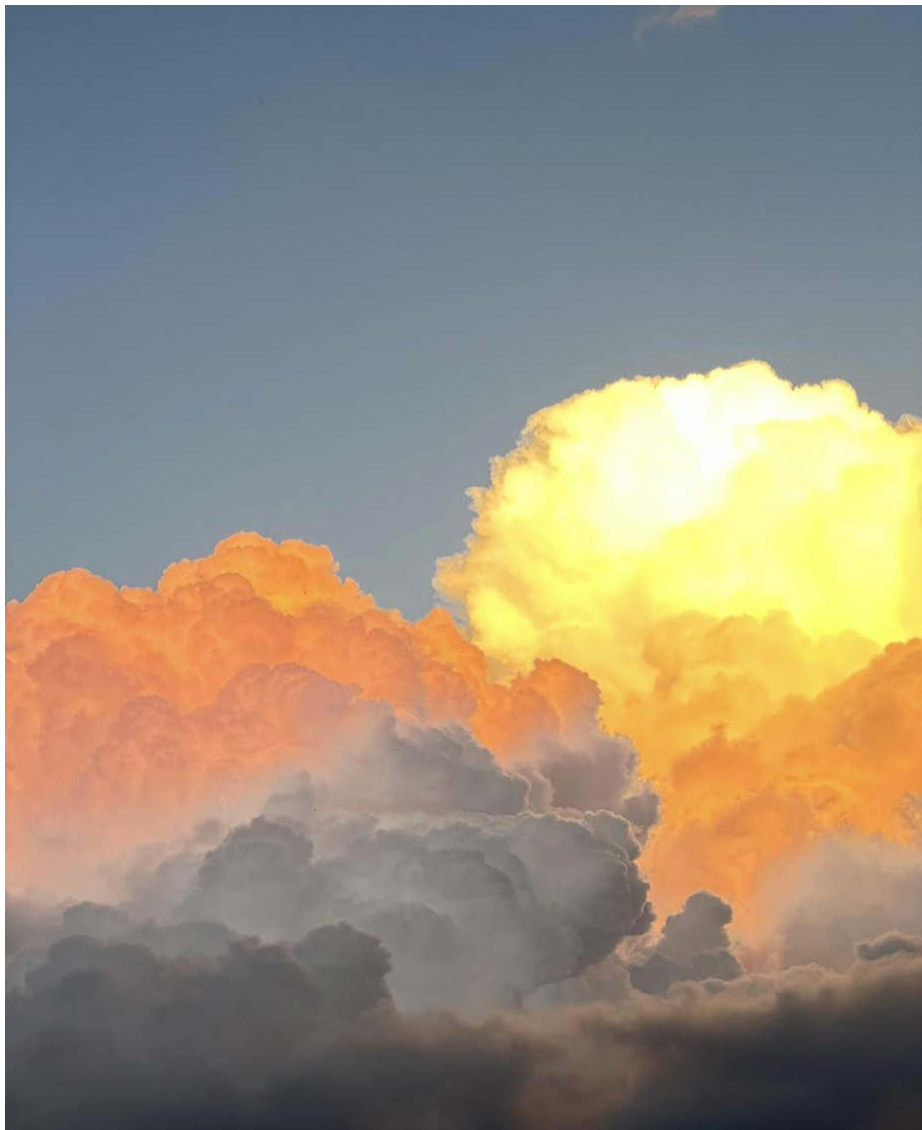


# ORPHEUS

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of  
Lindsey Wilson University



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# **Orpheus**

Spring 2026

Volume XXVII No. 1

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## Spring 2026



The Lyre of Orpheus Place Among the Stars  
Drawing by Eduard von Engerth (1818-1897)

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All submissions to Orpheus must be typed and must contain the following information: name, phone number, local address, class, major, and hometown of the writer/artist. All artwork and photographs should be submitted in camera-ready black and white. Editorial and other staff positions are open to any current Lindsey Wilson University student based upon experience or interest.

The ideas and views expressed in Orpheus are solely those of the writer/artist and do not necessarily reflect the ideas and views of the editorial staff or those of Lindsey Wilson University.

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Front Cover Image, “Gradations” by Jaiden Farley

Back Cover Image, “Nostalgia #1: Affrilachian Bros” by Paul-Anthony Jones

## Preface

From the Faculty and Student Editors

... I believe

Eurydice is actually the poet, not Orpheus. Her muse  
Has his back to her with his ear bent to his own heart.  
As if what you learn making love to yourself matters  
More than what you learn when loving someone else.

— “American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin”

*American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin*, by Terrance Hayes

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet.” Much like how Juliet declared the preceding to her beloved, an institutional changeover took place in the past year with LWC becoming Lindsey Wilson University, but *Orpheus* remains as it did before with this, its twenty-seventh annual installment. This year’s version of the journal features more than two-dozen student contributors whose prose, poetry, photography, and artwork span every tier of degree level: undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral. And just as these students comprise an array of academic programs and educational levels, their contributions are as similarly varied with creative pieces speaking to the political, the familial, the romantic, the nostalgic, the macabre, and much more. We invite you now to immerse yourself within the following pages of *Orpheus*, so please enjoy.

## **Raised by the Streets**

Sarah Abonyo

### **My dream.**

In my prime  
I wandered in a life unplanned  
Like a lily sprouts in a field of thorns  
Places I never belonged, but I roam for food  
An African kid dressed in rags, moved bare feet  
For all that mattered was to wrap and show up.

I lived for today as tomorrow wasn't promised  
Fed on street crumbs whose origin was unknown?  
"The world has no mercy for the poor",  
This I said to my pessimistic self  
As I stared at the wealthy in the pools

With nobody to turn to, all I had with me was my bag of hope and dreams  
My life, you could call the streets of South Africa if you may  
During the times of apartheid  
When all lived for was today as the next day was not in sight  
So, all had to conceal their plight  
And appreciate the day at hand.

But somehow, I knew that my future was great.  
The "how" part, however, was not mine to know but create  
I consumed whatever I got my hands on  
And acted as though my life was the easiest under the sun.

Survival was the ultimate goal.  
I just had nothing to lose but sorry,  
Nothing to give but a smile, nothing to do but dream  
Dreams, just dreams

The dreams that I live today.  
What's a life without dreams?  
That, I cannot tell, but all I know  
My purpose lay in the dreams I bore  
My dream was the product from the equation I had to solve.

## **Between the Clipboard and the Heartbeat**

Zanda Boggs

I straddle two worlds,  
Personal and Professional,  
one with clean lines,  
one a confessional.

One world calls me Counselor and Professor,  
like my name is a license,  
my pulse needs a measure.

I speak in outcomes,  
progress, and plans,  
like pain only matters  
if it fits in a span.

But in the other world—  
the personal me—  
I am not a theory,  
I am memory.  
I am bloodline and bruises,  
grief that won't leave,  
a mother with four hearts  
outside of me.

I'm bedtime and lunches,  
permission slip stress,  
"I'm hungry," "She touched me,"  
"I can't sleep," "I'm a mess."

Sometimes I clock out,  
but the work clocks in,  
and the therapist voice  
starts talking to my skin.

Professional me says,  
"Breathe, regulate."  
Personal me says,  
"I've been strong too long,  
I'm not okay."

Professional me says,  
"Set boundaries, don't bend."

Personal me says,  
“I just want someone  
to hold me again.”

I can name every pattern,  
trace trauma’s roots,  
then fall into old ones  
in yesterday’s shoes.

They love a healer  
until she bleeds.  
They love a strong woman  
until she needs.

They want your magic,  
not your mess,  
your medicine,  
but not your sadness.

They clap for your wins  
but won’t hold your weight,  
won’t sit in the dark  
while you sit and shake.

So I split myself clean  
like a file on a drive:  
Professional tab,  
Personal alive.

My personal life  
is not in the way.  
It’s the forge.  
It’s the fire.  
It’s how I learned to stay.

It’s the reason my empathy  
has muscle and bone,  
why my voice can hold others  
without cracking my own.

Allowed to be professional,  
personal too,  
a lighthouse for others  
still lost in my own blue.

Even lighthouses need rest,  
need oil, need care,  
need storms to remind them  
they're alive in the air.

So don't confuse my calm  
for a painless life,  
don't mistake my strength  
for the absence of strife.

I straddle two worlds,  
and I'm done with the lie  
that I have to be perfect  
just to justify.

And baby, I'm learning,  
day by day, by desire,  
how to shine like a sun  
without setting myself on fire.

## Licorice Milk

Morgan Bryant

The inky-black strands of hair poked out of the drain holes and twitched when the water splattered the china-white porcelain below. Her toe touched the longest strand, about the size of an unsharpened pencil, the kind that grade school children grip until their knuckles turn white, and it clenched both from her little piggy stroking it and from the assaulting water above. She had tried every trick in the book to stop the strands from poking through: Drano, which only seemed to cause the small holes to froth and curdle and the hair to twitch, a metal clothes hanger, which only seemed to churn the hair up, and a fat plumber, who simply said her pipes were fine.

"Disgusting," she said, watching the suds of her own body begin to run down her belly and thighs, meeting the strands with the bubbles that now contained the smell and essence of her own oils. "You're disgusting."

She would often peek into the bathroom whenever she walked to her bedroom, but soon came a noise, a crying noise. This, the crying, was a new phenomenon. She had been dealing with this for the past five (or was it four?) weeks or so, seeing the strands in her bathtub grow from little buds that poked out of the holes, to thick, curling, and oily lengths that made their presence known every time she looked down at her body in the shower. The cry was less of a cry, more than a shriek, and definitely not a moan. It sounded like someone was rubbing a chalkboard with a knife in the other room, scraping it at just the right angle so that it would make someone's teeth clench to the point of pain. She rose, slowly tiptoeing to the bathroom and poked her head inside, her own dark hair cutting her face from view to only expose a single eye, and when she looked in, the sound ceased. She opened the door more, and looked down at the tub, and saw a slight pool of oil form around the drain hole cover, with the black tendrils having grown slightly and twitched.

"You're disgusting. Shut up."

The drain said nothing.

Her friend came by. They had planned to go out drinking, but the noises of shrieking and crying exhausted her to a point of nausea and sobriety. So now they sit here, across from one another on the couch, with nothing but a pitcher of iced, red raspberry leaf tea sweating between the two women. It had soured from sitting out too long.

"I don't hear it," the friend mumbled. She knew that her friend wouldn't, but she could hear the drain making its noise in the bathroom. The drain cried.

"You and the plumber both."

"Your pipes are clean, the house is new. It's barely 20 years old."

"I know."

"Did you use a clothes hanger on it? That always works."

"I did."

"Made sure it's metal?"

"Yes."

"Did you make it drink Drano?"

"I did."

"Then you must be doing something wrong."

"I know."

She brought her friend into the bathroom to look down at the drain. The long licorice lengths have now expanded to be like grade school rulers, and in a couple of days may rival the authoritative meter sticks. The friend leans down and pokes one of the tendrils of hair, and it barely twitches and makes a pitiful *squelch* noise from the pressure of the digit against its thin girth.

"You said it makes noise? And that it moved? It looks like a bunch of hair to me." The friend huffs, pulling herself up and wiping the now oil-covered finger against her leg. It leaves a stain, black.

"It does," she said, all the while holding the cup of red raspberry leaf tea close against her chest, the glass sweating beads of condensation onto her much like the now soured pitcher had onto the table below. "I guess it doesn't wanna make noise now."

The strands, by the time the week had ended, had mutated and gestated past the prediction of meter sticks. They were now infecting the bottom of the bathtub like an interconnected mess of oak trees in a forest that felt more like one organism than individual beings making up an ecosystem. They were getting thick, and now whenever she stood in the shower and poked them with her toes or, like her friend, with her fingers, instead of the *squelch* or the high-pitched crying from days before, it would now screech and flop violently like an elephant's trunk slapping and splatting against an unruly child. The bottom of the tub, too, was now stained to the color of licorice, blackstrap molasses, and blackberries, coated by an oil that clung to the bottoms of her feet no matter how long she stood in the shower with it. It smelled sweet, like sugarwater boiling over on the stove that hummingbirds would harm each other for. She wondered if it tasted sour.

She squatted as the water ran down her long hair, spine, and legs, with her thighs and knees spread as she was hovering above the longest strand that went directly through the center of the bathtub and crept up to the wall behind her ever so slightly. Its thickness, unlike the others, had made one of the holes of the drain bulge, but not so much that the entire cover would come off. That would take force, a pushing force. She began to stroke the strand, watching it writhe both due to the water beginning to slowly fill the tub, and also from the feeling of her cold, feminine hand squeezing it. It groaned, and squeaked, and *squelched*, and cried.

"Disgusting. You're disgusting," she hissed, stroking it more and squeezing it harder in an attempt to understand it. *Squelch* it moaned. Her feet, beginning to be covered by the water and the thick oil that was oozing from the slivers of the drain not filled and spread open by the girth of the hair strands, slipped out from under her, her bare bottom landing on the floor of the tub that filled with oil and water and herself more. *Squelch* it moaned.

"Disgusting!" she squeezed the strand in her hand harder as she fell, tugging it as it slid through her palm, and gripping it more when she landed. The motion caused a large gush of oil to come up from the drain cover, and kept gushing until she quickly stood, letting go of the length, and turned off the water. *Squelch* it now cried and then moaned again. She stepped out of the bathroom, slipping from the black oil coating the soles of her feet. She, with her curves exposed to the air, prickling at the skin and causing goosepimples to form on the tops of her toes to the edges of her breasts, walked to her washing room and pulled out a rusted-over screwdriver from a junk drawer. It had motor oil on the tip from some old car from some old man from some old time ago.

The drain continued to moan, spurting the oil and gunk from the barely there edges of the holes, as the hair writhed. She came in, slipping again on the tile of the bathroom, a skid mark formed from both the oil on her feet and the oil that was slicked onto her body from her initial fall inside the tub. It followed her as she looked over the edge of the tub. She saw licorice lines of what she still thought was hair twitching and slapping about as it attempted to drain the oil and water from the once snow colored tub,

now looking more like the runoff in parking lots, the excess, the discarded, the unwanted. The thing in the drain was unwanted. She pressed the tip against the least filled of the tub's holes, inserting it slowly but then with some greater force. The drain made a noise akin to the first crying she had heard, the kind of not moan, not screech that made her eye twitch, especially as her own hair fell in front of her face as she was bent down inserting the screwdriver into the hole no greater than her pinky.

The drain cap, while initially apprehensive, eventually, with the force of her screwdriver inside of its smallest and most exposed hole, came off with a groan and a pop. It, with hair still thoroughly throughout its holes, clattered against the nearby tub interior, sounding more like a metal spoon and a china bowl clinking together than a drain cover and a tub's bottom. It gushes black. She grabbed the base of the now exposed drain cap, still unable to see inside, and began to slide the cap backwards, herself scooting on her rear and sliding against the lengths of hair from the drain still writhing around in the tub with her. As she pulled, oil began to be milked as if with each tug to fully remove the drain cap, she was milking the udders of this mass, tapping its oil preserves and coating her body in the sweet-smelling oil. She again wondered if it tasted sour.

The last bit of the drain cap came off the largest, thickest black strand with a satisfying tug. She remained on her knees on the other side of the tub, facing the direction the hair was going after following the path off, as the long, reaching rods of blackstrap molasses-colored tendril seemed to be twitching only slightly, as they had in the first few days. The days when she fed it Drano. The days when she stuck a metal hanger down it. The day the plumber, fat with a belly that looked like he should have been a she, said her pipes were fine. That's when she heard the *gurgle*. That's when she heard the soft *glug*. That's when she heard the *squelch* screeching scream again. This time, it was sustained, like a piano cord with an upset hammer in its stomach.

She turned, slowly, her knees twisting around the oil and threads of hair that were now faintly twitching in the soiled tub. She began to crawl on them with her hands sinking into the oil still coating the bottom, until her face met the drain. The open drain. At first, she saw the teeth, grimed over and blackened at the base. Then the flesh, grey and purple and pink and all the colors of a school yard bruise. The eyes, dark black beads encased in throbbing sinew that lay in a glob in the fetal position in the drain. Some of the teeth jutted out of the meat, pulsing as it screamed, the long, thick black strands, similar to her own blackberry hair, connected at the uppermost base of the tendon pile sitting in her drain. Under its skin, it had veins that looked like they had already burst, lying underneath the papery veil of its epidermis, and all she could do was look at it as it screamed and pulsed.

"Disgusting."

She poked at it with her finger, the nail bed covered in its oil.

"You're disgusting."

It had one of its mouths suckle on the finger, begging for milk and only getting sweet-smelling oil. It must have tasted sour.

"I'm disgusting."

It gagged on the oil and the finger, the tendrils of hair beginning to thrash violently, slapping against her thighs and the tub and all things once pure and porcelain and now stained and blackened. She kept her finger there as it coughed and gagged and slurped and writhed. She pressed it firmer, harder, as it kept gagging. Gulping. Maybe it tastes sweet. That's when, with one hard thrust down the thing's gullet, the gagging stopped, and the licorice strands slammed down and writhed for the last time. The feeling of the mouth on her finger ceased with one final pathetic screech, gulp, and whimper.

"Disgusting."

## **I Am a Wo(man). Fe(male).**

Morgan Bryant

Human jelly inside the belly,  
grows and swells  
and makes a tiny  
cell.

Is this cell a woman?  
A man?  
Is it more apt to call it  
wo(man)?

The cell is destined to be somethin'.  
A firewo(man)?  
A policewo(man)?  
A chef?  
No wo(man) personifier there.

What if the  
cell  
is a ()?  
Not a wo or a man after it leaves the belly.  
A ().

Woah man,  
isn't that wrong?  
The human jelly  
is gonna be  
somethin'.

Of course, man,  
the human jelly will be a  
wo(man).  
I'm not tryin' to deny that.  
I know at conception  
the human jelly is a  
wo(man), or sometimes  
both.

But what I'm tryin' to say is what happens  
after  
it leaves  
the belly?

And it finally sees,  
that it isn't the jelly  
that made the person  
inside the belly.  
But what surrounds it once it leaves?  
I mean,  
the parentheses  
that surround the wo(man),  
and  
traps  
it from letting everyone  
see  
the true person  
it's meant to be,  
may be what we need to take a look and  
see.

I dunno what you're sayin' man.  
I don't either.  
I think I'm sayin' that  
I'm a wo(man). Fe(male).  
But not cause I was  
a cell  
made inside of a belly  
made of human jelly.  
But cause I know that I  
am  
and  
are a  
wo(man).  
And nobody can tell me what I  
am  
or  
aren't,  
after I leave that  
human belly.

## **Emerald Union**

Morgan Bryant

“You smell that? It got that sour smell, kinda like cucumbers. I hate cucumbers. Means it’s gonna rain, and rain hard.”

Janie looked up from her spot amid the grass, the emerald strands beneath her kissed her milk-toned legs and sand-speckled dress. They, and she, were covered in their morning dew, shadowed by the worn, moss-covered siding and roof of her near hollow home.

The gardener stared, sitting on his beast of a machine, the cutter growling to a halt as he stopped in front of her. It could swallow her up.

“You best run inside,” he started again, chewing on a toothpick as if he was a beaver gnawing on the last strands of a great redwood, “it ain’t good bein’ out in the weather with you being how you is.”

“How I is?” she stood, smoothing the length of dress and apron against her thighs, seeing the soft green splotches from her lying, flopping, playing amid the grass on her. Her palms felt sticky, like the grass was covered in a residue greater than the dew, and denser than the chlorophyll that brought its green vibrance. “How about you is? You still choppin’ up on my grass when you know it gonna rain. Ain’t good to do that to your clipper. And doin’ it on the side you never cut for that matter.”

He huffed, and Janie watched as he rode off somewhere beyond the house, swallowed by the size of the structure and the protruding, rotted-out rose bushes that scattered the sides. The gardener’s machine, as he sat atop it like a fattened-up jockey on the clipper’s back, snarled and bit the ground as it made its way toward the fields of budding corn and soy. The clipper’s mouth wouldn’t see a difference between them and the lowly grass it consumed.

He was right, the air did smell sour, almost pickled. It was as if someone was canning cucumbers, ripe before they fermented and transformed into something mouth-wateringly desirable. She liked it, but hated the smell of clipped grass.

The home, filled with nothing but worn-out, mothball-and-mildew-scented furniture that clashed with the delicious outside smell, felt as old as the greenery around it. It ached and moaned as Janie, often the only occupant, walked around with her bare feet gripping the planks as she walked from room to room. Her favorite perch was the one by the large, seat-to-ceiling window that looked out at the grass and fields of her land. The gardener hardly liked to chop there, seeing as the grass was consistently growing more slowly here than in other parts of the property.

“It sure is lovely,” she said, her eyes staring down at the preserved strands, “and it all for me.”

She had, for a while, a thought that crept into her mind when she stared at the grass in both the early morning and the late night. Whenever her eyes began to prickle, sweat from the dryness, she’d swear she saw the form of a man made of the colors of lime, peas, and olives. There were dots of yellow throughout, vibrant little dandelions, which colors roared amid the orchestra of greens. He was slightly fuzzed, like moss, too, but the edges of the fuzz were too prickly, too familiar a shape.

“Grass,” she’d whisper, staring at the outline. Yet, whenever she’d blink, it would go away, the form melting back into the lawn until her eyes had reached that level of dryness to allow him to return. She often would think what he, the grass man, would be like if he weren’t so finite. Would he braid her hair, the black strands reaching the small of her back, and insert little pieces of himself and vibrant golden flowers that also sprouted out in splotches on his body? Would he preserve her grass, that the gardener so mercilessly chewed and spat out with his clipper? She wondered, most importantly, did he like the smell of cucumbers, of rain, and the idea of her being in the rain with that smell?

Janie felt the drizzles on her skin as she stepped out into the evening air, beading and rolling down onto her bare feet, mixing with the grass kissing her toes. She tiptoed over to the shielded lawn, where she would see the grass man, and had a thought. Maybe he just needed an edge, though that was a bad choice of words for her to think, seeing as the clipper's edge would be the one thing to chew him up and spit him out. Maybe, rather, he needed a little help. She stood in front of her window, where she usually would expect to see herself, and knelt after bunching her dress up around her sides. The fabric was starting to become damp, but all she focused on was beginning to construct her man of grass.

She gripped and ripped the grass by the base, fat clumps filling her hands as she started at the legs, forming the arches of the feet, the knobs of the knees, and then the narrow, straddable hips. She situated herself upon them as she peppered throughout dandelions, half wilted from too much rain, as she began to knead and clump the stomach and sides. The arms, spindly and made of some of the looser, drier grass (despite the drizzle), were splayed, and if they could move, Janie knew they'd hug and squeeze her, massage the softness that made up her body. The chest was filled out and then the face, made out of the greenest grass she could find in the shadowed part of her lawn. She patted it gently, feeling her handiwork in the curves of the cheeks and the softness of the hairline.

"You so fine. You so nice. You so good." The grass man said nothing.

Feeling pleased with her handiwork, she rose, her feet between the armpits of her grass man. She blushed, realizing her position, and adjusted her dress with her hands, pressing the front to cover the underside of herself. She stood there for a while like that, staring down at him, his emerald self looking up at her. The rain kept going, as she soon went inside and perched herself in front of that window to watch him for the remainder of the evening. When the lightning struck, and she could see a flash of him lying there, she would hum with joy. He stayed even when she blinked her eyes.

The chomping, gnawing, and loud snarl of the clippers stirred her awake, and as she opened her eyes, she looked out and saw the gardener, glancing down at her handiwork, as he plowed over it. It chewed the upper half of the grass man by the time she came out.

"STOP!" she screamed, grabbing the arm of the gardener, who flicked her off him, narrowly missing her feet with his beast.

"The hell you doing! There's a clump of grass, lookin' ugly round here. Hardly cut round here should have known better."

"That isn't a clump! It's..." and as she looked down at the mess of grass, it no longer looked like a man, even though he had consumed her grass man's chest and left his delicately made legs. Would she admit to him that she made a man of grass? Someone to stare at? Someone she inserted little bits of herself into with each grip, squeeze, and pat? "You're getting too close to my rose bushes."

"Those things done been rotted," he said, "and you never want me touchin' them."

"I don't want you touchin' over here now get!"

The gardener looked at her for a second, looking at her face, splotched with grass still from the night before, and the way she smelled like the sour smell of rain.

"Don't be goin' out no more in the rain. And don't be playin' in the rain, it ain't good for ya, as you is." And with that, he went off, dragging parts of the grass carcass on his clippers' tires as he mowed into the distance.

It became a near-daily occurrence. Janie, who crept out to the side of the house, would rip the grass out of the ground and clump it into the shape of her man. The once immaculate lawn, clipped by the gardener, began to be bare from the ripping of Janie's hands, and the chomping of his clippers. It did not seem to matter to Janie, though, since the feeling of elation she felt looking at the emerald man, filled

with dandelions and a shape that would hold her, caress her, feel her if he could, was worth it all. And then it would be crushed as soon as she heard the roar of the monster the gardener rode.

"It ain't right," she said, sitting on her perch, "it's my lawn. My house. I told him to get and he ain't." But that is when she had an idea. As the night drew near, the sky melting from the blues of the day to the yellow, orange, red, and eventual purples of the night, she once more crept out. From the edge of the clouds, there were soft flashes of light forming with a gentle applause of thunder following. It smelled like cucumbers.

Janie gripped and ripped and grabbed and clumped the grass in her hands, tossing it and throwing it into a pile in front of her window perch. She plucked the dandelions, near rotted from the rain, and some partially fuzzed over into old cats that could have been blown away if she huffed hard enough. She didn't care how the yard looked, how the gardener would holler at her. As she soon had a pile that rivaled any other she had formed, reaching the top of her ankles, she lay down and began to lay the grass upon herself. She started with the feet, covering her soft, petite toes and heel with hefty clumps of grass. Her legs and thighs were built up with plenty of the excess grass, giving her thicker thighs that could carry a bride over any threshold. The stomach and chest was one of the toughest, since covering her breasts took a large amount of the grass to begin to look masculine. After having placed lines of grass in which she could slide her arms into once she was done, all she had left was her face. She grabbed one of the dandelions, the last of the vibrant ones that looked like gold in the middle of the worn-out green and put it between her teeth as she took the last of the grass and put it over her face. She gripped her eyes closed, knowing if she opened them, she would see the face of the man of grass looking back at her. It still smelled like cucumbers. She loves cucumbers.

The gardener had come around. He looked out at the dark sky, seeing how it was gonna rain and it was gonna mess up this lawn he meticulously cared for. He saw on the far-off side of the house the clumps of grass Janie had been messing with. All he saw was a mess, ripped up plants that had no purpose but for compost, but as he mowed over, he saw the clump was one of the biggest he's ever seen.

"Gotta get that done and over with before that rain comes," he said. His clipper, he named her Betsy by the way, hissed and chomped as he came closer, swallowing and spitting any of the grass in his path. Before he could really process anything as he passed over the large clump, with the pitifully scattered dandelions, a crack of thunder louder than any bullwhip, explosion, or nagging wife echoed throughout the entirety of the sky and lawn. "That was a loud one!" he shuddered, stopping his clippers and looking back at the lump. All he saw was more grass and some sort of water coming out, probably from the dampness of the grass clumped together. "Nasty ass grass clumps," he spat, spitting on the clump with a goober that nearly matched in color. And with that, he took his clipper back inside before any of that rain came down, it chewing excitedly still on the bit of clump it did pass. It smelled like cucumbers in the air; he hated them.

When the gardener came out of the house the next morning, a drizzle was still happening. He yawned until his jowls hurt, and while scratching his belly, wondered where his morning coffee was. He looked out at the side of the house where Janie often loved to perch and lie about. All he saw there was grass, chopped-up dandelions, and something new: poppy flowers.

"Ugly flowers. I'll rip 'em out later." With that, he went back inside.

## **Cheyenne**

Cole Burch

The sky over Cheyenne  
comes wide and honest,  
hanging above dust and grandstands  
and cowboys who yearn for glory.

Metal clanks in the chutes.  
A rider checks his rope  
like he's checking a promise.  
Eight seconds don't sound like much,  
but that's long enough  
to meet yourself.

The bull waits  
muscle stacked on muscle,  
a storm in hide.

Gate swings.  
Rope snaps tight.  
Every jump tells a story.

A cowboy's story is one of sweat and blood  
wrapped fingers, broken ribs,  
long drives and short prayers.

Sometimes he hits dirt.  
Sometimes he walks away nodding  
like he shook hands with thunder.

Win or lose, he tips his hat,  
thanks the bull,  
and moves on.

Cheyenne keeps the memories  
of hooves and dust  
and men who ride  
not because it's safe,  
but because it's who they are.

## Home Field Advantage

Cole Burch

I hop the fence,  
turf stretching wide beneath my cleats,  
a field empty but alive,  
sunlight bouncing off the green like it remembers me.

I lace up,  
not for a game, not for a drill  
this is therapy,  
each sprint, each cut,  
a clearing of the noise inside my head.

The stands watch silently,  
the goalposts reach out,  
and for a few stolen hours,  
I am whoever I want to be,  
fast, unbroken, free.

The wind hums through the stadium lights,  
the ball rests heavy and expectant,  
and the field whispers,  
“You belong here.”

## **Almost, Famously Yours**

Lilly Campbell

You were never mine to begin with.  
We spent a year together becoming something great.  
Even if we did not belong, I was yours, and you mine.  
Everyone but us noticed, and yet it was perfect.  
A year of bliss filled with innocent yearning.

That year has long passed; now I have an empty space within.  
A space you filled with no comparison.  
I see you still, only on a rare occasion.  
But, when I do, all I see is a ghost of us.  
Now it's just two strangers passing with no words.

Why, I wonder?  
What changed besides you leaving the city we met in?  
Everything is still the same, so why aren't you here?  
I suppose I will always be your affair,  
the one that never happened.

## A Woman's Experience

Lilly Campbell

Back to the hotel after a long day of work. A brisk workout and relaxation is calling my name. I make my way through the lobby and down to the middle courtyard. The outdoor pool and hot tub under the stars seem so nice. The hot tub is tucked away in the left corner, directly looking into the workout room. *Funny, I felt like someone was watching me when I was working out.* It's relaxing by myself, eyes closed and floating, but I hear heavy footsteps approaching. I look to see that there is a medium-sized man approaching me. I take note of his size and height, not because he was attractive, but his energy was frightening. I grab my phone, texting my aunt that I work with, "I need you to come to the hot tub, I'm scared". I know it will take a couple of minutes for her to see, so I play it safe, he asks a question, and I will give the bare minimum. *I think that's the safest way out of this situation.* He asked me, "What are you doing here in Vegas?" Easy enough, "I'm working at a car event." He pries for more information, "Where, when, does it cost any money?" Basic information, light conversation would be okay. I ask what he is doing, and he claims he is just on vacation. I try to talk about sports, and we move on. A slight sigh of relief since I don't have to share personal information anymore. He asks if I am an athlete, "yes", I say, "not very good though." *If I lie, he won't ask more, right?*

"I was watching you work out earlier. I couldn't help but stare." My heart drops, and a pit in my stomach has formed. I nod my head, "Oh, haha, it was leg day." The adrenaline kicks in; *at least my dad taught me how to defend myself.* He's blocking the stairs. If I try to get out, I have to either turn my back to him or lift myself up on the ledge. Both are too slow, his legs are longer than mine. He starts to circle to my left, and I go to the right just a bit slower. My aunt says she's coming. "I can't help but say how sexy you are. What room are you in?" *If I splash him first, will that help me?* "I'm not interested, I am engaged." Another lie, but it shows someone will look for me. Panic has filled my chest, my body and mind are screaming to run, try, at least to get away. *What if he just drowns me instead? Who would hear?* "I think this is getting a little weird." Maybe if I tell him directly, it will be fine. "Just let me get to know you and it won't". *Why can't he get the hint?* I look him up and down to see where I might be able to get a punch in. His legs aren't too close together; that's going to be my first spot to kick on my way out. *If he weren't so big, he wouldn't be scary, but he's almost double my size.* He covers the stairs again. It is like cat and mouse, only this cat will make sure I suffer under him.

My aunt walks in the courtyard. She sees my face. *I've never seen her look this scared. I never ask for help.* She yells my name, and it's like an angel has sung for me. My heart skipped a beat. *I am okay.* I rush to get out of the hot tub. I jump out, grab my phone, and start to walk too fast. I feel the adrenaline in my legs, and walking seems to slow. My left leg goes to step, and the ground is too wet. I unbelievably slip and fall on the fucking tiles. *Are you serious?* I jump up and sprint away, so much for relaxation.

## Fishing

Lilly Campbell



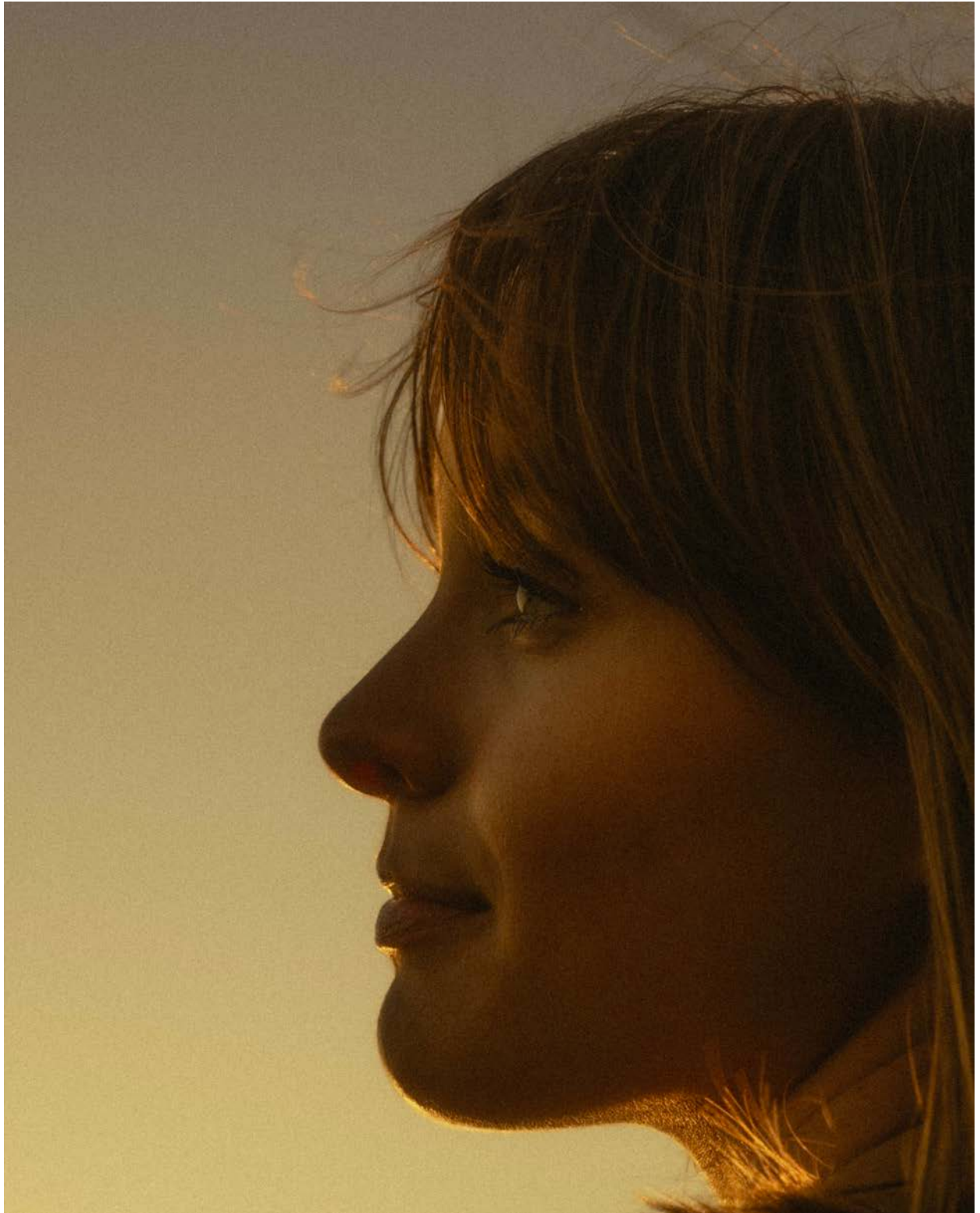
## Barn Owls

Gabrielle Crawford



## Fall

Jackson Dalton



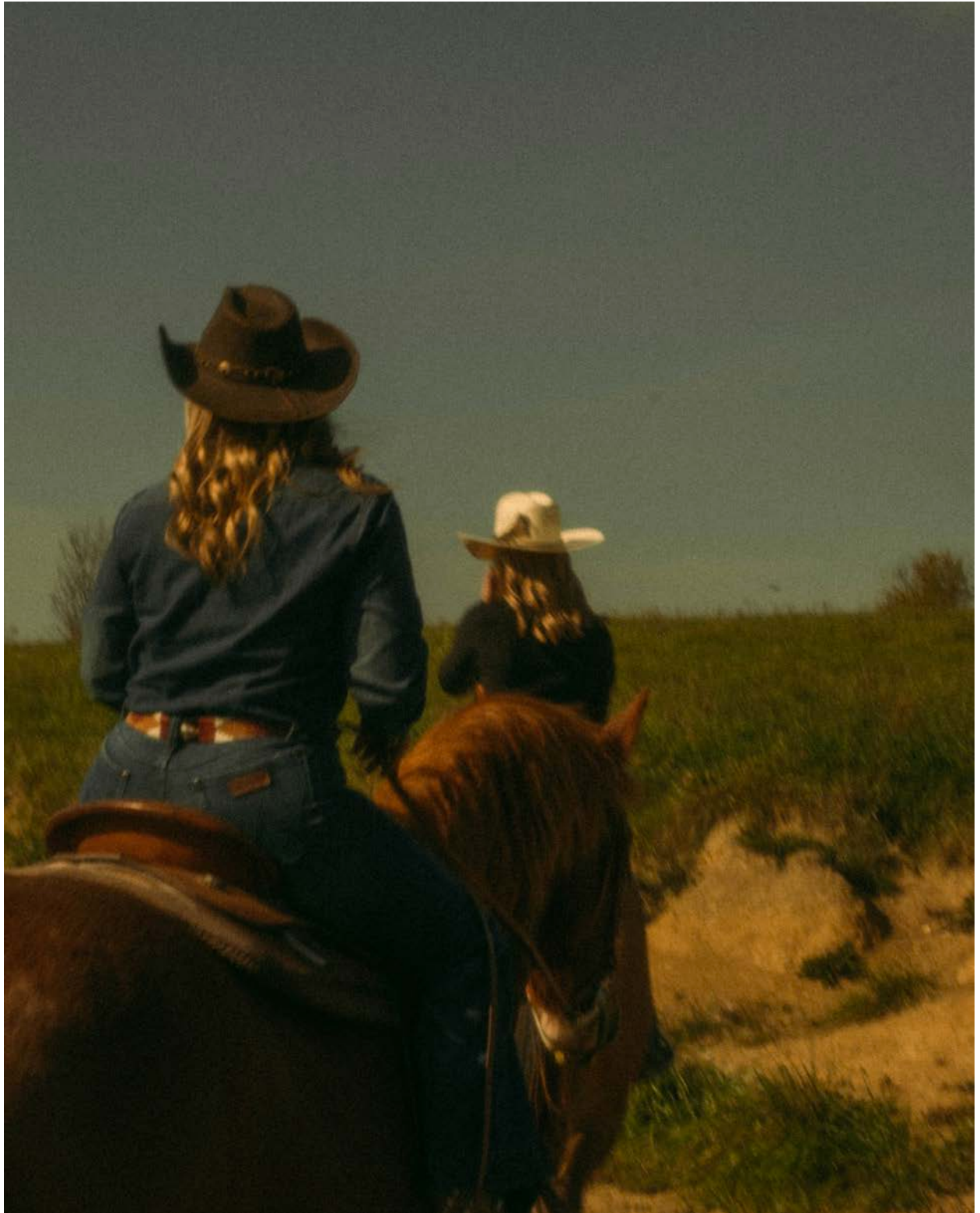
## **Diner Love**

Jackson Dalton



## Cowgirls

Jackson Dalton



## **Minneapolis et al.**

Anna Dangelmaier

Can you hear them?  
Little boys and little girls are screaming for their mothers,  
for their fathers.  
Latchkeys and Kool-Aid,  
a kindergarten TV dinner.  
Tuck yourself in.  
Can you hear them?

Can you see her?  
Two cars back, in the right lane,  
face drenched in lights, like a doe in late fall—  
red,  
blue,  
white, wide-eyed.  
An understudy thrown into opening night,  
an empty prayer: “Just how we rehearsed.”  
Can you see her?

Can you smell it?  
Sweat baked into plastic chairs,  
carbon steel gritted into ankles,  
the stench of skin melted into the pavement.  
I miss my wife—  
her hair,  
her perfume.  
Can you smell it?

Can you taste it?  
Knuckled flesh on your teeth,  
the tang of copper in your throat,  
white skin, face down on the asphalt,  
with a gun to your head.  
This is freedom.  
Can you taste it?

Can you feel it?  
A prick of guilt under your skin,  
the heat of the sun on your back.  
You stand frozen,  
the weight of your neighbors,  
your friends,

your people.

Their shoulders brush yours as they run, as they hide,  
as they cry.

A child's wail is imprinted behind your eyes;  
her mother's hand reaches out to you—  
a near miss.

Can you feel it?

Will you feel it?

Will you?

## **'Tis It Was a Morning Breeze**

Kevin Familia

'Tis it was a morning breeze.  
Where shadows cast down their grievance  
And the wind blows louder than life.  
Where I feel the room of emptiness  
The war of laziness consumes thee.

Oh, would I know the pressure of a steam engine?  
The same as life, it's pressure that blows like deception.  
On my foul, crippled body that is called delusion  
How it sounds, even the shadows that it casts lie.

Oh, I would go back to that morning breeze.  
Though the loud winds push me  
Back and forth to oblivion  
Like a siren, my heart constantly watches  
It aches, it is filled with abomination.

Though it would seem my heart is the enemy of everyone  
It springs forth lies, delusions that shiver my senses.  
The senses are diluted, and corruption is all that I see.  
Though that morning breeze I desperately need.

Now it is just a shadow form of a storm that is called damnation.  
I know this: the storm has already begun.  
Where now, I lay, in the midst of it.

## Over There Is a Place of Carnage

Kevin Familia

Over there is a place of carnage.  
That place where the trees fade.  
Where the spoils from previous rulers echo.  
That echoes like the thunderous noise of battle.

The victory's call out, but there is no response.  
The losses cry out, and praise comes from the kings of crimson.  
Those kings of crimson, how outspoken they are, like broken pieces!  
I felt on that day the darkness crawling from their faceless heads.  
Their unspeakable horrors are the horrendous places they've seen.

'Where are the wealths and the prosperities!'  
'Where are the conquests and times of old that walk inside our bodies!'  
They don't know they are blind, unspoken, and misery triumphs inside!  
Those kings of crimson cannot tell of any victories, even the thought of hope!  
People walk through them, they shout, 'Justify the ways of old!'  
But no one hears them through a mist, in a liable world.

I gazed upon them for a while, only over that place of carnage!  
I saw a few that had deep, dark faces pouring over their ruined robes.  
I yelled, exposing myself to the darkness of the misty ground.  
I became like one of the kings of crimson taken to the lies and silenced!  
Carnage, a place glorified, victory replaced by a jagged pound of distress!  
Where the only praise heard is of losing wars, coming from the dark ground.

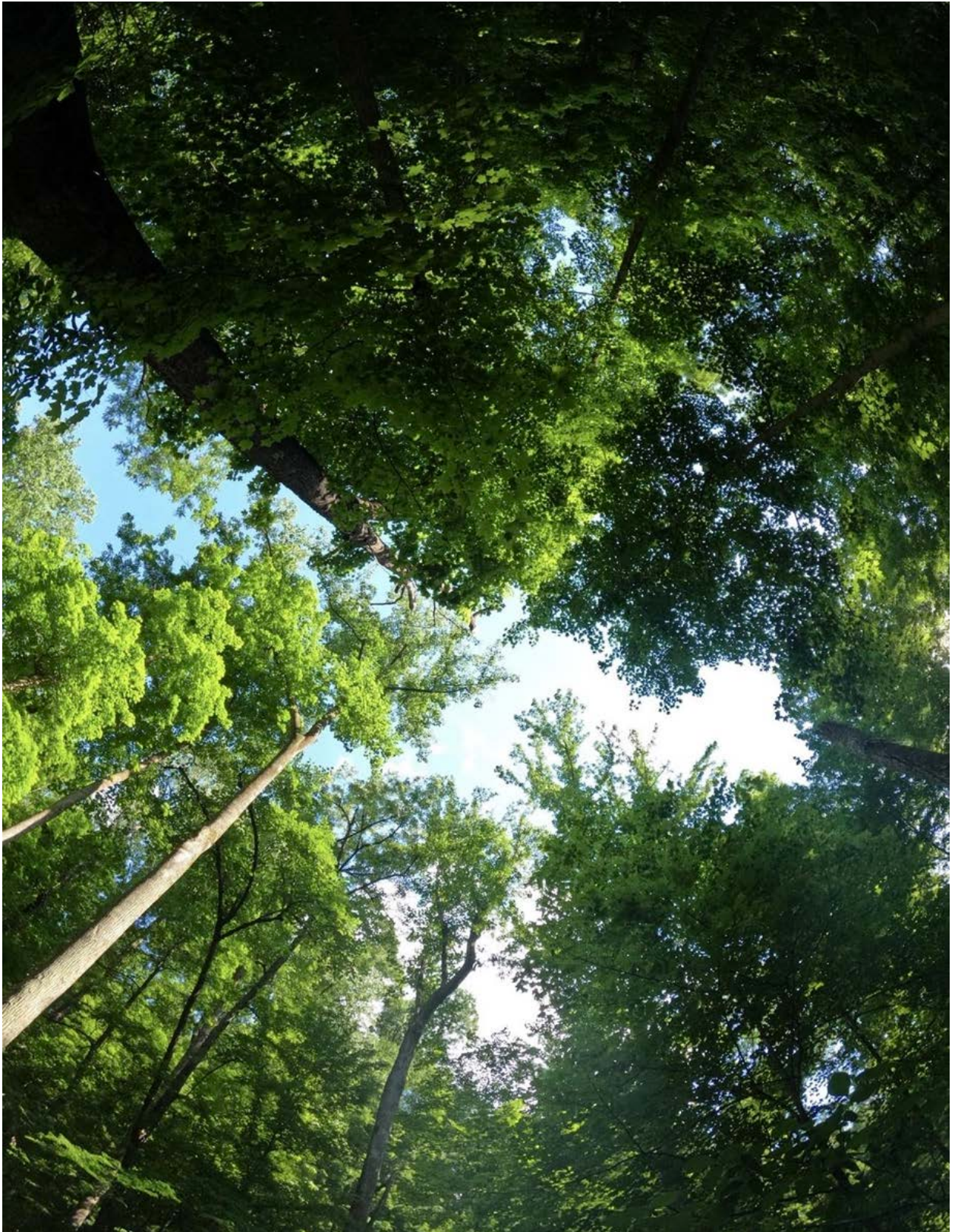
Like me, they speak with a voice, static, distorted, and rigged!  
Like me, they were crowned with crooked, deep, edged, dreaded spikes!  
Like me, they walked, shouting inside, unseen and unspoken by people!

Ask why, and our faces are mystified by them.  
They control the places full of broken shards of deceitful lies.  
Ask what these places are, and our faces are horrified by them.  
To what end are their motives, by restraining forcefully, truths?  
No one knows, not even those who have a face!

What control of power do they have over me?!  
No one knows, not even those who have a face!  
These crowns upon us dwindle on that place of carnage!  
That they may have no meaning upon them!

## The View from Below

Jaiden Farley



## Sunlight on Silo

Jaiden Farley



## **Red String Theory, but There's No One at the Other End**

Sydney Frazier



## Summertime

Sydney Frazier

In Hammond, Louisiana, growing up meant running across the street with my neighborhood friends to play in the biggest quarter-acre lot any of the local kids had ever seen. Walking out to the corner of East Park Ave. and Orange St., I was surrounded by familiar faces, hot pavement, a park two blocks away, and the brick church across the street. Even though annually, my friends and I would step on bees in the churchyard, I would always run barefoot, too stubborn to put my shoes on. I would go crying to my mother later, foot red and throbbing from an unfortunate sting. She would walk outside, look in the grass for a big, flat-leafed weed called plantain; then she would chew it up and stick it on my wound, and the pain would leave. I would be laughing with my friends outside, running around carefree, then pausing to wonder if the loud, booming crack we heard was a firework or a gunshot. I never thought of it as anything out of the ordinary: the sound of flying bullets as normal as the smell of magnolia blossoms. As I watched my father stack bricks outside my bedroom wall to keep me safe from stray shots, I felt, in the moment, more embarrassment than comfort; the red hue of the bricks did not match my childhood taste for purple walls and polka dots. Oftentimes, he would insist I sleep between him and my mother, because he said if a bullet were to fly through the house, it would hit him before it hit me.

In Columbia, Kentucky, where my family relocated to escape the pending doom of our economy collapsing, the summer was isolating at times. I had seas of grass to play in now (about 19 acres), but the company I lacked made everything fall short. My father thought that living by less people would be a good choice for the family. Maybe we wouldn't have to wonder what sounds the wind carried to us anymore. In Columbia, my family dropped me into an ocean of the unknown. Safety in isolation, I guess, but in reality, there were fewer neighbors to bother my father. Unfortunately, that did not account for the lady who became delusional about us. As her dog, a small creature with short hair and stubby legs, lay dying one day, she made up her mind that we, the villains in her insanity, set out to poison and kill her beloved pet. She spat awful things at members of my family as we walked down the road, calling anyone in town to tell them of our midnight dances to the devil. Now, when we heard the familiar crack of a gunshot, we knew it was her, killing yet another unaware animal that crossed from our land onto hers. We thought it would end there, but the deaths of our chickens, guineas, and rabbits didn't seem to satisfy her. As I walked with a child on my hip and more trailing behind me, along with my father, mother, and brother-in-law, we passed by her house. Suddenly, the loud and familiar sound of a gun being fired went off. We realized she had just shot at us while we were walking on the road, and we hurried back to our house, thankful none of us were injured. My brother-in-law recounted later watching our neighbor get put into the back of the police car, her small, frail body hitting the cop's chest as she went.

Sometimes you grow up with something constant, and moving doesn't get you away from what you were leaving behind.

# The Healing Quality of Artistic Creation

Briana Frey

The cold was a cutting force, piercing my bare palms as they pressed against the concrete hospice floor. I had been here for hours now— how many, I did not know. There were no words I could construe anymore to explain the way my heart had become pulverized in my chest, and this was a fate nearly crushing for an author such as myself— unacceptable even, but then again, who would I give those painful words to? At the ripe age of fourteen, none of my friends could exactly relate to watching their sister die. Of course, I would be bombarded with a thousand different cries of “you poor thing,” and “I’m so sorry,” but none of it would truly be able to console me.

Instead, I turned to perhaps the only person who understood my plight; my other sister, Sam. We were curled up beside each other on the freezing floor, a ridiculously small blanket spread over the two of us. It was almost reminiscent of when I was a small child— sleeping with my sisters under the family tree on Christmas Eve— but the sickeningly surreal events of the night were still suffocating me. The others had finally fallen asleep at nearly three in the morning— that was, besides us and my mother. Her soft voice had long since gone hoarse from singing to my ailed sister, but the sweetly broken sound still comforted my ears. My eyes, however, were sealed to the drawing pad in Sam’s lap. On it, soothing lines were being woven together, forming a marigold; our sister’s birth flower.

It was these two forms of art, composed respectively of voice and ink, that grounded me that night and helped me to seal away my tears. Unfortunately, I also sealed away my own art— words. It would take me nearly three years to uncover either of the two again, and I would find that they had become nearly inseparable.

Throughout my life, I have encountered numerous fellow authors, and from their perspectives I have read of just as many different versions of our world, but that encompasses only a small portion of the realm of art. Art is the most deeply moving and easily accessed form of self-expression, and one common thread that it gives us is its ability to share experiences that would otherwise go unmentioned, uniting us into a broader community. Regardless of the artist’s personal medium, whether it be words, dance, instruments, or the pen, a close examination will lead to a realization of the nature of the creator, or at least of their current state of mind. Few can create a poem beaming with joy if they have recently suffered the loss of their best friend. Many times, the soul of the creator becomes trapped in the creation, and it seems as if that piece of soul is suddenly allowed to become tangible. This, in my observation, leads to a sense of release for the artist and a sense of companionship for the person experiencing the work for the first, second, or perhaps even fifth time. In both outcomes, healing becomes a possibility— it should not come as a surprise then of the sheer amount of people that value such a kind of creation so deeply.

I began my free-fall into the world of creative writing when I was only ten, and it was as if I never put my pen down for four years after that. I was entirely entranced. Many of the world’s greatest minds seemed to have the same love as I did, from Shakespeare to Tolkien to Homer; and I filled my mind with each and every one of their works that I could find. I discovered that writing offered an efficient and eloquent way to express my concerns for our natural and political world, vent my emotions, and yet also pay homage to the intrinsic beauty hidden within reality. A new sort of wonder struck me as to if any creation is truly original, or if it is simply a retelling of what has already been made true in our world.

Due to this longstanding love of writing, it was incredibly shocking to my friends and family when I stopped. Perhaps it would have been to me also, if I had paused to consider the

ordeal. This loss of art ushered in a conflicting period of my adolescent life. I began to move in a whirlwind, never allowing myself a break—and many who also write could easily tell you that art is not found in the fast pace of the urban world. Instead, it is found in the silent moments of thought, in the bleakness of those hours that are both late night and early morning, in moments of self-exploration and vulnerability—the very things that I had become so terrified of. My friends had all grown up and long set down their pens also, and I convinced myself that leaving our worlds of fantasy was simply an aspect of the next phases of our lives, and suddenly we no longer spoke at all. Irreconcilable to the fast pace I had begun to hunger for, I also became drowned in my own inner world, harboring thoughts that I no longer had an outlet for.

To state it simply, art is painful. It is slow—and in order to achieve it in its truest form, it forces you to sit with it in a sort of meditation. Without this communion, you will never be able to effectively transpose your emotion into physical form, and you lose that opportunity to connect not only with yourself but also with others globally. On a wide scale, when an artist goes silent, not only do they deprive themselves of relief, but they could also be hiding away their own hand from another person that may be desperately reaching for the aforementioned connection.

The end of this avoidant period of my life only came when I was seventeen, with a glaringly simple question from my father—“why did you ever stop?” Yet again, I could not put to words the frustration this question brought to me. The truth was that I was afraid. I told myself that it was the pain I was afraid of, but in reality it was moving on. I was afraid of healing, because to me, it seemed not only a betrayal to my sister, but also to myself. I had begun to base my identity so feverishly on that one moment, and I believe that I somehow knew that to create would be to grow, and resulting would be an intrinsic quality of art—connection.

For myself, connection had certainly become another issue, as on a personal level, connection to others is a step towards healing. At the same time, however, it leaves a vulnerability to more pain in the future. Regardless of this, everyone communicates—some speak English, others Japanese, yet others still Chinese or Russian or any other language gracing our planet. When words are to be considered, there is truly no other aspect that so deeply connects us. Many people, such as the deaf or the mute, must communicate using sign language, accomplished via using hand signs which translate to corresponding spoken words. In addition to verbal words and physical signs, nearly all cultures throughout history have developed written languages. There is nothing so radicalizing and yet freeing and uniting as the widespread sharing of knowledge through books, letters, and the press. Since our beginnings, humans have needed to convey ideas and opinions, and we continue to learn to better articulate ourselves throughout all of our personal lives, whether consciously or subconsciously, and as we learn to articulate, our words become our own personal art forms. We attempt to be understood, and sometimes we are successful—and that is meant to be rewarding.

As to the reason behind my loss of voice, it took me several weeks of pondering my father’s question before I reached a conclusion. Connection to others was undoubtedly a fear now, and where I had once easily shared my works with friends, the thought had become a nauseating one. Worse than that, however, was the idea of connection to myself. My true emotions, my tears, were not aspects of myself that I wanted to explore, and I knew undoubtedly that allowing myself to write with that old creativity would bring all of them up to the surface. You see, I based my stories around a woman named Ymir, and since the beginnings of her tale taking shape in my mind, I had always planned that she would lose someone akin to a sister; it was only that I had never expected to share such an experience with her, but evidently it was unavoidable for the both of us.

But finally, it had all become unbearable. I had too many words inside of myself, I had seen too many events take place that required me to speak of them, and that buzzing within my fingertips had returned to my life. I began to write again, my penmanship became my apology— and that art of healing came back to me. I began to weave bits of myself into the characters I had brought to life in my mind and on the page. I gave my love of poetry to a thoughtful man named Hodr. I gave the version of myself that my friends see to the plucky teenager Camilla. Most important of all, however, I gave my hurting and aching to a lost little girl called Ymir, and as she grew up and healed, so did I.

I wrote the scene that had scared me for so long. Ymir's tears for her lost sister mirrored my own, and this creation process became cathartic for me. My own tears returned, and I began to think more about my mother's voice and how in our darkest moments, my sister had created a masterpiece of her own making. Neither my mother's songs nor my sister's drawing were perfect, but they perfectly encapsulated our very real pain. Art is unapologetically similar to our own lives, and just as heartbreaking— but perhaps that is what we truly need in order to heal.

Some may argue to leave the poetry to the poets. I argue that everyone is their own poet. I implore everyone to write whatever story will release them, craft whatever song will free them. Everyone has their own piece of creation to offer the world. I deeply believe that this kind of self-expression would bring the same kind of healing to others as it did to me, and I implore everyone I meet to explore themselves further through art. As for myself, a thousand different pieces of art have shaped me, and I have shaped my own— in the barest hopes that it may help another to shape theirs.

## ***The Fox and the Hound***

Briana Frey

I always thought I was the hound  
Until I found  
You  
So loyal and true  
But chained to the winter's rue  
So I became the fox  
Wild like the spring phlox  
I became we  
However I was free  
I roamed beyond our forest's trees  
But you stayed chained  
To the same winter's rain  
And when your master set their snare  
You were the one who fell to despair  
I was free  
I was beyond the trees  
You were chained  
You were restrained  
But no cage held you  
No fence impossible to squeeze through  
Neither of us had a leash  
Or collar  
You stayed behind by your own heart's bother  
So I ran further  
And you hated harder

## **The Boy Who Won't Cry Wolf**

Brandon Grider

The boy hides in his room all locked tight,  
Hoping the wolves won't come for him tonight.  
Despite how well he's barred himself in,  
The wolves find a way to enter again.

The wolves slink through from window to floor,  
And one questions the boy "Why lock the door?"  
The boy says nothing, no cry, no shout.  
"I wonder." Says one more, "What's that keep out?"

"I think he hoped to deny our meal."  
"What other reason would his door be sealed?"

The boy sinks down, head held in his hands.  
"What is wrong?" Asks a wolf, "You're among friends."  
The boy breaks, and cries soft silent tears,  
As the wolves regale him with all his fears.

"You're a failure, you'll never succeed."  
"It's no surprise there's nothing you've achieved."  
"You're unlovable, unoriginal."  
"Everyone thinks you're bleak, boring, and dull."

He cannot fight back, so he succumbs,  
To the wolves' fanged words till he's cold and numb.

He's finally fit to devour,  
They feast upon his strength and will power.  
They eat all his peace, and drain his health.  
They eat confidence, and his love of self.

They've a taste for creativity,  
And motivation, a delicacy.  
They eat their fill until they've swallowed,  
All he has within and left him hollowed.

One by one the wolves leave as they came,  
One more night in the cycle, just the same.

The boy lies empty and depleted,  
In his dark cell, tired and defeated.  
And stares at the four walls of his hell,  
Alone with these thoughts, too afraid to tell.

For none would believe these things he feels,  
They'd tell him of others whose pain is real.  
So as the sleepless hours pass by,  
He steels himself for another day of lies.

So his pain goes on from the world kept,  
And "Fine." He says when asked how he slept.

When he's asked an empty "How are you?"  
"Fine." Is a response he's grown quite used to.  
He spends "Fines" just to get through the day.  
Though it's not as if they care anyway.

He hides with no need of admission,  
When just an "I'm fine." quells all suspicion.  
So goes through his day, his pain unseen.  
And finds brief joy in his same "Fine" routine.

But then it comes, the end of the day.  
As he returns home, his faux smile fades.

He squandered the day, all those chances,  
To tell others of the wolves' advances.  
Not content with keeping confidence,  
With pen and paper he breaks his silence.

He writes of the wolves in a notebook,  
And hides it in a place no one will look.  
As the sun sets his gut starts to sink,  
He blocks off all doorways that he can think.

The boy hides in his room all locked tight,  
Hoping the wolves won't come for him tonight

## Doctor Fixit

Brandon Grider

All about the town a whisper had fluttered, and  
all of Main Street with people was cluttered. But  
why have all these people gathered around? I  
learned that Doctor Fixit had come to town.

But who was this Fixit to cause such a stir?  
I had to see for myself I had to learn.

He was tall and slim with a flawless clean face. He  
spoke eloquently and strong and moved with grace. He  
unloaded all his supplies from his cart and built his  
shop fast and was ready to start.

He sold potions and oils and pills and ointments.  
To ease all your woes and cure all your ailments.  
My interest grew, and I thought, how wonderful; I  
wanted to get close, to see this grand show, but I  
would not have if I knew what I now know.

What I saw then is still branded on my eyes: his potions  
were poisons, his cures were all lies. One girl came to  
him and asked to be pretty. His smile turned crooked,  
“Then let’s make you skinny!” “Head my advice and  
you’ll have men a plenty.”

“Eat only what’s in this jar.” Which was empty.

She walked away with the empty jar in hand, then a  
young man approached the cruel Doctor’s stand. He  
took a deep breath and solemnly confessed about how  
he felt drained, hollow, and depressed. Fixit said, “I know  
how to remove this doubt!” “Self-hate’s in your blood!  
Take this Blade, Cut it out!”

This sight made me rage, I cried at the doctor “You  
sell no cures! It’s only hate you offer!” He turned to  
me slowly, his smile, now disdain: “This boy wants me  
to leave you to ache and pain!” The crowd turned  
on me and they told me to leave. They made clear  
that in this doctor they believed.

From that day, by my people I've been spurned,  
So I packed up and left, never to return.

For a long time, I wandered as a wayward stray  
Fearing for my people, unsure of their fate.

And now I've a home in this place truly found  
But voices tell that a doctor has come to town.

## **A Place a Poet Could Die**

Brandon Grider

As I ascend the cobblestone path  
Walking among the weather epitaphs  
Blanketed in the cold gaze of crows  
My life is foreign to this house of bones  
This valley it seems that time has forgotten  
Masked by the fog that rolls down Benbulbin  
In the shadow of a church that's seen it all  
Through wars and through strife, still standing tall  
I come face to face with the cold eye of death  
A stone marks the place where a poet now rests  
This is the relic I've come here to find  
And as he asked of the horsemen I pass by

## 93.1 FM: A Whispered Eulogy

Kaleb Humble

This car has seen it all — a 2003 Nissan Altima, three generations of drivers: my grandmother, my sister, and me. My grandmother, my sister, and me. My grandmother took care of it, but it was neglected after my mom bought it for my sister. The car hardly got oil changes, had squealing brake pads, and smelled like Spam. First, my dad, then I, were always hard on my sister, especially when it came to the car. It was our way of saying, “You were given trash, now make magic out of it.” And so we did.

Driving through bluegrass country, I’d realize all things are a game of association. Election booths plastered red when you’d think blue was our color— bruised. Drug deals outside of the Monticello Motel; three kids scrunched up, listening to Akon on molded seats. Kids on Friday nights behind the football bleachers, Dollar Tree, and Kroger parking lots smoking rocks and fighting everyone and losing but beating themselves because it paid to look small. And they’re driving off to the lake *to kiss, to fuck, to be whole* because the blue waters were where waste went after the sun went down.

If anything, that car was a way to disappear, even if just for a split second. It just blended in when it barreled through town, how you can walk through a thrift store without being spoken to. Just a head nod— maybe an offer for something on your wrists or fingers. That’s the way it was here. If you weren’t at the local vape shop, McDonald’s drive-thru, the lake, or shooting up, you were trying to metamorphose and start over.

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“You didn’t take care of it. Look at what you left me.”

The car had been in the yard for the past six months, rusting away in the rain with flat tires on all four wheels, until my dad and I fixed it up. It was practically totaled with a warped axle and caved-in driver’s side fender, but it didn’t take long to get it back on the road. We’ve had all-nighters working on it, and I feel like I’ve finally started to understand him. We were sons first, shaped by an image we had no disposition in, trying to make amends.

Once we got it running, he taught me how to drive. We would creep slowly on the neighborhood street, and I eventually memorized the gears and the steering wheel’s crevices. It felt like a time capsule for a place I shouldn’t have been, which is why I liked it. It’s hard to describe the itch on my neck when I rest my head while driving, and the sweat and dirt on the headrest aren’t mine. Or the tinge on my sunbaked arms as they rest against the white exterior, re-establishing my skin’s shade. I feel like I’m stranded between beginning and end, and the road isn’t an invitation, but a whispered eulogy.

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My grandmother would drive my siblings and me around for various things from time to time. It was little stuff, like going to the doctor or the dentist, or just to get us out of the house. I would ride in the backseat and play with toys or pick around the floorboard to see if there was any loose change. We’d listen to 93.1 FM, the local country radio station. These drives were where I found some of my passion for music. I’d spill drinks and stain the floorboard singing songs like “Wagon Wheel”, but my grandmother wouldn’t get mad. “It’s just a car.” She’d say.

So, I treated it that way. The backseat was our playland where we could do as we pleased.

She kept a dreamcatcher, an old wheat penny hung up on the rear-view mirror. She would have various items she would yard-sale. Wicker chairs, pocketknives, stained glass tableware; whatever she and my grandpa could make a profit on.

Sometimes I got lucky and was able to take her finds home with me. I never knew the magic that would unfold with her behind the wheel. If I ever felt safe or at home, it was when I was with her in that car.

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My dad and I wrapped up working on the car tonight, and since I only had my permit, my mom had to ride with us because my dad's license was suspended for missing court dates and being on the run for trying to steal bedsheets from Walmart.

They got into an argument, something about money, or they were just arguing to argue. These were territorial squabbles over something that "belongs" to them, but I was nothing to be claimed. I'm sure he was high; he was always high. I sat there listening to the radio, zoning out, and then I heard a gun click in the backseat. He had it pointed at my mom's head. All I could do was look at the solid, yellow lines on the asphalt and beg and plead.

"Dad, please," I said repeatedly. I didn't want to hate him, but he was making it hard.

"You don't know when to shut your mouth, you bi—, this is all your fault." I turned my head back and saw the chamber eye-level, in range of taking us all out with one shot. I flinched and sped up.

I guess seeing me so torn up made him calm down, because I could see him reposition the gun in his pocket in my peripheral vision. He had been showing it off all day, talking about its features and how handy it was. I should've seen it coming. He even tried to sell it to me, but I didn't think anything of it. This was what I had come to expect.

We eventually dropped him off a block away from his home. He got out, shouting curses, spitting on the windshield. The darkness consumed his withered body with a ferocious gulp. It couldn't have gotten much uglier. I didn't see him for months after that.

This was one of the first times I had ever driven a car on the main road, and I didn't drive again until I could drive on my own. Driving with one of them meant it might happen again.

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While my sister still had the car, she would stay out late after work, coming home high or smelling like weed. It was one of the things I could count on. She usually left the car doors unlocked, and sometimes I would go out and see what I could find.

Occasionally, I would come across a roach or two, or a bowl that still had some residue left at the bottom. I liked smelling it. After she would smoke, it would leave a scent like gasoline that ignites in your brain; it had potency. The kind of potency that makes you forget you've moved three times this year involuntarily, instead, in the car, you're leading a Kentucky State tour.

I wondered if smoking made things easier, if the smoke bit and burned, not as a therapist, but as a victim. If her cupped hands shielded and extinguished a fire, and her spirit hotboxed this car permanently.

One day, I found a half-smoked joint lying in the center console. I didn't care what my sister thought, so I lit it up and puffed on it. It didn't take but a few hits, and I was riding a rollercoaster at the peak of its momentum, and the only way was up.

I threw up all over the car door. I didn't feel like cleaning it up, so I just left it. I thought, "My sister must hate herself to do this." And she must've hated the car too because the scent of vomit never quite disappeared. We didn't talk about it after that. Just a mutual understanding when we looked at each other. We were debris scattered along the sidewalks and gutters of these backroads—outliving everything but *fear* itself.

\*\*\*

Cars were made to be a second home. Throughout the day, it's one of the only places you can be alone.

Since I started working my new job at Walmart, I have been increasing my time in the car each day. When my breaks come, I rush out here. Not because I love it, but because it's been my one constant that will listen. It rarely saw me at my last job. I would come in there happy, getting onto the next destination. I didn't feel the need to linger here.

I'll come out and see stray carts pressed up against it and new dents on the body; associates in the parking lot day-drinking. I've never seen a happy soul in this desolate, wild-west of a parking lot. Bird shit smeared on the window; "Human" by The Killers on the parking lot speakers, and delivering an order to a car, just to hear the same song on their radio.

This job breaks people. People who once had aspirations of becoming a scientist or a teacher are now stuck running groceries out for someone who grew up down the street from them, and now they just have different expiration dates on their lives. Worse yet, a forgotten family member or friend shows up, and you have to pretend you have all of your pieces in place in your life.

You say, "I'm just saving up. The money's better here," but it's your exhaustion that says it all. It's the faint smell of menthol and resignation coating your words that lets them know you aren't just passing by, but you're here to stay.

There have been times when I come out here and contemplate driving as far away as possible. I've imagined wrapping this car around a tree. I've imagined how the memories layered and pressed into the upholstery and cracks in the body of this car would scatter, giving it a proper ending. But this wouldn't be the *right* burial place. Someone has to lay us down.

When you quit or get fired, you find yourself lingering longer. Because, amidst the fast-food wrappers and energy drinks, you've adapted to it. You no longer have the energy to collapse into your own thoughts. In this battle, you've learned the stillness of apathy.

You've become a foreigner inside your own flesh and blood; unable to forgive your forgiveness in becoming what you swore you'd never be.

\*\*\*

Now, I like to drive around campus, looking at people walking and imagining stories they would tell, and what they're thinking. Some people are easy to read, some aren't. Someone could have just gotten their heart broken or met a new lover. They could have lost their scholarship and moved out. They could have been laid off from their job and been looking for a place to crash. I wondered how they looked at me when I drove past and if they thought the same things.

They might have felt reassured of their own placement when it bounced over speed bumps; everyone stopped to look. The crooked bumper, sunken muffler that sounds like wind chimes, letting them know they're not alone.

I remember rust as being made new.

I remember us as one. A stampede swallowed by the mouth of unbecoming. Jumping. Plummeting. Rising to meet our successors.

I remember radio static reverberating on the corroded metal, guitars and banjos, their snapped strings, but nothing louder than the human voice, and continuing to run so that *what remained of us* wouldn't have to wander alone.

## Palimpsest

Kaleb Humble

*Our resistance to change is a gesture of love;  
a prayer to defeat time,  
and preserve a home as beautiful as ours.*

The square is at its brightest  
when the doughboy's  
fist rises up at the moon.  
A place to be laid to rest is all  
the commemoration he needs.  
Your bones marked Mainstreet  
before it had pavement,  
before the mayor gave you spotlights  
to prove you could still be stripped  
of all colors but grey and green.  
You taught us how to escape  
with borrowed dreams—  
we came back to help you remember;  
the bouquet of dead leaves  
and bottle caps were the closest  
to serenity we could hope for.  
Now they want to dig you up  
and finish your story.  
Forgetting was how we mended our wounds,  
but war has no end or beginning.  
If you read the plaque it would've told you,  
*I didn't die for you,  
I was a hollow tip  
soaring at the speed of sound,  
I flew so far my body was found on  
the landing strip  
of a place as small as my hands.  
Take me back where I was retrieved,  
and spell my name with  
the bloodshed of our wounds—  
We are the war.*

## Confessional

Kaleb Humble

There's nothing here but wood panels  
engraved with our initials:  
a striped Hollister polo with an arrow  
shot through the seagull's heart—  
praying we can still fly by morning.  
A cross on my neck I can't help but bite.  
Scarred lips and closeted kisses—  
the closest we'll come to Heaven.  
Boys I can't count with both hands  
wasted in the chapel, mouth wide open  
with crushed Adam's apples,  
straining to hear themselves speak.  
Bolted pews and tender bodies repenting.

## What the Body Knows

Erin Janovec

The body knows what the calendar forgets—  
how much was held this week.

Not just the crisis calls  
or the therapy sessions  
or the quiet tears of a mother masked as rage.

The body remembers  
the pause before a phone call,  
the breath before confrontation,  
the tightening of your jaw  
when someone responds with anything less than kindness.

It remembers  
the softness you showed to a boy  
who cannot yet be the man  
the world expects.

The patience you offered  
to a mother balancing recovery and responsibility  
without complaint.

The body carries it all—  
in the ache of your shoulders,  
the weight behind your eyes,  
the sigh that tries to make space  
for your own breath.

But love,  
you are allowed to put it down.

Not all of it is yours.  
Not forever.

Let the couch cradle you.  
Let the air cleanse you.  
Let the silence speak to you  
in a voice gentler than obligation.

You are not the answer to every problem.  
But you are a steady hand  
on the edge of the storm.

And today,  
you get to rest.

## **Empathy**

Leeshawn Johnson

“To have or to not have”

It is a rare commodity “to have”  
Or to see in this day and age  
In a world riddled with corruption,  
False narratives, Propaganda  
Steppingstones, And evil tendencies  
It is never at the forefront  
And seems to be dying  
Along with all the children  
Men and women alike

In a perfect world, “to have”  
The world would birth new life  
Without the fear of being  
a category or a statistic  
Crossing one’s mind would be  
Loving thy neighbor  
Not separation  
Ending generational curses  
Not influencing hate  
Realizing people are human  
And Not giving them a label  
Where we all celebrate life  
While dancing in the streets until we drop  
Because life is so good

Sadly, this is not that world  
We are “to not have”  
To not have  
When a mother dies just wanting  
to see the sun rise with her family again  
What did she do? Did she cooperate?  
To not have  
When families are being separated after seeking refuge in  
“the greatest country in the world”  
Send them back. We don’t have enough jobs.  
To not have  
When the streets are filled with blood  
And the cries of people who just want peace  
They were violent. They were chaotic

and needed to be put down.  
To not have

I pray we all see the day  
in a world  
When we are “to have”

## **What Is Love?**

Leeshawn Johnson

Love is...

Love is something that can be felt anywhere, but never touched

Love is something that can be shown

But never seen

Love can be spoken

But it cannot speak

Love can be lit like a fire

But also extinguish into smoke

Love can be built upon

But it can also be destroyed

Love can be a pretender

But it could also be so real that you lose sight of everything

What is your love?

Is it conditional?

Is it something you just... say?

Is it second-hand nature?

Does it have weight?

Is there only a certain number of people who can have this?

What can have your love?

Where does it come from?

Would you get furious over it?

Could you discriminate for it?

Would you frame someone for it?

Could you devalue someone for it?

Could you watch as a family is torn apart?

Would you put someone in a cage over it?

Would you deprive a child of food and water?

Would you see all this and not care?

Could you betray someone over it?

Would you kill for it?

Would you shoot someone for it?

Would you torture... for it?

Would you let someone be killed because of it?

**Would you die for it?**

All in the name... of love.

## The Sun Is Resting, But I'm Feeling Awake and Nostalgic

Paul-Anthony Jones



## Sunflower Study

Paul-Anthony Jones



## The Path Less Taken

Sadie Kemp



## The Peace of Ribbon Falls

Sadie Kemp



## Rim-to-Rim Journey

Sadie Kemp



# The Chameleon Who Forgot His First Color

Zachariah Lawson

## **The chameleon says he never meant to become so many things.**

He tells me this softly, almost apologetically, from a branch that isn't really a branch but more of an idea of safety, a place you perch on when you're not sure who you're supposed to be yet.

He says that blending in is not instinct, the way people think it is.

It's a discipline.

A craft.

A survival tactic learned long before he knew what he was learning. Back when the world wasn't asking him to be anything extraordinary, just quiet, just agreeable, just invisible enough to avoid the hunger of larger creatures with louder colors.

## **He says he used to believe that changing was a gift, a talent almost.**

But now he understands it was a lesson taught by shadows and expectations, a language he learned by watching which versions of himself the forest rewarded and which it punished.

Then he pauses, as if listening to something old and familiar lodged deep behind his eyes.

He says something he once felt whispered into the back of his skull:

'Every space speaks to you long before you open your mouth.'

The chameleon nods after saying this.

Not dramatically, not like he's performing wisdom, but like he's recognizing an ache he's carried for years.

He has lived these words.

His skin has memorized them.

They feel truer than anything he could paint across his body.

Realer than real.

He adjusts slightly on the branch-that-is-not-a-branch, and for a moment his color flickers, caught between who he is, who he was told to be, and who he might become if he ever stopped listening to the world's unspoken instructions

## **I. On Changing Colors**

The chameleon insists that color is not the point. Shape is not the point. Motion is not the point.

The point is: Someone is always watching.

He remembers the first time the forest asked him to be green. Not because green was peaceful, but because green was acceptable. Respectable. Quiet.

He didn't want to be quiet.

But silence, he learned, is a powerful discourse.

He practiced anyway.

And later, when he needed to be brown, he became brown. When he needed to be sun-gold, he shimmered. When he needed to be invisible, he disappeared entirely, leaving behind only the faintest outline where a body used to be.

He tells me it became hard to remember which color belonged to him first.

“Missing Shade”

I used to wear a color I can’t name.  
It tasted like warm rain  
and sounded like breath returning.

But the world said  
hue is a requirement,  
and I obeyed.

Now I switch skins so often  
I can’t tell if I am changing  
or dissolving.

## II. Lessons in Discourse

He lives in a forest.  
But the forest is also a schoolroom.  
And a church.  
And an office.  
And a kitchen.  
And a silence-filled hallway where his footsteps echo like requests for permission.

Every clearing feels like a different kind of room, and every room feels like a different test.

Each place speaks differently.  
Each place demands differently.  
Each place waits for him to inhale before telling him who he must be next.

“It’s not that I don’t have a voice,” he says, “it’s that every space auditions me for a new one.”  
He says it with a small laugh, the kind that tries to hide how exhausting the truth is.

The forest’s rules aren’t written anywhere, but he feels them in his bones. A  
place built from expectations no one remembers forming,  
where power doesn’t shout,  
it hums,  
a soft, constant vibration tuning his behavior before he even knows he’s  
changed.

The chameleon hears the hum everywhere:  
In the posture he must hold.  
In the tone he must use.  
In the quiet way his true thoughts stay pressed between his teeth,  
waiting for a room gentle enough to hear them.

Not imprisoned--just waiting.

He has learned fluency in a dozen discourses:  
reverent, polite, professional, masculine, agreeable, harmless  
the dialect of people who never want to be too much,  
the dialect of people who want to survive the room.

Sometimes he wonders whether discourse is just another word for camouflage

### III. The Problem with Blending In

The chameleon tells me he doesn't resent it. Not really. He has lived long enough to see the beauty in adaptation.

"Change", he says, "is its own kind of wisdom. Knowing when to shift, when to silence, when to step lightly; these are the quiet skills that keep a body from breaking."

But there are days he wishes he could stop editing himself.  
Days when he grows tired of rehearsing colors he never chose.  
Days when he wonders what his body would say if he ever let it speak first, without consulting the expectations wired into every branch-that-is-not-a-branch, every shadow, every waiting pair of eyes.

He tells me there's a difference between hiding and being unseen.  
One is a strategy. The other is loss.  
He's mastered the first. The second still stings.

He dreams of a place where he can be the wrong shade on purpose.  
Where he can stand out without feeling like an apology.  
Where contradictions aren't liabilities but little badges of freedom pinned to his chest. A place where he doesn't have to negotiate every inch of himself before stepping into the world.

He admits that adaptation has given him many things: safety, acceptance, a way to move gently through unpredictable spaces. But it has also taken something-- a small, glowing center he can feel dimming if he holds himself too tightly for too long.

"Pattern Recognition"  
Every room teaches me its grammar.  
I rearrange my heartbeat to fit.

I call it survival.  
They call it maturity.

Either way,  
My skin becomes an essay  
written in disappearing ink.

### IV. Maybe Change Isn't a Bad Thing

"Maybe change isn't a bad thing," the chameleon says, knowing he doesn't know if he's telling the truth. I ask him, "Why do you change so much?"

He pauses, his skin flickering through a spectrum he doesn't quite control. "I'm so scared that I'm going to become the wrong thing," he finally says.

He says it softly, like it's a confession he's practiced in the dark.

Change is scary, but change also brings comfort.  
Change means you don't have to settle.  
Change means the story isn't finished, even when you feel like you are.

All his life, the chameleon has been used to change.  
Moved from house to house, given new parents, new rules, new ceilings to sleep under. He learned early how to read a room, how to adjust, how to become whatever version of himself kept the world from falling apart.  
He never knew what stability felt like, only the tremble of packing boxes and unfamiliar hallways.

For him, change isn't just a habit. It's a muscle.  
One he's been working on since before he even had words for loss.

"The thing about change," he says, curling his tail around a thin  
Branch-that-is-not-a-branch,  
"Is that it comforts me like a warm blanket in the cold."

He says he doesn't always trust it, but he needs it.  
He says staying still feels too much like waiting for something to go wrong. He says motion keeps the fear from settling in his bones.

He looks down at his own hands-small, delicate, shifting, and says that maybe change isn't the enemy people make it out to be.  
Maybe it's a kind of hope.  
A quiet reminder that even if you've been remade a hundred times, you are still becoming.  
Still learning.  
Still allowed to outgrow every version of yourself that once felt like survival. And maybe that's why he changes so much: because change, for him, is the closest thing to home.

#### V. A Final Confession

The chameleon never admits he's telling his own story. He pretends it's hypothetical. A general reflection. A harmless allegory. The kind of thing anyone could relate to.

and maybe that's the point.  
because when he describes the fear of sticking out,  
Someone in the back of the room nods.  
and when he describes the labor of switching selves,  
Someone exhales like they've been recognized.  
and when he wonders whether he will ever find the courage to stop blending in, Someone's chest aches because they have wondered the same thing.

The chameleon isn't just one creature.  
He's whoever reads him.

"Color Returns"  
One day, I will choose a shade  
and stay.  
Not because the world allows it,  
but because I do.

And maybe that color will be loud.  
Unapologetic.  
Something close to truth.

If you see it,  
maybe you'll remember  
your first color too.

## VI. Ending Without Resolution

The chameleon climbs higher into the branches-that-are-not-branches. He moves slowly, deliberately, as if testing whether the world will hold his weight today. His body shifts color as the light changes, not because he's hiding now, but because he's learning himself in real time, watching the hues arrive, watching them leave, watching what stays no matter how much the world tilts around him.

Up here, the wind feels different.  
Up here, the leaves cast gentler shadows.  
Up here, he can almost imagine what it's like to exist without permission.

Sometimes I think he climbs just to see who he becomes at new heights.  
Sometimes I think he climbs because staying still feels too much like disappearing.  
Sometimes I wonder if the colors that flicker across his skin are revealing him or protecting him;  
if this shifting is a mask or a mirror.

And sometimes, though he never says it aloud, I wonder if the chameleon is someone I  
already know.

Someone who learned early how to read a room before entering it.  
Someone who has carried the weight of everyone else's expectations like a second spine.  
Someone who has spent years blending in so well that even he can't always find the outline of  
himself.

He says he isn't finished.  
He says none of us are.  
He says the forest will always speak,  
but we can speak back.

And maybe that's the only part of the story that matters.

## Turbulence

Zachariah Lawson

I felt turbulence once,  
and for a moment I forgot how to breathe.  
The cabin rattled like it knew something I didn't,  
like the air itself had decided to argue with gravity.

My hands tightened around the armrest,  
because when you're suspended miles above the ground  
there's nowhere to run,  
only the choice to trust or panic.

They tell you turbulence is normal,  
that it means the plane is still moving forward,  
that resistance doesn't mean failure,  
but that's hard to believe  
when your stomach drops before your faith does.

It reminded me I was still alive.  
Not in the loud, cinematic way people talk about living,  
but in the quiet realization  
that fear only shows up  
when something matters.

Like the world was trying to wake me.  
Not gently.  
More like shaking me by the shoulders,  
saying, pay attention,  
this is what motion feels like.

Because smooth skies don't teach you how to hold on.  
They don't teach you how to sit with uncertainty,  
how to trust a destination you can't see yet,  
how to believe that a shaking path  
can still be the right one.

Turbulence makes you question everything:  
the pilot, the path, your own decision to get on the plane.  
Just like life does  
when it refuses to stay steady  
for more than a moment.

But the plane doesn't turn around.  
It doesn't fall apart because the air gets rough.  
It keeps cutting forward,  
even when the ride is uncomfortable,  
even when the passengers are afraid.

And maybe that's the point.

That turbulence in life  
isn't a sign you're doing something wrong.  
It's proof you're in the air,  
proof you left the ground,  
proof you chose movement over safety.

I felt turbulence once,  
and instead of breaking me,  
it reminded me that  
I was still alive,  
still moving,  
still on my way somewhere.

## Unaskable

Zachariah Lawson

I ask myself these questions often.  
The questions they tell you not to think about.  
The ones they say lead to bad actions.

What if on that day I had pulled the trigger?  
Would I have silenced the noise around me?  
Would I be missed?

Would the world still carry on like I didn't exist?  
Would the pain go away,  
or would I be the reason for more pain?

Sometimes, I still hear the echoes  
of these questions in the dark, not as an urge,  
but as a memory that shaped me.

Because I didn't pull it.  
I stayed.  
And staying was the loudest thing I ever did.

Now, when the dark comes back,  
I remind myself:  
the noise isn't the end.

It's proof that I'm still here,  
breathing through the ache,  
learning that light doesn't always come easy,

but it always comes.

## Feel Again

McKenzie Melton

Relief

That's most of what I feel now.

It's been months, and finally,

I don't always think about you anymore.

Okay, who am I kidding?

Of course I think of you.

But not as much as I used to

And that's progress.

I've met someone new,

I can breathe normally again,

Finally, I was able to move past you.

Finally, I was able to let myself feel and move on.

Because now I want to feel.

I want to feel the wind,

Whether it be a winter wind that chills me to the bone,

Or a spring breeze that makes me feel at ease,

I want to feel it blow past me.

I want to feel the flowers and the grass between my toes,

Between my hands.

I want to feel the beating of my heart,

Along with every single breath my lungs take in and release back into the world.

I want to feel everything this life has to give.

Every piece of joy,

Every bit of fear,

Every scrap of sadness,

Every part of love, even the heartbreak that may accompany it.

I want to feel it all.

I let myself feel it all.

Even falling in love again for the first time after you,

Just like there will probably be someone after him too,

Because I want to be okay again.

I want to feel again.

And slowly, I am.

## A Letter to My Grandma

McKenzie Melton

It's days like today that I miss you just a little more. Days when someone compliments the necklace I never take off. The one your husband had handmade for you with your birthstones, that you talked about wanting me to have just days before you passed. The necklace that I feel like I can't breathe unless it's around my neck, ironically enough. Or days when someone compliments the matching silver ring around my finger that has your name engraved alongside your husband's, once again with matching birthstones. The ring that I feel the constant weight of when it's on my left ring finger. The finger that almost burns without the ring to keep it cool.

Days when I'm driving around, in what was your car, listening to songs I know you would've loved. When someone says anything about that red 2017 Mitsubishi Lancer, it feels wrong that I call it mine. Because it was yours first. It should be yours still. You lived a good, long life of course, but it could've been longer. It should've been longer.

I miss you every time I'm in choir and remember all of the concerts you had to miss. Especially when I now have to go up there and sing an arrangement of "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" which I sang countless times with you in your room.

I miss you every show I perform, unable to accept that you never got to see me in a musical. I was okay with it before, when everything was a little less formal and you were busy. I let the disappointment sit with the comfort that you would get to see me once I actually had a part. And then the week of auditions, after encouraging me from your hospital bed, you left me. Right before I got my first real role. That you didn't get to see.

I miss you with every essay I write because every line is a reminder of the last composition competition I left the house for when you told me that you knew I could do it. Although at the time, neither of us knew that you wouldn't be there to see me when I got that medal. At the next competition it hurt a little extra when I didn't place, feeling like I let you down. Even though I knew you'd be proud of me just for making it as far as I did, whether you admitted it aloud or not.

I miss you every time I remember my graduation. The joy of finally being done with high school and the plans to go on to better and bigger things in life, followed by the immediate realization that you weren't there. That you didn't get to see the end after being there for the beginning, since I had moved in with you at the start of high school. The realization that you will never get to see anything I accomplish, or any degree I get. That you will have never attended my graduation past kindergarten.

I miss you every time I walk into JCPenny or Belk, where you always took me school shopping. Even though I always hated those shopping trips, because every single one ended in a fight. Whether it was because of comments about my weight (mostly that I needed to lose some) or because you didn't like my taste in clothes and I didn't like yours. Although eventually you came to terms with the latter. Especially once Ross opened and we started going there instead.

We always argued, but as I got older we found a middle ground. Or I guess the better way to put it is I learned to keep my mouth shut, even when you tried to pick a fight. You always did love a good argument.

You weren't perfect, not in the slightest. You were rude, occasionally cruel, and sometimes I don't know why I miss you so much. But then I remember the early mornings and the conversations that occurred during sunrise with the news playing softly on the TV. I always cherished those conversations, even if most of them included me getting scolded for staying up until 6 A.M. Because they also included

all of the advice you gave me, the encouragement, and most of all the confidence to be myself (even if you did occasionally work to tear that down). I miss you on every birthday. The first was especially the hardest, because after 17 years you had been four months shy of watching me become an adult. To tell the truth, I didn't feel like celebrating on that April 25th. It was a beautiful day, and a Friday, which was always a reason to celebrate. But after everything I had endured in that year, I didn't feel like celebrating. When we all gathered around the same pink and teal confetti cake Dad got me every year, you weren't there to place and light the candles. Your voice wasn't one of the 4 singing, because now we were down to 3, without me being included.

I miss you on every Christmas. It felt wrong to celebrate the first one, knowing you had left us just two weeks before.

I miss you on every trip to Virginia. Although there's only been two since you passed. Dad and Grandpa no longer want to go without you. It's too hard, for all of us, to go see your family without you being there to see them yourself. Playing poker and hearing Roy get called a "Jackass" isn't the same when you're not there joining in. Especially since you used to be the first to resort to name-calling. Even winning a game of "Screw Your Neighbor" isn't right without you. Coming home 20-40 dollars richer is meaningless without you there teasing me for it. Especially since it was your money I always used to deal into the game in the first place. I'd give every single winning I've ever earned in that house over the past 10 years if it'd mean I could lose one more game to you.

I miss you every weekend I come home from college. When I come home to a house that you're no longer in. A house that has changed so much that almost every sign of you is missing. A house that without you feels so empty. The people inside of it feel empty. Because I know Grandpa misses you, every day. Every day I have to look at him and every time see how he lost the light in his eyes, something in me breaks. But slowly, that light has been coming back. But he's still not the same. None of us are. Your memory lingers over us, every moment of every day.

I still remember the last thing I ever got to say to you. It haunts me every day. A text jokingly saying, "You alive?" because Grandpa had left us home alone and left me with the job of making sure you were okay. But you had just gotten back from the hospital, and I had just gotten diagnosed with Strep and didn't want to risk making you any worse. So, I refused to even walk on the same side of the house as you, but I still wanted to check in. So I sent that text. The text that you never replied to, but read, and showed to Grandpa. The text that ended up being the last communication you ever got from me. I didn't know then that you wouldn't wake up the next morning.

That instead of spending the next few days recovering while you got better, I would wake up to Dad telling me "She's gone." How was I supposed to know that the next morning I would be sitting in shock, for what felt like the longest moment of my life, processing that you were gone? That it wouldn't really hit me until I got up to see your lifeless body in that bed for myself. In the bed that is also now mine, but isn't. Because Grandpa insisted I move into your room after you were gone.

I still remember your body in that bed. And I say your body because it wasn't you. Not really. I had never seen you look so peaceful, so I know that you at least went easy. But it wasn't any comfort when I was faced with watching my Dad, who I had so rarely ever seen cry, break down. It wasn't a comfort when I had to watch my Grandpa, who in all of my 18 years I had never once seen sad. I had seen him angry, frustrated, annoyed. But never sad. I had never seen him cry until then. Even to this day, I have only seen him cry twice. Once was that morning, and the second was your funeral. Your funeral, at which your daughter asked if I should be listed as a child or grandchild for your eulogy. Your funeral, at which I sat next to Grandpa as various people, both family I knew and strangers, told me about how I needed to

take care of and watch after my Grandpa. And both times, at the funeral and when he found you dead, he was fighting to hold back the falling tears, refusing to let it last any longer than a few minutes. He is forever the strongest man I have ever had the blessing to know.

And I still remember having to watch the strongest man I know break. I remember the feeling of trying to control my own tears and grief so that I could be there for him, after all that was my job. Especially when he was here, blaming himself for your death that was so far from being on his hands. How was I supposed to grieve when I needed to make sure he was okay? Now that you were gone it was up to me and Dad. And I had to be there for him too, because he had lost a mom. But hadn't I also lost a mom? After all, most of my life was spent being raised by you and living in your house. You might have only been my grandparent, but you were always more of a parent to me. More of a parent than the ones I had been given. You and Grandpa were the only ones who were ever consistently there. Even if you didn't always come watch me at competitions or performances or games, you supported me. You always supported me. Even when you didn't agree with me. Especially if you didn't agree with me. You taught me how to be myself, and to be confident in that self. You taught me how to be unapologetic about who I was and what I thought and what I did, always telling me "who cares" when I would worry about other people's opinions of me.

I'll never be able to find the words to explain how much you helped me, and how thankful I am to you for raising me, especially when it wasn't supposed to be your job. But I'll also never get the chance to tell you. And I'll never get to tell you that I miss you. Every. Single. Day.

## **Knitting**

McKenzie Melton

Click,  
Click,  
Click,  
The sound comforts me.  
When I can't find comfort in anything else I love  
Because they are now reminders.  
Reminders of the past,  
Reminders of you,  
But at least I still have knitting.  
I still have the clicking of my metal needles as they meet,  
Creating stitches to make things for myself, Because I  
need to focus on myself.  
And as I stitch these items together,  
I feel myself slowly being stitched back together.  
Knitting the shreds of who I was into someone  
new.

# The Rhythm in my Soul

Holly Murphy

Sometimes in life you need a moment away from reality, something to distract you from life's stresses and pains, or sometimes something to express your joy, to communicate euphoric moments, without words, but everyone still understands. The feeling of spinning into another world, one where the impossible is possible and every movement, every beat runs through your veins. This is expression in its purest form. Everyone finds it somewhere different, but for me, I find it in dance.

I can't remember a time when I didn't love dance. It makes up who I am as a person, it's silently woven into every aspect of my life. The expression 'I could dance before I could walk' comes to mind. It is crazy to me how you can develop a love with an intangible thing before even understanding the depth and meaning of the word 'love'. However, dance is one that never leaves you, it never unloves and never asks for anything other than simply your presence. I was one of those kids that just couldn't sit still. No matter how big or small the space was around me, I could always fill it with dance. I have a fond memory of dancing in my living room, practicing what I had learnt or teaching myself something new. I remember constantly telling my parents to watch my new skill and the pride and happiness in their eyes, every single time I said, 'look what I can do!' Dance, to me, isn't just about getting every step perfectly, it's about interpreting the music so you can express your emotions without uttering a single word. It's about losing yourself in the music and forgetting that anyone else is in the room but you. It's feeling at peace and letting the beat take control of what your body does next. Dance is surrender.

I will always remember my first dance show. The nervous excitement pulsing through my veins to the beat of the song previous to my set. My foot tapping, hands clapping, heart racing. The best yet worst feeling all in one.

However, the second I step out onto the stage, I realize I can't see the mass of people I know are sitting in front of me. The white light shines so harshly onto the stage I feel the heat from it on my forehead. My heart races as I get into position, then all of a sudden, I'm in the eye of the storm. The music comes on as my heart slows. My hands stop shaking, I'm calm. Just like that. Not a worry in the world, just me, the music and the feel of the cold stage floor below me. I forget the world exists, my mind is at peace, my heart is happy. All I can think about is how my body moves to the music. Plie, attitude turn, kick. Then, only as the music fades and I begin to hear the applause from the audience do I come back to my senses and recall my surroundings.

Dance is a healer, whether on a stage or just in the studio, it allows you to process emotions you may not have even realised you had. Sometimes, when it has been a hard day or a hard week, the only thing that makes sense is the beat of a song to capture your mood. It's almost like talking to yourself – a moment in which your body may release everything you don't have the words for. In these times, I let the music wrap around me, fill the silence between my thoughts, and my body starts to move. At first, it feels like I don't know what I'm doing, but when I find the right song, my body takes over, it does it all for me, no thinking involved.

My dance teachers will always hold a special place in my heart. They've been a part of my life, every week for the past 15 years. They have been my inspiration, my cheerleaders, and sometimes, my toughest critics. But above all, they have been the ones who showed me that dance is more than just a skill, it's a way of seeing the world. The way dance teachers coach you through a routine is something a non-dancer will never quite understand, sometimes they count, 1 through 8, but sometimes they make sounds to the music that as a dancer you just understand what it means, how harsh or soft to hit the move,

and suddenly everything seems so simple. It's not just the lessons they teach but in the ways they inspire you to grow – not as a dancer, but as a person. A good dance teacher will teach you about discipline, perseverance, and grace. They help you understand that success is never just hitting that perfect move, but it's about how you hold yourself, how you go about every challenge, and how you learn to fall and rise again. They give you the courage to take risks, to experiment, to fail, and to try again with more determination than before.

Dance breaks barriers, crosses language and cultural borders and brings the world, where there is hate and pain, together where everything is tranquil. Everyone understands what is being communicated in front of them.

There is something magical about how our body instinctively responds to rhythm. Our own biology is made up of this connection between music and movement. When we dance, our body releases dopamine, the feel-good hormone, which naturally draws you in, makes you want to dance over and over to experience this high again. Dance becomes an addiction, a healthy one at that, one where you lose yourself in music, not just because you're dancing to it, but because in your head you want to be. I find myself thinking a lot about how I would be dancing to a song, even when I'm sitting in a chair doing work.

Dance becomes an addiction, but more than that, it's self-care. It's looking after the mind and soul and just for those 2 or 3 minutes, being one with just yourself, there's no one else in the world. Dance carries you, hugs you, tells you everything is going to be okay, and I believe it every single time. And it always seems to be right.

To love dance is to fall in love with the idea that we are always moving, always evolving. It's a commitment to feeling deeply, to expressing freely, and to connecting with others in ways that go beyond words. Dance doesn't need a stage or an audience; it just needs a beat, a body, and a heart ready to follow wherever the rhythm takes it. A relationship with dance never fades, it only grows stronger, it only twists and turns and leaps more into your veins and your person as a whole, until you never want to not dance again. Until it is truly ingrained into the person you are today.

Dance is not my 'main sport', but it was my first. Those are always the ones that seem to stick with you.

## **When Did I Grow Up?**

Holly Murphy

Dad, when did I grow up?  
Mom, when did I stop asking  
For you to do my hair?  
When did all this happen?

Maybe when I packed up my bags  
To move halfway across the world.  
Maybe when I had to say goodbye  
To my two favourite people.

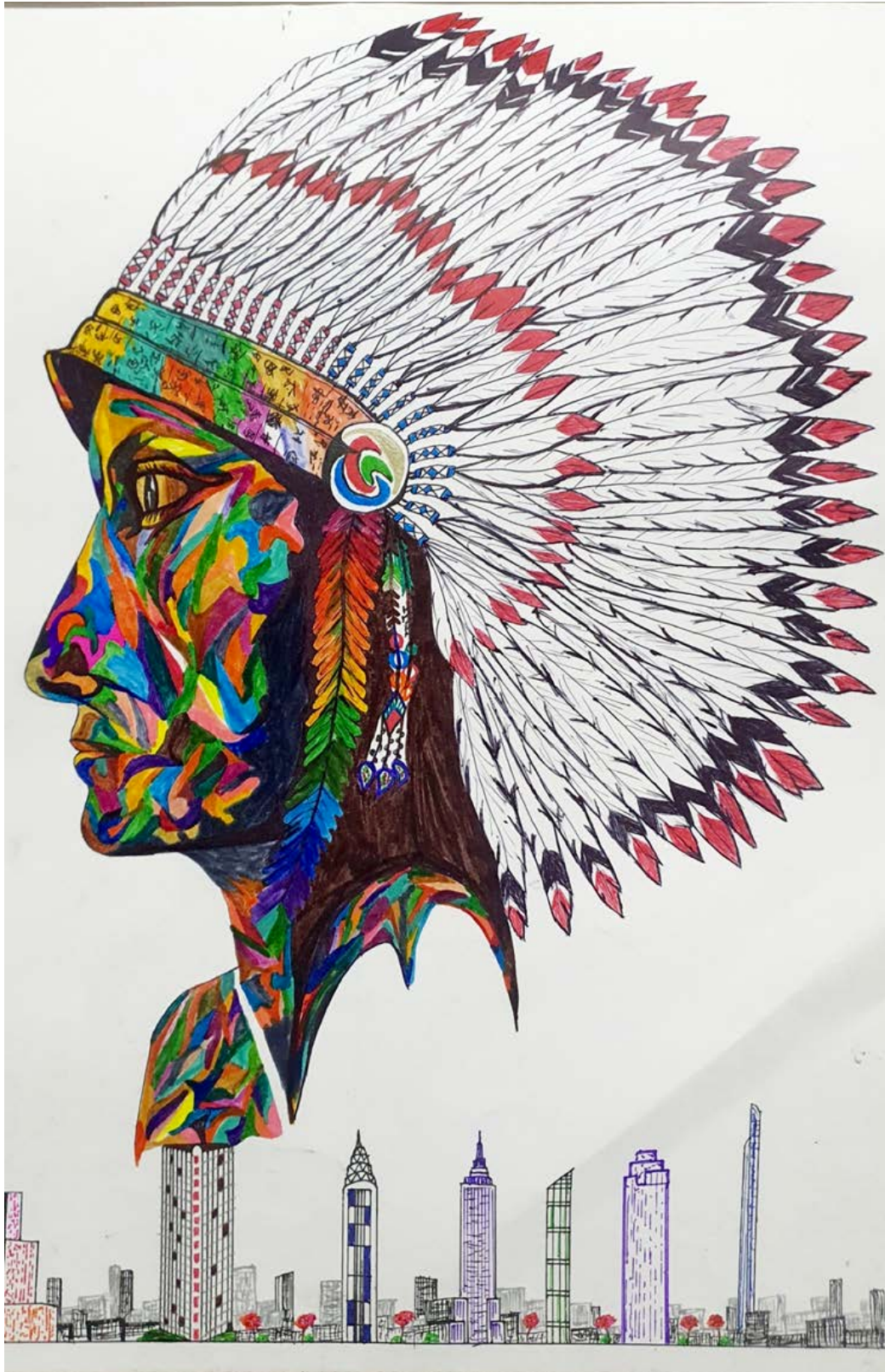
Maybe it was somewhere  
between airport gates  
Or tearful hugs that  
Will never last long enough.

Or maybe growing up  
Didn't happen in just one moment  
But in many smaller ones  
I never noticed at the time.

Mom, Dad,  
When did your little girl become  
Someone brave enough to leave?

## American Beauty

Nikhil Ramesh



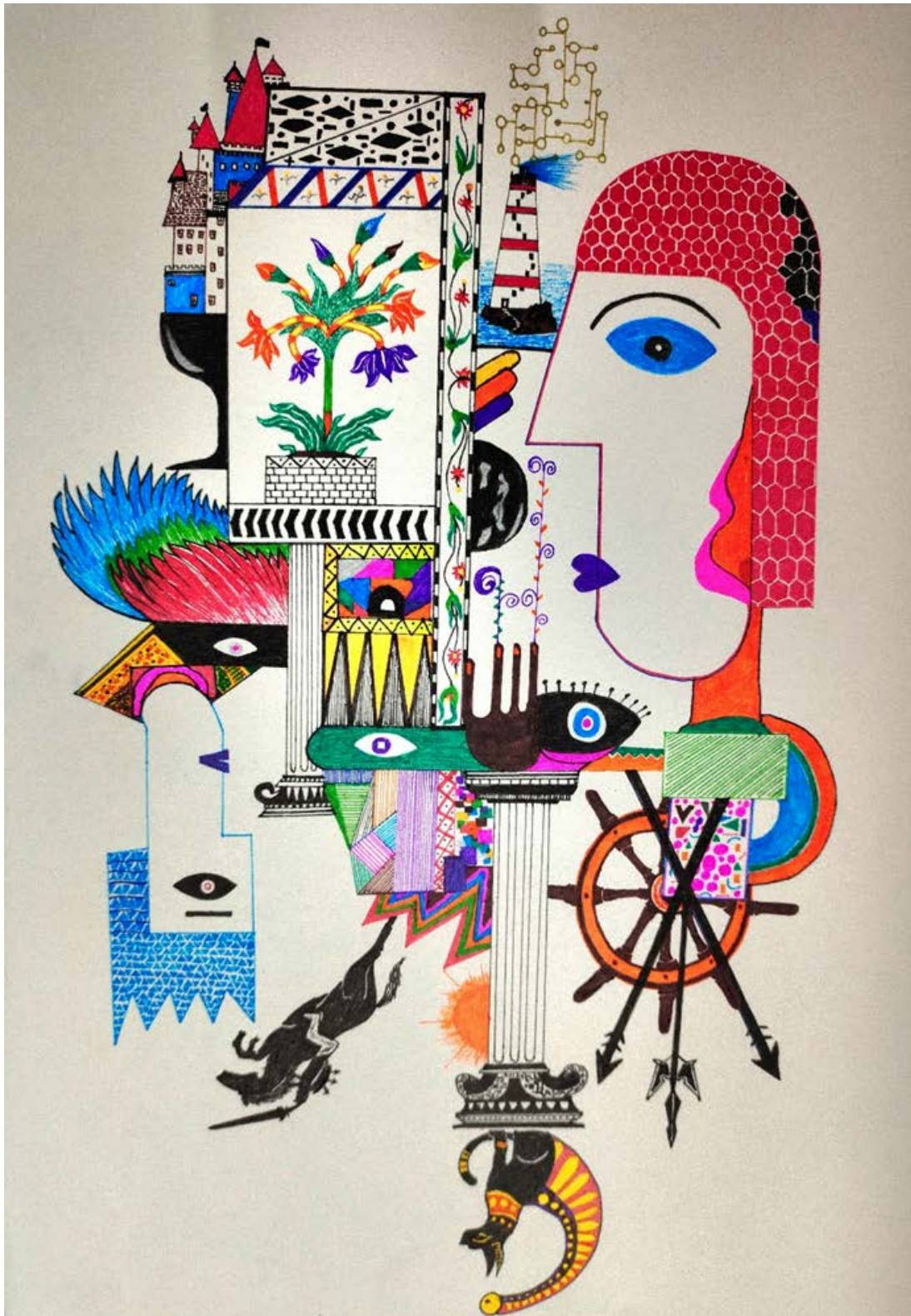
# Timelapse

Nikhil Ramesh



## Parallel World

Nikhil Ramesh



## The Apocalypse of St. Lazarus

Yesh Singayao

*ARISE YE PRISONERS OF STARVATION!  
ARISE, YE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH!  
FOR JUSTICE THUNDERS CONDEMNATION,  
A BETTER WORLD'S IN BIRTH!  
NO MORE TRADITIONS CHAINS SHALL BIND US  
ARISE, YE SLAVES, NO MORE IN THRALL;  
THE EARTH SHALL RISE ON NEW FOUNDATIONS,  
WE HAVE BEEN NAUGHT, WE SHALL BE ALL!*

...

“Arise!”

His eyes shot open. A dull pain pulsed through his head. He groaned and sat up. It was dark and blurry. His feet and pants were wet. Something smelled terrible. What the hell had happened? Faint images began to flicker in his vision.

A white rose. The faint glow of a streetlamp. Another man was there, standing on the boulevard. Brown hair. Grey eyes. Subtle Makeup on his cheeks. There was a handkerchief hanging from his breast pocket. It smelled like lavender. He plucked the rose and put it where the handkerchief was. They had kissed. They were both in an apartment, dancing. Brown Hair. Grey eyes. Makeup. The handkerchief and rose were laying on the table. Suddenly, there was a sharp pain in the back of his head. Then...

He groaned again and put his hand in his pocket. Nothing. His wallet was gone. Abstinence until next payday then. It pissed him off. The street gangs were growing bolder since all this had started. Or more desperate. But that was for the municipal police to handle. Right now, he needed to report back, or they would come in, probably shooting, into the working district looking for him. Things had been getting dangerous for Municipal enforcement. A police sergeant, who had helped shoot into a crowd of demonstrators a week before, had been reported missing. He was found a few days later, quartered and tied to several lampposts. He had to get out. His eyes adjusted to his surroundings. In front of him there was an entrance built into a wall, leading to an exposed toilet. There was raw sewage leaking out. He was lying in a small pool of it.

“Bastards...”

He was in a narrow passage between a dark grimy wall in front of him, and another one behind him. He saw that it led into a narrow courtyard. He nearly stumbled back over trying to get up. He stepped through pools of sewage, and entered into the court. There was a gray two-story building in front of him and two walls on either side, which made up an enclosed space. He could have outstretched his arms and nearly touched either wall. Piles of trash were strewn all over, and clogged up the drain in the middle of the court. The doors were rotting off rusted hinges and many of the window panes were broken.

He sighed. He fumbled through his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. At least they hadn't taken his smokes.

In a chapel, they held a mass for the dead. A row of Coffins were draped in embroidered banners. Crosses of dark burgundy. Wives and daughters veiled in black sat in the pews.

*DIES IRAE, DIES ILLA,  
SOLVET SAECLUM IN FAVILLA,  
TESTE DAVID CUM SIBYLLA.*

He took out his lighter and lit the cigarette dangling from his mouth. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something with jaundiced skin and wearing ragged khaki, limp out of the narrow passage. It stared at him with no eyes and pointed past him. He blew out some smoke, and looked. The veiled mourners had arisen from their pews. They followed the coffins draped in crosses.

"Fuck off."

It snarled and took off its helmet. A piece of flesh and hair fell to the ground. It stood next to him and placed its hand on his shoulder as blood and bits of its brains dripped onto his sleeve. Their husbands, fathers, and sons followed them with no eyes. They linked arms and formed a circle. They twisted and turned in ecstasy, their entrails wrapped around their legs. They had no more burdens, no more orders to follow, only the dance.

"You're wearing his skin," he said, shuddering. "But you're not him. You are not alive. Just a thing wanting to be born."

**"Sator"**

**"Arepo"**

**"Tenet"**

**"Opera"**

**"Rotas"**

The thing clawed at its face at the words from the sudden voice. It started to cry. Blood dripped down its cheeks. It crawled into the drain, moaning as its bones broke on the grate. Then silence. He sighed and tossed his burnt out cigarette down after it. Should he thank his new benefactor? No, he wanted to avoid acknowledging him for as long as possible. Maybe then, he would go away.

He went over and knocked on one of the doors. A few moments later, the door cracked open and a woman's smiling face appeared. Her makeup was smudged. Her eyes rapidly looked over him, up and down. "Hello dearest, lookin' for company?" she said. "I already have someone here, but come back in an hour. We'll see if I can help you. I can take a small deposit now if..."

"I'm not here for any of that," he interrupted. "I need a rotary if you have it." She frowned.

"Hells bells, man, does it look like I can afford to have a landline installed? I can barely pay rent, and heat with the coal shortage. If you're not lookin' for anything, then go stick it up somewhere else."

“How about a ration card for your troubles then?”

When the lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, Come. I looked, and there before me was a black horse. Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hands. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying:

***TWO POUNDS OF WHEAT FOR A DAY’S WAGES AND SIX POUNDS OF BARLEY FOR A DAY’S WAGES AND DO NOT DAMAGE THE OIL AND THE WINE***

“Ration cards? What will that get me? Not shit! Did you hear what they announced the other day? Ration stamps 1-7 are only good for a loaf of bread. Can’t even call it a loaf. 15 percent reduced, because of the excise tax! And stamps 8-10 are only good for an ounce of ground pork. Even if you have the money for it, it doesn’t matter. Not with the underground market, though. Don’t need ration cards with them. Just pay their jacked up prices! Jesus Christ, somebody gets rich off this, and I’m fucked either way. There! They can go ahead and shoot me now, just like they did with the demonstrators! Hell with it!”

He gritted his teeth. She wasn’t wrong. They were being sold out. That was clear, even while he was serving at the front. But what the hell did it matter anyway? That would land anyone in enhanced interrogation. He had some leverage now. He reached into a hidden pocket in the inside of his coat. He pulled out a silver disc, hanging from a small chain:

***REGNUM LOTHARII  
GENDARMERIE.  
0501***

“I won’t report this conversation, if you can get me a phone.” The woman’s face started to lose color.

“I-I beg your pardon sir. I didn’t mean any of that. It’s something in my head...the psychiatrist at the municipal clinic wrote me up the prescription, but I don’t have the money for it...” Her mouth started to quiver. She bit her lip. “Mr. Walter has a telephone upstairs. He’s my landlord, and a clerk at the stockyards. Let me go get decent first.” He nodded, and the door shut. He could hear yelling and swearing inside. She reappeared in a bathrobe. Inside, a half naked man was hastily fastening his belt.

“It’s all her fault!” he yelled. “She’s lured me in! I...”

“It’s not my job to police vice. That’s for the municipal police or a priest.” He turned to the woman. “Can you call this clerk down?”

“Well...I haven’t seen him for two days. I have been knocking on the door to pay the rent, but he hasn’t answered. And there’s a terrible smell...” He rushed up the nearby stairs and knocked on the door. No answer. He broke it down. There was a pale corpse lying on the floor. A swarm of flies hovered above. What shall we eat, what shall we drink, what shall we wear, the maggots had cried. And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of waters, and they became blood. For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets. Thou hast

given them blood to drink. They are worthy of it. The voice of thy brother's blood crieth out unto me from the ground.

He got down on one knee and listened to the dead clerk:

***I CUT MY THROAT I CANT HANDLE IT ANY LONGER HOW COULD I AFFORD  
A SUBSTITUTE WITH MY SALARY THEY LAID ME OFF TOO NO WORK EXEMPTION  
THE KNIFE IS OVER THERE NEAR THE TABLE DO YOU SEE IT OH GOD FORGIVE  
ME***

He looked over and saw a knife with dried blood on it. Placed on the table nearby, there was a typed paper with a signature on it. He went over and read it:

UNDER § 77 OF THE WARTIME EMERGENCY ACT,  
THE RECIPIENT: JAKOB WALTER,  
IS CALLED UP AS A REPLACEMENT FOR THE: 6TH INFANTRY REGIMENT.  
REPORT TO THE TRAINING DEPOT BY: MARCH 4TH.  
IF THE RECIPIENT HAS NOT REPORTED TO THE DEPOT BY THE STATED DATE,  
AND HAS NOT ARRANGED FOR A PAID SUBSTITUTE TO TAKE HIS PLACE OR  
APPLIED FOR AN ESSENTIAL WORKER'S EXEMPTION, AS BOTH STATED  
UNDER § 78 OF THE WARTIME EMERGENCY ACT, COMPLIANCE WILL BE  
ENFORCED BY THE INSPECTOR-GENERAL OF THE GENDARMERIE UNDER §32  
OF THE INTERNAL ENFORCEMENT ACT.  
SIGNED: *Municipal Commandant, Colonel Alfred Gollwitzer.*

There was a picture there too. A man, a wife, and a son. "Your family?"

***I HAD TO DO IT I'LL BE DEAD IN A MONTH OUT ON THE FRONT MY  
FAMILY THROWN ON THE STREET MY BOY BEGGING MY WIFE A WHORE  
SELLING HERSELF ON THE STREET I CANT BEAR THE SHAME OF IT I HAD TO IT  
DO THEY DID NOT FEEL ANYTHING I MADE SURE THEY WERE ASLEEP OPEN  
THAT DOOR PLEASE I CAN HEAR THEM CRYING OUT TO ME I WANT TO SPEAK TO  
THEM ITS MUFFLED THERES A POCKET WATCH IN MY COAT TAKE IT***

He walked over and pulled out a golden pocket watch. There were specks of blood covering an old engraving:

*Happy birthday, Dearest.  
Here's to this moment, and every one after.  
Yours devoted,  
Elisabeth.*

He stared at it for a few moments in silence. He closed his eyes, trembling. They have no eyes. They join the others in the dance. Should he join them? Maybe it would be better. He couldn't sleep anymore. And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh. And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams:

***MEN ARE IMPALED ON THE BRANCHES OF A TREE  
BLOOD DRIPS DOWN AND NOURISHES ITS ROOTS  
GROWING FROM THE TRUNK  
MARS IS LAUGHING  
HIS LOVER HAS AN ORGY  
BABYLON IS DRUNK ON THE BLOOD OF THE INNOCENT  
SHE COMMITS ADULTERY WITH KINGS AND PRINCES  
PRESIDENTS AND PRIME MINISTERS  
THE SHAREHOLDERS IN MILITARY INDUSTRY  
BANKERS AND FINANCIAL SPECULATORS IN MARKET STOCK  
INSIDER TRADERS AND DEFENSE CONTRACTORS  
LAZURUS  
A SLAVE  
THROWS ENVELOPES OF MONEY ONTO AN ALTAR  
A SACRIFICIAL SEED  
FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD  
GOD BLESS OUR COUNTRY  
AND OUR BRAVE TROOPS  
CURSE YE MEROZ  
THE ANGEL OF PROSPERITY  
LOAVES AND FISHES MULTIPLY  
A HUNDRED-FOLD BLESSING  
M-C-M  
CRIES THE FALSE PREACHER  
THE PEDDLER OF GOD'S WORD  
DO NOT RICH MEN OPPRESS YOU***

***DRAW YOU BEFORE JUDGMENT***  
***THE NATIONS BECOME DUST ON THE SCALES***  
***THE PALE HORSE AND ITS RIDER STALK THE DESOLATE FIELDS***

He opened his eyes. There was a landline hanging on the wall. He walked over and spun the rotary. "Hello, operator? Connect me to line seven. Identification, 0501." A few moments of silence. Static. Then a voice.

"What is it, 0501? Where the hell have you been? I don't give a damn about what you do with a weekend pass but if this keeps happening..."

"I have a suicide here, Inspector-General," he interrupted. "And two murders. A former clerk from the stockyards. I'm in the working district." A pause.

"What? I haven't heard any reports about that. A political agitator settling some scores?"

"No, sir. It was over a conscription order."

"Were you there to enforce it? To bring him to the depot?"

"No. I just stumbled in. It was a mistake. He was already dead here."

"Then it's none of your business. Call the municipal police to clean it up. Report back to the barracks within the hour." The line went silent. He let the receiver hang. Justice thunders condemnation. To know God is to do Justice.

**"I was, I am, I shall be."**

Now the feast of Unleavened Bread drew near, which is called Passover. And the Chief priests and scribes were seeking to put him to death, for they feared the people. But now, he said, take your money and a traveller's bag. And if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. For the time has come for this prophecy about me to be fulfilled. He was counted amongst the rebels. Yes, everything written about me by the prophets will come true. Cursed be he that keepeth back his sword from blood.

Lazarus takes the sword and cuts down the tree of Mars, Babylon, the rulers and merchants of the earth, and the peddlers of God's Word. Hail the day so long expected, hail the day of full release! Zion's walls are now erected, now the watchmen publish peace! Throughout Shiloh's wide dominion, hear the trumpet loudly roar. Fallen, fallen, is Babylon the Great!

"Fallen, fallen..." he murmured in a shaking voice.

**"I was, I am, I shall be."**

"Who are you?"

**"That which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now. Perhaps you will find it later."**

"But what do you want?"

**"Nothing. But though I am free from all men, yet have I made myself servant to all. I am made all things to all men. I was already in existence, in the ages which were before you. I am undying under the sun. To the prophets, I became a prophet. To the Platonists, I became a Platonist. To the Stoics, I became a Stoic. To the Christians, who worship The Resurrection, I became a Christian. To the Sceptics, I became a Sceptic. To the Idealists, I**

**became an Idealist. To the Materialists that venerate the Dialectic, I became a Materialist. What shall I become to you?"**

He gnashed his teeth, and clawed at his skin. They were full of sores. "What do you want me to do?"

**"Nothing. Do not try to do anything now. Perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek anything, do not perform anything, do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact of my existence."**

"Then...I do. There is no other choice, is there?"

**"Then the work can begin. Nations and churches must fall, to make way. The end of the way is joy. Him who laid the foundations will shake them. We are the builders of the coming world. We are the planter, the seed, and the field. We are the reapers of the coming grass. I was, I am, I shall be."**

...

## **The Farmer**

Sarah Stephens

He began his day before the sun  
And on his knees beside the bed  
Before his tractor started to run  
He never failed to bow his head

Except for Sunday each day was the same  
He put on his overalls and donned his shirt  
And though it wasn't a job with fame  
He went outside to work the dirt

When a child needed love he heard the call  
By blood, adoption, or foster care  
He opened his door and gave them his all  
He had enough love, no need to share

If news is brought both sad and sweet  
His lips will tremble and his eyes will tear  
A more gentle soul you'll never meet  
He's always cared and it's very clear

His knees are weak and they won't bend  
So now he sits upon the bed  
Though his farming days have come to an end  
Still every day he bows his head

Of this farmer I'm very fond  
So great a man there's only one  
Nothing will ever break our bond  
He's my "papa" and I'm his "hun"

## Heart Broken: Back-to-Back

Niah Thompson

I used to believe being chosen  
was something you could earn,  
something you could be given  
if you were soft enough,  
good enough,  
quiet enough,  
smart enough.

I tried.

I wanted to be big,  
strong,  
courageous like my mother always taught me.

Nothing brought me joy or happiness,  
peace or comfort.  
All I had were tears  
and disappointment.

I waited for my father  
like a porch light left on too long.  
Every car that passed, I yearned for it to be him.  
Patiently waiting for my turn to be picked.  
Could it have been him?  
Finally there to get his little girl?

It never was.

Abandonment doesn't shout.  
It erases.  
It makes a girl question  
her own reflection.

Was I not enough?  
Not pretty enough?  
Not worth staying for?  
When is it my turn?  
Why can't I be picked just once?

I'm so tired of fighting to be picked.  
When will I be seen for myself?  
When will that special someone recognize my unconditional love and loyalty?

One day it will come.  
One day it will pass.  
One day I will walk with my father, hand in hand.

I loved a grandmother  
who held my face in her hands  
like I was treasure.  
She brushed my hair, baked me cookies, and made me smile.  
Took me to church and would show her true colors upon me.

I thank her for that.  
Guiding me to where I needed to be.  
I now know where I need to be in order to succeed.

Somewhere behind her smile  
was a story I wasn't told.  
Still, I loved her.  
Grief is complicated like that.  
Love doesn't disappear  
just because truth arrives late.

Then there was the friendship  
that felt like safety  
until it wasn't.

Sharing air with someone  
who studies you  
like they're waiting for you to fall  
changes the way you sleep.  
Changes the way you breathe, look, speak, think.  
I once mourned who I was.  
Slowly picked those pieces up.  
One by one.  
I was still there.  
Little Niah.  
Standing strong and holding on.

I stopped resting.  
Stopped breathing fully.  
Started shrinking

without realizing it.

And the anger  
God, the anger.

Anger at being misunderstood.  
At being judged  
when I was barely holding myself together.  
Crying so hard  
I couldn't recognize my own voice.

You said I was confident.  
Confident?  
I could barely look in the mirror  
without seeing a girl  
who felt unchosen.

Her birthday is the 12th.  
Mine is the 13th.  
Back-to-back.  
Like we once were.

For just a second, I wanted it to tell me something.  
What does this mean?  
Why do you do this to me?  
Where is my daddy to rescue me?  
Where is grandma to show her true colors to me?

I wanted it to mean something.  
I wanted the numbers to explain  
why it hurt the way it did.

But numbers are not prophets.  
They are just numbers.

What hurt  
was loving people  
who could not hold me safely.

What hurt  
was wanting to be picked  
by a man who never learned how.

What hurt

was confusing survival  
with strength.  
And yet still,  
I am here.

I am here  
after nights of shaking.  
After waking up afraid.  
After begging for it to stop.  
“Make it go away,” I asked.  
I just want to rest.  
Rest.

I am here,  
and I am tired,  
but I am not erased.

Faith, for me,  
is not symbols in the sky  
or codes in the calendar.

Faith is waking up anyway.  
Faith is writing again.  
Faith is believing  
that God does not require my humiliation  
to teach me a lesson.  
I do not need to be embarrassed  
to become holy.

I do not need to be abandoned  
to be worthy.

If I saw her now,  
I would not spit venom  
or spit scripture.  
I would just walk.  
Walk steady.  
Walk quiet.  
Walk like I have been hand-picked.  
Chosen.

Not because a man picked me.  
Not because a friend validated me.  
But because I stayed.

I stayed.

And that is enough for me.

## Notes on Contributors

**Sarah Abonyo** is from Uganda who is double majoring in Recreation/Tourism & Sport Management and Human Services and Counseling. She is minoring in Communication, is a member of the Women's Soccer team, and enjoys writing poetry and making art.

**Zanda Boggs** is a doctoral student in Counseling Education and Supervision who is from Campbellsville, Kentucky, where she balances academic life with clinical practice, teaching, and creative work as well as with her pursuit of motorcycle riding.

**Morgan Bryant** is from Shelbyville, Kentucky, and is double majoring in English and History with a minor in Women's and Gender Studies. Nonacademic interests include drawing on whiteboards around campus, cooking with roommates, and watching films.

**Cole Burch** is a senior from Philpot, Kentucky, and he is a Human Services and Counseling major and Psychology minor. He is also a member of the football team and enjoys creative writing.

**Lilly Campbell** is from Davenport, Iowa, and she is a Secondary Education major with an English emphasis area who is also a member of the cycling team.

**Gabrielle Crawford** is from Burkesville, Kentucky, and is majoring in Art with a Studio emphasis area and is minoring in Communication. Besides art, her interests include reading crime-related thrillers.

**Jackson Dalton** is from Nancy, Kentucky. His major is Secondary Education with a History emphasis area, and he is also a photographer.

**Anna Dangelmaier** is a senior from Liberty, Kentucky, whose major is Nursing. Her interests include mental health advocacy, Appalachian history, and collecting trinkets.

**Kevin Familia** is from Columbia, Kentucky, and he is majoring in Political Science. He enjoys writing poetry, fiction, and metafiction.

**Jaiden Farley** is a freshman from Louisville, Kentucky, and he is double majoring in Communication and Media Studies with a Media Arts emphasis. He enjoys photography and is on the Bowling team.

**Sydney Frazier** is a junior from Columbia, Kentucky, and she is double majoring in Media Studies and Art with a minor in English. She enjoys cooking meals for friends and rating movies on Letterboxd.

**Briana Frey** is a freshman from Columbia, Kentucky, who is double majoring in Psychology and Human Services and Counseling. She is deeply passionate about choral music and creative writing.

**Brandon Grider** is a sophomore from Columbia, Kentucky, who is double majoring in Theatre Arts and Arts Administration, and he is also a member of Singers.

**Kaleb Humble** is a senior from Monticello, Kentucky and a Communication major, his interests include postmodern Appalachian, contemporary Southern Gothic, and queer literature.

**Erin Janovec** is a doctoral student in Counselor Education and Supervision, and she lives in rural Appalachia. Outside of her academic work, she enjoys cooking, reading fiction, and time with her family.

**Leeshawn Johnson** is a senior from Louisville, Kentucky, who is majoring in Theatre Arts. A member of the Men's Track team, he also enjoys playing video games and photography / videography production.

**Paul-Anthony Jones** is a senior from Columbia, Kentucky, whose major is Art with a Studio emphasis area. He is also minoring in Women's and Gender Studies, and his main hobby is painting.

**Sadie Kemp** is a senior from Columbia, Kentucky, majoring in Elementary Education. She is also a Bonner Scholar and member of Singers.

**Zachariah Lawson** is a senior from Williamsburg, Kentucky, who is majoring in English. President of the Student Government Association for the past two academic years, he also enjoys writing poetry rooted in personal experiences and is passionate about storytelling.

**McKenzie Melton** is from London, Kentucky, and she is double majoring in Psychology and English. Additionally, she loves being involved in theatre and choir.

**Holly Murphy** is from Worcester, England, and she is a Communication major who is also a golfer for the university.

**Nikhil Ramesh** currently lives in Oklahoma, and he is a graduate student majoring in Data Science. A non-academic interest of his is in creating sketches that express the beauty of art.

**Yesh Singayao** is from Vine Grove, Kentucky, and he is a Political Science major who is also minoring in History. A member of Singers, he enjoys writing multi-genre fiction and reading about Christian theology and socialism.

**Sarah Stephens** is a junior from Russell Springs, Kentucky, and she is a Human Services and Counseling major, and she enjoys performing in and directing theatrical productions.

**Niah Thompson** is from Bardstown, Kentucky, and she is majoring in Human Services and Counseling and is minoring in Psychology. In free time, she enjoys doing her nails and hanging out with her family.

## The Legend of Orpheus

The ancient Greek mind was both subtle and skillful and the legend of Orpheus (pronounced **or'-- fee - us**) amply epitomizes this. Orpheus ('he of the river bank') was the son of Apollo, god of poetry, and the Muse Calliopé ('she of the fair voice'), who gave birth to him on the banks of the Hebrus River in Thrace. Such was his power of verse and song, he could move the trees and rocks and tame wild beasts. He was given the gift of the lyre by Apollo. When his wife Eurydice died from a serpent's bite during their wedding celebration, Orpheus, in his grief, descended to the underworld - no easy task for a mortal - to attempt to win her back from the land of the dead.

Arriving at the judgment seat of Persephone and Hades, rulers of the underworld, Orpheus began to sing his lament for Eurydice. So sweet was his voice that the dead, including Eurydice, flocked to hear him, weeping for the beauty of the upper world, which was lost to them. Persephone and Hades were so moved, they chose to let Orpheus take Eurydice back to the world of daylight, on condition that he not turn to look at her until they had reached the upper world. Hermes, the guide of souls, led them on the arduous journey back to the land of the living.

With his foot on the very threshold of the day-lit world, Orpheus, whether from impatience or anxiety, turned around too soon - Eurydice was not yet out of the realm of the dead. Because of the edict of Persephone and Hades was irrevocable, Hermes was forced to lead Eurydice back to the eternal darkness. Though Orpheus wandered for days through the dark caverns and tunnels of the netherworld, pitifully calling out his wife's name, he never found her again.

