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Mission Viejo, CA

WALL LITERARY JOURNAL 2022

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WALL
Literary Journal

2022



WALL

Literary Journal
2022

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WALL is a student-produced literary journal of Saddleback College. All entries were submitted by students of Saddleback College. Submissions to WALL are reviewed, selected, and edited by the students on the journal staff.

We accept entries that embrace all viewpoints and walks of life.

However, the opinions and ideas contained here in no way represent those of Saddleback College or the South Orange County Community College District Board of Trustees; they are solely those of the authors and creators of these particular works.

To submit your work for the 2023 edition of WALL, please see the guidelines for submission at www.saddleback.edu/la/wall.

The deadline is January 25, 2023.

WALL

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

MISSION STATEMENT

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

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“Are We Out of the Woods Yet?” The first time I read the title of the captivating colored pencil drawing that graces this year’s cover of WALL, I immediately interpreted it as an apt phrase to cover a multitude of calamities that characterize the state of the nation and world in 2022. In addition to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, we are experiencing mass shootings, inflationary and recessionary economic pressures, erratic climate shifts, and political instability and violence, including the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Avery Bonnette describes her rendering of a troubled woman whose face is mirrored in triple reflections as a visual exploration of identity issues and subconsciousness. But she concedes that the image invites multiple interpretations. So does the enigmatic title, a phrase that traces back to at least the late 18th century to describe the literal dangers involved in being lost in a forest but has since taken on the meaning of no longer being “in danger or difficulty,” according to the Cambridge Dictionary.

The word “we” in the title of the drawing implies that all of us are connected to each other through our common humanity and shared experiences. That is a simple way to explain the concept of “sonder” described by Editor-in-Chief Lizeth Tello as the unifying theme within the literary and artistic works in the 2022 edition of WALL. I recommend reading her Editor’s Note on the next page for a more detailed explanation, but for me, it suggests that we are surrounded by unnoticed others who are experiencing struggles and triumphs similar to ours. Part of WALL’s mission is to help readers and viewers experience that sense of sonder by being sensitive to the stories people carry within them, stories that inspire us and amplify our capacity for empathy.

The sense of unity implied by the term “sonder” is also apparent in the network of campus and district supporters who make WALL possible. These benefactors include Dr. Kathleen F. Burke, Ed.D., who served as South Orange County Community College District Chancellor from 2018 to 2022; Dr. Julianna M. Asperin Barnes, who assumed the role of Chancellor in August 2022; and the district’s Board of Trustees: Marcia Milchiker, Timothy Jemal, Terri Whitt Rydell, Carolyn Inmon, Barbara J. Jay, T.J. Prendergast III, and Rachel Abalos. We also are fortunate to receive stalwart support from Dr. Elliot Stern, President of Saddleback College, and from Dr. Kevin O’Connor, Dean Emeritus of the Liberal Arts Division, whose encouragement and inspiration have contributed significantly to the success of the journal.

Special thanks goes to professors Suki Fisher, Catherine Hayter, Bill Stevenson, Brett Myhren, Bridget Hoida, Jennifer Hedgecock, Ray Zimmerman, and Shellie Ochi of the English Department; Khaver Akhter and Cynthia Luher of the Liberal Arts Division; Professors Karen Taylor, Christopher Clafin, Louis Bispo, and Avery Caldwell of the Graphics Department; Dr. Scott Farthing, Dean of the Fine Arts and Media Technology Division; Professors Barbara Holmes (Art); Ariel Alexander (Music); Deidre Cavazzi (Dance); Larry Radden (Speech); Matt Brodet and Randy Van Dyke (Cinema-TV-Radio); Ryan Even (Photography); and Professors Timothy Posada and Mary-Anne Shults of the Journalism Department. Other supporters include Kristen Bush and Donna Pribyl of the Graphic Services Department; Ali Dorri, an instructional assistant for the Lariat; Bruce Parker of PJ Printers; and the Science Scholarship Foundation.

Whether we are out of the woods yet remains an open-ended existential question, but it is my hope that the 2022 edition of WALL serves as a source of wisdom, solace, revelation, and inspiration while wandering through the wilderness.

Gina Victoria Shaffer
Faculty Advisor
WALL 2022

EDITOR’S NOTE

While going about your day, have you ever taken a moment to stop and really think about the people and events happening around you? We are the stars of our own stories, but we are far from the only characters. We encounter countless people every day and often pay them no mind. They are side characters, blurred silhouettes in the background, figures that seem insignificant in relation to the main plot line or big picture. These side or background characters are simply blank faces at face value, but a closer look reveals a complex web of experiences and connections. When walking down the street, the person sitting against the wall could be homeless, an unfortunate circumstance caused by the recent recession, and is stressing over how they’ll be able to feed their one and only companion while also avoiding starving themselves. The person in a suit could have just returned from a work meeting, ecstatic to share the news of their promotion to close friends and family. The small child by the ice cream truck could easily be in a troubled mindset, conflicted by the knowledge that their family has only two months left with their mother.

The world does not revolve around just one person and it is that thought that circled in my mind when deciding the theme for this edition of WALL. For those who are unaware, the term “sonder” refers to the revelation that the people around us are “living a life just as complex and vivid as our own,” as defined by John Koenig, a writer, editor, artist, and filmmaker. It was coined by Koenig in 2012 as part of his project *The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*. He aimed to create new words for the emotions that had yet to be given a specific name. Sonder hints at a deep connection we all share through our experiences by reminding us to practice empathy. Every life is unique and assumptions are best avoided, but there is no denying that we are all connected by our emotions, deep within our souls. Main characters do not truly exist; neither do background or side characters. We are all just people, each attempting to live our lives the best we can.

We are all a part of a network of stories that creates one giant story, the main one known as our reality. These narratives make up our history, our culture, and our knowledge. They teach us lessons and preserve the past. I’ve always been intrigued by stories, whether fictional or not, and being given the opportunity to participate in the production of WALL this year has brought me a lot of excitement. It was both enlightening and fun to see the journal being put together by our team of editors, as well as reading, sorting through, and editing submissions from various Saddleback students. Each piece offers a unique experience of its own, but a main theme stands out in each one. Using these themes, ranging from struggles with relationships and identity, to accepting change, becoming self-reliant, facing trauma, and finding redemption, we’ve arranged these tales in such a way as to mimic the structure of the story of our existence. Similar themes are grouped together, but ultimately the works chronologically flow with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

To Professor Gina Shaffer, the WALL staff, submission contributors, and everyone else involved, thank you for allowing such a wonderful space for creative expression to exist. It was an honor to be your editor-in-chief. To every reader, I hope you enjoy the plethora of creative works this journal has to offer and revel in its abundance of emotion. On behalf of the WALL staff, we present the 2022 edition of WALL Literary Journal.

Lizeth Tello
Editor-in-Chief
WALL 2022

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ON THE COVER: Design by Chelsey Bennett using
ARE WE OUT OF THE WOODS YET?,
a colored pencil drawing by Avery Bonnette

*Please see the QR code for a reading of the poem set to music

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A LETTER TO A FRIEND

Matt Cuevas

Dear Friend,

I'm a bit lost this season. Overall, the weather is getting colder and my hair is getting longer, but I feel too lazy to go out and get it cut. If I can find them, comfy beanies and bulky coats will soon become the norm again. As the autumn colors fall and the geese head south, I remain unmoved. Here, in this town, I am a piece to a game that's missing its favorite player. You are not of this world anymore, and I am beginning to wonder if I will ever learn to accept that. Hopefully in time, but as for now, I remain in love with the world seen through your eyes. Only now that you are gone, I've become blind. I am starting to forget your face. I guess we should've taken more pictures, but you always wanted to live in the moment. I know you can't write back. I mean, how could you? But I really need your guidance for my next move. God only knows my last one was pitiful. Where should I go? What should I do? What hand should I play next? Should it be something complex and grandiose or maybe something simple, like to finally stop procrastinating and just get my hair cut? In time, I hope to see you again. Hopefully sooner than later. Either way, I know that somehow we will meet again. And in that moment, when I see your face, I'll remember just how beautiful you are.

Sincerely,

Your Friend

SUMMER SKIES

Josh Hoopes



PHOTOGRAPH

GOLDEN

Dana Wilske



Illustration by Walter Costescu

Find me all in blue,
fingers tapping your forget-me-not bedspread.
I ask, Do you? Do you still?
Your eyes are pretty, cold sea glass.
I am kept alive by scraps.

Find me soaked in grey,
anchored by your promises, drowning beneath your waves.
I ask, Did you ever?
but only air bubbles escape.
The shore seems closer than it did before.

Find me framed in gold,
Sparking indignation at your touch, but
you can't extinguish me. I burn brighter than I did
when I thought you did, too.
You can stay and simmer, but me, I'm molten.

DIVINE COMEDY

Alexis Backstrand

Cracks, blemishes, creases and folds
Two broken far before foretold
A mother pried a world away
While the father, shattered, chose to stay.

A son, chained, between his parents
A cell, open air, all transparent
A father to stay, a mother to go
A father to stay, nowhere, not home.

Pushing the boulder up on his mountain
Sisyphus climbed, a son. Soot and ashen
Caught in that hell he calls a home
In a circle, No Dante, No Virgil, alone.

Sisyphus, too, must have a father
Does he, as well, not show, not bother?
Surely he has no muse, no Beatrice
For who could love a fiend—lost, hideous?

Deep beneath the stone and rock
Lie Hell's captives, writhed with rot
Battered, they wait for the spring
Though none escapes, save Persephone.

Seasons change, the land grows bare
A man delves into his deep despair
Lost a wife, nowhere to go
Into the crucible to retrieve her soul.

Down into the darkened flames
Instructed not to meet her gaze
Orpheus turned, his character faltered
Oh! Poor Eurydice cursed to wander.

Orpheus returned without his lover
Lost, sang songs of one another
Though love would not meet his gaze
He would meet her, beyond his grave.

Thus we see the divine comedy
Broken yet beautiful integrity.

THE CREATION OF MOUSE

Samantha Buck



OIL ON CANVAS

CHOCOLATE COSMOS

Elijah Santiago



PHOTOGRAPH

DREAM TOWN

Stephen Myer

As a child, I was cursed with a certain fever neither prayer nor prescription could remedy. I remained weak in body and mind. My petitions to heaven and science went unanswered. The heavy oaken door of my house remained locked to protect me from perdition. Guilty of never committing the sins of passion, I was sentenced to incessant ennui during my youth.

Of course, there were nights in my cloistered childhood when curiosity tempered despair, and I believed myself capable, in these moments, of snapping the latch that firmly secured the door. How I yearned to steal a glimpse of things one should savor in youth, when callow blood rages through one's veins—the powerful but temporal gift of puerile delight. Yet the dread of opening doors terrified me. I feared being discovered.

Years passed. I grew old and nature no longer censured curiosity. With all my strength, I pried open the door, then squeezed through the crevasse and languidly strolled along the path from my house past the silent others.

I became a nightwalker. At the sound of my footsteps, respectful crickets ceased their raspy chatter, of which I could barely understand a word. The evening air felt crisp and clean and liberating as I scuffed my heels along the moonless way. I knew nothing else to compare this pleasure to, so I believed it to be ecstasy. I stopped in front of each house to inhale the heady fragrance of my neighbors' shadowy gardens, illuminated only by vapors of light from scattered streetlamps.

There among the gardens swayed infinite flowers in night's muted colors. They spoke to me in floral languages that I understood. They were polite but troubled by the thought of losing eternity. I listened and wept, unable to offer advice.

The night grew cold and heavy with dew. Several blossoms surrendered to the chill. They pleaded with me not to let them die. Oh, how I exhausted myself explaining to each fading petal they were just the first to leave Dream Town, and we would all eventually follow.

"Please hold on for as long as you can, for your beauty is the salvation of man," I begged them.

How could I speak of life when I had stifled it myself? What more could I say, knowing nothing about the happiness of flowers?

As I passed the gardens on my return, the night mist gathered each scent into a redolent bouquet and handed it to me. How this joy penetrated my being. I held it within me as long as I could, then exhaled its pleasure, expecting more with each breath, to comfort me in the illusion of everlasting evenings. After all, I deserved such compensation. I had paid it forward in my youth.

The crickets (aware of my return) resumed their raucous serenade. I slipped past the door and undressed, then lay upon my satin sheets, staring at the florid frescoes on the low ceiling. My eyelids grew heavy as life's perfume brought peaceful sleep, with the promise that every awakening would beget a new beginning, by the authority vested in dreams.

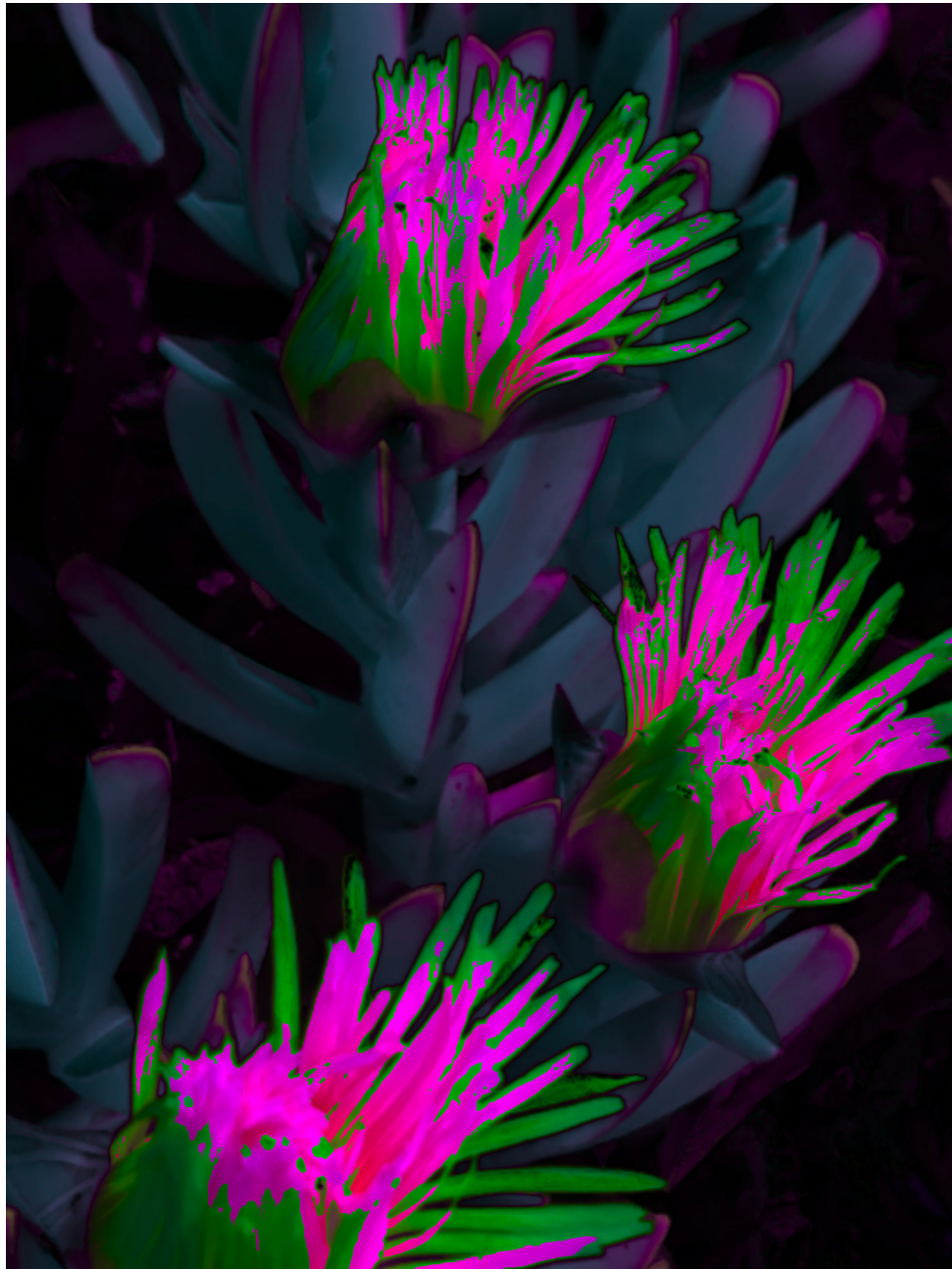


Illustration by Chelsey Bennett

DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION

FICTION

VIVID
Chelsey Bennett



PHOTOGRAPH

IN YOUR DREAMS
Alani Walraven



PHOTOGRAPH

INSOMNEUROTIC

Kelly Daub

wind down, wind down
clear your head.
sleep, sleep now,
go to bed.
trickle, trickle,
drip, drop.
trickle, trickling,
thought, thoughts.
a plan, a checklist,
avoidance, despair,
light's out, leg's out,
my nose, my hair,
my child, my future,
my husband, my fate.
shut it down, shut down,
no more worry, it's late.
wind down, slow down,
give it a rest.
sleep, sleep now,
to be at your best.

tick tock
tick tock
watching
minutes
pass
on a clock.
ten, eleven,
one, three,
gone, wasted
spent on nothing.
six, seven,
time to arise,
covers over head,
hide, hide, hide.

I HATE MY GUTS

Kimberly Dzwonkowski

“Any questions for me?” my doctor asked, forcing his face to be serious but unable to fully hide the hideous laughter threatening to flood out of his thin, tense lips.

“Yes. Um. What is so funny?”

“Do you remember anything about the procedure?”

Beyond the crippling fear of death I’d swallowed along with the tiny camera he used to probe for signs of fatal disease, no, nothing of note.

“That kind of anesthesia usually knocks people out,” he continued. “But there are some rare ones who stay awake... and talk.”

“I’m rare.”

“Very.”

“What did I say?”

“You really don’t remember anything?”

I remember Shakira. He was playing Shakira, that song about her not-lying hips, but I couldn’t exactly tell because it was all in Spanish. I thought she sounded great. I remember wondering if she had nice, honest intestines to match her not-lying hips. They had to be healthy to whip around like they did when she danced. Mine felt stiff like they were made of lead, like I had complicated automotive exhaust pipes instead of supple guts comprising my entire digestive system. I remember thinking, “Can you imagine if this is the last sound I ever hear on Earth?” I remember wondering until I don’t remember wondering anything at all.

I stared at Dr. Jeremy’s almost handsome face and wondered what kind of doctor listens to Shakira in Spanish as mood music for an endoscopy. Maybe Dr. Jeremy was a secret musician. A larger wind instrument like a bassoon felt fitting for a gastroenterologist. He smiled his almost arresting smile, a giggle still pulling at his cheeks, and patted my hand. I stared at him with laser eyes and willed him to speak, to spill it, to tell me what the deepest crevices and corners of my insides told him when the anesthesia gave them voice.

“It’s probably best,” he chuckled before shifting to leave.

“I remember Shakira!” I blurted, not wanting the conversation to be over because he could not leave without telling me what I said.

And then he let the laughter loose. It shook his shoulders, the cot, the recovery room, and my soul. He was like a dragon breathing fire, only it was laughter and it singed my skin as it sailed over me, sinking into my ears and throat, leaving behind smoke that was heavy and choking, burning me to my very core. For a moment, I forgot I had just received a life-altering diagnosis after a year of suffering.

It was supposed to be the best year of my life. I had birthed the baby I had always dreamed about, the wish that had extinguished every hopeful birthday candle, the longing desire I breathed into the sky to any shining star, not just the North Star because I’m not NASA down here, but all twinkly stars in any direction: please, please, I want a daughter so badly, please. While I spent a year taking thousands of photos of her thriving and growing, I withered. My skin turned gray. My hair started falling out in clumps. I threw up everything I ate. I felt pain, so much pain, all the time. But I was a mom at last, and a working one to boot, so I moved through life, smiling with rouged cheeks, cinching my pants bit by bit, going from daycare to work to home, armed with hair scarves and breath mints, trying to ignore that something was wrecking my body, something was making me

double over in pain and sob silently alone in the shower, until a nurse practitioner in my gynecologist’s office saw me for my “well-woman” visit and noticed I was not, in fact, a well woman at all.

Dr. Jeremy was her recommendation. After presenting him a color-coded spreadsheet detailing all of my symptoms, which no other doctor took seriously, he did the unthinkable. He listened. He ordered tests. Prior to his hideous laughter, he diagnosed me, circling the obvious signs of damage in my small intestine that confirmed I had celiac disease, a condition that must have been dormant in my body until activated by my daughter’s difficult birth. He assured me this was good news because, while the damage was extreme, I wasn’t dying yet and it just meant I couldn’t digest gluten. I couldn’t digest wheat, rye, barley, spelt, couscous, wheat bran, wheat starch, wheat flour... I couldn’t digest not knowing.

“What did I say?” I pressed.

“Let’s just leave it with Shakira,” he whispered, his lips still pulled in a giggle. I imagined him with a villain’s mustache, twisting one curling end with his dainty, probing fingers while he used his other hand to fan his smirking face with the black and white portrait of my guts, his red Sharpie marks outlining my rot in tiny circles and arrows that made the image bleed.

“Do you want to keep the photo of your damaged intestines?”

“I do, yes, very much, thank you.”

**“ He was like a dragon breathing fire,
only it was laughter
and it singed my skin as it sailed over me... ”**

While I stuck with the diet, the rot of not knowing gnawed at my insides. I meditated. I tried to slip myself into states of hypnosis before bed to try to bring up details of what I might have said, what deep secrets Shakira unlocked, what truths her un-lying hips shook out of my mouth. It became hard to focus on remedies and treatments. During a phone call to discuss his findings after watching hours of footage on fast forward of my digestive system passing a pill-sized camera, Dr. Jeremy revealed two details:

“I watched your footage while listening to Slayer.”

Oh, fitting.

“Also, you have stomach lesions that might explain the burning.”

Oh, lesions. Right. Or it could be regret. Shame. The sting of unanswered questions.

The truth was Dr. Jeremy could send cameras down into my darkness and find ulcers and nubby things that might explain the sickness I felt, but I couldn’t be healed until I traveled that darkness myself. On some level, I knew the secrets I told him, but whatever they were, I had stuffed them down so deep inside me, then built walls and a life on top, that they only surfaced when my guards loosened, like when under the influence of Shakira, or as sores marking my insides, little wounds festering like tiny volcanoes ready to blow.

I hadn’t confided in Dr. Jeremy that I was a murderer and that no one should ever, under any circumstances, look inside my garage freezer. But... I might have told him I had stolen a tiny rubber stamp from a novelty shop when I was a kid and then buried it in the backyard, only to be haunted by it, so I flushed it down the toilet. I might have told him I have no sense of direction to such a stunning degree that even my own neighborhood

often looks foreign, and I feel lost all the time. I might have confessed that I subscribe to Highlights Magazine for children because I love the hidden pictures. Or that I like to iron. Or that I didn't learn to swim until I was an adult. Or that when teenage me went to Sam Goody to buy CDs with my allowance, I skipped over R.E.M. and Nirvana and Alanis and went straight to Barbra Streisand, specifically the soundtrack to *Yentl*, of which there was miraculously one single copy that I listened to far too many times.

Or... I told him my Unspeakables. That I feel disappointed in myself. That I feel undesired. That I feel horrible that I feel anything but undying gratitude because all the twinkly stars granted my wish. I got what I wanted and I feel so happy, but it's hard, and I also feel alone. So alone. But determined to make it all so pretty, so I charge relentlessly forward, only to keep moving in a circle with rouged cheeks and cinched pants, going from daycare to work to home, the circle of life, devoted and dazzling but damaged inside my hips that lie. Damaged because I pump all of myself into other people so they thrive and change and look radiant in thousands of pictures while I wither behind the camera, singing "Cheese!" Smiling. Forcing my face to be happy but unable to fully hide the hideous sadness threatening to flood out of my glossed, tense lips. I am sad that I will never be enough for my dreams because it's hard to be everything at once and when I try, I spread myself so thin that all nourishment and joy passes through me, rushing, unable to stick and plant and grow as I charge relentlessly forward, wasting away bit by bit, losing my color until I simply disappear.

I stopped seeing Dr. Jeremy even though he was the best doctor I ever had. I couldn't digest that he'd seen my insides completely, that he'd shed light on all the darkest corners and seen the rot and pools of acidic despair. I couldn't look at his almost handsome face and listen to him talk earnestly of steroids and antacids when I knew what was really eating me up inside. I Google him now and then hoping to see that he's aging badly, but the portrait on his profile for the medical center remains unchanged, perhaps because it is the same photo or perhaps because he doesn't age, his perpetual youth fed by the secrets of the patients he probes, lubricating their confessions with the dulcet sounds of Shakira. Ever since we broke up, I have tried a new gastroenterologist, an acupuncturist, a cognitive behavioral therapist, healing crystals, Reiki, and a psychic. I have never fully turned the scope on myself. While I have quieted them significantly, my insides still burn. I've learned to live with it.



SECOND NATURE

Noah Izaiah

nothing feels like it did at sixteen.
colors are brighter and duller all at once.
my head has been breaching the water's surface
for the longest time.
maybe i will love you forever, but
how long is that exactly? until death? or after?
my eyes burn from looking
at the hot summer sun.
sometimes it hurts to think
about the person i used to be.
an angry, withered, festering soul
moth-holes and fraying edges.
i am rebuilding it slowly despite nature's protests.

ALL MY ROCK TEES ARE BLACK

Eric Lee Ososki

All of my rock and roll tee shirts are black.
Sometimes, I really wish that they were
Colors that did match my brown applejack
And in the sun left me not to be burned.

Then again, if I stop to think of it,
Black really is the best one of all.

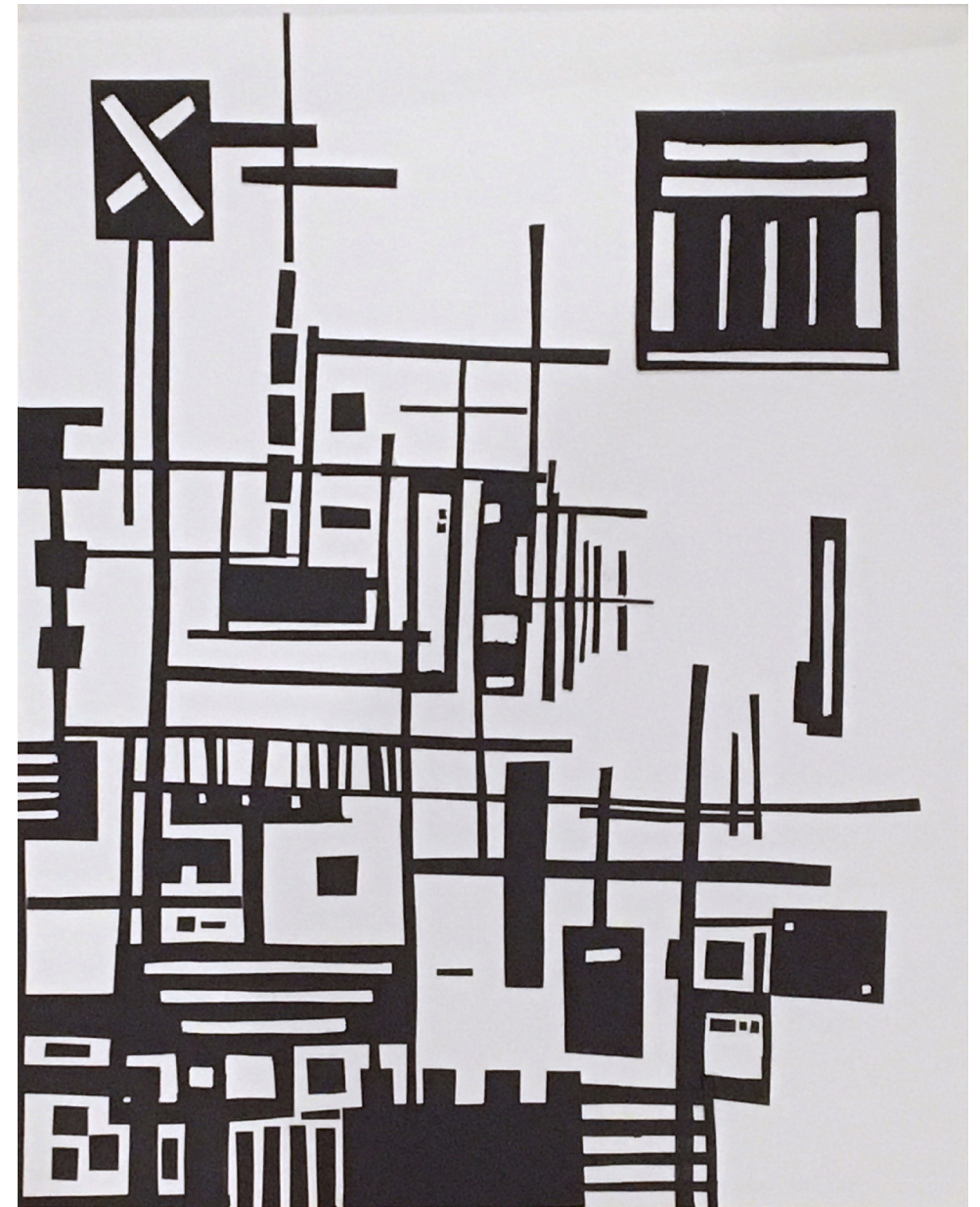
What other color speaks, spitting vomit,
And, like a snake charmer, keeps me enthralled?

In truth, a color in fact black is not.
Black is all the other colors combined.
When mixed together, they form leather wrought
In fabric spine, rock and roll tee design.

So, if I wear black and you think me trash,
I will see you in hell with Johnny Cash.

STREETS ON A MOTHERBOARD

Angelica Petersen



PAPER ON BRISTOL

POETRY

DAYZ

Nathan Smith

I awoke one morning to a glaring sun piercing through the tree line. I looked around me to see a bright blue sky accompanied by the constant splashing of waves beating against my eardrums. I had no memory of my previous life—only that I was now suddenly on this desolate beach surrounded by a beautiful but barren landscape. There was no sign of any people so I began to walk. Hours passed by until finally, I came upon a small town. *Strange*, I thought to myself; there was still not a single person in sight. It was as if we were in the apocalypse. I walked into a convenience store covered in broken glass and empty cans strewn across the floor. I began to feel very uncomfortable; I knew that something had to be wrong. *Why don't I remember who I am? Where is everyone?* I thought to myself nervously. I continued rummaging through the store and, to my surprise, found a can of beans! I was starving so it was a welcome sight. As I began to reach for the can, I heard faint footsteps from down the street. *A person*, I thought to myself! The beans would have to wait.

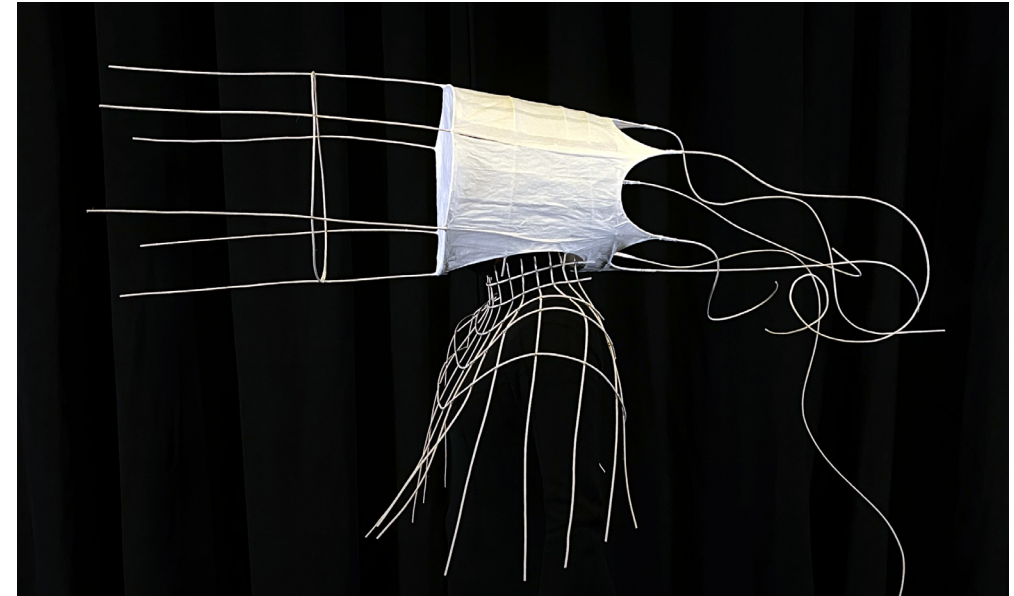
I looked out the door and saw the silhouette of what looked to be a very disheveled individual, but I was happy to see anyone in such a desolate place. As I approached, the being turned around and let out a grotesque noise. A bloody face with skin almost falling off, a missing eye, and a pool of liquid dripping from its mouth turned to greet me. This was no human; it let out a large screech and began to charge me. I was a deer in the headlights, unable to move from fear of death. His lifeless piercing eyes were inches away from me when suddenly BANG! A loud shot rang out and echoed throughout the valley. The figure slumped down in front of me. A man in a bush costume with a big gun emerged from the trees. He said, "I'll take those beans as payment." I didn't think twice about it and handed him the can. If he could kill that monster with such ease, I didn't want to know how easy it would be for him to dispose of me.

I suddenly began to feel like I had been here before. I remembered; I had been here before. This is where every survivor goes when he dies out in the waste. We all respawn at the coast to loot up and make our way back up north. Suddenly, another gunshot rang out. I looked to my left and my bushman friend was lying on the floor. He said, "I don't want to forget. It's just a game." I had no idea what he meant. BANG! Another gunshot rang out, but this time I was hit. My vision began to fade and everything was going black. In my final moments, I suddenly understood what my friend had meant when he said it's all a game. I awoke to a glaring sun piercing through the tree line. All I could hear was the crashing of waves with no recollection of who I am.



PROJECTION

Maya Tellez



WICKER AND RICE PAPER

PUPPET

Victoria Schmaltz

For sixteen years, I lived in exhausting complacency, tossed around by a ruthless foe I was too afraid to classify. Terrified of the possibilities of what could make me feel like such a freak: OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder). In the aftermath of a world around me being shattered by grief and sickness, I stumbled upon the key to unlock my lifelong prison: vulnerability. This epiphany assisted me to open up to the people who would help me face my demons through love and guidance.

In middle school, an awkward time for everyone, I discovered a controversial and under-the-rug aspect of our society: people love appearances. The more weight I lost, the more power I felt I gained in a superficial world. I would find out later that OCD and eating disorders often coexist. The same energy and obsession one has about germs or order can be directed to one's eating habits. I felt more in control of my life, yet it wasn't enough. I kept finding new ways to lose weight.

In high school, I settled into a meticulous routine. I had lists and regimes for every day of the week. I composed lists to record calories, lists to keep track of the workouts I was doing, and lists for anything that would help me stay sane. The September of my sophomore year, I had reached my lowest weight I had ever been since I wore pigtails and jelly shoes. When I stepped on the scale and bowed my head to look at the same digits I watched flicker every morning, I was about 5 feet 6 inches tall and weighed 103 pounds. At a certain point, I decided I had everything in order, or at least I set up the house of cards so that they were balanced. I was skinny, made new and better friends, and had finally crafted a military-like routine to run my meticulous life. Sure, I was tired from a lack of nutrition and the rituals of cleanliness; I adopted an obsession with cleanliness around this time, but I was "free" from the thoughts that would plague me if I stepped out of line. In the back of my mind, I still remained so afraid of what could possibly have been wrong with me my entire life. I figured if I kept up my rituals, I would be okay and wouldn't have to look deeper within, so I remain closed off from the possibility of any bombshell discoveries.

“The more weight I lost, the more power I felt I gained in a superficial world.”

Then the house of cards fell and I was forced out of my comfort zone. A close relative of mine died of a stroke. It was the darkest period of my life; I felt hopeless and alone. I was acting out with my family and friends, hurting them with my words and being selfish. My mind was plagued with dark ruminating thoughts about death, which would haunt me in the day and become almost unbearable at night. Starving myself became a coping mechanism for my despair. Finally, my mom got fed up with my jumpy behavior and I was so broken by grief and tired of keeping up my routines that I gave into her wishes of seeking help for whatever was causing me so much pain.



Illustration by Juno Martinez

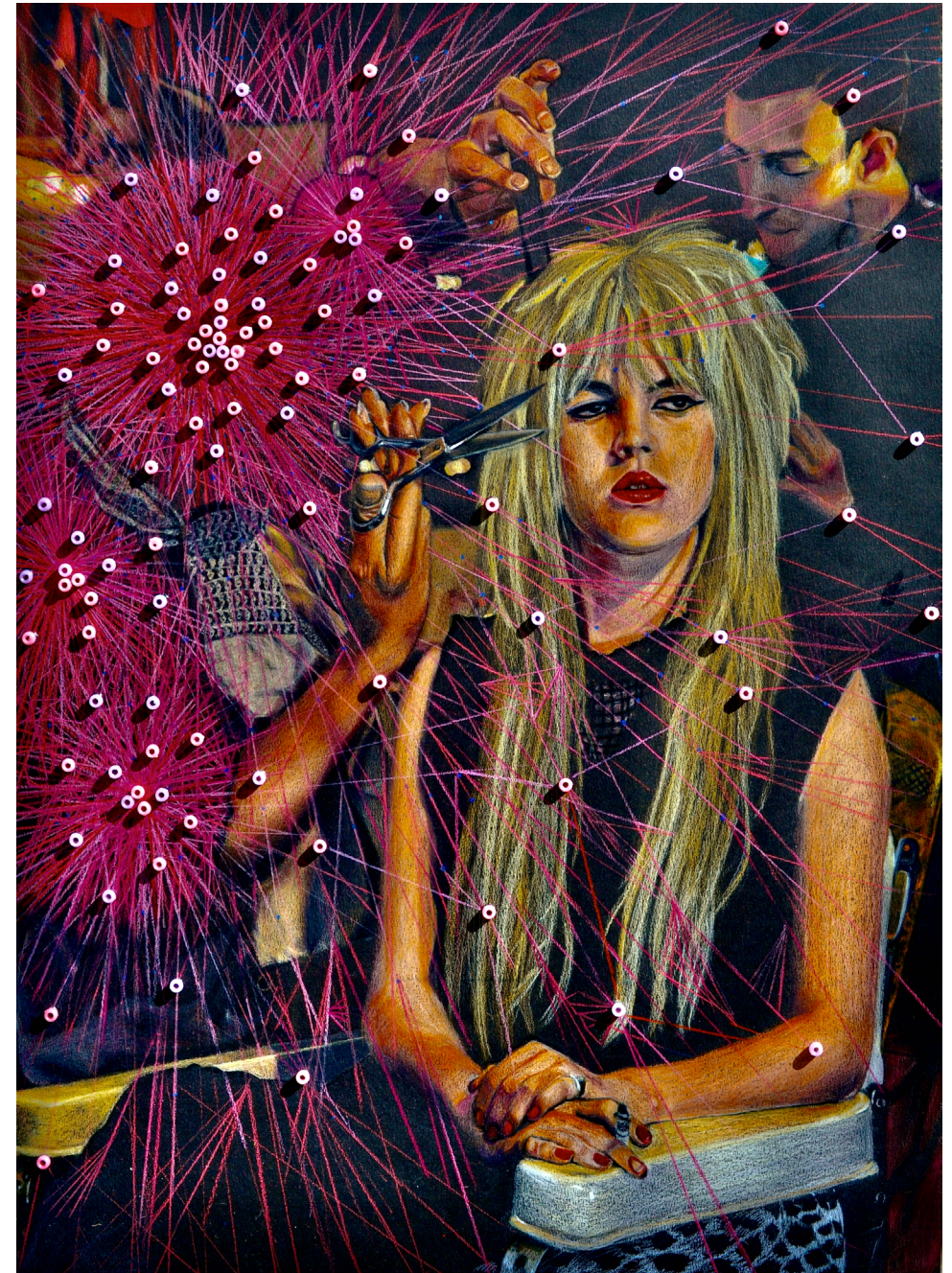
When I sat down to talk with a doctor in a cold office, I was afraid of what she would say. *Maybe I'm just crazy*, I thought. It wasn't long before the doctor told me that I had OCD and explained what that meant. One in 40 people in the U.S. suffer from OCD. Immediately after I was diagnosed, I felt a sigh of relief. After all, maybe it's true that a foe without a name cannot be defeated. I started opening up to my counselor about my various superstitions and phobias about death. I once felt fearful of discovering the true puppeteer of my pain, but now I was freed by the knowledge I had gained. I viewed my identity and my illness as two separate beings. I listened to the advice of my doctor and started eating more as well as healthier. I knew if I wanted to regain true control of my life, rather than the artificial control I currently had, I would need the energy to do so.

I still have days when I am overtaken by the feeling that I am a marionette being controlled by some strange, malicious puppeteer. But now I can rationalize my obsessive thoughts and compulsions as side effects of a chemical imbalance in my ventral striatum. I am learning to accept myself and have a better sense of self-awareness. At my lowest point, my brain fuzzy from starvation, I realized that if I kept suffering in silence and fear, I would die without ever truly understanding what was killing me. Every day is a boxing match with myself, but the lessons I have learned provide me with the mental strength to keep fighting.



CONTROLLED

Yoonseo Lee (Yoon)



COLORED PENCIL AND BEADS

“I THINK I’M GAY”

Ivanna Arredondo

It was a sunny day in early spring in Irvine, California, in 2013. I would dare say we had been eagerly waiting for a sunny day. Southern California seems to stay hot even in the winter, but, for some reason, it felt like we had been looking forward to a day like this for a while. It felt like a typical Sunday, which consisted of going to church and, if things were not tense that day, even going to lunch. I say “tense” because my mother, my brother, and I lived in a one-bedroom apartment with not a lot of room for activity. This meant we saw each other’s faces 24/7 and there was no way of escaping. My brother, Sebastian, was a 17-year-old teenager, who half of the time could not even stand himself. My mother, Sylvia, was in the mid-stages of menopause. I, Ivanna, on the other hand, was a 13-year-old girl who did everything in her power to avoid conflict. Even if it meant sacrificing my own peace of mind for it. Living with an annoying adolescent and a mood-swinging, menopausal woman meant conflict could arise from placing the toothpaste tube in the wrong drawer or from turning the TV volume a little too loud.

Sebastian had always been a sweet kid, the boy that teachers would pick as their favorite because they saw something bright and different in him. I guess the key word is *different* because that’s the same word my parents used to describe him every time they talked about him. This always left me guessing that *different* had a positive connotation to my parents because no parent talks badly about their own children. Sebastian has had an angelic face since he was born, with a long body and olive skin. I’ve always envied the color of his skin because every summer he would turn golden, and his hair would turn into golden curls that looked like instant ramen. Sebastian’s personality was fragile since he was little and would break easily. He was shy and didn’t have a lot of friends. At school, he only had female friends because boys would always treat him badly and make fun of him. My parents, especially my mother, had done everything in their power to protect him. They would always have arguments about whether overprotecting him would end up messing him up rather than helping him.

I, on the other hand, was outgoing and very sociable. My parents said that I would talk to whoever stood in my way, including rocks. This is a personality trait that I got from my mother, who would befriend whoever was standing in front of her at the grocery store. For her, it was so hard discovering that her beloved son would turn into a monster as soon as he hit adolescence. My mother was menopausal, had just gone through a divorce, moved to a foreign country, and was living with two teenagers. I guess we could say she was going through a lot. It was difficult for Sebastian and me to understand what was happening because we were so young.

However, on this particular Sunday, my mother had plans to get lunch with her friend after church. We found it weird that all of a sudden she became a social butterfly. She had told Sebastian and me that we could have lunch by ourselves. It was “her treat,” which made us incredibly happy, so we went with it. After church, she dropped us off at Ruby’s Diner, our favorite place to get milkshakes.

Ever since I could remember, Sebastian and I had been incredibly close. When we moved to the USA from Mexico after our parents’ divorce, we became even closer. He always felt like my best friend. We were this dynamic duo who would entertain each other and make each other laugh until our parents had to come into the room to shut us up. I thought I knew everything about him, that no one else knew the real Sebastian the way I

did. We had a strong connection and moving to a foreign country proved that this closeness meant we would have each other’s backs in the good and bad moments.

My mother dropped us off at Ruby’s Diner and we went right in to grab a seat at a booth facing one another. Ruby’s is such a happy restaurant. It’s a 40s-inspired diner, designed after American diners of the Swing Era. The waitresses wear checkered red dresses with a white apron, a white collar, and short sleeves with peaked white trim. They used to wear rollerblades, but I guess it became too dangerous, so now they just wear white sneakers with high white socks. They are known for being speedily attentive, so as soon as we sat down, the waitress took our order. The food came right out. It looked as delicious as always. Sebastian always got chicken tenders with fries, and I got the cheeseburger with fries. We would share an Oreo milkshake because if you have ever gone to Ruby’s, you know that they always double serve their milkshakes and they are gigantic.

We were eating our food and having small talk. The conversations we had as siblings were mostly about stupid things that would make us crack up, but we also had the ability to have serious conversations and learn things from one another. At that moment, I could see that Sebastian had this look of concern on his face. I asked if everything was all right.

“I gotta tell you something that’s been happening in my life for a while now, but I think you already know...” he said in a shaky voice. The words that came out of his mouth after that punched me right in the stomach and took me by complete surprise. “I think I’m gay.”

It took me a few minutes to understand what he had just said. “How is that a funny joke?” I snapped. As those words came out of my mouth, his face contorted and he looked at me with a half-hearted smile, shaking his head. He couldn’t believe what I had just said. I remember thinking at that very moment that my dreams for adulthood were ruined because of him. What happened to the idea of our kids being best friends and going to the same school? What happened to being neighbors so we could have both our families together for the holidays? Stating this years later, I now find it incomprehensible that I reacted in such an insensitive and narrow-minded way towards my own brother. Was I really that selfish and self-centered? I did that to him when he was most vulnerable and he finally felt comfortable sharing such a personal matter with me.

**“ I lost my appetite
the moment he opened his mouth.”**

As the meal went on, tears were shed and the conversation continued, leading him to explain and go into detail on how hard life had been for him until that very moment. “You really had no idea?... Ivanna, I’ve only had two girlfriends in my entire life!”

“So? That doesn’t mean anything to me. I’ve never even thought about it.” I admitted, “The idea hasn’t even slightly crossed my mind.”

“Well, I am,” he said as he avoided eye contact with me. “And you were the last person I expected this reaction from...” He shared that it had been difficult for him to hide his true self from me, but that it had been even more difficult trying to understand who he was.

To be honest, the meal tasted like absolutely nothing. I lost my appetite the moment

he opened his mouth. He went on to say that he told Mom first, to which she said, "I've known this since you were born, and I want you to know I love you and I will always love you no matter what..." Then he told Dad, who said, "Tell me something I don't know." My brother confessed that he was not content with his response, but that deep down he knew our father meant well. Him telling me this made me understand so many things about his life. I realized that when my parents always said that Sebastian was *different* since he was born, it was their way of saying, "My son is gay." Years later, I learned that Sebastian had been bullied at school since he was in kindergarten. Coming to the USA made him realize that it was perfectly okay for him to be his true self. He was able to come out of the closet with pride. He saw that at school nobody really cared what you looked like or maybe they did, but people were free to express their true selves. He also confessed that if we had stayed in Mexico during our teenage years, he would have never stepped out of the closet.

It is devastating to admit that it took everything out of me to digest the news. I felt like the Sebastian I had known my whole life was a complete lie. But why was I making this about myself? What made me believe I could treat my brother the way I did? What in the world made me think that just because he is gay we don't get to live our adulthood dreams? I knew I had to redeem myself. Because there was no way I would turn my back on the person I love most in this world. When my mother picked us up from lunch, she could see that we had both been crying. Our eyes were swollen as if we had gotten stung by a wasp. Of course, she asked what had happened, but we decided to make something up because we didn't want to talk about it.

On our drive back home, my mother had to stop by the pharmacy to buy something, so I decided to go with her while Sebastian stayed in the car. While we were in the store, she asked me again what had happened. I started crying immediately. "He told me he's gay and I made him feel horrible about it..." I sniffled.

Sadness clouded her features. "What did he say exactly?" she asked with a tone full of curiosity.

I didn't tell her everything we had talked about but gave her a bit of context. "He told me he thinks he's gay and that you guys already know..." Her face was motionless, but I could tell she was surprised that he finally told me.

She ended up telling me that it was understandable that I had reacted like that. "Ivana, you really had no idea? The idea of Sebastian being gay has never crossed your mind?"

"No, of course not!" I replied in an annoyed tone. "I have never even thought about that..." She was surprised that I actually had no idea because it was something expected and obvious in a way, given my brother's behavior throughout his life. Like the fact that he would get little boy toys for his birthday and still choose to play with my dolls, which years later made so much sense. I don't mean that in a generalized way; if a boy plays with girl toys, that doesn't necessarily mean he'll be gay, but in my brother's case it made sense. By the time we got back to the car, I wasn't crying anymore.

I hate to admit this, but I definitely saw my brother with different eyes after that day—not in a bad way, but just differently. I understood that my love and respect for him was even bigger than I had ever imagined. It was clear to me that he had been through so much in his head and in his life. Of course, I apologized and told him that my reaction was genuinely full of surprise because up to that moment during lunch, I had no idea. I went on to say that I loved him more than anyone in the world, and that I would care for and respect him no matter what happened. The news hit me like a truck, but my behavior and reaction towards him slapped me in the face, making me realize that we must be open-minded and always treat everyone with the same level of respect and understanding because we never know what people are going through.

BLOODLINES

Miles Martinez

The ink permanent.

But not the pain and sorrow we both share.

These pin pricks, these stings, nothing compared to what he brings.

My way to numb the heart,

Although a morbid portrayal, brings memories of better times.

When the house was filled with laughter.

When we were a family of three.

When he was cancer free.

ALONE

Ghazal Moezzi



ROCK BOTTOM

Samantha Hope Boulgarides

Your eyes peered
into me like a lighthouse
from the distance. I swam to you.

I clawed for the lungs in your
chest. You watched
me gasp for air.

Sinking
down

down

Down.

I hit the ocean floor,
Deceived by your phantom presence
glaring down onto rock bottom. You never
dove in. I gazed up from the Depths

I dug for you. Your eyes turned
cold wondering Why

I

dove

down

in the

first place.

THINGS COULD'VE BEEN DIFFERENT

Rachel Dahlquist

I wasn't used to somebody
Being that genuinely nice to me
Without there being a disorder behind it.
I wasn't used to thinking
There might be potential.
It could've gone well
If I hadn't messed stuff up.
Things could've been different.

There might have been
A phase of bliss,
Regardless of what type
Of association formed,
But eventually, it would diminish.
Either he wouldn't be a big fan
Of my autistic-impacted persona
After getting to know me,
Or we would have an association
Of some sort,
But he would grow tired of it
And become distant,
Wanting to move on.
Things could've been different.

If I became close with him,
It would hurt if I lost him.
But I could ruin the connection—
Mess things up on purpose
Before I'd become more vulnerable.
I pulled off a scene that indirectly
Left him disturbed and confused.
In the aftermath, we weren't close.
He learned that I liked him,
But I knew he would never want me.
In his mind, I would always be
A mentally unstable being.
Things could have been different.

Sometimes I think about changing myself,
So I could be the kind of woman
He would fantasize about,
Instead of feeling like I fall short
Of being as desirable as other women he liked.
Sometimes I wonder if it's worth it
To just be completely myself,
Or if it would be better to compromise
So that someone I really want would like me back...
Things could've been different.

THE SECOND SEX 3

Saba Anoushahpour

WHEN NO ONE IS LOOKING

Taylor Akiko Shoda

She eats four Campari tomatoes from the fridge after waking up. They sink into her teeth and the cold aches. She drinks a glass of water and then a black coffee in a to-go canteen before she leaves the house. She doesn't have anything to do today besides wait for him to call. She didn't get ready for anything either—she's wearing a low-waist pair of jeans and a dark blue acrylic sweater that shows a glimpse of her belly button as she briskly walks on the sidewalk.

The first time he calls, she lets it go to voicemail. He texts her hi, what are you doing? When she opens the glass door into the coffee shop, she still smells like last night.

At a party they went to last night, she was between a seated man and a standing one. She was a body pillow, a log, a mountain of meat picked up from the butcher's waiting to be chopped and cooked. The men were talking to each other and she was staring ahead, imagining herself as these things so much that maybe in their peripheral, this is what she looked like to them. Maybe they'd eat her.

"Yeah, I'll see you out there, man," he'd said before turning to her on the chaise lounge they were sharing. He'd asked her something like, are you all right? or you good? or said, you're being quiet or you're supposed to have fun at parties. To all of these questions and comments she could shrug, nod, and they would mean the same thing to him. He used to hate her silence, taken it personally, like she wasn't listening to what he was telling her by having nothing to say in response. He once told her she weaponized her indifference and it had transpired into an ugly trait he hadn't noticed before. He'd said something like, if I had known you would be like this... then grabbed her shoulders. He'd shaken her, yelling at her face, TALK! SPEAK! ANYTHING!

“ This conversation has played over in her head all night and morning. ”

They didn't see each other for a week until he called and said, sorry. She'd said, me, too. He'd said, we don't see eye to eye when we communicate, if we ever communicate. Communication is important to me. She'd nodded, me, too.

In the middle of the party chatter, he followed the man outside and she sat on the chaise a minute longer, staring ahead at the basketball game on the television. Then she got up to refill her drink in the kitchen. On the walk back to the chaise, he returned from chatting outside with the man and they ran into her, causing her drink to spill. Her mom told her she couldn't put acrylic sweaters in the wash without shrinking them, so she hadn't. But she wanted to wear it today, so she did.

She's very sure of how she wants the anticipated conversation to go. This conversation has played over in her head all night and morning. She plans to keep it light, make it seem about her and not him. However, she'll throw in some signal phrases that will make him double-take on his personal contribution to her decision that they are a toxic couple. She'll say how she imagines he would have come to this conclusion himself had he had more



PHOTOGRAPH

FICTION

time away from her to think about their relationship objectively. She'll remind him how he always told her she clouded his thoughts and how at first, it was a romantic, infatuating element of her mystic idealism as a partner, but now it was a burden. He'll probably say that she's oversimplifying what he meant by that but agree nonetheless because it evades some of the blame from his self-inflicted directionlessness in life. They'll both collapse on each other in this social Jenga until he nods and says something solidifying and cliché like, well, we always knew this wasn't going to last. She thinks it would be much easier if he were to just die.

The coffee shop is a stuffy, claustrophobic wooden box, save the glass door and windows that, when looked through, feel like portholes on a submarine underwater. There are signs that say "Drink Before You Think" and "Coffee Is My First Love." The chairs are curved to mimic a seated body and the tables are unsteady in their footing, wobbling with the pressure she puts on either side.

She texts him back, coffee?

When he responds immediately, she reminds him of the name of the shop. Once he lets her know he'll be there soon, she places her phone face down on the table. On second thought, she gets up, moves to a table shoved up against one of the portholes. It's wobbly, too, but she sits down.

**“She imagines herself telling him
how hostile he can be.”**

"I feel like I used to be so much better," she tells him when he joins her. "I haven't been my best in a long time. I used to think I was special and I was going to do uniquely incredible things and I would be known."

He folds his hands and unfolds them to cross his arms across his chest.

"And since we've been together, you don't feel that way anymore." He leans forward.

"Well, no," she says. "Us being together... that's not the point."

"Well, it's kid shit regardless," he says, shaking his head like someone who's been wrongly blamed for a shattered vase.

She folds her arms then, too. She looks side to side at everyone else in the shop, all unaware of a hand shoving itself into a girl's body to rip out her insides. She imagines herself telling him how hostile he can be. How he talks to her like she'll always be there to listen. How he listens to her like she has a rewind button and can repeat the same sentence over and over again.

The waiter drops off their iced coffee glasses with a splash spilling over the side of hers when he sets it down on the table. She nods a thanks and swipes up the drop with her finger. "I feel like everyone is supposed to feel like that. Like when you were a kid and you felt like you were going to make it against everyone else. I don't get why that's supposed to go away. I really don't think it's supposed to."

"I feel like we're way off topic," he says. "You wanna break up?" But he asks it in the tone of wanna go the movies? or can I get a ride home?

She glances up at him and grabs the body of her glass as if to steady herself. The conversation has gotten away from her. With each attempt to steer it back in place, it's as if she's

pushed it away rather than pulled it in.

She huffs and then says, "We don't work. I distract you too much and you hate it. I hate feeling like a distraction. I really feel like—"

"I don't see you as a distraction. You're in my mind, but—"

"I'm a cloud in your mind."

"I like thinking about you."

"Because it distracts you from caring about anything else."

"What the hell, Fiona? That's not—"

"Well, I've already made up my mind."

"I can see that." He looks down at his own glass and gives the straw a twirl. The ice clinks against itself as it melts away. "I guess that's it."

She sips her drink.

He says, "I guess I should go." He looks at her and adds, "Fi?"

As she meets his stare, she imagines asking, "You want me to fight for you?" but in the tone of is the movie worth fifteen dollars? or how far away do you live?

"So I'll go then," he says. When he sees her look down, he adds, "Right" and nods.

In her peripheral, she watches him stand up aggressively, knocking back the chair and rattling the uneasy table. He shoves the chair back in, which hits the table, which wobbles the coffee glass, already precariously close to the edge. He watches the glass ponder its leap from the surface. She does, too. And then it falls off the side.

He steps around the shards, glances at them, tiptoes, and then walks out the door.



I WISH IT DIDN'T BREAK MY HEART

Ariana Quinonez

I thought everything was fine
But my god, all I wanted to do was cry
No tears flowing
Just the silence exploding

Too tired to talk or was it too tired to care?
I'm ripping out my hair
You don't know me
Why does it feel like you own me?

I wish I didn't love you
I wish I trusted you
I just want to be free
Hello, can anyone hear me?

You're screaming
Am I breathing?
This shouldn't break my heart
Was it like this from the start?

I can't make myself let go
I think my heart might implode
You said it's all in my head
Is this all in my head?

I can feel your silence through the walls
Are you angry I missed your calls?
I love you, I'm sorry

I love you, I'm sorry

I wish this didn't break my heart
I'm sorry that I'm falling apart
What do you see when you look at me?
Please leave me alone
Where'd you go?

CYCLES

Gabriella Gorven

I.

I was vulnerable, what can I say?
His pretty face blurred that one day.
When someone's heart is broken,
even when they say they are in love,
there are no words to be spoken,
& no answers from above.

I fell into the web that you so carefully spun.

I used to dream in light,
but now I fear the night.
When darkness pulls its covers,
your grip is all I feel.
The memories I try to smother
always feel so real.
I can't look at your face
without reliving what you've done.

I fell into the web that you so carefully spun.

I blamed myself for so long,
all that we had was so wrong.
But your control numbed the pain
I first felt when we'd begun.
But now my body feels shame
because you had none.

I fell into the web that you so carefully spun.

II.

You can breathe.
Feel the wind in your hair.
The sand on your feet.
All the love you have left in your heart.

He can't touch you here.

Not 3000 miles away.
It's just you, the world,
and the couple skinny dipping in the ocean.

Listen to the music from the bar,
Not the missed calls and voicemails.
You can be by yourself,
He doesn't need to know.

Love the shiver down your spine,
The smile on your face,
The bustling city that begs you to come play.
You can feel alive again,
for the first time since you met him.

THE MONSTER OF MOUNT PISGAH

Alicia Marie Glass

My husband's gleaming green eyes were the last thing I remember seeing before his fist made contact, leaving me with a swollen jaw and the courage to run. Julian was called into the office at sunrise that Saturday morning to perform an emergency root canal. As he showered, I hastily pressed his clothes and brewed his daily espresso. "Damn it, where's my coffee?" he yelled down a few minutes later from the top of the stairs. I grabbed the cup and saucer and ran as swiftly as I could. In my sleep-deprived, frantic state, I tripped on the last stair. Before I could regain my footing, the searing hot liquid lurched forward and scalded my husband's face and chest. Later, as I held an ice pack on my chin and waved goodbye to Julian as he pulled out of our driveway, I told myself that was the last time. And when I knew it was safe, or as safe as it could possibly be, I fled.

After five days and 2,017 miles on the road, I find myself in Asheville, North Carolina, at one of the many entrances to the Blue Ridge Parkway. I've never expressed an interest to visit this area to my husband, so it seems like the perfect place to be. It's the sort of place people go when they are trying to get lost. My heart smiles with the joy of knowing I'm a needle in a haystack that he would never find. I am free.

I met Julian when I was twenty years old. He was charming, handsome, well-educated, and fifteen years my senior. Balancing fun with just the right amount of responsibility, Julian provided me with a sense of stability I'd lacked since my parents divorced when I was thirteen. Our courtship was a whirlwind, as cliché as that sounds, but I felt in my bones that he was the one. And so we fell madly in love and were married in Vegas two weeks after our first date. My vision blurred by Julian's hypnotic French accent and captivating emerald eyes, I missed every red flag along the way. Never did I question his actions or demands. After all, this was my husband, and I was to submit to him—at least, that's what I was taught by my Sunday school teacher and June Cleaver. I trusted him without reservation. When Julian asked me to leave college to help him run his successful dental practice, I never questioned why he wanted me to forgo an education. Nor did I question why he wanted to keep me hidden away from all my loved ones after I suffered multiple miscarriages. And the first time Julian struck me, the only question I had was for myself: "Why am I such a horrible wife and how am I ever going to please him?"

My hands shake, not just because Julian rarely lets me drive, but also from the anticipation of what lies ahead of me. When I was a kid, I was infatuated by lore and legends, and the parkway was filled with both. However, it was also a daunting two-lane highway with unpredictable weather that I wasn't sure I was ready for. My first stop would be a near-vertical hike to a place called Devil's Courthouse, and tonight I was off to see the ghost lights of Brown Mountain, if I could catch them. This was precisely what I needed. To reconnect with myself again. To remember who I was before Julian.

According to the locals, Devil's Courthouse got its name because it's where Lucifer holds tribunals, but what really fascinates me is that the Cherokees believe it to be home to the cave of a hairy leviathan named Judaculla. Natives say that this regional Bigfoot-type creature roams the surrounding mountains and valleys hunting human women to take as his brides. My interest in these myths made it the perfect place for my first hike in North Carolina, so long as it stayed dry. The trail would be too slippery and, like most Californians, I don't do well with the rain. Especially when I'm driving. I pass through lush, green tunnels of unfamiliar Appalachian forestland, slowing down briefly to let a beaver

cross the road and to enjoy the views of Hominy Valley. The scenery is postcard-worthy but occasionally interrupted by massive concrete tunnels blasted through the mountains. I'm not a fan of tunnels. My palms sweat, my pedal foot begins to twitch, and my bags smack the side of the trunk as I take a sharp bend slightly too fast in my haste to get out of what I was sure would be my coffin.

A drizzle of rain lightly kisses my windshield as I escape tunnel number three. The guidebook I bought calls it a romantic rain, an everyday, beautiful occurrence. When I exit tunnel number four, the rain grows louder, and sunlight ceases to seep through the cracks in the canopy above. I make the mistake of noticing how steep the cliff to my immediate right is—only a simple guard rail and a slip of the wheel between me and certain death. My vision blurs as I begin to panic. *Just breathe. In... two... three... four. And out... two... three... four.* These breathing techniques never do a damn thing. I pull a tissue out of my puffer jacket and wipe away my mascara-infused tears.

The Subaru ahead of me signals that they are pulling over just as my heart begins to palpitate. *Finally, a place to stop!* I follow them to the rest area and turn right into the lot as they turn left. I don't want to seem like a stalker. A couple in their twenties hop out of the SUV. I wait for them to completely disappear into the trees before opening my door to take in the crisp mountain air. Rain or not, I need to get out of that car and catch my breath. I see a couple more pairs of headlights pull into the parking lot near the Subaru. *Where am I?*

I walk along the mossy edge of the parking lot that separates the blacktop from the forest. A sign appears at the end of the lot that reads "TRAILHEAD: Mt. Pisgah, Elevation 5,722 Feet." *Hmm... never heard of it.* I consider my options and decide to explore this trail until the storm—and my anxiety—eventually subside. I pack the trail bag I bought that morning with a few snacks and screw together my walking stick.

“Off in the bushes, I see a pair of green glowing eyes locked on me.”

If the beginning of the trail is any indication of what is to come, I'm in for a serendipitous treat. Miniature waterfalls appear in the tiniest of grottos, glossy pink mushrooms grow on the sides of moss-covered fallen trees, and dainty orange-hued blossoms hang upside down from the shrubbery that lines my way. The beautiful rocky path is slippery from the rain, but I push on, gripping my stick tightly to keep me steady.

SNAP, SNAP, SNAP. A pile of twigs breaks not far behind me. I turn to see a red-headed woman about my age walking towards me with her coonhound, the pup clearly on a mission to track down a scent. The woman says hello in a rushed breath as her furry companion drags her into a slow jog. I mumble an equally quick salutation. It's still a bit odd meeting new people without Julian keeping a watchful eye over me. The two veer off the trail and disappear into the mist.

Rocks teeter and shift ever so slightly as I make my climb up a mystical rock slab staircase. Years of gymnastics training as a child helps me to balance along my ascent to the summit. I hear a rustle in the bushes to my left. *Too big to be a rabbit or squirrel. Deer, maybe? Are there deer here? Maybe it's that dog? Or Judaculla?* Off in the bushes, I see a pair of glowing green eyes locked on me. They remind me of Julian's eyes. It is the same dead stare

he gave me before throwing me across our kitchen. The trauma from the incident was the catalyst to my fourth and final miscarriage, three of which he caused. His blacked-out fits of rage could be deadly, and I knew I'd likely be next. The eyes disappear back in the forest and I continue along my journey.

I've never seen greens this bright in nature before, a stark contrast to the desert coastal landscape of our home. Julian likes to brag that he is a waterwise early adopter of native landscaping—before it was trendy—but I knew it was just because he's cheap and because Julian felt pleasure from keeping me away from any potential joy in life. All I had ever asked for was a garden of my own. Something that I could tend to, that I could grow, something that maybe wouldn't die on me, that he couldn't kill. Of course, Julian refused. Not a rose garden, edible garden, or even a tiny bonsai tree. Keep me miserable, keep me closed off, keep me under his thumb. *How could I have been so stupid?*

After some time, his answers to everything became predictable and predictably cruel. When my mother reached out to tell me my grandmother was dying from breast cancer, I begged Julian to let me visit her one last time. Even though she lived just 30 miles away, I knew his answer would be no. Keeping me away from my family was too important. He needed me to be within his iron grasp.

It feels as though I've been hiking for many hours. I feel a bit dizzy and nauseous. The elevation and heat are getting to me. I suppose that's to be expected when you attempt to climb a 5,722-foot mountain in humid weather. I sit down for a moment on one of the stone steps to take a sip of water and nibble on a granola bar, brushing aside one of the many weeping plants that spill over onto the mossy path. A marker on the trail tells of Judaculla sightings upon Mount Pisgah, and I get a funny feeling that someone is watching me. As if on cue, I hear more twigs breaking. More bushes rustling. I turn around. Nothing there. I listen again. Critters scurry. I freeze and slowly scan my surroundings. Nothing. *Wait.* Something moves. Something runs. *Was that fur? Or a jacket? Were those the green eyes again?* I'm confused, perhaps on the verge of delirium. I'm extra jumpy today, so I try the worthless breathing techniques again. They still don't work. *Probably just a deer. You're safe.*

**“My intuition tells me something is off,
but my rational mind tells me I'm paranoid.”**

I keep reminding myself that Judaculla is just a myth, and my husband is at home in California. I wonder how much longer I have to go until I reach the summit and find myself wishing this was over. *No quitting.* I can't quit. Julian always called me a quitter because I dropped out of school, even though it was his idea, even though he insisted on it. I had no choice. Or maybe I did? *Did I give into him too easily? Was I to blame for my educational shortcomings?* There goes my mind playing tricks on me again. Back to questioning my reality. Back to questioning my sanity. Back to questioning if Julian really is as bad as I think. *Or am I always in the wrong?*

The canopy above begins to thin, and I can feel that stupid romantic rain again, except it actually feels sort of nice, a pleasant relief from the sticky, humid air. I close my eyes and tilt my head back, a slight smile appearing on my face as the droplets gently cool

down my warm skin. “Whoa!” I yell as I lose my balance and nearly fall backward. I hear footsteps behind me, my heart begins to race, and my breath quickens. My cheeks feel like they are on fire. *Stop it. It's just another hiker. Probably the redhead. Maybe that first couple?* I slowly turn my head around to see who is accompanying me on the rest of this trek, but nobody is there. I walk down a few steps to look around a bend. It's just me and the trees. *I really am losing it.*

I wonder what Julian is doing at this very moment, if he is on the road searching for me. I wonder how he reacted when he figured out I had disappeared, when he saw that I had taken the Audi. I wonder if he went on a rampage and smashed more of my grandmother's wedding china, one of his favorite pastimes. I wonder if he filed a missing person report, if he told my family, if he even cared I was gone.

The forest changes the closer I get to the summit. The sky is murky with shades of dreary gray, making it impossible to tell what time of day it is, but I do know it isn't night. The sounds are noticeably quieter now as well, almost eerily so. The squirrels no longer scamper. The birds no longer sing. Gone are the drip drops of the sporadic waterways below. The rocks grow dangerously slick, and dirt is now mud. I want to give up my trek to the peak of Mount Pisgah as it could be nightfall at any moment, but I have to keep going. I need to finish what I started. I wish, for a moment, that Julian was here. Maybe he'd be proud. *NO! NO! NO! You are better off. You are strong, smart, and capable. You are on the right track.*

I keep repeating this mantra in my head until I have convinced myself it is the truth. *Wait. Track. Tracker. No!* He would have given the police the license plate if he had filed a missing person report. How did I remember to smash my phone back in Tucson but not this? My whole body freezes up and my lungs grow tight. Rivers of tears stream down my cheeks. I can barely draw in oxygen and begin to gasp. What am I going to do? I need to ditch the car somehow. Or give up and go home. *Maybe that couple from the parking lot would give me a ride back to town? Or I could go look for the redhead.*

From far down below, I can faintly hear the sounds of a flock of birds all fleeing all at once, their silence-breaking squawks signaling a threat. Bushes are stirring, trees are trembling, and the rock steps are quaking underneath someone or something coming my way. My intuition tells me something is off, but my rational mind tells me I'm paranoid. I hear their steps grow louder, their pace growing faster. There is a deep, heavy audible breath just beyond the fog below. I'm petrified and have nowhere to go. The summit is in sight, but what use is that to me now? *It's not Julian. My out-of-shape husband could never make it this far up the mountain. Right? Right.* A shadowy figure begins to emerge from the haze, only their brightly lit emerald green eyes are visible. Was my mind deceiving me? Was that *monster* actually standing before me? *No, it couldn't be. This isn't real.* I heave my walking stick like a javelin, hoping to wound the beast. I sprint for my life towards the summit platform, praying that other hikers are up there. My efforts are of no use as two hands reach out to grab my ankles, throwing me forward. I'm flipped over onto my back. The monster and I lock eyes, and I understand my fate. I try to whimper, but a massive hand is placed over my mouth, gagging me into silence, one I know will be eternal. At least in death I will finally be free.

HAPPY WIFE, HAPPY LIFE

Roger Young

Oh boy, do I love our home: the orange velvet chairs, the blue carpet floor, the lavish wallpaper, the checkered and baby red pastel kitchen, *the closet*. But most of all, I love my family. To be quite frank, they've been, well, out of touch—less lively than normal I would say. It's truly concerning me and I feel as if it is my wifely and motherly duty to turn those party poopers into the hip ol' family I know we can be. Family time!

My first task of the day includes getting my loving children out of bed. I truly cannot remember the last time I didn't have to get up and wake the little ankle-biters up though I certainly do love carrying them downstairs to breakfast and plopping them right down in their seats. I've made it extra special for this occasion. Good thing they haven't gained a pound! They always sit there so patiently—no elbows on the table, upright position, stiff as boards, with beautiful little smiles on their faces. Those smiles have been waning though. It makes me terribly sad, but I know that my special breakfast and the family time I have planned for the day will make it all better. My husband, Murray, loves to lend a hand whenever I need him. Like I always wanted.

Murray Dernavich, my dreamboat of a husband, would never help around the house. But I remember the day he changed. When they all changed. It was truly a miracle! Having everything the way I wanted. Murray never understood what I wanted before. But he sure does now! Yes, he does! Oh! Ahem. I don't even have to wake Murray up anymore! It makes me so chipper. He just sits in his chair all day and all night with his peepers on, struggling to finish the crossword in that faded and wrinkled paper of his. Lately, the man hasn't had his head on straight and that isn't too nifty for me. *The closet might help*. This amazing breakfast will certainly lighten his mood and maybe our family time can get that wet rag's head back on between his shoulders. *The closet will help*.

“ ... the family time I have planned
for the day will make it better. ”

I need Murray's help with the breakfast, but I don't want him to see the surprise I have planned for them. No worries though. I can just ask him for a hand and I am sure he'll be just fine with it. What's he gonna say? No? Ain't that a bite? I always forget how rigid the husband's hand is. Oh well, I'm sure all will work out just fine with it.

I cannot wait for the family to see the surprise I have in store. It will undoubtedly brighten their faces. Less pale than usual. For the life of me, I can never remember which powder worked best. Which shade of tan was it again? Oh, I should have labeled them when I started. Silly me. Here we go; I believe it was the one that was a tad darker than their regular color, which contrasts nicely with the paleness. Murray's is always the most helpful of hands. What would I do without it? Test on one of the children maybe? No no, I could never do that to them; I'd just use Murray again. Ah, the powder works perfectly, as expected. The joy I get from brightening my beautiful family's flesh is unbeatable; they already look much better. Now, we are all ready for that much-needed family time. *To work I go*.

The closet helped me with all the family time routines. My sewing kit sits nicely atop a barren shelf and beside it is my favorite kitchen tool, elegantly wrapped in plastic. Nothing more, nothing less. I like the closet empty; it keeps everything clean. No need for messes anymore! I absolutely hate when things aren't how I want them. Like before. That is why family time is so important. Murray must keep his head on right and the children must smile!

Lights! Where are those lights coming from? Our home! No, our home—I mustn't lose it. My tawny-stained chairs, my gray carpeted floors, my cracking wallpaper, my blood-stained and alabaster tile kitchen. The family must be fixed before the lights get any closer. I must sew them up now! No time to dilly dally! The children will be smiling and Murray will be headstrong again! No more party poopers in this house! My hip family will be back to tip-top shape in no time.

Knocking. Please go away. We are having family time! No! I will not allow you into my perfect home! No, please, I beg of you, gentlemen. Do not take me from my family! They are happy with me. Everything is nice and clean here. Don't you see? I was just about to finish up our family time! No! No! We are all happy here! I am happy here! You know what they say: happy wife, happy life.



THE LAST HUMAN STRANGER

Fern Helsel-Metz



PHOTOGRAPH

BREAKING NEWS

Birute Ranes

Anna took one last sip of her morning coffee and set the large mug into the sink. As she set the mug down, she knew she was breaking one of her mother's rules: no dirty dishes in the sink. Rusty had been licking her hand and nudging her for his morning walk. The dirty mug would have to wait. She petted Rusty, grabbed his leash, and stuffed a few doggie bags into her pocket. As Anna grabbed the remote to shut off the TV, a news headline blared: "Ukrainian Invasion: Women take up arms in Kyiv." Unbelievable, she thought. She pushed a loose dyed-pink hair strand behind her ear, trying not to hook it on her multiple ear piercings and leaned in to listen. "Ukrainian women have signed up to fight for independence," said the newscaster. "Visas waived for all volunteers." Those women are so brave, thought Anna. I wish I could do that.

It was 8 a.m. and already 80 degrees in L.A. The palm trees swayed back and forth in the strong Santa Ana winds. Dirty coffee cups, plastic bags, and flyers advertising an upcoming open house flew about in the wind. Rusty knew where he was going. He pulled Anna past the homeless man sleeping on the bench, past the yoga class on the parched grass, and straight to the skate park with its half-pipes, banked ramps, and bowls. They had been here many times before.

Tyler, her boyfriend, who worked in tech but still acted like a kid, was in the skate park. From a distance, she could tell it was him by his striped beanie and the winding snake tattooed around his arm. He teetered on his skateboard at the bowl's edge, his body leaning into the open crevasse as he dipped in and went flying down one side and up the other. She liked watching him; it excited her. He took risks she couldn't imagine doing. Tyler glided to the edge of the skate park and poked his face through the openings in the steel fence while stretching his arm out to pet Rusty.

"Did you tell your mom we're getting an apartment together?" he asked.

Anna lowered her head and shook it. "I started to, but then she had that sad look on her face, and I just couldn't."

"I thought you wanted this," Tyler said, raising his voice and shaking his head in disappointment.

"I do. But you know how she is."

"Hey, if you don't want this..."

"I do, I do," she responded with a weak smile.

"It doesn't seem like it," he said as he twirled the skateboard in circles beneath his feet. "I'm meeting up with Zack in a few minutes, so I got to go... but hey, I'm counting on you. Tell her." Tyler gave Rusty a few more pats and skated off to meet up with his friend.

In small ways, Anna had tried to break free of her mother. Anna wanted pink hair dye. Her mother said no. She won, but now her mother wouldn't let it go. "That pink hair is so unbecoming," she said. "I don't know why you let that Tyler talk you into it. You're so easily manipulated."

Anna's mother had settled on a career selling high-end real estate and drove a black BMW sedan to match her image. She wore designer shoes, carried logo handbags—albeit purchased at the outlet mall—and kept her nails meticulously manicured. "If you look like you have money, people will treat you better," she said. "And they will listen to you, too."

As Anna and Rusty walked home from the park, she thought back to when she was six years old, sitting on her mother's lap on the old black suede couch in the family room.

"Promise me you'll never leave me," said her mother. What is a six-year-old child supposed to say? Of course, Anna promised to stay forever. She was six and could not imagine a life without her mom. But now, at twenty-eight, that promise still haunted her. "Don't abandon me like your father," her mother had told her. Anna's father had left her mother for another woman, but the love affair did not last. None of his relationships with women lasted, but her mother never forgot and never forgave him.

Most of Anna's high school classmates had graduated college long ago and worked in business or finance or were married with kids. Her mother kept bugging her to get a college degree, to become a high school teacher or physician's assistant, but Anna just wasn't sure. "Anna, stop wasting your life," her mother said. "Dog walking is not a profession."

"I'm a dog trainer, Mom, not a dog walker," Anna replied. She wished her mother appreciated how much she loved working with dogs or how good she was at it. She loved it when she was able to calm a nervous, jumping pup or stop a whimpering little terrier long enough to have their nails clipped. If she could get an unruly dog to trust her and obey, then that was good enough for her. The best part was she had lots of free time. No, she was not ready to return to school. Not yet anyway.

Anna turned on her computer and typed in "Ukraine Russian invasion." Somewhere deep inside, Anna knew she had to have some courage. If her grandparents could leave their Ukrainian village with its little wooden houses and apple trees in spring bloom, their beloved parents, their German Shepherd, and two white cats, why couldn't she grow up and leave her mother? Why was it so difficult?

“In small ways, Anna had tried to break free of her mother.”

Anna and her father used to visit her Ukrainian grandparents every year. When she was twelve years old, she and her father flew to Chicago for her grandfather's funeral. Anna especially remembered the falling wet snow soaking through her white sneakers, making her feet damp with cold, as she stood at the cemetery and watched her grandfather's casket lowered into the winter ground. She remembered her grandmother wearing all black, smelling of freshly washed linen, and holding Anna's hand tightly while she talked. "Honey, if you follow your heart, you can't go wrong," she said. Anna tried to follow her heart, but she wasn't always sure if she was following her heart or her head. Her heart said, "Move in with Tyler" while her head said, "You'll be breaking one of your mother's rules. Never move in with a man before marriage."

What inner resolve does it take for people to fight for their independence, to fight for a cause they believe in? Anna's cause was small compared to the Ukrainians fighting for their freedom, but her small cause mattered to her. She needed—no, she wanted—some of that inner resolve. She decided today was the day. Her mother had recently received a hefty commission for selling a seven-bedroom, five-bathroom estate on Sunset Boulevard. Making money always put her mother in a good mood. Anna gently approached her.

"Mom, I was thinking... maybe..." Anna whispered. Before losing her nerve, she blurted out, "I'd like to get a place of my own."

Her mother, who was watching the evening news, clicked pause on the remote, turned her face to look at Anna, and gave her full attention. "Would you repeat that, please?" her mother asked in a stern voice as she straightened her back.

Anna squirmed, twisting a strand of pink hair round and round. She swallowed hard and repeated a little bit louder, "I was thinking maybe... it's time for me to move out."

"You know, Anna, you can be so ungrateful," said her mother, pursing her lips. "I expected it from your father but not from you."

Her mother's words stung. *Ungrateful*. She had been her mother's sounding board, tolerating her rants about how her husband left her, living with her mother's sour moods and controlling ways. "That's not fair. Mom, I'm twenty-eight and who am I still living with? Oh yeah, my mother."

"Fine. Go. But don't think of coming back when you need money or when Tyler leaves you. Because you know he will."

Her mother's words made her want to scream, "Just because Dad left doesn't mean every man does," but she didn't say anything. It wasn't her fault her mother did not trust men.

"Why can't you just be happy for me? Anyway, I already put money down on a place."

Upon hearing Anna's words, her mother's face deflated like an old balloon, and she began to cry. "Go ahead, leave me, that's what everyone does." Her face streaked with tears, she added, "How am I going to live without you?"

Anna wavered for a moment. "Mom, just because I'm moving out, it doesn't mean it changes anything between us. I will always be there for you." Anna leaned in and gave her mother a hug. "You know in your heart, it's time for me to move out, don't you, Mom?"

Seeing her mother nod slowly, Anna added, "Besides, you could help me decorate. You're really good with color."

"How far away is this place anyway?"

"Not far, Mom. Not far."

"Since you're so set on moving out... well... I admit I did put some stuff aside for you. There's that teak chest, a few pots and pans." Sniffing away a few tears, she added, "Honey, really there's so much stuff in storage I'm sure you could use."

"That would be nice, Mom," said Anna, giving her mother another big hug. Her mother returned to watch the evening news, and Anna stepped out onto the deck to call Tyler.

"Hey, Tyler, I did it." She didn't tell him she neglected to mention to her mother that she would be moving in with him. That was a conversation for another day.

"I knew you could," said Tyler. "Let me know when you want me to help you move your stuff, and I'll rent a truck."

Breaking News: Anna finally moves out.



A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Clarence Cooper

When he came to, the young man was sprawled out alone on the steps of an unfamiliar brownstone in what appeared to be Greenwich Village. The taste of stale beer and cigarettes coated his mouth with a thickness that told him he'd been passed out for an hour, maybe two. After checking the time and seeing it was 1 a.m., he decided to make the most of the rest of his evening until last call. He did this often, too often.

"Better to pass out than black out," he muttered to himself as he stood up.

He buttoned up his dark blue coat and adjusted his black denim pants. His clothes were expensive and fit him well. Just because he felt like shit didn't mean he had to look like shit.

Once he started walking, he was well on his way to continue punishing himself for sins he did not commit, slowly martyring himself for no cause at all. The cause of the pitiful, hopeless, broken drunk.

He had been drinking since about noon... three days before now. This was normal behavior since the accident. But the whole point was not to think about that now. After a few minutes of walking, he saw a familiar neon sign in the distance. The illuminated word "COCKTAILS" shone like a lighthouse to the lost, the lonely, and the lustful, a small bright hope in the darkness of any given night. This was not the kind of swanky establishment where you would find young men and women dressed up nice exchanging small talk as part of some useless mating ritual. No Rolexes, suits, high heels, or craft beer would be found here—just cheap liquor and the smell of tobacco, dirty carpets, a fetid washroom, dim lights, and nonjudgmental bartenders. This was his kind of place.

He walked through the black metal door and found his way to a bar stool. He noticed a few regulars and exchanged an obligatory nod in their general direction.

"What can I get ya, hun?" asked a familiar female bartender with broad shoulders and a kind, knowing face.

"However much whiskey I can get for twenty dollars."

"So the usual."

"Yeah, the usual."

She poured him a double of Jameson and a complimentary half beer to wash it down. She left the bottle, knowing that twenty dollars worth wouldn't be enough; it never was. He began drinking, shuddering in delight as the first drop of warming, burning grain alcohol touched his tongue.

This was communion: bar nuts the body and whiskey the blood of Christ. Whoever decided it was wine all those centuries ago, he thought, had never had whiskey. He would have preferred a good bourbon, but the Irish stuff was cheap and cash was elusive.

"Hi, Nathan," whispered a soft voice beside him. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Of course not, silly, ghosts don't use doors."

He chuckled a bit and realized that she was, in fact, a ghost. The same one that visited him every night and the same one he wished would just leave him the hell alone.

"Why can't you just let me be," he said, still refusing to make eye contact.

"You really think I want to be here? In this gross bar next to your drunk ass?"

"Then why are you?"

"To save you."

"From what?"

“You.”

He laughed again. “What a fucking cliché.”

This was the same conversation they had every night. But something, he noticed, was different. Her voice was more clear, her form more visible, as if she were actually there beside him and not a figment of his imagination. He decided to look over at her face, but she was already gone, a fleeting visage of someone who no longer existed.

“Who were you talking to?” the bartender asked, with visible concern.

“My sister,” replied Nathan.

“Oh, you have a sister?”

“I did. She died.”

Before she could respond, he slapped a crumpled twenty on the bar top and an extra five for her time.

“See you next time,” he said and walked out of the bar.

Now that they knew he was crazy, there would be no next time. One less bar for him to haunt, one less sanctuary for him to repent in. He decided he needed to go somewhere a bit livelier, keep his mind off of things. He made his way to the college part of town, where at least he could disappear into the crowd of spoiled kids who would pay him no mind anyways.

He found his way to the White Horse tavern, a popular spot usually too crowded to get into, but luckily it was a Tuesday and he was able to find a spot at the far end of the bar, far from everyone and everything. The whiskey, even the cheap stuff, wasn't very cheap here, so he opted for a pilsner that was the nightly special. After a few of those, he was finally starting to feel good, which for him meant not feeling much of anything.

“Hey, Nathan? Is that really Nathan Pierce? I haven't seen you in ages!”

Fuck, he thought, and turned around. “Yeah, man, in the flesh.”

This was Stanley, an old drinking buddy of his in college when drinking was still fun. Always a good friend, Stanley came to the funeral and everything. But Nathan no longer desired good company.

“God, it's been ages.”

“You said that.”

“Yeah, ha ha. What are you doing here? I haven't heard from you since...”

“Since Clara died.”

“Yeah, since the funeral.”

“How are you holding up these days?”

“Best I can, considering,” he lied.

“Well, I didn't want to say anything, but—”

“Then don't,” Nathan retorted harshly.

“Your parents reached out, man. They are worried about you. Like really worried. They said you come home every few days smelling like booze to sleep and shower and then you're gone again before they know it. Are you okay?”

“A hell of a lot better than them. Those delusional fucks still haven't accepted that she's gone. It's been half a year and every night... every night...” His voice trailed off as he tried to hold back tears.

“Every night they still set a place at the table for her, hoping she will walk through that door, alive and well. Let me tell you something. She won't. The second that junkie ran her over, she was gone, and there is no coming back from that.”

He slammed cash on the bar and walked out—another bar off the list. Stanley, too stunned to speak, didn't follow. Nathan was walking again, fast and directionless until he found himself at the bridge. Another fucking cliché. The night was as dark as a night gets,

lit only by street lamps that were too dim to illuminate any sort of emotions. Before he knew it, he was standing near the edge. This was it, he decided. This was going to be his last call. Forever.

A small hand grabbed his. “Oh, Nathan, you are breaking my heart,” said Clara.

“You are dead. No heart to break.”

“Look at me.”

“No.”

“LOOK at me.”

He looked at her. He looked at her very real face, with her very real eyes, crying very real tears. She was here, really here. This was no longer a hallucination but an actual specter of his sweet, poor little sister who had been taken from him far too soon.

“How... how are you here?” He was barely able to speak.

“They sent me here.”

“To save me?”

“Or,” she lamented, “to bring you with me. It's your choice.”

“Where would we go?”

“Somewhere else. It's not quite heaven, but it is quiet.”

“What's my other option?”

“To go home, to Mom and Dad. To live. To move on and to love and to feel.”

Once again he was chuckling, now dangerously close to the edge. How could he go on and feel things ever again? She was walking home that night because he was too busy to pick her up and give her a ride home. She had called him repeatedly, but he was having too much fun getting drunk with his buddies to notice his phone. It was his fault, and his parents were just a constant reminder of that guilt. That place at the table was their twisted way of never forgiving him.

“You know,” he said, “those two—they still set a place for you every night. A place at the dinner table.”

“No, you idiot. They don't.”

“I've seen it with my own two eyes, Clara.”

“They don't, Nathan. The place at the table is not for me. It's for you.”

Nathan cried. He cried so long and so hard he could feel each sob throughout his whole body. Six long months of tears and emotions poured from him like whiskey from a jar.

“So what are you going to do?” Clara asked him. “Where are you going to go?”

“Home,” said Nathan, and she was gone. He never saw her again.



ROLLER COASTER

Rojan Kashani

To all those who think they must toe the line,

Imagine yourself on a roller coaster ride. Even though you have been waiting in line for much too long and are excited about the experience, you can't help but notice the lump in your throat as the roller coaster train you are in starts creaking its way to the top of the death drop. You reach the top and, for a single moment, you are given the opportunity to look down to your doom, and as you tighten the grip of your sweaty palms on the handles, the lump begins to feel more like a rock.

Now imagine the drop. The lump in your throat dissolves and your hands swing to the sky to express your joy. Thanks to the wind, the smile on your face is bigger than ever and you are already thinking about going back into the line again. This feeling of liberation would have never come had you not experienced the moments of fear and surpassed them. Too many people allow fear to drive them away from a situation when it can be used as a tool if you allow it to drive you through a situation. Although a roller coaster is a simplistic metaphor, it raises a deeper question: How do we as students expect to not conform to the preset mold of the schooling system if we give in to the fear of independence?

“ I never let go of my fear and every day it would loom over me as I felt more and more like an outsider in an unknown world. ”

In my life, the situations that have terrified me the most have been the ones that have resulted in the most growth and have shaped my sense of self. My father passed away when I was only a twelve-year-old girl and with the loss of my male role model also came the loss of my house and half of my family. Before he left this life, my father imprinted on me the importance of independence. Even beyond the grave, he ensured that my mother and I would have to navigate our own path to independence as he failed to leave a will behind. We were forced to leave our luxurious lives and move to Iran with very little financial help and a heap of fear. My mom single-handedly turned our lives around despite the numerous people who stood in her way, inspiring me to do the same with my mental state. To my surprise, I fell in love with my country and my culture all over again, making friends who are still in my life to this day and experiencing belonging in a way that I never could have imagined.

A big fear that had always been tucked away in the back of my mind became a reality when I decided to leave my family and friends behind. Although Iran felt like home to me, it was clear that I would have to move to the United States to have better educational opportunities. Fear took over my life for months as I hugged my mother goodbye, landed in a state I had never been to before, and got ready to start my junior year. I wish that I could say the fear dissipated and I found comfort in Colorado, but that would not be the truth. I experienced the feeling of sitting alone in libraries and coffee shops rather than being surrounded by the laughter of my friends, every person pronouncing my name



Illustration by Mariana Lagrava Romero

differently, and the occasional racist remarks from teachers or students.

One instance that deeply instilled the feeling of not belonging in me occurred during the infamous SAT exams. Having studied in Iran, I had become accustomed to having a close relationship with my teachers, who would share their personal phone numbers and send me Happy Birthday messages each year, even if I was no longer in their class. In my panicked mindset on the day of the SATs, I had forgotten my calculator at home and made the independent decision to grab one from my math teacher's classroom, leaving a note on the desk to explain that I would return it the moment I saw her in class. As I sat in the exam room staring at the bubbles on the SAT form, I felt quite proud that I had been able to fix my issue so quickly.

The next day, pride was one of the last emotions that could be used to describe my shrinking stature as the students gathered to watch the teacher scream at me in the hallway for taking the calculator without her permission. I never let go of my fear and every day it would loom over me as I felt more and more like an outsider in an unknown world. What makes that year one of the most rewarding years of my life is the fact that instead of letting the fear take control of me and drive me back to Iran, I held it up like a mirror and used it to learn more about my needs and my boundaries.

In every situation where you experience fear, you have two options: flight or fight. In a school where 99% of the students were white, by some miracle I had found one friend who understood my language. One day this friend and I were talking about a project for a ceramics class, but our conversation was stopped in its tracks as my mind blanked trying to find the Farsi word for elephant. At this moment a wave of panic washed over me and I feared that I was losing touch with my roots. So I chose flight.

I booked my flight to Iran for winter break and convinced myself that once I landed in Iran, I would not be able to leave again. I knew that once I was reminded of the fun I have with my friends and the deliciousness of my grandma's food, I would never want to let it go again. The minute I landed at the airport, I saw a resemblance of myself in the face of every person who passed by me, simply because they were the same race. I felt immense comfort when I arrived home and smelt the familiar concoction of stale, humid walls and homemade Persian stew. I would learn soon that although stability can be comforting, facing your fears can be liberating.

“...I had an opportunity that many in the world would give anything for: freedom and independence in the United States.”

All of the ideas I'd had about the comfort of my home country changed one night when my friends and I decided to meet up for dinner. During this dinner, they each told me about the jobs that they had found and the path they were hoping to take after high school. One friend with a 4.0 GPA explained that he teaches English for a wage of \$2 an hour and cannot attend college because his Farsi is not good enough. Another chimed in, saying it is more worthwhile to join the military than to go to college in Iran. These responses were from my guy friends who live in a society that puts men on a pedestal. You can only imagine the kinds of responses I got from my girl friends, who had been taught through a sexist regime that did not promote independence and intelligence in women.

After this dinner, I began to see my situation in a whole new light. I could no longer stay blind to the disadvantages that people experienced in my country, disadvantages that I, too, would be subject to if I did not have a way out. This realization allowed me to take control of my fear and learn to manipulate it to my advantage. I could no longer let the thought of not being accepted allow me to run away from the fact that I had an opportunity that many in the world would give anything for: freedom and independence in the United States. I returned to Colorado, still fearful but with a new perception of fear.

My math teacher's reaction when I failed to ask for permission made it clear to me that independence was not only shunned in countries like Iran but rather discouraged in more discreet ways when it came to more developed countries. As a student, I believe that we must shoulder the responsibility of thinking critically in order to make the most significant impact for ourselves personally and in the overall nature of the schooling system. In the United States, students are given every tool necessary to be able to succeed, yet the notion that we should never go against that which is established keeps us from reaching full independence. By taking risks and questioning the rules every now and then, we teach ourselves how to navigate autonomy. Maturity is a concept that is not taught in school and all of us are personally liable to free ourselves from certain mindsets that school instills in us.

When my father passed away, he left me with a piece of advice that I would like to share with all of you. He would say that life is all about cycles and that you can never experience the good without the bad and vice versa. His advice led me to overcome my fear of his loss and the end of my childhood as I knew it, which in turn liberated me to be the strong woman I am today. To reap the good of life, you must first accept the fear that precedes it.

Yours truly,
Rojan Kashani



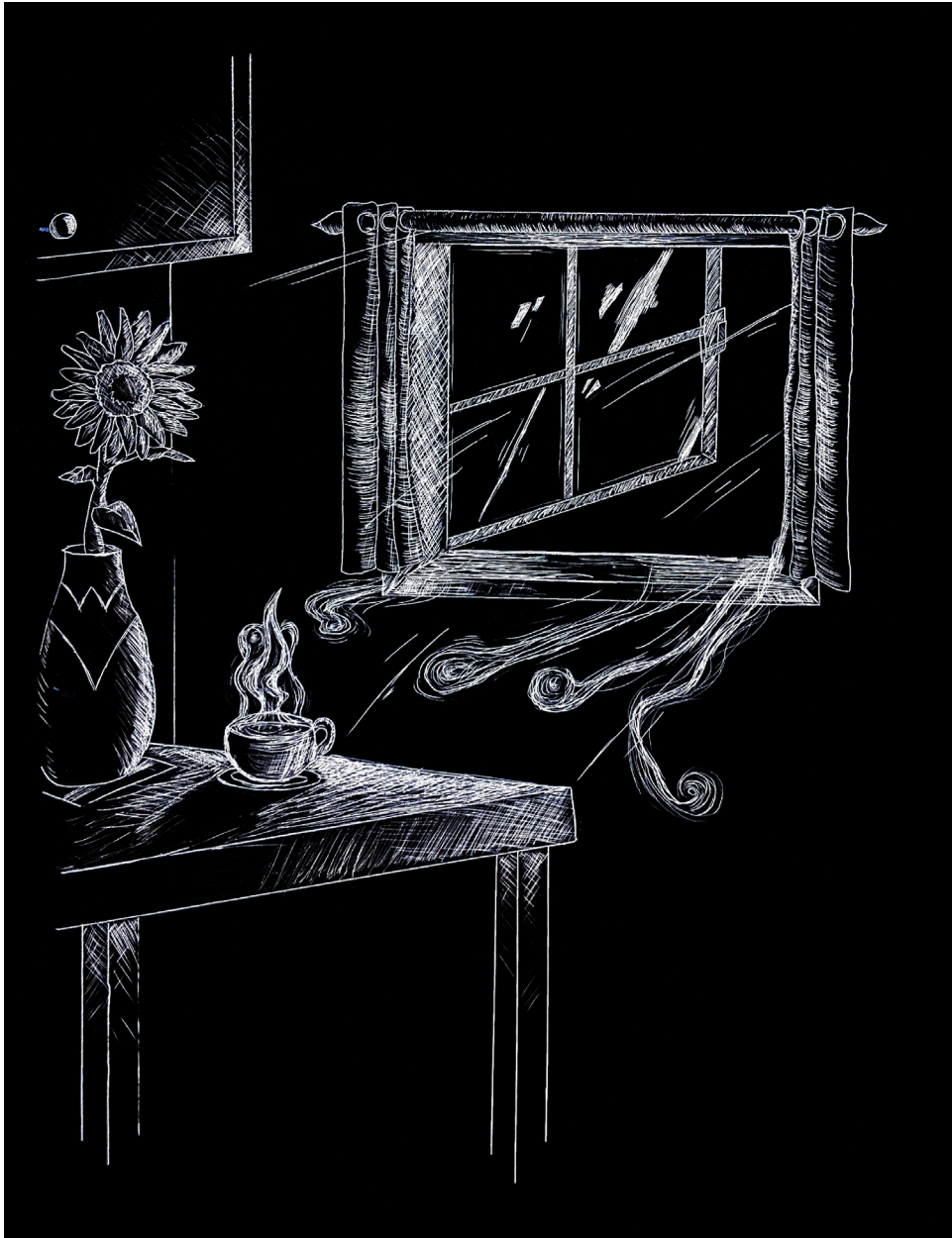


Illustration by Jaden Porras

GINGER

Paige Kujan

Ginger is warm.
 Before I'd been told
 The tang of ginger,
 I'd been sold
 That ginger tasted *warm*.
 Sun streams on skin,
 Blanket over living body,
 Soup for the soul.
Warm.

I see that ginger in reflections
 And recollections,
 In netleaf trees that
 Must be cut to grow.
 I see ginger in kin
 And their kindness,
 Blood of my blood,
 Root of all roots,
 And the flower bud
 Of friendship and its fruits.
 Oh, I see ginger,
 Soup for the soul,
 All around the ground
 From which it grows.
 Taken its time to find
 Its hold here true,
 On the land of life inclined
 To chill, it grew.
 Up, up past the storm—
Ginger is warm.

RISE AND FALL

Nathan Richmond

Gods
emperors
priests and scholars
a thousand epics to fill the halls
legions on legions of soldiers with spears
ten thousand laborers hauling bricks of mud one by one

-
day after day week after week
year after year after year
sun rises and sun falls
faith forgotten
legacies lost
dust

DOMES OF CASA GRANDE

Teri Perlstein



PHOTOGRAPH

THE CHANGE

Brandi Michele Ortiz



Illustration by Cindy Gonzalez

Buzzzz. Finn could hear her coming for him. He could tell by the insufferable buzzing getting louder and more unbearable. She was closing in on him and no matter how far he ran, she was always right behind him. And she was really going to kill him this time. He knew it.

Buzzzz. Faster and faster, he ran across the mossy floor. No matter which direction he ran, he found himself in the same dark woods. There were trees far as the eye could see. Tall, twisted, and sickly-looking trees that begged to be cut down. His bare feet were caked in mud, making each and every step a dangerous maneuver. One wrong move and he would slip, and she would most certainly catch him.

Buzzzz. He could not afford to look back, but he knew she was near without having to look. He knew she was with him when the buzzing finally came to a stop and all was silent. That was the sign she had finally caught up to him. He froze in place, unable to move. Unable to breathe.

Finn could feel the heat of her breath against the back of his neck and sense the smug grin in her voice. "Time's up, worm."

Buzzzz. Finn jolted from his sleep and discovered himself wrapped in a cocoon of cotton sheets. An annoying ring filled the air. The eerie woods, which Finn was certain would be his final resting place, melted away. He found himself in his room. His alarm clock brightly flashed 8 a.m. over and over again.

Buzzzz. Finn groaned, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and snagged the clock from his bedside table. He really needed a new alarm clock. Something with a less ominous and irritating sound. He shut it off, placed it back on the table, and took a deep breath. *Just a nightmare*, he thought to himself, untangling himself from his sheets and rising from his twin-sized bed.

"Just a nightmare," he muttered, trying to reassure himself. He got up, made his way to the dresser, and grabbed his clothes for the day. Something in the corner of his dresser drawer caught his eye. It was an older photo of him with his sister, Mabel. They were in the family garden, wearing bright smiles and oversized gloves. She smiled a lot back then.

They used to share this room, but that was before Mabel changed a few months ago. She stopped spending time with him, started wearing makeup, and hung out with the older kids at school. Eventually, it got to the point that she asked their parents for her own room. They obliged and Mabel moved into the guest room down the hall. The room felt emptier without her in it.

Finn sighed and tucked the photo back into place. He changed into his clothes and made his way downstairs to find his parents and Mabel sitting at the kitchen table. Dad had made waffles while Mom brewed coffee. They all sat and ate together like any other family.

Yet, in recent months, things had become tense. Words were barely said at breakfast, and Finn often lost his appetite at times.

Occasionally, Finn's eyes would dart toward Mabel. She had changed so drastically over the past few months, from her attitude to her choice of clothes. She painted her nails red, wore fancy makeup and clothes, and straightened her natural curls. It was so odd that sometimes he was certain the person across the table could not be the same person who adored him so many years ago. *How could she be?*

When Finn looked at his sister, his friend Dane came to mind. "It's probably not even your sister," he said when Finn came to him about his nightmares and his newfound fear of his sister. In retrospect, going to Dane wasn't the best choice. After all, Dane had a way of spinning things to the point that Finn would believe just about anything.

"What do you mean?" he remembered asking.

"I mean that she could be an alien, shapeshifter, or run-of-the-mill monster, for all we know," Dane said. "If you ask me why she's so different, it's likely 'cause some monster snatched her and took her place. The same thing happened with my cousin and his step-sister."

"Really?" he asked.

"Really really."

"Well, what happened?" Finn remembered coming to regret asking because his stomach dropped considerably when Dane smiled, showcasing a full view of his teeth.

"She ate him."

That memory sent a slight chill down his spine each time Finn made eye contact with Mabel. Her eyes were cold whenever she looked at him, indifferent almost. Dane could very well be right. There was definitely something *wrong* with her, to say the least.

It had been less than a week since Finn came forward about his fears to Dane, and today was the day to find out the truth about Mabel, to find out whether or not she was his sister or just some imposter. It was a Friday morning so, after breakfast, Mom had left for the office, while Dad had left for the store, likely to buy fertilizer for the garden. The summer heat was really bringing out the bugs so Dad had his work cut out for him.

“The red was everywhere.”

Finn watched carefully as Mabel gathered her things and made a break for the door. He had overheard her talking to a friend over the phone. They were set to meet up at the mall and Finn knew that this was his chance. As soon as the front door was shut, Finn raced for the stairs and toward Mabel's room. He cautiously opened the door and peeked inside, half expecting her to still be lurking somewhere in her room. The room was empty so he went inside.

He called Dane, as planned. "Are you in?" Dane asked, his pimple-ridden face appearing on his phone screen.

"Yeah, I'm in," Finn replied, raising his phone so that Dane could see for himself.

"Okay now, if she's a monster, there's gotta be evidence somewhere so keep an eye out," Dane instructed. He sounded excited.

Finn scanned the room and chose to rummage through one of her drawers. Most of her clothes were missing, and the clothes he had found were nicely folded. With his sister being such a neat freak, it was to be expected. He paused and thought, *What do I really expect to find?*

Just as doubt began to rack his mind, something caught his eye. There was dirt covering her sheets... and something else. Something *red*.

Weird, he thought. *Why would his clean freak of a sister have dirt in her bed of all places?*

"Dude, did you find something? Let me see. Let me see." Dane begged, sounding like a kid at Christmas time.

Finn failed to register Dane's voice anymore. He walked over towards the bed to get a

better look and faltered once he'd gotten close enough to see more dirt and tiny droplets of red, originating from the bed and leading to the bathroom. *Is that... is that what I think it is?* Terrified, Finn hesitantly followed the trail. It led to the hamper. He took a deep breath and gripped the lid, lifting it slowly. *There was red everywhere.*

Finn gasped, falling backward and knocking the hamper over. Blood-stained clothes littered the floor. He scrambled backward and ran out in a panic, slamming the door behind him. He clutched his chest, trying to keep his heart from bursting out of his chest.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Mabel stood in front of him, her arms crossed. From the looks of it, her red painted nails were digging painfully into her upper arms.

Finn froze.

"Well?" she snarled.

"Dude! Tell me what's going on!" Dane shouted, his voice loud enough for Mabel to hear. Her eyes narrowed in on the phone and Finn quickly disconnected the call.

Finn could not find the words. Mabel glared at him as his mouth opened and closed.

"You've done it, this time, you little worm. I *told* you to stay out of my room."

Words finally came free, but Finn quickly regretted them when Mabel's eyes began to narrow. "I thought you were going to the mall."

Mabel's glare intensified and his blood ran cold. "I *was*, but I forgot... something." She did not care to elaborate, and if he wasn't mistaken, she almost looked flustered. Her stance had become defensive, too, by the looks of it. "I'm calling Mom and Dad. If they don't kill you, I *will*."

As promised, Mabel called their parents, and Finn was almost relieved they were on their way. Mabel had left for the mall, and the three of them moved into the living room. Finn sat down at one end of the couch by his mother. Both his parents towered over him and had that look that promised a stern and unpleasant lecture. As usual, Mom began while Dad remained silent and impassive.

"Finn, Mabel tells us you've gone through her room," she stated. "Can you tell us why?"

Finn bit his lip. Mom took that as a sign he wasn't going to say why and came to her own conclusion. She nodded sympathetically and knelt in front of him. "Honey, I know it's hard not sharing a room with your sister anymore, but you're both growing up. She needs her space, *especially* right now."

Finn crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. "I'm telling you," he said, stressing his voice in the process, "there is something *wrong* with her."

His parents looked at one another with a look he could not properly explain. It was Mom's turn to bite her lip and look to Dad for advice. He had nothing to say. In fact, he looked downright flustered.

His mother began again with "Finn, sweetie" and paused. "Nothing is... wrong with your sister. Mabel is simply at the age when her body begins to change, and when that happens—"

"But I saw *blood*!" he shrieked, cutting her off. "There was *blood* in her bed and on the floor! I *saw* it! I know I did!"

Both his parents looked mortified at this outburst. Finn had had enough. "And I can prove it!"

Finn raced back up the stairs towards Mabel's room while his parents followed fast behind. "Finn, stop!" they cried.

Finn reached the room and yanked open the door. "Look and see!" he cried, pointing towards the bed. His parents looked in the direction he was pointing. His mom sighed. "Honey, what are we supposed to be looking at?"



Illustration by Kate Howard

Finn looked towards the bed. There were *clean* sheets on the bed, and there was nothing on the floor. *Nothing!* He raced into the bathroom to search the hamper again. *Empty!*

“It was here! There was blood everywhere, I swear!”

Mom reached for him, trying to hug him close. “Finn, honey, if you just listen, we can ex—”

Finn cut her off again. “No! You don’t get it! I know what I saw!”

Mom again tried to console him. “Finn, this isn’t fair to your sister. If you don’t want to listen now, go to your room, and we’ll talk tomorrow, okay?”

With that, Finn was sent to his room. Still fuming, he called Dane again and explained what he had seen in Mabel’s room.

“So they didn’t believe you, huh?”

“No, and I don’t think they will,” Finn groaned.

“Dude, if your sister’s a monster, there’s no way you can stay in that house. You’ve either gotta get out or take *her* out.”

“I—I don’t think I can,” Finn confessed. Hurting Mabel had never really come to mind.

“Dude, it’s her or *you*,” Dane explained. “Your choice.”

Finn hung up after that and received a text from Dane a minute later that read “**Call me in the morning. If you don’t die, that is.**”

...*maybe Dane was the crazy one.* With that last thought in mind, Finn went to sleep.

“ *It was a scene straight from one of his dreams.* ”

Buzzzz. Finn stirred and expected to see 8 a.m. flashing brightly. Instead, his clock read 3:25 a.m.! **Buzzzz.** He had had enough and ripped the cord from the wall, tossing the clock against the wall. There was silence for a moment and he sighed, resigned to going back to sleep.

Buzzzz. His eyes snapped open and looked back at his alarm clock. It remained on the floor, across the room. The screen cracked and still displayed 3:25 a.m.

Buzzzz. There it was again. That awful buzzing. Finn rose from his sheets, followed the sound, and made his way to the hall. Something munched beneath his feet. There was dirt in the hall, leading from Mabel’s room and through the hall. Finn followed the trail, going down the stairs, past the kitchen, and towards the yard. He opened the sliding door and continued following the sound, leading him to the garden. **Buzzzz. Buzzzz.**

There he saw *her*. It was a scene straight from one of his dreams. She was caked in blood and mud. *Digging.* Gnawing at the ground with her polished fingers. Her back was turned from him, and he could see something *moving* underneath her clothes. Something *alive*.

Finn couldn’t stop himself. He took a step towards her. He had to be sure of what he was seeing. She continued to dig through the dirt for who knows what. Finn continued his slow pace towards her and froze. Apparently, she had found what she was looking for. Then he heard *chewing*.

Once he got closer, he saw something dangling between her fingers. He peeked over her shoulder and paled at the sight. Mabel had *worms* slithering between her fingers. *Worms!* Appalled, Finn scrambled backward, making him lose his footing and hit the ground. The chewing ceased and the buzzing increased immensely. **Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzz.**

Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzz. He was paralyzed, watching her head rise and her back ripple beneath her clothes. She slowly turned her head, and Finn paled further. He recognized her pajamas, but he could not recognize *her*. Her face was simply not human. Her eyes were big and bug-eyed, glistening and staring. She had drooling mandibles sprouting from her mouth, with worms slipping between what appeared to be her lips. Her skin was falling apart at the edges of her face, revealing something *else* beneath the surface. **Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzz.**

This is just another dream, he thought. I'll wake up any minute. Right as she's about to kill me.

Then, *wings* sprouted from her back, buzzing loudly in tune with her temper. **Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzz.** Finn lay there in the dirt, horrified and devastated. *Maybe I was the crazy one.*

Mabel just stared at him, fuming. She looked angry and embarrassed. "You think *this* is bad?" she hissed, her voice barely audible. "Just wait until it's *your* turn, worm. Give it another year. You'll be in for a *real* treat. This is what growing up's all about."



SCRATCHBOARD

Illustration by Alani Walraven

MEMORIES OF INNOCENCE

Ciara Weitzel

It feels as though my life has consisted of me not being completely present. I might have been physically sitting at a desk, but my mind was at a simpler time. I find myself going back to these times even now, as an eighteen year old. Even if these times were not all pleasant, sometimes it's all I have. "These times" are specifically from my early childhood, one to six years old to be exact. Those six years weren't perfect, but they continue to be all I had.

The day my mom had her fate-deciding stroke was a bright day in May 2009. After my mom picked me up from kindergarten, we were going to have a picnic with our good friends at the park near our house. But before we could leave, she had to change my sister's diaper and feed my brother while I finished all my soup. I was upset over having to eat before leaving, which in my mind defeated the purpose of a picnic, but I complied. She disappeared upstairs while I sat at our counter sipping my lukewarm soup. Everything was normal; everything was fine. I heard staggered steps until the most piercing sound of a woman screaming echoed down the stairs.

Not expecting what was to emerge from the bottom of the staircase, I saw her fingertips sliding down the banister. "Por favor, Ciara, por favor, call 911," my mom begged me, using the Spanish word for "please," while she gripped her temples and screamed as if her life depended on it. She collapsed on our muted green couch while my brother, oblivious at two years old, asked her what was wrong. I panicked and searched for her Blackberry, a device too complex for a six-year-old child. I called every number on her contact list, but the numbers became jumbled; I didn't know how to type. Luckily, the friends we were supposed to meet got my urgent call and came to our house. They immediately heard the commotion behind our front door. We were late for our picnic. My brother, five-month-old sister, and me were ushered upstairs to my room. Muffled whispers came from the adults downstairs. The rest is blurred except for a teary-eyed view from my bedside window of my mom being pulled on a gurney and rushed to the ambulance. This day has become one of my last memories of my mother, but I didn't know that until later.

Whether it's positive, negative, or a mixture of both, we all have a distinct view of our lives. Many of us have similar experiences, up until a certain point that is, which might be days at a park or the first day of second grade—all impactful moments designating what I would call innocence. Innocence can be many things, too—either ignorance or cleanliness—but there always comes a moment when that concept of innocence is challenged and eventually taken away. For me, my innocence was guarded against a false narrative I had of my childhood, memories of my mother, and specifically the last memories of her. I already understood that I was very young and that my perspective might be different than what happened, but, for the most part, I had always been right. I had always told the story of my mom coming down the stairs and me calling the police—the whole event I described earlier. I was never challenged on its legitimacy for when I relayed it to other people, a lot of it checked out. Our friends did come in to "save the day" and people did come to see why my mother's daughter had pinged their phone. What I did not enjoy hearing was that everything that happened afterward—such as my mother coming back later that weekend perfectly fine or going to last-minute doctor appointments before her death—was not true.

My brain burned as my dad negated every event that came out of my mouth. I thought my mom came back for the rest of the month with vivid memories of waking her up in the

mornings like I always did and her taking me to school. She came back ill, not even for a week. I had concrete images of going to the hospital with her to visit the therapist at Mission Viejo Hospital. She was in an induced coma with only a machine as her source of life. What changed everything was my final moment with her. I was eating pistachios in the hospital waiting room until my father came to get me, bringing me to my mother's hospital room. She was wide awake. She looked healthy to me and we had an actual conversation, a conversation I can repeat verbatim. Her hair was the straight dark brown I had always been envious of and she squeezed my hand tight. This never happened. She was bald. She could not talk because she was not awake. She couldn't grab my hand because she was not awake. She was going to die later that day. This was impossible for me.

My dad correcting me incited an inevitable internal grief. I felt that everything I knew was a figment of my imagination. If it never happened, why was it so real to me? If it never happened, why do I feel it has shaped me into who I am today? I felt as though I never fully grieved my mother due to my young age and the immediate distractions I had confirmed that. I just knew she passed and I was supposed to be sad. I didn't have time to process my emotions or my anger; I just knew they were there. Since then, I have had to grow up faster than I previously thought. I had to be more mature for my siblings and I was a lot more depressed than many of the kids in my elementary schools, yet it wasn't until that ignorance was brought to light that I realized my innocence was gone.

Despite the obstacles I faced as a child missing my mom's voice and her presence during Mother's Day, I'm the woman I was meant to become from this traumatic experience. The transition from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to experience, comes at different times for all of us. No matter how much you wish to, you cannot hold onto your innocence forever. But it remains part of you until the end of your time.



AFLOAT

Renee Le

At times, I feel that life is like swimming, and I'm a mediocre swimmer at best. I went to lessons as a kid because kids who grow up near the California coast have to know how to swim. I couldn't tell you what I learned; I can only tell you that I'm able to keep my head above water and would live for maybe a solid hour if I were stranded at sea. I do remember, however, my fear of the deep end. My instructor would beg me to just jump in, promising my safety as I sat defiantly on the edge of the pool. This was a headache for my poor sweet teacher and certainly embarrassing for my mother bearing witness on the sidelines, but I could not be swayed. I was so small and the pool was so big that the bottom was nowhere to be seen. I didn't trust myself to dive into things, even then.

I had to get in eventually. Some things happen because they have to happen, because time ticks and you can't sit on the edge of the pool forever. I don't know what pushed me—the pressure, the embarrassment, being fed up with the same impasse over and over, a literal push— but it must have been something because there's always the push, followed by the struggle.

In the near decade and a half since, my aversion to the deep end of swimming pools has thankfully diminished, but I'm still that little girl with her little legs halfway in the water, terrified of taking the plunge. I'm still the kid who needs the nudge and the shove. The deep end has been replaced by the big, bottomless expanse of being and living, and doing it with mental illness. For all I resist, life barrels forward. When I don't reach in to meet the water, it rises to meet me anyway.

Depression turns the water into molasses. Everything is thick and heavy. There's weight pressing in on me from every direction. It sticks to me, engulfs my whole body. I fight so hard to move a millimeter. It feels like so much effort yet not enough. Anxiety is like being caught in the riptides, jostled every which way until I don't know which way is up or down. Everyone appears to be swimming laps in still water, treading with skill and ease. I haven't made it past the five-meter mark, can barely keep my chin above the waterline.

When you live so much of your life in your head, caught up in trying to stay afloat, the rest of the world fades into the background. There's guilt because of it, a sense of self-ishness I think I'll spend the rest of my life apologizing for. Among other things. *I'm sorry I'm so self-centered. I'm sorry I'm such a coward. I'm sorry I've failed and keep failing. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.* Shame and embarrassment covers me like a second skin. There is no thought of mine that I feel entirely comfortable with.

In some other reality, there's a version of me that doesn't have to battle her own mind. There's this greener in me to have that life, this naive belief that I should be able to do it all and nothing should hold me back. I push my limits because I resent their existence. It's strange to think that could have been me if I had done things differently, made different choices. Maybe I should grieve for her then, this girl with this life and this future that I lost. Or maybe I was destined to be this way from the beginning, and there's nothing to mourn. I don't have these answers, and I never will. Part of healing is accepting that there's some things I'll never know, some things that will never have closure.

Through the haze, there are moments of sharp clarity, emotions breaking through the surface tension. Even stupid little moments. Even the smallest of ripples can blossom into tidal waves. One night on the cusp of a particularly bad episode, I walked into the

kitchen. I'd spent the whole day in bed crying; I was puffy and sniffing, eyes bloodshot and swollen. When I went to sit at the dinner table, my baby brother glanced at me. It was just a flash, maybe not even anything, but I registered a look that I interpreted as *scared*. Something inexplicable pierced me then, something between guilt and love and heart-break. Here's my little brother, scared for me. It's not fair that he should see me like this. People talk about one moment when it all falls into place, like something out of a movie. This was it. In an instant, I knew, and the thought rang louder in my head than anything before it. *I can't have him lose a big sister.*

And so it starts over again. The cycle of getting better and getting worse and getting better. The riptides, the waves. Up and under and back again. In my worst moments, the thought that I'll be subjected to this push and pull for the rest of my life is unbearable. What a scary thought—that I'm caught within an unbreakable force. You can't fight physics. The laws of nature dictate everything, and my nature is to let the water overwhelm me. It would be so easy.

But would it really? It's September 2020 and I'm sitting in my room on a Zoom meeting, listening to Dr. Tony Huntley explain the first two laws of thermodynamics as they relate to metabolism. I barely remember that tumultuous fall semester, sad and sequestered in my house, but none of that is particularly important here. The important part is my memory of this: "I would argue," Dr. Huntley said, "that the definition of living is fighting the Second Law." The Second Law concerns transformations and entropy, the growing disorder that accompanies physical changes. As time progresses, entropy only ever increases as the number of transformations increase. The universe wants us to descend into chaos and disorder; the universe seeks entropy while our bodies seek to maintain order in its many systems. *Living is fighting*. This is a phrase I've taken and turned over in my hands, considering it deeply. *Living is fighting*. It's always a losing battle, ultimately, morbidly, but it's a fight worth fighting. It's the fight we never stop fighting. It wouldn't be so easy to deny my body its purpose, the fight that it was made for, born into.

And I've learned a secret, one tucked between the lines of a long, winding story: I'd rather float than drown, even when there's a current beckoning me under, even when there seems to be nothing and no one for miles and miles and miles. There are moments when I can't breathe, moments when my muscles ache, my cheeks are cold and wet, and I'm so tired to my bones I don't think I'll ever be free of the weight in me. All of this is true, and yet there are calm waters where the sun shines on my skin and the sky is clear. There is good on the horizon if you let yourself get that far.



THE BEACH IS QUIET

Trevor Roach

The beach is quiet,
Too quiet.
It's amplifying the never-ending noises
In my head.
I wish it could stop,
Just for once.
I wish to hear the cool, sea-salted wind
Whistle through the sky.
I wish for the crash of the waves
To wash over my dwindling spirit,
Cleansing me of the madness beneath my bones.
Will true silence ever come and wake me
From this dissociative state?
I hope so.

RADIAL SILENCE

Mandana Bonakdar



CHARCOAL

BOULEVARD OF BROKEN GLASS

Kat Johnson

They say life comes at you like a truck. I'm aware that sounds very cliché and I don't use this phrase often, but it happened to me. Literally.

It was supposed to be a simple night. On January 3rd of last year, my best friend Joseph was helping me move boxes from my mom's stagnant storage unit so I could decide which of my childhood possessions to keep. I was exhausted from this process, which spanned several months.

It was a long day, and we needed to head back to my home, so I looked up the directions on my phone. I'm not one for freeways, so I saw no harm in the directions that led us down the entirety of Camino Capistrano before turning onto Oso Parkway. A pair of headlights came into view down this dark, two-lane road. Joseph and I stared at them silently as it appeared they were directly in our lane. There was no way to avoid this collision, so all I could say was "Oh, god!" The most ear-shattering sound rang out as the front half of Joseph's car was entirely compacted and we rattled against the airbags.

When we came to a stop, I looked around in a dazed state to see that my left wrist had been knocked out of proportion and my entire lower half felt like it was on fire. I soon discovered that my spine had been fractured and my knees were bruised to the bone. Joseph immediately jumped out of the car to assess the situation while getting help from some nearby residents. He jumped into action so quickly that—incredibly—I didn't realize that he had also fractured his left wrist. His injuries also consisted of a concussion and dozens of cuts all over his body.

Nevertheless, I've always tried to keep lighthearted about the situation. I made some dark jokes while they lifted me into the ambulance although I had been crying minutes before as I was trapped in the smoking vehicle. They had to carry me out the window since the door was jammed shut. One such joke I made was commenting, "Think this would've hurt a lot less if the car had just exploded." It's crazy to think I could've easily become the next deceased victim of rampant drunk driving that would be used as a cautionary tale at public schools.

I was in the hospital for three days and deeply appreciated having Joseph's company during the times he was able to walk over to my room. He is the kind of person who can tough it out through almost anything. Joseph kept telling me about how he wished that he had been the one with extreme injuries instead of me, insisting that he would be able to handle it better. Kinda one of the reasons why he ended up joining the Marines.

For the period I was stuck in bed, I FaceTimed my therapist. She helped me set goals for my recovery and understood that I had trouble leaving my home to visit her for quite a while. It felt like quarantine all over again except it was entirely voluntary. I was stuck in a home where I was mostly alone except for occasional visits from my parents. They definitely came over and helped but only for so long. The number one thing from my therapist's sessions that truly got me back on my feet again was her reminders of how this situation would only be temporary.

The one-year anniversary of the incident happened recently. Joseph and I joked about it as if it were a holiday that only the two of us celebrated.

"Happy car crash anniversary!" I messaged him.

"Haha yayyy what a banger," he replied.

The way we can easily talk about this experience definitely brought both of us closer.

It makes it hard that, for the time being, we are both far from one another since he finally went off to the military after he recovered. I continue to update him on anything about the accident case, which is still ongoing.

There is still a constant fear that follows me when driving because of this incident. From the metal now implanted in my wrist to my lower back pain, little reminders of anxiety follow me, making me avoid driving at night.

About the matter of my metal wrist, I simply say I am a step away from becoming a cyborg with many other fantasy-themed jokes along that line. One of the best comments came from another friend claiming, "Your wrist is just a future upgrade that soon everyone will be having." My spine though... It's kinda hard to joke about that one even though I am fully walking and mainly functional despite scoliosis.

It may seem obvious here who was at fault for this incident. However, everyone involved wanted to try to take the blame in some way. I blamed myself for choosing a route home from Google maps that didn't involve the freeway. Joseph blamed himself for not swerving in time to avoid the head-on collision as we stared like sheep at the impending doom in our lane. My mother blamed herself for having us go out to the storage facility. But this stranger who hit us and still is trying to plead not guilty is the one at fault. He had the audacity to get drunk and high on cocaine on a Thursday night and then go out driving.

In instances such as these, it's extremely hard to accept that life is simply out of your control. And the only thing you can do is lay back nearly paralyzed in a bed and hope that you are not alone by having a trusted friend beside you to help you through it. Luckily, I did have that friend and I make sure to tell him all the time just how grateful I am for him. And I'm especially proud of myself for all the improvements I've made. I often need support, but I can confidently say that I have healed to a large degree.

As aware as you can make yourself of an oncoming catastrophe, nothing can prepare you for it. And there is nothing to blame except for the catastrophe itself. But how does that blame ever help you in the long run except for the single fact that it wasn't your fault? That it just happened? And that it won't happen again anytime soon, yet your whispering thoughts tell you otherwise in the form of looming shadows from each corner? You just simply can't predict it.

That is why you must take your own time to heal and rest. Then, eventually, you get up to share your story about all your pain in an effort to make sure it doesn't happen to anyone else. Just like those PSAs you see running on the TV stating that "every 15 minutes a drunk driver kills someone." But here's the thing: You just can't predict when life will come at you and you must realize that it's okay. Everything will be fine, eventually.



DAVID

Barbara Beaupre

It's almost a year now since David died and a little over two years since I learned he had lung cancer. David had been a heavy smoker since he was thirteen. It should not have come as a shock that at seventy-seven, he would be diagnosed with lung cancer. When you add liberal consumption of alcohol and some drug use to the smoking, it is surprising he had few serious health problems earlier. That said, I was still in disbelief when he told me he had cancer.

From my earliest memories, David was in my life. I remember tattling on him after crying because he called me Anna's baby. I don't even know why that designation was so abhorrent, but it was probably because of the sneer in his voice which accompanied any verbal injury he wanted to inflict. I was the first girl after David had been the baby for four and a half years. He disliked sharing the spotlight and found any opportunity to get even. It wasn't until I was around eight years old that I started challenging him, refusing to put up with too much teasing. We became friends.

We had long weekend marathons playing Monopoly and Parcheesi. Since by that time there were four Stern kids with another on the way, we had to entertain ourselves. So we did. On weekends, I would bake muffins. We would slather the hot muffins with butter and honey, savoring the steamy sweetness on cold winter afternoons. Then we would launch into a game marathon. We were not lonely as we had each other.

David and I also shared our love for our grandma's farm. As very young children, we went to the farm with our mother and her brother, Uncle Irvin. He drove a station wagon so there was room for my mother, brothers, and me as well as Irvin's two children. Those visits to the farm were our first tastes of freedom and adventure. Later on, with the birth of the sixth Stern kid, Ma stopped making farm visits. David and I made the seven-hour journey to Clintonville with Uncle Irvin or took the Greyhound bus. Those trips cemented our relationship as we were the two Stern kids who both loved the place and stayed there.

"I don't know what you two see in that godforsaken farm," Ma would say. "I couldn't wait to get away from there... no toilet, no bathtub, all that weeding. Ugh!"

Ma couldn't understand that the farm was magical to us. Grandma only expected us to turn up for meals. Other than that and not scaring the chickens, we could do whatever we wanted. She didn't tell us to go to bed or even wash up at the kitchen pump. Those things we did on our own. Fortunately, we went swimming in the river so there was some water that touched our skin.

Long after we stopped visiting Grandma's farm, the place held sway in our memory banks. When we spoke either on the phone or on a Milwaukee visit, one or both of us would bring up some aspect of those visits.

"Remember those breakfasts Grandma made for us? Sausages, bacon, ham, potatoes, and, of course, the berries." David had a special love for berries and remembering them always brought a wistful smile to his lips.

Our last visit to the farm was bittersweet. For his sixty-fifth birthday, I flew to Milwaukee from Los Angeles. "We're going to check out the old homestead," I said. "Can you be ready by nine tomorrow morning? If that works, we're going back to Bear Creek."

"Really?" David asked. "You're actually going to drive us to the old farm? Do you think it's still there? Maybe they turned it into a subdivision."

The farm was still there though the dirt road leading to the farm off the highway had

been paved. Even the old barn was there, but it was as though someone had let the air out of a balloon. The old building had simply collapsed onto itself with no one touching a single board. Even the old farmhouse was still standing. The kitchen window that overlooked the field separating Grandma's farm from Aunt Irene's had been boarded up, but the place was still ours. We sat in the car for several minutes, neither of us speaking. Then almost in unison we looked at each other, tears streaming down both of our faces.

Last August David told me the cancer was back and it was bad. "Now, don't go making plans to travel," he said as I was stumbling for words on our telephone call. "All you need to do is get Covid on a flight to see me. I'm on my way out anyway."

"I'll be there as soon as I can figure out my flights," I told him.

"Have you taken care of making arrangements?" I said, choosing my words carefully. Who wants to mention plans for dying? Yet that was important to know since David lived alone. He was my wonderful gay brother who never planned ahead.

"You can help me, Barbs. I've got some papers to give you and then you just do it." These words were typical of my brother and I knew we had work to do. My three days in Milwaukee were crammed with visits to the bank for power of attorney, visits to a mortuary, and calls to a cemetery. I hoped this was just being prepared, but when I saw David, I knew time was short.

When we left for the bank, David had to rest a few minutes in the lobby of his building. The distance from his room to the elevator and from the elevator to the front door had nearly done him in.

"I need to stop, Barb," David gasped, his labored breath coming unevenly. "This is harder than I thought. Mike, could you give me a hand getting up?"

In all of my life I couldn't remember David ever asking for physical help, least of all from my husband Mike. Our visit to the bank was tortuous. After sitting with his favorite banker Marlene for over 40 minutes while she gathered the appropriate power of attorney papers for signatures, David was doubled over in pain.

"Get this over with, Marlene. What's the holdup? You know me. I just need to get this legal stuff in my sister's name." David was snarling as he ground out the words.

"I'm going as fast as I can, Mr. Stern, but I need to check your sister's credit and her credit information is sealed."

Oh dear, I thought. I had put a hold on releasing any credit data since I had had several credit cards compromised and my bank had suggested locking my credit information. Who knew that would be a stumbling block for getting power of attorney?

David was groaning quietly by the time Marlene finally produced the sought-after documents. Mike helped David to his feet and half dragged and half carried him back to the car. What a nightmare. We got him back to his couch in the apartment and then it was off to the mortuary, where I had made an appointment.

"Hi, Barb," said John Schultz, the mortuary owner, his face beaming.

Why was he calling me Barb? I'd had one brief conversation with him on the phone. It was taking me some time to get used to the Midwest familiarity that used to feel commonplace.

"Does your brother want to be buried or cremated?" Schultz asked, beginning a series of questions and decisions that would take care of disposing of my brother. I felt like throwing up.

I was back in L.A. two weeks when my sister Mary called.

"Dave was admitted to the VA today. Think he's going into hospice this week. I can't do this by myself, Barb. You have to come back."

I called David after I spoke with Mary. He told me he had no plans to stay at the VA

and he was going home in a day or two once he got the medicine he needed.

“The nurses are really good here, Barb, I’ve been telling them how good lookin’ they are.” His words made me smile. David loved flirting and he was good at it. More often than not, his female subjects never knew he preferred the male orderlies. At least his upbeat attitude was an improvement. The meds must have taken effect.

After a few days of making several calls to various doctors, I learned that David had very little time left. It was less than a week and he was no longer coherent on the phone. “You gotta get me outta here, Barb,” he mumbled, barely intelligible. “I gotta go home.”

I got another flight to Milwaukee. On the way from O’Hare, I stopped in Kenosha at Mary’s house. We drove straight to the VA Hospital in Milwaukee. The hospice nurse let us into Dave’s room. “He’s been waiting for you, Barb,” she said. I was stunned again that she not only knew my name, but called me Barb. “He talked about you a lot last week and, of course, the farm.”

My brother looked like a cadaver. He was just bones and imperceptibly breathing. “Do you think he can hear me?” I asked.

“Oh, he can hear you,” the nurse assured me. “Trust me. Just talk to him. That’s what he needs.”

For the next hour, I sat next to Dave and talked. I reminded him of the farm, those starry nights spitting watermelon seeds from the side porch, catching frogs in the creek, and nearly killing ourselves in the hayloft. Dave never spoke, but his breathing was labored and his chest moved with every breath. I told him I loved him and forgave him for his mean streaks and then I left with my sister for my hotel.

The next day Mary and I went to Dave’s apartment. We needed to clean it out. It felt macabre discarding his things when he was still alive, but this was my time in Milwaukee and he wanted me to do it. His walls were covered with his paintings, many of which were scenes of the farm, the old house, the barn, the meadow. One he named “Heaven on Earth.” I couldn’t stop my tears. I picked seven paintings that I couldn’t part with, took them to UPS, and mailed them to California. My sister took several and we donated the rest of the items in his apartment.

As I looked around his disassembled home and thought of the countless visits I had made to this place over the years, I could barely breathe. How could a life be dismantled and cherished possessions turn into castoffs in a matter of days?

After I locked the door to Dave’s apartment, we drove to the VA. The receptionist said we had to wait a few minutes for our passes. When we got upstairs to Dave’s room, several doctors were coming out of the room. The hospice nurse from the day before touched my arm.

“Your brother just passed, Barb,” she said. “Today he was ready.”

I got to Dave’s bedside and touched his hand. He was still warm.

“It’s not him,” I said. “It doesn’t even look like him.”

Mary looked at me and said, “That’s because he’s left us. That’s just his shell.”

After nearly a year, I know that Dave is gone—no more political emails, no more Trump rants, and, of course, no more nostalgic conversations about the farm. In fact, there is no one else left who loved that farm the way we did. At least when I drive into my garage and see my wall of farm paintings, my brother is still sharing those thoughts with me.

BARN ON A CLOUDY DAY

Jim Gaston



PHOTOGRAPH

HERE BE DRAGONS

Tristan Vanderlinde

What would it be like to know how my life would end? That question was all I thought about back then although my daughter, Scylla, was the one facing the heavy toll of that question. When she was born, there were various complications and she wasn't expected to live past the age of twelve. As she got older, she never balked at the sad fate she was told she would meet. Her wide smile was enough to make my day, but what surprised me the most were her eyes. Every night we would climb up to our old apartment's mossy and worn-down tile roof to look at the starry sky. When we reached the roof, she would gaze into the sky with the pure white reflections of the stars shining off her eyes with a shade of blue so deep it could compare to the depths of the ocean. The longing you could see in her gaze was something I had never seen before. Her little girl's dreams filled her with a determination that couldn't be defeated by her situation. No matter how, she was going to see a dragon.

She had carried in her heart a goal to see a dragon since she was old enough to know what a dragon was. It started when she turned four years old and I got her a book called "Here Be Dragons." It was a cute but sad story about two dragons, one green and the other red. The green dragon had a dream of befriending the human village that was fairly close to their cave, but every time he tried to visit the humans, they all ran and hid in fear of the giant beast. The red dragon, noticing the green dragon's sorrow, devised a plan to help his teary-eyed friend. The red dragon would frighten the villagers by causing a commotion with his mighty flames until the noble green dragon stopped him and saved the townsfolk. When the day came and the red dragon attacked the town, the green dragon made a friend of the entire village. They partied with him all night and celebrated the savior of their town, but when the green dragon returned to his home, he found a note in front of the cave the two friends had always known. It read

"I'm happy you've finally achieved your dream. However, if the villagers were to one day see me with you, it would all have been in vain. So I have decided this will be my end. Even if we never see each other again, you will always be my friend."

Sincerely,

Your friend, The Red Dragon

The green dragon was torn with emotions after losing his old friend. He became sad, angry, and humiliated to the point of driving away the villagers he had befriended. Realizing he had lost everything he loved, the green dragon lay down in the cave he once shared and wept so loud that even the stars could hear him.

After I read that book to Scylla, the longing in her eyes was undying. She wanted to go to the roof every night to look for dragons. Sometimes she would sit in silence, patiently waiting without blinking so as not to miss anything, while other times, she would explain to me her plans and schemes that would help her find one. She once told me she saw a nature show advising that you need to watch carefully for movement beyond your peripheral vision when looking for animals. Another time she told me she could see much farther with a makeshift telescope she'd made from an old paper towel roll and some broken glass. I tried to explain to her that she would miss out on the pretty stars, but that never mattered to her anyway. She was stubborn like that.

It was only after her eighth birthday party that the harsh reality of what the doctor had told me all those years ago dawned on me. Up until now, Scylla had been living a normal

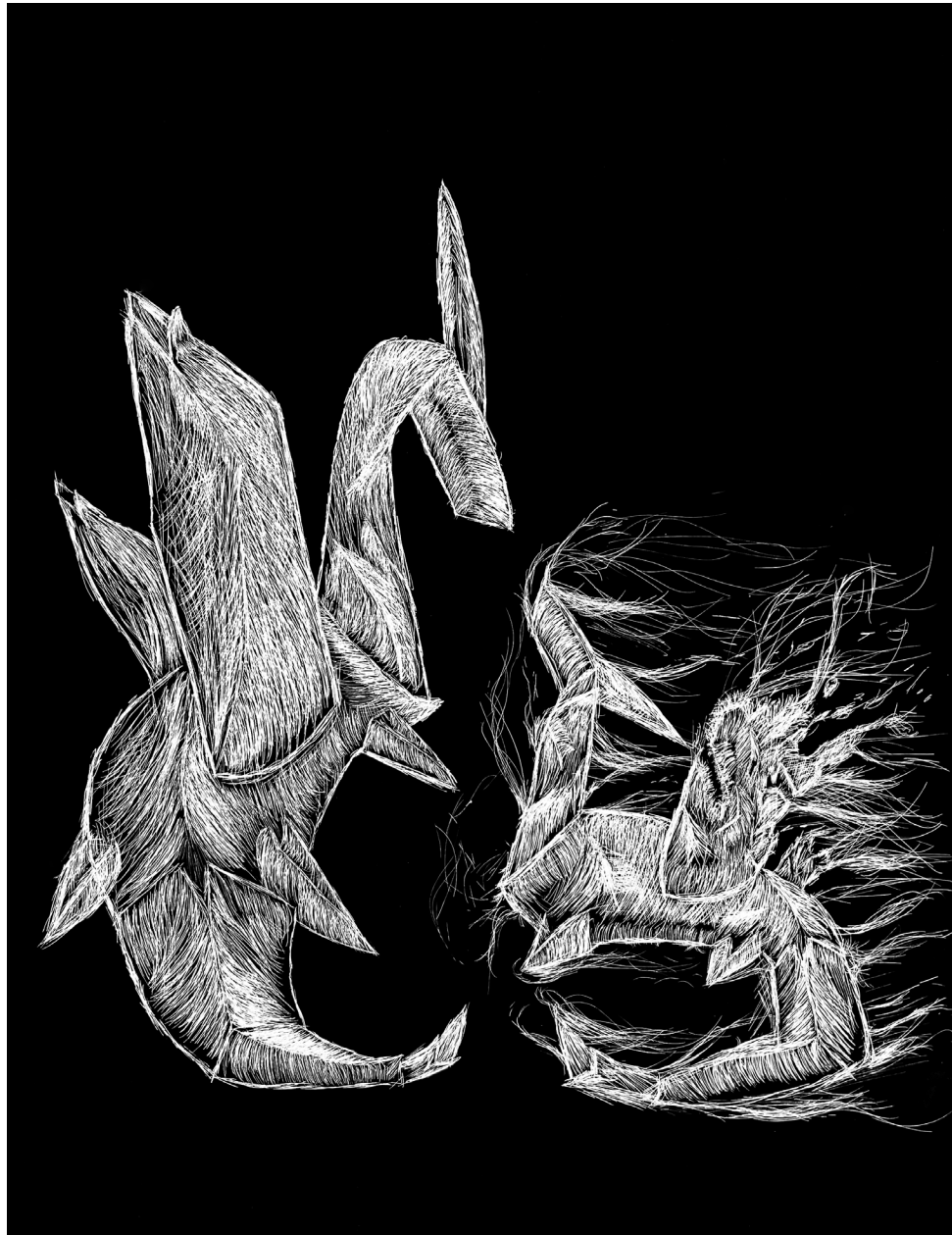


Illustration by Christopher Balsells

life, and I had almost forgotten what he had said. The sun seemed to rage down on that summer day in August, with the innocent party being the victim of that. Even in the 90-degree heat, she played with the only two friends she met in her first year of school, or at least she tried to. I couldn't help but notice the wobble in her legs, and no matter how many times I asked, she brushed it off, pouting and telling me she was fine. I started to converse with the mother of Lucas, the quieter and more polite of her two friends, when her other friend, Elaine, came over to me yelling and crying that something was wrong with Scylla. When Elaine guided us to my daughter, she was lying down under a tree. Her skin was so pale it looked like she had been through a snowstorm, but sweat dripped off her as if she were the survivor of a long desert journey. We rushed her to the hospital, and no matter what we tried on the way, she wouldn't wake up until we arrived. As she came to, she started pouting and crying about having to leave her own party. Even if it was just for that brief moment, her careless attitude lifted my spirit from the dark mindset her unconscious body had left me in. She was tested for standard complications that come with the condition with which she was diagnosed at birth. When she finally came out, she was in a wheelchair, shivering as if the building was made of ice. The doctor pulled me aside to tell me the situation. He explained that she would not be able to walk, probably for the rest of her life. The condition in almost every case would only worsen and eventually affect her ability to move as well as her motor functions. The longer he explained, the more I could feel my heart sinking into my chest and a ringing started buzzing in my ears, getting louder and louder. So loud I couldn't think. I couldn't hear what he was saying or my daughter crying in the next room. I finally came back to reality when I heard Scylla screaming for me. I ran over to her tear-soaked face and nearly fell apart when I heard her say, "I'm scared."

With every ounce of my soul, I hugged her and promised that everything would be okay, that somehow, we would make it work. She cut me off to explain that she had no idea what I was talking about and it would be past her bedtime before we got to look for dragons. I laughed with tears rolling down my face like some sort of deranged idiot you'd find in an asylum movie. The only thing I could think to say to her after she had completely thrown me for a loop was "If we really hurry, I'm sure we could make it."

I slowly found myself worrying more and more about her and praying every night that she would be okay even though I have never been religious. As her health worsened, she stayed as bright and positive as ever while I sank into a thick black pit of despair. I started drinking to ease my mind, and I always found myself getting irritated or angry with people or situations that normally did not bother me. This continued for about a year until the night of her ninth birthday party. I was carrying her to her bed while she was already half asleep, and in a haze, she told me, "Daddy, you're just like the green dragon." She let out a giggle before falling asleep.

I couldn't think of why my daughter would say that until I pulled the dusty book out from the shelf in my cramped office room to reread it. As I read the story I had long forgotten, I realized the path I was following. It would be a dark and lonely one if I didn't change the way I was thinking, but the pain of losing not just my wife but my daughter, the only remnant of her I had left, was far too much to bear. When I went to check on Scylla for the last time that night, I found her asleep forehead to forehead next to Lucas, the knight in shining armor who saved her from the evil witch, Elaine, who had made fun of Scylla's wheelchair. I promised myself then that no matter what happened, I would be there for her and be the father she needed while this was happening—although her untarnished soul made it seem like she would be fine either way.

By her eleventh birthday, nothing much had changed, aside from me quitting drinking. With minor ups and downs in Scylla's condition, life seemed to be stable once again.

Even though she had become a little more aware with age, her dream was untarnished, with the longing in her eyes unfazed by the passing of time. Lucas came over much more than usual now, which made for some fun days. But time flew by quicker than the speed of sound, with its overbearing property of change raining down on us. Her condition fell to a new low a few days before her twelfth birthday, and, for the first time, the spark in her eyes seemed to dull. As she became more mature, she was able to perceive the concept of death and what that entailed. She slowly lost function of her arms and gradually the ability to speak. By the time she had a mask on to help her breathe at all times, the bright white longing that once consumed her eyes seemed to fade, leaving nothing but an endless void in her empty gaze. The only way I could communicate with her was to raise her hand to a sheet of paper with letters on it. She would mumble every time her finger hovered over the right letter, although she only ever said one thing: "Can we go look for dragons?"

***“As her health worsened,
she stayed as bright and positive as ever
while I sank into a thick black pit of despair.”***

Her thirteenth birthday had arrived, and she had stopped putting effort into asking if we could go. It was almost as if she was emotionless, just waiting for a cruel end to take her far away from here. I felt worthless, as though every time I told her she needed to stay in the hospital to get better I had betrayed her hope that she would ever fulfill her dream. But the first spark of hope I had seen in a while walked in to surprise her on her birthday. Lucas, whose hands were covered in bandages soaked red from cuts and bruises, put a cardboard box labeled "A Dragon's Home" between her hands. As I opened it and pulled out her present, I saw a small spark that had long since been put out return to her eyes. Tears rolled down her face, and she mumbled louder and longer than she had in a long time. What was placed between her hands was made by a boy who had put all his love into it. It was metal wiring with dragons made from carefully patterned and prepared origami to look like they were soaring through a vast and open sky. A nightlight attached to the top displayed a blue light across the roof with stars riddled across it like spilled marbles. Her tears turned to a deep stare, filled with amazement and longing even she had seemed to have forgotten. I told her she should convey her thanks, after which I placed her hand against the paper sheet she had refused to use for months. Instead, she pointed to letters that certainly didn't say "thank you." As she slowly pointed out letter after letter, I had to fight a desperate urge to break down. She was begging to go look just one more time, even if it meant it would be her last time.

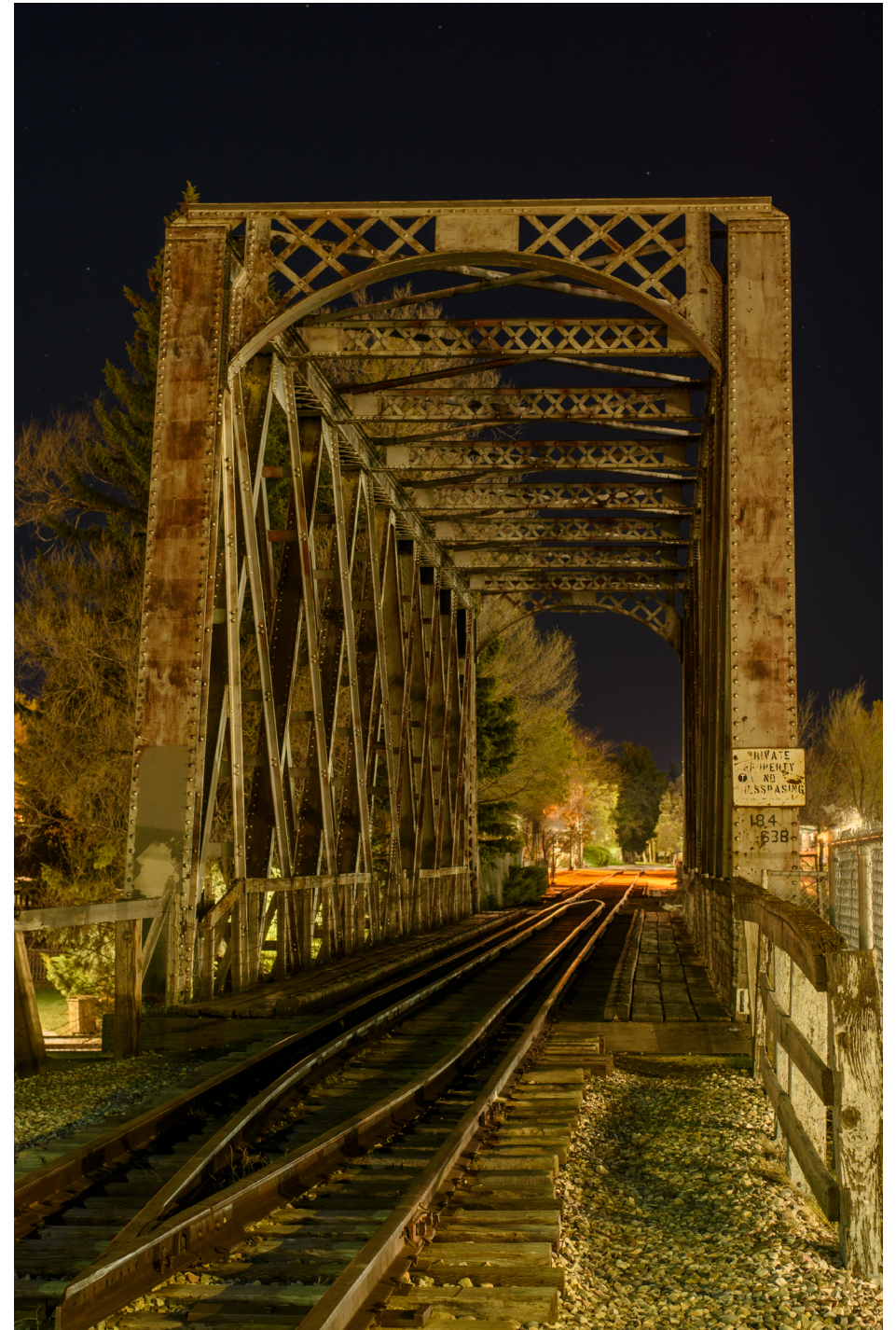
My mind raced, and I still wasn't ready to accept the pain of losing my little girl, the only person I had left. Still, I finally realized how selfish I had been to keep her locked away in this white patterned prison in a misplaced hope of a different outcome. I carefully detached the tubes and wires they had strung across her and picked her up in my arms for the first time since she was hospitalized. Despite being older, she was much lighter and frailer than before. Like a glass butterfly with a beauty that could be tattered with even the gentlest mishap. Doctors yelled at the teary-eyed boy and me as we walked outside the room all the way to the hospital doors. I could feel my heart sink through an endless pit, my ears ringing and drowning out the sounds of their voices until I could hear nothing but the sounds of being underwater in a raging ocean.

We walked and walked along the side of the road until we finally came to a grassy hill. The resonating sound of the ocean was consumed entirely by the sound of grass blowing in the nighttime breeze, but what I felt was far from peaceful. I was terrified. When we finally reached the top of the hill, I laid her down gently with her head in my lap. The feeling of her breathing was short, distant, and so fragile. She looked up at the starriest sky we had ever seen, and the nostalgia of the nights all spent looking up hit me more than I thought it could. Slowly and slowly, as the hours passed, her breathing was almost at a stop. The light seemed to be fading from her eyes when suddenly they lit up like never before. With all the strength she had left, she mumbled until Lucas and I looked up one last time to the sky we loved to share. A black shape with a large body and even larger wings danced across the sky. I felt like my eyes were betraying me until I was distracted by a small giggle. I looked down to see a fulfilled look I had never seen in the ocean blue eyes I had known so well these past thirteen years. A small smile was draped across her face as I felt her faint breathing stop and watched her eyes close. That was the last time I would ever see the eyes of my daughter, of whom I had been so proud. A gentle rain poured down on us, and as I looked to the sky once more, I wept so loud even the stars could hear it.



SNAKE RIVER CROSSING

Chrissie Haneline



PHOTOGRAPH

ARRESTED FLIGHT

Elaine Pike

THE LIGHT

Lizeth Tello



A light is blown away
As the wind picks up its pace.
The candle, once burning bright,
Does not shine anymore.
All sense of warmth disappears
As the shadows crawl inside,
Their claws grasping for flesh.

When it seems all hope is lost,
The wind begins to die down.
In the dark, black room,
A gentle hand comes forth
To ignite a new light
And the world is right again.

PHOTOGRAPH

POETRY

INDIFFERENCE

Sophie Matossian

Something about the bare gray walls of the cubicle and the illumination from the small desk lamp reminded Shyla of those old detective movies. The ones in black and white. That's what her world looked like—lacking in color and life. She sat at her almost empty desk, late on a Thursday night. The rest of the office had gone home. It was probably getting close to nine o'clock now, although she couldn't remember the last time she looked at a clock. Shyla didn't like clocks. Their faces seemed to mock her, and the never-ending cycle of the hour felt more like impending doom than the countdown of the workday.

The sounds of silence that swamped her senses grew more and more dissonant with every passing minute. She stopped wishing a long time ago. Now there was only "do" or "don't do." And most of the time, do-ing felt more like dying than don't-ing. She hated her aging body. Every year, she got older. Every year, another bone ached. Every year, her hair grew grayer and longer, each silver strand coarser than the last. But she felt the lack of color comforting. She never liked her dark brown waves and never felt they suited her. If anything, Shyla thought they flushed her out, made her look paler.

Who's to say now though? Shyla's skin hadn't felt the warm rays of the sun in over a decade. This wasn't necessarily a problem for her; she never liked the sun either. The bright light only made the ever-multiplying lines under her eyes and around her mouth more noticeable. And the heat made her sweat. No, she preferred the flickering fluorescent lights of the office basement. No windows, no sun, and only the occasional breakdown of the air conditioner.

Shyla looked down at her desk. Lying there, holding a pen, were hands she didn't recognize. They were thin and speckled with dots of melanin. The nails on them were long and manicured but wiped clean of any polish. Still, some nails looked more distastefully beige than others. The knuckles on each of the fingers were thick and fat though the skin embracing them looked paper-thin. The hands were soft but not in a pretty way. It was as if they had never been used. Like someone set them up on a shelf, encouraging them to deteriorate a long time ago. Over the years, they became hollow and useless. Surely, they were useless now.

The hands, still stiff and rigid, tried to grip the pen and failed. The utensil slipped onto the table and slid to the floor, rolling under the desk and out of view. In the silence, Shyla could have sworn she heard the black ink sloshing around in its dull, plastic container. She sighed and looked down at her desk once more.

A plain white envelope stared back at her. It grew more menacing by the second. Shyla had almost forgotten it was there. She spent so much time ignoring it that its existence had begun to fade away entirely, melting into the white background of the table. She picked up the letter. Its rough matte exterior was not pleasant to hold. It was dry and brittle. She imagined how it would feel on her tongue and grimaced. Turning it over in the strange hands that seemed to do just as she told them, she studied its smiling face. Its upturned mouth mocked her. Shyla salivated at the thought of the bitter taste of the sealant and the sputum that left its bacteria stuck between the lips of the pages.

Dare she give in? Indifference hid around a corner, watching and waiting like a stalker on its haunches. Where curiosity died—and it always did—there it would emerge and sink in its teeth. Shyla traced the lines on the envelope. The symmetry soothed her.

She had been waiting for this frenemy of a letter for some time now. Did she real-

ly know each and every detail of its filed contents? No. But there was not much else to be excited about nowadays. Sometimes Shyla wondered if she would rather life be that way—a cruel form of self-sabotage that dictated her thoughts and actions. Some nights she dreamed, mostly in black and white. Once or twice, she dreamt of a different life: one where she sat in a field surrounded by lilies, breathing in the thick pollen through her nose and letting it sink into her lungs. Every time, though, it was the same. After minutes of feeling the warmth of the sun on her scalp, breathing in and out, she choked and died. So she never lingered on that memory. It brought her discomfort.

Shyla shifted in the clear plastic chair that sat on unbalanced legs beneath her. It teeter-tottered with each back-and-forth motion. At first, Shyla found this rocking to be consoling. She closed her eyes and imagined being sung to sleep in her mother's arms. But her mother had died a long time ago and, before she could stop it, the image of her decaying body beneath the ground flashed behind her eyes. She opened them quickly and her mother faded back into the depths of her memory, likely to be forgotten for good this time.

Without thinking it through, Shyla tore off the corner of the envelope, its contents included, and folded it up into a small dense chunk of paper. She bent over and stuck the wad under the shortest leg of the chair. She wiggled once more, testing her solution. The chair wobbled—a bit less this time—but still, unsettlingly so. Frustrated, Shyla tore off the opposite corner of the envelope, created a larger block of paper, and shoved it under a different leg of the chair. She repeated this process two or three more times before giving up. Her back began to ache from the constant up and down movement.

Shyla reclined, giving the appearance of relaxation though it was impossible in the unsupportive chair. She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them tightly. Her hamstrings twinged with pain and her spine rested awkwardly against the back of the chair. The thin slate carpet below seemed so far away. She could make out the light, uneven pattern despite her aging eyes and followed it around the entirety of her cubicle. Resting her chin atop her bony knees, she glanced begrudgingly towards the letter, now torn and missing pieces.

Shyla felt as though something in her should care, but her old friend Indifference clawed at her with all its might, shredding what was left of her inquisitiveness. She willed the envelope to disappear. It didn't. She gave in.

Shyla let her feet fall to the floor again and reached for one of the three identical drawers to her right. Her fingers lingered over the knob on the first drawer and then dropped to the second. With a tug, it opened. She rummaged through the plethora of manila folders until she felt the bottom of the drawer. With a flat hand, she cased the drawer. Impatiently, she picked up the pile of folders and tossed them onto the floor. They tumbled and opened, letting loose their papers and files and covering the dark carpet like a patchwork blanket of white and cream, stitched together with black lettering.

Left in the back of the drawer were three items: an unbranded pack of cigarettes encased in a plain cardboard box, a stainless steel lighter, and a metal instrument that looked more like a knife than a letter opener. Instinctively, Shyla reached for the cigarettes, emptied one into her hand, and placed it between her lips. Before grabbing for the lighter, she saw the letter and was reminded of why she had opened the drawer in the first place. Turning towards it again, she stopped, studying both the lighter and the letter opener. The white light from overhead glimmered off both metallic exteriors, making them seem more ornamented and detailed than they were. Her lips, still stretched, holding the cigarette in place, started to quiver from the fixed position.

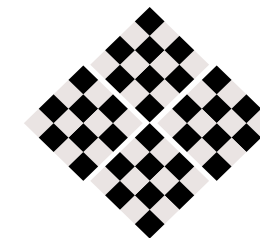
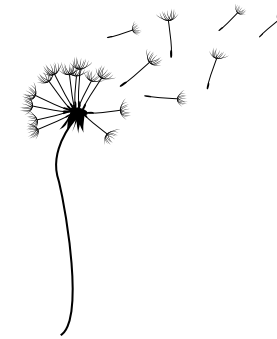
She took up the lighter, flicked it on, and sucked with great force. Thick, fiery air filled her lungs. After a moment, she felt the dust settle on the walls of her chest and coughed

involuntarily. Her dragon's breath burned her esophagus, and her sputtering echoed off the cubicle walls and around the empty office floor.

She held the cigarette in her fingers and felt more attached to them than she had in a long time. In that moment, she was fully aware of the bones and tendons that connected her fingers to her wrist, her wrist to her arms, and her arms to her torso. The warmth in her lungs remained and traveled through her veins, spreading like wildfire. With her free hand, Shyla picked up the misshapen letter and felt an overwhelming desire. This feeling was so unfamiliar. She hadn't longed or wanted for anything in years—decades, even. She let the compulsion inhibit her body. She followed its guidance and brought her hands together.

The envelope caught fire almost immediately. The orange glow moved along the edges of the paper, eating everything in its wake. Shyla watched as the flames gleamed orange and yellow and let the soft crackling of the dying letter tickle her ears. She sucked again on the cigarette and fixated on the fire. She had never seen such beautiful colors. Not in her life, not in her dreams. The luminosity shone brighter with every inch it devoured. And it spread faster with every second. Before long, the fire had reached the tips of her fingers. She let the flames singe the ends of her nails and burn the skin until she could take it no longer. Shyla dropped the blazing envelope onto the floor beneath her. Where she meant to let it reach the carpet and stamp out the fire, she made an error. The folders and files she had strewn on the floor caught aflame.

Shyla, eyes crowded with delight, embraced the euphoria. She danced and stomped on the papers, feeling the flames bite at her ankles, laughing with every rhythmic step. Indifference was no more. Now, there was only warmth and desire.



WALL 2022 STAFF



LIZETH TELLO
Editor-in-Chief

Lizeth, who has been a Saddleback student for four years now, is an aspiring editor and has loved books and stories since before she could even read. She has completed five Associate's degrees in Journalism, English, Liberal Studies, General Studies: Arts and Humanities, and General Studies: Natural Sciences. She was the editor-in-chief of Saddleback's Lariat newspaper during the 2021-2022 school year as well as the editor-in-chief of the Orange Appeal magazine during the Summer 2022 semester. During her free time, Lizeth enjoys reading fiction novels and watching cartoons. You can view her portfolio at <https://muckrack.com/lizeth-tello/portfolio> and contact her at lizeth2526@gmail.com.

CHELSEY BENNETT
Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Chelsey is a recent graduate of Saddleback College with an Associate of Science degree in Graphic Design and a Certificate of Achievement in Graphic Design. A lifelong student, Chelsey is a member of Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society and is proud and honored to have been one of the Graphic Design Interns for WALL Literary Journal this year as well as to have her art displayed within the journal. Chelsey is a proud wife and mother of two beautiful children who keep her busy and laughing. She is an avid reader, someone who loves to garden, an artist who dabbles in a little bit of everything, and a seriously devoted Red Sox fan and Tom Brady enthusiast.



VICTORIA ROMERO CASTANON
Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Victoria has had a love and passion for design since before she realized she could pursue it as a career. Eager to learn as much as she can, she started taking classes at Saddleback in the summer while in high school. Project after project, she learned to improve her skills and was excited to join the design team for WALL. As her love for graphic design and problem-solving grew, her dreams did as well. A year after graduating from high school, she completed her certificate in Graphic Design at Saddleback and will be transferring in Fall 2022 to Laguna College of Art and Design, where she will pursue her BFA in Graphic Design.

ALANI WALRAVEN
Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Alani has always had an interest in graphic design, photography, and digital arts. After taking many graphics classes throughout high school, she's found a love for all types of design. She has improved her skills in product design, art skills, software, and layout since attending Saddleback College. She works hard to make things appealing to the viewer and easy to understand.



BRANDI MICHELE ORTIZ
Fiction Editor / Art Editor

Brandi earned her B.A. in Anthropology and a minor in Creative Writing from Cal State Fullerton, but, despite her initial choice in major, she has always had a deep-seated love for stories and a knack for storytelling. With that love in mind, she returned to community college to pursue her passions of writing and drawing in the hopes of becoming a recognized author and illustrator. When not reading, writing, or researching for her next story, Brandi can be found lurking in her makeshift library with a hot cup of honey milk tea. You can contact her at brandi.michele.ortiz@gmail.com.

ALICIA MARIE GLASS
Fiction Editor / Copy Editor

Alicia attained Associate of Arts degrees in English and Liberal Studies from Saddleback College in Spring 2022. Following graduation, Glass will continue her education at Arizona State University with plans to become a technical writer. When she isn't writing short stories and poems, or spending time with her family, Glass utilizes her entrepreneurial spirit to create environmentally conscious businesses, such as her newest venture Laguna Beach Vintage.



KAT JOHNSON
Fiction Editor / Copy Editor

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

BIRUTE RANES
Fiction Editor / Personal Narrative Committee Member

Birute discovered her passion for writing late in life. Once ignited, she threw herself into taking a variety of writing courses, including journalism, screenwriting, short stories, and creative fiction. Her writing explores the impact of independence on our personal lives and the influence of her Lithuanian culture in her everyday American life. She continues to hone her writing skills to get to the essence of a story. She enjoyed the WALL Literary Journal class, which expanded her knowledge of what makes a story zing. Birute plans to enroll in an MFA creative writing program in the near future.



FERN HELSEL-METZ
Photography Editor

Fern is proudly serving her third year as Photography Editor for WALL Literary Journal. She continually finds inspiration and creativity from those who contribute and bring life to WALL each year. A lifelong student, this Spring she will be adding an Associate in Arts degree in Photography from Saddleback College to her Political Science and Paralegal Studies degrees. Her education at Saddleback has contributed to her photography being exhibited, published, and winning multiple awards. When not at school or photographing, she can be found working on her startup, Phive Elements Photography, at www.PhiveElementsPhotography.com (launching Fall 2022).



RENEE LE
Personal Narrative Editor / Fiction Committee Member

Rene enjoys writing fiction and poetry as well as reading literature, including stories involving magical realism. Through her experiences working on the staff of WALL, she has gained a deeper appreciation for literature, creative writing, and the work of editors.



RACHEL DAHLQUIST
Poetry Editor / Personal Narrative Committee Member

Rachel has been passionate about writing personal narratives and poems regularly since 2017. Although she plans to pursue a cognitive science major, she has been well-invested in fine arts, wanting to keep up the reputation she acquired for being the first student in her high school's history to make the regional and all-state honor choirs in California and being individually recognized at a school district board meeting for her achievements. She also served as vice president of the American Choral Directors Association Club. Her writings are strongly influenced by her love for music and rhythm as well as her interest in psychology. She particularly loves Gothic literature, which can be reflected in her writing as well. She finds it important to pursue her interests and ideas, including ones that may deviate from social norms.

NATHAN RICHMOND
Personal Narrative Editor / Fiction Committee Member

Nathan, an avid reader of literature and history, has been taking classes in creative writing and journalism at Saddleback College. He draws inspiration from a diverse array of sources, including the surreal and fantastical. His poem "Cities" was featured in the 2020 edition of WALL. Nathan, who believes everyone has a story to tell, has enjoyed helping to select and edit the pieces featured in this year's WALL.



SOPHIE MATOSSIAN
Poetry Editor / Copy Editor

Sophie is an aspiring writer, director, editor, photographer, and performer. Her background includes musical theatre, dance, voice, film, playwriting, short story writing, and poetry. Sophie previously served on the staff of Wack Mag, a literary publication at Emerson College. In addition to her lifelong love of writing, she enjoys copy editing and being part of a creative team.



GINA VICTORIA SHAFFER
Faculty Advisor

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

WALL 2022

FICTION

CLARENCE COOPER

Clarence is currently studying Liberal Arts at Saddleback College. His love for travel and the people he has met along the way directly influence his work, including “A Place at the Table.” Because of this, you will likely find him enjoying a good drink and talking to strangers.

MATT CUEVAS

Matt completed his last semester at Saddleback College and plans to further his studies in English at Cal State Fullerton. He wants to earn his degree in English literature, eventually teach high school English, and write on the side. His short story “A Letter to a Friend” in the 2022 issue of WALL is his first published work and he hopes to have more later down the line.

STEPHEN MYER

Stephen is a Saddleback College Emeritus student who holds B.A. and M.S. degrees. He taught music for nearly three decades and performs with rock, country, Renaissance, and jazz bands in Southern California. His poetry and stories have been published in online and print journals such as Goats Milk Magazine, The Literary Yard, A Thin Slice of Anxiety, Grand Little Things, and The Avenue Journal. He can be contacted at SteveMyerMusic@aol.com.

TAYLOR AKIKO SHODA

Taylor studied English and creative writing while working towards her Associate in Arts for Transfer degree in English Literature at Saddleback College. She is transferring in Fall 2022 to pursue a B.A. degree in English Literature or Creative Writing. Taylor has been writing stories for as long as she remembers and never plans to stop.

NATHAN SMITH

Nathan is a computer science major and an aspiring software engineer. When he isn't writing short stories, you will most likely find him surfing or studying. His story is inspired by a video game that he used to play in high school, which helped him through a rough patch in his life. He wasn't sure if his story was supposed to be funny, but it made him laugh while reading it with his dad.

TRISTAN VANDERLINDE

Tristan is the author of “Here Be Dragons,” a fictional story shared with classmates in his short story writing class. Their positive feedback inspired him to submit it for publication in WALL.

ROGER YOUNG

Roger is majoring in communications at Saddleback College. He has not done much writing on his own but hopes to further expand his abilities, for he is confident in what he is able to put down on a page.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

IVANNA ARREDONDO

Ivanna is a first-year student at Saddleback College. Writing is something that brings her great joy and peace of mind.

BARBARA BEAUPRE

Barbara, who used to teach English, has always enjoyed writing. In her memoir class at Saddleback College, she is learning from her peers and enjoying putting her memories on paper.

KIMBERLY DZWONKOWSKI

Kim graduated from Skidmore College in 2000 with degrees in English and Theater. She returned to school at Saddleback College to pursue additional certifications in Early Education. Her first publication, “The Hat,” appeared in the 2020 issue of WALL. Kim is a mother of three and a preschool teacher who loves crafting, baking (badly), gardening (also badly), and outdoor adventures, although not long walks on the beach. She'd rather just lie on the beach. Still. Completely still.

ROJAN KASHANI

Rojan, an engineering major at Saddleback College, hopes to transfer to a four-year university soon. She moved here from Iran a few years ago. Her motivation for “Roller Coaster” was a fond memory of winning first place in a high school essay competition in Tehran.

VICTORIA SCHMALTZ

Victoria is a first-year student at Saddleback College studying graphic design. She hopes to continue exploring different areas of the arts, including film, music, composition, and design. Growing up in Orange County, she loves being outdoors and enjoys the many beautiful beaches of California.

CIARA WEITZEL

Now a first-year student at Saddleback, Ciara has been writing since she was a little girl. She has always loved to write either poetry or stories, either in her journal or on a computer.

POETRY

ALEXIS BACKSTRAND

Alexis is a French American student and novice writer who enjoys creative writing as well as photography and philosophy. The poem “Divine Comedy” communicates how Covid-19 has affected Alexis’s family.

SAMANTHA HOPE BOULGARIDES

Samantha completed her general studies at Saddleback College before transferring to Portland State University to participate in their Honors program, with the goal of earning a B.A. in Creative Writing. She is a self-published author who released her debut poetry novel, HE OVER ME, in 2016 at the age of fifteen. While currently focused on academic, personal, and creative enrichment, Samantha enjoys painting in her free time.

KELLY DAUB

Kelly is a part-time photographer, writer, and digital designer. She is also a mother to four beautiful children. She is currently working towards finishing her degree. Though new to the world of submitting her work for possible publication, Kelly has been writing short stories, plays, and poetry for going on 25 years now.

GABRIELLA GORVEN

Gabriella is currently getting her Associate’s degree in English at Saddleback College and planning to further her education by obtaining a B.A. in English Education. In 2020, she had her work “read me like your favorite girl” published in Cultural Daily. As she continues writing, Gabriella works as an instructional assistant helping educate America’s youth.

NOAH IZAIHAH

Noah is majoring in environmental studies. He loves all forms of art, such as pottery, painting, music composition, and writing. For more, visit noiznoiznoizbandcamp.com

PAIGE KUJAN

Paige is an aspiring nurse and writer in her sophomore year. She previously published poetry in her high school literary journal. Having written a fairly successful but entirely embarrassing Wattpad novel, she hopes to move on to readable work. When she is not studying, reading, or watching a historical fiction movie, Paige can be found collaging on Instagram (@scraps.and.glue).

POETRY

MILES MARTINEZ

Miles is currently working part time as a bartender while majoring in English Literature at Saddleback College. He started writing poetry in Spring 2022. His email address is Miles0218@yahoo.com.

ERIC LEE OSOSKI

Eric, a Michigan State University graduate with a B.A. in History and a second major in English, is studying creative writing at Saddleback College. He left Michigan in 2019 to enter a treatment program for alcoholism in California, which despite a few slips and setbacks, has proven to be successful. A casualty of the ’90s generation and Seattle music explosion, Eric lives in Costa Mesa, where he spends his time working, playing guitar, and pursuing his creative ambitions.

ARIANA QUINONEZ

Ariana, currently studying English literature, plans to change her major to political science, with hopes of becoming a political journalist. “I Wish It Didn’t Break My Heart” is her first publication. Ariana, who will be attending Portland State University, has high hopes for her future.

TREVOR ROACH

Currently in his second year at Saddleback College, Trevor plans to attain an Associate in Arts for Transfer degree in English Literature. He does not have any serious credentials in regards to his writing at this moment but is very excited to be a part of WALL. Trevor loves to write poetry, short stories, novels, and even screenplays in his free time, taking inspiration from the different mediums of art he likes to consume.

DANA WILSKE

Dana is transferring from Saddleback College to continue her studies in English at California State University, Chico. She plans to receive certification in literary editing and publishing so she can use her passion for literature to help authors achieve their dreams. Her poem “Golden” is dedicated to her grandmother, who helped her feel she could succeed in the literary world.

ART & GRAPHIC ILLUSTRATIONS

SABA ANOUSHAHPOUR

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

CHRISTOPHER BALSELLS

Christopher is studying for an Associate of Arts degree in Illustration/Animation at Saddleback College and pursuing a future career in the animation industry as a 3D character animator. The inspiration for his scratchboard illustration of the short story "Here Be Dragons" was born out of a personal connection he felt towards the story. Currently, Chris spends most of his time playing Pokemon and working on freelance animation work as he builds his portfolio.

MANDANA BONAKDAR

Mandana, who took English classes online at Saddleback College, is currently working as a digital marketer. After earning a master's degree in IT Management from Salford University of Manchester, she taught IT as a university professor and published three books (The Analysis of Philosophy Aspects on IT Systems, E-Business, Revit Architecture). After immigrating to the United States, she decided to focus on art, her favorite hobby. For the time being, Mandana is eager to teach drawing by charcoal and painting by oil. Instagram: [mandana_artist_ca](#)

AVERY BONNETTE

Avery is currently studying studio arts with a concentration in printmaking at Texas Tech University. In 2022, she graduated from Saddleback College, earning an Associate in Arts for Transfer and an Associate of Arts in Liberal Studies. After she is done with school, she plans on creating murals, illustrating kids' books, and teaching art to kids.

SAMANTHA BUCK

Samantha is excited to transfer from Saddleback College to a four-year university to study art and design. She served as Art Editor for WALL 2021 and loved every moment of it. You can see more of her art at [@samanthachaseart](#) on Instagram.

WALTER COSTESCU

Walter, a Los Angeles Film School graduate who majored in directing, screenwriting and cinematography, is pursuing graphic design/illustration and film studies at Saddleback College. He loves the flexibility that Saddleback offers in terms of online and in-person classes so that he can meet his educational needs while still being able to sleep in and wear pajamas during Zoom class. www.deviantart.com/offdwallnotdrack

JIM GASTON

Jim Gaston recently took up photography through Saddleback classes after retiring from a 35-year career as a computer programmer, project manager, and IT director. He is fascinated by the technical and creative aspects of this art form and wants to explore how photography can illuminate the spirituality he believes underlies nature. You can find more of his work at <https://peacefulsoulpics.com>.

CINDY GONZALEZ

Cindy is currently working towards a degree in Illustration and Animation at Saddleback College. She holds a bachelor's degree in Psychology from California State University, San Bernardino but had always wanted to study art. She is now finally achieving that dream. Cindy can be contacted through email: cgonzalez101@saddleback.edu

CHRISSIE HANELINE

Chrissie is currently studying photography at Saddleback College. Her work has been published in the 2021 issue of WALL Literary Journal as well as this year's edition, which features her photograph titled "Snake River Crossing." Two of her pieces were chosen for display in the 2022 Juried Photography Exhibit at the Orange County Fair. Chrissie enjoys travel photography. <https://chrissielaguna.mypportfolio.com>

JOSH HOOPES

Josh plans to achieve a bachelor's degree in Cinema and Television Arts with a focus on Audio/Visual Production. As a photographer for the past eight years, he really enjoys shooting nature photos, such as "Summer Skies," featured in this year's WALL, which was taken in summer 2021 at Yosemite National Park. Many of his photos are posted on Instagram [@josh_hoopes](#).

KATE HOWARD

Kate is studying graphic design at Saddleback College and will be completing her Associate of Science degree in Graphic Design at the end of the Spring 2023 semester. She has been a sign artist at your local Trader Joe's for the last seven years and enjoys getting to bring art into customers' everyday lives. In her free time, she enjoys working on her art, cooking, and spending time with her loved ones. For any freelance work, *please reach out to katehoward33@gmail.com*

YOONSEO LEE (YOON)

Currently majoring in design at Saddleback College, Yoon plans to transfer to a four-year university with a design/digital media major. Having recently changed majors, she started creating art in December 2021 and is still exploring new mediums.

JUNO MARTINEZ

Juno is majoring in illustration/animation to obtain their associate's degree and hopes to transfer to Laguna College of Art and Design to continue their studies in animation. They are a proud plant, dog, and cat parent. In their free time, true to their major, Juno enjoys watching cartoons. Business email: JunoMT78@gmail.com

GHAZAL MOEZZI

Ghazal, who plans to transfer to UC Irvine to prepare for a career in the medical field, was introduced to art through a high school drama teacher who was impressed with her work and asked her to design the backdrop for a show. The positive reaction Ghazal receives for her art makes her very happy. She has won awards for her artwork from the California Senate and the Laguna Niguel Woman's Club.

TERI PERLSTEIN

Teri, who holds a B.A. in Studio Art and teaching credentials in art, math, and special education, is completing her A.A. in Photography at Saddleback College. She is conducting a Lightroom and Photoshop course. Her work has been displayed in Triton Museum of Art in Santa Clara, CA; The Museum of Los Gatos, CA; The Silvermine Gallery in Norwalk, CT; and Picture This Gallery in Norwalk, CT. In addition to teaching at one of the area community colleges, Emeritus programs, or community centers, Teri would like to sell her fine art photography and edit photos for others. INSTAGRAM/Facebook: [EnvisagePhotographyByTeri](#)

ANGELICA PETERSEN

A first-year studio arts major at Saddleback, Angelica plans to transfer into graphic design, noting, “I have always been creative with my writing and look forward to developing that same creativity in art.”

ELAINE PIKE

Elaine was exclusively a writer until six years ago when she discovered Betty Edwards’ book *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. That book catalyzed what she describes as her visual journey, which includes her current passion for photography.

JADEN PORRAS

Jaden is studying toward an Associate of Science degree in Graphic Design and pursuing a Certificate of Achievement. After three years, he plans to finish his studies at Saddleback College in Fall 2022. Jaden now works hard to be an open and creative thinker who seeks innovation in his design career and artistic value in his life.

MARIANA LAGRAVA ROMERO

Mariana is currently studying studio arts with a concentration in animation at California State University, Fullerton. Previously she attended Saddleback College, where she graduated with an Associate in Arts for Transfer in Studio Arts and an Associate in Arts in Illustration/ Animation. Her artwork is now featured as an illustration for the story “Roller Coaster” in this year’s WALL. Currently, she is busy obsessing over all things pink and cute as well as having fun with her friends and dogs.

ELIJAH SANTIAGO

Elijah is currently a student at Saddleback College with an undecided major. His parents instilled in him an affinity for nature, art, museums, and galleries at a young age, and he has always enjoyed being creative. His favorite artistic medium is photography. He has fostered his love for printing and photographic film at a print shop in Rancho Santa Margarita, where he has worked for five years.

MAYA TELLEZ

Maya studies studio arts at Saddleback College and plans to transfer to CSU Long Beach in 2023 to major in animation. She has always valued storytelling and character design, seeking to capture them in her work. Website: mayatellez.com

TAKE IT TO THE WALL

Submissions for the 2023 edition of WALL Literary Journal are being accepted through January 25, 2023. Each work must be an original, unpublished piece submitted by a Saddleback College student enrolled Spring 2022, Summer 2022, Fall 2022, or Spring 2023. For a submission form and guidelines, please go to the WALL Literary Journal website at www.wallliteraryjournal.org

Students who submit their work will receive a confirmation via email. Members of the WALL staff read and review each work based on criteria devised for each genre (fiction, poetry, personal narrative, and art). Selections are typically completed by mid-April. Students will be notified by the staff on whether their work has been chosen to be featured in the 2023 edition.

In October, contributing writers and artists share their work with the campus community through a public reading at Saddleback College. Writers read either their entire work or excerpts from it. Artists discuss the creative process behind their work. Some of the pieces are presented in an oral interpretation by students in the Speech Department.

WALL Literary Journal has been honored with First Place awards in nationwide literary magazine competitions since 2012. Recognition for the publication includes Most Outstanding Community College Literary-Art Magazine for the 2017 and 2018 issues from the American Scholastic Press Association. The Community College Humanities Association honored the 2017 edition of WALL with a 1st Place Award in the Pacific Western Division. The 2020 issue received a Literary Arts Magazine Pacemaker Award from the Associated Collegiate Press.

JOIN US ON OUR JOURNEY

If you are interested in being involved hands on in producing WALL, enroll in ENGLISH 160: Literary Magazine, a 3-unit class that focuses on creating our award-winning literary journal. Staff members are responsible for reviewing and selecting student submissions; layout and design; copy editing and proofing; and publicity. Students on staff have the opportunity to have one of their own pieces published in the magazine. We seek students in English, Creative Writing, Journalism, Art, Photography, and Graphic Design, but the class is open to all students and no experience is necessary. For further details about the class, which is held every Spring, please contact Professor Gina Shaffer by phone at (949) 582-4544 or via email at gshaffer@saddleback.edu. You may also check for information on the WALL websites at www.saddleback.edu/la/Wall and www.wallliteraryjournal.org