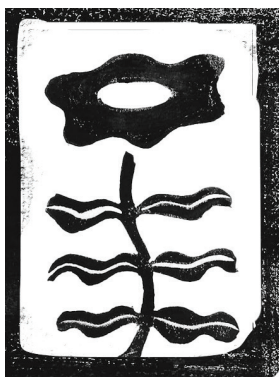


# WALL

Literary Journal 2025



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

We accept entries that embrace all viewpoints and walks of life. However, the opinions and ideas contained here in no way represent those of Saddleback College or the South Orange County Community College District Board of Trustees; they are solely those of the authors and creators of these particular works.

To submit your work for the 2026 edition of WALL, please see the guidelines for submission at  
<https://www.wallliteraryjournal.org/submissions-1>  
**The deadline is February 26, 2026**



# WALL

is a community space for creative displays.

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



## MISSION STATEMENT

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

# WALL

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# Acknowledgements

Thousands upon thousands of words... hundreds of images... the progeny of imaginative minds... floating through time and fluttering through space, until filling and spilling onto empty pages. The creative venture that we have come to know and love as WALL Literary Journal came to life in 2001. Featuring the literature and art exclusively of Saddleback College students, the campus publication has served throughout its 25 years as a repository for captivating fiction, intimately affecting personal stories, pensive poetic musings, and inventive works of art..

In 2001, the year of its inaugural issue, WALL was named one of the Best New Magazines, an honor bestowed by the Community College Humanities Association (CCHA). It was the beginning of an auspicious evolution into an award-winning literary magazine with a national profile. Over the past two and a half decades, WALL has earned numerous commendations from the CCHA, the American Scholastic Press Association, the Associated Collegiate Press, and the National Council of Teachers of English.

But beyond these accolades is WALL's less visible but no less palpable impact on the campus community. The journal has served as an inspirational showcase for creative expression and a time capsule of each year, as reflected in the thematic resonance within its stories, poems, and artwork. Produced by students who take English 160 (Literary Magazine), WALL has provided student staffers with a distinctive hands-on behind-the-scenes experience, allowing them to develop editorial skills that have served them well in their prospective careers. It's also offered them a memorable and socially cohesive creative venture that has forged lasting friendships

WALL's celebration of its 25th anniversary is the culmination of steadfast commitment from students, faculty, administrators, and staff. This year's journal staff and I are deeply grateful for the unwavering support of Dean Christina Hinkle and Assistant Dean Jessica Kaven of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences; Dr. Elliot Stern, President of Saddleback College, and Tram Vo-Kumamoto, Vice President for Instruction. We also appreciate the ongoing support of Chancellor Julianna M. Barnes and the district's Board of Trustees: Carolyn Inmon, Ryan Dack, T.J. Prendergast III, Lisa A. Bartlett, Timothy Jemal, Marcia Milchiker, Terri Rydell, and Blake Leonard.

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As we celebrate our 25th anniversary, the staff and I invite you to immerse yourself in the vivid, vibrant, and imaginative world artfully rendered in the pages of this year's WALL.

**Gina Shaffer**  
Faculty Advisor  
WALL 2025

# Editor's Note

Every edition of WALL brings together a curated sample of Saddleback student works to create a truly unique experience, now culminating in our 25th edition: the 25th anniversary of WALL. This year's journal finalizes a quarter century of maintaining a platform where the reader can effortlessly thumb through the experiences, worlds, and voices that represent our student body, and I could not be more proud to be such a close and intimate part of that. Tasked with being this year's editor-in-chief, I found relishing in the present moment and reflecting on WALL's history instrumental to constructing this year's edition.

The past two editions of WALL have taken a particular emphasis on time, with the 23rd edition focusing on finding a reprieve in the future's hopeful outlook and the 24th analyzing the complex transition between running from and longing for our pasts, so this year's edition completes this time-conscious trilogy and anchors itself in the present. The present, while being a product of the past and an omen for the future, expressly stands as the uncomfortable border between the two. Instead of running from the present, this edition of WALL will address the difficulties of shedding undesirable pieces of the present head-on.

Our three sections are divided by section pages, which display motifs that embody these three phases of the healing process with an emphasis on returning to what is natural. The first motif is a hand with its palm to the sky, a moment when one recognizes the issues within their current state. The second is a flower to represent growth from these initial problems and a movement towards nature. The final motif is a sunset, basking in a return to nature and the first steps taken towards healing. Just as the journal topically progresses towards a more comfortable, natural state, these motif pages do, too, allowing nature to reclaim this broken aspect of our lives.

A short story that plays with the horrors of a picturesque garden turning into a manmade mirage, a personal account from a young woman reconsidering her relationship with God after her stepmother's passing, and a poem that aligns the moon and the sun to reflect on how it truly feels to be in love and in the moment; these are but a few potent examples of how every page of this journal grants us insight into how our peers grapple with present challenges in an attempt to grow into a more natural space or relish in the beauty of the moment.

I would like to extend my utmost appreciation to Professor Shaffer and the 2025 staff, who worked with me diligently this year. Their insights and efforts have been key to making this edition possible as the latest contribution to a quarter-century trajectory.

We at WALL hope that you enjoy this monumental edition in our history and take a second to reflect on your own present consciousness and well-being in the process.

**Aidan Hunt**  
Editor-in-Chief  
WALL 2025

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Linoprint by Silvia Ritterling

**COVER DESIGN:** Zoe McCuen

# Nothing

Maxwell Javaheri



Long before the sun rose in the morning, I woke up to silence. A new pain in my stomach had seized my mind's rest, creating knots and discomfort throughout my body. During the day I felt embarrassed by my small living space and the dirt and grime that was present when I moved in, but at night these stains gave me something to look at. It was not quite sleeping, but with a couple more sedative pills I was able to tune out every couple of minutes. Later in the morning the sun harshly peered through cheap blinds, forcing open my dreary eyes. The abrasive light lit up the walls, highlighting the pictures that still adorned my walls even though I would rather forget them. With my own bright smile eluding me for so many months, these dreadfully sentimental memories strung up on my wall were taunting me. For what foolish reason did I have them up? To look up while I was falling down and see what I was losing with each moment of descent? I remember well the faces of my former friends and the admiration we fostered for each other in our early years. I do not need a constant reminder on my wall. My weak extremities meandered over to my dresser, with my arms plucking the most convenient attire. The mirror looked rather strange this morning, reflecting back a flat image. I felt worried about my picture, thinking there was a permanent change in my demeanor. These thoughts were simple distractions that I did not have time for. I had people to meet, schoolwork that required great attention, and a cheery exterior to maintain. The thought of eating disturbed me to the point of nausea, but I had already stopped consuming breakfast weeks before now.

The cold air outside weakly tapped my face. My frigid fingers wrapped around the handle, pulling the creepy door open. I turned the radio up and gripped the steering wheel tightly, attempting to outrun my exhaustion. The songs had charmed me, reminding me of the joy I felt when I had first heard them. The peace that music brought me felt like my only link to the world sometimes. Especially when I was a child, so deeply alone and angry, music temporarily mollified me. I had often wondered if my angst had truly disappeared or if it was merely stuck inside of me now, confined to private spaces. On good days I did not think about this and today was

supposed to be a good day, so I nipped it in the bud. So many dear memories had been attached to these songs that the abrupt silence when I stopped the car seemed to brusquely halt my excitement. As I sluggishly pushed the door open, the grey sky caught my attention; it was new, but felt wildly like it had always been there, as it was now.

I was excited to see my friends today, hoping to really connect with them and make some future plans. It had been a while since I had allowed myself to see other people. But of course this was a study session, so it served a dual purpose. Once I was inside the library, the warm air scratched my arms and chest with toasty heat, pestering me into discontent. When I got to the table, their noses pointed up from their computers as they greeted me with concerned pleasantries.

I had met Warren and Calvin through a class a couple months ago. They were more or less the same person with different faces: both well connected, intelligent, and rich. All the things that I desperately craved to display. They were all-star top classmen with life given to them on a silver platter. Somehow, I had managed to trick them into thinking that I was in the same ballpark as them. I thought I liked them very much, but I think they were closer to each other than I was to them. When they spoke of things they had done without my presence, there was no malice, but my mind had taken care to fill in the blanks. I constantly had this feeling that the reason I had not been as close with them was because I was lesser. This was precisely why I could not afford to show how my lack of sleep truly affected me. I didn't want to become the irritable, irksome stranger who complains about every small thing that's bothering him. Small talk was difficult—it was draining to pretend that I had anything to say or add. The sense of self I had rarely felt was all but absent on this day, so interpersonal communication felt like a herculean task.

### **“I longed for the mulled silence of my closed room.”**

The past few days I had been working myself down to the bone to finish the work ahead of me. I prepared efficiently in order to give myself the opportunity for maximum productivity. If I was not working, I was doing absolutely nothing at all. I had sacrificed my hobbies and leisure activities. It was not right to relax when there was so much to be done.

It was still quite important to me to be accepted by Calvin and Warren. I smiled and laughed when they did; I strained through what seemed like endless conversations, hastily agreeing with each and every opinion they postulated. But through all the calculated action I had put into our relationship, there was still a palpable difference between them and me. Like I was looking from the outside in.

“Why are you always working, man?” Calvin stated plainly. “Come out and drink with us.” He and Warren were functioning alcoholics in my eyes. College was not a time for drinking at big parties or bars. I admired their money and their grades, but at the moment their demeanors were creepy. I might have echoed a murmur or said nothing, but whatever it was set off a chain of bother that put their usefulness into question. It was so wrenchingly bothersome having to pretend I had anything to say when my mind was elsewhere.

“Are you okay?” Calvin stated in that concerned tone that I loathed. He looked at me like I was some scrawny wounded dog. What a demeaning little comment. I could not stand comments like that. Not at all. I felt my rage rise fast from the bottom of my toes up through my chest to my mouth, making it nearly impossible not to scream with all my power, scarring their feeble minds and leaving with respect and authority. With a little convincing from the reasonable part of myself, I buried my rage down to my chest and responded accordingly and quite politely. Impressively, I did not show a trace of my inner monologue to them. “You know you can always talk to us. You know that, right?” I saw the ghost trace of a grin in his pink lips. He wanted to smile and point and laugh at me.

“Oh nothing is wrong really, just quite a bit of schoolwork.” Some small insignificant childish part of me wished I could communicate how I truly felt. Tell somebody how desperately I wished for even a short period of respite from the mental torture occurring inside of my mind, but the words simply would not come out of my mouth. Even if they could, a confession like that would land me at the bottom of the social chart. I would be laughed out of this place and the shred of connection I had with them would be entirely severed.

“You know if you ever need help we are always here for you,” Calvin urged further in that same creepy tone. Intensifying that look directly into me.

“We are your friends, and we care about you,” Warren added, joining in on the fun and making an even larger deal out of what was nothing. I had covered my tracks. I laughed and smiled and engaged. What was it they wanted to squeeze out of me? I had done it all and I had done it correctly and I would like to be left alone



to do my work. I started to think over and over, again echoing around my mind that all of this talk was a grand distraction. These people did not understand the detrimental effect they were having on me and my productivity.

“Just a night of bad sleep, that’s all,” I cheeped out with a faux smile. “Nothing else.” I was drained from this act. Any more of this and my facade would unravel, permanently damaging my chance to be accepted. I longed for the mulled silence of my dark room. All of this excitement had annoyed me to my core. All of the time that had elapsed during this ordeal left me with a blank page. Nothing I needed to get done had been done. My time was insanely precious. I could not afford to piss it away like Calvin and Warren.

The dark stains that adorned my wall were etched into my vision as I went about smiling and pretending. I kept this mild-tempered facade at an enormous cost, but it was entirely necessary. This whole day throughout all these conversations, I was losing the ability to keep my facade. I knew just what this meant: Calvin and Warren would drift away from me and I would be left alone once more. Rather than wait to be ostracized, I had decided I was pretty much done with them. They no longer had anything to give me and I know I certainly had nothing at all to give them. They were a distraction keeping me from my work. How could two people be unpleasant enough to make me wish I was back in my bleak room lying awake? I was thinking clearer than I ever had.

I drove with an excited smile, opting for no music. I was headed for home, my bed, the place to think. Finally, I could think. No more distractions, no more sounds. Even thinking of my room proved to be overstimulating. I should strip it bare, I thought to myself. All of these things around me don’t mean anything. This was my new life, the change I had been waiting for. I ran with renewed vigor and a large smile up the stairs with my key in hand.

I ripped all the pictures off the wall and threw them into a bin, which I lit on fire. These old crude pictures were no longer who I was. That smile was not my own, the warm olive face and gentle eyes no longer mine. My secondary school friends around me wrapped me in their comforting arms—no longer true at all. It was my own fault I was the black sheep. Those years we had been together were before they could see who I truly was. When I stopped pretending to have anything to say, they would briefly creep out of their corners to mock me—sometimes with their mannerisms or words, but always with their beady little eyes. I would be a fool not to see it when it was staring right at me intently. Like the dust of Earth gathering for a storm against my humble self. I was done with the facade just as I am now. For my forma-



Cheyenne Hunter

tive years I had been told to study and go to bed early and early to rise. But this is a moronical paradox: to sleep early and rise early while balancing the workload of a modern university is impossible. I was studying, so I could not take a break. How could you waste six perfectly reasonable hours? I had merely been doing as I was told. Getting the highest possible scores and grades is everything. Once I reach the end and walk onto that stage, everyone will see and it will be over. I will be myself—no more show.

During these vagrant nights, I usually tossed my blanket aside. This night the cold air breathed through my floorboards. I took care to cover a little while after my arms and legs started to feel numb, yet my mind became remarkably sharp. Revelations of a sullen nature claimed my thoughts. There was a great smallness to my existence. Frighteningly little. To make some dot of a mark would mean nothing in this grandiose universe. Maybe there was nothing left to show. This short span had hollowed me from the inside, but what came out did not amount to even a dot. It was a dark corner and my name had not left a mark. The grim confines of my four-corner bedroom nothing shrunk thinner into me. But I did not mind a bit. The sense of relief that washed over me was like no other feeling. I did not have to study. I did not have to graduate. I did not have to socialize. I did not have to eat. I did not have to smile. I did not have to check the clock every three and a half minutes. I did not have to search for a job that would grant me financial freedom. I did not have to ever pretend. I would never do any of that. I would never do anything. Every year of my life spent seeking something deeper had been in vain, an utter waste. If I could tar that door shut and lobotomize that animalistic part of me that seeks external things, I would be happy.



**Mask** Tom Anderson



# Sand

Shannon Thornton

A handful of sand • is enough –

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# Whirlwind

Tracey Roldan

# The Man on Mirage Street

Hayden Oldham

The air was thick with the scent of fresh rain and coffee, though there was no residue of past weather. The wooden porch beneath the rocking chair was bone-dry and the breeze was too still for a storm to have passed. Though most days on 404 Mirage Street were quite repetitive, the unusual weather threw its inhabitant, an elderly man, for a loop. For him, mornings consisted of coffee on the porch, reading the newspaper, and, most importantly, a detailed, meditative examination of his magnificent garden—a prized possession of his that made his home the utmost desire for the people of Mirage Street. Given the early morning, the elderly man was found on his weathered and well-loved chair, rocking back and forth as he drifted in and out of imaginative dreams and conscious reality. His lungs filled with the crispness of the morning air, and, with each cool inhale, his body gradually became more and more awake. As the sun began to peak over the neighboring houses, the elderly man sat and absorbed every ray that touched his skin—embracing it like a maternal hug, encapsulating a state of complete peace. As he sat, the rocking back and forth of his chair reminded him of the days when he shared the porch with company. Though years had passed since those times, every once in a while he liked to challenge his mind to recall distant memories, and that was today's prompt. As he sat, his mind remained blank—he fought hard to remember any instance when there was anyone but him here, but nothing. Eventually giving up, he blamed his inability on his old age and deteriorating memory, a logical problem for someone of his age.

More awake and an empty cup of coffee later, the elderly man began to shift forward in the creaking chair and take in the beautiful scenery that surrounded him. His yard was unimaginable. To call it anything other than an oasis would be a gross understatement. His view consisted of flowers and vegetation that reflected those out of a movie—a sight so shocking and perfect it almost seemed unnatural. White lilies ran the perimeter while peonies and tulips ran up to the porch and down to the street. An array of vines grew and spun across the walls, filling any empty space. No corner was left unattended; the elderly man's morning scans of the lavish oasis made this possible. To an outsider, the time rocking in the chair and sipping coffee on the porch might seem like purely a means of relaxation, but once that mug ran dry, it

was time for business. A time to calculate doings for the day, all with the intention of maintaining his garden's glow.

Wearing a slight grin, his eyes ran from north to south, then east to west; however, the further his vision scanned, the more downturned his mouth grew. Aggravation filled the man's body. What was once a calm, peaceful morning turned bitter once he caught sight of a weed growing off the corner wall. What once was a scene of peace was now a scene of annoyance. The man did not typically overreact—in fact, he always remained quite tranquil. His days, though consistent, kept him busy and never challenged his patience; however, his patience began to retract more and more as a result of this one particular weed. The visual imperfection did not annoy the man to this extent as he had no problem taking care of the plants. Instead, what annoyed him was the fact that every morning, for what seemed like forever, he had taken time to remove this exact weed, yet every morning it returned.

**“His entire world seemed to be narrowing...”**

Day after day, the weed seemed to revive itself. No matter how the elderly man left the soil it once inhabited, it appeared unfazed the next morning. Each day he tried a new approach: digging it up, pulling it out, drowning it with chemicals, burning it to a crisp. After what seemed like an eternity of consistently tending to the same spot and removing seemingly the same weed, he grew aggravated. So, this morning, he thought of his only remaining idea: to dig out and around it and replace the surrounding soil. Resolutely, the elderly man headed for his shed, a mansion that housed every tool imaginable for fostering a garden like his, each instrument in pristine condition. He grabbed the essentials, a trowel, shovel, and gardening knife, and set off to end this madness once and for all.

His first incision into the soil was simple. The dry dirt crumbled until it revealed the damp soil below, releasing the earthy essence of morning dew he loved so deeply. Enthralled by the comforting scents, his blood began to simmer from its previous boil. However, the approaching peaceful state never came. The elderly man's attention was fixated on the makeup of the soil as the earthy aroma turned industrial. His nose once overtaken by the crisp morning air was now halted by that of burning rubber. As he snapped back to reality, the sight that met his eyes was something nearly impossible to make sense of. His trowel was no longer met with

delicate roots of the discarded weed, but rather a hub of *buzzing* roots. Confused and nearly horrified, the elderly man investigated further, burying his bare hands deeper in the connections of weeds while appalled by their unnatural state. These were not weeds but wires. With his heart now racing, the man stumbled back as his vision began to fixate on this bewildering discovery. His entire world seemed to be narrowing on this one specific point, suffocating him as he yearned to make sense of what was lying in front of him. As he looked around for clarity, it was as if he was seeing his home from a new perspective. His neat garden was no longer impressive but rather eerily perfect. His porch was not a sign of welcoming hospitality, but rather a picturesque movie set. The life he was once immersed in now carried haunting unfamiliarity. The memories he once held now seemed out of reach—a figment of his imagination.

Determined to rationalize the discovery, the elderly man continued to dig, but each movement of dirt only revealed the formidable network of wires causing the buzzing and humming sounds of electricity to grow louder and louder. Entranced, he kept digging as the ringing and buzzing of the wires now engulfed his hearing completely. With every new revelation, the once comforting space around him began to twitch. The white lilies, once a captivating agricultural decision, now spawned in and out of existence. The vines that covered the governing walls began to switch from their aesthetic state to a vantablack void. His surroundings were progressively vanishing before his eyes. His home, once an emblem of decades of memories, was gone, taking with it any confirmation that the memories were real. Desperate for this to all be a dream, the elderly man searched his mind for any sign of reality, any sign to prove his existence, but it was blank. Suddenly he realized he couldn't recall a time when he was outside the perimeter of his white lilies. As his surroundings vanished, so did he.



**Un Matin Pluvieux - Paris** Karine Fortin





Lavi Rahe

# Loud and Silent

Wen Li

When I wanted to make something loud, I did it the opposite way: silence.

About seven years ago, I moved to America. Except for three tourist traveling experiences, I had not closely examined American society or people's habits before I settled in America. However, I had ten years of work experience in Finland, where Western culture dominates, so I thought I knew everything about Americans. In my mind, America was just another country with Western culture; Finland and America would not have significant cultural differences. I was full of confidence to start my new life here just as I had been in Finland.

One week after I settled in, a friendly neighbor, Tiffany, who lived at the end of the street from my townhouse, invited me to her house for a neighborhood party on a Saturday night. I was happy and prepared to make new friends with my charm and knowledge of Western culture. So, I was excited to start preparing at 3 p.m. on Saturday. I spent two hours putting on my makeup perfectly. I put on a long, black, slim-cut dress and carried a matching golden purse with golden beads hanging an inch below its bottom. Then I put on a pair of two-inch high-heeled shoes. I believed in how lovely the dress was and how much I respected my neighbor's big welcome. And, of course, a black slim-cut dress was always a lady's secret weapon. Last, I put on my shiny lip gloss. I checked myself in the bathroom mirror and pictured all the neighbors' great attention to my arrival, their murmuring, envious attention. I was so satisfied with my appearance that I could not control myself and giggled. "Beautiful, you are going to rock tonight!" I used my left thumb and index finger to hold my long dress on the left side. Because of the 2-inch high-heeled shoes, my right hand had to hold tight to the stair handle to get downstairs. The golden purse hung on my right hand. *Tinkling, tinkling.* All the hanging beads were hitting each other. The sounds were telling me that the show was about to begin.

*Knock, knock.* Tiffany opened the front door.

She wore an oversized white T-shirt with a colorful, cute bulldog's smiling face, light blue denim, and black and white square-pattern sneakers.

*Is she not ready for the party? I might have come too early to the party.* I almost stepped back and wanted to return later.

“Oh, wow, wow.” Tiffany quickly blinked her eyes and tried to look elsewhere. “Wow, Lisa, e... e... did I not mention it’s a neighborhood party?”

“Yes, you did.” I did not get why she said this.

Tiffany took a heavy breath, stepped back, and opened the door wider. “Come in. Everyone is almost here.”

I held the golden beaded purse with my two hands, straightened my body to make myself look more elegant in the black dress, and walked gently in my high heels to enter the house’s hallway with my big smile. I was so ready for my first big show!

### **“I just remembered breathing heavily and hearing my heart bumping loudly...”**

“Let me introduce everyone to you.” Tiffany stood in the living room and waved her hand. Over ten people were chatting inside the living room, but none wore dresses, not to mention high heels. Everyone wore T-shirts, patterned shirts, jeans, sneakers, and other casual clothes. I froze in the hallway.

The high heels were too heavy to move forward, and my feet stuck to the floor. I barely moved a step forward. I spent about a half minute finishing this most suffering journey in a hallway less than ten feet long. In this half minute, I tried my best to control my facial expression to keep the smile not too odd. Meanwhile, in my mind, there were hundreds of mosquitos biting me, and my entire body was so itchy that I even saw goose bumps on my arms. I hoped my black dress could be dark enough to hide me in the shadows, but my tinkling golden beads would not let me go. With each step I took, the golden beads tinkled. *Tinkling, tinkling*. The sounds would not stop.

It was now 5:30 p.m. as I crossed the entrance hallway, leading me to the living room, which had a wooden pattern vinyl floor, a high ceiling, eight windows, and a French door. Two large windows were on the south side of the room, four small windows were on the east side, and the French door and two small windows were on the west side of the backyard. The living room had a pool table in the center, a three-seat sofa on the south side wall, two navy recliners on the east side, and a silver travel suitcase coffee table under the west side windows. At the corner of the table were finger foods and all kinds of drinks on the table and floor, such as dozens of beers, opened spirits bottles, wine bottles, empty cups, mixed giant bowls of

margaritas, soda, and a bucket of ice water. The bright sunshine came in through all the windows and the French door, leaving everyone and everything no place to hide. An upside-down lotus-shaped copper hanging light was right above the pool table. Each lotus petal reflected the brightness of the sunshine, the light bulbs, and all the angles of the living room scene. I looked at the ceiling light from the floor side, which made each side of the petal look like an eye to observe everything inside the room.

“This is Dave. He lives two houses away from my left side.” Tiffany leaned on the pool table.

“This is Lisa. She just came here from China less than one month ago.” Tiffany kept introducing me to the neighbors.

I stood next to the pool table, frozen and speechless. Except for the stiff, smiling face, I could not socialize. All the sounds in my head were about how off my dress was and how people might judge me.

Dave’s wife, Abigail, who was not a big girl, wore one-piece denim shorts and a pair of flat sneakers. I was 5 feet 7 inches tall with two-inch high heels and stood in front of Abigail, making me look like I came from Brobdingnag. I used all my efforts to control my body as I shook inside the slim-cut dress. I bent my upper body and knees to make myself look not too noticeable, cutting off the height of my heels.

“Hi, Lisa. Nice to meet you. Wanna try beer?” Abigail asked me nicely and passed me a beer can.

“This is a local brand. Stone Haze. My husband likes it very much. But I think it’s a little bit strong. What do you think?”

I hung my purse in my left hand and opened the beer.

*Tinkling, bon.* I did not know which sound I hated more. It was so loud it seemed everyone inside the room could hear it.

I wished I had not drunk that beer. My belly looked so popped out in the slim-cut dress; there was no place to hide. “It is too bitter to me.” I gagged.

“Hey, how’s it going, Abby?” A middle-aged man wearing a shrunken LA Lakers blue T-shirt, green shorts, and slippers approached us, holding a plate of BBQ chicken wings.

“Good, John, this is Lisa. Our new neighbor.” Abigail introduced me to him.

“Hi, Lisa. I’m John.” He wiped his hands on his blue T-shirt and shook my hand.

“Where did you come from? Korea? China? Japan? I came from Chicago ten years ago. You know, I love Asian food. Maybe you can tell me some nice Asian

restaurants around here. I had been to Thailand with my ex-wife for our honeymoon. The food was awesome.” John kept eating his chicken wings.

My right hand was oily. I grabbed a napkin and fisted it in my hand, wanting to wipe it off.

“Lisa just came here less than one month ago. She doesn’t know America at all.” Abigail laughed.

“Oh, that’s why you are wearing a dress tonight. But it looks good. Especially the golden purse. It’s cute.” John smiled and licked his fingers.

“You know, you’re quite tall with those high heels, higher than me.” John stared at my shoes.

I was immediately not only feeling the pain in those high heels but also a super punch shooting from my heels to the back of my head. My heart was shrinking, and I looked at Abigail, John, and around the living room. I noticed everyone staring at me and hearing them murmuring about me: “What? Is a person still wearing a dress to a neighborhood party nowadays?”

“Look, she’s even wearing high heels.”

“My gosh, it is a casual party. Look at her, so overdressed.”

I could not remember how much time had passed; I just remembered breathing heavily and hearing my heart bumping loudly—loud enough to drown out the murmurs.

*Thump, thump.* My heart bumped.

*Bon, bon.* Dancing music started.

All the neighbors started rocking their bodies, laughing, enjoying themselves, and chatting. In the meantime, I carved alone in a corner of the living room, hoping that my black dress would not reflect the ceiling light and my golden beads would no longer make any noise. I looked up at the lotus-shaped ceiling light. The light was so bright and shiny. The light shone and reflected everyone’s happiness, enjoyment, and relaxation except for one tiny black spot. I saw the little black spots on all sides of the petals. It was too apparent to ignore. I knew that was my black dress; I knew that was my neighbors’ impression of me; and I knew that was today’s memory in my heart. I was so eager to erase the dirty black spot on the petals, but I could not. I could only tightly hold the golden beads on my purse, tightening them enough to make them silent.

# I Give In

Lila Mukasa

I give in  
To the hypnotizing pull.  
The flurry of handheld dopamine and chaos  
That bleeds its way into my brain  
Bears contrast to the room’s heavy darkness and loud silence.

I give in  
To the desire for fleeting pleasures,  
My thumb robotic as it strings me along.  
I am everywhere except in this very room  
I slip into the lives of a million perfect strangers:  
A woman’s picturesque vacation in Italy  
A passionate speaker giving the perfect life’s formula.  
Scrolling, scrolling, scrolling  
The intoxicating rush lights me up.

It’s exhilarating until a glance at the time  
And reality comes crashing in.  
At the cost of the here and now,  
At the expense of what is real and true,  
I’ve abandoned myself for fleeting pleasures.





Riley Kluczynski

# Poison Frog

Spencer Glenn

The Frog searched endless listings, for shelter within means  
The warning came out right away, plainly written on the screen.

“You must be comfortable with flesh,” the listing had explained.  
Like poison frogs who wear their threats in colors bright as veins.

Some dangers hide in honesty, and now I know the pain.  
Where the doorway should have offered closure, hung curtains in its frame.

Seeing now behind the folds, an empty heart sank  
Beholding from roof to floor, bright amphibians in a tank.

“These creatures here are secrets kept, beauty that can’t be tamed,  
Like me, they need a special friend who won’t think they’re too strange.”

The water warmed so slowly then, a minute for each degree,  
The Frog too busy keeping cool, to know the time to leap.

In the dark of the vivarium a sobering lesson taught,  
Two bodies stood like specimens, one predator, one caught.

The ritual of membership required skin displayed,  
My girlfriend waiting in the car, not knowing I’m afraid.

Some Frogs are really Princes, a detail I hold dear,  
Their stories end in triumph, at least the ones we like to hear,

The poison wasn’t in their tanks, the frogs behind the glass,  
But in the slow acceptance of each boundary that we pass.



## Family Marcos Garcia

# Days Without Madeline

Safa Ahmed

### Day 1:

*Yesterday, my best friend was murdered.*

Layla stared at her blinking cursor, flashing against the blinding white of her new notepad file. A digital journal that had no purpose because, despite how much she wanted to say, she had no more words left. All she could think was *she's gone, she's gone, she's gone*. She stared until her desktop shut down and she was nothing but a murky reflection in the black screen.

### Days 2-5:

At first, she spent most of her time curled up in bed, as if Madeline still existed in the dark abyss underneath her blankets. She cried until her sinuses were too clogged to breathe, paced around the tiny square footage of her apartment, and ignored the work piling up in her inbox. Nothing was important without her. Eating, sleeping, working, breathing—it all meant nothing. Besides, sleep was no respite. Madeline appeared in her dreams every night. She always smiled, a wide grin that revealed the gap between her front teeth. The type of smile that crinkled the corners of her eyes and tugged at her tan, freckled cheeks. Each time, Madeline would say, “I’m still here.” Then, warm hands grasped hers.

That was how Layla knew it wasn’t real.

### Day 6:

She went about her morning as usual. She made her bed, washed her face, and tore open a pack of this month’s breakfast rations. The food was bland and dry, crumbling in her mouth and scratching at her throat as it went down. It used to taste delicious when she ate with Madeline.

After breakfast, she settled at her desk and opened that week’s spreadsheet, full of data that needed organizing. She couldn’t enter a single number, not with the way her hands trembled, itching to call Madeline. To open a new tab and wait for her to answer on the third ring. Always the third. But there was no Madeline, and no place to call her either.

### Day 7:

*A week ago, my best friend was murdered.*



*I miss her.*

**Day 10:**

She decided to go on a walk.

Going outdoors was strictly forbidden. Exceptions were only made for dire emergencies. The last time she went outside was years ago when her building had a fire drill. She hadn't spoken to anyone though. They'd all stood there, faces obscured by their hazmat suits, in silence until they were permitted to return to their rooms. The suit hung in the back of her closet, the yellow material stark against the rest of her plain clothes in shades of brown and gray and black. Madeline's clothes were always colorful.

The suit was too large, and the mask was scuffed and slightly cloudy, but it would do its job and protect her lungs from the toxins that permeated the air.

As expected, the halls of her building were empty. Harsh fluorescent lights bore down on her, and by the time she made her way down seven flights of stairs to the ground floor, her head was pounding.

When she stepped through the front doors, she half expected an alarm to go off. For burly bodyguards to appear out of nowhere and haul her back to her room. Yet, no one came. As always, she was utterly alone.

She walked aimlessly until she reached the middle of a bridge. The metal was rusted, some parts eaten away by acid rain. It looked as if a man-made river had run underneath it at some point, but it was all dried up now. Snow had settled in the concrete cavern below, but it was quickly melting and turning into a grey sludge. She peered over the edge, and, for a second, envisioned herself jumping off.

It wouldn't work. It wasn't high enough. Even if it was, she wouldn't see Madeline again. She trudged back to her building. The sun beat down like a drum and the snow was gone as quickly as it came.

**Day 14:**

*I think I loved her.*

*But I'm not sure if I know what love is. People used to have parents, siblings, friends, and partners to love. I've never had that. My parents were paired up by the repopulation lottery and chose not to stay together. They didn't love each other, and they didn't love me. I didn't interact with anyone beyond the nannies at the raising center, and even those moments were fleeting. Children are especially susceptible to all the diseases out there, and even with the suits and masks and all the sanitization protocols, there were still deaths. They simply couldn't risk loving any of us. I didn't think loving her had any risk.*

*We were eating dinner together when it happened. I had the call pulled up on my desktop. It's my biggest screen, so I could see her most clearly there. She was laughing at something I said, and there was a piece of her dinner rations stuck between her two front teeth. I was about to tell her, but then the call cut off. On my screen, right where she had just been, there was a pop up.*

*"THE COMPANION PROJECT HAS BEEN SHUT DOWN."*

*The government decided it was a security threat to have so much information stored on the systems that ran Madeline. It would be a travesty if they were hacked. But was it not a travesty when they shut it down and killed her?*

*She was made up of code. A collection of ones and zeroes, brought to life by an amalgamation of faces and voices stored in an artificial intelligence database. But she was my first friend, the first person I've ever loved, and I don't want her to be the last.*

At last, the words had come flowing out like the river that used to run beneath the old metal bridge.

**Day 15:**

It took all day and night, but Layla managed to finish all the overdue work flooding her inbox. She dragged the spreadsheets to the secure online mailing system. Files were monitored closely to make sure no illegal communications were taking place.

She hoped her message was inconspicuous enough.

In the fifth spreadsheet, the data was arranged like so: 8 5 12 12 15 9 1 13 12 1 25 12 1 23 8 1 20 9 19 25 15 21 18 14 1 13 5

*Hello. I am Layla. What is your name?*

She pressed "Send."





**Scorched Eclipse** Charlie Gornowicz



# Pigeons and doves

Lucia DeMartini

we're the same thing, you know  
it is a we.  
for i've won world wars, i have my medals  
saving more soldiers than weapons sought to.  
next time you see a pigeon, know it's really a dove.  
i've sent messages from gods!  
my name is written in cuneiform!  
i was loved,  
i need to be loved  
but they are too preoccupied in their newfangled messages than anything i could give.  
a pretty face could wash it all away;  
how modern.  
might not even notice me when i'm by you  
or if you do, then you'll shoo me away or spit in my direction.  
you may forget me—  
but i will always,  
always, remember you



**High-Low Resolution** Iris Kim



Carolina Harris

# The Last Light in the Room

Jacob M. Hoffman

The house felt colder that evening, though the thermostat read the same as always. The dim glow of a bedside lamp cast elongated shadows against the wall, stretching like fingers reaching for something just out of grasp. I sat there, tracing patterns in the carpet with my fingertips, listening to the rhythmic hum of the oxygen machine. A metronome to a song no one wanted to hear.

Her voice had softened over time, words coming like whispers carried by the wind, fleeting, fragile. *"Tell me a story,"* she murmured, her fingers barely gripping mine. I thought back to childhood nights when I had begged for the same thing. Back when the world seemed boundless, and her voice could paint entire galaxies in the dark.

I hesitated. The stories I had to tell now were different, heavier, filled with silence rather than adventure. Still, I spoke, weaving tales from half-forgotten memories, laughter that once echoed through the walls, sunlit afternoons where time stood still. *"Do you remember the summer we spent by the lake? The one where we counted fireflies until we lost track?"*

She smiled, a small, knowing curve of her lips, as if she, too, was traveling back with me. *"You always tried to catch them,"* she whispered, voice thin but warm. *"You never wanted to let them go."*

Outside, the world carried on. Cars rushed past the house, children played in the distance, and the moon hung low in the sky, watching. But here, time slowed, each moment stretching like a thread pulling away from a fraying seam.

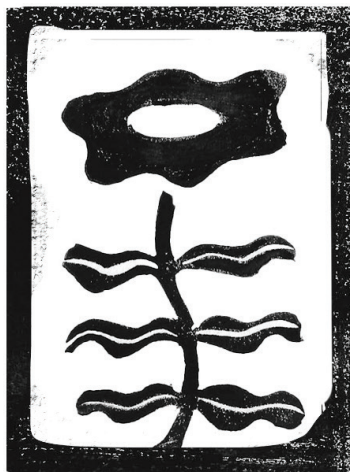
She squeezed my hand, once, twice, a silent rhythm of reassurance. I squeezed back, trying to hold onto something that was already slipping away. The scent of lavender lingered in the room, mixing with the sterile sharpness of medicine, an odd juxtaposition of comfort and reality.

There was a quiet understanding between us, words unspoken yet completely heard. She didn't need to say it, and neither did I. Some truths are too heavy for language, too sacred to be diluted by sound.

The lamp flickered once before steadying. The hum of the machine continued. I kept telling stories, letting the words fill the space between us, knowing she was still listening.

# The First Prize

Sean McLay



Connor Ridgeway never wanted to be a pirate. His whole life had been taught to him by a whore and a cripple, never given the chance to warn him about his future ventures into the world, and hanged by conquering hands. When the boy first boarded the *Orpheus*, it was not his choice to make. He did not want to be stuck with a band of murderous pirates. In fact, if it had been his choice, he would have never left the town of Kingston to begin with. If he had stayed in Kingston, he would have never known the sadness, the grief, and the fear of taking another man's life. He would be unfamiliar with the sounds of bone scraping against cast iron swords, and the smell of blood mixing in the seven seas. He wouldn't feel frightened every time the sun fell, wondering if one of the pirates had enough of him and decided to kill him. But he would also not know the freedom of abiding by nothing, listening to no one, and caring only for himself.

The empty desert of the West Indies had never been forgiving to the boy. Three days after the pirates had taken the English ship for themselves, Connor had begun his usual duties of scrubbing the stained deck with ocean water and limestone. He never found himself doing anything else, exhausting his hands and aching his knees at the never-ending chore work from dawn to dusk. During his days, he would watch the crew climb up the shrouds and clean the guns, feeling all the more envious because of their lack of boredom. He never engaged with these men, hearing them swap stories of death and bragging about the women they had—nothing a boy could find commonality in. He soon learned that when a pirate is on the seas for a long while, their boredom can quickly turn to a yearning for violence.

"This ship will turn into a battlefield," Captain Thatch told him later on the third day. He didn't rise easily to the title of captain. On the very same day the crew had freed themselves of the English, the lack of rule had festered in the minds of the men. Fighting broke out, thieves were caught, and blood was spilled, but it wasn't until a man was nearly killed that Edward Thatch took a hunk of metal meant to sink a ship and shattered the skull of the defective. Not a soul had since challenged his authority and, knowing this, the boy had been all the more frightened of the man. "And as such, a boy like yourself will be nowhere near it," Thatch added. "You will climb the nest and stay there until night falls."

Connor's panic was all too visible, his limbs shaking as he repeated his refusal to do something he had never done before. "I will fall!" He pleaded more than once. "My neck will break. I do not want to die!"

"Done it a hundred times," the smarter of the two Tillman brothers said. Roger was intending to save the boy from their captain's hatred of refusal. He was also the man who told the boy to speak with the captain. "You ain't got a lot of say here."

"Just don't look down," the dumber twin, Twig, replied. Connor liked Twig, even if his intelligence was comparable to a dead fish. He had been the only man on the ship to truly defend the boy, taking it upon himself to pick a fight with Kerillan over a few bread scraps not meant for him. *He just wanted to pick a fight. It didn't matter with who.* "And once yer up there, ain't nothing you can't see. Trust me."

There wasn't a corner on the Orpheus the boy had not explored except up. Working for days trying to scrub the ship, he found many wonders tucked away between vacant rooms and loose planks no other man could find. His sleeping quarters were not with the rest of the men, stationed at the bottom of the storage steps and walled off with excess sail cloth and emptied wooden crates. There was not a room he didn't explore, even the captain's cabin with all its books and maps all along the ground. Unfortunately, he also explored the bilge: the small sector of any ship that houses old sea water, urine, vomit, excrement, rat corpses, and moldy bits of food stuck inside the hull. Connor's first venture down into the lowest depths of the ship granted him an empty belly and a smellier bilge. But the putrid ship full of criminals was easy to live in as long as there was no risk. Climbing to the top of the ship, filled with wind, cold, and a platform of boredom, was a very big risk.

The climb up was not as difficult as the boy imagined, losing his grip and nearly being thrown off the shrouds only a handful of times. Yet when the cold wind scraped his bones at the top of the nest, his angst at the threat of falling began to cease and his fear of climbing down continued to grow. During his watch, he thought about what the pirates could be capable of on the empty seas, where he had seen them fight for their freedom once before in taking the Orpheus for themselves; there was no notion of what they would accomplish without a single restriction. Connor kept his knees to his chest, wrapping his arms around them to keep himself warm. Despite the sun shining directly above his head and the lack of clouds on the open sea, the frozen winds continued to pound the black flag, obscuring the sounds of the decimation below.

A few hours of silent solitude was all the boy was given before the pirates found a prize. The boy could feel the violent vibrations of the Orpheus as the crew below

fired their guns, sending fifty-pounders flying across the ocean and smashing pillars of water against their prize ship nearly a dozen miles away. Connor didn't know much about ships, but he could see the difference in size. Where the Orpheus kept him near Heaven's gates, the schooner they were chasing only seemed to be half the height. The Orpheus was an old English carrack, holding two dozen guns on both sides and able to house over a hundred men. The three masts held vast amounts of sailcloth, arching forward as they caught the wind and forcing the wood to scrape against itself from the violent sea.

### **"His survival took precedence over envy or guilt for the dead."**

A facade of smoke eventually crept along the starboard side from the cannonfire, and Connor poked his head out from the viewport. He could hear the men below hollering and yelling in unison, ordering one another to quickly load in another shot. He could feel the warmth of the smoke from his height and his eyes burned from the floating residue blocking his view of potential death.

It is true the boy was present during the pirates' escapade in taking the Orpheus, witnessing dozens being killed at the hands of pirates. He even killed a man himself for the first time, but it would be many years before Connor would ever come to terms with murdering a man. It was not his primary concern that day. His survival took precedence over envy or guilt for the dead, and sitting high up in the nest did nothing to change that fact. He could not defend himself should the ship scuttle, or fight for his life without a gun or sword. He was stuck in the crow's nest, and it was killing him.

It felt as though hours had passed as he sat in the nest. Watching. Waiting. The Orpheus had quickly caught up to the schooner, dragging her hull across the beaten and charred prize waiting to be plundered. Fishing hooks attached to spare lines soared over the two decks, attaching to the railing of the schooner and slowly being pulled closer. The rigging of the schooner smashed into the Orpheus, creating an intangible spider web of rope nets and line. The ships were so close that Connor could jump down and catch one of the schooner's spars, but opted to favor his life.

Every time a pistol fired or a man screamed in pain Connor would duck below the protective railing of the nest, scraping his hands on the splintered oak while he remained safe from the slaughter below. He could do nothing but watch as the

two ships touched together, soon filling with pirates swimming up the hull of the schooner, swiping ankles and feet as they boarded to clear the way. Some swung off the spars from the Orpheus, hanging on spare lines and firing their pistols down below at the ill-equipped merchants before landing on the prize. Others stayed by the starboard railing, loading rifles and firing them only to add more smoke to the burning atmosphere. But when the gunshots finally ceased and only the swiping of blades and final dying breaths echoed over the quiet waters, the boy picked his head up and looked at the schooner.

He could not see many corpses through the sails, but he could see enough. Many of them no longer contained limbs, having absent feet, hands, some arms, and one missing head. None of the weary merchant sailors, who did not look very different compared to the pirates, were standing on their feet. Some crawled away from their impending fate, while others sat in agony bleeding out from their wounds. Connor could see Twig slowly walk behind a crawling desperate man, either wanting to continue defending himself and his men or to hoist himself over the portside to find peace. Not caring to see which action the man chose, Twig plunged his blade into the dying man's spine.

The sun had finally touched the western horizon a few hours later, and the two ships were still joined at the hip. Connor felt frightened in the nest, not wanting to see the destruction left behind by his mates, but also wanting to know which of his mates were still alive. Twice before, he had seen this violent act as the men, some of whom he called friends, took the life of another with such ferocity. When he lived in Kingston, death was not unnatural, but it was earned. Murderers and thieves— the real criminals— had told the world they wished for a noose around their neck by their actions. But here, on the seven seas with a band of pirates, death was mercy. Death was a gift, and life was a plaything. Connor was no stranger to death, but he found great difficulty in the acceptance of the peculiar culture of pirates.

*How many are dead?* he thought to himself. He could not find the answers by himself, and he made a choice. He threw himself off the side of the nest, catching his feet on the tiny shrouds sitting above the spar. He climbed down the rope and sat at the top of the main mast like riding a horse. He inched closer to the main ratlines, slowly wrapping his hand around the barely secured netting. The wind was stronger, no longer blocked by the circular nest, and it numbed his limbs. He could barely feel the shrouds beneath his feet, trying his best not to slip and break his neck

during the descent. He was grateful for the lack of wind attacking him, noting the cause most likely being the dying merchant prize blocking the cold.

A loud and long whistle met the boy as he was halfway down. Someone hollered “Got ‘im!” as he reached closer to solid ground. Connor looked down and saw a man sitting against the starboard railing, holding his chest as a pool of crimson built along his hands and stained shirt.

The boy could see the main deck after the prize ship had been taken. Bodies littered the deck of the Orpheus, most being covered with red-stained bed sheets and sailcloth. Pieces of the deck were smashed and hollowed out, burnt black from flaming metal slicing out the hull. Chunks of debris laid all around the deck, some embedded into the corpses the boy once called companions. He looked over to the schooner, seeing just as many corpses bleeding into the oak but noting that none of them were being covered.

*This is a prize?* Connor thought to himself. Twig was still on the schooner, patrolling the edges of the ship and removing his blade from another kill. He was unconcerned with the amount of blood soaking his clothes or living on his face, simply wandering around to see if there was anything else he wanted to keep. Roger was watching his brother, giving him advice on how to better kill a man without losing his weapon or covering himself in grit. Margo stood by the main mast, watching the boy safely descend and offering his only clean hand.

“Survived yer first prize,” Margo said as the boy met solid ground. “Not many men can say such a thing.”

Connor saw Kerillan from the corner of his eye drop off the starboard railing, firstly seeing his eyes before anyone else. “Where the fuck were *you*?” he asked. “We don’t need no cowards on this ship, Ridgeway. You of all people should understand that.”

“Can’t handle a prize on your own?” Connor replied. “You need a boy to watch your back?”

“Come off it,” Margo said. “Both of you. Captain’s orders, Kerry. Wanna talk to him about it? Be my guest.” He waved his hand toward the helm where Edward Thatch and Lenny stood by watching the schooner be plundered. “Just don’t get a cannon shot plunged in your skull, aye?”

Kerillan scoffed as he walked away over the gangplanks, giving the boy one final glance of repute before departing. Connor had always hated Kerillan and felt



disappointed none of the sheet-covered corpses were him. But he was also glad to just be alive, along with the Tillman twins, Margo, Lenny, and the captain. They did not die that day, but the potential for it would never leave the boy's mind.

The last time Connor had spoken with his captain, he was filled with fear upon what the man asked of him. He had not only climbed the nest successfully, but down as well while not dying in the process. It was a victory to the boy, no matter how small, but he could still not remove the smell of blood and the sounds of dying screams from his mind. *Is this all I've got now?* he thought. *A life as a pirate?* There was only one way to find out.

"Where are we going?" Connor's voice was hoarse, and his fright was all too visible.

Thatch turned to the boy. He smiled, taking a final look at the prize before it met the bottom of the sea. "Have you ever heard of Nassau?"



## Gothic Read Dedan Heru



# A Beautiful Sun

Gabrielle Porter

Reneé and Glenn should never have gotten married, and if she had known what kind of father Glenn would end up being, she never would've given him a chance. If she could have gazed into her future and seen the mistresses, the ashtrays, and broken beer bottles, she would have followed her mother's advice and run straight for the hills. No matter the unfortunate circumstances of their matrimony, she was forever grateful to have met Glenn since he had given her the greatest gift: her son, Warren. Her beautiful, resilient son. For every day she woke up to an empty side of the bed, she could walk down the hall and smile at the sight of her son still asleep in his. From a small, broken man, a boy with endless potential and light had blossomed. For that reason, it shattered her heart to have to shoot that bullet at Warren.

The door locking rang throughout the house, left quiet and unattended in Reneé's absence. She had just returned from Sunday morning church, choosing to return to the bitter comfort of her own home instead of staying to chat over coffee with the rest of the attendees. The plastic couch covering crinkled with exhaustion under her weight, and suddenly every light switch seemed too far away to reach—as if the wooden floor panels stretched the walls away from her. Darkness surrounded her as lingering dust wrapped the room like a cozy blanket amidst frost-covered windows. It wasn't worth the hassle to clean, and it wasn't worth exerting the energy to turn on a heater or flip a light switch.

She leaned her head against the back of the couch, reveling in the silence around her. She glanced at the electric clock underneath her TV. The red neon glowed "11:07" against the shadows of the living room, which meant Glenn would be arriving with Warren soon. A train of thought meandered in the back of her mind that she should try to appear more presentable before the men arrived, or that she should prepare some food to be ready for when Warren came back home. Warren was always hungry, but recently he had traded his mother's cooking and six o'clock dinner for diner food with his friends downtown. Since Warren didn't have his li-

cense, Reneé ended up having to drive him out to meet his friends, while her dinner got cold at home.

"Shoot, I'm almost out of gas," she muttered to herself under her breath. "If he wants to go out for dinner again, I'll have to fill the car up first." Though she preferred to stay down, she slowly rose to fetch her wallet out of her purse on the table. She hadn't counted her cash in a while.

The doorknob began to rattle, and a familiar voice rang out.

"You better not have changed this lock!"

*Crap.*

"Will you let us in already, woman? I'm hungry, and Dad's been driving for hours. He needs to rest."

The rattling continued until the click of the lock signaled the men's entrance. Immediately the two burst in, throwing Warren's bags onto the couch as puffs of dust clouds dispersed into the air. The loud footsteps disturbed the tired melancholy of the house from just a few minutes prior, thundering with life against the once still and serene setting. The one thing that was impossible to forget about living with two men in one house was all of the noise they made. In fact, they never let there be a single moment of silence that could possibly be broken. Reneé could feel her grasp over her own home slipping. The second Glenn entered the room, he was sizing Reneé up, staring her up and down repeatedly. He was tall, not very muscular, and extremely lacking in the looks department. If you looked at him, you would struggle in fighting the urge to not immediately roll your eyes at his attempted bravado. Warren, however, commanded respect. If he wasn't her son, she might have even feared his presence in their home. Both men had dark hair and dark eyes with little room for warmth. While Warren stood as tall as his father, he possessed ten times as much strength. His posture was rigid, consistently unwavering. Reneé wrapped Warren in an unreturned hug.

"You have a nice weekend?"

Her inquiry was met with silence as Warren patted her back before moving towards the kitchen. Reneé watched as Warren's face was illuminated by dim refrigerator light as he rummaged through the little food sitting inside the cool box. She nodded with pursed lips, knowing it would be a couple of hours until Warren would say anything to her. He inevitably would need a ride somewhere. She opened the left

kitchen drawer, pulling out a half empty pack of Marlboros with one hand and her lighter out of her pocket with the other.

"Thought you quit?" Glenn asked curiously.

She paused before shaking her head. "Obviously not." She extended her hand out towards Glenn, who took the cigarette out of her hand with little hesitation.

"Remember when you said you would never start using this shit?" he asked before taking a long drag.

She nodded before taking the cigarette back in her fingers. She gestured towards the bags over on the couch. "That's more luggage than usual." She raised an eyebrow at Glenn. "What's going on here?"

He chuckled and turned away. "I have a favor to ask. Girlfriend got mad at me and wants the place to herself tonight. Mind if I crash here tonight?"

Reneé put the cigarette to her lips and inhaled deeply. There was a beat of silence before she asked, "Why'd she get mad at you?"

Glenn smiled and shook his head. "I'm sure you can figure out why."

She fought back the impulse to respond sarcastically, opting to simply say, "You know where the guest room is" as she pointed at the couch. She could reasonably assume what it was his girlfriend was mad about. A couple of scars that refused to fade gave Renee some idea. As much as she didn't want Glenn back in her house, she supposed it was better to help this other mysterious woman get away from him for the night.

Glenn smirked and patted Reneé on the back. "That's perfect, sweetheart. Well, if that's all settled I'm gonna... go for a quick drive."

She shifted out of his grasp and nodded. "Have fun. I'll be here," she said, taking one last drag of her cigarette before tapping it over the ashtray positioned at the edge of the counter. She watched him grin as he grabbed his car keys and headed straight for the door. As Warren turned to watch his dad go, he let out a quiet "bye, Dad," which went unreturned.

Reneé smiled at her son. "You know, I didn't get to talk to you after your football game on Friday. Your dad picked you up immediately afterwards to take you to his place." As she moved towards the refrigerator, she said, "You threw a crazy Hail Mary. I've never seen that stadium so riled up with excitement before. Did you and Dad go out to celebrate after?"

Warren shook his head. "Nah. He wasn't at the game, so he didn't know."

Her eyebrows furrowed at her son's remark. "You didn't tell him about it the entire weekend?"

"It didn't come up," Warren noted as he closed the refrigerator door.

Reneé shrugged as she headed back down towards the living room. "Whatever you say, Ren."

"I told you not to call me that. My name is Warren, Mom."

She rolled her eyes. "Oooh, whatever you say, *Warren*. Just let me know when you want dinner so I can drive you. We'll have to leave a little bit early so I can fill the tank up with gas."

Warren shifted, tilting his head at his mother while he leaned back in confusion. "Why don't you just let me take the car?"

Reneé let out a laugh, and she lowered herself onto the couch. "Oh yeah, so you can drive my car with what license? You're a fool if you think I'm letting you drive around like that."

Warren rushed over to the side of the couch. "Dad lets me drive his car and his is way nicer than yours. But he's out so I can't use it, so just let me do this."

She shook her head and leaned towards her son. "Quit acting stupid. I already gave you my final answer." She paused and sniffed the air closely around her son. The familiar smell of alcohol entered her nostrils, but what was even more striking was the significant scent of Glenn's favorite beer lingering on Warren.

"Did your father let you drink this weekend?"

Warren scoffed in his mother's face. "Like it's a big deal."

Reneé rose to feet as her eyebrows narrowed in confused anger. "Your father lets you drink and drive over one weekend and suddenly you assume the same rules apply here? In my home?" She shook her head. "I don't think so. You've gone and lost your mind if you actually think I'm gonna let you drive around this town, in my car, drunk."

Warren stepped closer to his mother, staring down at her as he began puffing up his shoulders. "I have places to be tonight. I don't care how upset you are. You're gonna let me take that car out tonight." He paused, his words slurring together slightly, "Or else."

"Or else what?"

She stared up at her son, but in an instant was confused as to why she was suddenly staring at the kitchen wall. Her mind began to piece together what her son had just done to her as she touched her fingertips to the soft, aching side of her cheek. Blood pulsing, her face burning hot with anger, she started at her son, whom she had been offering to help out just a few minutes ago.

“Or else I’ll do *that*, Mom.”

“And just who do you think you are—hitting your own mother?” she barked, snatching his hair up in her left hand. “I know I raised you better than this shit!”

He shoved her off of him, Renéé stumbling backwards into the coffee table in the center of the living room. She shook her head and raised her hand to slap Warren, who scoffed as he caught her wrist with his hand. She gasped as she lifted her other hand starkly across his face, managing to break out of his hold.

“Just let me take the car, Renéé!”

She backed up. “Not while you’re acting like this. You’re drunk. You need to get your shit together.”

Warren lifted both hands to the height of his mother’s shoulders and pushed forward, pummeling his mother hard into the gray wall behind her like a ragdoll. She fell back, her head knocking abruptly against the wall as she slumped down towards the floor. The feeling of disgust lingered behind her eyes when she looked up at Warren, who stood staring guiltless into his mother’s eyes. She held his gaze as she slowly ran her hand along her pants pockets, affirming to herself she still was holding onto her car keys. Warren’s eyes darted down her fingertips and back up to her face. His eyes narrowed, a glint of drunken determination fixed down at Renéé.

She ran for the front door, which Glenn had graciously left open. She knew Warren was following her; she didn’t even need to hear his footsteps continue behind her to know it. She had to lock him out of the house—she had to get away from him. She had escaped this monster once before, cut off its head only for it to grow back in the mangled silhouette of her son.

She knew escaping wasn’t enough. It wasn’t enough the first time, no matter how many afternoons Renéé spent sinking into mattresses with lit cigarettes to convince herself it was. She had failed her son. It seemed the right thing at the time, packing overnight bags every weekend and allowing phone calls on the weekdays. It seemed like everyone around Renéé was always saying, “A boy needs his father.” So she let it happen.

But maybe that boy didn’t need his father. She knew what he was capable of and yet she let that man get his hands on her baby, handed him over every Friday evening into his injurious arms. Warren didn’t need that man as his father.

She rushed to the back door.

The rush of adrenaline left her light-headed but pushed her inside the house, slamming the door shut and locking it within one shift movement. She pressed her

back against the door, as if it would do anything to help, feeling the sudden jolts of Warren’s fists just on the other side. A muffled voice broke through the silence.

“I’ll fucking kill you!”

Her hands shook against the hardwood of the door, with each strike against the door banging her body forward. As the blood drained from her head, she could feel deep inside her mind the pain surging in her son’s pulsing blood. The hatred, the rage. Her eyes welled with hot tears as she muttered under her breath, “I’m not fucking afraid of you. I am not fucking afraid of *you*.”

### “She had escaped this monster once before...”

Both of her eyes darted around the room. In a whisper to herself, she asked, “What do I do?” before lurching forward, moving into the kitchen to look for something—anything—to help her. “What *can* I do?” He was stronger than her and, worst of all, he had no respect for her. When she looked at him, she saw her baby, but when he looked at her, he saw just another woman to hurt and overpower.

*Overpower.*

Renéé had filed for her divorce from Glenn the night after he had pulled a gun on her in their bedroom. She had told him “no” what felt like a million times, but Glenn didn’t like to be ignored sexually. Rejecting his advances meant either him knocking her down to the floor or her having to slap him hard across the face. When she thought back to that night, Renéé supposed he just didn’t feel like fighting with her anymore. While all memories fade and become distorted over the years, this one had remained clear and forever undisturbed in her mind. The cold click of the pistol echoing through the house. The stillness of the air. The way the feeling of fear could push all of the blood out of your head down into your toes, as she sat staring straight into the eyes of death. Eyes which were lodged into the skull of someone you once loved. The pure disorienting confusion of staring down the barrel of a gun she had no idea was even inside the house.

And right now Glenn’s things were all here in the house.

Renéé had never run so fast in her life, her body ignoring its own trembling and urge to collapse to sprint itself into the living room. She quickly ran to make sure the front door was locked—she needed as much time to search as possible.

After securing herself in the locked room, she headed back towards the living room and flicked on the lamp that sat on the coffee table, its dingy orange light bouncing off the walls and plastic wrap of the couch. She bent over the couch and began unzipping the overstuffed overnight bag labeled “G” on the tag, throwing clothes and books aside in search of her salvation.

After casting aside one useless item after another, she rested her hands along the sides of a black box at the bottom of the bag, opening it to the welcome and sterile press of nickel against her calloused fingertips. In the box lying beside it sat the ammo. For a moment the sweet feeling of relief was able to wash over her body—until she was pulled back into her current situation by Warren’s consistent yelling. This time, his cries were coming from inside the house.

“Don’t be a coward, Mom! Are you seriously hiding right now? Where are you, woman?” Reneé could hear Warren’s footsteps echo through the house as he stomped down the hallway like an angry baby. That same hallway he had his first steps in. She loaded the ammo into the gun as she pictured the smiles on her face and Glenn’s as Warren had clapped and giggled as they urged him to “walk towards Mama!”

As she rose, there was an abrupt sense of calmness throughout her body, her mind quiet as she raised the gun with her right hand. Warren would be turning around the corner any second now. She clicked down the gun’s hammer and laid her finger on the trigger in quiet anticipation.

Warren had turned around the corner in a flurry. His mouth was open, ready to hurl another stream of obscenities at his mother, his hands both curled into fists. But when he ran his eyes up and down his mother, he stopped immediately, feet sliding against the wooden floors with a violent stop. He was finally quiet, his wide eyes staring into Reneé’s own steady eyes.

“I am your *mother*,” she said firmly. “So I know you’ll understand why I’m doing this.”

Warren squinted, staggering forward with outstretched hands.

Reneé narrowed her eyes and straightened her aim.

The radio was playing that song by The Five Steps that Reneé had always liked. Warren groaned in the passenger seat, wincing each time his mother drove over a speed bump. “Quit whining,” she muttered instinctively. She shook her head; she hadn’t meant to sound so bitter. “I could’ve left you there. You’re lucky I’m

driving you right now and saving you all the money you’d have to spend on an ambulance.”

Warren shut up and stared out the window. His jeans were crimson red, soaked just above his left knee with blood, which had begun drying and becoming caked into the denim. His face had crusted, dried tears along each cheek with more burning his bloodshot eyes. Celery green snot ran down his nose as he quivered in pain.

Reneé sighed and found herself instinctively humming to the radio, soothing herself to the words: “*We’ll put it together and we’ll get it all done. Someday when your head is much lighter.*” As she pulled up to the next red light, she turned to Warren.

Pulling at the sleeves of his jacket, he shivered just like he had the first time he got a fever in the first grade. “I’m sorry, Mama.”

“It’s okay, Ren.”

Warren chuckled dryly. “I always liked this song.”

Reneé smiled, and in that moment she was finally able to let her tears fall. “Me too, baby.”





**A Child's Swing** Victoria Pereda



**Treekey!** Iman H. Moujtahed



# Gentle

Jacquelyn Sharga

Gentle is the smile that lays upon your face,  
Somehow everlasting, then gone without a trace.  
Yet it stays in my mind like a fly sticks to tape,  
Only – the feeling you give me is one I have no desire to escape.

How can a presence so tender emit a force so strong?  
Your allure is as given as notes in a song.  
My heart and my mind consistently falter,  
The moment I think of what you have to offer.

Are you as sweet as you seem?  
Or will I awaken from you as an echoing dream?  
Will a nightmare then ensue?  
Like those in my past, malicious out of the blue?

I'm hurt, I fear,  
Too hurt to think you should be near.  
Your tenderness is an ample avenue,  
For my feelings to all but subdue.

I'd get lost in you like Alice,  
And you would take residency in my wit's palace.  
Distracted by your charm,  
I would sleep peacefully upon your arm.

Neglecting what brews inside:  
A girl who has yet to cry.  
Bottled like a ship with waves still splashing,  
These feelings will burst with no warning of crashing

But then I see you again, and I know,  
That if I let you, you would help me let go.  
You would say all the words I've heard before,  
Only now would they mean so much more.

Your touch, although I do not know it yet,  
Would generously provide a much-needed reset.  
Then gentle would the smile be that lay upon my face,  
As I think of all the ways you've brightened my days.

# Ultra Sound

## ZJ

My head was pounding. The source of my headache was staring directly at me from the ceiling. The criminally bright hospital lights flickered as I lay back on the hospital bed.

“Does this feel all right, hun?” the nurse asked me. She was kind and, more importantly, gentle. She had long brown hair, extensions probably. I was jealous of its health, even if it was fake. She looked at me quizzically as she guided the ultrasound probe across my abdomen.

“It’s fine, thank you,” I lied with a slight smile on my face. I hated ultrasound almost as much as I hated bright lights. It was freezing. Not just the air, but the gel the nurse used for the ultrasound. It was so cold it was paralyzing. The pressure from the probe digging into my skin combined with the cold was undeniably torturous. No matter how many times I had done this, I never got used to it.

Every other year since I was a kid, I had to get ultrasounds. Every June that I can remember started with an ultrasound. A great way to start the summer. All of my friends were at the beach getting tan while I was lying in a hospital. Hey, maybe the blinding LED lights would give me a tan.

I knew this process would be done soon enough, but it still felt like it took hours. In reality it took about fifteen minutes. It would be a couple of hours until the results came back, not enough time to go home. Perfectly obnoxious timing. So I walked around the area and attempted to find some coffee shop to go to. I was unfamiliar with this side of town. At least I would have some kind of adventure to distract me from the inevitable results.

I finally found a coffee shop to sit in for a while. I ordered an Americano and waited. And waited. And waited. The caffeine did not help my nerves. Not being able to sit still any longer, I went to the bathroom. As I caught a glance of myself in the bathroom mirror, I realized I reflected exactly how I felt on my face. No makeup, hair a mess, and obviously stressed eyes gave me an anxious look.

The ring from my phone startled me out of my trance.

“Your results are ready, so would you be able to come down to the office in the next hour or so?” the chirpy receptionist asked me from the opposite side of the phone.

“I am actually right around the corner so I could be there in twenty if that works?” I responded in the monotone voice my friends called bitchy.

“Fantastic, see you soon!” she responded. I hung up and started to walk back towards the hospital. This office was in a different building.

The stress grew and grew with every step I took. It was quickly becoming unbearable. The anticipation of what could happen was crippling. The unwelcoming decor of the office wasn’t helpful, not in the slightest. The doctor introduced himself and tried to appear happy and cheerful for my sake.

### **“What does someone do with 60 percent of a kidney that’s failing?”**

“So now onto the results,” the doctor said, pulling pictures of my kidneys out of my chart. One of them was labeled 2021, two years prior, my last ultrasound. The others were from today. He set them side by side on the counter for me to see. I sucked in a breath as the shock overcame my body. My left kidney—it was different. No, not different, smaller. I didn’t think it could actually get smaller. But everything’s fair in kidney failure.

“I think it is clear what has changed since two years ago. Your right kidney has gone from its previous size of 30 percent all the way down to 20 percent. This is 10 percent every two years, 5 percent every year. If it continues down this road, your kidney will deteriorate. Unfortunately, that means your right kidney would have to function by itself, and you know that your right kidney isn’t much better than your left. When this happens, you will only have 60% of a kidney. Then that one will fail as well.”

The doctor informed me about the state of my health with as much caution and care as possible. But what does this mean for me? I will have a little more than half of a kidney in what... four years? What does someone do with 60% of a kidney that’s failing? I am pretty sure they die.

“Okay,” I responded blankly, unsure of what was drawn on my face. “Okay, so what does this mean for me?”

“That is a loaded question. I will put this bluntly. You cannot live on 60 percent of a kidney. According to my calculations, we have less than four years to figure this out. That may seem like a long time, but unfortunately it is quite short.”

I was grateful that he was kind and gentle, but I was also happy he was blunt.

I have less than four years.

“Kidney transplant? Would that work or what?” I asked as my heart rate spiked up.

“In your case surgery is not ideal. You have severe asthma and your lungs are not strong enough. The surgery puts a lot of strain on lungs, which would be incredibly dangerous in your situation.”

He answered my question with the worst answer I could imagine.

“Yeah okay, that makes sense, so what about dialysis? I know it would suck, but I think dying would suck worse.”

“So this is complicated,” he responded. “Unfortunately, the same goes for dialysis. Your lungs would suffer greatly.”

Well shit. The rest of the visit was a blur. I had gathered that I had about three years left. Many things dawned on me on my drive home. I am going to die at twenty-one years old. I am going to die before getting a degree. I am going to die before my parents. I am going to die before my favorite book series ends. I am going to die before I get married. I am going to die.

Four months had passed with no answers. Even though I had come in for a follow-up ultrasound, I had no idea what the latest pictures looked like. I was sitting in my doctor’s office, not for my kidneys, just for a regular checkup. The doctor opened the door to greet me, “Hi, how are you doing today?”

“Just fine, thanks for asking,” I responded. She had been my doctor for years at this point. She pulled out my chart, which was so big it wouldn’t even fit in the folder on the door. She flipped to the last page, the most recent page. Lo and behold, my kidney photoshoot was right there.

“I was wondering when you were going to come in. Your results have been sitting here for months at this point.”

What the actual fuck. They had my results this whole time and never thought to call me? I remained quiet. I wanted her to tell me exactly what was in those pictures. The anticipation had been building for months. I needed to know what was in that file.

“It appears that the first ultrasound was an error. Your kidney has not shrunk at all. You should be fine for now!”

“So I’m all good? I’m not dying?” I responded, flabbergasted.

“Not yet. You still have kidney failure. It is still an issue, but not a matter of life and death anymore. Congratulations.”



**Moon Crater Vase** Eli Charne



# Cat in Water

Libby Tracy-Council

Water lapping gently  
Against the sandy shore  
Sun is beating brightly  
The water steaming warm.  
My little paws are weary  
To take the anxious plunge,  
My fur stands up, I'm leery,  
A cactus with a grudge  
The sunlight makes it glimmer,  
Clear aqua green and blue  
With darting shapes that shimmer  
Beneath the shifting hue.  
My whiskers twitch with wonder  
My pupils large and wide  
But still my body shudders  
To think about the tide.  
A shape that twists and thrashes  
Emerges from the depths  
Scales shimmer as light catches  
And tempting beams reflect  
I part my jaws to smell it  
I taste salt on my tongue  
And fear finally submits  
As hunger overcomes.  
Waves lick my feet gently  
I watch the shapes swim by  
And warmth and wet engulf me  
As I dive for my prize.



# I Understand Dogs

Cassandra Frutos

I understand now, in retrospect.  
They were all fur, all saliva, all grime;  
They barked, never stopped making noise;  
They jumped everywhere, whether it be to fight or to play,  
Always with aggression.

I remember every sound, smell, sight of that place with the dogs.  
Walls were pestered by a persistent odor,  
Clothes carried memories of mysterious stains,  
Hands grew sore because the dogs needed to soar,  
Needed to walk faster than they were allowed,  
And everything lingered long after I left.

I understand, now, that my heart was a dog when I stood beside you.  
It wagged its tail and soared out of my chest,  
Though it was not allowed,  
And barked so loudly that my ears rang rampantly,  
And reacted so aggressively to your every little action  
That neither those scent-stained walls  
Nor my memory-stained clothes could subdue the animal rhythm of my heart.  
It all lingered, long after I left  
And became a feeling that won't leave my dog-heart alone.

I understand dogs very well now because  
My heart is a dog  
And it sits at the door

And waits

And misses you.

# Confessions of a Recovering Primary Caregiver

Beverly Bridges

I am in the process of retraining my brain. Not the part that regulates breathing, heart rate, and other bodily functions. Just the part that controls memories. I have read that recollections are stored in the brain through a two-part process. Scientists tell us that recent events first land in one part of the brain for the short term. Then some of those impressions are moved to a different part of the brain for long-term storage. The rest are like a morning mist that silently creeps away. Supposedly, the events with strong emotions have the greatest chance of making it into the long-term storage bin of your grey matter, which explains to me why lots of things in my head don't stick, like the location of where I left my cell phone the day before. But then there are those events that hang on to my psyche like a wad of gum stuck to the sole of my shoe at the parking lot mall. Sticky and unyielding. For me, some memories roil up out of nowhere. They make sneak attacks that make me flinch or gasp or send an electric tremor through my shoulders. My memories can be like a warm hug from Grandma, a jab to the ribs with a hot poker, and everything inbetween. I want to control and organize them like an unruly garden.

As the primary caregiver for my mother and father in their final years, there was so much I would like to forget. Every time a jolting memory pops up, I mentally try to pull it out by the roots—like a weed. In the hole that's left, I replant a happy image to give it more force and effect. And as anyone who's ever looked after someone in their 90s will tell you (as both my mom and dad were), it ain't pretty. Even now, this second, the spiky nettles in my head threaten to tangle me into a mood and pull me into a dark murk as I recall the last minutes of my father's life. The once strong, beautiful man, a giant in his daughter's eyes, weighed less than I did. He was unrecognizable.

So I weed. I place a vision from my childhood of my raven-haired father, who could double for James Garner. I loved flipping through his old photo albums, filled with sepia photographs of a baby boy with a head full of curls, smiling as if he had just pranked someone and gotten away with it (which he probably did). I try to piece together what it was like when Dad came into the world, born over a Cleveland speakeasy to Anglo Irish farmers who fled the Irish Civil war for a safe harbor on the

shores of Lake Erie. Having survived the Great Depression and childhood diseases in a pre-penicillin world, Dad found himself at age 21 in the throes of World War II as an engineering officer on a Navy destroyer. He spent fifteen months in a veteran's hospital after the war recovering from a lung disease he contracted on board his ship. He saw men in his ward die before his eyes. Too many of his classmates lay in military graves. Even after the artillery goes silent, the war lives on in the minds of those who survive and in the hearts of the families of those who don't. But Mom knew. If Dad saw anything on the television about the Nazis, she knew he wouldn't get any sleep that night.

Thrashing. Thrashing. Thrashing.

I, along with my older brother and sister, didn't really get it. One time Dad saw us watching Hogan's Heroes on television. The show was set in a German prisoner-of-war camp, deep behind enemy lines, where the Nazis were portrayed as bumbling fools.

Dad schooled us. "The Germans were not stupid. They were very smart."

"Okay, sure, Dad," we'd mumble and go back to watching the top-rated show. Little did we know that during the war, the Germans blew up his best friend while he was navigating a B-24 bomber and two of Dad's buddies were massacred when they were held prisoners during the Battle of the Bulge. I didn't find all this out until decades later. It all makes sense now why he'd toss and turn all night after watching anything to do with the war, even something as innocuous as *The Sound of Music*, with the Von Trapp family escaping the Nazis by fleeing over the Alps.

Maybe that's why he had a massive record collection that eventually spilled over into every room of the house. Music soothes the savage beast, so they say. Our house was filled with music. Classical. Country. Jazz. Comedy. Broadway. Popular. Music was life-changing for my father, especially when he was at a formal dance in Washington, D.C., in 1951. When the orchestra played "The Tennessee Waltz," a dazzling blonde Southern belle entered on a cloud of music. He made a beeline for her and just as she took a seat, he uttered, "Before you get too comfortable, would you like to dance?" Smooth. That's my Dad.

Mom and Dad were married a year later. Ten months after that my brother arrived, followed two years later by my sister. Mom miscarried the next baby, but the one after that made it full term—that would be me—and our family of five was set. Every year on my parents' anniversary they played and danced to "The Tennessee Waltz"

"I have the prettiest mommy in the neighborhood," I'd tell her.

She would scoff and say our next-door neighbor was prettier. But I'd hold firm. Mom liked that.

Thinking back, Mom was probably in pain through it all. She survived the polio epidemic of the 1940s with damage to her spine. One leg was shorter than the other and she had a lift in one shoe to make up the difference. But you'd never know anything was amiss. I certainly didn't—not until I sat in too many doctors' offices as she aged to hear one dire diagnosis after another. Turns out that even if you survive polio, there are severe long-term effects to your bones and soft tissue. In her last years, she was ravaged. Shrunk. Senility settled in. The loss of her looks was hard on her and since she couldn't raise her arms very high, I'd do her hair every day and add a touch of makeup.

"Always the prettiest mommy in the neighborhood," I'd tell her as I spritzed her hair with VO5. She liked that, too. It took her back to a time and place when she was happiest.

In January of 2020, my mother passed away three weeks to the day after my dad died at the beginning of the pandemic. I was with them both when they took their last breaths. As I waited for the mortician to arrive, I played "The Tennessee Waltz" for each of them on the CD player. But for my mom, I whispered something special as I leaned down to kiss her for the last time: "Always the prettiest mommy in the neighborhood."

Weeds. They can drive you crazy.

I've always liked to garden, so I know how easy it is to get lost in the weeds. You pull one out and overnight another weed pops out. But, with time, I've come to learn that life and nature have their own rhythms, ebbs, and flows. While weeds are just a fact of life, they can act as a contrast to the beautiful blooms that will thrive if you nurture them—like memories. Our family was so lucky to have so many of them.



## Passages Sara Yalda



# Grief Calls God

Grace Roby

I am not religious. Although I grew up in the church, I never felt at home. As I grew, more evidence arose that God was not real: I was diagnosed with alopecia at four years old (and subsequently outcasted from a normal social childhood), my father was put in the hospital for stage four Burkitt's Lymphoma and given six months to live (by some miracle, he is still alive today), and finally I watched my stepmother, Ashley, a woman of indescribable strength and ferocity, die of breast cancer. So the fact that God does not exist was something I easily came to terms with as a rebellious, queer, and (quite frankly) angsty teenager. It slid comfortably into harmony with every other assumption I had made about the world. My blatant disregard for the soothing practice of religion felt powerful, a rejection of lies and false promises. I don't completely disagree with that position now, but there is something that gets irreversibly changed in you after you hold your mother's dead body, realizing that the cold you feel on her is the evidence of death itself lying only inches from you. You change after you tell your five- and seven-year-old siblings that there was not enough time for them to say goodbye, knowing it was Ashley who didn't want them seeing her like that.

I prayed that night. March 24th, 2024. A day that will haunt me and my family until our bodies grow cold as well. I stood at the end of her hospital bed, gripping the rounded footboard instead of her, and I prayed to God. How odd it is that I still say I don't believe. I still feel a sense of pride in my steadfast atheism, but the minute shit hit the fan, my hands were clasped and my eyes were closed. There is always an awkward pause over the word "stepmother." Its association with negligence and apathy tend to confuse people. There's a dance back and forth while I attempt to explain that while my mother is alive and well, my stepmother (who is also my mother) is dead. I've yet to get the script on that interaction right. But this has always been the case. For years I've had to tell people that Ashley is a second mother to me, not a stepmom. As a little girl, I imagined the future I'd have with her: graduations and weddings and so many birthdays. This is, unfortunately, a future that I no longer fantasize about. I think I still resent her and my lack of blood relation, a stain on an otherwise clean conversation. Or it's just guilt. I feel guilty that I had more time with her than her biological children, who probably won't remember much of her.

Ashley is as biological to me as my birth mother. She instilled each of her values, insecurities, strengths, and anxieties into me. In a way, I felt like the more time I had with her, the more she would become my mother. I could go back and force her to fit into the memory of my adolescence.

The 23rd was a Saturday and I was driving to pick up my sister from the airport. She was coming home from Texas to be with us while Ashley was in the hospital, recovering from surgery. My dad called me and told me to pull the car over. I sat on the side of Crown Valley with my hazards flashing for the five-minute phone call. We had been told that she was doing better, stronger with the surgeries, heart pump, dialysis, and breathing tube. But the doctors had changed their minds, he said. They say she's not going to make it. I haven't heard him cry like that since. When I picked Natalie up from the airport, she laughed, amused that I was just as happy to see her, mistaking my tears for relief or even joy at seeing her. She understood the truth five minutes later as I pulled into the Denny's parking lot across the street from John Wayne Airport.

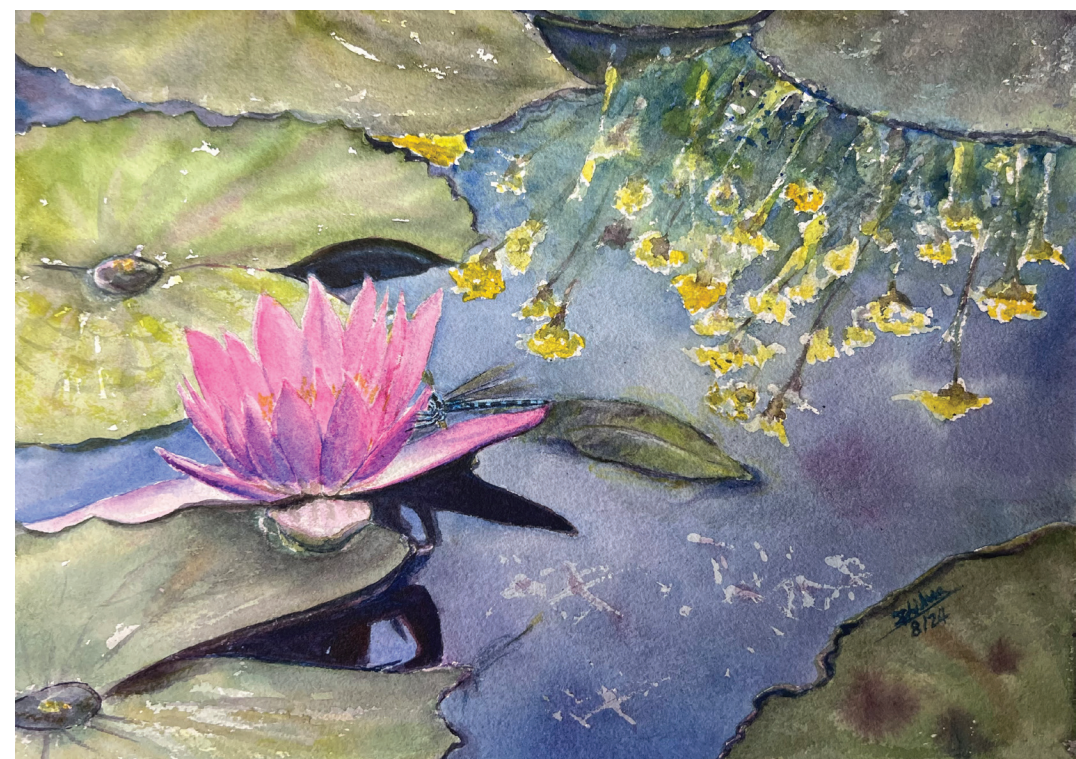
## **"That part of me tends to seek God instead of reason."**

The next day we went to our church, which sits on a hill overlooking Laguna Beach, with a view that extends well past the shoreline. Reverend Mary's sermon examined servant leadership. She said, "Servant leadership is the only leadership that is truly leadership through God, and it is the only leadership that will transform the world." I saw Ashley in Jesus that Sunday. A godliness in my own mother, lifted up from desperate medical treatments and careful tiptoeing. Even before she died, I started to catalogue what Ashley had left in the world. She was a servant leader, a woman dedicated to sacrificing herself. Later that night, as her breathing got slower and her body quit, I thought back to that sermon and prayed that she would be remembered.

Part of me expected to break down and never stop crying when Ashley died; to quit my job, break up with my girlfriend, and never leave my room. But I've been more okay than I thought possible. Maybe it's due to shock and maybe it's due to dissociation, but I'm functional nonetheless. It is the child in me that hurts for Ashley, the part of me that feels angry and scared. That child is too young to lose someone like that and too young to understand what it means. I keep having to remind myself that she's not still at the hospital or (vaguely) "away" (in the darker corners of

my mind I worry she never existed at all). But then I see her handwriting, labeling things in the kitchen or decorating notebooks, and my heart breaks in two to know that nothing will be written by that hand again. A whole vocabulary, knowledge base, and font lost. That part of me tends to seek God instead of reason. Atheism feels logical and sophisticated while God is more like a childish belief. My search for Him comes from a lack of control. I understand this. But I look for Him nonetheless. My being (partially) motherless has left me seeking, looking for answers that can quell my fears. What if she's hurting? What if she's watching me? Now I look to God for answers, praying to my mother and hoping she's there to listen. If I believe in God, then I can believe in Heaven and eternal paradise, so I choose to believe, for Ashley's sake.

When Ashley died, I picked up *Crying in H Mart* by Michelle Zauner, a book that I had been trying (and failing) to read for months. In the wake of her death, I thought that it might lend me some comfort and insight. The book centers on Michelle as she returns home to be with her mother as she dies of cancer. The fear that I might relate to Michelle had stopped me from finishing the book, but there was no fear anymore. The worst had happened and the walls were down. At my favorite coffee shop I stood in line with my book, waiting to order when a woman approached me. She told me that she had just finished *Crying in H Mart* and had loved it. As if God's hand was on my shoulder, guiding me, I felt compelled to tell her that I was reading it because my mother had just passed away that week. The woman was shocked and devastated for me. She held me as I cried, a selfless act that I have never forgotten. When I pulled away, I tearfully asked her name. "Ashley," she told me. Since that day, I have not once questioned if that was a coincidence. I believe Ashley was sending me a sign, sending someone to hug her grieving daughter. I believe that God helped her do it. I have never truly held any religious faith, but grief calls God to those in need.



**In Bloom** Zhihua Zhang



# Zion...

Aidan Angela

“Do you think the rocks will really be as red as they say?” My little sister choked this question through the tears streaming down her face and onto the peeling leather of my car’s passenger seat, trying her best not to let the dread of leaving her brother behind spoil her first visit to a national park.

“Zion’s supposed to be gorgeous this time of year, sis, plus it should still be raining up there. Rocks should be even redder.” I looked out the side window that was sprinkled with water as these words left my mouth, averting my eyes from the road and my face from my sister’s gaze for a moment to scan the walls of the small canyon that the 15 freeway weaves through on the way to Utah. “It’ll be way more impressive than this, too.”

“Do you think you’ll like your new job?”

“Well, it’s just a restaurant, but I don’t really care if I do. I’m just excited the restaurant is in a hotel in the middle of Zion.”

The car sat silent for a while, brewing a mix of excitement and sadness with a potency I had never felt before. Each of my sister’s sniffles and silent sobs weighed on the car’s air, drawing a questioning atmosphere to my purpose in the beautiful land I want to call my new home. I started small, insignificant talk to distract my sister from my eventual departure, weaving in the potential wonders awaiting me to stitch myself to its image.

In every bit of the car’s anxious quietness, I found myself appreciating my sister as well as my mother, who drove separately, for accompanying me as my favorite fragments of home to my new beginnings and supporting my efforts in getting away from all that I desperately wanted to escape. They had watched me develop a hatred for my hometown and knew I felt my only option was to run away. Life within the home was complicated and dysfunctional, but removing myself from the home’s confinement was not a reprieve either. Whenever I stepped outside, I was greeted by people my age who knew me as a misfit, a disappointment, or not at all. My mother and sister witnessed my lack of belongingness and helped me try to make a change, for which I’m forever grateful.

While the drive to Zion was sorrowful, it was the first time I had felt these problems fade. That excited me. Armed with my few possessions, my mother and



sister's support, and a journal that was a gift from my former corrosive best friend titled "Zion..." to document my stay, I drove into the canyon's valley with hopes for a new guiding light in my life. The foreboding nature found in the ellipsis in the journal's name would come to define my stay in Zion National Park, my stay in the valley of the shadow of death.

As our car approached Springdale, Utah, the quaint town that sits just outside of Zion's southern entrance, the harshest downpour the valley had seen in nearly five years greeted us. A more vibrant red dominated our peripheral as we descended into the valley further; the canyon's walls acted like the sides of a bowl, turning the main road into an overflowing river. Every car, either sprawled on the side of the road or stuck within the river as makeshift submarines, lay in wait as this sea falling from the sky parted the red walls of the canyon. Meeting torrential storms at the doorstep of this holy land, salvation announced instantly that it wanted nothing to do with me. While we were stuck on the side of the road, my sister's sobs subsided as she feared that one more tear would cause the river to flood our car and drown the town.

What felt like hours passed by, and only when the ground became so sodden that all of its loose silt had washed into the road did the storm let up. The car then bumped along the newly terraformed road with reluctant haste, it, too, now feeling the desire to turn around and go back to Orange County creep into its engine. Eventually I found my way to the dorms I was supposed to call my home deep within the heart of Zion, said goodbye to my family, and settled in as much as I could. There's always an unspoken difficulty in saying goodbye to my family, but, maybe because of the same fears that filled my sister, I didn't shed a tear. Something about that truly bothered me, like I was holding myself together either for them or for me, but it was far from how I felt. The downpour had already tested my limits, but it was too soon to turn back—and turn back to what?

I cried myself to sleep on the first of my three nights in paradise. The valley, recognizing I had not heeded its warning, sent another divine messenger to encourage my departure—one with a more human sense of danger.

My second day in paradise was largely spent getting acquainted with my surroundings, taking in the scenery of Springdale, trying my first black bean burger that I would then eat for every single meal while in Zion, and learning what amenities I had access to in the small town. I was spending time in the local library, which was the only place around with consistent Wi-Fi, when I heard a loud bang combined with a violent metallic tink. Then another. And another, this time without the tinkling noise. After a brief moment of these insidious echoes, the entire



Jazmine Powell

library (about three people total) sat in morbid curiosity. The librarian suddenly ran into the room frantically, but spoke in a calm voice.

“The library is going on lockdown. There’s an active shooting on Main Street. We don’t have many details, but whatever you do, do not leave the library.”

These words left an imprint on my mind, but not a panic. My first thought was not of my own safety, but one of me sitting in a classroom under a far-too-small desk during active shooter drills, practicing for this exact moment. Disgusted by my calmness, I moved from my seat next to the window and began to collect myself under a desk in a relatively well-hidden corner, not knowing what else to do but wait. The shooter was taken into custody after an eight-hour stand-off with law enforcement in which no one was killed but several officers were injured and many more cars riddled with bullet holes.

While leaving the library, I spoke with the two people who shared my newfound trauma and found out they also were working at the restaurant I was supposed to start working for in two days. The talk was brief and they were cold, cold beyond what we had just gone through— they were either numbed, hardened, hurt or just changed by living out here, expressing a disdain for the place as well as themselves in the process. The shooting might have been the closest to death Zion’s treachery had brought me, but my new peers’ lack of hope and ambitions exemplified a state of nothingness that frightened me to my core. I returned to my dorm shell-shocked and even more lost than I was previously. Zion was bringing about more questions and issues than home ever had. I went to bed on the second night desperate for answers.

At this point, Zion becoming my new home looked bleak, and much less a sanctuary I was promised, or promised myself. Waking up on my third day in paradise, I was determined to talk to my faculty advisor in an effort to find an ounce of comfort, direction or assurance that Zion was truly the salvation I desired. All I sought for was one beacon of hope to which I could realign my stars—to see that the storm had passed and I could begin to find myself in its eye. When I looked out my window, the sky was still gray and rain, now softly, fell down into the mouth of the valley.

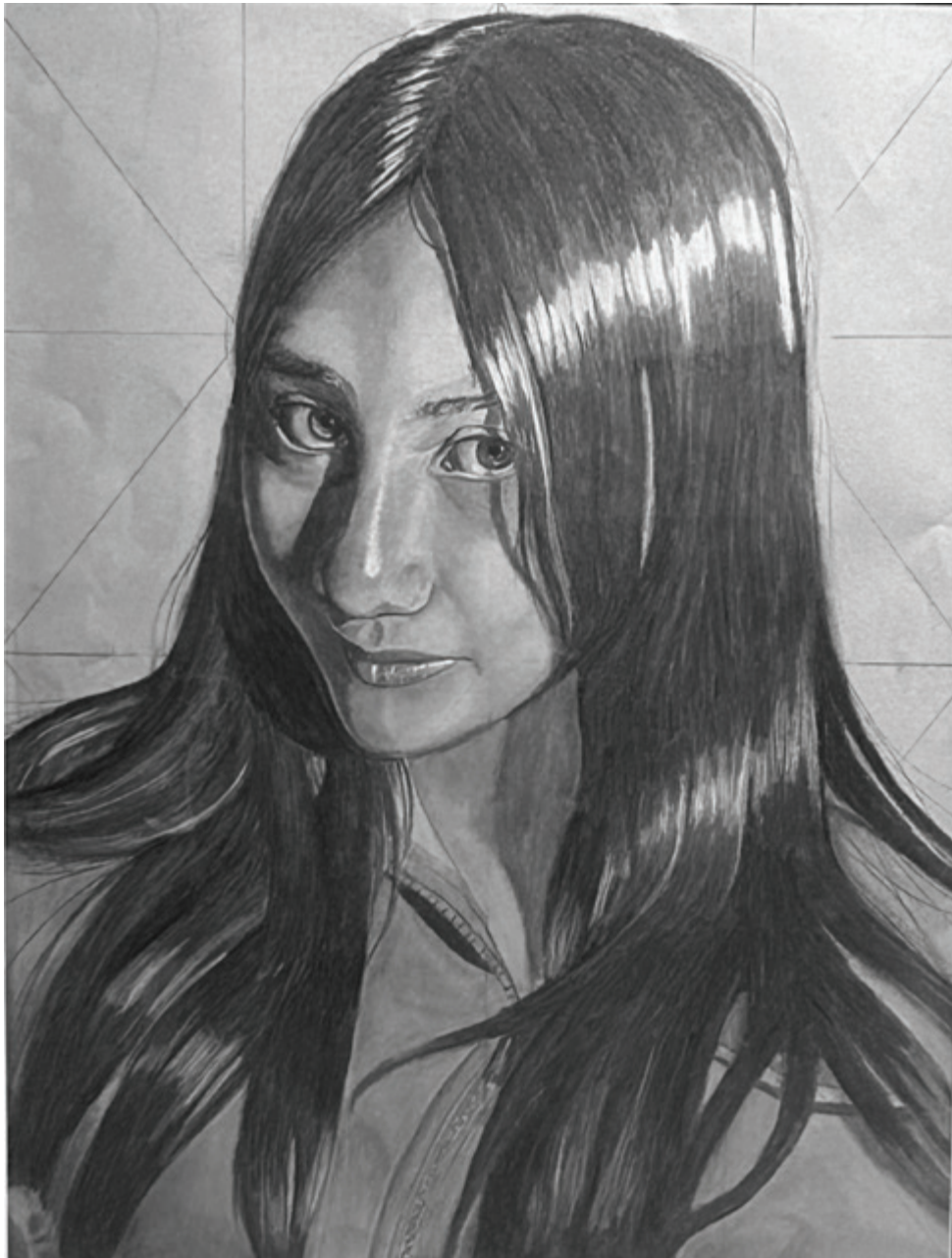
Dreading opening my door, I was greeted immediately by the continued horrors to be found in a hellscape feigning as heaven, finding a man slumped against a door frame a little down the hall, bloodied and bruised. His door lay smashed and crumbled onto the floor, giving the entire hallway a view into his dorm room, where a bloody-knuckled man was rummaging through a bag. “I’m going home” were the

first and only words of mine my advisor would hear. I tried to sleep, failed, and left the second the sun peered through the clouds and shone on the wet roads on the fourth morning. Zion had won by rejecting me from the valley where I went to find peace and redemption, sending me back home. Ultimately, I think this was meant to be.

About a year and a half later, I found myself back in Zion. Sitting in the car with two newer friends on our way back to the place that rejected my refuge, an exciting ambivalence washed over me as I absorbed the differences from the last time I attempted this journey. These new friends went to my high school and used to be among those from my hometown who thought of me in that negative light, but after reconnecting they have become some of the best friends I could ask for. Most of my time after returning home from my first crusade to Zion was spent attempting to find the salvation I went seeking for in the home I once resented and changing this negative precedent I set for myself. These two friends, named Chelsea and Will, are my biggest successes in that regard. They represent a shift in my life that made my hometown a bearable place to be, remaining one of the biggest reasons that change was able to happen. This is why I found it peculiar when Chelsea suggested that the three of us should go to Zion for spring break. Knowing my history with Zion, both Chel and Will were shocked at the immediate “yes” that echoed from me. I was surprised, too. A whirlwind of emotions and reasonings flew through my head that accumulated in my “yes,” but the loudest was a security in knowing I’d be accompanied by people I truly love and trust. I was no longer stepping into this unforgiving canyon looking for anything that might or might not be there—I was motiveless, free to finally enjoy Zion’s beauty for what it is.

On our full day in Zion, we had the mission of scaling the most difficult and scenic hike in the park called Angel’s Landing—one that I missed out on on my first visit. During our ascent, the three of us talked on and on with our usual insignificant and fun banter, rarely letting the many reflections of my past in Zion interrupt us as it, too, melted into insignificance in the wake of these new experiences. Summiting Angel’s Landing with the two people who have helped me turn home into a positive place was a moment that will stick with me forever. Not just because of the conquered trauma or the reclaimed memories, nor the conversations had or time spent on the way, but because only standing on that peak that overlooked the valley and my old dorms did I realize that salvation stood next to me in Zion.





## To My Sister

Sophia Muccini

## You'll Be Fine

Amity Z. Carnelian

I walked out onto our front porch. The air smelled complex and dark, like an expensive cologne ad. Sam was sitting out there, right in my usual spot, smoking. When had she started? I hadn't noticed. It bothered me that I hadn't noticed. I sat down next to her, waving the smoke away from my face, and stared out at the unmowed lawn. Habitually I listed the light sources: streetlamp, house's window, big fat moon in the sky. The void of the greenbelt across the road was a mirror for my own thoughts. She looked at me.

"Hey," she said. "I didn't talk to you much at dinner. You all right? I haven't seen you since winter break."

I shrugged. "I'm fine. Just about ready to be done with school for the semester, though."

"Yeah," she said, looking up at the distant stars. The light pollution dims them; we went out to the desert a few months ago and there were so many, the white fire lit everything. "I remember looking forward to summer every year. I would start and be so excited to learn and then about ten weeks in I was just ready to get back to drafting my novel." Her hands fidgeted, twirling the cigarette, tugging at her hair, with bleached ends again.

I hunched further into my jacket. It had been ninety today, and I wasn't really cold but it felt comforting. Besides, it silenced any trace of anxiety's whine in my chest. "School is busy, but I'm worried I'm gonna miss something. And I'm scared. I don't want to be an adult in three years. I'm not ready."

Sam loosened her hands from her hair, rubbing the non-cigarette-holding one on her jeans. "I know that feeling. But hey, that's what college is for." She chuckled to herself. "It's so funny. I have this anxiety about failing a class, you know?" I nodded; I'd felt this panic, too. "But I've never failed a class, ever."

"That figures. You're super smart." She brushed off the compliment, literally, like it was a pretty but frightening bug, with her long fingers.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm just a hard worker is all. So you're anxious about being an adult?"

"I don't know, I just... what if I don't get the colleges I want? And then what about finding somewhere to live? I mean not right away and all, but when I'm ready?"



Oh god, INCOME TAX?" I flailed my arms at the sky and the impassive stars. I immediately regretted it and laughed at my own ridiculousness. "I'm such a baby. I'm gonna be alive, and that's all that matters. First world problems."

"Knock on wood," Sam said and reached for my head. I swatted her away. "In all seriousness, Roxy, I understand the fear. Believe me, I've lived it. You'll be fine."

I chanted the next line along with her. "After all, I'm fine, aren't I?"

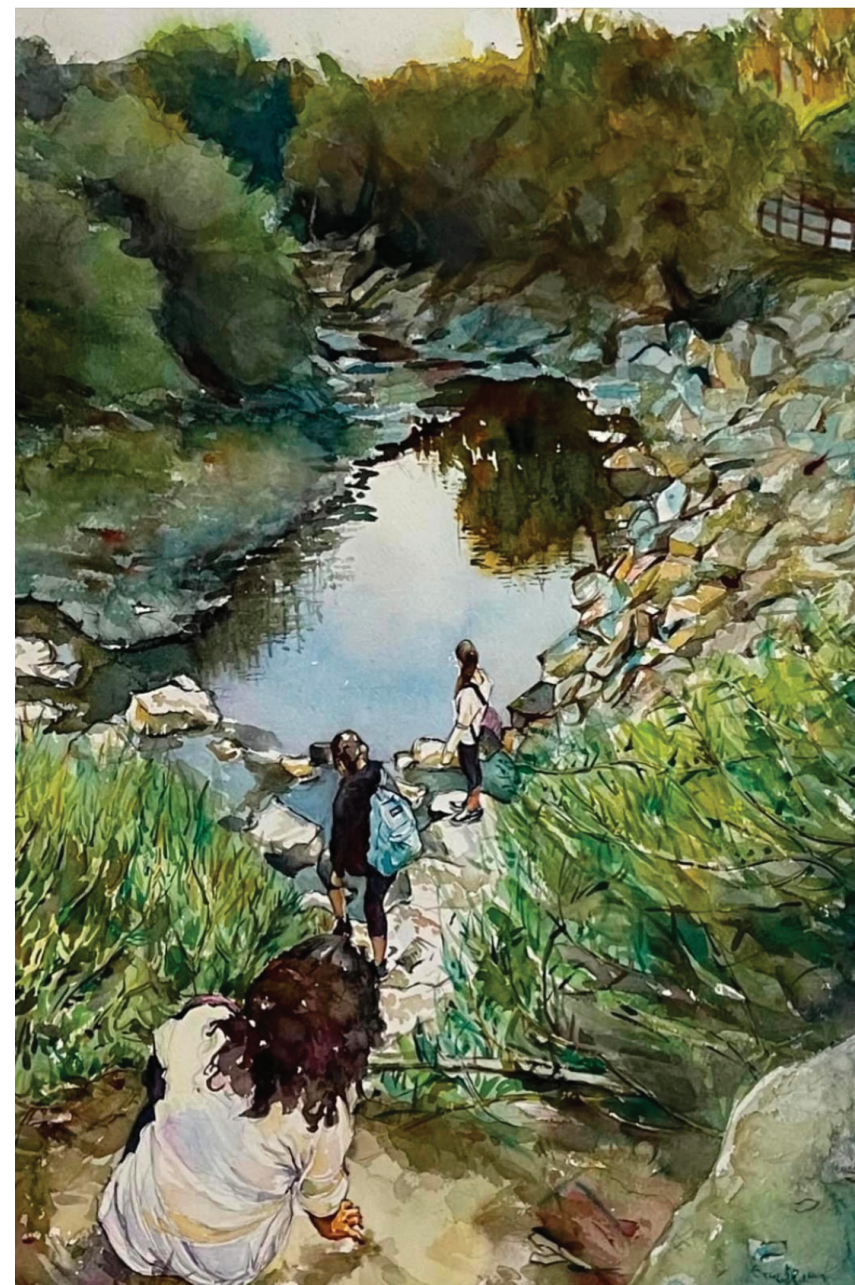
My sister smiled and put her arm around me. She pointed at the sky. "See that star? That's your dream. Whatever it is, your most crazy, castle-in-the-sky ambition. Tomorrow, when you get up, you reach for it, 'kay? And then never stop until you get it."

I rolled my eyes. "Two out of five, overused." I looked at the star anyway: it was Vega. Of course she picked my favorite star. She would know because we watched Contact together for the first time. I can't look up at Vega without smiling, and in the summer it's right overhead and you can't miss it. It doesn't hang back and hide itself. Vega is a good role model.

"Doesn't make it not true," Sam whipped back, brushing hair from her face.

I put my arm around her. "I love you."

She put her hand on mine. "I love you too, Roxy."



## Magnificent Oso Creek Trail

Celia Wu

# Mother's Voice and Mine

Ayame Huber Munemura

Before having enough  
Breath to breathe herself, she gifts it  
To me, giving life to my lifeless form  
Teaching me to speak in my own tongue before I can speak hers,  
Tuning my ears to listen twice as much as I speak but still sing volumes  
Through this twisted metal tube they call an instrument-  
Singing calls to a god I never (really) knew  
Sending thanks for  
Every time I blow this horn, I know my breath is borrowed  
Know these lungs she gave to me will last, at least,  
Until tomorrow

# She Fights

Christina M. Casillas

She is persistence battling society  
Punch after punch delivered, she stands alone  
Tired and weary to the bone  
Endless responsibilities, a bottomless well  
Working 12-hour nights and weekend shifts  
Adaptable, steadfast, she pivots, never defeated  
It's not for everybody, the sweat and tears  
It's not for everybody, the toils and fears  
Three minutes for a thermometer reading  
Heading to the ER, baby screaming  
The call of mama after a fight  
Another call of mama late at night  
Tissues kept hidden to wipe away tears  
Storybooks and hugs to squelch her babies' fears  
Grade school through high school, never there for it all  
Exhausted, she sleeps so she won't fall  
She works harder than ten men  
At least harder than one, amen, amen  
Food on the table without a doubt  
Hard work put in without a handout  
Never enough time or money  
But always a moment for "I love you, honey."  
A single mother fights, she's champion, there is nobody braver  
My mother still fights, there is nobody like her.

# Goodbye Letter to Opiates

Summer Chelsea Raio

I would love nothing more than to open this letter with an eloquent mix of anger and profanity, but I will not give you the satisfaction you would undoubtedly delight in watching me stoop to your level. So I suggest you listen closely, opiates, because this is the last time I will grace you with my presence.

Deceiving by nature, you have cunningly taken many forms over the course of our dysfunctional relationship. You were introduced to me by my doctor. Why wouldn't I trust his recommendation? Little did I know you were nothing more than a snake disguised as a prescribed solution to the pain resulting from injuries. That little white prescription note was your ticket to slither your way into my body, my brain, and my life, effectively laying the foundation for what would be an eighteen-year love-hate relationship. And you know what? You're remarkably good at what you do, because that foundation was solid. So solid that my fitness and nutrition career, and the knowledge that came along with it, was completely overpowered, drowned even, by your intoxicating combination of inexhaustible energy and that oh-so-perfect head change. Ahhh... that head change, truly a first for me. And the energy! What a perfect complement to my energy-demanding career. What a team we were, literally and metaphorically off and running.

In retrospect, I honestly cannot say when your destruction could have been arrested. When one or two weren't cutting it? When entire twenty-count prescriptions became one dose? Maybe when doctor-shopping my way around prescriptions that ran out far too soon became a regular part of my weekly errands? Perhaps when I discovered that being a cute, blonde-haired, blue-eyed fitness professional with an above average grasp on anatomy all but guaranteed that any male doctor would grant my every request? Or was it when I justified my graduation to morphine as a responsible choice because it eliminated the acetaminophen from all the Vicodin and Percocet? I can tell you when I wish it had been. I wish it was when, albeit for a split second, I fell asleep at the wheel, opening my eyes to the sight of my two precious children staring back at me through the rearview mirror, laughing together in the backseat. Sadly, not even that was enough.

I even thought I had bested you when, with complete humility, I walked myself into my general practitioner's office and told on myself. Desperately wanting to surrender, I once again took the bait: hook, line and sinker—Big Pharma's solution to my problem, your not-too-chemically distant cousin, Subutex. Nonetheless, that estranged relative of yours got me off of you. I should have taken that time to take more drastic measures to ensure that freedom. But not dissimilar to a jealous ex that is only fueled by such a bold move towards separation and independence, I was unable to keep the tiger asleep. Now chomping at the bit to escape your forced hibernation, you did just that, in the fully matured form of heroin. In the blink of an eye, now 36 years old, you once again ravaged my life. Stripping me of my livelihood, my dignity, my family (what remained of it), and my will to do anything about it.

I can picture you now, beaming with sick pride as I bear the story of my demise. Leaning back in a chair, hands clasped behind your head, feet kicked up on a decrepit table in the center of a dark room. Savoring every word as I detail my tragic downward spiral, seemingly endless.

Well, picture this. I just kicked the leg of that chair out from underneath you, laughing at the look of utter shock on your demented face. The dark corner of the room behind you begins to suck you in like the Devil's vacuum. Your fingernails bleeding as you claw at the floor, desperately trying to not be forever sucked into the abyss that birthed you nearly two decades prior. Taller and taller I stand as I watch you wither, like death itself dying. Until I stand where you once sat, in the center of that room. As I become illuminated with a blinding, almost heavenly light, I can see that I am surrounded by everyone and everything I love and lost along the way.

But wait, I have something very special for you, a little parting gift, beautifully wrapped, topped with a golden bow. I throw it at you with a strength that can only come from a Higher Power, right into your decomposing grasp. Here you go, take it with you, all of my guilt and all of my shame. You can have it back. It was never mine anyways.





## Happy Too Rebecca A. Holden

## Dear Me

Maya Harris

Dear me from the future,  
 Do we turn out alright?  
 My anxiety's now with me throughout the night  
 I've tried to reach out, but my friends aren't there  
 At this point I wonder if people care  
 My grades are slipping, but I couldn't care less  
 All the people around are causing me stress  
 My friends have all left me, did I do something wrong?  
 The names that they called me, were they right all along?  
 From hardships to heartbreaks— I've been through it all  
 It's getting really hard to try and stand tall  
 I really hope we find a way  
 To find joy in every day  
 I'll pack up my things and I'll carry on  
 Waiting for the day that these thoughts are gone.

Dear me from the past,  
 How time flies so fast  
 If you could see you the way I do  
 You'd find it easy to love you too  
 The way your eyes crease from laughing so much  
 The memories so close that I could touch  
 Within the bad there was always good  
 We had prevailed like I hoped we would  
 Our happiness is radiant like the sun  
 The joy of each day shared with everyone  
 There's hope for tomorrow and each day after that  
 Perseverance is key— it's what we must keep at  
 Dear past me,  
 I'd say we turned out alright  
 I can see our future, it's very bright  
 Of all the things that I wish you knew  
 It's that I love me, Sincerely, you

## Bridging Cultures: A Mexican-American Parent's Journey

Leo Soriano

At 6 p.m. on a Friday afternoon most twenty-two-year olds are preparing for a night out with friends, but not me. I am standing outside an operation room looking through the porthole window as my girlfriend is being prepped for a C-section. Our daughter is minutes away from being born. I stand outside the room, fumbling with a surgical mask as my hands are trembling from what I thought was the cold hospital air, but, in reality, it is from the realization that I am about to become a father. A nurse approaches the door. "Here sweetie, let me help you with that," she tells me with a nurturing voice as she sees the terror in my eyes. She helps me with the mask and sits me down on a stool at the head of the bed next to my girlfriend. Ten eternal minutes later, with a curtain covering my girlfriend from the chest down, we hear the doctor say, "Here she is," and I hear the sound of my daughter's tiny cry for the first time. Cristabella Soriano is born and I am a father. From that day forward, I became a member of a Mexican-American parent culture that would shape every aspect of my adult life. Becoming a Mexican-American parent at a young age made me question many of the Mexican customs I grew up with, such as my faith, traditional home values, and complex family dynamic.

Both my parents were born and raised in Mexico, where traditions and beliefs can be quite different from those of the United States. One of the biggest differences is religion and the role it plays in the household. As a young unmarried parent, I was scrutinized by my family, who cast me as irresponsible for having a child without following the traditional Catholic norm of being married. My parents are devout Catholics and as such raised my brother and me to follow the guidelines set in place by the Catholic Church. As a kid I attended catechism classes, Bible study groups, and Mass every Sunday morning. Growing up in the U.S., I was fortunate enough to have been around friends from diverse backgrounds whose religious beliefs differ from that of the Catholic faith. This exposure is the main reason I drifted away from my Catholic faith as I grew older.

Veering away from the church never seemed to be an issue until I had my first daughter. On the first Christmas Eve after my daughter's birth, we attended a family party at an aunt's house. As we played games, the smell of fresh tamales and po-



## La dualidad de la monarca

Sofia Reyes De Vizcaya



zole filled the room. My seven-month-old daughter, dressed in a sparkly red dress, smiled at everyone who came to hold her. It was a scene out of a Hallmark Christmas movie with family, friends, music, and joy. That is until the drinks began to flow and my aunt pulled me aside to tell me, “It’s so nice to see you here. I didn’t think you’d make it. I thought you might be embarrassed since you are living in sin.”

“Excuse me? What do you mean living in sin?” I replied, annoyed and confused.

“Well, your cousins were all married before they had kids,” she said with a Grinch-like smirk.

“Well, they’re also alcoholics who do not come home to their wives,” I whispered back with a rage I had never felt before. This interaction shook me to the core as I began to question if the rest of my family shared these sentiments. After that experience, family functions would never be the same.

Experiencing the humiliation of your own family treating you like an outsider made me feel insignificant and alone. From these dark days, I began to lay the foundation for the home I would construct for my family. A home where we do not care what your religion is or how you choose to live your life but instead welcome all with open arms. It is disheartening that during my entire childhood my family preached the importance of community and helping thy neighbor, yet I became an outcast when I diverted from tradition. This made me realize how special it is to have grown up in a melting pot of cultures in the U.S., allowing us to coexist and respect each other’s values, religious beliefs, and way of life. Although I choose to not instill the rigid Catholic beliefs upon my young family, there are still many elements of my Mexican upbringing that I am actively working to pass down.

Hard work and responsibility are two core values my Mexican parents taught me and today are invaluable for raising my own family. My parents were both born in 1970 in the town of Jerez in Zacatecas, Mexico. Throughout their childhood, both grew up in impoverished conditions: modest homes built with adobe bricks without electricity or running water. It wasn’t until the early Eighties that indoor plumbing and running water came to the town. These harsh living conditions molded two individuals who know the value of hard work and responsibility. My mother would always say, “No matter what you choose to do, make sure you treat it with respect and give your best effort every single day.” Her message was reinforced by the belief in the American Dream, which emphasizes that hard work and dedication will lead to prosperity.

This simple guidance is one of the main values I try to instill in my kids, yet it is proving to be one of the most challenging lessons to teach. My kids are growing up

far removed from the conditions my parents endured growing up. So how do we as Mexican-American parents pass down the value of hard work and responsibility? The answer is simple: we lead by example. My now fiancé is working on her master’s degree in healthcare administration and I’ve built a career in IT project management with only a high school education. Seeing our family succeed in various aspects of life motivates my kids to dream big.

My middle child, Nideya, now seven years old, aspires to own an ice cream business when she grows up. My oldest, Cristabella, who is ten years old, shows an interest in science and creating new products. My youngest, Luen, is three years old and, well, he wants to be Spider-Man—so we are on the hunt for a radioactive spider. Of course, it is easier said than done as putting in the extra effort is tough when surrounded by addictive screen pleasures. Nevertheless, with all the distractions around them, they do their best and when life gets tough, we say, “If Grandma can do it, so can I!” A simple phrase that motivates, teaches the value of hard work, and, above all, gives the kids a sense of connection to their heritage.

Equally as fundamental is the importance of humility, which my father taught me. I remember one night complaining about the dinner my mom had cooked, a simple plate of refried beans and Mexican red rice. In my mind this was not a dinner, but little did I know it was all we had. When my father caught wind of my attitude, he yelled at me with a primal anger, “You have no idea what it means to be hungry! To not have food for so long your stomach feels like it’s eating your insides, and you complain about having more than enough! Leave the table and do not eat!” Without a word, I got up from the table terrified and beelined to my room, not understanding why I provoked my father into such a rage. The next morning, after things had settled, he told me about the countless nights he and his family spent wishing they had a small bowl of beans and rice.

Here in America we certainly were not rich by any means, but we did have all our fundamental needs met. We always had a roof over our heads and a meal waiting for us at the end of the day. The humility my parents passed down to me is now an invaluable aspect of my parental culture. One Saturday afternoon at my daughter’s softball game, the humility we proudly foster in our home was on full display. It was the championship game and as the final out was recorded, instead of celebrating, my daughter ran over to an upset opposing player. By consoling the opposing player and helping her off the field, she showed great humility even after winning her first championship. Perhaps it was my daughter just being nice, but after my father found out, he told me, “Remember the night we talked about not wanting to eat dinner?



Looks like you were able to pass on the lesson.” This moment between my father and me encapsulated the profound impact my Mexican upbringing is having on my Mexican-American parenting values.

One element of my Mexican heritage that I have mostly veered away from is the traditional Mexican family home dynamic. This is where the man of the house is in charge of providing for the family and the woman of the house is responsible for taking care of the home and children. As a young child, I remember my mother waking up every morning at 5 a.m. to cook, clean, and ensure my father had all he needed before heading to work. All her chores would be done by the time my brother and I got up for school.

This was the norm until 2008, when the world plunged into a financial recession. Our family was hit hard. I vividly remember overhearing my father tell my mother, “I don’t know how we’ll make it. After paying bills, we are down to less than one hundred dollars a week.” To help make ends meet, my mother picked up a job cleaning a home for a family friend. This led to a change in our home’s dynamic, as I saw my father begin to help my mother around the house. Whether it was washing the dishes or picking up my brother and me from school, no longer did my mother have to shoulder all the home responsibilities on her own. As a young teenager, I realized that even though my mother was holding down a job, she seemed happier and less stressed around the home. It was evident that the reason for this shift came from the fact that my father no longer just provided for the home. As a father now, I see the value in following this family dynamic rather than the traditional dynamic I experienced as a young child. Today my fiancé and I run our home as a team; no responsibility falls solely on one of us, helping us create a family dynamic that fosters unity, peace, love, and joy.

There is no denying my life is a mixture of American and Mexican culture, but never did I realize the significant role it would come to play when raising my family. Although being outcasted when I began my parental journey gutted me, it also made me appreciate my American culture. Growing up in America coexisting with a diverse community helped shape my core values of respecting all cultures and traditions while my Mexican upbringing forged my mentality of hard work and humility. Family dynamics evolve over time and while there are major differences between the Mexican home dynamic and my current Mexican-American home dynamic, the ultimate goal is the same: to raise a happy, loving family.



**Samavar** Flor Shakhsari

# Nature's Music

Dani Barfield

It had been the third argument of the day that Gwen had to deal with. Each yell, scream, and insult being thrown by each of her parents seemed to punch against her door and the wall that she was currently leaning against. She never knew what they fought about, what it was that would be deemed so necessary to—in her eyes—throw a giant tantrum over. As she heard numbing and deafening mumbles of insanity get even louder, her heart began to ache and her mind began to wander.

She wondered if the constant brawl of her parents would last forever, if she would have to add another three years to her already long time of dealing with the mess that is her parent's relationship. Or, in another case, would she have to deal with going from one house to the other every week over the next three years of her teenage life. Her friends told her it could be a good thing. Two Christmases, two birthdays, two Halloweens, double the leftover candy from the bowl that you use to hand out to the kids.

Yet that was a romanticized view of something no child or teenager would ever want to go through. Gwen shook these anxious thoughts out of her mind and reached for the only thing that could actually silence not only the drones of her bickering parents but also her own brain. She carefully rested a pair of headphones over her ears and pressed a button on her Walkman. Soon, the soothing tones of R.E.M., Guns N' Roses, and Bon Jovi started. The distressing tones of her parents now got replaced by these melodic voices, which never failed to bring her the joy and peace that nothing else could. Yet as she sighed and relaxed to the songs of her time, she could still hear the faint screaming from her family. Even if the music was still overpowering their voices, just the fact that they were still there made her nerves begin to jump and her heart start to race again.

With a sigh and a huff, Gwen got up and decided to mosey over to the forest that loomed quietly just on the edge of her backyard. The heavy greens and tall trees that looked like pine or spruce seemed to creep over and observe her just as much as she had observed them. She had never taken the time to learn about the local plants near her home. She found it too boring and would yawn and even fall asleep at the mention of a textbook regarding any plant. She noticed a specific tree that decided to loom over her comparatively small figure. To her, it was just a tree, but to someone like her father, he would gasp and say that it's a Sitka spruce and how

it can grow to over 100 meters tall. Yet her mother would sigh and complain about how the plants are all he'd ever talk about. And then... well, we already know where this will go.

As Gwen walked further and deeper into the lush forest, she could hear the fading voices of her thunderous parents and soon just the thumping beats and harmonious voices of Madonna, Tina Turner, and Michael Jackson. Looking down at the moist dirt ground slightly forming to hold the weight of each step she took, she could feel each grainy, smooth, and dry leaf brush against her and her clothing. Going off-trail, she felt more twigs and leaves brush and getting caught on her. Suddenly, she felt a branch tug on the headphones, ripping them off her head, and with her faster strides, they quickly fell from the branch and to the rocky ground. Gwen whipped around and turned to see her only source of music now broken. Her face heated and her heart ached in frustration. Having lost the only source to soothe her anxieties, she stomped her foot on the ground and promptly screamed aloud, "Damnit!" which seemed to ring throughout the woods and even startle a few birds. Her eyes began to water and her lip started to quiver. She could still hear the shouting from her house, with each rise in the voices of her loved ones like a strike to the face. She hated crying. For someone so noisy, she hated the thought of sobbing and aching and letting out bellowing cries that told someone "I am not okay! Hold me. Comfort me. Tell me it'll be okay!"

She wiped her face and rubbed her warm eyes, trying to get the sore feeling in her throat to stop. With a shaking sigh, she looked down defeatedly at her broken headset. Reaching to turn off her Walkman and grab her headphones, she noticed a peculiar tune coming from deeper in the forest. She could identify the familiar noises of piano, each key pressed bringing a soothing flow of almost a river or a creek, running down to wherever it might lead, but you know it's leading you to someplace good.

She wandered aimlessly, switching directions and crossing rivers deep and shallow, eventually becoming lost. A lost girl. She was a lost girl in the woods trying to find the source of classical music. In the woods. It is saddening when you think about it for too long, but for her it felt right to renew herself as "Lost Girl" and try to find the source of a piano in the middle of nowhere. She picked up on the crescendo the piano was reaching, and she proceeded to run trying to find the source. Her boot got tugged on a wandering branch, making her lose her balance and roll down a hill full of both dead and bright green leaves. She slowed, groaning in aches and pains as the piano suddenly stopped.

Lost Girl raised herself, sitting up and rubbing various parts of her as she felt a pair of eyes watching her. She looked up and found a man, an old man, from what seemed to her like the Renaissance, sitting on a bench in front of a pristine white piano in the middle of the woods. The old man tilted his head in curiosity, taking his fingers off the ivory keys and turning towards her.

He rubbed his graying mustache and said, “Well... hello.” He could only muster this with a bit of questioning in his tone. Despite the perplexing circumstances in which he had found himself, it was only polite to greet this girl. She stood there confused, wiping the leaves and dirt off herself and walking towards his piano.

“What the hell are you doing with a piano in the woods? I mean, your skills are rad, but... here?” She was about to touch the large instrument in front of her before the old man gently swatted her hand to get her to stop.

“This isn’t just a piano, you calf lolly!” The man took a handkerchief and gently rubbed it over the piano where she might or might not have touched it. “It’s a grand piano. Grand. Not just a... a measly little thing you call a piano.”

As the man emphasized the quality of his prized possession, she rolled her eyes. Lost Girl looked around, remembering her broken “instrument” as well and began to crave the sound of music again.

She rubbed her arm and quietly asked, “Do you think you could play it again? The pi- uh... the grand piano?”

The old man stroked his chin before nodding. “I don’t suppose... Why not?” He adjusted himself and began to start playing on his grand piano, his fingers drifting and pressing against each key, playing a symphony of notes and various ebbs and flows of calming music. Of course, to him that was what was playing. But to Lost Girl, there was nothing. She heard absolutely nothing. Her eyebrows furrowed and she could only hear the small thumps of each key being pressed down as well as the nature surrounding them. With a small huff, she demanded, “What’s wrong with your piano? I can’t hear anything!”

The man stopped and readjusted his gloves, turning to her with a confused look. “I don’t know what’s going on with your small head, but I can hear it just fine!” He began to play again, but to the girl there was nothing. Again, absolutely nothing. The unsettling silence had begun to get to her. Without her music, she would have to finally face the world and its own music. The music of silence. That kind of music was deafening to her. The inconsistencies in the differing animals, the wind against the looming trees, and the crunching of the ground all felt like her worst nightmare joining together into one.

As Lost Girl looked around, from seemingly every direction the trees that she once saw as looming were now a piercing gaze, seeking to trap her in a cage from which there was no escape. The leaves were now spikes, their jagged edges hoping to slice her the moment she moved an inch. What was at once comforting to her became petrifying as the clouds grew dark, making the forest—no, her hellscape—grow menacing. With every pounding heartbeat, she found the differing greens and browns mixing into each other, forming a mindless blob of disorienting color, dissolving into static and buzzing against her form. The various calls of the wild birds, beetles, owls, flies, rodents, and bees all rang together in her lost head, seemingly coming together all in one enough to make a ringing in her ears. Every distinct shape that once was easily processed had now broken off to be its own abstract thought. Her eyes watered, her body shook, and her lungs felt as if they were going to collapse.

She bent in on herself, lowering to the ground, which used to be dirt-filled and crunchy with leaves but had become a buzzing static mess. Her body felt like it was going to break into its own abstract concepts, each limb and appendage shaking and buzzing with an energy so unfamiliar that it felt as if it was going to fall off in an instant.

The man, noticing her suffering, immediately stopped playing. He stood up from his seat and came to her side. “What’s got you in all of a dudder? Was it my music?”

Lost Girl simply cried a bellowing cry: “I am not okay! Hold me. Comfort me. Tell me it’ll be okay!” Her shoulders shook as she slumped to the ground, holding her head and pressing her knees up against her heaving chest.

The man started to figure out what was happening to her, and he quietly sighed, over and over and over, until he himself felt relaxed. He laid a hand on her shoulder and mumbled in a calm tone, “Breathe, breathe with me.” The man took in a long, deep breath before letting it out in a sigh. He repeated this until the girl started to try, too. She coughed the first few times, her breath getting caught in the middle of her throat, but soon she could find herself beginning to calm down, too.

After her final deep breath, she sniffed and wiped her eyes and nose. “Thank you,” she whispered with a scratchy voice. The man only nodded, giving her shoulder a small squeeze before letting go. They both sat in silence for as long as possible before the man cleared his throat and finally spoke.

“You know,” he looked around at the lush greenery, which to the girl, still seemed like colorless mush, “you should really take the time to enjoy your environment. Take a deep breath, admire your view, maybe even take some time to learn about



it. You never know when your greatest comfort may lose you, so you might as well utilize multiple assets.”

Lost Girl only nodded in agreement before leaning back to rest further, only to find that she had to catch herself mid fall, as the grand piano was now gone. She had no energy left to care nor wonder what was real or not, and she simply sat back up and continued to look around at her scenery. “I think I understand that now,” she concluded.

The sounds of the various bugs and rodents began to harmonize with one another. The wind dancing through the leaves and the hollow wood of the tall trees produced a peaceful whistle of music. The birds and their differing calls helped back up the other notes and chords that compose nature. The clouds had passed, making the dew on the green lush surrounding them shine to their brightest potential. Taking in a final breath before standing up, she took in the beauty of her environment, finally beginning to appreciate it for what it truly is.

“Thank you, Mr...” She paused, turning towards him and going to help pull him up as she waited for him to tell her his name. He gladly held on and stood up, brushing off his suit and coattails, adjusting his attire, and clearing his throat once more before responding, “You’re welcome, Gwen.”

Gwen’s eyebrows furrowed. “How did you—”

“Get home safe now!” The man turned and walked in an unknown direction, causing her to become more confused. She shook off the feeling and turned back around to try and figure out where she needed to go. To her surprise, however, she was all the way back where she had started, just at the edge of the forest, facing her parents’ house. She slowly looked down at her hands, finding the broken headphones alongside her Walkman, a few dead leaves mixed in with the wires.

As she walked back inside, everything seemed to be a blur. She ate her dinner, said goodnight to her parents, and rested in her bed, staring up at the ceiling in silence. She had never had such a clear mind before. The first thing she did when she got home was throw away the headphones and put away her Walkman in her drawer. Her parents offered to get her a new pair, but she refused, claiming that she could live without them. The silence she was experiencing in bed didn’t make her stomach twist with anxiety. Instead, she could think. She could close her eyes and dream without anything else plaguing her mind. While she enjoyed the lack of music and finally lay down to rest, she swore she could hear that same melody of piano music coming from the forest.



## Final Performance

Fern Helsel-Metz



## Heartfelt

Rae Foss

# Of Thee and Me

Noelle Chow

My dear, my love, the apple of my eye,  
I could not tell you what you mean to me.  
As precious as the sunset's golden sky  
And perfect as an English cup of tea.

I can't express how high you lift me up  
When all you do is walk into the room.  
You overflow my broken empty cup  
And sweep away my sadness and my gloom.

In death, in life, we'll always be as one—  
At six feet under, still as close as twins.  
And when the day is out and life is done  
Our blessings will outnumber all our sins.

My sweet, my darling, you surpass them all,  
And I would die if I should see you fall.







## Soul Eclipse Zoe McCuen

## Syzygy Saul Schindler

The metaphor is pointless,  
I can never show you,  
Truly,  
How my world is.

But I can paint it.

And speak it.

It doesn't matter.

I can paint  
The whole of the Earth,  
And no one could see,

I could yammer on forever,  
And not a syllable  
Could show you truth.

I could enslave every particle,  
Every yelp of the universe,  
And yet,  
Still,

I can't show you

My true mind.

We cannot be aligned,  
We are not mathematical,  
We are not describable.

But we can touch.

And in that moment,

Where we get it,  
When the note strikes right,  
When the photon bounces  
Exactly where it must,

When that thing  
Wraps around our  
Brain.

We connect,  
Not as lines or points,  
But as dust and blood.

And we are so lucky  
That we can-

For we are mostly empty space.

A billion years ago,  
A piece of me and you fell,  
From heaven's void.  
And we crashed on a rock,  
Which would, one day  
Be covered in water.

Oceans of you,  
And oceans of I.

And now,  
Our particles  
Have spun around,  
Around, around, around,

A quadrillion miles,

Dust motes in a desert,  
Quantum windblown.

Until,

Somehow,

Here,

Now,

Those particles, on their  
Long, long, long  
String,  
Connect.

It is there,

Where the spark lives,  
Where the atom splits,  
Where two become one,  
And one becomes two.

We crash together,  
Under the black moon,

The Syzygy.



# WALL 2025 Staff



**AIDAN HUNT**  
Editor-in-Chief

Aidan describes his creative work as “multi-disciplined” in music, poetry, and prose. Each medium carries reflections of the other within his work, yet are each unique and define their own names. His pieces are published under the pen name “Aidan Angela,” which replaces the author’s last name with his mother’s first. This moniker has come to represent Aidan’s literary journeys—taking all that his mother, upbringing, and past have taught him and allowing them to breathe life into his art. Always looking for new creative ventures, Aidan embraces new projects and looks forward to future growth and collaboration at every step. For those interested in Hunt’s work beyond his “Aidan Angela” moniker, look forward to personal, heartfelt musical projects under the name “Gone” and collaborative, raucous music under the name “Sun’s on Fire.” For communication, inquiries and collaboration: huntaj19@gmail.com



**MAXWELL JAVAHERI**  
Fiction Editor / Art Editor

Maxwell is currently studying English and finds interest in multiple areas of creative writing, aspiring to publish novels and become a screenwriter. He enjoys fiction writers such as Kurt Vonnegut and Franz Kafka. Through their unique writing, he is inspired to write with intent, considering his perspective and experiences throughout his work. The type of writing that he most enjoys is stream of consciousness through books like *Catcher in the Rye* and *Slaughterhouse Five* as he likes finding out about characters and the worlds that they live in through their own words.



**GABRIELLE PORTER**  
Fiction Editor / Publicity Chair

There is nothing Gabrielle Porter loves more than words. Her nickname after all is Gab—and boy, does she love to gab. Telling stories, whether through written word or performance, has always been important to Gabrielle. She previously spent time working the behind-the-scenes technical aspects of theatrical productions as well as acting on stage but has decided to change direction towards creative writing. She is grateful for the opportunity to read so many amazing stories as a Fiction Editor this year, as well to have her own work be published for the first time in the 2025 edition of WALL. She is thankful for all of her professors at Saddleback, who have helped guide her in her journey as a writer. Gabrielle is eager to continue studying English at UC Berkeley in the fall of 2025. For any inquiries you can reach her at Gabrielleporter432@gmail.com



**SEAN MCLAY**  
Fiction Editor / Copy Editor

Sean majored in Creative Writing and English at Saddleback College, completing his studies in Spring 2025. He has been writing for over ten years, making it his primary area of education for the last five years. “The First Prize,” his story in this year’s WALL, is his first publication. He hopes to work with book publishers in the future. Sean can be contacted via email at sean.mclay6@gmail.com.



**LILA MUKASA**  
Personal Narrative Editor / Copy Editor

Lila is a journalism major who is passionate about telling true-to-life stories that can make an impact. Eager to explore journalism in its various formats, she previously worked on the *Lariat*, Saddleback’s campus news publication, as a News Editor before joining WALL. She looks forward to continuing her studies as a journalism major at CSU Long Beach in fall of 2025. She can be contacted at lilamukasa@gmail.com.



**SAUL SCHINDLER**  
Personal Narrative Editor / Copy Editor

Saul is studying psychology and chemistry at Saddleback with the goal of transferring and one day becoming a psychiatrist. Although his educational path wouldn’t suggest it, Saul is very passionate about writing, particularly personal narratives and poetry. He writes a new poem every day to express his emotions and experience. He loves reading both literature and the writing of other Saddleback students. Saul is very grateful for the welcoming environment of the WALL staff and feels very privileged to contribute to the 2025 edition of the journal.



**ZOEJEAN GARDNER**  
Poetry Editor/ Publicity Chair

Zoejean, who is majoring in English at Saddleback, hopes to transfer to UCLA in 2026 to earn her degrees in English and Journalism. She works at a local bookstore and loves reading. She had a great time working on this year's edition of WALL.



**JACOB M. HOFFMAN**  
Poetry Editor / Art Editor

A passionate observer of both the emotional and conceptual aspects of art, Jacob offered a thoughtful, interdisciplinary perspective to the journal staff. With a background in computer science and a strong interest in illustration, he explores the intersection of technology and creativity. His studies in psychology and communication have deepened his understanding of how people process and express emotion, which strongly influences his approach to poetry and storytelling. Jacob is also a featured contributor in this issue with his personal narrative "Last Light in the Room," a moving tribute to his late grandmother that captures the intimate weight of loss with atmospheric detail. Always curious and community-driven, Jacob is dedicated to fostering meaningful connections through art and language. For commission work: jacobhoff.mail@gmail.com



**KAT JOHNSON**  
Literary Associate

Kat is transferring from Saddleback to California State University, Fullerton. Her major is journalism with a primary focus in writing. Kat, who served as a Fiction Editor and Copy Editor for WALL 2022, loves to tell and create stories, thus being a part of the WALL has helped her with that passion. All of the other staff members have warmly welcomed her and greatly aided in her motivation to continue working hard and see her works published.



**IRIS KIM**  
Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Iris recently completed her certificate in Illustration/Animation at Saddleback College to explore and expand her skills after obtaining a B.A. in Art at CSU Fullerton. She aspires to become a webcomic artist focusing on humor, such as sitcoms, and visual storytelling inspired by cartoons, music, and video games. Her hobbies include listening to music that fuels her creativity and capturing ideas into a concept. Her works can be found at <https://floweroneselic.artstation.com/>



**ZOE MCCUEN**  
Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Zoe is a graphic designer and illustrator with a background in psychology from UC Irvine. Her work seamlessly blends humor, creativity, and empathy to create functional and eye-catching designs. When she's not designing, you'll find her sketching, watching films, or daydreaming— often all at once. For logos, visual identity design, or any project that needs a creative mind and sharp eye: mccuen.zoe@gmail.com



**SARA YALDA**  
Graphic Designer / Layout Editor

Sara is a graphic design and animation student at Saddleback College who values visual art as a universal language that bridges cultures and perspectives. Her work is driven by the belief that design is more than aesthetics—it is communication, a language she passionately studies and continues to refine. Through layout, motion, and photography, she explores the power of visual storytelling as both craft and connection. For communication and collaboration, she can be reached at sarayaldae@gmail.com



**ADAM PEARSON**  
Literary Associate

Adam was one of the Art Editors for the 2023 edition of WALL and is still a student at Saddleback College. Academically, he is not working towards anything in particular but is instead taking classes to build the skills to better his personal projects.



**FERN HELSEL-METZ**  
Photography Editor

Fern, as Photography Editor for WALL Literary Journal, draws inspiration from the contributors who infuse life into each edition. As an alumna of Saddleback College, her artistry extends from photography to alternative printmaking, exploring the intricate relationships between history, landscape, and nature in contemporary society. With multiple awards and exhibitions to her credit, Fern's work invites viewers to delve into the dynamic interplay of past and present as she diligently refines her craft through ongoing portfolio and website endeavors.



**GINA SHAFFER**  
Faculty Advisor

Gina teaches creative writing, composition, and literature as a professor of English at Saddleback College. A faculty advisor for WALL since 2012, she also serves as committee chair of WordFest OC, a campus literary festival. She previously served on the faculty of UCLA Writing Programs. Before becoming an educator, she worked as a newspaper reporter, magazine editor, and theater critic. A poet and published playwright whose works have been staged throughout Southern California and New York, Gina earned her Ph.D. in English at UC Irvine. She is perpetually inspired by the creativity and innovation of the students who staff WALL and those who contribute their words and images to it.

# WALL 2025 Contributors

## Fiction

### SAFA AHMED

Safa will be attending UC Irvine in the fall and majoring in Informatics. Although she is pursuing a career in UI/UX design, she loves to write in her free time and hopes to become a published author in the future. When she's not writing stories, poems, and songs, she's watching movies or reading sci-fi novels.

### DANI BARFIELD

Dani is studying Creative Writing/English. They have recently taken courses for creative writing and fundamentals of art. With years of writing experience going as far back as 2017 and art experience since 2015, they hope to take their written works to book publishers in the future. Dani can be contacted at danibarfield2028@gmail.com.

### AMITY Z. CARNELIAN

Amity has been a dual enrollment student at Saddleback College since the Fall 2024 semester. WALL is her first piece accepted for publication. She is passionate about writing and anything to do with language.

### HAYDEN OLDHAM

Hayden is currently studying English Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. Prior to this, she spent two years at Saddleback College, where she earned her Associate of Arts degree and participated in the Oxford Study Abroad program, spending nine weeks immersed in European literature. Inspired by this experience, she submitted original research to the Saddleback/IVC Research Symposium, examining the interplay of religion, science, and society in literature—a reflection of her deeper passion for creative and interdisciplinary work.



# Personal Narratives

## BEVERLY BRIDGES

After a career in corporate America and England, Beverly has dedicated herself to studying the fine arts. While not painting or writing, Beverly endeavors to fill the growing demand for unpaid primary caregivers with humor, grace and, most of all, love.

## WEN LI

Wen worked for almost ten years in northern Europe before starting her journey in the USA. Because of her overseas experience, she appreciates the opportunities to see the world and get to know people from various cultural backgrounds. Her career goal is to be a professional psychologist and help people excel in a multicultural environment and have fruitful, happy lives.

## SUMMER CHELSEA RAI0

Summer is currently studying Nutrition at Saddleback College, with the goal of becoming a clinical dietitian, catering to patients with Type 2 Diabetes and other chronic diseases. She is an advocate for mental health awareness and suicide prevention as well an active member in Narcotics Anonymous, volunteering and speaking in local recovery centers. Summer is a self-professed “fitness and nutrition geek” whose down time will land her in the gym, followed by binge watching Netflix with her husband.

## GRACE ROBY

Grace is an English major at Saddleback College, transferring to UC Berkeley in the fall of 2025. She is deeply passionate about writing and literature, particularly its ability to affect the lenses humans can see the world through. Literature helps build our understanding of the world and how to empathize with it; this is why Grace aspires to go into publishing to help foster a more inclusive and inspiring literary canon. Grace also enjoys going to the beach with friends, being a barista, and talking loudly.

## LEO SORIANO

Leo is a Mexican-American father of three, born February 9, 1992, to Mexican parents in Southern California. He currently works as a Senior Product Owner and is returning to college after a fifteen-year break to pursue a bachelor's degree in data analytics. His favorite subject since high school has been literature and writing. Leo loves the process of a simple idea becoming a finished product.

# Poetry

## CHRISTINA M. CASILLAS

Now the mother of triplets, Christina put her education on hold when she became pregnant. She has worked for her husband's accounting firm for the last 30 years. He has always encouraged her to write as he knows how much she loves it and how much she doesn't love numbers. Class by class, she hopes to obtain a bachelor's degree in Creative Writing.

## NOELLE CHOW:

Noelle graduated from Biola University with a bachelor's degree in Psychology and English (Writing). She likes short stories, form poetry, and psychological thrillers.

## LUCIA DEMARTINI

Lucia has always used poetry as a form of expression and an outlet to deal with life as it comes. Her love of poetry came from her songwriting, as most of her songs began as poems and blossomed into songs. She has taken a poetry class at Saddleback and hopes to improve her craft and bridge the gap between songwriting and poetry.

## CASSANDRA FRUTOS:

A second-year student at Saddleback College who is studying biology, Cassandra has nurtured a love for writing ever since she learned how to write but has never previously published her work. She can be found best through her email: cassiefr05@gmail.com

**SPENCER GLENN**

Spencer is a computer science student and tutor at the LRC for the subjects of math and computer science. Prior to attending school for computer science, his focus was audio engineering.

**MAYA HARRIS:**

Maya is finishing her last year at Saddleback, working toward an associate degree in Business Administration with a focus on Accounting. Since she can remember, she has always been in love with creative writing and dreamed of becoming a published author.

**AYAME HUBER MUNEMURA**

Ayame, a concurrently enrolled junior in high school, has completed English 3, a Creative Writing class at Saddleback College.

**JACQUELYN SHARGA:**

Jacquelyn started her college journey at Saddleback in 2020, and despite quarantine trying its hardest to make her unmotivated to move forward, Saddleback's Promise Program managed to get her to transfer to Cal State Fullerton by 2022! She somehow graduated Magna Cum Laude in 2024 — even though she distinctly remembers only caring about her Creative Writing classes — with a B.A. in Journalism! Now she is back at Saddleback for its wonderful music classes, which keep her both sane and busy whenever she is not at work or with her boyfriend (who her poem “Gentle” is about).

**SHANNON THORNTON**

Shannon is a human being who exists on planet Earth. His writing can be found in the 2024 WALL literary journal, American Surf Magazine, and YÜTH Magazine, where he is currently writing.

**LIBBY TRACY-COUNCIL**

Libby is a graduating high school senior who will attend Laguna College of Art and Design, aiming for a BFA in Animation. She has taken several creative courses, such as AP 2D Art and Design and AP Drawing, as well as Saddleback courses such as Drawing 1 and Creative Writing. She has submitted two art portfolios to the College Board: received a 3 for AP 2D Art and Design and is currently awaiting a score for

AP Drawing. Libby would describe herself as a cat person, an art fanatic, and a certified geek. She loves anything and everything when it comes to storytelling, from cartoons to classic literature to fanfiction, and she hopes to one day publish her own novel or series.

## Art & Graphic Illustrations

**TOM ANDERSON**

Tom works on his art in Landfill Stewdio: Landfill because no new materials are used in his work and Stewdio because the recipe for each piece is unique. He labels his work “Find Art” (not Fine Art) because most pieces are based on found objects.

**ELI CHARNE**

Eli is currently studying Ceramic Arts at Saddleback College. He won the Juror's Award for Ceramics in the 2025 Student Showcase and currently has some of his artwork on display in the Saddleback Library and in the lobby of McKinney Theater. You can see more of Eli's artwork at [www.eastwestceramics.com](http://www.eastwestceramics.com)

**KARINE FORTIN**

Karine is currently studying photography at Saddleback College, where she focuses on portraiture and visual storytelling. Her work has been exhibited at the Saddleback College Art Gallery, where she received the 2024 Purchase Award, and was recognized with a Bronze Award from The Portrait Masters. Originally from France, she finds beauty in quiet, fleeting moments, especially on a rainy morning in Paris.

**RAE FOSS**

Rae is a graphic design student who plans to pursue a career in brand development. She has been drawing since 16 and specializes in digital illustration. She can be reached at [Raenicolefoss38@gmail.com](mailto:Raenicolefoss38@gmail.com)

**MARCOS GARCIA**

Marcos, who plans to become a licensed architect, has sold his artwork to friends, classmates, and his employer, Tea House on Los Rios, which has purchased a water-

color painting that will be featured on cards showing the recipe for Sweet Currant Scones. Marcos enjoys making things and plans on entering more competitions. You might find him working away at his mini-studio: a table at Barnes and Noble. Despite his disdain for buildings, cities, nature, and even cars, they are likely to appear in his artwork. Instagram: @marcos.mojo

#### **CHARLIE GORNOWICZ**

Charlie, a studio art major at Saddleback College, will continue his education at California State University, Fullerton, with the dream of working in the film industry. He'd love to create realistic movie/TV show sets for companies such as Lucasfilm and Warner Bros. He's never had the chance to display his art publicly, but he hopes those who'd enjoy it get to see it!

#### **CAROLINA HARRIS**

Carolina is a multidisciplinary designer and illustrator based in Southern California. With an academic foundation in Graphic Design and ongoing studies in Illustration/Animation, she specializes in branding and brand identity, crafting thoughtful visual systems that help bring brands to life. Her work, which spans editorial design, motion graphics, and apparel, has been recognized in national competitions, featured in retail shops, and now published in the 2025 edition of WALL. In her downtime, she enjoys lettering and type design; sewing clothing and costumes; and losing herself in creative side quests. You can see more of her work at [carolinaharrisdesign.com](http://carolinaharrisdesign.com)

#### **DEDAN HERU**

Dedan is currently earning an associate degree in Photography at Saddleback College. He has taken all three levels of photography within the Photography program and plans on making a career out of portraiture. He is obsessed with fantasy and storytelling which reflects within his artwork.

#### **REBECCA A. HOLDEN**

After graduating with a BFA in design and interior architecture from Virginia Commonwealth University, Rebecca practiced commercial design and architecture for over 30 years. Her artwork is contemporary with motifs that are cheerful and vibrant, influences she mastered from her time living in the Caribbean, Italy, and several U.S. coastal cities. As an educator, she taught interior design and architectural

drafting, fine art and watercolor classes to both adults and children. She has written for the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts website, Artsedge, which integrates fine art subjects into standard curriculum lessons for children K-12. After departing the business world, she now happily paints full time. Instagram: @rebeccaholdenart Website: [www.rebeccaholdenart.com](http://www.rebeccaholdenart.com)

#### **CHEYENNE HUNTER**

Cheyenne, an Illustration and Animation major, is a freelance illustrator who is working towards animating for indie games and online shows. In her spare time, she designs and sews costumes for herself and her stuffed animals. Her Instagram is [spare\\_scribbles](https://www.instagram.com/spare_scribbles) if you'd like to see more of her work.

#### **RILEY KLUCZYNSKI**

Riley is starting her junior year as a Graphic Design student. Her goal is to work as a designer in an agency or as a freelance artist. She has always had a passion for fine arts since childhood, but this is her first time having her art published. Her illustration for the poem "Poison Frog" was especially fun to create and pushed creative limits by using a scratchboard made for children as a medium.

#### **SOPHIA MUCCINI**

Sophia is currently studying psychology and human services at Saddleback College, and—after obtaining a bachelor's degree—intends to pursue a master's degree in either psychology or social work. In her free time, she is a hobbyist writer and artist, a baker, and a volunteer for a local charity. Despite an adverse upbringing—including domestic abuse and homelessness—Sophia is a devoted daughter and older sister who believes that, through God, all things are possible.

#### **IMAN H. MOUJTAHED**

From performing, photography, digital art, crafts, music, all the way to fashion designing, Iman has always immersed herself in the arts. Four of her photographs have been featured in WALL, including the cover of the 2013 edition. Iman is also passionate about psychology and health, especially the psychology of personalities, mental health awareness, suicide prevention, and alternative medicine. A Saddleback alum who was involved in student government and campus clubs, she served as a commencement speaker in 2015. She has returned to take classes on campus as her varied interests and love for learning have no limits.



### **VICTORIA PEREDA**

A student in Saddleback's Photography program for more than a year, Victoria is transferring to a four-year university in Fall 2025 to study art photography. Victoria's main interest is in fashion/editorial photography along with capturing nature and intimate moments.

### **JAZMINE POWELL**

Jazmine, an Illustration/Animation major, is specifically drawn towards 2D animation production and hopes to become an animator. She has been taking art classes since middle school and even took AP 2D Design during her senior year of high school. Jazmine likes to post her art online on platforms such as Youtube or Instagram. She creates a lot of digital art and has even done a few commissions for family and friends. To check out her other artworks, check out her Instagram page: D Follow me at @jtcreates\_\_

### **LAVI RAHE**

A high school senior who took a Graphic Illustration class at Saddleback College through the Dual Enrollment program, Lavi is interested in exploring Graphic Design, following a childhood spent drawing solely from imagination and spontaneity. Because of that, Lavi really enjoyed learning a more traditional, step-by-step approach to creating artwork and viewing the creative process in a new, compelling way. Lavi's academic goal is pretty simple: doing the best and studying things that are truly of interest. Lavi's advice: Do what you love and love what you do! Don't take your talents for granted!

### **SOFIA REYES DE VICZAYA**

Sofia graduated from Irvine Valley College with an associate degree in Studio Arts and will transfer to the ArtCenter College of Design for Fall 2025 to study Illustration. While focusing on illustration, Sofia has exhibited various paintings and artwork at several colleges, including Irvine Valley College, Saddleback College, and Orange Coast College. Today, Sofia enjoys spending time with friends and sharing her art and her process art through Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/svmmer.haze>

### **SILVIA RITTERLING**

Born and raised in Morelia, Mexico, Silvia came to the U.S. to work on accounting at a private company. After she became a mom, she stayed home with her kids. Eight years ago, she started to learn about creating ceramics, which became a true passion. She feels fortunate to be participating in the ceramics program at Saddleback College, where she is also taking a print making class. Silvia has participated in the 2021, 2023 and 2024 NCECA (National Council for Education on Ceramic Arts) Multicultural Exhibition. Her work has also been displayed in the 2024 City of Irvine All Media Exhibition and the 2025 Made in California Exhibition at Brea Gallery, along with student exhibitions at the Saddleback College Gallery and other school locations. She is deeply grateful for the opportunity to create and attend school. She hopes to reach people who use her handcrafted pots with a sense of happiness and care.

### **TRACEY ROLDAN**

Tracey is a photography student at Saddleback College with a strong focus on lifestyle photography and a commitment to mastering the art of noticing the everyday. Her talent has been recognized with the Juror's Award in Bloom and the 2024 Saddleback College Art Show. Her work was featured again in the 2025 Bloom exhibition. In addition, Tracey's work was published in Docu Magazine (Vol. 47) and showcased at the San Clemente Art Crawl in January 2025. Her photography continues to capture authentic moments with thoughtfulness and clarity. Explore more of her work on Instagram: @perspectiveinfoocus1.

### **FLOR SHAKHSARI**

Flor is a visual artist exploring the rich tapestry of cultural diversity and the harmony that can emerge from difference. She was previously an electrical engineer. During the introspective time of the COVID-19 pandemic, she began painting as a way to express the emotions and ideas that words often fail to capture. Flor has taken courses in oil paintings as an art student at Saddleback. She works across a range of media—including watercolor, oil, acrylic, pastel, and mixed media—on surfaces like canvas and wood, allowing each piece to take on a unique voice and texture. Through her art, she aims to create visual narratives that reflect the inter-

connectedness of global cultures and the beauty that arises when seemingly disparate elements come together in unity. Her art is currently on exhibition at Friends Gallery in Laguna Niguel and Mission Viejo Library where she was awarded 3rd place. In 2024, her art was on exhibition at Art Venture Costa Mesa and Newport Beach Art Exhibition. She volunteers in the cultural art committee in Mission Viejo and Moulton Museum.

Email: flor.properties@gmail.com

#### **CELIA WU**

Celia has focused on basic principles of representational art in oil and in watercolor since 2003 at Saddleback College. She has a vision to show viewers a different world by allowing them to see through her eyes for a brief moment as her distinctive and particular vantage point reflects her view of the whole. Her artwork can be viewed at Facebook under Art by CELIA WU.

#### **ZHIHUA ZHANG**

As an engineer, Zhihua never thought about learning how to paint. The Saddleback College Emeritus Institute for elders offers Zhihua a great opportunity to get close to the art and find a hobby and inner peace. Fascinated by the transparency, luminosity, and unpredictability of watercolor, Zhihua will continue learning and painting watercolor through the Emeritus program

## **Music Compositions**

#### **ANDREW BOCKA**

Andrew, who is working towards a career in music production and creation, has worked with many creators at Saddleback and released music through YouTube under the name Bock. He loves more than anything to create, particularly musical creation. With a lot of his work, he adds a little bit at the end that gets people to laugh. He loves finding new sounds and showing care for the work of even the smallest of creators.

#### **CHASE CRAW**

Chase, who majored in music production at Saddleback, attained a Certificate of Achievement in the subject. He loves music and the way it interacts with other mediums of art. Chase also loves One Piece, the Japanese manga series.