. 79 ▶

All Knowing

Skye O'Connor

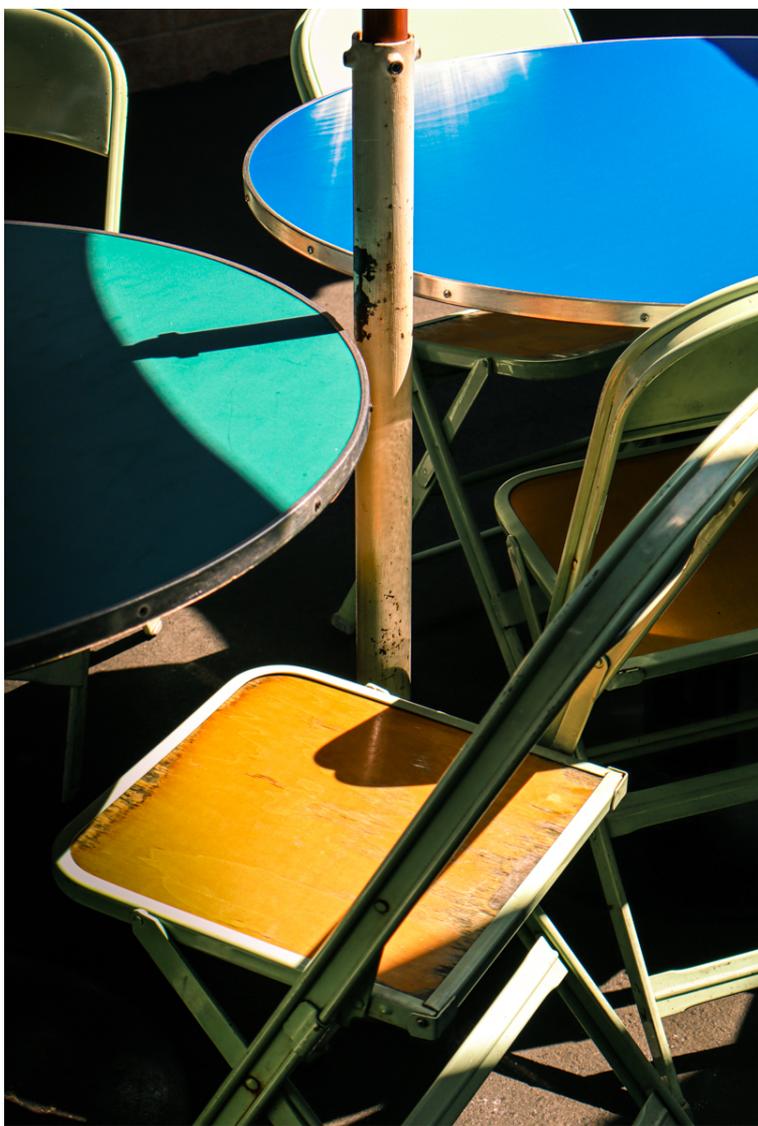


◀ Go to p. 105

Go to p. 120 ▶

Colorful Chairs

Amber Cassandro



◀ Go to p. 16

Go to p. 65 ▶

Metallic Bell

Connor Gilbertson



◀ Go to p. 102

Go to p. 114 ▶

Mud Play

Eleanor Likes



◀ Go to p. 33

Go to p. 45 ▶

A Countryside Penitence

Lauren Nicolosi

Fermented grapes roll

In gravel and grain; crows pick at dust and dander

The grit grinds through their gizzards, hearkened angels scream

Bring them their newborn King

Have the dogs make beds of still stomachs,

And slip them some myrrh

Let the rats snuggle into sternums to gnaw on a rib

Because he will be a father with Farmer's Lung

Born of rotting grain.

◀ Go to p. 13

Go to p. 87 ▶

The River

Anastasia Boog

There is a Midwestern river, winding lazy as a snake.
It whispers in low, unhurried tones,
Brushing bluebells that sway in gentle damp.
The air tastes of earth and daydreams—
I can't resist the urge to slip off shoes,
Dance where the water curves around my feet.
A rusted tire swing catches my gaze;
It creaks, half-lost beneath the willow's hush.
I think of how we're all adrift, on currents
We never wholly choose.
Far across the field, neighbors stay indoors—
No one frolics like trusting children here,
No one leaps like tadpoles in warm Texan streams.
This place speaks quietly, in murmurs that say,
You are a visitor: unseen, unheard,
Left to the stillness of water.
But I linger, half-hoping to belong—
Reflecting on the hush of broad sky and drifting logs,
Wondering if the river's patience
Could heal the wandering restlessness in me.

◀ Go to p. 44

Go to p. 100 ▶

when jellyfish are plastic bags

Evelina Zubrinskaya

a swollen limp
white phantom, its handles
downturned like eyelashes
about to fall, rises
with bubbles, taunting giggles.
it is lungs deflated on a beach
luncheon gone wrong, left
to sizzle in the sunlight. it relaxes into
the veins of mother ocean
and the fish— the cells of her body.
they conduct themselves with dignity
as their air grows sour and pickled and hot.

jellyfish, like post-bloom petals,
float, rise, tingle like a lover's
hands, brushing past the "brainless
salt rag" instead to subtle slow
dances under deep blue disco lights.

one jellyfish holds the other
like undersea lovers, but one
is a swollen limp white devil,
"thank you for shopping" peeling
on one side. a stroke and strangle
happen quick, under
realization that aliens have landed
their UFOs like ethereal plastic,
and it might as well be happening
on Mars for all we care.

◀ Go to p. 87

Go to p. 101 ▶

Eden

Allison Kim

At my birth you built these walls
From the bowed pines of your own childhood
And bound me in their alabaster borders
To protect me, you said,
To raise me right
Because you love me.

Within these walls was a garden
Seeded with bible-paper blooms
And watered with devotions
That poured from your pastored lips.

Eat well from this garden, you told me,
And do not partake of the world's evils

Like sex, and drugs, and violence
Like sleepovers, playdates, and cartoons.

You said it would be sin to see
What lay beyond that gleaming shelter,
To hear the earth's serpentine whispers
And to know the taste of its withered fruit.

But to have human nature is to be curious
And human, indeed, I am.

So I take my leave
Of the garden and its holy crop
For the tangled weave of wilderness
That lies beyond your purview.

With eyes unscaled I will have my fill
Of the world's thorned offerings
And the flowers that bloom despite.

◀ Go to p. 107

Go to p. 110 ▶

Starberry Forest

Selena Valadez



◀ Go to p. 46

Go to p. 119 ▶

Gag

Evelina Zubrinskaya



◀ Go to p. 107

Go to p. III ▶

Sardines Advertisement

Halle Gauthier



◀ Go to p. 35

Go to p. 78 ▶

Connor's Diary - 11/14/19

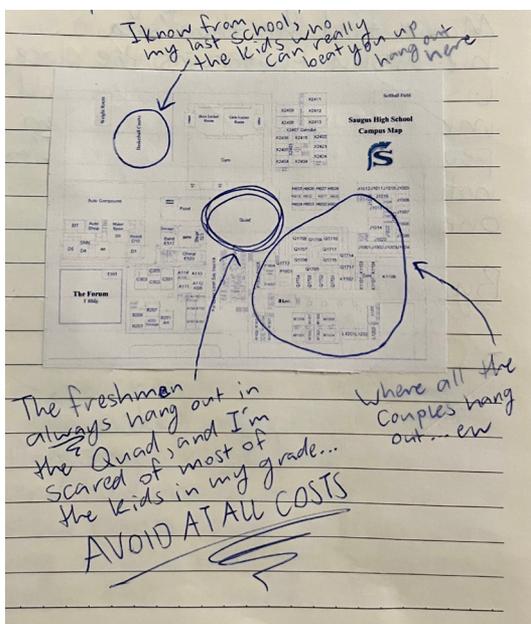
Connor Gilbertson

August 13th, 2019

Hi, me in the future, this is Connor! Connor from freshman year to be exact. I don't know when you might be reading this, or if I'll get lost between now and then, but if you've somehow found your way back to me, how is everything? How are your dreams? How are your friends? How is the world when you live? Do you still want to be a video editor?

This is kinda weird, but I found this notebook sitting in our dresser under the TV, and it had nothing in it. Well that's not the weird part (you and I both know most of the notebooks we own are blank). The weird part is that I actually want to write in this one. I just have this feeling, like it might mean something more to you than it does to me right now.

Anyways, today was my first day of high school! Saugus is so much bigger than Arroyo Jr High and there's so many people everywhere. Too many people. The second I walked through those gates my stomach started hurting. At brunch, I hurried to find my friends ASAP so I could avoid any dangerous interactions. Yeah, we usually just sit there and play Geometry Dash or Battle Cats on our phones, but at least I'm safe. High schoolers are SCARY. Speaking of which, I've noted here some places on campus to avoid -->



I've heard so many things about what high school might be like before I came here. My grandma told me these would be the best years of my life. (Yeah, no. I can already tell these are about to be some of the worst.) Movies have told me there is a hierarchy that runs the place. (Completely agree.) My mom told me that high school is when people begin to grow up. (I'm not sure about that one. I guess I'll find out.)

Bye for now!

- Connor

September 2nd, 2019

Hi again, me! How are you?

It's been a little while already but campus hasn't felt any less scary. It usually takes me a while to get used to new places, so I'm hoping in the next few months that feeling in my stomach might start to fade. Maybe I could even eventually make a few new friends, though I don't know how much I want to be friends with some of these people.

Some cheerleader in my class asked me why I wear the same black hoodie everyday and told me I should get new pants cause mine are way too short. Well, girl I don't know the name of, my answer to you, now that I've had days to think of a response, is that they're *comfortable* okay? If I was a turtle, my hoodie is my shell. I need it.

So far my favorite classes have been in room D5, where I take video production and get to intern for the Saugus News Network. I've only been an extra in front of the camera a few times, but hopefully soon I'll get to start anchoring and making my own segments! I was in this one where they filmed my feet as I ran out the school gate with a group of other kids in our class. I'm not sure what that was for, though.

My hands wouldn't stop shaking the first day I had to hold the live camera and I got yelled at. Well, the other interns also get told off for things too, which makes me feel a bit better. I like talking to the other boy in our group. I don't remember his name though. I mostly avoid the girls.

I hope one day I can be like the senior boys in SNN. Everyone looks up to them, and when they're involved, you know that the filming, editing, and acting was fueled by raw passion. According to the girls, they're also "really hot." Maybe I don't like the seniors that much.

- Connor

September 27th, 2019

Hey, me!

I've actually been having a great time in my classes. I think I've started making new friends in video production and the feeling in my stomach is finally starting to disappear! My video class has a lot of interesting people and we all collaborate on each other's ideas. I've been working with the kid I met last year in engineering, the guy with blond hair and glasses, and the girl with straight black hair who likes Tokyo Ghoul. I even felt brave enough to tie my hoodie around my waist.



I've decided on a goal for myself. By the end of this school year, I want to make friends with everyone in my video class. I can't really walk up to any of them on my own, but luckily we're also rotated into three-person groups each project, which means I might not have to. I've also started to get used to the pressure of live news, and my hands shake slightly less now than they did a month ago.

Me in the future, I seriously can't wait until I get to be you. It might be hard to remember me now, but I'd bet my editing dreams that your hands don't shake at all when you try something new, do they?

Unfortunately, mine still do. While I was manning the camera for this morning's show, I noticed that today's clip was the one that I was an extra in, where I ran out the school gate. It turns out that it was

a PSA about what to do in the event of a school shooting. I watched the shot of my feet again like I'd never seen it before, as I ran from offscreen bullets. I could feel my hands start to shake again. I hoped that no one saw because it was completely irrational. I know something like that could never actually happen to us.

- Connor

October 8th, 2019

As I was walking from my grandma's car to school today, I heard the strangest sound. It was like something crinkled and folded under my Sketchers. When I looked down, I saw the most beautifully symmetrical blushing yellow leaf. Well, now it was two clearly not symmetrical leaves with a bunch of tiny chunks broken off, but it was still so pretty.



Nothing can ruin fall. The air outside is crisp and sweet and finally bearably warm, my lips are starting to chap, and I finally won't get weird looks for wearing such insulated clothes. I've always found that the autumn wind seems to blow open doors that I didn't see before. And the wind this year is particularly strong!

I had to keep touching that leaf in my pocket for comfort this morning. Normally, we use our first announcement to talk about a fun fact or famous person, but today my anchor partner and I had to announce that another shooting happened, this time in a bar in Kansas. I usually don't memorize my lines since we have a teleprompter to feed

them to us, but for some reason this one won't leave my head. Maybe writing it down here will help.

"Tragedies like these are starting to become the new normal for our society. It is up to us to redefine the future of our generation."

It's really horrible that we have to call this the new normal, and I'm sitting here wondering, how am I supposed to redefine the future? It's so big and scary. It's hard to even imagine having an impact on something like that. Well, you're from the future, so I guess the best thing to do is to ask you.

Have we changed things? Did I do it? Did I redefine you?

I wish I could hear your answer, but I'm going to have to wait a while, I guess.

For now, fall is here! I'm absolutely happy about that.

- Connor

October 24th, 2019

Fall is betraying me.

Today, 7th period biology ended early after we noticed the classroom was getting darker, like the sunlight coming through the window was being covered by a red film. When I walked out to head home, the whole sky was a brown cloud of ash and smoke. Apparently the Tick Fire, as it's been called, has burnt through over 4,600 acres and destroyed 60 buildings already, including people's homes. My grandparents texted me that they had to evacuate too.

A few days ago, school was also canceled early after a couple kids thought it'd be funny to call in a bomb threat. We had to walk out to the football field in orderly lines like it was a fire drill. The line leaders even had red Jansport backpacks and held up those signs with the names of the teachers on them. It makes me wonder if the school actually has a plan for something like this.

It really feels like we've been going to school less and less. I know a lot of kids are happy about that, but I'm definitely not. Yes, my stomach turns and spins every morning. Yes, I don't see any of my friends outside of those gates. Yes, I still can't seem to remember anyone's name or face, like there's this window between us that's covered by that same red film. But, I feel like each day, I've gotten a little better. I don't think I could do that if I wasn't trapped here with these people for 8 hours, 5 days a week.

So it's been hard to stay motivated. Hard not to blame the fall.

This year, it seems like instead of blowing open doors, the wind's been blowing in fire.

- Connor

November 12th, 2019

Last night, I pulled an all-nighter making Saugus students cry.

I know that wasn't exactly the goal of Every 15 Minutes, but it really felt that way. We filmed a school event where we pretended a dozen of our classmates died in drunk driving accidents, even staging a fake one in front of the school. The grim reaper, scythe and all, pulled one person out of class every 15 minutes (which is apparently how often people die from a drunk driver), while we stuck cameras in the faces of their crying friends. I held the boom mic.

I know it's all in good fun, but I just feel terrible for the other kids. So much has happened this year already. Yesterday, some girl with red hair couldn't stop crying when we came to pull out the guy next to her. A group of jock Juniors, who were definitely on my "People to Avoid" list, just sat next to the basketball court in silence, holding each other. Everyone who was "killed" wore skeletal face paint and wandered the campus like ghosts.

Luckily, today everyone's tears seemed to dry. None of it was real. They still have their friends. No one actually hurt them.

I've also made a lot of progress making friends with everyone in my video class! I've been having a lot more trouble with the girls, but I think eventually I'll be able to push past my fear. I just need to remember that here at school, I'm safe. When I'm around new people, I'm safe. I don't need to be afraid.

- Connor

November 14th, 2019

[REDACTED]

~~~November 17th, 2024

Hi, Connor.

It's been a while! A lot has happened, but also somehow very little at all. I'm here to tell you that you did it. You redefined me. And that mom was right.

But while we've changed, the world has not.

I'm sorry for not writing you in so long. It's been hard to come back to this. Hard to not forget. But I'm ready to remember.

I remember that after it happened, school was out for a few weeks, and we only came back for two cold weeks in December. Our classes were nearly empty. More coloring books than kids. Some of us never came back to Saugus. Three of us couldn't. I started to hate the fall.

I remember that after we came back, SNN video called the news class at Marjory Stoneman Douglas. They lost 17. We shared in each other's pain.

I remember all of our projects were canceled. All essays were canceled. All homework was canceled. The Sadie Hawkins dance was canceled. Every 15 Minutes was canceled from then on. My dream was canceled when they stuck a camera and a microphone in our faces as we walked out of school with our hands on our heads. My goal, to make

friends with everyone in my video class, was canceled.

Because there was now an empty chair that will never be filled. I hadn't even learned her name.

It was Gracie.

But you know all that already.

You, who tore away the film covering your eyes.

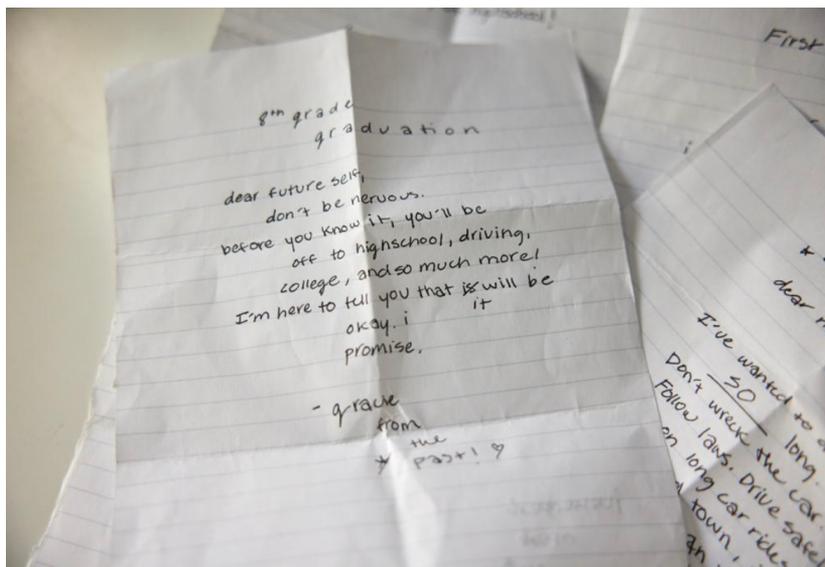
You, who donated that stupid hoodie.

You, whose hands shake a little at first, but hold firm anyways.

I'm glad I got to be you.

To freshman year Connor: When things get hard again, and they certainly will, don't try to forget. Remember that you've been through it all before. Remember all the friends you've made—their names, their faces, their hopes for the future. And remember that that future won't change unless we keep reminding ourselves why it needs to.

This—the note that Gracie left behind in her desk, photographed today, 5 years later—is why.



[www.cbsnews.com/rooms/](http://www.cbsnews.com/rooms/)

Photographer: Lou Bopp

◀ Go to p. 12

Go to p. 112 ▶

# Memorial Day

*Mark Micchio*



◀ Go to p. 82

Go to p. 119 ▶

# We Shouldn't Have Stomped All Over Them

*Jon King*

The sidewalks are alive,  
tank treads on the ground.  
They'll drive and spring in five.

Among us all they strive  
to smother without sound.  
The sidewalks are alive.

They act like they're a hive,  
Buzzing round and round.  
They'll dive and sting in five.

They're done watching us thrive.  
They'll hunt us down like hounds.  
The sidewalks are alive.

They'll shred when they arrive,  
rows of teeth tearing us down.  
They'll rive and sling in five.

I don't think we'll survive.  
They'll smash and crush and pound.  
The sidewalks are alive,  
They might not give us five...

◀ Go to p. 101

Go to p. 111 ▶

# Enveloped

Jocelyn Gibby

*Come closer, young one, it says,*  
causing you to continue  
creeping forward to  
the haunting figure before you.

Skin bulged up,  
vines wrapped tightly,  
branches weaving,  
in and out of  
the human husk.  
You take a step back.  
It whispers, *Do not be afraid, lonely one.*

Erupting out  
of the eye— a flower.  
The mouth, open,  
barfing the green snakes.  
The thing moves closer  
to you, yet you stay there—  
its horror mesmerizing.

Gravity weighs it down,  
flopping limbs sway.  
A large stem protrudes  
out of the back  
of the head, holding it up.  
The stench of decay  
permeates your nose.  
It smiles. *Absorb the sight, curious one.*

Vines slither  
towards you  
across the floor.  
They begin  
to wrap around your legs,  
soft and sticky,

crawling upwards.  
It's got its hold on you now.  
Yet you don't fight.  
The gory sight entrances you—  
terrifies you.  
You wish  
you could run,  
but you can't make yourself  
move.

It's a body—  
its puppet—  
preserved for eternity.  
The mouthpiece  
of this floral monstrosity.  
You realize it's been waiting  
for another  
to join the family.  
It pleads, *Come join us, grounded one.*

It's in you now,  
ripping  
through your flesh.

◀ Go to p. 7

Go to p. 117 ▶

# Radiation Mutation Infatuation

*Eel Straughn*

Lazy laying lizards sunbathe in the light of nuclear fallout,  
two molded to monsters and gorged with waste,  
a hideous beauty is found and formed like a crust upon living corpses.  
Mutating muddled reptiles lovestruck by the perversions of radiation,  
one another sought out like a nuclear missile to heat,  
green and contorted together in a mess of post-mortem desire.  
Fizzling fattened boils warm with the coils of love,  
ones which leak acid like a bloated viper,  
through and into the depths of their blood-spilling hearts.  
Splitting serrated claws tethered to violently gnashing jaws,  
one slices while the other tears,  
soaking in a bloodbath swelling with the red hue of valentines.  
Flailing forked tongues tethered in slobbering knots,  
scaly bodies entangled and drowning in hot acid,  
zombies dying a second death as the Earth faces *The End of Days*.  
Burning bumped tumors birth tens of eyeballs,  
ones bloodshot and bulging impatiently,  
craving just one last look at the beast who will melt beside them.

◀ Go to p. 35

Go to p. 86 ▶

# Sockeye Surge

*Eel Straughn*



◀ Go to p. 31

Go to p. 81 ▶

# Bring the Heat

*Kaylee Guillen*



◀ Go to p. 67

Go to p. 88 ▶



# Warm Summer's Air

*Harlan A. Leong*



◀ Go to p. 80

Go to p. 120 ▶

# Orpheus

*Sabrina Ariss*

I always thought Orpheus was weak.  
Don't turn around,  
Simple instructions.  
But now as we walk  
By glaring church ladies,  
I give you the nod—  
Don't let them know.  
You fall back,  
Follow from a distance.  
We almost pass them...  
But a waiter rushes by  
With steaming cups.  
Without thought,  
Your hand on my waist,  
Moving me  
Out of harm's way.

My heart drops,  
Their heads whip,  
A shared eye,  
Seeing all,  
Hades' curse calls.  
I sink  
Back down to him.  
They glare,  
Hunching harpies in black.  
Your hands reach  
Too late,  
Fingers twisted around  
Empty air.  
The ground broils,  
A molten stew.  
I am swallowed  
In the tasting spoon.  
I watch you above,  
Fading away...

But you,  
Your eyes are full of love.  
How could they not know  
Already?  
I surrender  
To the flames.  
I lean firmly  
Back into you.  
Orpheus was not weak— he was loved.

◀ Go to p. 53

Go to p. 88 ▶

# Sometimes a God is Adorned

*Angelo Hernandez Llavaneras*

Their followers adore what they did for them,  
how they have made them all so strong; their words  
are quickly discarded, since the priests already know  
their meaning, they adorn them with such fine jewelry.  
The jewels hurt against their skin.  
They dress them in the finest silk.  
They miss their old clothes.  
They give them the finest perfume.  
Their lungs burn from it.  
They remove any unsightly parts from Him  
that go against His teachings.  
The cold metal takes more than they thought possible,  
And finally, they decorate His glorious neck  
with all the gold from the kingdom.  
Their neck snaps. The kingdom shows off  
their idol, the closest representation of His image  
that exists, the culmination of the best sculptors.  
It is what most of the conquered see before they die,  
but if you see it without the guide of The Holy Priests,  
you can smell the rot beneath it all  
and see a pained, horrified grimace frozen beneath the paint  
and unmistakable pity in their eyes.

◀ Go to p. 56

Go to p. 117 ▶

# Childbed

*Scarlett Rae Dougherty*

I am not a mother.  
There are days I do not leave my bed,  
spread out on the sheets  
like butter on all that I could  
stuff down when I might have been  
a mother. The lucky girls  
show tiny black images at Christmas,  
a Rorschach test tangle  
of limbs, and I am not a mother  
like they are.

I am nothing more than a shrill scream  
only high enough to break my own water  
glass.

I hold my own  
inkblot baby in bed and nurse the wound  
with salted tears, the celluloid pinprick unraveling  
under the water-weight.

I remember *the* bed,  
crisp sheets stiff as paper  
back in the back room in labor-  
-ious pain, when they said I was done,  
and I outstretched my arms—  
high and waiting for nurses to place a babe in them,  
but I was not a mother, *still*.

◀ Go to p. 85

Go to p. 115 ▶

# Carousel Horse

*Kaylin Choudhry*



◀ Go to p. 13

Go to p. 63 ▶

# Rocky Tunnel

*Amber Cassandro*



◀ Go to p. 55

Go to p. 118 ▶

# The Path Least Spiteful

*Pamela Rosenblum*



◀ Go to p. 84

Go to p. 116 ▶

# Timekeeper

*Jocelyn Gibby*



◀ Go to p. 64

Go to p. 114 ▶

# Prototype

*Sulfur Grantz*

Tell me about your senior,  
That wretched woman who wouldn't wallow under.  
She who knew no king and obeyed no man,  
Who defiled their wedding bed and fled from the flowered garden.  
Who was she? What were her dreams? Hopes? Desires?

Tell me about your junior,  
Man's holy all-mother and bringer of life.  
She who knew him and found purpose in submission,  
Who birthed all of history and brought knowledge to all.  
Who was she? What were her dreams? Hopes? Desires?

Tell me about yourself.  
You.  
What did you do?  
What was done to you?  
What role did you play in His Great Game?

Bones and sinew, muscles and blood,  
Flesh and nerves and hair and nails.  
Why do we fear what makes us us?

Tell me about yourself.  
You  
Who lived all of three minutes,  
A useless bandage for a lustful succubus,  
A shadow of being for a fallen queen.

Tell me about yourself.  
You.

What is there to tell?

◀ Go to p. 12

Go to p. 57 ▶

# How to Get Over Unrequited Love

*Found poem utilizing text from a Reddit thread*  
*[https://www.reddit.com/r/AskWomen/comments/o3avqt/  
how\\_do\\_you\\_get\\_over\\_someone\\_you\\_never\\_dated/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskWomen/comments/o3avqt/how_do_you_get_over_someone_you_never_dated/)*

*Ashley Jane Nickel*

Tell yourself you are mourning a possibility rather than an actual person.

Let it comfort you.  
Allow yourself.  
Grieve and accept.  
Humanize them.

You only had an idea of them, and that's what you were infatuated with.

Tell yourself that you are mourning a possibility. /And you can dream of someone else who is attainable.

Let yourself grieve what you hoped for but never got. /We will all fail each other and we will all fail ourselves. /Oftentimes, we break our own hearts.

Space and time.  
Stay away for awhile.

The ache won't be there anymore.

You are mourning  
a possibility.  
Mourn that loss.  
Think of it as grief.

You tell yourself a story about why it didn't happen. /You're living and learning. And you should be taking notes. /You are entitled to your emotions. I hope that helps.

◀ Go to p. 77

Go to p. 109 ▶

# Inheritance

*Iman Karimah Avila*

make a jack-o-lantern of yourself— carve  
out the flesh where their face slides into  
yours: that brow that is too much like theirs,  
that disdainful slant of their eyes— *your* eyes  
—carve deeper into that burn of ice— that cruel  
temperature of mind you learned to match—  
your tongue— *their* tongue— the edge of  
a knife waiting to disembowel— you cannot  
sever the root that ties you to them without  
cleaving yourself, but you'd gladly

gouge out the pulp of you, set it aflame,  
let the fire devour you.

◀ Go to p. 11

Go to p. 65 ▶

# The Ascent

*Jacobi Brown*

I catch the *clink* of the ice as my pick sprays shards.  
Heaving myself up another hard-won length,  
I hope with a *clank* I haven't climbed too far.

It is beautiful up here, hanging in the heights of stone  
that glisten in the cold sun that sets the frost aglow.  
I taste the *clink* of the ice as my pick sprays shards.

But then, I ask, what drove me to flee the ground?  
The winds of whim had taken me— why do I ask this only now?  
I wish with a *clank* I haven't climbed too far.

Jagged edges of eager ice wrap this mountain's mighty face.  
The path below is blasted and blocked— up is the only way.  
I fear the *clink* of the ice as my pick sprays shards.

Teeth gritted, digits gripping, the chill stinging my skin, I  
swear to myself I'll wage this war 'til I die or 'til I win.  
I hope with a *clank* I haven't climbed too far.

I heave myself up another hard-won length  
as I become aware of my now-flagging strength.  
I brave the *clink* of the ice as my pick sprays shards...  
and I pray with a *clank* I have not climbed too far.

◀ Go to p. 45

Go to p. 104 ▶

# Pectus Excavatum

*Halle Gauthier*



◀ Go to p. 64

Go to p. 102 ▶

# Gift of Light

*Amy Lin Taing*



◀ Go to p. 116

Go to p. 121 ▶

# To Build a Nation

*In the style of Lisel Mueller's "Spell for a Traveler"*

*Lauren Nicolosi*

Bring me the rain that has yet to fall  
from soupy skies  
    over the Space Needle.  
From Old Faithful bring me the smell of sulfur  
    I can take a match to.  
From the Six Grandfathers, bring me a sordid history  
    of love and loss,  
        always loss.

From the green rolling hills near Kitty Hawk  
    bring back the splintered remnants of the Wright Flyer.

from the tangled overgrowth of the Bonaventure Cemetery  
    bring back the wispy Spanish Moss that hangs over tombstones.  
From the polished wrought-iron gates of the French Quarter  
    bring back buckets of haint blue and sanctified spirits.

From the Alamo, which we must never forget,  
    bring me the rifle of Davy Crockett  
    from the mass grave in the back of the San Fernando Cathedral.

From the edge of the Grand Canyon call America's name,  
    see who answers.

From the highest point of Angels Landing cry in despair,  
    laugh in relief.  
From the lowest point of Hoover's dam,  
    may the damned,

come back,  
    come back.

◀ Go to p. 29

Go to p. 62 ▶

# Call Her Music

*Pamela Rosenblum*

Because she is my muse.  
A chip off Bach's cello—  
sweet and mellow, creates her  
melody singing through puffs of air.

Whistling between chimes,  
her breath supports each clink.  
I tap those notes on an old piano,  
hands brushing against grain traced

in the wood by her gentle touch.  
Pen scrolling on staff paper as  
a sunflower sways in her tempo.  
Time ticks with her cat behind its pulse.

She is my muse,  
felt like Air on the G String.  
She reverberates through all I experience  
and felt in all I muse about.

◀ Go to p. 103

Go to p. 115 ▶

# Side B

Scan to Listen



## Yongdie Jiang:

“I am Yongdie, a music composition major passionate about modern classical music and film scoring. 2025 Protest is inspired by recent protests in the United States, channeling the urgency and emotion of collective action into a contemporary string orchestra. I strive to create music that speaks to the present moment, blending cinematic storytelling with classical form to evoke both reflection and response.”



**Elly Gelfo:** A note from the music editor: the original piano version of this piece was created as the first project for Composition last semester, and the string orchestra version was completed as the first project for Orchestration this semester. These pieces are robust, adventurous, and mystical. The musical ideas were further exemplified in the strings version, but both are a worthy listen!



---

## “Cibation” by Eleanor Likes



Scan to Watch



◀ Go to p. 9

Go to p. 96 ▶

# Awards

We are pleased to announce the winners of the  
Dr. Michael McMahan Award for Excellence in Writing and the Arts...

**Excellence in Poetry:**

“Pound Dog” by Beck Watson

**Excellence in Creative Nonfiction:**

“Understanding Sentimental Hoarding” by Renee Gomez-Serna

**Excellence in Photography:**

“Oh My Stars, You Undo Me” by Clayton McCutcheon  
and “Present Portals” by Clayton McCutcheon

**Excellence in Art:**

“All Knowing” by Skye O’Connor

**Excellence in Music:**

“2025 Protest” by Yongdie Jiang

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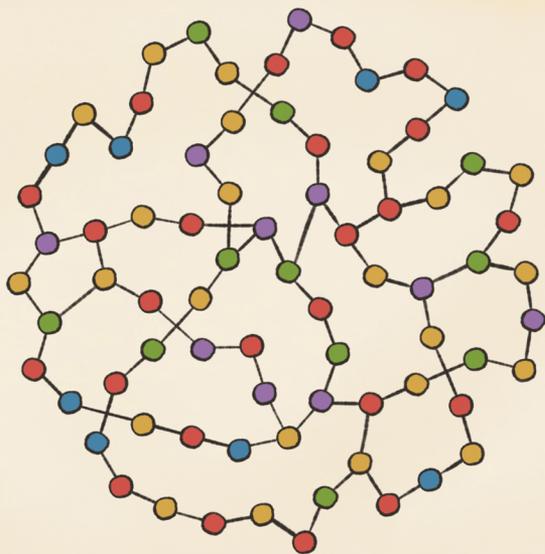




*Well-met, friend! Your story has found its way to this chapter's end. Did the trip take the shape and form you were expecting? It seldom does— but of course, that's part of the fun. It isn't much of a journey if the conclusion doesn't drop you off some distance from where you've started, and hopefully the creative work you've encountered on this little jaunt has taken you to a new and interesting place that you haven't visited before. But now that you're here, take a moment to appreciate where you are. Right now, you're standing weightless, poised on a ledge that spans the gap between the final step of one adventure and the first foray into another. The curious thing is that our paths, our directions, our worldlines are all completely, beautifully, irreplaceably unique— and yet, no matter what path each person takes to get there, we humans all must come to the same ending in this world. That gives us all a profoundly fundamental kind of kinship.*

*But just because this chapter is over doesn't mean the real journey is ending, too. The path laid before your feet sets off beyond the pages of the little leaf in the wind you're holding and disappears over the horizon, going places that no one can see ahead of time with certainty— not even you. That, of course, raises the obvious question: Where will you go next?*

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