

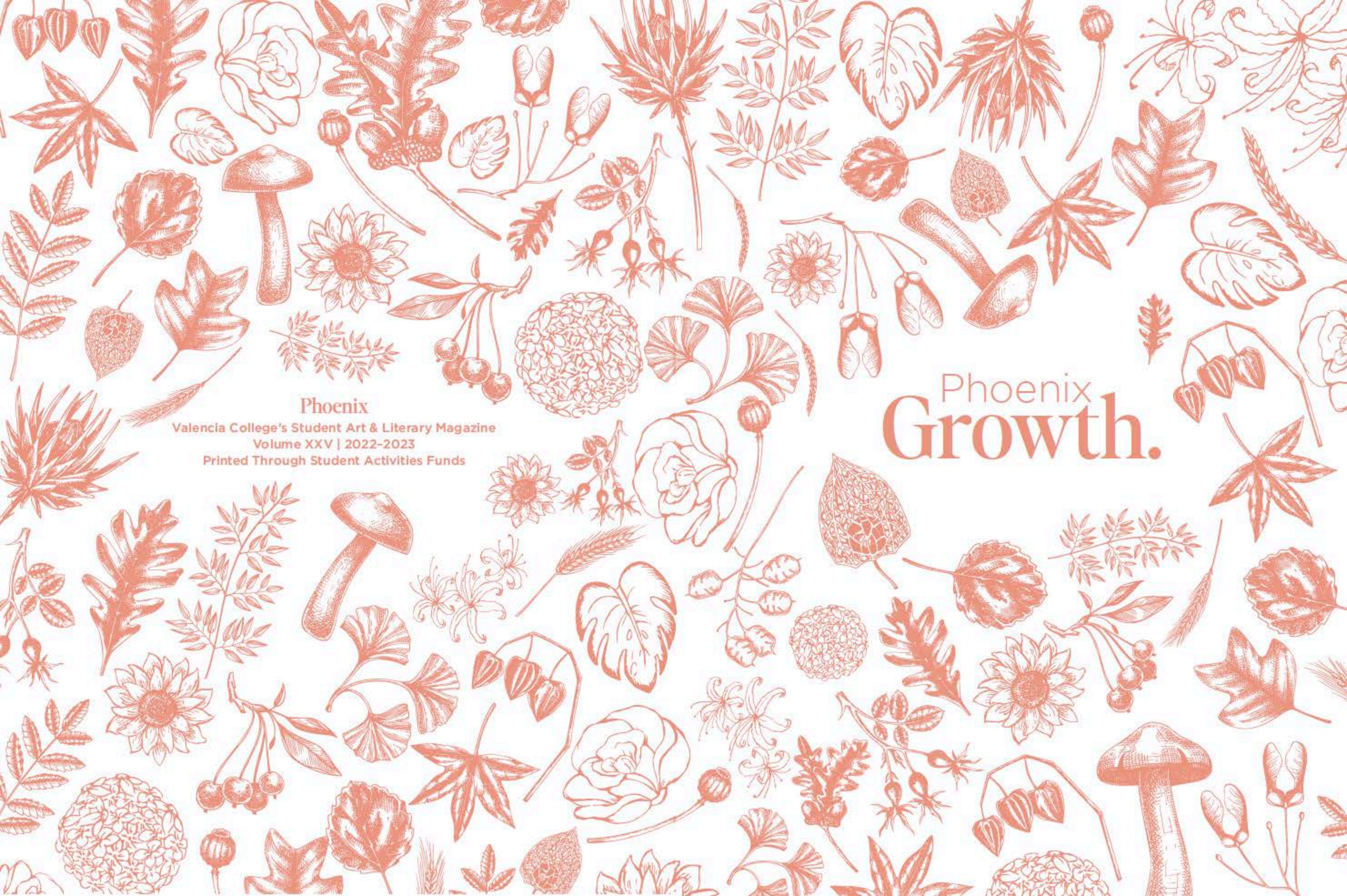
Phoenix

Valencia College Art & Literary Magazine | Volume XXV | 2022-2023

Phoenix

Valencia College's Student Art & Literary Magazine | Volume XXV | 2022-2023

PHOENIX
Growth.



Phoenix
Valencia College's Student Art & Literary Magazine
Volume XXV | 2022-2023
Printed Through Student Activities Funds

Phoenix Growth.



Dear fellow Gardeners,

Nature vs. Nurture. The long-standing debate amongst philosophers and psychologists alike tries to answer the age-old question: What makes you, you? Some would argue that we are nothing more than predetermined traits locked in from birth, while others believe that the choices we make everyday of our lives are what truly shape us.

NATURE

There are things in life that can only be obtained through chance and birth—ethnicity, nationality, genetics—these are unchanging. Our nature has everything to do with how we experience the world around us, individualizing our physical experiences like touch, taste, sight, sound, and smell. Our natural tendencies also influence our automatic emotional responses, thoughts, and preferences, the roots of our personalities. It is through these innate gifts of nature that are as familiar as breath that we begin to discover our potential. Nature alone is art—all flora and fauna can be beautiful and valuable, but nature also provides the foundation for us to create art. As we grow, we understand that nature cannot continue, that growth will be stunted, without nurturing. What will we do with all that we are?

NURTURE

Think of nurture as a blank slate. Everyone starts at zero and works their way up the ladder of life. Our nurturing helps us define what was already there, applying shape and form to the things we feel inside. As our families gift us the colored lenses with which we begin to interpret the world around us, our experiences elaborate on things we thought we already knew and allow us a new perspective on what life could be like for others as compared to our own. Nurture is the result of active choices. Not everyone is raised by their parents, and our families aren't always who we choose. Whether our caregivers made the choice to raise us with kindness or with fear, whether we decide to lead or follow, nurture is about what we choose to pass on to the next generation, and many people have the natural ability to turn traumas, victories, and all human experiences in between into works of art.

Writers, poets, and artists often use these experiences to influence central themes in their work, such as the importance of empathy or the lasting effects of neglect. Just as artists express their feelings with practiced brush strokes and just the right pressure to shape the clay beneath their fingers, so, too, does a writer follow where their characters choose to lead them, just as a poet finds the perfect words to describe the indescribable. In the same way that a plant will grow through a crack in concrete, the way the world nurtures us will give us our own paths to create art and shine in the light.

In this issue of Phoenix Magazine, we celebrate the intersection of Nature vs Nurture and confront you, the reader, with the opening question: What makes you, you? Take the time to reflect on your own answer as you experience the works of your fellow students and grow.

The Editors.

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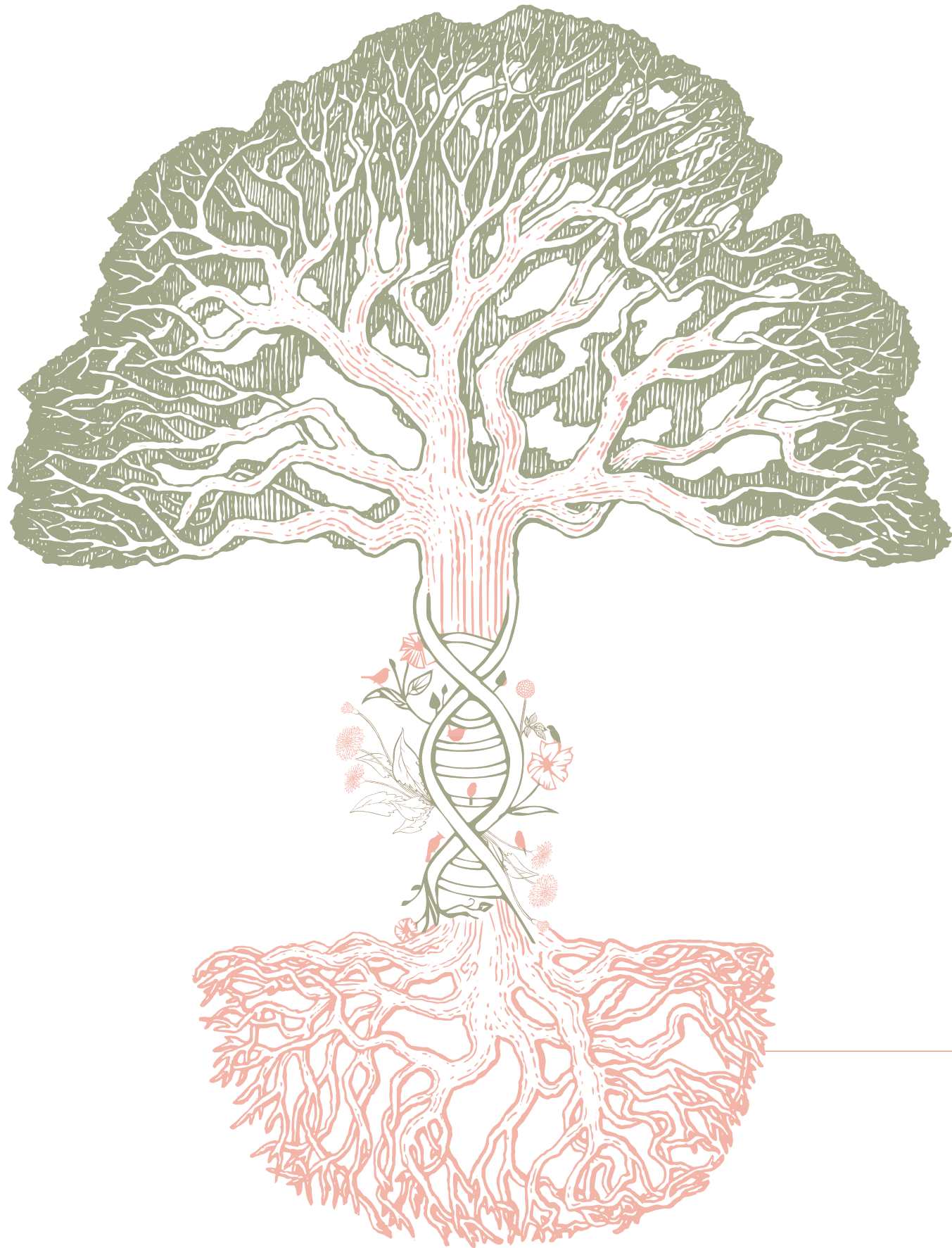
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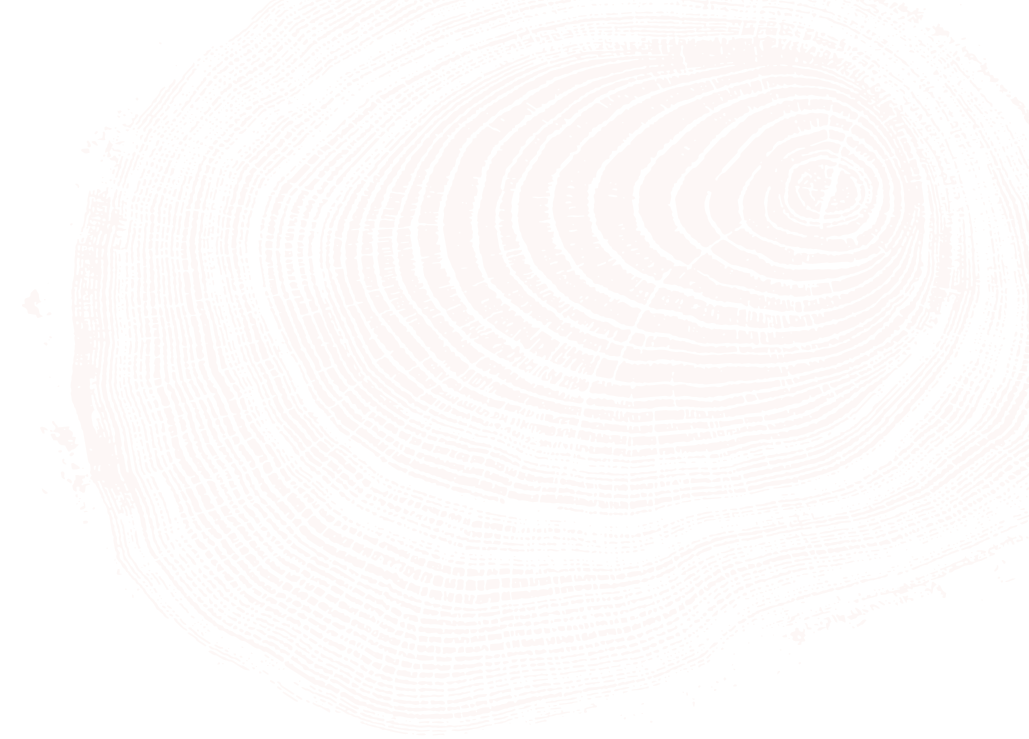
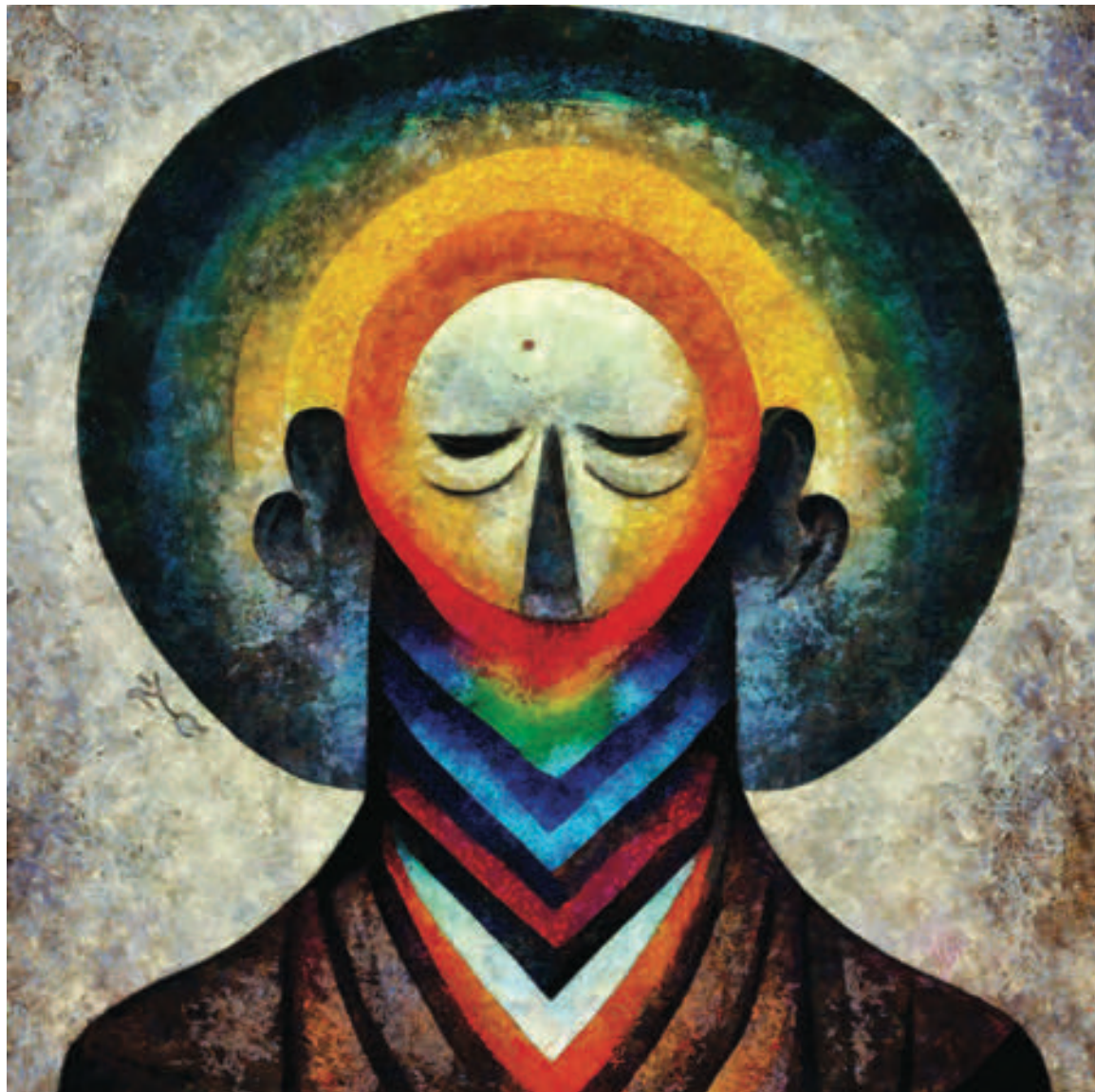
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Nature. 

Faceless

Joshua Montgomery | Digital Painting | 11" x 11" | East Campus



Moonshine Musings

Colleen Blake | Poem | West Campus

I'd like to be distilled down into stillness

for my form to form ethers

concentrate my blood

until I am pure

burn and

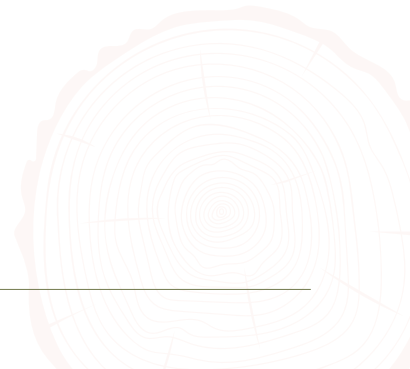
turn

my spirit

into

spirits

.



Just Waiting

Joshua Montgomery | Digital Painting | 11" x 11" | East Campus



A Conversation with You

Christian Bruno | Fiction | Downtown Campus

The moment hits like a speeding train. I knew the truth before the words were spoken. A happy *bing* of a text notification asking if I could call acted as the death bell omen and told me all I needed to know. However, in the short time before my reply, a few moments of blissful denial half-heartedly tried to ease the blow.

Everything is okay, my mind said, just letting you know that he's stable and that we have more time. A perfect recreation of my mother's voice told me the same thing, how I wish it could have been true.

"I'm so sorry," my mother says when she answers the phone. Heart drops through my stomach while leaping into my throat. Vision goes blurry and I experience a sensation of falling in circles, getting dizzy and sick. When did tears appear on my cheeks?

"He didn't make it," my mother continues. Instead of a bang, it is a whimper. T. S. Elliot meant this feeling in his poem; the destruction of the

world is happening all in my mind as my heart is squeezed into nothingness. Everything stops and there is no point to anything anymore.

I don't remember saying them, but I speak words and some are exchanged to me. I say a long prayer to a deity I'm unsure exists.

"I am so sorry," a whisper escapes my throat. All alone now. Is this when you heard me or was it another time? Did you even hear me at all? "I miss you... I... I... I just miss you so much." Mind is now racing through a projection screen slideshow of everyone back home.

The images display scenes of the family in utter despair, everyone is crying. Smiling has become a thing of the past for us.

I am somehow back in bed, tears freely flowing onto the pillow around me or pooling in my eyes. The ceiling watches me cry from above while the walls listen to the soft whimpers that leave my mouth, offering a silent vigil for the loss of someone truly unbelievable.

A decade, days, or ten minutes pass and somewhere along the way, I have fallen asleep. It's a dream. I know that I am in a place created by my subconscious and played out by my fragile brain.

A football stadium. It's the one you took me to once in Tallahassee. We lost that night, but it is still one of my fondest memories. Every seat is empty and spotless. Rows upon rows of garnet chairs overlooking a perfectly-manicured field with banners commemorating National Titles in 1993, 1999, and 2013 along with honors of football greats from the past.

A figure, far up in the stands, catches my focus. Though I can't be sure, there's an inkling of who it may be.

I don't walk, I don't run. I sprint, up countless flights of wide cement stairs, past endless rows of bleachers. The stadium is larger than its counterpart on earth, but I make it to where I am headed. I was right. It's you!

Dear any deity that may be listening, my mind begs, screams, pleads, ***I know I am dreaming, but please allow this to keep going.***

I speed the rest of the way toward you and there you are—eyes that were always so full of wisdom, eyes that had seen more than any of the family could even comprehend, that smile of mischievousness, joy, care, and wonder. You look healthy and happy. An inflation plumes in my chest.

"Hey, buddy," you say in that old time Florida accent and pull me into a hug. Funny, when I was a kid you towered over me, and as an adult, you still do. A man larger than life that is equally as tall.

"C'mon," you say, sitting back down, "Have a seat, son." I sit and gaze over the vast stadium with you. "Remember bein' here?"

I nod, smiling though holding tears, "Yeah, I was thirteen. That was an incredible time."

"Golly!" you exclaim, emphasizing the O so that it comes out in two breaths, two tones. It's something that made it into my vernacular along the years, "Hard to believe it was that long ago."

"Yeah," I agree, still awestruck, "Crazy how fast everything really moved."

"Shoot," you breathe, "You ain't kiddin'."

I don't know what to say. The forever-present struggle of my inability to keep a conversation going at the worst times. I'm running out of dream; I need to speak. Nothing is good enough to say to you, but you save the day as always.

"You know, every day here, we play Florida and beat them. Usually, it's somethin' like 93-0, though sometimes they'll have it be a close game where we get the score last second to win. My brother told me they played and won after a twenty-eight-point deficit once."

You have family up here! Well, of course you do. It seems so dumb not to think that your afterlife would be with family.

"That sounds amazing," I tell you, "I am really happy to hear that." Emotion overcomes me, I try to hold it, but I fail. You notice.

"What's wrong, buddy?" You ask with genuine concern in your voice.

"I..." The floodgates burst and a new flow of tears follows, "I just miss you!" I don't mean to yell it, you don't flinch, but I feel bad.

I see you nod in the clarity between the blur the tears create, "I miss you too, son. I miss all of y'all down there. I have to say, though, I am so proud of where y'all are."

I try to smile.

"You, your brother, your cousins, Mom, Uncle. All of you have just blown me away with what you've done. It's hard to believe that this is the family I have. It makes me so happy for everybody."

Trying not to crack my voice or get too emotional, I tell you, "We were all trying to live up to your name." I take a breath. "I mean, you were the best, who we all looked up to, all you've done, how you lived, everything was just..." The emotions win the fight. "We just love you." There were no suitable words for how grand he really was.

"Shoot, Son," You say through a chuckle. It is not a mean one, nor a humorous one, but a small laughter of happiness, of humbleness. Such a marvel of a man that we all wanted to make proud, yet you remained so modest of it all. "Y'all have already done so much more than I could have ever hoped to. Again, I'm just so proud."

"We have really big shoes to fill," I say and smile, "We just wish we could have had more time. Everyone thought that we would."

"I know," you say solemnly. "Unfortunately, all the time in the world still wouldn't be enough to watch y'all grow up, to see how you become

adults. I miss being around already, but I'm still not entirely gone. Y'all may not see or hear, but I'm with you guys."

"I know," I sigh, "I just wish it was like before." I want to say more but am at a loss for words.

"That's life for us, though, Son," you tell me, that tone you use when imparting wisdom coming through. I miss that tone, "We'll all be together here soon for endless fish fries and barbeques. We'll all watch football together and it'll be like it was when you were growin' up." You pause for a moment and smile at me, reaching a hand to my shoulder, "I gotta get goin', buddy. Fishin' with my stepdad and brothers."

"But... but..." I try to stall.

"It's goin' to be okay, buddy," you assure me. "I'm still around and the family is still together. It's what happens."

"Just a bit longer?" I ask in a small voice. Though, of course I want to keep our conversation going, I know we can't.

"Sorry, buddy," You tell me, "Besides, Bobby might be joinin' us." You give me a wink and a slight nod toward the sign with the name for whom this field is named after.

I get excited for you. I understand. I want you back with us, but a gentle feeling of calmness enwraps me. We hug one final time.

"I love you."

"Love you too, buddy."

Forgiveness As an Act of Burning

Colleen Blake | Poem | West Campus

We held the match together

Hands clasped around that finicky little fire

Flame flickering to our fingertips

Soot staining our hands

Smoke in every caress

I want to forgive you so badly

It burns

Remorse

Hanna Melo Fugulin | Digital Painting | 26" x 26" | East Campus



Portrait of a Woman

Estefania Sanchez | Acrylic | 6" x 8" | West Campus



The Scarlet Ford

Jessica Moody | Fiction | West Campus

The dyer woman sank heavily to the ground, the soft grass by the riverbank cushioning her weary limbs. Before her strength failed her entirely, she lifted the heavy leather bucket in her arms and set it carefully on a broad, flat rock, mindful not to spill a drop. The bucket's contents shimmered darkly in the pre-dawn light, giving the illusion that the bucket was fathomless, bottomless. The effect was strangely ominous, and she shuddered before shifting her gaze to the landscape before her.

The river stretched away like a swath of dark ribbon, flowing swiftly before coming to a bend and twisting beyond her sight. Beyond the bend, she knew, the river broadened into a wide, shallow ford where the fast clip of the current slowed to a gentle, steady flow. She knew too, that a road met the ford, which would soon be crowded with cavalry and foot soldiers as a battalion came to the ford, which served as the only viable river crossing for miles. But for now, the only sounds were the cheerful gurgling of the river and the soft chirps of birds singing for the coming day. Satisfied that she had time, the dyer woman leaned back and rested.

As the heat of exertion cooled, and the dew bejeweling the grass began to soak her woolen skirt, she shivered and pulled her thin shawl tighter around her shoulders, not that the tattered scrap of fabric did much to fend off the morning chill. There was a time when such rags wouldn't have been fit for even the lowliest of her household servants. That was a lifetime ago - yet sometimes the rough skirts and threadbare shifts still felt like the clothes of a stranger, as if she was merely borrowing them and would soon have her silks and satins returned. She held up her hands, work-roughened and perpetually covered in a shifting mosaic of ochre and indigo from the dyes she used in her trade - these too were the hands of a stranger, totally alienated from the lady she'd once been.

She'd had a golden youth. Her parents had immense wealth and immaculate pedigrees, placing her family amongst the more powerful of their tiny kingdom's court. As a child, she'd had the entirety of her family's vast estate for a playground, and any selection of toys and diversions she wished for. As she grew older, she exchanged toys for the finest gowns and jewels money could buy, and quickly became a star in the small kingdom's royal court.

In fact, she was lovely enough to attract one of the queen's highest advisors—a dashing young man of suitable stature and breeding to please even the woman's critical mother. Best of all—and rarest—the woman actually loved him. Love was practically unheard of in the court's arranged marriages, where family ties and power far outweighed actual affection.

With her husband by her side, her glamorous life as a maiden slipped into the happy dawn of a beautiful marriage, and eventually, motherhood, as the couple soon welcomed a son. She remembered how her husband, teary eyed and awed, peered into the perfect face of their firstborn. How he marveled at his son's impossibly small hands and cried at his first laugh. How they discussed what his future would look like, with all its glorious possibilities. How naïve they were.

All those castles in the sky crumbled soon after, passing away with the old queen.

The dyer remembered the first time she saw the queen—as a child, leaning forward to peer across the vast royal banquet hall, her mother hissing at her to sit still, and catching a glimpse of the monarch. She was a thin slip of an old woman, swallowed by the bulk of fine fur she was always wrapped in, a goblet of wine perpetually before her. She was not a noteworthy queen - not particularly benevolent or beautiful or wise, but she was well-suited to her position. She collected

taxes, enjoyed her furs and wine, and largely left everything well alone. It was a splendid arrangement and the small kingdom prospered beneath her indifferent rule.

And then she died, leaving her idiot grandson the throne.

Her husband, working closely with the new king, saw the signs first. She recalled a night not long after the coronation, when her husband, tongue loosened by brandy, proclaimed that's he'd rather see Old Finnigan—the village fool who had a predilection for walking about with a bucket on his head—as king than the simpleton who rightfully possessed the crown. She'd shushed him frantically, but though treasonous, she soon agreed with the sentiment.

At least Old Finnigan, arrayed in his favorite pail, wandered under no direction but his own. The new king proved to be spineless as well as foolish, unable to make his own decisions. A group of young upstart courtesans sensed his uncertainty, like beasts drawn to the scent of blood, and slowly ousted wiser, older advisors. They flattered, bribed, and betrayed themselves into place as his dearest council, and then used the king as a royal puppet, urging him into raising taxes, granting them favor, wheedling out whatever they wished.

The king with his crown was more fool than the fool with his bucket.

Anyone who dared speak against the changes found themselves ousted from the court by royal decree, all their lands and holdings seized. The court grew smaller, and the voices of reason grew fainter.

Finally, the greed of the king's advisors grew too great. The tiny kingdom did not have enough gold in all its breadth to sate their appetites, and like a whisper from the grave, the deadly idea was borne into a scheming mind.

War.

You could be a king of legend, they promised him.

Reclaim land that was once ours, they urged, rewriting history to suit their needs.

The stars will it so, they prophesied.

Any promise or platitude that could put him on the warpath was whispered in the king's ear.

Her husband was among the few of the old advisors left, and for every voice that called for war, his shouted louder for peace. ***Our armies are little, our neighbors peaceful.*** It was in vain. The king lusted for blood and glory, and the battalions were sent out.

They rarely returned, and never intact.

Her husband thought the losses incurred would be enough to stop the ridiculous attempt at an empire, but his protests only angered the advisors. He was a nuisance, and they couldn't risk the king listening to him.

She was the one to receive the royal missive. In fancy scrollwork, on fine velum, she was informed that her husband had been chosen for the honor of leading the next campaign.

The cold morning she watched him stride away to war stretched into an evening that saw her a widow. There was no funeral for her to grieve – he had been buried hastily on the side of some dusty battleground. She was denied even a grave to lay down and die beside.

Her suffering wasn't over. One of the few surviving soldiers from her husband's battalion swore her husband had attempted to betray his kingdom for clemency before being struck down. For this treason, all that he had possessed was seized, and his family's titles stripped.

She was left with one dress, a toddler, and nothing besides. But the king was not without his mercy; she could work as a dyer in the armory, making the same brilliant red and blue surcoats that her husband had died in. She had no doubt that the fabrication of her husband's betrayal and the job were schemed up by the king's advisors, who still smarted from her husband's opposition. Turns out there are ways to exact revenge from a dead man.

So, she worked. For years, slaving over boiling, stinking cauldrons of dye, learning what herbs and ingredients to gather, seeing uniform after

uniform take on the colors of the crown her husband died for. Her son grew older, and her hands grew strong and stained, and the kingdom grew weary of the war the king refused to abandon.

She thought she understood tragedy then, had already mastered loss. She had no idea.

The knock came during breakfast. Her son rose to answer it, and nearly had to stoop to exit the door of their little hut. She was again struck with one those proud little pangs of sadness one only gets when their child is growing. Her son had hit another growth spurt and the baby fat on his cheeks was melting away, revealing a square jaw that was heart wrenchingly like his father's. She'd accepted that he was on his way to manhood.

Yet in that moment when he looked up to her, unfathomable depths of fear in his eyes, his upper lip – with its laughable trace of peach fuzz – trembling, he was identical to the little boy who'd run to her so many times. Who believed he'd be protected from any harm by hiding behind her skirts, as she hastily tried to prevent him from burying his face in her soiled apron and getting dye all over himself *again*. She took the note from his numb fingers. And read it.

She didn't really feel much on the first read-through. All she remembered was looking after the little messenger boy who delivered the missive, already sprinting off to dispatch more conscriptions, like some cow-licked, gap-toothed reaper. She found herself wondering how long it would be before she was dyeing a tiny uniform meant for him.

And then her son, her only son, was grasping at her arms, asking what he should do, what was going to happen. She had no answer for him, no help to give. This was not some nightmare she could shoo off with candlelight and a lullaby. She could do nothing but watch as he was forced into the king's forces, led on a path that would end with him dead beneath a proudly billowing pennant dyed by his own mother's hands.

She sat there for hours, staring at his empty chair. The future was laid before her as sure as the past. Her son would take the same path as

her husband, through the forest, over the river, to a battlefield where the ground was soaked as scarlet as the dye she used.

Her gaze fell on a bucket of the same scarlet dye. And she stared. And stared. It was madness. It was probably treason too. It was impossible.

He was her only son.

Before she could stop herself, she snatched up the bucket and began a trek through the woods, numb to the branches that lashed her face and thorns that pierced her flimsy shoes, until she reached her destination, the riverside where she now rested, just upstream from the ford crossing.

She was jolted from her reverie as the drumbeat of hooves and clatter of armor shattered the serenity of the dawn. The battalion had reached the river. Somewhere, just downstream, her son waited.

She willed her weary muscles into one last effort and overturned the bucket into the river. The bucket was hardly empty before she turned and sprinted to the tree line, flinging the incriminating pail deep into the woods. Downriver came the sound of screaming and swearing, and then – was it...? Yes! Hoofbeats back toward the castle! The battalion had turned around.

Her son was heading home.

...

The rest of that day can be found in legend – the foolish, bloodthirsty king who watched a river turn to blood before his eyes. Tales tell how he was divinely chastened into giving up his violent ways and reigned in peace until the end of his days. But these legends omit the story's most important note – the scarlet-stained hands that welcomed a son home.

Forest Solastalgia

Ricardo Fernandez | Digital | 12" x 9" | East Campus



Trees of Childhood

Fatima Manna | Nonfiction | West Campus

During the golden years of our childhood, my brother, cousin, and I spent our days playing under the sun until the streetlights were on.

In the summer, the sun's scorching heat was unforgiving; our moms wouldn't let us out until past five. Once out, we'd take to our plowed backyards, our feet digging into the soil, every step met with resistance, making the hike uphill to the fig tree all the more rewarding. The tree had been there long before any of us were born, and it was as tall as the second story window of my uncle's house.

After resting, we'd start climbing to get to the higher branches where all the good figs were. We would split open the soft purple fruit before eating it, heeding my mom's warning: "Always look at the fig's inside before you eat it," she would say, "or you might end up eating a worm."

After we had our fill of fig, we would hike back down, making sure to stop by the green plum tree, which to this day has the most sour fruit I've tasted. Every bite left our faces scrunched up at the bitter taste, a fact we turned into a challenge to see who could eat the most plums, laughing at the faces we made as we suffered through the taste, only to give up after a few plums with no winner.

We would ride our bikes uphill to my cousin's house, passing by the walnut tree that no one but the older kids could climb, struggling against the incline with each pedal, our calves burning with

exhaustion by the time we made it to the top. Gravity would then carry us down-hill, the wind rushing through our hair, bodies leaning forward to maximize our speed. We liked to imagine that we looked like motorcycle racers.

Once the sun set, the real fun began. When the day's heat died down, all the adults would gather at my uncle's front yard to catch up since most of them are only there for the summer. We kids would take advantage of our big numbers and the cover of night and hold the biggest hide and seek game of the year. The location: the entire neighborhood, the time limit: until everyone was caught. I always hid in the same spot, the olive tree that stood at the side of my house, which was about fifteen years at the time, fairly young for an olive tree, but its youth made it easy to climb, and it had enough foliage to hide us well.

When I went back home a few summers ago, a heavy weight set on my heart when I saw the olive tree, trimmed down to a few thick branches, no longer a viable hiding place. The sour plum tree had withered down to a skeleton of its former self. When I took a walk around the neighborhood, however, I found myself craning my neck to see the top of the walnut tree just as I did all those summers ago, and the trek through the plowed soil was just as difficult as ever. The best gift was that the fig tree stood as tall and strong as I remembered, its fruit just as sweet.



Flock Together

Sheridan Macon | Poem | Lake Nona Campus

Outside my work window, there is a tree
lanky and spindly, it rocks, and it swings
but it's sturdy enough to support the small nest
of two small lovers with bright red wings

Outside my work window, there is a couple
that sits in their home in the fiery afternoon
but the warmth seldom parts their little red bodies
as I sit here and watch them cuddle and swoon

Outside my work window, there is a love
subject to my stare every other day
I attempt to ignore the weight in my chest
as their family grows with each egg that they lay

Outside my work window, there is a desire
someone to grow with, a home despite heat
building a family, dedication unending
perhaps my coworker will be willing to switch seats.



Regrets Egrets

Julie Villanueva | Collagraph | 48" x 40" | East Campus



The Heads of One Being

Amanda Hawkins | Mixed-media | 16.5" x 13.5" | West Campus



Dear Future Me

Jennifer Valenzuela | fiction | West Campus

10 hours... 10 hours... just 10 more hours before I can see you again. God, I'm nervous... but why should I be? It's not like I'm not going to see you again in six months. The last time I saw you, you didn't look like yourself... I'm just overthinking it. I should probably go to sleep, that way the time will go faster. Right now, it is 10:45 pm, I'll see you at 8:45 am... Azeen. I can't wait to see what you've become in six months.

I closed my diary as I wrote my last word. I went to sleep. It was a hard night. It wasn't easy to finally fall asleep since my mind could only think about what I was going to see the next day, but in between my thoughts, I slept. My alarm went off at exactly 7:45 am, just an hour before the meeting. I started to get ready, brushed my teeth, brushed my hair, everything — I even put on some makeup.

I checked my smartwatch, and it was 8:35 am. I ran back to the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. I could only see my reflection, my actual reflection, but as the minutes passed and the time was getting closer, my reflection started to get blurry. I got goosebumps due to the excitement.

1 minute--1 minute-- just 1 more minute. I'm so nervous, I don't even know if I'm going to be able to write everything that we talk about in the next few minutes... I just want to know everything.

A minute before the time, I couldn't see my reflection anymore... It was as if I was just looking at a silver wall. I kept checking my smartwatch until the time finally changed... I saw my bathroom, but I didn't see her/me/myself. I couldn't see myself. I got so disappointed, worried. **Why wouldn't she be there?** I thought as I kept seeing the seconds pass... but she finally appeared.

There I was... and I was a... mess? I couldn't believe that I was looking at myself, myself six months in the future. I was speechless. How was I such a mess? My hair was extremely short, my eyebags looked as if I slept with makeup on. I was horrible. It was not the outcome that I was expecting for myself in the next six months.

"What happened?" Stuttering to speak, I was finally able to gain the strength to talk.

She was sitting on the counter on the other side of the mirror as if she had just been screamed at. She seemed as if she wanted to cry.

“Too much.” She sounded tired. Her voice didn’t sound like mine. I was looking at myself but at the same time a completely different person.

“Could you elaborate on that?” I asked kindly.

“Aze... School...” She paused, “I’m sorry... I can’t... I’m a mess... I can’t lose time.”

“School?” I repeated, “Come on. I need you to work with me.” I checked the smartwatch. Time was ticking; time was running out.

She took a deep breath and finally started talking. “School—it made my hair fall out due to stress... we are now taking medicine for all the stress and anxiety. That’s why I cut it, so people wouldn’t notice all the hair loss. I sleep well.”

Time was running out. I couldn’t hear her clearly anymore. I still managed to tell her—me—to take care. The time ran out and there was my present reflection again. I went to my room to lie down on the bed. I wrote the entire thing in my diary. I like to keep track of everything that happens every time I see myself in the future.

As I was writing I was thinking about what she said about school and how it was stressing her. I thought to myself that I needed to start getting myself together with school. I hadn’t been putting much effort in, so it was time, time to start caring. That was going to be the way that I was going to change my path. I started to study more, and each day of each week, I was reading... studying for all my classes.

It started to pay off... all the work. I started getting good grades, I started getting recognition from my professors. Months started to pass by, and college started to get harder. I started studying more. I was stressing out that finals were driving me crazy. Every night I was stuck with a book. I read and made notes until the words started to fuse.

Finals are almost here. I’m stressing out, but at least I’m passing. Ha-ha. right? Is this what you meant by school? No. It couldn’t be. It was probably, us stressing out because we weren’t doing anything. Ha-ha, but we are doing fine, Azeen. We are doing fine.

I was spending so much time studying that I didn’t sleep. I started taking sleeping pills, but that just took time off me. I started sleeping 3 hours a day. My eye bags were horrible, but it was fine- I was going to sleep when I was done with finals. I was so stressed, but I knew I was going to be fine, it had been 5 months, and I knew everything- I was going to pass- my hair was a mess. I was touching it every single night and holding it so it would keep me awake when I was studying. But as the finals got closer... every time I took my hand off my hair, I would always have some of it left in my hands. I was too stressed, so I went to the doctor.

My doctor told me that I was anxious due to finals. So, he gave me some pills to relax—they just made my hair fall out more.... I chopped it all off. I didn’t have time to stress about my hair. I needed to focus on school.

Finals are over. I didn’t leave my room for two days, just rested. As I was resting, the alarm on my smartwatch went off. The alarm that the meeting with myself is about to go. I couldn’t believe that six months had already gone by. I brushed my mess of hair, put on some concealer to cover the fact that I hadn’t slept in six months and ran to the bathroom. I arrived right on time, just as the mirror became a silver wall.

I stood there for several minutes until I appeared. I couldn’t believe my eyes. I looked even worse than before.

“What-” I paused in shock. “this doesn’t make any sense... what happened to us... again?”

“You know—just keeps getting worse and worse” She was drunk. Drunk. She looked like she had been drinking her entire life. “I party, and you know my medicine and alcohol just do not go well together.”

“You don’t say...” I was shocked. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Especially because I hadn’t tasted a single drop of alcohol in my life. Yeah, I’m 23, and in college, but I had other things to worry about.

“I’m going to go take a nap... I’m tired,” she said in a sleepy voice. She laughed a little. “You kind of look like me, it’s cute,” she laughed again, heading out of sight “Well...bye.”

“No, don’t leave me!” I started screaming and banging on the mirror. She left me anyway. At least I knew this time what to avoid.

I did that. I avoided everything that had to do with alcohol. For the next few months, I kept things straight. I kept studying. Taking my medicine. Everything was going great. The end of the year was finally here, and everyone was going to parties, packing to go home over the break.

In between all those invitations, my friends decided to do this small reunion. I wanted to celebrate that the year was done. So, I decided to go. I got all dressed up, everything was cute. We got to my friend’s house, we started talking, and more people started to arrive. In a blink of an eye, her entire house looked like a frat party. I didn’t want to be there anymore. I went to the kitchen to get something to drink. To my surprise everything was alcohol, but I found this juice that tasted amazing. I drank one. Two. I drank a lot. But it tasted amazing, like a party of fruits in my mouth.

Everything started to get fun. I started to dance, and I kept drinking those amazing juices. I think I drank most of them. I could barely walk- it was just juice, I didn’t understand, but I didn’t care. My smartwatch started to go off- it was time for my medicine. I drank it with a bit of juice.... Within a few minutes, my entire vision was spinning around. I was so dizzy I couldn’t even stand straight. I was messed up. I wanted to throw up.

That entire night was a mess, but I got so into it that I went to more parties—just for the juice. It was so good, you wouldn’t understand. It was a weird fetish.

I keep going to parties—reunions. I don’t party. I don’t drink. I’m fine.... I’m fine. Why are we like this? Why am I like this? It doesn’t make sense. I don’t understand what I did wrong. I tried to avoid everything that I saw...

My medicine. My drinking problem. Everything got caught up. Six months went by—again. I was more ready this time to talk to myself.

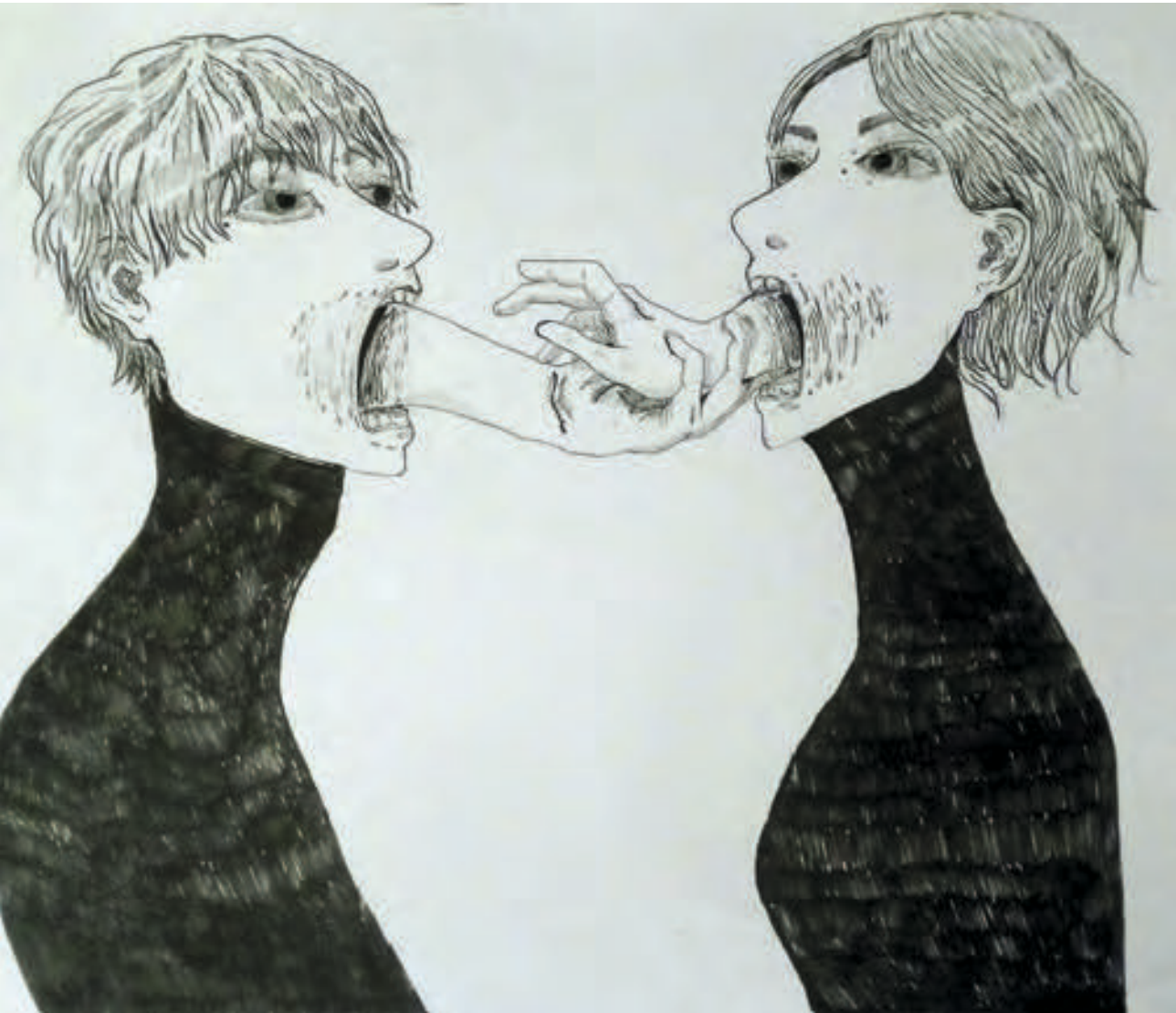
I went to the mirror. I waited until I appeared. I couldn’t believe what I saw. I had a black eye. I was all beaten up. She was trying to smile, but she looked in pain, and tears were falling down her cheeks without even forcing it. Looking at her—at me—that way, I could almost feel it too. It was the first time that we hadn’t said a single word. Seeing me, there, all messed up- I couldn’t hold it. I left crying back in the room.

I felt a black hole in my body, just eating me from the inside. At that moment I realized I couldn’t escape my fate. Did I do something wrong? I didn’t think so. I was trying to avoid everything, so I would go a different path... I guess I can’t escape what’s already decided. I can’t escape.

I’m sorry I failed you... I failed us—me. I can’t breathe. I can’t find peace by just thinking about what’s going to come; with every move, everything just gets worse. Dear future me... I’m sorry I can’t save us. Soon, I won’t see you in the reflection. There will be no reflection...this is our last chance to take a breath... escape the suffering.

Hold My Hand

Kalianys Ortega Reyes | Pen | 11" x 9" | Osceola Campus



The Unforgiving Fiddler

Gabrielle Sawdo | Poem | West Campus

Who is she? I ask as her grip around my throat gets tighter.

I don't know her. I don't know her. I don't know her.

The voice in my head plays on repeat. Like a broken record, I've forgotten how to properly speak.

My tight is so chest, wait no, that's not quite right. My words are almost as twisted as the fight I put up to breathe. But she won't let go of me. Oh no no no!

Not my anxiety.

She plays me like her fiddle and all day/night long I try to hide the rhythmic diddle. Looking for a rest is like searching for a needle in a haystack, but I just discovered I was in the wrong pile!

That only turns the dial, which stirs my pot of thoughts into something even more vile.

All the gods be damned! Why won't she let me be free? Why do I refer to her as "she"? Is it because I pretend it isn't me? I am not the same person, through anxiety.

Even that being said I hear her record skipping.

We're not gonna talk about it. We're not gonna talk about it. We're not gonna talk about it.

Then stop making me think about it. All I want to do is sleep. But instead, in bed, I steep.

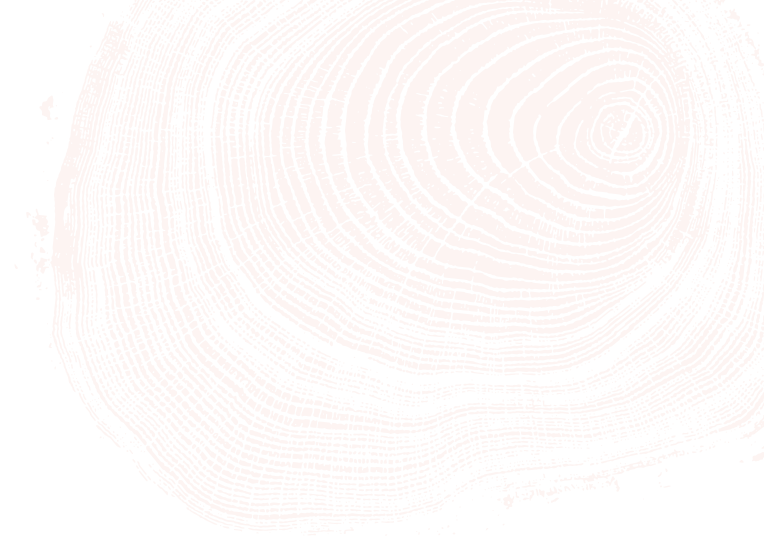
I brew till morning when I finally shout:

"Leave me alone and stay out!"

And sometimes that works for a day, or maybe two. But I always know she'll be back soon.

Commitment

James Cornell | Digital Painting | 8.5" x 11" | West Campus



Pulse to Me

Mark Christmas | Nonfiction | East Campus

Before:

The thudding music, combined with the blaze of colored lights from above and the body heat of those around me, was overwhelming in the best possible way.

I was on the main dancefloor of Pulse with my then-boyfriend, Joey, and even though we were surrounded by hundreds of other clubgoers, we were cocooned in our own private world, holding each other close, our hands moving up and down our bodies to the rhythm of the music.

Joey was a transplant from rural Ohio and grateful for that. He'd told me on our first date that he'd sought, in Orlando, a sanctuary from the scorn and rejection he faced at home as an openly gay man. Places like Pulse, he said, were where he could flirt and hold hands and dance and kiss whoever he wanted without fear. On the dancefloor that night, "whoever" was me.

The song transitioned to another. I yelled that I wanted to grab a drink at the bar and asked if he wanted one. "Go ahead," he yelled back. "I'm gonna keep dancing!" And as I turned to move away, he grabbed me gently and pulled me close and kissed me on the lips.

I felt a brief, familiar pang of anxiety. But then I remembered where we were, and I kissed him back for longer than usual.

At the bar, Joey's friend, Misty, stood with her drink. I leaned on the bar next to her, waiting for the bartender to notice me.

"He really likes being here with you," Misty told me, chewing ice from a small plastic cup of gin and tonic. "He doesn't usually get to be like this."

"Be like what?" I asked, finally catching the bartender's attention.

"Himself," she said.

After I got my drink, I sat down at the booth we'd claimed earlier, soaking in the crowd. It was Wednesday—"College Night" at Pulse—and everyone was young and eager. I scanned the room, transfixed by the dazzling ether of light and color and sound and by the people absorbed in it all. I saw Joey alone in the middle of the dancefloor. His eyes were closed and his body swam confidently with the beat. He looked lost in himself, and I smiled.

He looked free.

During:

The vibrations from my ringing phone woke me up. It was my brother, and he'd already called several times. Tired from a pool party the day before, I wanted to ignore him. But we had a brotherly rule: three phone calls means an emergency—answer.

My brother was frantic: *“Are you okay?”* There was fear in his voice.

“What?” I asked, sitting up in bed, the haze of sleep instantly clearing.

“There was a shooting last night. Downtown.”

“A shooting? What?” I felt slow and stupid. I fumbled out of my bedroom and into the living room and turned on the news. Images appeared of bloodied people being carried down a street, lit by the hallucinogenic glare of red and blue emergency lights. It was a chaos I could not process.

I sat down on the coffee table, stunned.

“He’s okay!” my brother yelled to someone else in the room. He asked me something else, but I couldn’t hear him anymore. I could only hear the television:

“...and police are telling us that at least fifty people are dead after a mass shooting at Pulse, a gay nightclub on Orange Avenue...”

Pulse.

Orange Avenue.

Fifty people dead.

I stood up, my mind racing. Pulse was here, in Orlando. The bloodied people on TV were here, in Orlando.

I realized then why my brother had called me.

Because I could have been there.

All morning, I reached out to everyone I knew, nauseous at the thought that any one of them could be among the fifty dead. Phone call after phone, text message after text message, and ultimately none of my close friends or acquaintances had been involved. I was lucky. So many were not, and the pain the community was feeling was unbearable.

But while there was pain, there was not fear.

No one was frightened.

We were defiant.

After:

Three weeks after the shooting, I went on a date with a man named John, who I'd met through mutual friends. We were at a bar in downtown Orlando with an atmosphere far removed from the communal safety we were used to at Pulse. But we talked the night away, asking the usual open-ended questions, getting to know one another. Inevitably, the subject of what happened at Pulse arose. John had been there the night before the shooting and expressed a pained disbelief I had grown accustomed to hearing in the previous weeks.

“When I left Saturday morning, I couldn’t have imagined what would happen the next night,” he said. He ran his finger around the rim of his untouched drink. “Pulse—to *me*—was safe, where I could be myself. Where nothing bad happened.”

I thought back to Joey all those years ago. I thought about our kiss, and how it felt so safe and secure inside Pulse. I thought about what Misty had told me.

John continued, “You know something, though? When I came out to my parents, my dad just shut down. Began to ignore me, those kinds of things. Whenever my mom called, he wouldn’t talk to me. Didn’t want to talk to me...” His voice trailed off.

“But,” he said, shifting gears, “my dad called the morning of the shooting.”

“What happened?” I asked cautiously.

John looked up at me from behind round glasses, smiling. “We talked,” he said.

*

Later that evening, John and I traded the smoky bar for the humid summertime evening, preparing to say goodbye. All around us, downtown Orlando was alive with activity. Pedicabs ticked quietly past us and throngs of clubgoers spilled out onto the streets, leaving behind the hectic din of nightclubs and bars, an entire night ahead of them.

“I really needed tonight,” John said, stopping in front of his car. We were on Orange Avenue. Two miles south of us, Pulse sat riddled with bullet-holes and stained with blood. “I’m sure you did, too.”

“I did,” I said. “And I’d like to hang out again. Keep this conversation going. Catch a movie, maybe.”

“Definitely,” John said, grinning. “Can’t wait.”

And we leaned towards each other and kissed in the middle of the crowded street.

A Disease of the Heart

Aya Anzouk | Poem | East Campus

I remind myself that we don't own those we love

I watch as you flash her a smile

Shake her hand

Get too close for comfort

I fake oblivion in the face of this torment

I smile because that's what you love about me

Thinking I'll walk out victorious

From this humiliating competition

Between a woman who loves you

And the woman you desire.

Although we walk out, side by side

Hand in hand

Her presence slowly fading

I can still feel the two of you

Staring into each other's souls

While I stand foolishly in the middle

Caught between two hearts, two souls

One of them I call mine.

I embrace silence like a good little girl

Making sure not to get on your monstrous side

Jealousy is a disease of the heart

But tell me darling

How do I distract myself

From the shadow of infidelity

That lingers between us two?

Dark Night

Ednie Jozil | Acrylic | 24" x 28" | West Campus



Swamp Child

Melinez Garcia | Digital Painting | 10" x 13" | Osceola Campus



I Have a Whole in My Head

Carrigan Raketic | Poem | West Campus

I have a hole in my head.

It's not that big - (not that large really)

Like the skin and bone disappeared

And a gap was left in its stead.

Oh, but I don't mind it Fig -

I only noticed it yesterday, you see.

Tell me a story -

Oh! Please, please do!

There is a hole in my head

Waiting for words to pass through.

Oh.

I'm sorry, but could you say that again?

I didn't catch a word that you said.

It's like the words floated right through my head!

Oh!

I've just found another hole on my right,

It's just as big as the other on the left...

I wonder if my brain is all right,

Perhaps there's been a theft?

I hear your words,

I hear you talking -

Yet, they don't stay inside,

The words just keep on walking.

My dear Fig, what am I to do?

I'm having trouble paying attention to you.

Oh, you're not boring - Not by far!

I just can't figure out where your words are.

Ah! There they are, they're floating away -

Gone today not left to stay.

But talk again - I'll see if I can catch them!

I'll cup my ears and try and clamp them!

Aha, it worked!

I remember what you said!

But oh, oh wait,

Now your words are stuck in my head.

Perhaps, now I have a whole in my head.

Ah, no, just a grammar pun instead.

Study Hard

Joshua Montgomery | Digital Painting | 11" x 11" | East Campus



Bracelets and Ribbons

Hannah Franco | Nonfiction | West Campus

It was early summer vacation, and students gathered in circles across the campus lawn to talk and eat.

I noticed her for the first time sitting alone under a tree, drawing something beautiful, a sketch of a bird, it seemed to me. I approached and asked:

- What are you drawing?

- It's a bluebird, she replied smiling.

I watched the line of the wings as she lightly touched them with her fingers. Her right wrist was covered in gray and brown bracelets and ribbons like she was collecting them from many years of memories. I returned the smile.

I had already forgotten about the art and exploits of flirting, for a long time all I knew was how to make friends and origami in the form of elephants.

I saw her a few more times on sunny and gray days. But every day with her was nice and beautiful. Sometimes we'd both go for a walk and come back after hours, her cheeks rosy from the sun. Time has shown me who she was, as happens to every couple. Certainly, the bracelets and strings on her wrist were jealous of me, of that in such a short time I already knew almost all her history.

She was an impressive girl. She had done a lot in her life, and she was very talented in all forms of art. Once she showed me a drawing of a horse with a fishtail that almost made me cry, it looked so beautiful. The girl cornered me in such a way with her charms and manners that, without my even realizing it, I became attached to her. I couldn't stop thinking about her: the way she spoke, the way she acted, her unmistakable warmth, her short black hair, her strong, determined hands, her shoulders well-positioned



below her neck, the way she looked. She held me in her embrace; she was very much a girl, very much a woman.

I was deceived because there is no worse feeling than someone in love. For many days I lost the will to eat, my driving force, waiting for the pure soul that had imprisoned me to appear before my eyes.

We even kissed once. It was a bold step, I must say. She asked me out, and I saw a different glint in her eyes.

I decided that I would take that step. I took her hand, as we sat side by side on a fallen tree trunk, and asked if I could kiss her, and she said yes, we could try. They were awkward kisses, those first ones, but we found the way, as all lovers eventually do.

I created a lot of expectations to carry on, I was overflowing with luck. I was the personification of happiness.

But fate didn't smile on me for long. We met a few more times, and one day she called me to talk about our relationship. She wanted to finish it, but didn't know how to say it, she tried to be subtle. Being a boy who values freedom, I immediately suggested that we didn't kiss anymore... And so it went on.

We stopped seeing each other so much. Things would never be the same again. Many days of suffering followed.

I already there is no worse pain than the pain of a contained love. There is no greater lament than the lament of an offended heart.

For all I had to give was my most sincere devotion, and even this was not embraced.

I cried many nights, and nothing helped me. The loves of youth are difficult to overcome. But it's one of the flavors of life, this misunderstood love, this embarrassing love. I believe this is one of the identifications of human beings.

Seriously speaking, we don't need people until we get attached to them. Attachment is the most dangerous drug because even after years without seeing a loved one, you can feel the emotions with the same intensity as if not a day had passed.

I'm old and I'm young, and there isn't a day that I've allowed myself to forget her.

My heart is like a stubborn and disobedient child with unconditional love for life and for certain individuals who happen to be awesome.

And as they say, life is like the sea, with its infinite wave formations, and opportunities that come and go. Every gain implies a potential loss as if the universe couldn't decide whether to be good or bad.

And sometimes, I find my balance amid the so many rushes of everyday life. I'm good, I can breathe sometimes. It keeps me hopeful. The belief is that it is possible to be happy with things other than the girl with bracelets and ribbons.

Maris

Shanti Figarella Correa | Ceramics | 3" x 8.5" | East Campus



Painful Femininity

Hanna Melo Fugulin | Poem | East Campus

Painful femininity.

I didn't choose this life,

Slave to a uterus.

And it definitely didn't choose me.

It holds me like an anchor,

And I'm chained to it,

Down to the strips of my DNA.

X marks the treasure.

And I have to wonder Y.

Color Me

Kimberly Snipes | Poem | West Campus

Color Me

Bizarre

Strange

And odd

Paint me weird

With a twist of quirk

And a splash of mysterious

Mix me perplexing

With a bit of simplicity

Dotted in imperfection

Flawed and Broken

Dipped in a tint of mellow yellow

And loyal gold

A beautiful misunderstood masterpiece

Colored and designed by my creator

By his own desired plan and will

Mamacita

Susana Swearingen | Acrylic | 8" x 8" | West Campus



The Burden of Emigrating

Isabella Adames | Acrylic | 6" x 9" | Osceola Campus



Homesick

Sarah Samuel | Poem | Lake Nona Campus

Thirteen years in Kuwait, it was like my own land.

I knew all the places like the back of my hand.

KG to 8th grade school sure taught me a lot.

What it didn't teach me was how to cry ever night not.

First day of 9th grade here, I was so naive an nice

Everyone was with their friends, and I was solonely, I wanted to cry twice.

The people and places here sure are really sweet, on't get me wrong.

But I just don't think I will be able to fit in here fora few more years long.

I have to adjust quite a bit, transform to a newperson completely.

I think I have to be more friendly.

Things here were so different from people to even school.

These three girls asked me to sit with me, which did, and they were pretty cool.

One thing I wish I did back home was to hug my friends and family for a little longer.

So that our bond would remain stronger.

I know that all this is part of life and I understand.

It's just that it will take me a while to be myself and stand.

For Christmas all I wish for is a ticket back home.

I guess that will never happen, so I'll just look at pictures of Kuwait through Chrome.



Explosive Overthinking

Ricardo Fernandez | 3D Computer Modeling | East Campus



The Forgotten Shipwreck

Joy Dennis | Poem | Osceola Campus

You're heavy on my heart like a boulder

And your words still hit like a bullet

train

But never forget the tears that would fill

an ocean, I am now just a body of water, a

vessel of your own design

I now understand why the sea cannot be calm

for long, for I, too, do not wish to be

silenced, hear the cries of the forgotten,

if only the damage, pain, and heartache

hadn't gotten lost in the waves, all that's

left of the wreck has either sunk

or washed away

Supernova Love

Janiely Fernandez | Poem | East Campus

My love is like a supernova

Explosive & unrelenting

It is a cause for worry since I am known to collapse unto myself

If you love me, don't let it get this far

For our sake

For my sake

I acknowledge that I would throw my life away for affection

And Tem Think It Wasn't Possible

Veronica Lennon | Poem | Osceola Campus

Yes missis!

Mi fly up on Air Jamaica and returned on American Airlines

And tem think it wasn't possible

Come up with dulce mina grip and went down with luggage set,

And tem think it wasn't possible.

Let mi tell you, mi think overhaul and crep was hot; Kiss mi neck!

You should see mi now I look like Jennifer Lopez, leather Jacket and all.

And tem think it wasn't possible.

On Saturday nights mi hang around the Chinese man grocery store now

It's drive-in movie, popcorn and pizza for sure.

And tem think it wasn't possible

I use to hop on the lauda, fi go around the corner

Now I'm on my cellphone speeding past Lorna

And tem think it was possible

Mi no know about you, mi used to say come ya, come har, guwai yr breadfruit

Too dar!

Now I say, your cuisine is too expensive, I don't think that it fair.

And tem think it wasn't possible

Right now America make mi into somebody, mi still love Jamaica them a fret

and a worry

And them think it wasn't possible.

Thanks be to God I'm better now than before. Argue in my office and I'll throw
you out the door

You never thought it was possible and I prove you wrong for sure.

And think it is possible.

Self Portrait

Diana Saguin | Acrylic | 15" x 22" | East Campus



Have Half a Say

Hunter Samson | Poem | Osceola Campus

What I have to say
Is probably different from what I *have* to say
But not sure what that is I *have* to say
Mostly wanna hear what you have to say

Have to say, don't like what I had to say
But had to say, what I had to say
I had to say so I have some say
What do you have to say?

I have to say I had a say
Normally have no say
Stay silent with what I have to say
Say what it was you had to say

My say, didn't matter after what you had to say
It's different from what I have to say
But not sure what that is I *have* to say
Always ask what value it adds, what I have to say

I ask, do I actually have a say?
Do I *have* to say? I do in half a way
Split truth in what I had to say
Have to say, better half than to have never had a say

Now all I think of is what I have, and *have* to say
Add that to what I have
If it's still half, math shows there's nothing you had to say
That's okay, fact remains, happy to have solved for the
remainder of the half than whole of what I have had to say

It's a UFO, Yo

Annabelle Pullen | Acrylic | 8" x 11" | East Campus



Gods

Maryana Ortiz | Acrylic | 11" x 7" | West Campus



Burning Gold

Megan Skena | Poem | East Campus

Autumn destroyed Summer
In all her blazing glory
With the gentlest of kisses.

It started out light as a feather,
A subtle breeze that danced with the wildflowers,
A soft chill that ran through her.
But Autumn wasn't satisfied
With clear skies and crisp nights.
So he pressed further,
Turning the sweet chill into something cold
And all the greens and yellows
Into crimsons and golds.

An unexpected bite
That stole her breath away.
Summer crashed headlong into Fall,
Sending up sparks of ruby and bronze.
It was a passion that lit the trees
And dried the flowers into clay.

Sugarcoated September
Felt like only yesterday,
When the fireflies danced
And everything was alive.
But Autumn's hold began to take effect
And the days started to die.

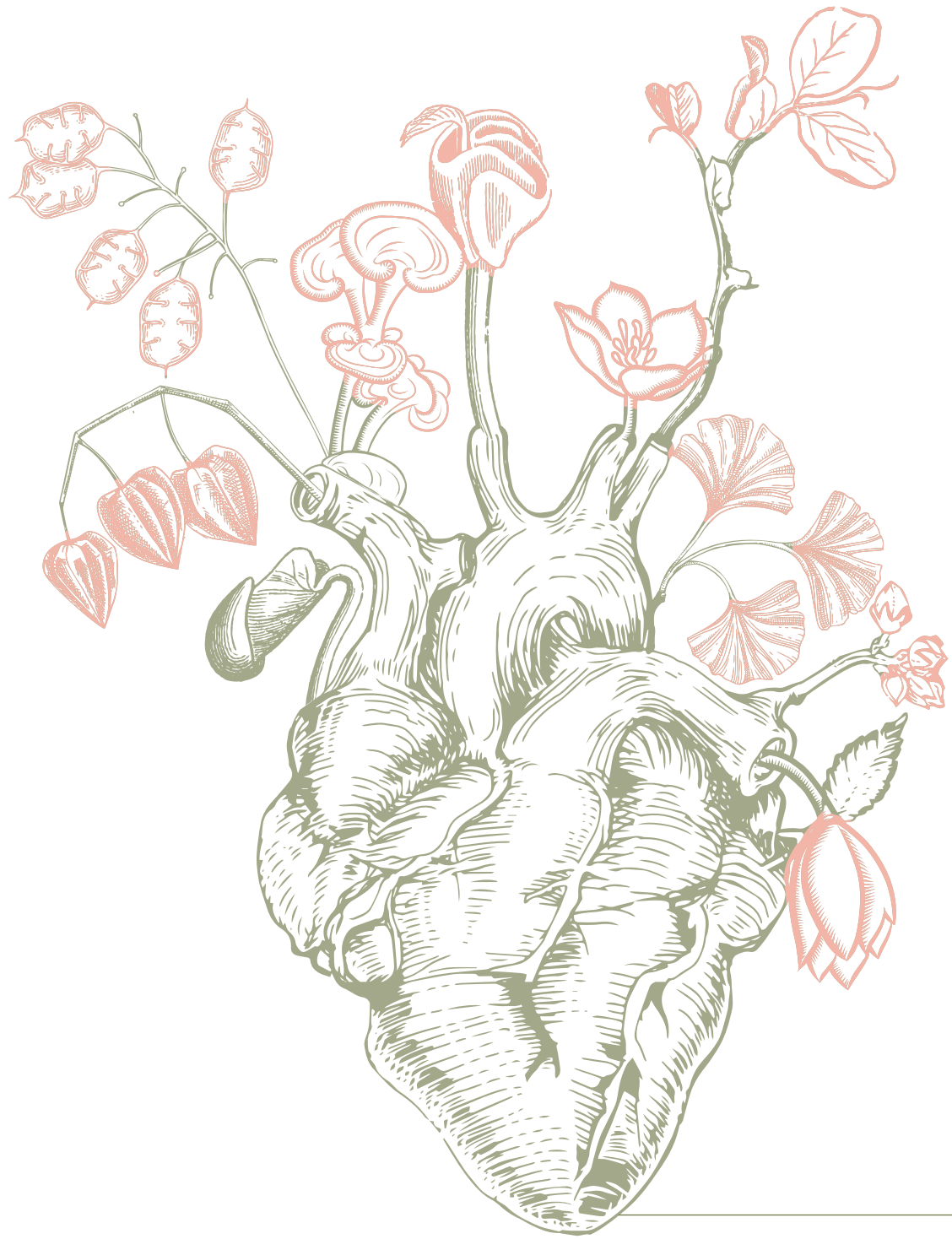
The air was filled with hazy spices;
The crickets all lost their voices.
And then she was falling,
Like a leaf spiraling down;

Summer released her grip on the world
And her heart froze over.
While Autumn's breeze swirled,
Somber and colder,
He left her behind
Without any closure.

The West Wind's lullaby sang
Of burning love
And silky mornings.
The wild sky's trill
Of smoky evenings
And frost-dusted goodbyes
Was coming to a close.
The wind always sang his story
In hopes of a better ending,
But his breath,
Along with the months,
Were growing short.
So with burning lungs he howled
The last of his harrowing,
October tune.

It was the fire of coming together
And the piercing cold
Of parting.

And so,
It was Autumn's turn now
To set the world aglow.
He took up his torch of icy flame,
Swirling with freezing garnet
And shivering scarlet,
And began to blaze
His first love's warmth away.



Nurture.



The Gaze

Zainab Sohail | Poem | East Campus

I told my daughter to cover her legs

And I wept

Not because I heard my own mother in my words

But because I remember wearing shorts

And men not pardoning me with their gaze

I was 8

Just a Girl

Laura Gomez | Pencil | 9" x 13" | West Campus



Still Slaying Holofernes

Diana Saguin | Acrylic | 24" x 30" | East Campus



Bars

Dylan Lambert | Screenplay | Lake Nona Campus

Fade In: EXT. SAM BUCCINI'S GROCERY STORE - DAY

An almost completely pristine building sits in the middle of an arid little town.

DISOLVE TO:

INT. SAM BUCCINI'S GROCERY STORE PARKING LOT - DAY

It is a busy day in the store today, many customers roam the aisles looking for the items on their shopping list. JESSE, a skinny college student that has been flunking through his entire semester is desperately searching the many aisles of Sam Buccini's grocery store for something.

JESSE

Hey, sir, do you know where the Buccini bars are, I tried looking in the usual place but I couldn't find them anywhere.

SHELBY, a chubby college dropout that is trying to do his job while battling a killer hangover.

SHELBY

Um, that stuff has been recalled.

JESSE

W-what...

Jesse collapses to the ground and begins to weep.

SHELBY

Oh god, are you crying? Sorry if I was being mean about it, I've just been having a rough week, you know? Please don't tell the manager about this.

JESSE

I-it's not that, All I had left was my Buccini Bars, and now I have nothing.

Shelf stocker becomes visibly uncomfortable when he realizes that Jesse is just having a mental break.

SHELBY

That's... um... rough... I guess?

Jesse brings himself to his feet, with his fists clenched and his face scarlet red.

JESSE

Rough?! Rough?! You couldn't even begin to understand.

SHELBY

(under his breath)

And I certainly don't want to.

JESSE

It all started when I first moved out to college.

SHELBY

Dammit...

JESSE

My father always wanted me to become an editor, but I can barely spell my own name right!

Jesse continues his shpiel, but it becomes unintelligible as Shelby zones out.

JESSE

Gah! Why does no one listen to me?! You're just like my parents!

Shelby's eyes widen and without hesitation walks right up to Jesse.

SHELBY

I don't give a damn about your stupid candy bar you stuck up, dramatic, baby. If I wanted to listen to people's mommy and daddy issues for a living I would have stayed in college and become a psychologist.

Jesse charges Shelby and they begin to punch at each other while rolling on the floor making a massive fool of them both. It got so bad that one of the bystanders ended up calling the police.

FADE OUT

The police arrive and the two are still going at it, slapping, and screaming at each other. The two police officers sent to break up the fight are big buff guys that look more like professional wrestlers than cops. They both work together to separate the brawlers, with much difficulty, as if they were stuck together with glue.

COP 1

I swear to God I'm going to taze these degenerates.

COP 2

Fine, but you're doing the paperwork this time.

Both of the police officers take out their tazers and shock Jesse and Shelby in unison. They collapse to the floor, finally letting go of each other.

FADE TO BLACK

INT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

A dusty old building that operates on a skeleton crew, it runs almost entirely on technology that has been outdated since the 80s.

Three men walk into the booking room, two of them are SHELBY and JESSE, and the other is SHERRIF CASSIDY, a root'in toot'in sheriff that wears a big Stetson hat with a star on it, a big bushy mustache, and has a cheesy country accent.

SHERRIF CASSIDY

Say Cheese, partners!

Cassidy takes a snapshot of Jesse and Shelby with a polaroid camera.

SHELBY

Aren't you supposed to take photos of us individually?

SHERRIF CASSIDY

Well you know budget cuts and all, heh, I could Jaw on about it for hours, but to say the least, we're runnin' low on polaroid film so we've gotta start conservin' our supply, at least 'til the next shipment arrives, heh.

Shelby grimaces at the thought of how inept this police station is, while Jesse seems to be petrified with fear.

SHERRIF CASSIDY

Oh uh, heh, speaking of them there budget cuts we only have one cell, I know you two kinda assaulted each other, but would ya kindly not beat each other into a pulp, we don't really have anyone staffed in the clinic, budget cuts and all.

JESSE

You can't leave me in there with that jerkwad!

SHELBY

Jerkwad? You're the one that tackled me!

JESSE

Only after you pushed me over the edge!

SHELBY

If what I said is all it took to drive you "over the edge" then maybe you should've been put in a mental institution instead!

SHERRIF CASSIDY

Actually, the mental asylum was shut down beca-

JESSE

SHELBY

Budget cuts!

Budget cuts!

Sherrif Cassidy grunts and escorts them to their cell.

The cell is in terrible shape, with rust lining every metal surface possible and dirt covering the rest. There is only one toilet in the cell and it has seen heavy use.

The two attempt to settle in for the night on their rough beds, but JESSE gets up with a strained look on his face.

JESSE

(under breath)

Sorry.

SHELBY

What?

JESSE

I said sorry, I'm sorry for tackling you today it totally wasn't cool of me to do.

SHELBY

Well that's an understatement.

Shelby takes a breath.

SHELBY

I'm also sorry, I uh, I shouldn't have belittled you, you were obviously going through something rough and I was just getting annoyed with you.

Jesse stands up and gets closer to Shelby.

JESSE

So, ya wanna hug it out brother?

SHELBY

What? No! We just beat each other up today, now you want to "hug it out"?

Jesse backs up and sits back down.

JESSE

Oh, sorry, today's been an emotional rollercoaster.

SHELBY

There's something I can agree with! Man, I am probably never going to work again after this.

JESSE

What do you mean? Are you just sick of working or something?

SHELBY

Don't you know that businesses don't hire people with criminal records, especially violent ones like ours, yep once the Sherrif somehow puts that polaroid into the system we're marked for life.

Jesse stands up again, but this time begins pacing in a panic.

JESSE

No no no, I'll never become an editor if we get put into the system! There has to be a way to stop it! What if we told the Sherrif we were friends now?

SHELBY

We're not and the only way we'd get out of the system would be if we destroyed the polaroid and escaped.

Jesse's pacing becomes even more erratic.

JESSE

There's no way we're going to even get out of this cell let alone find the polaroid!

As soon as he finished that sentence he bumped into the cell door and it swung open.

SHELBY

Was there just no lock on the cell?

JESSE

Must've been budget cuts.

Shelby laughs for a moment but catches himself and regains composure.

SHELBY

I guess we can leave the cell now, so um do you want to uh, break out of jail?

JESSE

Anything to clear my name.

The duo venture into the hall and notice at the very end of the hall is a big blue neon sign that says "Mugshot Holding Room/Fire Escape."

SHELBY

I guess that explains the budget cuts.

They sneak through the halls looking over their shoulders every few seconds to check if anyone is nearby, but they never see anyone.

The door to the mugshot holding room/fire escape is left agape, when the two peer into the room they spot the polaroid hanging on the wall as if it was a trophy.

The two triumphantly march up to the polaroid and tear it to shreds. The fire escape lays in front of them, plated with gold and bejeweled on every step.

JESSE

Now this explains the budget cuts.

The duo carefully descends the luxury fire escape, careful not to crack any of the gems along the way down. After what felt like ages they finally make it to the bottom of the steps, just in time for sunrise.

EXT. POLICE STATION - DAWN

SHELBY

We actually made it out, I guess now all that's left is for us to get out of the city.

JESSE

Did you say us?

SHELBY

That I did, so what do you say, do you wanna partner up, one last time?

JESSE

I thought you'd never ask.

Shelby and Jesse walk from the derelict police station with the absurdly lavish fire escape and into the sunset.

FADE TO BLACK

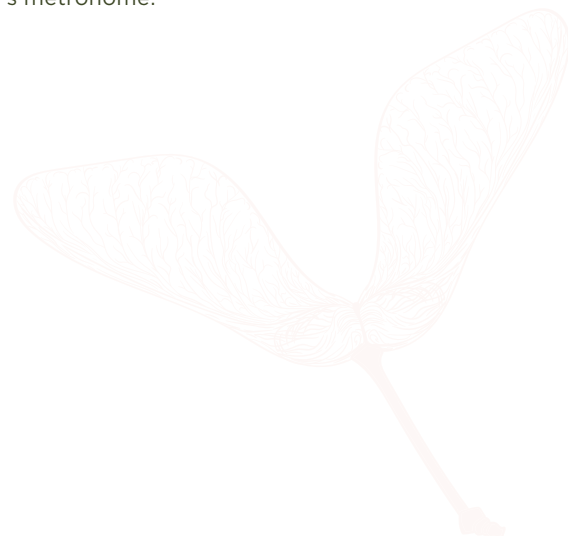
My Metronome Hand

Hanna Melo Fugulin | Poem | East Campus

I wonder when I noticed
I've never read my poems out loud.
I think whatever they are,
This somewhat arranged vomit of thoughts
Still holds some sort of power of secrecy over me,
So secret, I can't allow myself to know,
Or maybe I just don't want to.

I wonder if one day I dare,
I'll find that they rhyme or flow
Differently than the pace of my hand,
Closer to my soul's metronome.

Tempo.



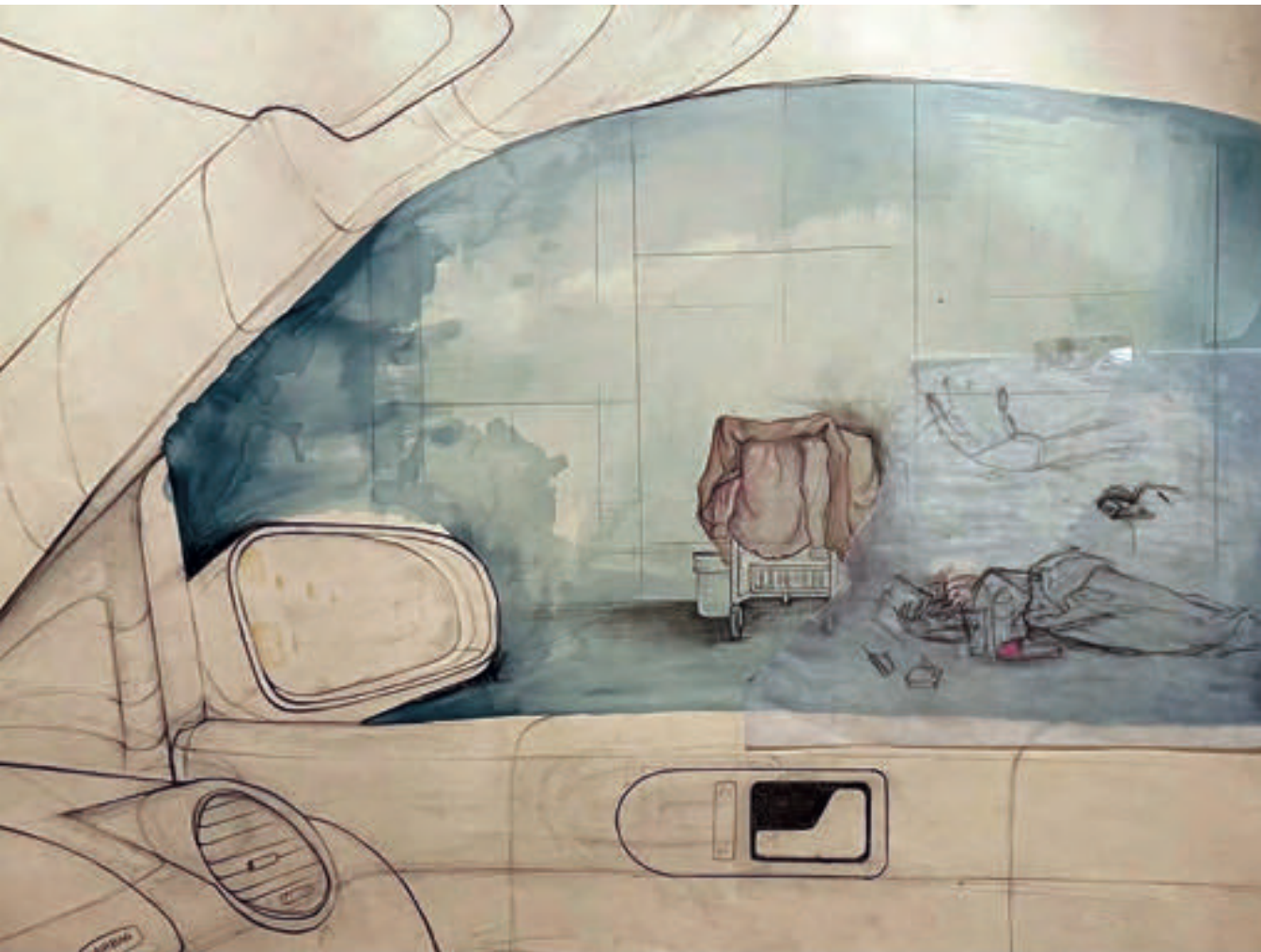
The Smoking Flower

Estefania Sanchez | Pencil and Oil | 6" x 9" | West Campus



Downtown Orlando

Fabiana Rojas | Mixed-media | 30" x 22" | Downtown Campus



The Driver

Adam Scharf | Fiction | Downtown Campus

Laurel Balfour brought me home after the second date. The Balfour's were gathered in the living room fighting over money. Her eldest sister stood on the Victorian loveseat, yelling at her parents by the fireplace. Laurel's younger sister was exhaling her cigarette into the face of a middle-aged woman seated next to her. Nobody introduced themselves or acknowledged I was there. I stared at the ground. An ashtray was broken on the carpet. I glanced at the walls covered in portraits of Laurel—Daddy's favorite. I later found out the middle-aged woman in the chair was Aunt Meredith, but only later, after I shot her in the head.

Thinking I was the new driver, Mr. Balfour asked me to wait outside while they sorted everything out. Laurel never corrected her father. She pretended she didn't know me.

I stood outside with my hands in my pockets. I thought about leaving. I thought about deleting Laurel's number from my phone. Then one of her sisters opened the front door.

"Our father wants the driver."

"I'm not the driver," I said, then walked in anyway.

I didn't think about leaving again. I thought about toxoplasma: when parasites manipulate their hosts to do all sorts of crazy things, like drown themselves or walk into fire. I wanted to walk into a big goddamn fire.

"Driver, we need your help," said Mr. Balfour.

"At your service," I said.

The feeling of dishonesty excites me.

I should also mention he was holding a gun. A friendly gun. A gun that belonged in a gun show or an old Spaghetti Western. In fact, everyone in the room had a gun. These guns were silver and had handles engraved with the letter B.

Mrs. Balfour handed me a gun. Mine wasn't shiny. It was rust-covered and reminded me of an old car I lost my virginity in, then drove into a drug store because I was plastered and feeling no pain.

Mr. Balfour told me their family defied physics. He said change was natural, but for whatever reason, change wouldn't come to the Balfour's.

"Our financial circumstances aren't changing. This is the one tunnel that doesn't have a light at the end of it. There isn't a train coming either, so we decided to make the train come to us. In other words, we've decided to end it all in a civilized way. We've decided to shoot one another using family heirlooms."

They needed an extra body after Laurel refused to kill a member of her own family. I had nothing better to do. I sort of wanted to end everything anyway. Mr. Balfour kissed his daughters' foreheads and wiped the nervous forehead of



Mrs. Balfour with his tambor lace handkerchief. Nobody comforted Aunt Meredith, or even looked at her.

We stood in a circle. The instructions were clear: place your gun at the temple of the person to the right of you. On the count of three, pull the trigger.

I was responsible for shooting Aunt Meredith.

At first, Mr. Balfour begged to shoot me, but Laurel insisted she be the one to do it, which sort of gave me the romantic butterflies. Mrs. Balfour was offended her own husband didn't love her enough to shoot her. "I'll do it myself because my husband's a bastard," she declared. She held the gun to her own temple, threatening to sabotage the proceedings.

"Bunny, please put the gun down," pleaded Mr. Balfour. "I haven't been much, but I've always tried my best."

"Can't we get this over with?" I said.

"My God, he's right," said Mr. Balfour. "Honey, you stand on my right. It's only fair. I'll shoot you."

Laurel didn't say anything. She put the gun to my head. It felt like a cold kiss.

If you were to ask me if I was scared, I wasn't. In fact, I was apathetic towards the entire scenario. I raised my gun to Aunt Meredith's head without hesitation. I hoped something memorable would

pop in my head the moment I died, but it didn't. I could only think about how warm the room was. How I wanted to open the window. It made me so sad I couldn't think of anything better at my time of death.

"Jesus, it's warm," I told everyone. Then I wasn't sad anymore. I managed to make death trivial. I was freed and truly living—death before life—I felt like dancing.

Mr. Balfour pointed his gun at his wife and counted. "One, two...three."

I fired my gun. I expected things to go black, but they got brighter. My eyes were closed. This couldn't be Hell, I thought. Things were too bright for Hell. I hated how bright and warm it was here, wherever I was.

I was still in the living room. I was the only one to pull the trigger. The family cried in relief and embraced one another, apologizing for ever thinking of doing such a thing. Their cries soon turned into laughter at the enormity of the situation. They were practically rolling on the floor while Aunt Meredith's warm blood dripped down my face.

No one rushed to her side. No one cared. I didn't even care. I blew half of Aunt Meredith's head off and we didn't care. Motionless, covered in blood, I stared at the family, at the Balfours. I could feel the parasite in my body getting healthier, becoming larger. I had walked into the fire.

I drove home. Convinced death was trivial, I ran every red light. I yelled at someone walking in a raincoat because I felt unburdened by civility.

"Hey, Raincoat, fuck you!"

At home I concocted something brutal to swallow—a mess of pills and alcohol that would make everything dark. I didn't want to live. That is, until Laurel called as if nothing happened and invited herself over for lovemaking. When we were through, she asked if I could drive her home.

Though our romance ended, I kept driving her and her family around.

One day, I was asked to pick up Aunt Meredith from the hospital. She had survived and was doomed to live the rest of her life paralyzed from the neck down. Having half a face, she couldn't speak or hear that well. I didn't have much to say anyway. They'd put her in one of those chairs she moves with her breath. The family car wasn't equipped for that chair. I strapped her in horizontally across the seat—chair and all. I sort of sang Christmas carols to make her think maybe it was the holidays, like that would make things more tolerable for her.

Overwhelmingly Incompetent

Hanna Melo Fugulin | Digital Painting | 27" x 15" | East Campus



The Bathroom

Caitlin Foster | Poem | East Campus

yesterday was hard
I thought today would be better
but it's not
my mind is racing
spinning
I hear my cat
she knows I'm not doing too well
she's trying to come into the bathroom
the bathroom where I have successfully locked myself away
away from everyone and everything
maybe it's better this way
I've been like this awhile and no one has noticed
maybe that's a good thing
the flashbacks begin
I was so happy
what happened?
why is it all good things come to an end?
is this a mistake?
what am I thinking?
no, what are others thinking
today is not better
today is yesterday
today is hard

Her

Jean Mercado | Poem | Winter Park Campus

She aches for a cure
She longs for the light
She cares for a few
She watches them fight
She dies in the day
She heals through the night
She has seen the whole truth
She knows the end is in sight
She is home for the wicked
She harbors the right
She witnesses tragedy
And miracles alike
Objective and neutral
An observer of plight
She was here before us
And will outlast our might
She dances and twirls
A majestic satellite
The canvas for all beauty
A stage
For the ultimate playwright



Arwen's Choice

Annabelle Pullen | Acrylic | 11" x 14" | East Campus



The Red Jacket and Black Cat

Stella Cruz-Jimenez | Digital Painting | 21" x 21" | Poinciana Campus



10 Things I Could Write in a Video Game Review That I Could Write in My Suicide Letter

Tyler Tyrell | Poem | Osceola Campus

1. I'm sorry I couldn't make it through to the end; I found myself lost from the start.
2. I wish more tips and hints were available whenever I ventured the wrong path.
3. I found myself unable to cope with the challenges that stood in front of me as each stage grew progressively more difficult.
4. I wish the journey was more based around co-op rather than being solo; I think an increase of friendly NPCs would have made the experience more manageable.
5. Whose idea was it to make "**Permadeath**" a thing?

How is it fair to only be given one chance at everything?
6. I don't know how I managed to start with nothing and, after years spent grinding, I'm still feeling like I have gained nothing at all. Free 2 Play is advertised, but those that paid their way through have a significant advantage. I just wish I didn't start out this poor.
7. There are too many bugs!

Most of them are annoying but manageable.

Okay this one's a joke to lighten the mood, but I really don't feel like I was coded right when I was put into this world. Like my own thoughts are attacking me, the things that are supposed to raise my happiness meter don't. Whenever I think I made the right choices, they lead me to bad endings, but if I choose the more selfish choice, I get an even worse ending... I don't think a good ending is possible for me. Is this a glitch?!
8. I don't like having to role play as someone I'm not. Why couldn't I just be me? The option to create my own character is there, but if I stand out too much, I am penalized. I just want to be myself and not have everything decided for me. We live in an open world filled with wonderful lore and endless possibilities. So, why's the pathway through life made linear?
9. I didn't mean for this to turn into a rant; there were, admittedly, some good moments, moments when despite my being lost, I still had fun.

I couldn't accomplish everything I wanted to in one run, but the accolades, the relationships I built, and the vastness of the unexplored world kept me motivated for the time being.

But potential without the kinetic within me is just wasted energy.
10. I hope the sequel is better, or maybe I will move on and there never is a sequel. Who knows? At least I can say I gave it my best effort.

Goodbye, My Dear Friend

Jasmine Jaros | Poem | Osceola Campus

Another school year over, another year done
I slump in my seat reminiscing about summer
All of a sudden, my moment of thought ends
With the soft, gentle whisper of my best friend

I look into her eyes, and she looks into mine
Beaches couldn't fool me, not even the tide
We were a few hours from departure
Where she would drift away ever so farther

We both sit in silence
The seconds fly by
I stare at her eyes
This is my life

It must hurt her because she heads away
I hope this doesn't go on, what do I even say?
How about all those gifts I haven't yet repaid

I come up with the words but to my dismay
It is three o'clock; now I'm completely afraid
Rushing down the hall, I wrap my arms around her
Although startled, she smiles and does the same

Goodbye, my dear friend
Goodbye, beautiful spring
Those few words eternally ring

No words were exchanged
They weren't ever needed
Every day, the same things were only repeated

She and I were always on the same page
We had a mental connection
Something, I didn't even need to mention
She's my best friend, and that will never end

Forever and ever our friendship held true
Always a text away whenever I was blue
Now old a gray, I think back to that life-changing day
When I stare at the stone of her grass-covered grave

Goodbye, my dear friend
Goodbye, beautiful spring
Those few words eternally ring

Reflection

Ednie Jozil | Pencil | 11" x 8.5" | West Campus



Mothering My Father

Zoey Akers | Nonfiction | East Campus

“That certain night, the night we met. . .”

He was sitting behind the curtains curled up in a ball in a disheveled heap sobbing and wailing with immense amounts of obvious fear in his eyes. Tears ran down his cheeks and I could see the hurt he was feeling. The adrenaline was flowing through the man’s veins and I could see how out-of-it he truly was. He looked up at me and immediately started to make excuses. I felt the pain and the danger he was in. My father was lying on the floor in a wardrobe full of clothing.

“There was magic abroad in the air. . .”

My dad is a singer. For as long as I could remember my dad would sing me lullabies. His vocals rang through the air and made me shudder from the happiness of him always being there for me. I knew that he would always be my dad and I would always be his daughter, and we would forever be the inseparable pair that skips in the grocery store parking lot and sings sappy Broadway during every car ride.

“There were angels dining at the Ritz. . .”

Strength. Purity. Hope. Angels are seen as a symbol of all of these things in many forms of literature- whether it be songs, poetry, or novels. My father used to be my angel. He was my beacon of hope and strength. Both his parents passed when I was twelve and the way he kept his head up and continued on despite the unbearable pain of never seeing the folks who raised him again was inspiring to me. He sang despite the stinging, and for that I am so proud of him.

“And a nightingale sang. . .”

For generations the nightingale has served as a symbol of wisdom for all. But my father, on the other hand, is not particularly wise. He is impulsive, scared, and lost, only in my eyes, of course. The night I found him in the wardrobe was about a week after he came out to my brother and me. He told us he was divorcing my mother and going to “find himself.”

“I know ‘cause I was there. . .”

Now I was feeling the unbearable pain, the sting and the agony. I was completely in the moment. I was stuck in the living room, surrounded by my mother, brother, and father, sobbing from agitation. I felt the perturbation creeping into my head; I needed my family to stay together. I needed peace and a put-together life. I needed wisdom and hope, angels and nightingales.

“That night in Berkley Square.”

Berkley Square is a patch of green land in the West End of London, in Westminster. It is a place of tranquility with bird song harmonies surrounding the seated. My family is nothing like Berkley Square. No serenity, peace, or joy, just shambles, a state of complete and utter disarray that I realize will last for the rest of my life.

Eric Maschwitz, the lyricist of “A Nightingale Sang in Berkley Square,” wrote this piece based on a short story, yes, but it feels more like it was composed for me and my father. He sang this song to me every night as a child, and when he wasn’t home, I would shiver in disarray without the rich voice of the man who raised me and stood by me since birth. My dad may be a blatant mess. He may be struggling. But he is still my hero. Everyone has their moments of impulsivity and loss, but he is still trying to be my father, still trying to celebrate my accomplishments, still loving me. Maybe I do have a nightingale, after all.

Three Hundred Sixty-four Days

Reese Miles | Digital Drawing | 16” x 25” | East Campus



The Beast

Juliana Bittar | Acrylic | 16" x 20" | West Campus



Anger

Sabrina Costopoulos | Poem | Downtown Campus

This anger inside of me
Speaks a different language
It only releases with actions
And recedes with consequences
This anger inside of me
Is like, the sunlight burning my skin
I don't know what to put my anger towards
So, I put it within
This anger inside me, comes from
A long history of deceit
And when I'm angry
It's where my pain and happiness finally meet
This anger inside me,
Roars a tidal wave into my world
You don't hear it coming
But all it takes is
Less than a whispered word

A Sparrow's Elegy

Ornella Nshimiyimana | Poem | Downtown Campus

From high above the flowering ash tree
I heard a mournful sparrow cry.
I asked this bird to reveal exactly
The reason so I could know why.
Her sobs got louder as she said:
“The day I dreaded is finally here.
Soon I will have to leave the nest.
It makes me cry. I’m sad and filled with fear.

Last fall, two sparrows found a branch to build
a home where all their eggs were safe.
As the first-hatched I had a role to fill.
I helped out for the others’ sake.
Oh, how I loved standing on guard
When my parents were out to get us food.
Did the things the youngsters found hard.
Like share the last seeds and soothe restless moods.

But spring has come, it’s truly disheartening.
Nest swaying, my weight too heavy.
Leaving it is just another hard thing
I must do first, one of many.
Farewell, dear tree. I’ll miss you so.
The seas, mountains, and flowers call to me.”
Then sparrow spread her wings to show
Her bravery and grit as she flew free.

Nothing to Crow About

Julie Villanueva | Collagraph | 12” x 22” | East Campus



Dreamer

Sarina Ali | Colored Pencils | 9" x 11" | Osceola Campus



Cliffside Vigils

Janiely Fernandez | Fiction | East Campus

You wait until the floorboards settle and the light underneath your sister's room goes out before you make your nightly escape. Bundled into a heavily worn-out hoodie that's from a university you'll never be able to attend, the initials *L.T* etched into its stretched collar and a pair of dark wool shorts, you ease open the latch on your window and slowly heave it up as a light summer breeze skims over your face.

The sound of your brother wandering through the hallway makes you freeze up, hands clenched white on the window frame as you wait until little footsteps sneak over creaky steps on their way down to what you can only believe is for a midnight snack.

The first squeak makes you shudder. It is far too close.

The buzzing that only occurs when the kitchen lights are turned on makes you relax and lets the blood flow back to your scratched-up knuckles.

You jump onto the roof before the hesitation that built through your forced stillness gets the better of you. It tuts disapprovingly and makes you think about what you're doing, aiming to force you to get back into bed and forget about doing what you've been doing for the past 3 months.

With a sort of practiced ease, you catch yourself on old shutters and dig your sandals into the gaping holes of the roof of the house you've called home for the past 15 years.

You try to misremember the tightness that welds up inside you at the physical representation of how you feel.

It's easy to controllably tumble down the side of your house, keeping track of any other insomniac busybody in the silent maze that has become

your neighborhood tonight; but everything is still and restful, save for the ever-present summer wind and the shifting of houses cemented into the ground. You relax and tread the path your feet have been kissing in remembrance for the past 80 days (2 and a half months of new grief) while your mind slips down to your heart; whispering half-truths and half-lies with every step and sway of your sore body.

Nights are getting shorter, means less time to not dream.

Lie. You dream all the time, every waking moment that you have to give, every kind of dream, until your mind feels weightless with it all.

Tonight, he'll remember you, he'll know who you are when the sun comes up.

Truth. He'll think about you after you part from him. He'll continue to think about you as Morpheus guides him back to the god's realm, and he'll remember you in the timeless moments when he first opens his eyes to see his room covered in sunlight; but you are not guaranteed any promise a moment after the first.

The roaring of dark waves greets you before the dirt beneath your sandals turns damp with newly wet grass. From a distance, against the backdrop of the world's natural cradle, you spot a dark figure curled up at the edge of the cliff. There is no surprise, and if there was, it still would not be enough to make you pause in walking towards the still figure. You lay down to greet your equal and the stars.

The silence has been a steady companion for years, and for all that you wish to have the one you want, you let it grow amidst the spaces between you. You and the boy who lays against the edge of a cliffside in hopes of drifting over the edge right before a dream begins.

"I thought I was the only one in this town that couldn't sleep."

"You think too highly of yourself Cassius."

You and the boy with scars running up and down his cracked body do not speak after you utter his name, after you let it drop from your lips in a moment of weakness.

Weakness, you realize after nights of holding your mother while she cried to sleep and doing the same to every single one of your siblings, is shown more in words and actions for all that you feel in your soul.

You busy yourself with mapping the stars in the sky while Cassius sneaks glances at you from the corner of his wide eye, each look burning itself into your body until you can't help but meet his eyes head-on. You gaze at each other, thoughts held back from being fully voiced. It isn't until you glance directly at the narrowed eye underneath a curtain of burnt skin that Cassius stands and slowly wanders to the edge of the cliffside. His bare feet inches away from allowing the rest of Cassius to drop to the roaring sea below the two of you.

Cassius does not ask how you know his name and he does not ask about yours.

You tell yourself that it's better than repeating your name to a boy who will just ask again, and again, every single time you decide to join him.

You tell yourself that the ash in your mouth comes from days of not sleeping instead of the bittersweet situation that you find yourself in now.

You take a breath and join Cassius by the ledge. Staying close to the only source of warmth for what felt like miles, you let yourself lean forward

slightly to see waves crash against the jagged edges of the cliff with more force than you have ever felt in your life before.

Lie. You forget sometimes that what you have experienced, and what you are about to experience, are one and the same. The memories slip from your fingers like sand in the wind and you are helpless to stop them.

Sometimes you wonder who forgets the most—you or Cassius?

Cassius doesn't feel the need to ask you what you're doing, and in turn, you don't try to get him off the edge. Instead, you take the time to reach out and gently touch the fingertips you can see over the cuff of his hoodie; thick material, unlike yours, and its long enough that the sleeves cover his hands almost entirely. You wait until Cassius sways towards you and binds your fingers together; palms sliding over the other in such a fluid motion that it feels like the two of you have been doing it for years.

You squeeze your eyes closed hard enough that the hollow space beneath them throbs from the pressure. But it's worth it because you don't want to cry when you realize that you've forgotten that *yes, you have been doing this for years, this and so much more. It used to feel like you were one person in two different bodies.*

A tug to your bound hand makes you open your eyes fast enough to see Cassius jumping over the edge, and a single second before you follow is stretched into eternity as you look at the boy that you have spent your entire life with.

Covered in aching wounds that never seem to heal and scars that feel numb inside, you see a boy in a too-large thick hoodie with half of his face burned off looking like he just discovered the secrets of the universe in the space between the ocean and the stars.

You think, *I want to feel what he feels.*

What you mean is, **I don't mind the aches as long as I'm with him.**

What you do is, **jump off the edge of the cliff and watch as the world's cradle tumbles down with the two of you.**

You hit the water with your fingers still grasped by the boy who filled the empty spaces of his head with stories about the stars, and you believe that as long as that remains a fact, you can do what you do best and keep your head above the water.

As you break the surface, the water tries to drag you back, and if you weren't used to it, the waves would have ensured that you were kept down. You tug Cassius back to you, holding on to him with a hand over his shoulder as your legs find themselves around his waist. He places his only free hand over your hip; he is strong enough to keep the two of you afloat as the currents take you closer to the shoreline.

Your hoodie sticks to you like a second skin, the thin fabric becoming more transparent, and your hair is fanning out over the water as they become curlier and curlier. In contrast to you, Cassius is basically drowning in his big hoodie, becoming more of a hindrance than any help, but he bears the weight of it like it is nothing. The wind doesn't pick up and for that you are grateful for it, just as much as you are grateful that the water isn't interested in being its usual freezing self.

You shift your bound hands to rest between the two of you, and Cassius gives it a squeeze as if trying to remind himself of what is going on. You rest your head on his shoulder and feel the weight of his own dark curls drop to rest on your neck, sending little rivers of water down your collarbone that warms when he lets out a heavy breath.

"Liliana." It's a statement more than anything else, an acknowledgment of a fact that his mind has allowed him to remember. You do nothing more than shift closer and drop your weight just

a little bit more on him; because right now, you're drifting in the middle of the sea with the boy you used to share the world with. At this moment, you couldn't be damned to carry anything; and it's ok because Cassius is ready to carry you and everything else while you're like this.

You're free while he becomes grounded in reality, and when living in a world that is missing as many pieces as it is for him, being tied to something *real*, something physical is more of a gift than anything else you can offer.

Cassius' arms tighten in response as you lean in even closer and the rest of your time in the water is spent in peaceful silence.

Sooner rather than later, you find yourself back on top of the very cliff you just jumped. Your sandals becoming soaked with every minute you spend with them on. At your side is a silent Cassius, who looks on over the horizon as the sun steadily begins to climb up. Without speaking, you both decide to head back into town, leaning into each other as the grass turns into dirt, and then into the familiar paved gravel of the streets of your town.

You walk the same road together, side by side as your steps sync up and your clothes begin to slowly dry in the summer wind all around the two of you. Cassius is the first one to split off, and you take a moment to watch his retreating back move closer and closer to the second house down the street to the left of you. You see the moment before he hesitates between the two lots, and you think to go and tell him which one is his before Cassius shakes his head slightly, and turns towards the second house. The relief hits you harder than it has any right to, and you shake all the way back to your bed; wet clothes and all.

You're fifteen in a tired body, but you feel like you're centuries-old with every night that you close your eyes and can't sleep. The feeling of being seconds from splitting is becoming the norm, and you don't know what you'll do when the time comes for you to finally **break**.

A Clucking Childhood

Fatima Manna | Nonfiction | West Campus

My sister, Samira and I have been standing behind the door for what feels like forever, the chickens were clucking nearby, stabbing their sharp beaks into the soft red soil, pecking out worms.

We watched them from the glassed-up veranda of our home. We're scanning the brush of our backyard, looking through all the shades of green, the silver-grey olive trees, the vivid green pomegranates, and the muted green tones of the fig trees. Our heads snapping to attention at the slightest of sounds. Because if the chickens are nearby, then so is my uncle's rooster.

It's 5 in the afternoon, we've spent the day doing chores, right now we're itching to go play outside, but a door stood in our way, it was the only thing keeping us safe.

See the reason we're afraid of my uncle's rooster is that he's nothing but a troublemaker. Every time one of us tries to go outside on their own the rooster attacks them and proceeds to attempt to pick the flesh off their legs, he's even attacked my aunts. No one is safe from the reach of his beak, no matter how fast you run, he will catch up to you, no matter how many steps you climb, he will follow you, he will corner you and pick your thighs like they're the ultimate worm buffet. The only way to get past him is in groups.

"Come on let's go!" my sister wined, slapping her 7-year-old hands on her sides.

"Are you crazy!" I yelled back, grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking hard.

"He's not even there!" she forces herself out of my grip and violently points at the chickens with her tiny open palms.

"He's always there,"—I turn back to face the door—"we just can't see him." I lift my arm up and place my open palm on the cool glass of the door, like a prisoner longing for freedom.

"Oh my god! You're not supposed to be the pussycat!" she dramatically slams her forehead.

"You're supposed to be the problem child!" she violently points at me.

"Nasima is the pussycat," she points behind us at the inside of the house, where our older sister is.

"And I'm the favorite," she points her little thumb at her puffed-out chest.

"No, you're not!" I yell back crossing my arms.

"Yes, I am!" she stomps her foot.

"No, Nasima is the favorite!" I point inside.

"Really, is Nasima the one who gets you out of trouble just by being there?"

She did that smug smile kids do where they squint their eyes and puff out their chests like they won a prize just by being right.

I roll my eyes at her, "Okay, just shut up we'll go in a second."

I turn my focus back to the soil and start searching for the vivid red of the rooster's comb since it's easier to spot through the foliage than his brown and black feathers. Nothing, I scan through the foliage again then I hear the unmistakable sound of the door handle squeaking open.

I turn my head so fast my neck burns.

Samira barely makes it down the short steps when the rooster charges after her pecking at her legs as she runs around in circles screaming.

Every few paces he jumps in the air and flaps his wings at her shoing her away from the chickens.

I know I should help her, but I'm doubled over with laughter, gasping for air at the sight of it all.

The Archer

Milena Pereira Russell Wanderley | Digital Painting | 28.5" x 28.5" | West Campus



Stare

Valeria Loyola | Digital Painting | 15.5" x 15.5" | Poinciana Campus



To You My Son

Zainab Sohail | Poem | East Campus

I will teach you to weep
I will not tell you to man up
I will teach you to let go of
What is expected of a man here
As these are all old tales
To make you feel big
I will teach you to break tradition
And be small
I will look you in the eye
And remind you of how worthy you are of everything
I will hold your face in my hands
And tell you how to be kind and gentle
I will teach you to keep your voice low
And to never raise your hand
I will give you unconditional love
The love that fathers never give to their son
Together, my son we will break tradition
I will teach you to listen
And talk less
I will teach you kindness so when a woman sees you
She sees your kind eyes first, and your gender later
I will teach you to be great yet grounded
Not grounded in tradition but grounded in kindness
My son, this is what matters
Not medals, not accolades, not praises

Condemned

Jacqueline Malanga | Poem | Osceola Campus

The veil of night torn, screaming shedding grace like skin
Peeling off in bloody swaths, spilt unto the pit in sin
Choking on siren call
Voice hoarse with the dusty chase
Infectant whispers pushing to prevent the fall
Alight in dead eyes
Clawing towards a desperation locked within
Unwritten future hums, trembles in wake
Awake with the rise of the silver serpent
Coiled coyly elusive, resolute
Blades and blunt nails pull at truth's veil
What unbidden ties reveal
Time heals they say
Unravels, surpassing flesh
Soul preserved in rotting death
Expands boding the break of day
Lashing out in scathing garbled tongue
Exodus, like cattle they were culled
The cunning of the ecdysis
At the judgement field, the final seal of fate
As we take our final infinite breath
All is life, all is death

Just Out of Reach

Hanna Melo Fugulin | Digital Painting | 24" x 24.5" | East Campus



The Restaurant Experience

Hanna Melo Fugulin | Nonfiction | East Campus

This isn't about social diseases, nor is it any commentary on capitalistic practices or anything of this sort, though you are of course welcome to read into that if you'd like. This is just a reflection of someone who has done more people-watching than people-talking-to.

Even prior to the pandemic, I disliked going pretty much anywhere. After working in retail myself, I couldn't help but feel awful any time I walked in wherever and saw that mask of politeness on some employee who would rather be anywhere else at that moment. I never liked taking people's space, time, or energy, especially not unhappy people's. And I don't know about you, but I have yet to see an actually happy retail worker.

Hence, it took some convincing to get me to go eat at this restaurant. I hadn't been there before, or even heard of it, but I relented regardless. And upon arrival, the first thing I noticed was how quiet it was. There was music playing at a decent volume and some typical white noise from some machine somewhere, but very few people were speaking, which I found utterly unusual. All the employees spoke very briefly with charming, accented English, and all the costumers replied in a word or two and were otherwise silent. Weird. At first, things seemed orderly and calm to the point of being eerie, or that's what my forever-apprehensive mind decided, anyway. But when I sat down and had time to take in everything and everyone around me, I noticed there wasn't any energy at all. And by that, I mean I could only describe the atmosphere as the opposite of *vigor*. Not an ounce of vitality to be witnessed. Everyone looked borderline defeated. It gave me that same old awful feeling.

I took time to look at the servers specifically. They all looked tired, the conformed-to type of tiredness that makes me think maybe they all have that dull working pain down to their bones. But the one waitress who attended our table had this particular *resigned* sadness about her. Don't get me wrong, she was perfectly polite and efficient, but I could just see it. Even though she was wearing a mask, I cannot forget her face. That resigned look she wore had an impact on me.

Now, I'm aware that *sometimes people are sad* isn't some kind of genius revelation. And I guess that's my point. Do you know the term 'mores'? It speaks to our way of life, the essential and/or characteristic customs and conventions of a community. Social Mores are the reason why, for example, when you're a kid, it's weird to see a teacher at the supermarket or on vacation. Even though we're aware other people are three-dimensional human beings with their own lives just like we are, we usually only see them to the extent that they fit their mores in relation to us. Perhaps that's why that particularly sad server stood out to me so much. I've interacted with countless employees and other costumers and other people my entire life, and I don't learn their names or wonder about their stories, and they don't learn mine. A server is a server, a costumer is a costumer, the *other person there* is just another person there. But that day, the employee mores was broken. And now, it makes me think it's regretful that I never got her name, that I don't know her story, just like pretty much everyone around me, and others around them, and so on. She's a three-dimensional being, but to me she'll forever just be *that sad server*. Perhaps she just thinks of me as *that staring costumer*. Though it's more likely she hasn't thought of me at all.

I guess that's just how it is, after all, civil inattention is yet another social mores. The world only works when it's full of stories left untold. But this weird way of coexistence we've habituated ourselves to just weirds me out. I don't like that we're just meant to be used to the fact the world is full of sad, tired people. I'm sure it hardly matters to my life personally if an employee has to unhappily do their job because I'm there. I just think it should matter a little bit more.

Naturally, I'm an overthinker. Not that that matters to you. This is just a reflection of someone who has done more people-watching than people-talking-to.

Under Construction

Fabiana Rojas | Charcoal | 24" x 36" | Downtown Campus





Memories with Ma Opie

Jody Smith | Nonfiction | West Campus

I can still hear the typewriter clicking methodically away as I sat in my great grandmother's room encompassed by simplicity. She lived a mundane life surrounded mostly by books, a small desk where she would type, a trash can full of crumpled up incomplete works, and a twin bed where I sat holding the cabbage patch doll, she had made me for Christmas the year earlier. This woman, who sat in front of me, I had given the name, Ma Opie. She was the epitome of mental strength and headstrong nobility despite her hunched over and aged appearance. She returned to school in her seventies to earn her GED as women in her generation often did not graduate high school. Ma Opie was also a published author of poetry and essays, mostly about her faith and dedication to God. I admired her tenacity and perseverance throughout her lifetime. She had experienced a great deal of loss over the years, yet somehow life had not left her bitter. As I continued to rest on her bed, the room became silent and still. Ma Opie turned to me and said tenderly, "Jody, you can do anything. There is no mountain that is too high for you. Always remember that." I continue to carry these words of affirmation in my heart to this day. She helped me to believe in myself and to believe in what I can achieve. Transcendent moments of happiness spent with my great grandmother helped shape me into the woman I am today.

I was four years old when my family left my home in western Pennsylvania to move to Sarasota, Florida. I remember being filled with heartbreak saying goodbye to all that I knew: my cousins, my grandparents, and Ma Opie. I looked forward to the summer break when my parents and I would go back home to visit family and friends. Though

they dwindled over the years, the trips back to Pennsylvania were filled with memories of joy and contentment. During the school year I would write letters to my great grandma, and she in turn would write back. She was my pen pal. It was not until high school that my own writing started to blossom. I admired Ma Opie and felt comfortable sharing my writing with her. She would proofread assignments I had written for English classes, gave me honest feedback, and refrained from any type of harsh judgement. Through our back-and-forth letters, she truly inspired me to be the best writer I could be. To this day, I can still feel her gently nudging me to dig deeper into myself and to work harder.

The trip to Pennsylvania in the summer of 2000 would be the last time I would see Ma Opie alive. She had been moved to Concordia Nursing Home in Cabot, Pennsylvania in January of 1999. She was frail now; her skin was paper thin, and walking was a chore. My mother had warned me on the drive there that she had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's and might not remember me. When we arrived at the nursing facility, I walked over to where she was sitting and gave her a gentle hug and kiss on the cheek. Immediately she asked me how my boyfriend was doing, which perplexed me because I was single. I looked at my mother in confusion; she shrugged. Again, Ma Opie said with determination, "Your boyfriend, Jody!" Then she got up and began walking to her room, slowly yet steadfastly. At this point, I was concerned about her mental wellbeing. My great grandma stopped with precision and pointed to a picture taped to her dresser mirror. It was a picture I had sent her months prior of my posing with a gorilla



at Busch Gardens. She started to laugh wildly. She knew who I was. She not only had her wits about her but she also still had her remarkable sense of humor. I cherish this last moment with Ma Opie the most. I can still see her in my mind's eye, waving goodbye to us as we drove away; tears filled our eyes.

Ma Opie's birth name was Opal Winifred Grimm. She was a distant relative of the Grimm brothers who wrote many of the fairy tales we are familiar with today. Like them, she also had a phenomenal gift for writing. In 2015, my mother came to my house with a copy of *The Life Story & Collected Works of Opal W. Fitzgerald* that she had received from her cousin Amy. My great grandmother passed away in January of 2003; now twelve years after her passing, Ma Opie finally had her published book. There sitting in front of me was a hard bound book with a picture of a white doily imposed upon its brown cover. I began reading ferociously, page after page of her poetry, essays, and short stories. Her words, even beyond the grave, are with me eternally. To this day when I am feeling lost, I can pick up her book and still feel her presence in my life through her words. One of my favorite poems she wrote was entitled,

"Rain on the Roof." Although it may seem bleak to some, I find solace in her words.

Rain on the roof, mist on my cheek,
misty haze in my eye.

It rained on a roof in a distant place on a
day long, long gone by,

When a woman sang a quaint refrain to
a child who played nearby.

And the child's glad heart and the
falling rain kept time to a lullaby.

Rain on the roof, rain on my cheek,
blinding rain in my eye.

You speak tonight of a distant place and
a day long since gone by.

But the singer's lips are mute tonight,
and the child who was am I.

And my heart still leaps as the soft rain
weeps in time to a lullaby

(Fitzgerald 273).

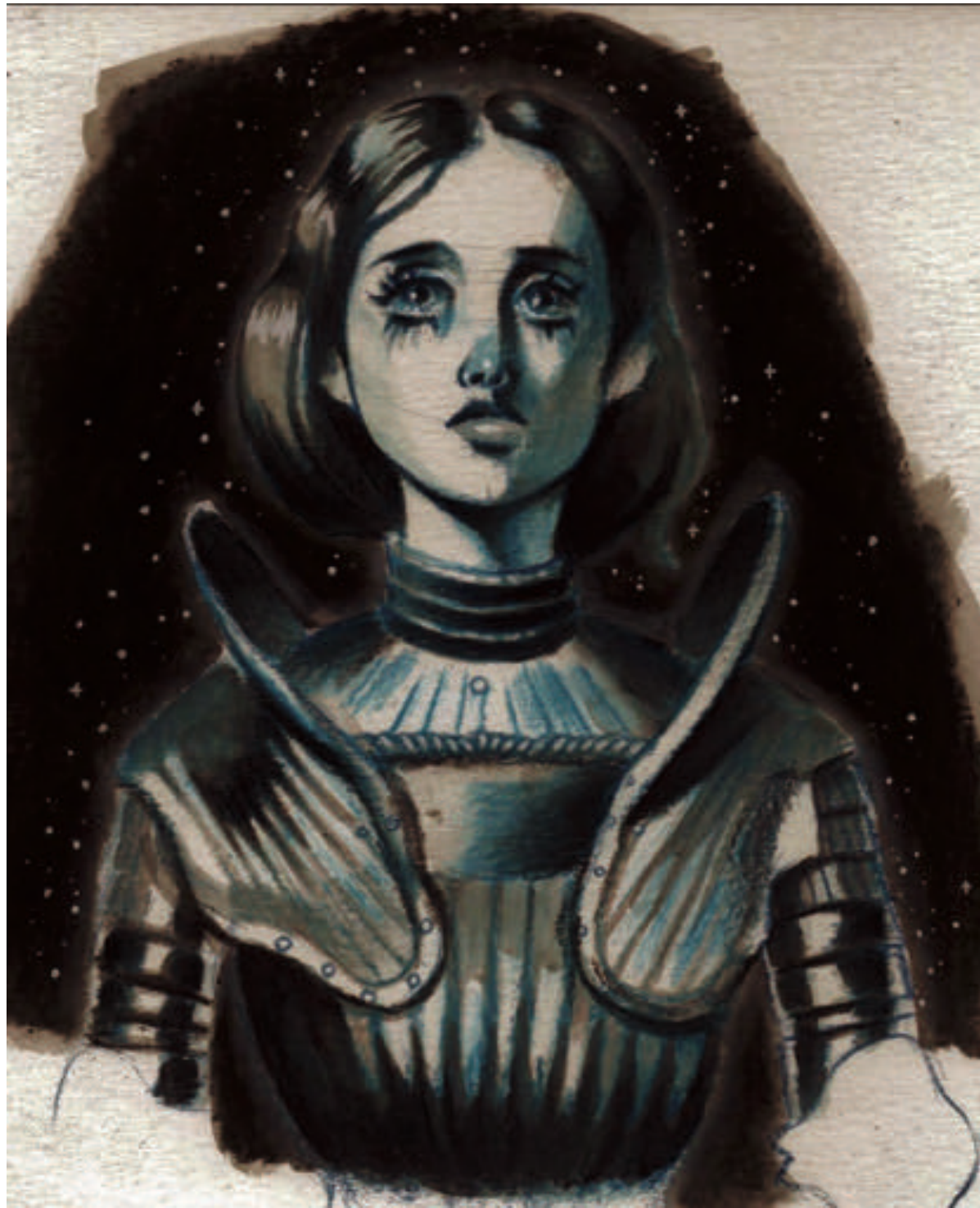


Sitting here in silence, clicking away on the computer keys, I pause for profound rumination. I am blessed to have known this fascinating woman and to have been her great granddaughter. I carry her spirit with me in my heart every day. I can still hear her kind reassuring words. These precious moments with Ma Opie have, in part, molded me into the woman I am today. She gave me the courage to return to college at the age of thirty-nine. I know she is looking down on me from heaven, full of pride. There is no mountain too high, and that, I will always remember.



Joan of Arc

Annabelle Pullen | Charcoal | 5" x 6" | East Campus



I'm Fine

Tyler Tyrell | Fiction | West Campus

I'm sitting in the living room with my family.

My mom's sitting across from me sobbing her eyes out, clutching onto a piece of paper as if it's her last breath.

My dad sits adjacent to her, reclined into "his" chair, fidgeting with his thumbs as if he's signaling his chair through Morse code to engulf him at any second and allow him to disappear from this moment altogether.

Mom's been acting weirdly calm throughout the morning asking me questions about my day, something she typically never does.

"How is your day going, Sweetie?"

"Did you eat today?"

"Do you want to go out with me and your dad tonight?"

"It's fine—no, but I'm fine," I said. "I'm fine, Mom."

The whole morning, she let me lie to her face.

She said nothing, which was surprising, considering back when I was a kid, I'd be beaten for just about any white lie.

But not this time!

Maybe because I'm too old?

Maybe because she was hoping for me to tell her, "You know, everything is not fine."

Maybe because being "fine" is subjective. What does it mean to be fine anyways?

I've been uncomfortable in my own skin for so long I guess I've gotten used to the feeling. Maybe being fine just means I've adapted.

So, I guess it's not a lie.

I mean I can no longer differentiate "the thoughts" from my own; I live in a body that continues to fight to live with a mind that has given up, but despite this, I can wear a smile on my face, so maybe I am fi-

"Why would you do this to us?" my mom cried out, breaking my train of thought.

I sat there silently, a calm demeanor...as if relieved all this weight had been lifted off my shoulder.

They found it.

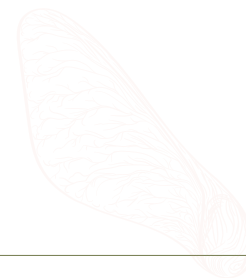
They found *the note*.

"Well, that's a selfish question to ask," I thought to myself.

As if it's my fault my own mind betrayed me. As if it's my fault I struggle to find the will to wake up, to brush my teeth, to shower...to love myself. It's my fault.

What your mother means to say is, "Why didn't you talk to us?"

I took a breath. "I don't know why you went through my things. It's just a stupid note," I said. "I'm fine."





Colophon.

The twenty-fifth annual edition of the Phoenix Art & Literary Magazine was designed using Apple Mac Pro computers. The software used in the production was Adobe InDesign, Illustrator and Photoshop Creative Cloud 2023.

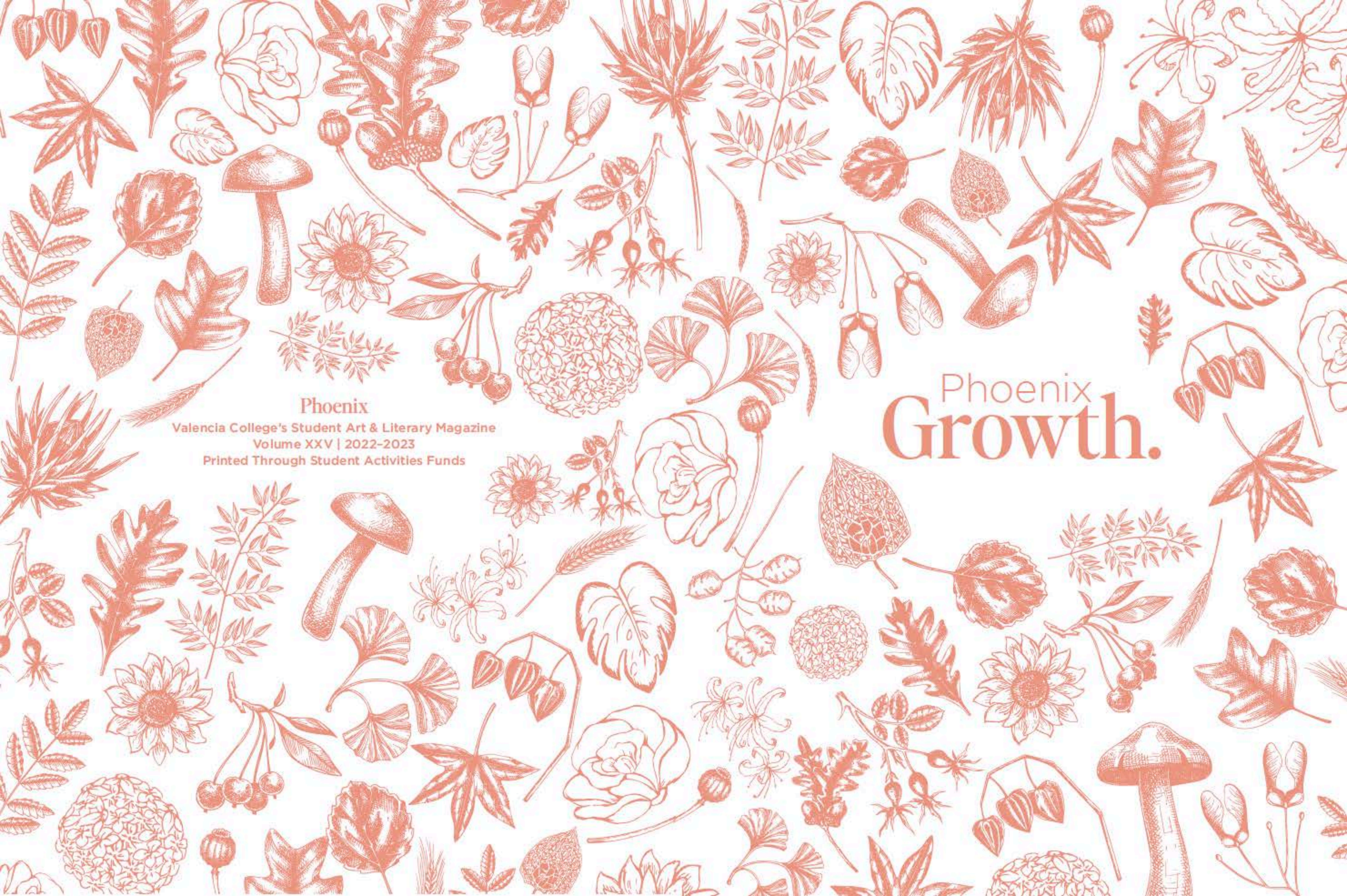
Volume XXV was printed by Baker Press of Orlando, Florida. The cover and inside pages were printed using four-color process inks using an off set lithography press — the cover on 100 lb. Mohawk Via Felt (FSC) in pure white, with a blind embossed artwork printed on a letterpress, and the inside pages on 80 lb. Gloss Text, white stock, with a flood matte aqueous coating.

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All content within, as well as the book itself, was created by and for Valencia College students.

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