WALL Literary Journal 2026



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First Edition

WALL 2026 was produced in Adobe InDesign CC. Text is set in Source Serif 4 Subhead, IM Fell English, and Yrsa. Cover is printed on Tango C1s 12 point. Interior pages are printed on 80# coated silk with satin AQ. Printed through offset four-color process by PJ Printers in Anaheim, CA.

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by students of Saddleback College.

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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 2027 edition of WALL,
please see the guidelines for submission at
https://www.wallaliteraryjournal.org/submissions-1

The deadline is February 26, 2027.

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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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

You're either in or out. A winner or a loser. A success or a failure. These oppositional terms characterize the societal expectations and hierarchies that are pervasive in the human experience. At one time or another, often throughout various stages of our lives, we strive for recognition and validation of our identity and worth in the world. This struggle—magnified in times of economic, social, and political strife—can lead to feelings of alienation, displacement, and discontent, resulting in a deep sense of loneliness and loss.

With nuanced shadings of gothic darkness, playful irreverence, and soul-stirring enlightenment, this year's edition of WALL celebrates resistance to oppressive societal pressures. Through the immersive stories and poems shared on its pages, through imaginative works of art, we learn about people (both real and fictional) who have confronted rigid boundaries, endured interpersonal conflicts, and faced disheartening disappointments. Alongside these pieces are narratives of self-realization, resilience, and hope. Alec Elder, this year's editor-in-chief, uncovered this resonant thematic connection among the works. The inspiration behind the theme is adroitly delineated in his Editor's Note on the next page.

I commend Alec and the talented, dedicated staff of WALL 2026 for producing this memorable edition. The staff and I are immensely grateful for the campuswide support the journal receives. Especially supportive are Dean Christina Hinkle and Assistant Dean Jessica Kaven of the School of Humanities & Social Sciences. Other benefactors include Dr. Lonita Cordova, President of Saddleback College; South Orange Community College District Chancellor Julianna M. Asperin 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 Eric Shin. Our gratitude also extends to the stalwart support of Dr. Elliot Stern, who retired as campus president in 2026.

Special thanks goes to professors Suki Fisher, Catherine Hayter, Jennifer Hedgecock, Bridget Hoida, Brett Myhren, Shellie Ochi, and Ray Zimmerman of the English Department; Professors Karen Taylor and Louis Bispo of the Graphics Department; Scott Farthing, Dean of the School of Arts, Media, Performance, and Design; Professors Barbara Holmes (Art); Ariel Alexander (Music); Deidre Cavazzi (Honors Program Chair); Hiro Konishi (Cinema-TV-Radio Department Chair); Ryan Even (Photography); Timothy Posada and Ali Dorri (Journalism and New Media Department); and Matt Brodet and Randy Van Dyke (Cinema-TV-Radio). Additional benefactors include Christopher Hargraves and Jacqueline Zimbalist of the Student Development Office; the Associated Student Government; Khaver Akhter, Emily Lowry, Carrie-Ann Mansel, and Joyce Speakman; and Bruce Parker of PJ Printers.

The staff and I invite you to immerse yourself in the compelling stories, poems, and art, which collectively affirm the human need to fit in, to feel seen, heard, and valued.

Gina Shaffer
Faculty Advisor
WALL 2026

EDITOR'S NOTE

Over the past year, I have had the privilege of working alongside Professor Gina Shaffer and the fantastic staff at WALL to experience and congregate the works of art from the many wonderful artists here at Saddleback. Each with their own stories, experiences, and perspectives that makes their art singularly theirs. That uniqueness is exactly what WALL aims to celebrate in this year's edition. Throughout the journal, you will be able see, for yourself, the divine spark of creativity that rests at the heart of these works of art. Uniqueness is also explored in this year's theme.

While reviewing all of our finalists, I noticed a recurring element of people feeling separated from others around them. Whether they are viewed as a black sheep within their family and community, struggling with internal demons, or feeling a general sense of loneliness. These elements led to the formation of this year's theme: outcasts. To reflect that theme, we've worked hard to make this edition of WALL be unique among the catalogue of years past. The black pages inked in white writing provide a very different feel to the reading experience and contrast nicely with previous editions' more traditional use of white pages and black ink. The 2026 edition is also unique in its content as this year, we are proud to feature WALL's first student short film submitted by Saddleback's very own Luke Shuler. You are able to find the film on WALL's website, as well as a companion poster with a barcode leading to the website in the journal.

While reading through, you may notice patterns in the order of featured pieces. We have taken great care to tie certain groups of pieces into thematic pockets throughout the journal and provide a pleasant ebb and flow to the reading experience. You will also find that some of the written works feature an artistic motif. The three variations of this motif represent the feelings of isolation, acceptance, and community. All in service to our theme.

We have all felt like we don't belong or are different at some point in our lives. Maybe some of you feel that way now. Let this journal show you that you aren't alone. That no matter how different we may be from each other, we are all still bricks in the same wall. Each brick has a story to tell. Some are beautiful and bright. Others are dark and foreboding. Yet they all come together into one great community. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for reading our jounal. I hope you enjoy it.

Alec Elder
Editor-in-Chief
WALL 2026

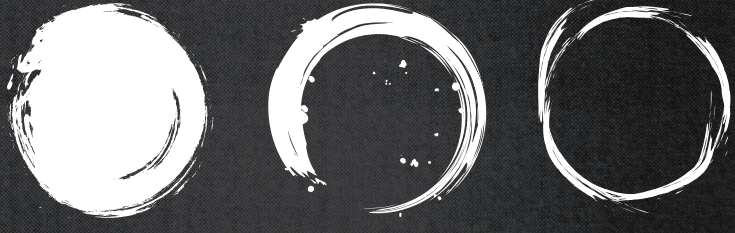


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On The Cover:

Front: **SARA** Photograph by Teri Pfeffer Perlstein

Back: **THE UNDER STORY** Photograph by Fern Helsel-Metz

Cover Design by Zahra Molaei



PLASMA

Alex San Filippo



Charcoal and Pastel

A STRANGE AND BEAUTIFUL CREATURE

Edwin Paez

I awoke to the presence of no moon.
Darkness had eaten away at light till it was no more.
Perplexed,
I looked around and found salvation in two emerald worlds.
Mesmerized,
I was engulfed, completely thrown into your gravity.
Lost in this Universe for years, I knew no escape.
But scared I was not, for you, my strange and beautiful creature, brought love and passion,
Comfort and understanding
and an inexplicable need to never leave.
But what Eden I had found eventually became
a Monster
devouring yourself through jealousy and anger, eventually devouring me, too.
And so, slowly, I was consumed
Dissolved by the very Universe that I had grown to cherish.
My body evaporated, exposing my soul
and you, the Universe, took it without hesitation, admiring it in your delicate hands
until intrigued you were not, and like a child to an ant
Crushed me
Leaving infinite passion in a limbo of heartbreak and poetry.

AUDIO VERSION

54321

Retaj Ridha



Scratchboard

54321

Lea Packer

5
a blue ceramic mug on my bedside table
and the tea stains on its wooden frame
the sweatshirt with the red hem hanging in my closet
~~collecting dust like our memories~~
the blues of my nails that refused to rinse off
and the chipped paint on my walls

4
the heavy metal against my chest in the shape of a heart
the feather softness hugging my body
~~i wish it were you~~
my toes curling and uncurling, tightening and releasing
'umbie'

3
engines protesting outside my window, they're carrying souls away
~~like you did, with mine~~
faint rustling of plastic bags
clunk, clunk, clunk of my mother's shoes

2
6 a.m. coffee with hints of cinnamon and ginger
poignant citrus, like
~~your cologne you fussed over~~
the neighbor's lemon trees

1
sour candies, a punch to my tongue

yet, unable to
~~hold me tighter into the night~~
catch my breath

I MISS YOU

Diego García-Taborga

I found a memory of you in the fridge today. Your flowers, shriveled but still healthy thanks to the cold. The same ones you presented to me on Valentine's Day years ago. That was the day I started my battle for your attention.

I had a crush on you for so long before and, holding your flowers in my hands, it took no time at all to decide that I was going to say "yes" to you.

I took you out for our first date with glee. It was cute, and we had fun. I didn't mind planning every date after that. You were too busy to plan them yourself. A few weeks in, I realized you weren't fond of kisses, hugs, or cuddles, but that's easier for some people than it is for others. After a few months, you told me you weren't ready for sex, and that was all right; it takes most couples time.

I did my best to be an easy girl to please.

And then you spiraled.

As your depression got worse, you moved into yourself, and our phone calls grew shorter and rarer until they were a monthly occurrence at best. If we said "hi," that was a good day.

In your absence, I realized I wanted to be held, but you couldn't hold me. I wanted to know your body, but you wouldn't let me. I wanted your heart, but you could not share it. That realization was the end.

You changed your meds the week we broke up, and things started to go better for you. They went better for us, too, now that we were just friends. A few lighthearted phone calls convinced me of that.

We talked once a week the month after we broke up. The month after that, we only spoke once. The following month...we didn't talk at all. A familiar pattern crept in; no matter how much I called or texted, you never had the time to get back to me.

"I haven't heard much from him either" was something many of your friends told me. Still, I knew what was happening; you were ignoring me.

It's the post-breakup blues. I went through it, too. But it still hurt.

I spotted you in a sea of graduation robes and waded through picture-taking and diploma-waving families to find you alone. You and me, face to face like no one else was there. You gave me your signature smirk, looking adorable in the afternoon haze, and suddenly, I had the same crush as when you handed me flowers two years before. I couldn't resist when you opened your arms to offer me a hug, and I sank into the warm body of the boy I had once loved.

"I miss you." That's what you said when we embraced.

My eyes widened. I wondered how it could be true. Wasn't it you who never called?

"I really miss you."

You tightened your hug. There was such an earnestness in your voice that it scared me because I realized: you were never ignoring me.

You caught sight of your mother and said, "I've got to go." I didn't say a word the entire exchange, yet I learned a belated lesson simply by listening: I had to let go of you.

You melted into a sea of black robes, and I haven't seen you since.

But I did come face to face with your flowers this morning. I tossed them in the backyard this afternoon.

THE COUCH

Margarit Pitt

I am leaning against my grandmother's couch/bed, which serves a dual purpose role in her two-bedroom apartment in Kishinev, Moldova, where I was born. During the day and late into the evening, it is a sitting couch, but at night it is where Baba, as I so endearingly like to call her, sleeps. And on rare occasions, it is where I sleep.

I don't recall the texture of the couch—the way the grooves felt or what it truly looked like. I just remember feeling safe on it, as if no one and nothing could get to me there. When I was on that couch, I knew even back then that the world's cruelties would not and could not find me. Like a piece of antiquated jewelry, I was tucked away from wandering eyes.

There, locked in her room, I would sit in admiration while she secretly recited Shabbat prayers behind closed doors and curtains. It was a ritual and tradition among many Jews that the Soviet regime did not allow to be practiced openly. I recall her smile as she sat me down on the couch, touching her index finger to her mouth as if to say, "Quiet." The white cotton and lace handkerchief lay slightly tilted over her head as she closed her eyes and prayed over the flickering candles that seemed to dance to her song. I watched her hands and fingers gently touch her face as she swooped the light toward her.

As my Baba concludes her prayer, I spy a pair of new stockings my mother had brought over to show off to her—the expensive kind, the kind that comes from abroad, whatever that meant. Like a forbidden treasure that had been stowed away, I mark it and wait for my grandmother to leave the room.

I am now on a mission to excavate them from the boroughs of bags and clothes that my mother had brought along with us. Once she leaves, I rummage through the pile of stuff and manage to pull the pantyhose out safely without anyone noticing. I slowly unwrap the packaging to make sure everything is intact. I am half squatting, half standing, leaning my buttocks against the back of my Baba's couch, trying on a pair of my mother's pantyhose.

One leg at a time, just like she had taught me. My little fingers crinkle the hose up just enough to be able to get my toes through the top of them, and then I slowly and gently push through with the entire foot.

"I can't let them snag," I think to myself. "These were imported from somewhere very important!"

The stocking makes its way around the circumference of my foot, like a surgeon gently maneuvering around the area of an incision he is preparing for. As I make my way to the other foot, I hear a loud chorus of voices coming from the living room where my mother and father are screaming about something.

I can see my parents through the entrance of the doorway. Their voices scrape my eardrums like fingernails on a chalkboard. It is all happening too fast. I cannot comprehend what is unfolding.

"No, I will not go!" my mother screams, and as those last words are said, she is suddenly flying across the room into the wall between the couch and my Baba's dresser.

What happened next is unclear to me because I am no longer a five-year-old mischievously playing in her sacred safe place. My mind draws a blank.

I feel as if my mind's walls are closing in on me.

Fear.

The feeling of being submerged under water and not being able to come up for air. I call it drowning. Water is everywhere. I cannot yet decipher between the sounds around me and my own reverberation.

I am paralyzed.

The whole world seems to take on a suffocating, slow perspective. Everything and everyone appears to be moving very slowly. I could feel my lips move, but I am unaware of what I am shouting. I look over at my mother and she is slumped over, disoriented, her eye swelling and tears streaming down her face. I look over at my father, who is walking toward us in a slow-motion kind of way, and with all the venom I can conjure up from within my little body, I hear myself scream, "I hate you! I hope you die! Die!"

What I did not understand in that moment was that this was not just a fight. It was an ending. At five years old, I had no framework for departure, for immigration, and for the quiet finality of leaving a country behind. I could not grasp that this moment marked a rupture—one that would separate my life into before and after. I only felt intensity without context, loss without language.

Now, more than four decades later, I understand what was unfolding beneath the surface. Sitting here in my great aunt's home in Hollywood, California, where there remains the last of the Russian community, I feel as though I have stepped into a preserved fragment of that earlier world. She was one of the few in the 1990s who insisted on parceling and shipping her furniture from Moldova to America. Not replacing it. Bringing it. Piece by piece. As if continuity could be packed, labeled, and carried across an ocean.

And in a way, it was.

The textures, the weight of the room, the arrangement of objects—they mirror my grandmother's space so precisely that time feels suspended. These are not just furnishings; they are artifacts of identity, of displacement, of resistance to erasure. They hold memory in a way language sometimes cannot.

And I realize now that the couch was never just a couch.

It was safety. It was ritual. It was the last place where the outside world was unable to penetrate, before everything changed.

The next thing I know, we are standing at the train station with my grandmother kneeling down toward me at eye level. "I love you," she says, handing me her watch. "Here, take this, so you can look at this watch and know that with every minute that passes, I am thinking about you and your brother." As she tries to hold back her tears, I wrap my little arms around her to say goodbye. As the train disembarks from the station toward our new life in America, my Baba stands waving at us for the last time.

ISTANBUL TRAM

Brad Friesen



Photograph

FUNNY MAN

Thomas Granata

"Tijuana's a good place to get car seats re-upholstered," said Jim.

The other three at the table froze, then Mike and Susan burst out laughing, while Carol smirked and averted her eyes from Jim.

"No, really. Get off the main drag, and you'll see lots of car seat re-upholstery outfits."

Susan, almost in hysterics, said, "The next time ... I need my ... car seats re-upholstered ... I'll make sure ... I go to ... Tijuana!"

"Me too!" said Mike. "Thanks for the tip, Jim."

The four friends had been swapping travel stories while playing Scrabble at Jim and Carol's. Mike, Susan, and Carol had met back in graduate school. Jim fashioned "peculiar" on the board, using all seven tiles, gaining fifty extra points.

"Good play!" said Susan, now calmer.

"When were you in Tijuana?" asked Mike.

"A while back."

"Yeah, Jim told me about it," said Carol. "He spent a day down there one summer when he was in college, before we met. You hadn't been anywhere before then. Right, Jim? And why you went to Tijuana in the summer I'll never know. It had to be blazing hot."

He and Carol had traveled more extensively in their five-year marriage, but the Tijuana trip stood out in Jim's memory.

"The heat didn't bother me, Carol. I had my Pancho Villa sombrero, my Clint Eastwood sunglasses, and a thermos of cold margaritas."

"You wish," said Carol. The other two chuckled.

"And you wandered around, looking for car seat re-upholstery places?" asked Mike, squinting at Jim, his voice rising at the end of the question.

"No, I wasn't looking for them. They were just there on the side streets. I wanted to get away from the tourists." Jim furrowed his brow and tried to concentrate on the game. "Are we still playing Scrabble or what?"

"Sure, Jim. But we want to hear about your Mexican holiday, too," said Susan, then asked matter-of-factly, "What else did you do in Tijuana?"

"Went to the art museum."

"There's an art museum in Tijuana?" asked Carol.

"Yeah, there is. In the cultural center. I told you about it."

"No, don't think so. But it would be just like you to spend your time in Tijuana in a moldy art museum after traipsing around deserted side streets. Others would have found better things to do," Carol said and sipped her

soda. “And you told me you were really overweight then. You must have been drenched in sweat. Did you go into the art museum to cool off?” Jim glared at her, his injured expression tinged with anger.

Mike and Susan fidgeted, gave each other pained looks, and nursed their sodas. After several moments, Mike broke the silence: “Carol, don’t be so hard on your poor hubby. Jim’s a good guy.”

“Oh, he knows I’m just kidding. Right, Jim?”

He didn’t answer and moved the tiles around on his rack. “Well, anyway, the museum has both art and history exhibits. There are dioramas of the Aztecs and some paintings and sculptures. They’re pretty cool.”

“Okay, sounds worthwhile,” said Mike.

“I bet Jim found the car seat re-upholstery places more interesting. He’s not really that highbrow.” Carol tried to sound good natured, but her voice had a disdainful edge. Jim took a swallow of soda.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” said Mike.

“Well,” said Susan, “if I ever get down to Tijuana, I’ll forgo the re-upholstery and art scenes and just bargain hunt for leather goods and pottery with the other tourists. You can’t have everything.”

“Yeah,” said Jim, “where would you put it?” More laughter from Mike and Susan.

“You’re in rare form tonight, Jim,” said Susan.

“He’s always a little rare,” said Carol.

The Scrabble game was winding down. Most of the tiles had been played and no one had made a word for some minutes. Jim was winning.

“Well, Jimmy boy,” said Mike, who had been keeping score, “you’re way ahead ... again. I suggest we call it a night.”

“Okay, if you want to give up without a fight,” said Jim.

“Oh, Jim. We know how much you enjoy beating people who have graduate degrees,” said Carol.

“We’ll let you have that pleasure,” said Susan.

“Jim thinks he’s smarter than the rest of us, when he’s really just a little odd,” said Carol. Jim didn’t even look at her.

“Well, he’s certainly a good Scrabble player ... Mike, we should go.”

“Yeah, it’s getting late,” said Mike. He, Susan and Carol got up from the table. The tension in the room abated.

“Thanks for coming over tonight,” said Carol.

“Oh, don’t mention it,” said Susan.

“Yeah, we always have fun when we come over for Scrabble, even if Jim beats us most of the time,” said Mike.

Jim remained seated and silent while Carol showed Mike and Susan to the door. They thanked her for the hospitality, then both called out, “Good night, Jim.”

"Oh sure, good night," Jim replied, giving a slow, half-hearted wave.

Carol glared at her husband, watched the pair walk to their car, then closed the door and came over to Jim. "You could have got up and helped see them out."

"Yeah, I guess." Jim avoided eye contact. Carol brought the soda cans into the kitchen, then returned to the table but didn't sit down.

"Honestly, Mike and Susan are two of our oldest friends," she said, her voice rising. "I don't know how you could be so rude to them."

"I wasn't rude. They know me. And you were the really rude one here tonight."

"Now what is that supposed to mean?" she said wide-eyed.

"C'mon Carol. You tried to embarrass me all night and made Mike and Susan uncomfortable."

She stared at him and frowned. Then her face twisted into a scowl. "What are you talking about? It was just playful conversation. We always joke around when Mike and Susan are here."

"You weren't just joking around, and you know it."

"Think whatever you want." Carol gathered up the Scrabble game, put it in the hallway closet, and returned to the table. "So, are you going to sit out here all night, savoring your win?" she asked, hands on hips.

"Yeah, I might take a few victory laps around the living room."

"Really funny, Jim. You're a regular riot. I'm going to bed." She climbed the stairs, went into their bedroom, and slammed the door.

Jim remained at the table, replaying some of the evening in his mind: Could she really be unaware of all her nasty cracks tonight? Bringing up my being overweight was a really cheap shot. And now I'm "always a little rare?" That's a new one. She makes me sound like an undercooked steak. Maybe I'll be "well done" next time. I happen to like moldy art museums; maybe Carol sees me as a moldy oldie. She already believes I'm a "little odd." And I don't think I'm so smart.

After a while, he rose slowly, walked over to the picture window, and looked out at the neighborhood. His and Carol's good-natured bantering, present from the first, had gradually turned into sniping and sarcasm. Jim abhorred the pettiness of it all.

He could hear Carol moving around in the bedroom. Jim went out and stood in the front yard. The cool night air refreshed him. Jim gazed upward: the full moon shimmered in a canopy of glittering stars.

He wondered how much longer his sense of humor and eccentricity would forestall a spiral into depression. At least Jim's performance at the advertising agency had not suffered, and the work provided a welcome distraction from his troubles. He and Carol hadn't talked about his job or her teaching position at the junior college in months.

After a few minutes Jim went back and got his car keys. “Time for another midnight ride,” he said, “like Paul Revere, only I’m not warning anyone.” Carol would probably hear the garage door opening and his car starting. Jim eased his Fiat Spider convertible onto the street and sped away. Shifting through the gears, he got on the southbound highway, took the car up to ninety and kept it there, with no thought of being stopped for speeding. With the wind in his face, the tension in Jim’s neck and shoulders eased. Driving into the night, away from the house, away from Carol, a weight lifted from him, and a rush of exhilaration coursed through his body. With no destination, he wanted only to keep driving, to go faster than the car, to not even need the car. But as with all his other brief nocturnal get-aways, the feelings of escape, of freedom, of release, slowly evaporated, and Jim knew he was destined to go back. Getting off at an exit about forty miles from his house, he headed back on surface streets. I’m in no hurry, he thought. And one of these times, I’ll keep going; I won’t turn around. Jim arrived home and pulled into the garage. He turned off the engine and sat silently for several minutes. “If only I could get myself re-upholstered in Tijuana...but that’s not very funny.”



NO LONGER MINE

Laili Shahrestani

the scent of fresh paint seeps into my nose,
and as i breathe in this foreign scent,
i drown the air that once knew my name.

the truck outside waits and
the bright red engine growls.

every box on the driveway is
full to the brim, but
i remain empty.

inside the rooms bleed of nothingness—
silence.
the home stands still, pretending not to ache.

i turn the knob once more.

the door closes behind me.
and the house stands still,
no longer mine.

FACE THAT REMEMBERS

May Bahi Nur



Porcelain Clay

MEMORIES IN THE MIRROR

Angelica Jimenez



Scratchboard

MEMORIES IN THE MIRROR

Deborah Rothbart

Eleven family members are coming for Christmas Eve dinner. The group on the front step is silhouetted from behind by a spectacular Washington orange-striated December sunset. My forehead has beads of perspiration. There is always a fair amount of heavy lifting to get ready for this coveted tradition. It calls for lots of love and deodorant. Our condo is comfortable for us, but hosting this number is a cozy challenge, always provoking memories. Lots of memories.

The rhythmic tinkle of a chime can be heard inside. Through the clutch of people assembled at the door, two young granddaughters, three and five, sidle past, heading straight for the brass Swedish angel chime on the coffee table. My eyes track their movement to where they stand in wonder, mesmerized by these magical angels as I once was. To their delight, three trumpet-bearing angels whirl round. The tiny strikers attached to their feet tap small bells on each rotation, inspired by the heat from four lit candles. I muse on whether these young girls will cherish this memory like I do.

The family scatters. I'm lured back to the kitchen to finish preparing dinner. The savory aroma of roasting brisket, along with the sweet, spicy aroma of mulled cider, permeates the entire house. With plates full, conviviality revels on. Waves of laughter, like accents in a musical score, fill the long, rectangular room, where logs blaze in the fireplace at the opposite end from the dining table. An arrangement of upholstered bergère chairs and a leather nail-head sofa are gathered around the flickering fire in an inviting nest.

As everyone eats, my gaze is drawn to the large framed mirror on the wall across from where I'm seated at the table. The mirror is adorned with a festive holiday wreath. Through the eye of the wreath, I can see the reflection of our living room.

The laughter and banter in the room disappear. The playlist dies away. In its place, I hear two soft jingles. Confused, I wonder where the second chime is coming from. My current living room dissolves and is replaced by the living room in my home in Nebraska, 1958. There I am, like my five- and three-year-old granddaughters, standing over another Swedish angel chime, gazing with wonder. Every Christmas, Mom reverently opens the box where it lives, removes and assembles it, lighting all four candles. Miraculously, the trumpet-bearing angels come to life, whirling as if by heavenly grace. Here,

too, the tiny strikers at the angels' feet tap the small chimes on each rotation, giving rise to a tranquil, insistent tinkling.

At the other end of the room, Mom and Steph, my older sister, are almost finished adorning the Christmas tree. My sister, impatient, urges me, "Barbie, come here and help. We want to finish this before our show." I hear a muffled broadcast coming from the black-and-white TV in the family room. My spectacled, balding father sits in his favorite upholstered rocker, captivated by one of his favorite programs.

Floor-to-ceiling windows on two walls of the living room reflect the soft incandescent light of the shaded lamps on the end tables that bookend the sofa, the lights of the opulent Christmas tree, and the brilliant light from the candles on the angel chime. Mingled among the reflections in the window is the promise of a white Christmas. Outside, large snowflakes free-fall. A soft blanket of snow has already covered the ground around the house.

Mom calls from the other room, "Hurry up! The Wizard of Oz is starting." I put the last string of tinsel on the tree, gaze at the spinning angels, and hurry into the next room to join the rest of the family. A mug of hot chocolate awaits me. My mom hands Dad his usual, a gin martini with a lemon twist. She watches from across the room at the round dining table, sipping her own gin martini with a skewered olive.

A chorus of voices and the sweet tinkle of the strikers on a chime interrupts my reverie. I return to the present and the sound of laughter. A family friend asks me for my brisket recipe. As we chat, a raucous barrage of conversation and admonishment comes from the other room, where all four grandchildren and our son-in-law are relaxing. A children's cartoon plays on the TV, serving only as white noise rather than compelling entertainment, but for an audience of one: three-year-old Gianna.

Adrian, thirteen years old, spins like a dervish in the swivel armchair to the tune of his dad's even-toned scolding, "Please stop doing that, Adrian. You're going to break it!" Quietly, I think, let their parents bring order to the gathering.

I am mindful that not all my memories are joyful. I wince, looking out the window for a moment. A tall palm tree majestically reaches for the sky. A memory lingers on the edge of my mind. One I would like to stow in a lock box and throw away the key. I imagine that the emoji for this remembrance would be a blue-gray heart. My eyes turn back to the mirror.

The living room slowly fades, replaced by my parents' living room in their second-story condominium in St. Petersburg, Florida, 1984. Thirty-two-year-old me stands in the doorway to the lanai, listening to the call of circling seagulls. The view of the pool deck below and the boat traffic flowing back

and forth in Tampa Bay beyond inspires calm. My eyes come back to rest on the small, meagerly decorated Christmas tree that Dad has placed in the corner of the lanai like an afterthought.

The balmy air wraps me from head to toe, but my heart is burdened. Behind me, Mom, dressed in a housecoat buttoned up to the lace-edged collar, is sitting in a light blue wingback chair. Her thin, gray hair is cut close to her scalp. Her puffy, pale skin envelops vacant hazel eyes, staring down at nothing.

My sister and her husband are here from California. Immediately, the two-bedroom condo is a squeeze for five adults. Dad, with whom I've always had the easier relationship, is in the kitchen.

There is always an edge in my relationship with my alcoholic mother. After I left home for college at eighteen, I rarely went back. Conversation with her is still arduous, even though all-day states of inebriation no longer plague her. A near-death bout with cirrhosis of the liver years ago ended her dependence on gin but tore away her flimsy curtain of self-esteem, bringing silence instead.

This is probably the last time we will see her alive. My parents received grim news from her oncologist, an explanation for her chronic back pain: "You have stage four breast cancer that has metastasized to your bones."

I rummage through my mind to discover a way to connect with her before it's too late. First, I need fresh air. A walk along the water would be a perfect panacea. As I put on my sandals, a gurgling sound comes from my mom's direction. I turn to see her body slip down in the chair. Foam is bubbling from one corner of her slack mouth. A seizure. Dad races over in two steps and wraps his arms under her arms and around her back. Her flesh is soft, unwieldy. It is difficult for him to get his balance, and he chokes out, "Help me!" He seems to know what to do. This is not her first, then. Together, we lift Mom into a seated position and wait for the symptoms to subside. Dad carefully walks her into the bedroom to lie down.

Christmas Day is quiet, interrupted only by a few kids playing in the pool below. Smiles are pasted on our faces as we utter the gratuitous Christmas "oohs" and "aahs" over opened presents.

The next morning, I enter my parents' bedroom to say goodbye to Mom. Their twin beds are apart, the same arrangement as throughout most of their marriage. She is awake, lying on her side. I sit on the other bed, facing her. Beyond the closed window, the fronds of the palm trees sway, scratching the glass, as if to wave goodbye. The tension thickens with no conversation, only my thoughts.

I understand that her emotional life, before and after my birth, was rife with uncertainties. Her private roller coaster. She was eight when her mother died. The death certificate read "criminal abortion attempt." Her father

raised her and her sister by himself. It is not altogether clear what hardships she experienced. Mom has rarely offered any explanation, only snippets, about that part of her life.

Doctors predict that she will not live six months, and that breaks my heart. How can I leave her now? What can I do to make us better?

The life flame, burning in the eyes of the children at the pool, is extinguishing in her eyes. Does she fear what's coming? My eyes drift down her face, taking in every detail, resting on a few long-unattended wiry whiskers on her chin. Further proof that her vanity and pride are slipping away with her life force.

Without thought, I point a finger and whisper, "Ohhh...those whiskers." Instantly, I regret the words and want to grab them out of the air before they reach her ears. I lack the capacity for this relationship, which has lain unattended for such a long time. What if our paths had been different? One where I pick up the phone and invite Mom to join me for a girls' spa day, starting with lunch. We both get facials and massages. These whiskers, whoosh...gone. No words are spoken. All I can do is stare.

Mom's lips form an embarrassing pout and her brow furrows. Her eyes on mine, she moves her fingers to grasp her chin, as if to locate and hide the unsightly blight on her face. She does not want to disappoint me. I have run out of time and adequate words. "Mom, I have to go. I love you!" I rise and take a step to bridge the distance between us, lean over to kiss her on the cheek, and walk out.

Misgivings about those last moments, about decades of moments, consume my soul. On the plane home, I pray for the strength to forgive the errors of the past for both of us. Will I be able to do things differently for my family one day?

My focus returns to the present. The brass angels in my living room resume their bright, measured serenade. I look down at my damp hands folded in my lap. Slowly, I raise my head and look around at my vibrant family.

Everyone is up and stretching their full bellies. In the other room, the older grandkids slouch on the sofa, intent on their cell phones. The three- and five-year-olds are running circles through the rooms, laughing non-stop at each other, everything, and nothing.

What's this? I feel a small, warm hand on mine. My five-year-old granddaughter lays her head on my lap and looks up at me, eyes wide with expectation. Tendrils of dark brown hair escape from her ponytail and are a disorder framing her face. "Mimi, when can we open our presents?"

LADY CARRYING A BASKET

Beatrice Divinagracia



Clay with Gold Leaf

MY MOM'S LESSON

Clarissa Miranda Portillo

I saw the big, red letters in my gradebook. The worst letter to receive was staring at me under my class grades for my history, science, and English class while tears streamed down my cheek. *How am I supposed to tell my mom that I failed half of my classes? What will she think when she finds out her daughter failed eighth grade? How could I be such a disappointment to her?* I quickly closed the tab on my phone and spent the next two days trying to figure out how to avoid telling my mom so as to not upset her, but I soon realized there was no way out of it.

I decided to tell her after she had had some time to rest after a long day at work. She is the manager of a restaurant, so she always has long, exhausting days. I approached her with downturned eyes and hands clasped together to bring some comfort in confronting this terrible secret that had been eating me alive. As soon as I told her, her face showed no emotion, and she just sat there at the table for what felt like a lifetime. Suddenly, she turned to me and said, "*Cómo?* (How?)" Of all the possible reactions I had imagined and prepared for, for some reason I had not thought of that one.

I gazed at her face trying to figure out if she was testing me or was genuinely asking me. With no clue about her feelings I mumbled, "*Yo no sé*. (I don't know.)" I said this hoping it would be vague enough to where she would just get angry at me for not giving her a clear answer and go off on a lecture yelling about how I could be so lazy and ungrateful. I wanted this because I knew eventually she would get tired of yelling, and I could walk away without having to hold that difficult conversation, but she didn't. Instead, she saw right through me. She knew when I said that, I meant that I really didn't care to try in school because I had no reason to.

I had learned quickly throughout my childhood that pursuing a bachelor's degree was a dream that was way beyond what I could achieve. For starters, my family was working-class. I realized this at the age of five. I asked my friends at school if they also spent their weekends picking up their food from WIC or driving around looking for garage sales selling cheap furniture. I learned that finding a toy under $1.50 in the clearance section of the grocery store and convincing their mom to buy it wasn't a highlight of my peers' week. I knew from seeing my classmates in eighth grade with their smartwatches, AirPods, and new outfits every week that I was never going to be able to afford to attend a four-year university. Another reason I knew was because no one else in my immediate family nor my extended family had even earned an associate's degree.

To my family, even if they'd never admit it, spending thousands of dollars and hours on a degree was a burden to the students' parents. It caused students to fully depend on their parents' hard-earned money when they could just immediately join the workforce and start making their own money. I saw that at every family reunion whenever my cousins shared what they were doing with their life, my parents and their parents would always praise the child that already had a job more than the one who went to study at a community college. This was not only because the parents knew it was going to be a burden, but they knew their child would eventually drop out. It was a pattern that kept repeating whenever my cousins or siblings tried to take classes at a community college. I had no one to seek advice. I was too scared to go to university, not knowing anything. I didn't want to deal with networking, applications, paying tuition, and registering all by myself. I needed someone to look up to, but I didn't have anyone.

I had my mind set on just pushing through high school and finding a job right after. I saw how much my parents struggled making rent each month even with a bedroom in our two-bedroom apartment rented out to one of my cousins and her little family of four. I wanted to help. At least this is what I thought I wanted, but my mom realized what had happened to me. She realized I had given up on my dreams because of the way I grew up. She realized the struggles she faced raising us had been ingrained in me. She knew that I had settled for less, a reflection of my surroundings. She saw this when I told her I had failed eighth grade.

Another one of her kids, who had teachers at parent-teacher conferences saying her child was advanced, had given up on school. Another one of her kids, who had grown up being the best students in their teachers' classes each year, had reached the point where their dreams felt impossible. Ever since kindergarten I told my mom I wanted to be a teacher, and now all I wanted to do was get a regular minimum-wage job so that I could help with rent. The same thinking changed in my siblings, and now my mom was faced with her youngest child—me—revealing that I was going to do the same.

So, when I finally told her that I was failing the eighth grade, my mind was scrambling to find clues on what she was thinking about. Is she not going to yell at me? Is she thinking about what she's going to yell at me about? Is she going to send me to my room and wait for my dad to come home so that they can discipline me at the same time? Is she thinking of ways to punish me? Oh no! She's going to start making me walk to and from school!

Then she took a deep breath while rubbing her forehead. I think this was her way of regaining her composure and preventing herself from acting out of anger.

"*Mamita, sabias que yo era lo mismo de inteligente en la escuela?* (Darling, did you know I was just as smart as you in school?)"

What!? Why is she trying to compare herself to me? I just wanted to run back into my room and cry to myself. I felt pity for myself because I thought my mom was trying to play mind games on me. I believed this, but it wasn't true. My mom would go ahead and use this rhetorical question to introduce the story of her childhood in Guatemala to me for the first time.

The eldest of her siblings, my mom was the only child of my grandma and my mom's absent biological dad. Although all my mom's siblings were half siblings, my mom still treated them as full siblings. However, my grandmother and stepgrandfather didn't feel the same. Despite my mom being raised by her stepdad, there was still a difference in how my grandma and grandpa raised her.

My mom had the burden of taking care of her siblings, helping my grandma with selling food, cleaning the house, making dinner, and completing her schoolwork every single day. She had all these responsibilities while her younger siblings got to be kids, fool around all day, and play with their toys. Even though my aunts and uncle were younger than my mom, eventually they grew up to be able to help with some chores, but still my mom carried almost the whole load.

Although my mom doesn't like bringing it up, she told me about the sad and demanding reality of it all. She told me how every school morning she had to have thirty chile rellenos—a popular Guatemalan dish—prepared before heading to school. Then coming home from school, she had to quickly cook dinner before her stepdad came home. She had to time the dinner so that the food would be hot and ready for my grandpa to enjoy once he came home. Of course, this wasn't always possible, so sometimes he would berate my mom about how cold the food was. They were too poor to have a microwave to heat up the dish again, so, out of anger, my grandpa would throw the dish and smash it onto the ground. My mom had to scurry and clean up the mess so that her younger siblings wouldn't accidentally step on the broken ceramic.

Then came the part she wanted me to listen to the most. She mentioned that my grandpa told my grandma that he would immediately stop sending my mom to school the moment she failed one of her classes. With dried tears on her cheek, my mom let out a chuckle and said, "*Le fue mal porque saqué As en todas mis clases*. (Sucks for him because I got As in all my classes.)"

She loved school so much that even with all the stress and traumatic experiences, my mother kept pushing and graduated high school. She was the top of her class and was definitely getting accepted into a university. Despite this unthinkable achievement in her parents' eyes, they did not want her to go to university. They not only discouraged her but shamed her for thinking she could just leave her family behind while she pursued her dreams. They made fun of her for even believing it was possible to gather enough money to attend a university.

This brought tears to my mom's eyes again. She quickly wiped them and suppressed her emotions like she always does. It always annoyed me how she would not let herself feel her emotions, but how could she? If she had cried to herself and felt pity for herself, she would have never had the courage to "rebel" against my grandparents. They tried so hard to mold her to their expectations, but by putting her emotions aside and knowing how to stand up for herself, she pursued more than she could have imagined. This always made me envious because I am the complete opposite. I am emotional. I quickly start to tear up whenever something goes against what I expected, and it takes a lot for me to defend myself.

"*Mirá, sé que hay cosas que son difíciles, pero quiero que sepas que estoy aquí para ti. Sé que la escuela pide mucho, pero sé que puedes hacerlo.* (Look, I know there are things that are difficult, but I want you to know that I am here for you. I know school demands a lot, but I know you can do it.)

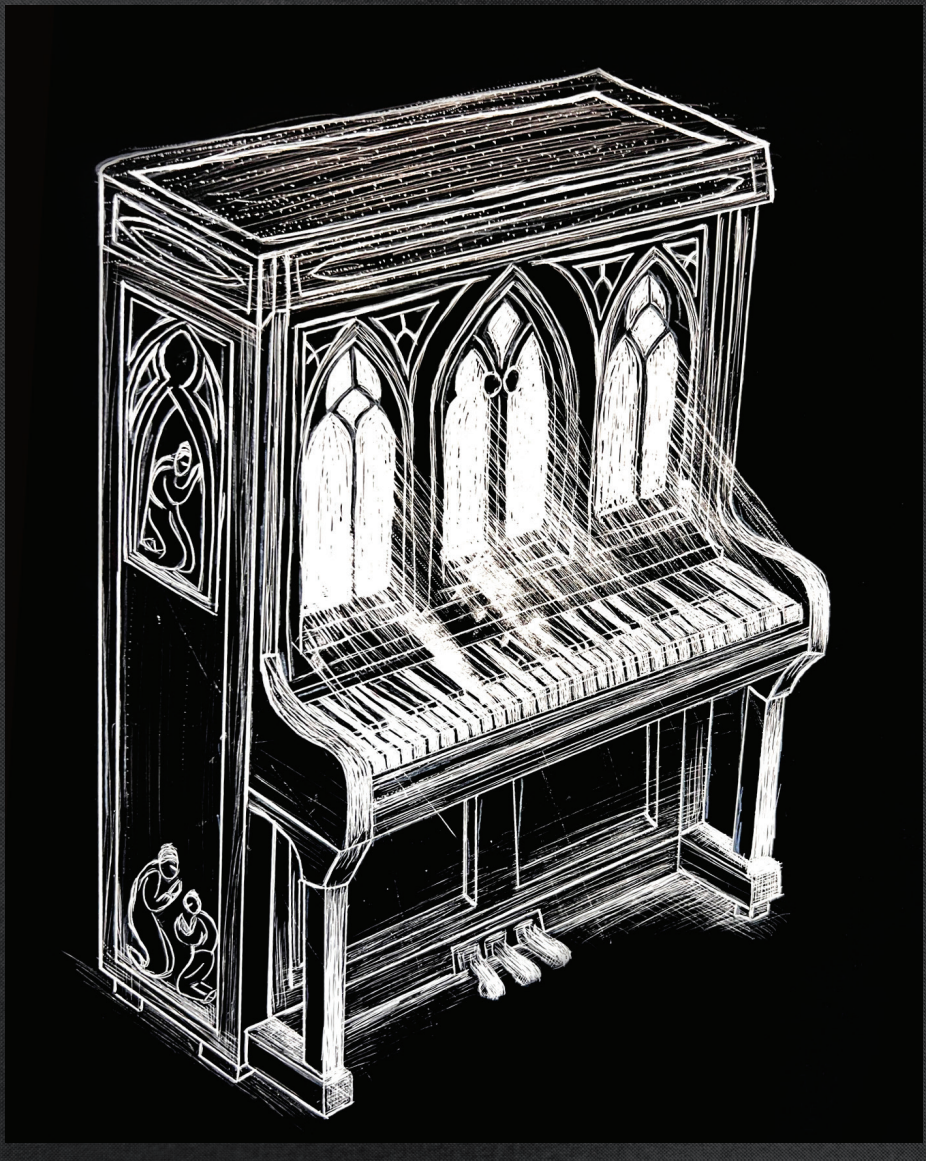
"*Vine aquí para que tuvieras la oportunidad de hacer lo que yo no pude. Hay muchas más oportunidades y ayuda aquí que las que yo tenía allá, y tienes mi apoyo.* (I came here so that you would have the opportunity to do what I could not. There are many more opportunities and help here than I had back there, and you have my support.)

"No te enfoques en el dinero. Quiero que te enfoques en la escuela. Aunque tengamos que trabajar más duro, no quiero que pares solo por el dinero. Tendremos que apoyarte porque somos tus padres. (Don't focus on the money. I want you to focus on school. Even though we'll have to work harder, I don't want you to stop just because of the money. We will have to support you because we are your parents.)"

I immediately covered my face as I burst into tears. Although I have had my struggles and downturns in life, my mom, who has gone through much bigger obstacles than me, never misses having my back. After I have had a long day of failing, she has always been there waiting to pick me right back up and remind me what all the tears, exhaustion, and frustration were for. She has been my direction on what to pursue and what to avoid. With her perspective on the struggles that many immigrant parents have experienced alike, I have learned to reflect on all the sacrifices and privileges my family has gifted me. My mother's grit, which has persevered through poverty and constraining societal standards, has helped me understand my privileged stance in life and how much I take it for granted. Even though I have sometimes been ungrateful, I now feel a sense of pride and gratitude for my family legacy. As a result, I have vowed to take advantage of any opportunity in which I have even the slightest interest. My mother's regrets and missed chances have been tattooed into my character. This permanent reminder of how much I have yet to experience, not only for myself but for my mom, will be ingrained in me for the rest of my life and hopefully in my future children.

THE PRACTICE ROOM

Zahra Molaei



Scratchboard

THE PRACTICE ROOM

Christina Yoon

Monks have their chapels to pray and meditate, a small window acting as their only friend in an otherwise stark, shaded room. Light streams in through the window, peeking through strands of ivy while sailing clouds provide a respite for the eyes when they are too tired of remaining closed in reverent prayer all day. Monks exit the chapel after many hours, their hands cold and faces pale from the lack of direct sunlight, but their souls torched on fire for God—peace and quiet jubilation marking their stride as they retreat to their sleeping quarters.

Musicians also have their practice rooms—their chapels to make music with holy reverence, sustained concentration, and passion that demands a cloistered life. A piano usually stands in docile submission, ready to be played upon by whatever grimy fingers claimed its privileges that day. College musicians—particularly those belonging to a conservatory—are like a pack of wolves wanting the best, usually largest practice rooms, and won't hesitate to march at the crack of dawn to mark their territory. They grow fond of their piano, the pressure of the keys just right for their fingers, the sound ringing and concordant to their tastes, the position that the piano is facing just so.

The floors of this practice room are dirty—this college's music department has no money—and one student scans the floor quickly for any dead cockroaches. Despite the sign affixed to the wall telling students that food is not allowed, cockroaches are a common fixture, drawn by the good food and appetizing music. Once students are assured the floor is relatively clear, they slump their backpacks on the floor and take out their sheet music, taking care to re-zip their backpacks closed all the way.

Sitting at the hard wooden piano bench with no cushion—it's important that musicians keep their glutes strong—a musician will give a good sigh and spend a few moments staring at the sheet music in a daze, willing the notes to play themselves. Alas, they must finally perch their hands on the keyboard, and their fingers start to dance across the keys—puppet minstrels made to laugh, dance, and smile under threat of their watchful, overly critical owners. After a while, the fingers collapse in exhaustion and no amount of berating will get them to dance as lively.

The musician strains their ears to hear the muffled playing of other piano players, their sounds flowing trippingly along a golden stream. Jealousy soon takes over. Self-flagellation ensues. Practice more, practice more. Why am I not good enough? The musician tries to envision the notes of Tchaikovsky's piano concerto being played next door as spritely fairies throwing flowers,

filling the practice hall with elegant lightness. But the spritely fairies are devious, and they taunt and spin in mocking musical circles around the musician's head.

The musician hears the strident notes of an opera singer performing her scales like a fire truck siren that is plunging headfirst to its next victim. A cough as the singer clears her throat and sings the vowels "mee, mey, mah, moh, moo" before launching into her aria, "Una Donna Quindici Anni" from Cosi Fan Tutte. The singer is playing a coquette, and her sounds sparkle like champagne bubbles, save for the occasional screech when the music gets to a high G.

Singers are athletes, and musicians know that the practice room is a sacred space to make mistakes, judgment-free. A place to experiment and concoct new sounds, harmonies, and techniques. A place to fantasize about one day being accidentally heard and singled out for greatness by the star music professor of the school—the one who recorded an album with Leonard Bernstein and who approves of almost nobody. A place to practice controlling your incessant sighing–the amount of carbon dioxide produced in practice rooms would grow a botanic garden.

The musician stretches their fingers and looks at the clock—only three more hours of practice to go. This passage is still not good enough; it must be exact and consistent like a soldier well-trained and ready to march into battle—the battle being a lesson with the private teacher, whose eyes shoot cannonballs of fire when the sonata's arpeggios are still not precise.

The steady, mechanical ticking of a metronome tells the musician that time is wasting. Others are getting better and they are not. A musician continues working, slumping their backpack on the floor and communing with the piano day after day. Like monks, they wrestle with God and intercede for a divine touch, for their work to be inspired and reach heavenly heights. The voices of different instruments from different practice rooms intermingle, forming a cacophony of sounds—a symphony of groaning and complaint. The hallway sounds of suffering because musicians love their art.

The cycle of practicing continues again and again. The cycle of new generations of musicians—all with their fantasies, despairs, hard-won battles, flights of creativity, moments of pleading and genius—never stops. Life, in all of its glory and drama, happens in a practice room.

The musician closes their binder of sheet music and puts it in their backpack. They sling the backpack over their shoulder and look at the yellowed, stained walls and floor of dirt before locking the door with a final thud. This is their peace and quiet jubilation; this is their hallelujah.

GOLDEN STARS AND GUITAR STRUMS

Dani Barfield

golden that you are, interrupt me before
I burst open with stars and glowing lights,
from thinking of you, darling,
portray to me—or else I will be numb.

my heart strums to you—overcome—symphonies, for you, my love,

cosmos, comets, galaxies—you are the sun
while I, ruler of oceans, am the moon
or even venus, with love as vast as mountains
or as fierce as war.

my guitar with strings, sing against, or through my fingertips please,

or may my songs ring through the water, the fronds,
and the earth, if it fails to ring through your ears
so that all the universe knows of my bond
with you, my sweet dear

and with a dim warmth—lying down—I rest beside you again.

MUSIC IN A BALLROOM

Ella Richardson

Elizabeth Carroway had never been a suitable wife. She had never been the debutante her father needed her to be, a girl who would spin, toss, and turn in the middle of the ballroom, a bright smile reflecting off the buckle of every eligible bachelor's shoe. Instead, she was a houseplant stuck to the walls. She knew her role well: dutiful daughter, listener, and wallflower.

She played it well, too, standing clear as her more striking, extroverted sisters took to the dance floor.

This was fine with her. She was okay with this; she didn't need a dance partner. She had the piano forte to tango with.

Ever since her stepmother pushed her to the side, complaining of her wasted potential, ever since her weary-eyed father began to stare at her with prolonged regret, she knew she had to change things.

She signed up for piano lessons as a way to escape. It was a respectable hobby for any young woman of the 19th century; it was nothing out of the ordinary. Nonetheless, Elizabeth quickly fell in love. Yes, she wasn't the loudest or brightest debutante in the room, but she was the conductor of sound and all things symphony. Her fingertips danced over piano keys with quiet demand, coaxing more feeling from the instrument than most women managed in a matchmaking season. Her passion and expression carried through every note played.

Of course, though, she couldn't take all the credit for her talent. She had to give credit to the one person who believed in her: Mr. Gibbons, her teacher. Elias.

She first met Elias after her father off-handedly hired him from a flyer posted outside the town post. While aloof and standoffish at first, she quickly found comfort in him as a mentor and friend. Elias warmed up to her as well, teaching her keys and notes that seemed to encompass entire conversations.

He was the only one she felt truly heard her. While their conversations often lacked words, he still heard every chime, ding, and thunder from the keys. He heard her frustrated grunts as she struggled to learn a new fast composition or piece. He had heard all her confessions, echoing through each chord and decision as she swept her fingers across the surface of the wood.

Her favorite conversation, though, was their duet.

Taking a seat beside her on the bench, they would play a melody that would flow and intertwine together, finding an embrace that could only be lost to the depths of time. Each key complemented the other, building music that could only be heard by the closest of connections. Oftentimes, Elizabeth

found herself staring at him as they played. She wondered if he felt as seen, as heard, as she did around him. Nevertheless, every time they played, she felt her heart soar and her soul shine.

Through her time with Elias, she found musicality growing with each lesson, and with it, her confidence. While still stuck to the wall at every ball, she now found herself humming to the melodies of the violinist, harpist, and flute, her fingers drumming against the wall in remembrance of each key.

And now, that's how she found herself here, at the corner of the ballroom, at an empty piano.

It was Duchess Ashbourn's Spring Assembly. Elizabeth's stepmother had dragged her father, her sisters, and, begrudgingly, her (at her father's request) to the ball in hopes of finding suitable matches for her daughters. It was well known that the Duchess had five handsome sons, though their faces remained as mysterious as their reputations.

Elizabeth had quickly been left to the side of the dance floor as her stepmother approached the marriage market like a battlefield. She commanded Elizabeth's stepsisters like troops as they paraded across the room.

Growing tired of the wall she had been placed against most of her life, Elizabeth made her way to her own quiet rebellion, her own form of refuge from the marriage mart, matchmaking, and status. The piano.

Feeling the cold surface of each key, Elizabeth let go of a breath she hadn't known she had been holding. She ran her fingers through each grain of the wood, stretching her legs against the pedals. It was an old, antique instrument, yet clearly cared for. Whoever owned it had an appreciation for the art. While not the shiniest, sharpest piece in the room, it stood out as the grandest, every note and key rich with time and memory.

Placing her fingers on the keys, she let herself come to life.

Music quickly filled the ballroom, couples striding to the floor. It was a slow, romantic melody, entwined with an invisible longing that Elizabeth carried as she played. Would she ever be the one dancing to the music and not playing it? Would she ever be the debutante to be whisked off her feet, led into a fast-paced and exhilarating quadrille? Or perhaps drawn into a waltz, the slow notes guiding her and a suitor in close embrace.

She continued her melody in slow sadness and acceptance, each key seemingly cementing her destiny.

Suddenly, the tone of the song changed.

A second melody threaded its way in. A new warmth and comfort bloomed within the harmony, dancing next to the first. Elizabeth turned, startled, to see another pair of hands joining hers on the keys.

Elias looked at Elizabeth with unpredictable wonder and warmth as they continued to play alongside one another. The music was grand and rich,

filling the ballroom with new life as the couples embraced and swayed.

Finally, the notes softened to a stop. Debutantes and lords alike returned to their conversations, mulling over crumb cakes and bad wine.

"What are you doing here?" Elizabeth looked deep into Elias's eyes for some sort of answer. She observed him once more. He looked different. His waistcoat was more fitted, his breeches more refined.

Elias shrugged and smiled. "I came here to escape my duties. The song led me here."

Elizabeth stared, confused.

Elias continued, "I was surprised to hear you playing tonight. This doesn't seem like your type of crowd." He huffed in amusement, shaking his head. "But I guess I should have expected it."

Elias adjusted his breeches and fixed his posture, coughing awkwardly. "Anyways, I'm glad you have found solace in my piano."

"Your piano..." Elizabeth's voice trailed off as she glanced at the old, slightly worn instrument. While beautiful, the piano stood out like a sore thumb among the shiny and gold furniture of the ballroom.

Elias' voice broke her from her thoughts. "This particular instrument has been my choice of escape many times. It's my happiness."

Then, to Elizabeth's shock, Elias took her hand in his.

Elizabeth stared back at Elias, heart thumping at their close proximity. She searched for the familiarity of keys but found none.

This was real. It was time she faced this.

Whether that be love or music, though, she was still unsure.

"I saw you shine here, Elizabeth. I heard you. I saw the notes and harmonies slip from your hands. You hold a conversation better than anyone else out in society."

Feeling her cheeks warm, Elizabeth looked to the ground. She wasn't used to this. This attention. Words never came as easily as music.

But maybe it was time to try?

"I... thank you." She paused. "I still can't believe you are here."

Elizabeth then found herself searching Elias's deep auburn eyes. What did this all mean? What should she say?

At a loss for words, Elizabeth slowly continued, "And I fear I might be selfish to ask if you would allow me to not just be the one making the music, but the one enjoying it."

Elizabeth looked up again, pausing. His kind smile encouraged her, his presence a deep campfire that only seemed to burn when he was near.

"With you," she added, tentatively.

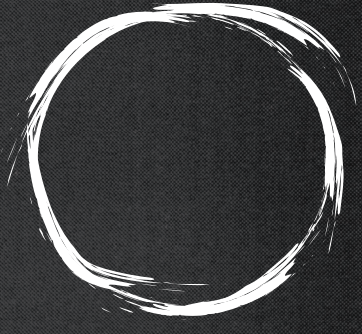
Elias smiled and stood. He offered her a hand to the dance floor.

"I thought you'd never ask."

Elizabeth still had many questions. Why was Elias there? Why was he dressed so nicely? Was that truly his piano? And why was it in the Ashbourn ballroom?

Nevertheless, she found her uncertainty erased as Elias pulled her body closer to his. His warmth and familiar smile left all unanswered questions for the future.

And with that, the music swept her away once again, leading her towards a life of new possibilities, one far from the ballroom wall. A life of love, conversation, and harmony.



THIS KISS ON THE SUBWAY

Brooke Lynn Magill

I'm kissing a girl on the subway
and we can't tell tension
between train and technique
horn blares but I think
love has this kind of mystique
that transcends chimes, time, come-on-holiday vibes
the rustle of paper, power, passengers that bustle by
as we enjoy an act of love
no one who knows
would yearn to chide

oh, I need to ask if she likes turkey—to come to Thanksgiving—
The horn blares again. I look
up to face
a truth flying by,
cranberry-red blur behind the window panes
and at the glimpse
Thanksgiving grit is rubbing the back of my throat like pebbles
skittering against the well-trodden
trampled carpet of the train car

and I
know and so I don't
like—despise—Thanksgiving

and as that settles like airhorn in a
white-majority family gathering
the kiss is sweet on my lips
but strange, and distant,
in a way I don't recognize
without on-the-tracks terror
pouring down my chest
like the blood of a suicide
filling that gap between the rails
because. how else could it be.

"You need to wake up, be present,"
says my love
a glove to my mouth—
and I realize guys
are what I'm supposed to be seen kissing on the subway
and they're all staring at me.

The horn blares. I can see
what's stuck between their teeth
and I offer what
somehow

I know they've refused already
and they decline and also
don't descend at the demand
of the horn.
They're awfully quiet.
Have been all this time.

I shake it off and look to
Stability and she isn't here.
Just the heaviness holding me
with every breath
bargaining futile details with
the air I share with these
people who
would never let me have
that kiss on the subway
if they could open their mouths and have a say.

But it couldn't be, anyway
I must have thought that
this
was another day,
another life away,
an actual sandbox in which to play

Someone coughs and doesn't cover their mouth
and I glance at glazed-over eyes
and windows that closed
at the promise
this wouldn't go south
I dare not lift a finger
to my chapped lips
to see if heat still lingers
that phantom touch of hope
that we'll be there someday,
sweetness without which souls can't cope.

All I see are the guys on the subway
words flowing from uncovered mouths
like smoke
even the train car flickers
The whole damn thing runs
off hope.
The biggest promise now
isn't the destination
it's the blood
between the tracks.
The necessity that some
should lack

The horn blares.
but the rest of the scene
and I
cling to life.

THE VACUUM

Deven Leigh DeKorte

So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this,
Cursed are you above all livestock
and all wild animals!
You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life."
Genesis 3:14

"Damn."

Beth leaned the vacuum handle against the couch and crouched down to rub at the new scuff on her white patent leather pumps — Leonard would surely notice. She glanced around the empty house out of habit to see if her coarse language had been caught. Leonard said it was unladylike when she cussed, but he wouldn't be home until 5:30.

Four years in and she'd just about had it with this vacuum. The handle was heavy and unwieldy, and between it and the cumbersome metal canister, the whole thing somehow spread more dirt than it cleaned. She thought the entire vacuum belonged in a museum, but Leonard would never allow her to get rid of it. His mother had presented it to her a week after their wedding.

"My boy likes a clean home," she had said, smiling and gesturing with one hand toward the open trunk of her yellow Impala parked at the end of the driveway. Leonard's father had died in the war, and Beth often thought she had married not just Leonard, but his mother, too.

"Thanks, Joan." Beth returned a pressed smile. "That's so generous."

The two ladies had stood awkwardly in the living room. Beth watched Leonard idly swirl an Old Fashioned in a heavy crystal glass, eyeballing *The Andy Griffith Show* on their new color television. He told her when it was delivered that watching TV was a man's pastime — the show's themes were too much of a "temptation for the feminine mind," he'd said. That didn't stop her from sneaking peeks while she cleaned up their dinners.

After a few moments, Beth had realized he wasn't going to budge from his armchair, and she walked outside and sidled up to the trunk, sliding both hands under the body of the vacuum and lifting it with a groan.

"Careful now!" Joan called from the porch, her smile still plastered on. "It's an heirloom!"

No shit, Beth thought.

It was 5:27. Beth had been so engrossed in her musings that she hadn't heard Leonard's car pull in the driveway. She felt her heartbeat quicken and took inventory of the house to gather her bearings. Table: cleared off. Kitchen floor: mopped. Dishes: dried and put away. She started toward the wall outlet, hand outstretched to unplug the vacuum, but Leonard had already pushed open the door.

"You're not done vacuuming yet?" he said. "What have you been doing all day?"

It wasn't a question. Not really.

"Leo — Leonard, dear," Beth said, forcing a strained smile and walking toward him. He raised his eyebrows. She had called him Leo when they were dating. But after their honeymoon, he decided that pet names were childish, for lovestruck teenagers.

She tripped over the vacuum cord and almost fell at his feet, clutching the edge of the spindly entryway table for support and rocking its contents. He stepped backward and away from her as if her temporary ungainliness were catching.

"Beth! Watch it!" he shouted. "You almost broke the crystal vase!"

Another heirloom. She blushed and hid a sigh.

Leonard replaced the vase on the table, rolling his eyes.

"Just put the vacuum away," he said. "And for God's sake, clean yourself up."

His eyes roved over the delicate frizz around her face, down to her slightly wrinkled blouse and finally, to her white pumps.

"And what happened to your shoes?" he said.

He turned around and began hanging his jacket, not bothering to wait for an answer. A tender mercy in the moment.

Beth straightened up and relieved the vacuum handle from its reclining position against the arm of the couch. She gripped it tighter than she intended, her knuckles whitening against the chrome. It wasn't the worst after-work encounter they'd ever had. Still, her cheeks burned, and the familiar heat climbed her neck, spreading beneath her collar. Leonard's tone lingered in the air, sharper than anything he'd actually said. Seconds slid by while Beth's fingers tightened on the handle. The polished chrome pressed back, cold and unyielding, as if resisting her grip. She took a breath, and the tension inside her shifted and started to uncoil. Leonard would be hungry soon.

As she turned away from Leonard to roll the canister along the floor to the outlet, Beth felt the handle turn supple in her right hand and slip out of her grasp. She tried to scream, but nothing came out. Her throat tightened and she stood rooted to the floor as a thick black snake slid from her hand and coiled at her feet: the vacuum was gone, a serpent in its place. Before she could register what had happened (what, indeed), her eyes followed as the

snake deftly slid over to the door where Leonard was hunched over, fumbling his shoelaces. It lunged forward and struck behind his left ankle, just above the lip of his shoe. Leonard arched back violently and raised his left arm in automatic protest. He paused, then crumpled to the floor, legs twisting awkwardly beneath him and tempering his fall.

Leonard slowly twisted his neck back, mouth open and eyes searching for Beth in a silent plea. His legs remained pinned beneath the trunk of his body, arms bent at his side: a crucifix of the bargain variety. Beth stared, immobilized, as she watched pink foam bubble between his lips and trickle out of the left side of his mouth. For a moment, his eyes widened and his irises turned black to form one great pupil in each eye. Beth reflexively leaned forward, but before she could take a step, the light left Leonard's eyes.

Beth stood, mouth agape, unaware she had been holding her breath. She took a sharp involuntary breath and hopped back, glancing around anxiously for the snake. It had gone, and so had Leonard.

She stepped forward toward the dead Leonard. Leonard wasn't there, so the body certainly wasn't "her" Leonard — then again, he hadn't been hers for quite some time. She took the point of her shoe and nudged it against his right shoulder. Dead weight.

I should call the police, she thought. But why?

Her heart quickened even more.

She stepped over to the mirror above the entryway table and slipped her purse strap from the coat hook beside it. Her hands trembled as she unclasped the fastener and grabbed her compact. She pressed the puff on the beige powder and dabbed at her face in an attempt to quiet her flushed cheeks. She quickly abandoned the pursuit and clutched the windowsill, shaking too violently to hold anything delicate.

She stared at her reflection in the window, searching for anything that would tell her what to do next. The sunlight glinted in, illuminating the brown in her eyes. She'd never noticed before how bright it was outside at this time of day. She'd always been inside.

She stood up straight and smoothed the small creases at the bottom of her blouse and replaced the compact in her purse. She felt her heartbeat slowing to a contented, steady rhythm.

She could take a deep breath now. The air felt warm, almost sweet. She turned and stepped over the body, pausing between the legs to pick the car keys up off the floor. She turned the door handle and stepped onto the front patio, thinking, perhaps, of stopping at the vacuum store.

THE DANGER AND THE BEAUTY

Daria Kmin



Charcoal

THE RIVER

Jakob Bagley

We came to the river as kids. We would skip stones across the water, seek refuge in the current on a blistering summer day, and skate the surface when it froze over. We'd come to ask the river questions and listen as the rapids would whisper their answer. I used to sit on the riverbank with a pen and paper and try to map the constellations. Gracie and I used to walk up and down the bank picking flowers and other plants we'd never seen before. When the bombs started to fall, they drove us away from the river, pushing us away from the only home I've ever known.

We left camp just after dusk, hoping to make it to the river before dawn. The nation on the other side of the river has agreed to accept us as refugees, but they will not help us cross the river; they will only help when we get to the other side. We tried to cross three days ago, but the resistance was too great. Only our friend Jamal made it across. He promised to help us if we went south, towards Meadows Edge—our hometown. If we don't make it across tonight, we might never have another chance to escape.

We dash from one pile of rubble to another, making sure to stay out of view of the helicopters flying over top of us.

"Is this just a regular patrol?" Gracie asks.

"I think so," I reply, with little confidence. We pass an old supermarket on the outskirts of town and head east down the main road. As we walk, we pass old department stores, Mr. Tony's ice cream shop, and my uncle's bowling alley, none of which still stand. It is the first time I have been back since the start of the war. Everything I remember about this place is gone —erased—an entire town reduced to ash.

Gracie and I keep walking east, without saying anything to each other. As we walk, I am reminded of how much we have lost: parents, family, friends. Almost everyone we care about is dead—killed in the name of manifest destiny.

We arrive at the entrance of the high school campus. The buildings are desolate, lying broken in piles of rubble. Gracie and I stand there speechless. So many special moments that we got to share here will now always be a distant memory. My dry eyes are starting to burn; I can't produce a tear. I take one step toward the road to leave campus and hear the terrifying symphony of scout helicopters passing right over us. I look up and see the three helicopters break formation and turn south. That can only mean one thing. As I turn and look at Gracie, my heart starts to beat out of my chest. We take off running through the courtyard and down to the old science building—one of the

buildings that's at least half standing. We climb through an open space and bury ourselves amongst the rubble. I throw my body over Gracie's and keep her pressed to the ground. This is the closest thing to a bomb shelter that we are going to find.

Determined to leave no trace of the lives we used to live, two drones flying in from the west get closer and closer with each second. As each shell explodes, the ground shakes underneath us. I close my eyes and try to forget. I try to forget what is happening, what has happened. I wish I didn't have to listen to the sound of bombs exploding, but I can't stop it. Nothing can make that sound go away. All I can do is hold my body on top of Gracie's and hope. Hope is all we have now.

After a while the bombing stops, and the only sound I hear is a constant ringing in my ears. We've survived, but for how long? We have to get to the river. I hope Jamal keeps his promise.

"Adam! Look at your arm," Gracie says.

I look down at my left arm to see a huge cut, about two inches long and pretty deep.

"It's fine, let's get out of here." I must have cut it on a piece of rebar climbing in here, but I didn't even feel it.

"That looks like it needs stitches."

"I'll be okay. We just have to get to the river."

"I have an idea," Gracie says as she dashes for the north side of campus. "Follow me."

She leads me down across the courtyard and past the old cafeteria and around what used to be the gymnasium. When we arrive, I see the only building with an exterior that looks remotely close to how it looked before the war.

We are standing at the entrance of the greenhouse. The place where the school used to grow vegetables and other plants maintained by the horticulture students. This is also the place where Gracie and I met. To think that was three years ago; so much has changed since then.

She takes my hand and we force the door open. "Gracie, what are we doing here?" I ask.

"We need to find something to cover your arm."

"I said it can wait. We have to go!" Just as the words leave my mouth, Gracie disappears into foliage. Plants that once sat in organized rows had been massacred by branches and leaves so thick you'd need a machete to cut your way through. I completely lose sight of Gracie in the overgrowth. I turn back and look outside. I can hear the drones off to the north. We have got to get moving. They could come back and finish the job any minute.

I am now looking up, trying to see if I can see any stars in the sky, but it's useless. I can't see anything through the smoke and ash.

"I found them," Gracie says, holding a few freshly picked but definitely worse-for-the-wear dahlias in one hand and an assortment of flowers in the other. "I knew they would still be here."

"Here, hold these," she says, as she hands me the assorted flowers and wraps the dahlias around the cut on my left arm. "My mom always said that dahlias bring you good luck." As she finishes wrapping the dahlias around my arm, she takes the assorted flowers and uses them as twine to hold the dahlias in place. "I know it's not perfect and it certainly doesn't replace stitches, but I think that should hold."

"It's perfect," I say, as I lean in and kiss her. "Thank you."

"We should get going," Gracie says.

We walk out of the greenhouse just as another scout helicopter flies over top of us. I look at Gracie and we both start running. "Don't stop till you hit the river!" I yell. We are running with everything we have. My heart is beating out of my chest. We run out through the other side of town and into an open field. We have been on the run for a year and a half. I am not going to stop one mile from our freedom.

As we are running through the field, yet another scout helicopter spots us as it flies above us. "We can't stop now!" I remind Gracie. We are getting closer and closer; I can almost see the water, but I do not see Jamal. He will be there. He has to be.

The third scout helicopter is behind us now; it's closer and flying lower than the two others. No, please God, don't do this now. As the river comes into full view, I hear a click on the front-mounted turret gun. Immediately, I turn and tackle Gracie to the ground. It fires a short burst, flies right above us, and then turns and heads back to the city. It missed us, but it will be back. We stand back up and approach the riverbank. Jamal is waiting in a little dinghy boat just like he said he would be.

"We got to go," Jamal says. "They will be back any minute."

"Thank you so much for coming back for us!" I say.

"I would never leave without you guys," he replies.

Gracie is climbing into the boat and I look behind us to see four Humvees closing in our position. FUCK. We are not going to be able to get away in time. GOD DAMNIT. I turn back to the boat and notice an AK-47 sitting next to Jamal. I have an idea. I reach down and untie the dahlias from my arm.

"What are you doing?" Gracie exclaims. I place the blood-soaked dahlias in Gracie's hands.

"I heard these are supposed to bring you good luck," I say as I grab the AK-47 from the boat. "We are going to need it for you guys to make it across the river."

"Adam! What are you doing?" cries Jamal.

"I just need you guys to make it across the river."

"Adam!" Gracie yells, tears streaming down her face.

"I love you, Gracie."

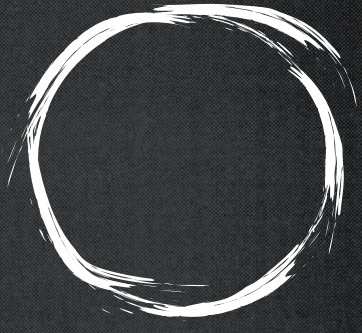
I turn and walk up the riverbank as Jamal starts the engine. The battalion of troops are exiting their Humvees and running towards me. I start firing the rifle and they return fire. *One day after school, Gracie stayed late to help me practice in the greenhouse so that I wouldn't fail my pruning exam. It only took me like thirty minutes to get the hang of it, but I kept pretending to mess up so she would stay with me longer.* A bullet hits me in the arm, but I am still returning fire.

I was too much of a coward to ask her on a date, so we went to the only place in high school where I felt comfortable, in the greenhouse with her. When it was just the two of us in there, it felt like the rest of the world didn't matter. Another bullet has struck me, this time in my right calf. I am still returning fire.

That night after school, she told me about the garden she used to plant with her mom. She talked about how plants always remind her of her mom and that she wants her own flower garden one day. A bullet pierces my throat. I try to draw a breath, but no air reaches my lungs. I am not scared. I turn behind me to see Jamal and Gracie have reached the other side. A teardrop falls from my eye, and I start to smile.

I fall to the ground. I feel cold, like I'm almost to the other side of the river. I look up to the stars and see a new constellation I haven't seen before—two kids dancing around a long flowing river.

Go plant your garden, Gracie. We're free. We're free.



PRESENCE

Alena Ardasheva



Photograph

BURNING WARMTH

Keana Salcedo

the warmth of your hand
flowing through my thigh
traces of fingerprints
like tiny strokes of fire
gliding inside me
i feel your hungry touch
piercing through my skin
mark your hunger
and engulf me
with your flaming embrace

PANIC AT THE REGISTER

Andera McCarthy

It was one of those songs where the beginning was barely audible. Especially not over the squeaking of cart wheels or the beeping of bar code scanners. As Pip set the coffee grounds on the conveyor belt, the first chords sounded over the din.

It was a song that faded in, slowly at first, then more quickly as the volume increased. Pip liked it when songs started that way because it made her feel like she was underwater. Drowning in sound. But a good kind.

She closed her eyes and let the melodic wave take her under as the song began. She had always loved being under water. It felt like being hugged from all sides, but by an element instead of a person, so it wasn't so awkward and uncomfortable. It meant she couldn't hear the swim coach's instructions, or the lifeguard's warning, but this seemed to bother them more than her.

She hadn't always liked this song though. The first time her friend had played it for her, Pip just couldn't understand her enthusiasm.

"It's good, I guess," Pip had said, which was a kinder way of saying, "It honestly kind of sucked."

"Wrong," her friend had replied. "It's David Bowie."

"Okay."

"Which means it can't get much better."

"Okay."

That had earned her a punch on the arm, but seeing as it came with a wave of laughter, she had smiled and let herself float. It can't get much better, she had thought.

"Cash or card, ma'am?"

Pip had listened to that song on repeat for the next week. Quickly, she learned it by heart and realized that she loved it, too. For Christmas that year, she had bought the album on vinyl for her friend, who was ecstatic, and exceedingly gentle as she reminded Pip that they didn't own a record player. Pip was mortified. Being the practical roommate was her job. But her friend assured her she loved the record and kept it on prominent display until her birthday, by which time Pip had managed to find an old record player in the secondhand store down the street.

"Ma'am?"

Pip resurfaced, fighting the urge to gasp for air. The man behind her had started to tap his foot, presumably not because of the catchy song. His bag of ice was beginning to perspire. The woman standing behind him stared ahead, catatonic with exhaustion while the toddler in her cart smacked her

hand with a lollipop, drumming while David Bowie sang:

This is Ground Control to Major Tom, you've really made the grade...

"Card, please," Pip croaked.

And the papers want to know...

She paid and fled to the car before the tears started, and she even made it home before realizing she had left the coffee grounds at the cash register.



A FIGHT IN KINDERGARTEN

Anita Parand



Scratchboard

A FIGHT IN KINDERGARTEN

Sophia Sparks

This is the story they will tell about us.

Once upon a time, two little girls sit on the pavement,
chubby legs crossed underneath them, doodling with chalk.
The older girl only cares about the picture,
the rainbow drawn above smiling stick figures.
The younger works patiently, sharpening the point of the chalk,
until it is so sharp that she stabs it into the other's back.
It crumbles, but the other child still cries.

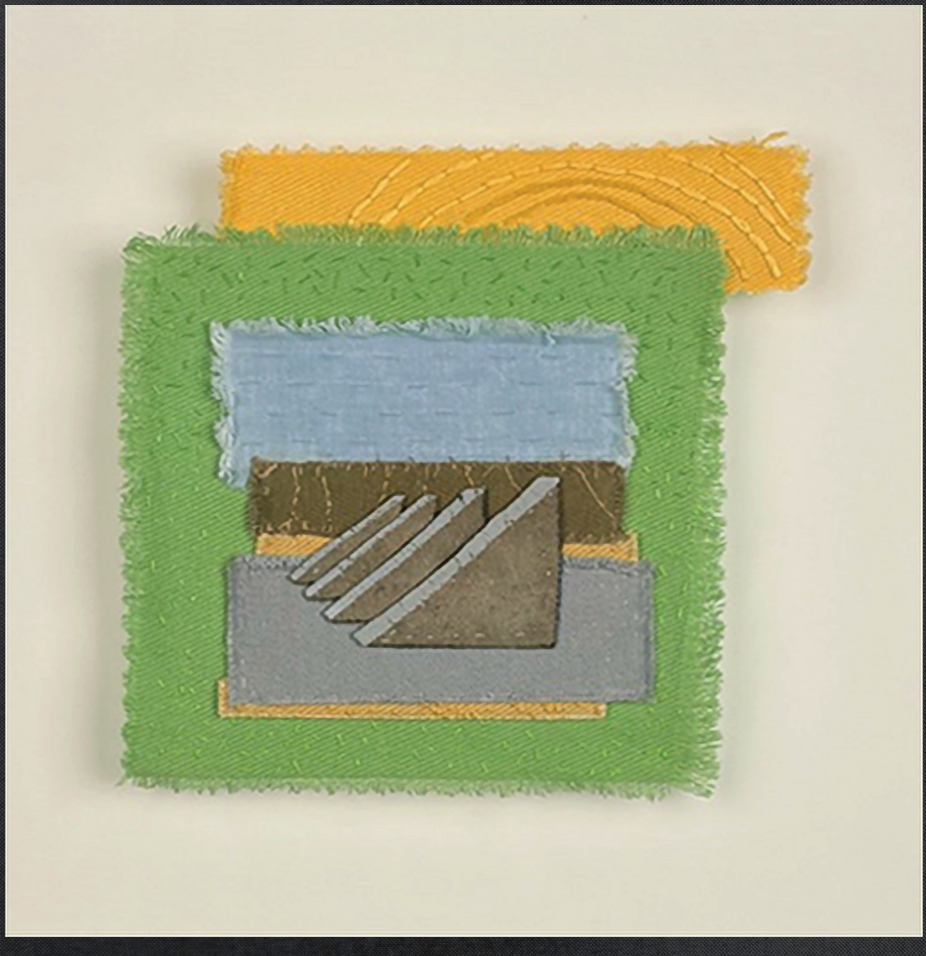
The end of a friendship as long as ours is a childish thing,
two fully grown adults fighting over the bright red plastic
of the tricycle of our mutual friends' attention.
Your hip collides with mine and I collapse to the ground.
Broken. Shaking. But I pull myself onto my feet.
And I walk away from the track entirely,
and the game ends. Maybe you claim to have won.
But I refuse to play the game.

Tomorrow the children will go back to their drawings, as if nothing
happened before. Tomorrow you will return to the track
and pedal in silent circles, as you realize that there is no point in winning
if you are the only one racing. Tomorrow I will open the scrapbook
that I've made of our future, and peel back pictures of
memories that will never happen. I will not babysit your children.
You will not drink champagne and toast to my first book deal.

But maybe someday I'll come back south and speak this poem
into the air, and you will stand in the audience, watching.
And you will hear my voice. And I will look up to see you,
and we will play tomorrow as if nothing ever happened,
as if the chalk crumbled in your hand, as if
the kindergarten yard still waits for us.

CITY OF TRANSFORMATION

Christine (SeaBee) Barker



Textile

PICTURES ON THE WALL

Hannah Ramirez

I glance at the pictures on the wall,
Hung up in dusty frames.
Little captured moments,
A smile, a kiss, a hug,
Glorified in grainy print,
Hanging from tiny nails.
One day they'll fade into the background,
But the memories never will.



THE HOME WE BUILT

Eliotte Paredes

They came from two broken homes, each with the same type of quiet damage. The first was Olive, born to a father who didn't seem to know how to choose between his family and a bottle, and a mother too frightened to ever leave him. Olive grew up afraid of her own reflection, searching for signs of her father in her own mind, someone she swore she'd never become. She learned early to hold her breath when the late-night footsteps grew loud, to shrink herself small, to stop feeling smothered by her family whose mouths repeated "dramatic, crazy, too much" with every reaction she had.

The other, Lucy, lived in a home where love slowly collapsed under its own weight, where the shouting of her parents filled the walls and silence filled just about everything else. Since she was a child, Lucy spent sleepless nights praying for a distraction, terrified that her parents' misfortune would someday settle into her own bones. She prayed for divorce the same way other children prayed for summer—desperate, guilty, hopeful. Lucy hid her hurt like contraband, afraid that naming it meant becoming her mother, trapped in a love that only bruised.

And then, one ordinary day in the sixth grade, the two crossed paths—two girls carrying different versions of the same ache, recognizing in each other the rare, unmistakable shape of someone who understood feeling alone, feeling like their home would never settle. In the quiet corner of the school's music room, the two met eyes. One looked lost, the other tired. Silently, they sat down together.

At first, they bonded over the small things—a shared hatred of math homework, the love for their music teacher, and the mutual understanding that middle school was hell. They joked about classmates and swapped snacks, slowly painting themselves into each other's lives. Beneath the surface, underneath the casual conversation, there was something else. A quiet recognition and softness that felt like relief. They didn't know it then, but their lives had started to melt together.

It happened one late afternoon, both of them waiting for their rides after school. They sat on the steps, as they regularly did, the last two left as everyone else cleared out. The sky was a pale and dark kind of gray that made everything feel heavier and intensity loomed in the air. Despite weeks of dancing around the subject, Olive finally broke in their silence. She'd spent the last hour of her day dreading her return home.

"My dad was drunk again last night." She sighed, staring deep into the cracks in the pavement. "He came home at 3 a.m. Nobody even said a word.

They just...let it happen."

Lucy took a sharp inhale, didn't move, didn't blink but surprisingly, to Olive, didn't look shocked. She took a moment, her world expanding around her once she realized it had never just been her that felt that way, burned by the repetitive nature of the parents she had no way of choosing.

"I hate my house, too," Lucy said, almost as a whisper. She spoke so quietly that Olive barely caught it.

It was just enough to break Olive out of her mindless stare towards the concrete. "You do? I've never really met someone that's understood. I guess, I've never really told anyone either."

"Olive, I understand," Lucy said, her voice low but steady. "My parents scream at each other day and night. Most nights, I pretend to be asleep so I won't get dragged into it, but it never works. I hear everything, I see everything. It never ends and nobody ever says it's not okay."

The wind between them blew, somehow feeling warmer than before. Despite the intensity of their conversation, both girls felt relief in the air. Olive swallowed. "I've always felt stupid for being upset...Everyone calls me emotional and dramatic."

"You're not." Lucy's voice grew serious, quiet but strong. "And even if you were, Liv, who cares? You should be allowed to feel things, allowed to freak out, allowed to not be okay with the way they make you live." Hesitating, she added, "I wish someone would've told me that."

For the first time, Olive didn't feel the need to defend her pain. Lucy had met her where she stood, amidst the chaos and pain, in the heart of all of her struggle, but she hadn't called her names, overreacted, hadn't been surprised. It was what she never knew she needed: quiet understanding.

Over the next few months, their friendship deepened in an unspoken way, the way that mattered most. They sat together day after day, sometimes in silence and sometimes with so many words that the air was full and time felt too short. They still sat daily in the music room, trading stories. They spent the end of each day being the last of their school waiting for a ride, which they soon found themselves looking forward to. Little pieces of themselves slipped out slowly. One particularly quiet afternoon, Lucy was unusually detached. A look in her eyes suggested she wasn't quite there, and Olive had taken a habit of noticing. "You all right, Luce? You've barely spoken all day."

Lucy's body tensed. "My mom said she's only staying in the house for the kids. She acts as if we are some kind of glue holding the family together, but I didn't ask for that. If staying together means I have to live a life like this, I don't want it and I never have."

"That's not fair," Olive breathed. "We're just kids, I don't understand why they expect us to fix their brokenness. I didn't ask for this life and neither did you."

"I know," Lucy whispered. "But part of me...part of me feels like I should be fixing things, like maybe there's something, anything I can do to make them stop..."

Olive nodded. Her time with Lucy these past few weeks had expanded her perspective far more than she had ever imagined. Slowly, she had stopped seeing her father's image in the mirror. She had begun to find a version of herself she didn't know was possible, one that Lucy had seen and had kept showing up for.

With the strength she had been given from Lucy, she breathed. "I know, but the truth is, there's nothing we can do. Any brokenness they have is not our responsibility. For so many years, I let how my dad acted and decided to treat others define my own worth. I thought that my weakness lay in not being able to fix what was broken before I even entered the picture. It's not up to us. It never has been."

Lucy sat in silence, but she met Olive's eyes. She knew they had the same thought—two different stories but an identical ache.

Spring crept in—soft breezes, bright afternoons, mustard flowers blooming on the hillsides. Stretched out under the warm sun, the girls continued to talk. The history of their own pain spilled out into each conversation, but understanding grew like a seed sprouted in the earth. The roots of their friendship connected in the most important of places and instead of causing destruction, their pain brought warmth to their developing minds. There were days of hardship, but however complicated it would get, Olive and Lucy tried their best to navigate it all together.

One day, stretched out under the warm sun, Olive spoke without looking over. "Do you ever feel like you were born into the wrong family? Like somehow, someway you're the wrong piece in a puzzle box?"

Without hesitation, Lucy said, "Oh, all the time."

Olive slowly turned to face Lucy. "So what if we just made our own family? You and me? What if we were sisters?"

Lucy waited a few moments before her words slipped out. "Like...us? Just us?"

"Yeah," Olive said with a slowly widening smile. "You're the only person who really feels like home to me, Luce."

The words were simple, but they meant everything. They meant all that Lucy ever wanted: to stop feeling alone in her chaos.

Olive continued. "When I'm with you, things in my life make sense. I don't feel scared I'll turn into them. I don't feel crazy, Luce. I don't feel alone".

Voice wavering, Lucy added, "And when I'm with you...I don't feel like I'm stuck in someone else's shadow. I feel like I'm allowed to have a life that isn't based on the pain of a broken marriage. I'm allowed to have a family without the weight of a fight drowning me. You're right, Liv, you're more like family to

me than they've ever felt."

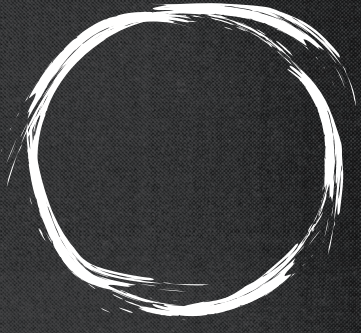
They both fell into a silence, not one of uncertainty, but one of warmth and fullness.

"Family, sisters," Olive concluded. "By choice. I'll always have your back."

And that was just...it. There was no dramatic vow, no loud moment. There were two girls, tired of the pain they had felt, tired of the homes they grew up in. They chose something gentler—they chose each other.

Olive and Lucy went home that day to the same broken places, the same uncomfortable arguments and forced silence waiting behind their doors, the same uncertainty of stability that would continue throughout their lives. But something had shifted.

They had a safe place now. A place that wasn't a building, or a parent, or even a last name. A place for each other. Family grown in the midst of pain. And for the first time, they weren't broken alone.



DONOR

Elijah Goldsbrough

Donate what you have to me,
Give me what you no longer want,
I am happy here,
And at the same time not.

We are all little girls
That sway and turn,
We do our makeup, play family,
And the boy inside us burns.

He is silent and waiting,
He is patient and kind,
But he does not match
The girls in our minds.

Us girls are all different,
Each a perfect porcelain doll,
We run around ignoring
Our true destined call.

I am a swirling mass of pink and purple,
I am an art piece covered in blue,
I am a girl that knows deep down
The girl I am is untrue.

I like to dance in skirts,
And I like to talk too loud,
Give me the boyhood you neglect,
Let me be proud.

Give me what you no longer need,
I'm sure I'll need it more,
Because like this I am chained,
I cannot walk out the door.

I am proud of the boy inside,
And I am proud of the girl you see,
Because although I am different,
I will always be me.

THE GOOD TIMES ARE KILLING ME

Starla Darling

I just met you tonight
and I think you're pretty cute
with your long curly hair
and your Doc Martin boots.

You tell me your stories
of your drunk days and dangerous nights
how you used to sell drugs
and get in gang fights.
Glimpses of your snake tattoo
are peeking past your sleeves.
You tell me you're sober now
that you've changed and I believe.
Ironically, I know your story
I've been there as well.
This makes me want you more
because we've both been in Hell.

You have a girlfriend
waiting for you at home.
But I'm sad and single
and I don't want to be alone.
I don't want to trespass
another girl's territory.
The temptation is burning strong,
to fuck a dead rockstar in all his faded glory.
As your cigarette burns to the end
I contemplate the risk I want to take...
of our bodies melting together
in the back seat of your car out late.

Because at the end of the day you're a piece of shit
and I'm a piece of shit.
Nobody really changes,
and this is the only moment that exists.

MITSU

Annie Park



Photograph

WHAT ARE YOU SO AFRAID OF?

Amity Z. Carnelian

My name is Poppy Lavelle. In most respects, my life is very ordinary. I am sixteen going on seventeen, and I live on a tiny island, affectionately dubbed "The Island" by its fifty thousand inhabitants. I have a little brother whom I am annoyed by and adore. I go to an online school. My house is in the sleepy, boring town of Seabrook Heights. Population: ten thousand, one library, three restaurants, one elementary school, and a movie theater. The Island is a blob of rock visible from the mainland on a clear day. It's covered in pine trees and it rains ALL THE TIME. It also hosts two other towns that aren't important to what I'm talking about right now. Oh, and also a biosafety level 4 laboratory.

One day, I was finishing math when my mom came upstairs and peeked into my room. "Hey," she said. "We're going to the park to play catch. Want to come?"

"Yeah, sounds nice," I said. I wasn't busy. "Which park?"

"Ridgecrest." Mom glanced back over her shoulder. "They're already suiting up, so you might want to hurry."

"Got it."

Downstairs, Dave (my little brother) and my dad (Josh) were zipping their HAZMAT armor suits. I took my shoes off and stepped into the suit part, then put the hood over my head.

The problem with zombie apocalypse media (and I've seen lots, so I would know) is that it presents only two paths things can take after the initial surge of zombie-fication, whether that's from a disease, a radiation event or whatever. Either the surviving scientists band together and cooperate in an inspiring effort to cure all the zombies and the world is returned to normalcy, or society completely collapses and the remaining severely traumatized humans are holed up behind perimeter explosives in a creepy old castle and you just know SOMEONE will go out without a buddy and get eaten anyway. The world chose the secret third option.

The initial outbreak swept across the Island, starting from the biohazard lab, of course. One technician mysteriously died, and then—cue the shock and horror!—here he is again, chomping on some poor woman. The governor of our state immediately decided to overrule our mayor, Matt Whitehead, and shut down the ferry to the mainland, so the virus didn't spread to the rest of the world. So then it was just us, stuck on a tiny island with a zombie virus, spread by the zombies' blood, spit, sneezes, and desperate craving for human flesh. Blah blah blah. Mayor Whitehead instituted precautions at the

last possible minute, like wearing HAZMAT suits everywhere and trying to limit activities around other people. People freaked out, perhaps predictably, because they couldn't go and...eat brunch or whatever. So, he lifted the precautions again. That turned out not to be the best idea ever. The second wave was worse. These zombies aren't pretty, either. The virus causes small capillaries to burst all over their body, leaving them bruised and bleeding from the eyes and nose. It also causes their skin to melt very slightly, so it was white and crepey and hanging off them. It was not a pleasant aesthetic, unless your aesthetic is like rottenfleshcore or something. So, imagine fifteen of those chasing one terrified human.

Obviously, they won very frequently, so in the end everyone on the island joined their ghastly ranks, with the exception of one hundred or so hardcore holdouts, including my family. Not ideal: we're only two tenths of a percent of the total population. We continued minimizing our risk of getting chomped by a creepy, drooling zombie, and it worked.

And then, the unthinkable (at least by zombie movie standards) happened. It turned out that once the zombies acted on their icky craving, they returned to a (lowkey dulled) level of normal human sentience. So, society restabilized and reasserted the normal order of things. The zombies went to work. The zombie kids went to school. They drove home. They went out to eat. And unfortunately for us, they walked their dogs.

Mom swung the door open. I looked down the street. There were at least five shambling, broken-jointed, blood-leaking zombies hauling around dogs without either interest or care for where the animals did their business. I cringed. Some of these people were neighbors I'd known my whole life. I saw Mr. Hendrickx from across the street, staring blankly at the ground. He'd always been vocal about not wanting to suit up, to the extent that he sent the city council death threats. I tried not to think these thoughts because I wanted to be a good person, but it was hard not to think of this as some kind of supernatural retribution. All these people, refusing to suit up to protect themselves and others, and now? Boom! Zombified. Taking advantage of a sudden gap in the dog walkers, we all sprinted for the car.

Mom started the car as I shook my hair loose from the neck of the suit. The car's radio snapped to life. "And for those just tuning in, the Community Selflessness Award goes to Dr. Lee of Community Clinic Windward Heights. The award recognizes a community member's devotion to a greater cause. Now to the press conference, where the mayor is giving remarks."

All of us in the car braced for maximum idiocy. I don't mean to be cruel, but Mayor Whitehead is not everything you would hope for in a community leader, though he's been ours for three years running. He's foolish, underinformed, possibly fraudulent, bigoted, and relentlessly self-aggrandizing. I have this theory that the only reasons he was elected are as follows: 1. He's charmingly

provocative, or at least provocative. 2. He's vaguely handsome in a young suburban dad kind of way, and 3. He used to be a hotshot reporter before he turned his ambition to politics.

I could tell he was about to speak by the heavy zombie breathing. I winced. Mayor Whitehead had remained—what do you call the opposite of undead anyway? Had remained normal thanks to the devoted efforts of his staff until about ten months into the chaos. (It's been two years.) Then, his staid refusal to suit up finally caught up with him. He attended some wild unsuited party and ended up bitten. Then he was in the hospital for a few days and he did NOT look good when he got out.

Anyway, the mayor started speaking. "Each year, I give out this award to a member of the community who has really helped other people. This year, the committee picked Dr. Allen Lee from the Community Clinic Windward Heights, here with me today. During the zombie crisis, Dr. Lee put his life on the line to care for the infected and investigate the cause of the disease. He was also important in getting out the vaccine, which brought that crisis to a very fast end, the fastest ever."

My entire family groaned at this sentence. In no way was the zombie crisis over. Mom switched off the stereo. "That's quite enough of that." We drove for a while in silence before she added, "It's not entirely Dr. Lee's fault that they ended the lockdowns. He advised against it, but Mayor Whitehead pushed him into lifting them."

I stayed quiet, watching out the window. There were so many zombies outside. We were driving through the town center now. Zombies shopping, streaming from the movie theater, enjoying an early lunch at the hip restaurant, in the cars next to us. One of the zombies at the crosswalk demonstrated a peculiar tic caused by the virus. The muscles in his shoulders and arms suddenly tightened and jerked up, pulling his arms up into the stereotypical zombie pose. Funny, isn't it, how closely real life clings to legend.

Also, in the "funny strange" category: how quickly one gets used to the sight of hordes of the undead roaming one's little town. I got distracted by nothing in particular.

Finally, we arrived. There were no zombies present at the moment, so I left the hood off. Dave came around the car with a bag of baseball mitts and a ball.

"Catch?" he asked.

"Sure," said Mom, taking a glove. You'd think my hands would get sweaty with a HAZMAT glove and a baseball glove, but after a while I hit on the solution of stuffing the fingertips and palm with those water-absorbing packets, so it wasn't an issue.

In a loose square, we tossed the ball back and forth, which is harder than it sounds while wearing a Michelin Man suit. That's why, when the ball sailed

far over my head, I called out "I'll get it!" and jogged over. It was time for my arms to have a break. There was a zombie standing nearby. I slipped on my hood, something tightening inside me. Another fun side effect of the virus: zombies became rude and belligerent.

My concerns were confirmed. I turned away. It said, stickily, "Why do you wear that thing? The zombie crisis is over, you know." I reluctantly turned back to face the zombie. It was a middle-aged woman, fit-ish, brown patchy hair in a ponytail that highlighted her bald spots and an ugly red weeping bite wound in her neck. "There's nothing to worry about here!" she insisted angrily, gesturing. I tried to think of a response.

"I just don't want to become a zombie," I mumbled.

"It's not that bad. What are you so afraid of?" she near-shouted, proffering a hand.

I watched as her hand, weakened by the gesturing, separated from the rest of her body. No blood, no gore, no dangling. Just the loosened ligaments between the wrist bones letting go. It drooped, rotten flesh and skin tearing easily, and fell with a disgustingly heavy plop into the grass. I stared at her stump, more specifically at the end of her radius and ulna, still visible, bright and white. It says a lot that not even this sight was able to shock me anymore. She stared down at her hand in the grass.

I pointed at her, at her hand, at the entire concept in general. "That," I answered.



GRASP

Olivia Anderson



Porcelain

THE GATE KILLER

Joshua Archer

The icy night wind invades the interior of the modestly warm gate booth, exaggerating the unnerving feeling of this murky area. My only friend is a yellow, warm light from the flickering bulb, reflecting off my name tag reading "Jack Fouburg." Scanning the area around me through the one-way glass, the bulb is the only light source. To my right, I can see an unsteady streetlight, making the sidewalk litter flicker in the light. The junk blinks like a pink eye. To my left, in the lush and tidy gated community of Havendoor, all the families are asleep—except for one distant singing house with pink and purple lights crawling from the windows. I can't make out the song that's blasting through the cold air–I have my ears tied. My sweating mind is louder than the music, spewing out warnings I want to ignore.

Someone is trying to kill me.

That idea releases shivers that run up and down my spine, but it's true. I think so. This side of New Gresin hasn't seen much violent crime since the city council reallocated funds to law enforcement and rehab, along with funding my booth with a company- provided "self-defense" revolver. Like this barrel will claim a life. I really should feel calm. Yet I don't. I don't know why I feel this way. I just do.

Someone is trying to strangle me.

I resolved that I would use the gun if I saw the killer—it's not enough defense. The outside is softer than my thoughts. The cold night now rests at a tepid 62.88 degrees Fahrenheit. I can't see the heat or taste the cold, yet I feel it tickling my back—swarming in my mind. I can't hear the choking crickets, the humming light bulb, or partygoers screaming—my mind presses against me with yellow noise. The stammering streetlight stops flickering, holding in its breath. Maybe I should follow along. Breathing, yes? Yeah, it calms me. For a moment. But a moment of peace is fine. I like temporary pleasure. But is it enough? I can't think straight. My mind is pressing firmly on the gas pedal or...I.

Someone is trying to—

"Mister!" a soft voice calls out.

The green, earthy hands of the world take off my tight blindfold. The scene is silent, yet the air is brave to make a whistle sound. Immediately, I'm swarmed by all the sounds I once rejected. I turn around, expecting a cold-blooded killer—not a young adult woman in a white Audi 3 sedan. While she's wearing a gray blazer you'd find in a white office with her brown hair swept into a ponytail, sweaty exercise clothes sit shotgun next to her. She rhythmically taps the wheel, waiting for eye contact.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." She apologizes, her voice rising slightly. Our eyes finally make contact. Hers are ocean blue and look a fraction larger because of her glasses. Mine are holding back tears.

"You seem...worried," she points out.

"Miss, name please."

"Olivia, Olivia Harper." She answers like she's used to this. I'm not.

"I made a call thirty minutes ago. I should be on the list."

"I remember seeing that name on the list. Where are you heading to?" It's protocol to ask this.

"16832 Locklin Street, right by the golf course."

"Going golfing?" My intimidated self seeps through my tongue. How should I know she can be trusted?

"Just some business." The truth is sealed behind her vague sentence. She leaves behind a proud smile, like a calling card. It leaves a print in my head I can't shake out.

"Hey, miss—"

"Olivia," she corrects.

"Y-you seem familiar with Northeast New Gresin."

"What is this about?" Her voice is asking the inevitable question.

"H–have you seen anything...suspicious in this area?"

"Why are you asking?"

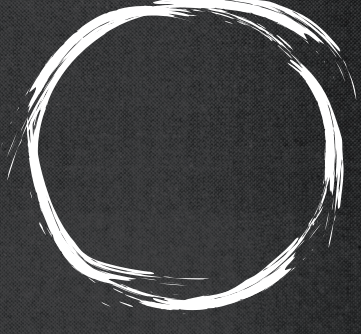
"Protocol." Lies. I want to know for myself.

"In twenty years of living here, it's gotten worse. Sydamime's taken over the southeast of New Gresin, in the Penton district." She seems concerned.

"That doesn't answer the question. I was asking if there were any... homicide incidents."

She has a confused look, yet doesn't challenge my words, "Uh... weeks ago the news was freaking out over a murder. In Penton. Some pizza guy stabbed a teenager. No real motive. Media said Sydamime made the killer lose his mind."

I feel like I swallowed a giant pill. "Thank you. Have a...better night than I'll have."



I raise the boom gate, the stick on the gate that opens if the guard lets someone in. As she takes off, the rumbling of her engine explodes. My mind follows suit. Yet I feel like a corpse left in a snow drift. My eyes zap towards the revolver's firm, brown grip. Before zipping back to the brake lights—now off. The muscles in my head slowly vibrate, breaking my eye contact with the car and returning to the old, 2010s-model computer monitor. It is littered with Post-its, yet I can see that the list of visitors is blank for now, so I can rest. And sit with these thoughts. These suffocating thoughts.

First off, Sydamime is a prescription drug for seizures. I've been taking it for a while. Last year, I asked my doctor to reduce my doses as I went from taking one every morning to several a day. One weekend I took about eight of those pills. My mind's been slipping, yet not off the cliff. I would say I am better now. However, I never drifted into murder territory.

Secondly, if someone was killed in Penton, there's no way he'll drive up north just for my blood...right? I don't want to think about the killer...my brain's too tired to think of the killer. But if I'm too tired and the killer arrives, I'll be dead. But let's not think about death. That's bad...and I'm thinking of it, despite me being tired...I don't feel tired, not anymore. Well, my feet, arms, hands, and body feel tired. Not my brain though. Someone is trying to end me.

I don't know who will kill me, but I know who will order my execution. This is my first week here. Before this, I was living with my parents although I'm in my 30s. Most of the jobs I worked before this ranged from scooping ice cream to doing chores for this weirdo, Jamal. Growing up I believed every family had a Jamal. He had a bogus "fun" attitude and was always micromanaging. I don't blame him. If you saw the documents he had me shred for rent money, I would have the word "mistakes" etched out of my brain. Fast forward to after the trial—a plea deal keeps me from rotting for half my life. So, I end up working at this gate for community service hours.

If he finds me... no...I don't want to think about it.



One power nap later, a couple hours fly by. It is now 2:55 a.m., but it feels like I've been clocked in for multiple nights. I shake my body awake, just in time for another car to pull up to the window. It's a 2015 model of Mustang convertible. Reeking. My nose is assaulted by the smell of weed. The driver is a scrawny man who seems to be the same age as Olivia. He is wearing a blue blazer over a white shirt with black, slightly stained jeans.

"Yo, Jack was it? I saw you in Mr. Paltan's English?" He squints at my name tag.

"Paltan...that piece of crap..." I mouth off.

"Hmph, guessing he hated your To Kill a Mockingbird essay."

"Hold up. How do you know that? I don't recognize you from high school." Then, I ask, as warm as a melting candle, "Name, please."

"I'm Pablo Reed, remember? I sold you Sydamime."

Funny, I never heard that name before.

"I'm prescribed that shit. I don't buy from strangers." My words are puppeted by seeping fury. "And you're far younger compared to me."

"Ay! Okay. Damn. Wait. Did they fire Tommy or something?"

"The old gatekeeper? He got...a new job."

"Yeah, that guy would've let me in. Old friend from high school. Besides, I have people waiting for me at 16835 Locklin Street—"

"You're not on the list," I calmly state, my eyes narrowing. "And you don't have a car sticker saying you are a resident. You're not getting in because you dug for my high school transcripts."

"What? No," he says, scrunching his face. "Some dude named Jamal blabbed to me about your class."

I can feel the air freeze around me after he says that. "Jamal? Why the fuck did you visit that prison just to pass this gate?" My eyes flash to the revolver and back to Pablo. Someone who spoke with Jamal is right in front of me.

"So I can pay rent, genius," Pablo flashes a couple Ziploc bags full of white pills.

"Y—you can't pass," I stammer with a tense face.

"Yo! Sydamime ain't that bad. It's legal here."

"Just get out!" My hand swipes across the desk and chokes the grip of the gray revolver. The air makes way for the cold weapon—held out of the window and pointed at Pablo. I can't tell if my goosebumps are from the cold outside air or from my finger brushing against the trigger. The crickets are the only thing brave enough to speak. You can hear them in the momentary absence of our breathing.

"I..." My voice returns, breathy and exhausted. "You can't pass."

Pablo doesn't speak, only putting his car in reverse.

Before he leaves, I impulsively ask a question. "I–is someone coming to kill me?"

"I wish," he says with venom in his throat. His car speeds away.

I hope he's telling the truth. I hope he and Jamal aren't planning to kill me. I don't know. I don't know anymore. I know I was harsh to him, but now I'm cuddling the revolver like a kid hugging a teddy bear. Fear boils up inside me. Fear for my job, my addiction, my life, everything. If my mind was an Olympic runner, I'd be accused of doping.

Jamal and I are both trapped in little boxes and he's still after me...I think. I know Jamal loves to trade information. My class schedule must have come at a price. Now what's left of his criminal organization knows everything. They know where I work. They know I tattled. They know I'm armed. They know I'm alone.

Someone is trying to kill me!

And he's here.

I see bright orange headlights spill past the window. The car is a rust bucket holding on for life. An older man appears–black tee, vintage tweed cap. Pizza in the back seat. It was the same guy down in Penton.

"I'm delivering for 16832 Locklin Street."

Oh. He's not after me. The cold air starts to shiver.

"O–okay...you may pass."

The driver seems pleased, as if he were entitled. The boom gate slowly opens as if it was a heavy sword. His car rumbles forward, beating like a heart. The driver turns his head over his shoulder, shining his misshapen teeth in my direction with an ugly smile. I can't do it. I can't let him pass. I can't let him kill her. I'll get fired. I have no option left... But to retract the boom gate.

The candy cane strips on the stick slash into his car, tearing through his roof and bashing in his skull. His face lands on the horn, giving out a plea without using his mouth. The car drives forward as his foot is still on the gas. Restrained by the boom gate, it spends several harrowing seconds attempting to break free. Smoke from the friction of the tires against the ground seeps through the air, invading my throat. Choking me from the inside as a punishment for what I've done. The boom gate finally tears away from the toll booth. The car races away from me and crashes into a sturdy tree. The body recoils through the window, shattering glass all over the crime scene. The crickets are silent. The wailing ends.



Three days later, the local media—starved for a violent story—are on a gossip frenzy about the incident at Havendoor. People do not know my name, but they know my given name: The Gate Killer. Most of the reporters and journalists are unsure why I did it. Yet they now know that Havendoor can happen anywhere, even in this heavily policed town. I sit in a detention cell, waiting for a lawyer to pop up. The hope of freedom seems dim. I don't deserve it now.

According to authorities, the rust-bucket car had no weapons in it. Nothing besides the pizza—which was never eaten.

THE BEST THING I EVER ATE

Antoinette Marano

The best thing you ever ate probably had butter in it. You might not have noticed, but it was there, working quietly in the background. Even if it was not the very best thing, I am certain there is food on your list of things you could not do without where butter is at the center. Sometimes it is the ingredient itself, sometimes only the finishing touch, but always the thing that binds flavor together and makes it whole.

I learned this later in life, when most people have already settled into their tastes and habits. It came to me in a small kitchen classroom, the last course I would ever take in culinary school. I had not enrolled with any grand ambition. There was no bakery waiting to be opened, no restaurant dream to chase. I signed up because I had poisoned myself twice in one year. The thought of doing it again, or doing it to someone I loved, was enough to send me into a classroom, apron tied around my waist, determined to learn the bare minimum of survival.

That final class was called Classical French Cuisine. It was a place where sauces thickened slowly in copper pots and where every lesson seemed to begin and end with butter. A cube dropped into a pan would hiss and melt into gold, carrying the onions into sweetness. A softened slab was beaten into pastry dough until the dough became pliant and alive. Butter was everywhere. At once common and precious, never announced but always present. The instructor, a woman with a voice like gravel, told us more than once:

"If you don't know what's missing, add butter."

She said it plainly, without humor. And she was right.

For our final project, we were asked to choose a chef who inspired us. My classmates picked bold names, the sort of chefs who appeared on television or were photographed in magazines beside their towering cakes and firelit pans. I chose Thomas Keller. He was a quieter figure, known less for drama than for detail. He built his reputation not on showmanship, but on discipline. He was the kind of chef who would notice if a chive leaned too far to the left and who would start over if it did. That might sound like severity, but I found in it a kind of reverence.

What struck me most about Keller was not his three-star restaurants or his impossible standards: it was the way he sourced his butter. He got it from Diane St. Clair, a woman from Vermont who kept a herd of cows and churned their cream into what many call the best butter in America. Her butter was made in small batches from cows that grazed on quiet, green pastures. And here is the detail that stayed with me: she named one of her cows after

Thomas Keller.

I carried this fact around like a small secret. It seemed to say something about how food and land and people are bound together. A chef in California could be tied, by way of a cow, to a hillside in Vermont. A farmer could honor a man by naming a creature after him. Milk could pass into butter, the butter spooned into sauces and spread on breads, ending up in the mouths of strangers who would never know the cow's name or the pasture's slope, yet they would taste it all the same.

When I told my instructor, I expected her to share my amazement.

"Did you know Thomas Keller has a cow named after him?" I asked.

She paused, holding her knife above a board. "A cow?"

"Yes," I said. "Isn't that something?"

She shrugged. "It's a nice story."

Her words fell flat, but the silence after them stayed with me longer than if she had laughed or praised it. To me, it was more than a story. It was a symbol of how the smallest details—such as where butter comes from and whose hands shaped it—carry the weight of entire lives.

Butter taught me this: transformation begins in stillness. Cream sits in its jar, pale and unremarkable. Then it is churned, broken, and changed into something else entirely: solid, rich, and indispensable. Cooking felt like that, too. I entered the kitchen unsure, heavy with doubt, and through hours of slow repetition, I changed. I learned the signs: the soft crackle that means the pan is ready, the faint nutty smell when butter browns, the sheen that means the sauce is finished. The change was not dramatic. It came quietly, like butter melting into flour, but it held.

Sometimes, when class was over and I walked home, I thought about Diane's cows. They stood in their fields, unhurried, unaware of how their milk carried so much meaning far beyond the pasture. One of them bore the name of a chef she had never seen. Her life was simple, but through her milk, she reached kitchens and tables across the country. It made me wonder what simple things in my own life might ripple outward, carrying pieces of me to strangers I would never know.

That is the nature of food: it is not only nourishment but connection. Every bite carries with it the work of hands unseen. The farmer, the dairyman, the cook, even the student in an apron with trembling hands and a whisk. Butter, most of all, reminds me of this. It is not bold like pepper or bright like lemon. It works in the quiet margins. It binds, softens, steadies.

I do not remember every recipe I learned in that class. The ratios and the rules have blurred. But I remember the moment when I dipped a spoon into a sauce and realized it was not the herbs or the wine that made it whole. It was the butter. It had always been the butter.

Once, after class, I tried to tell a classmate.

"You ever notice," I asked, "how everything starts and ends with butter?"

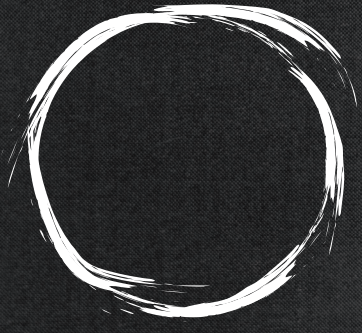
He smirked. "Or ends in clogged arteries."

We laughed, but I thought then of Diane's cows again, grazing in their green pasture, and I felt the truth more deeply than any joke.

The best thing I ever ate was not a single dish. It was the discovery that something so ordinary, so overlooked, was the quiet strength behind nearly every flavor I had ever loved. Butter was not a luxury. It was a foundation. It was survival, and it was grace.

I now imagine a wooden table in the late afternoon. The light is low, the fields outside quiet, the air carrying the smell of grass. On the table is bread, still warm, and a small dish of butter. The knife moves through it easily, and the butter spreads, melting into the bread's open crumb. There is nothing elaborate here, nothing grand, just the taste of cream, pasture, labor, and time.

That, I think, is the best thing I ever ate.



THE SECRET MENU

Luke Shuler



LINK TO FILM

LINK TO STORY

Film

MEDIUM RARE

Mary Magdalen

Tommy's face softened as the sides of his mouth lifted slightly. A puddle of saliva formed under his tongue. Tonight he was having dinner with Sarah at The Harbor House. He often forgot the names of his dates, so he used a mnemonic device he learned in freshman orientation many years ago: attach each woman to an adjective — or better yet, something delicious. Last night he had Finley; she was flavorful like the flan she ordered. Sarah's association was to be determined.

Tommy replayed the first time he saw Sarah: the delicate hand, the manicured nails, the deliberate curl of her lips around her fork. She knew he was watching. The slow lift of it to her mouth put him in a trance. She chased her bite with a sip of chardonnay, her lips leaving a trace of lipstick on the rim of her glass. He was taking a lunch break from work and when he saw her he was compelled to ask her out. Like most of the women he scouted, she said yes.

He pulled up in front of Sarah's house right at 6, his car going faster than intended, his tires letting out a little screech as he slammed on the brakes. Tommy was always early. The thought of being late to dinner had intruded his thoughts all day. He parked, swung open the car door, and practically ran up the stairs to her front door. But when she opened the door, it was painfully obvious she was not quite ready.

Tommy turned and walked back to his car, eyes cast down, mumbling something sotto voce. He felt annoyed with Sarah and panic set in at the thought of not making their reservation. When she finally came out the door, she looked a little more disheveled than when he first saw her. He humored himself with the thought of giving her the nickname Sloppy Sarah.

He drove a little faster than usual but slowed down when he noticed Sarah wrap her hand around the "oh-shit" bar. He reminded himself he was a regular; they wouldn't cancel his reservations.

That evening, two valets were working when he pulled up in front of the restaurant. One greeted Tommy at his door; the other opened the door for his date. He was happy to not have to waste time opening Sarah's door for her. Another diner exiting released the smell of buttery rich sauces. When the smell reached Tommy's nostrils, his mouth watered.

The two were seated quickly. Almost immediately, the server brought two baskets of bread, vinegar and olive oil, and a glass of their best chardonnay.

"Good to see you, Tommy!" said the waiter as he set the baskets down. "Let me know if more is needed." Tommy muttered "thank you" and quickly

reached for the bread basket. Sarah expected him to place a single piece of bread on his bread plate, but instead, he pulled the basket close to him. When Tommy motioned to her to hand him her plate, her confusion over what was playing out in front of her left Sarah no choice but to oblige. As he snatched the plate from her hand, he reached for a single piece of bread, placed it on the plate, and handed it back to Sarah.

"Thank you," Sarah said, still confused by this action.

By the time Sarah was finished with her one piece of bread, Tommy had mostly plowed through the basket, not even bothering to use his plate. Tommy lifted his eyes as Sarah took her last bite. Good God — are you this slow with everything?

"I have been saving my appetite today," he interjected. This was not true, but it made Sarah feel comfortable again.

As the waiter approached to take their order, Tommy thought about how much he loved having dinner at this time, right before the crowd. He watched Sarah's lips move slowly and deliberately as she ordered the surf and turf, medium. I would have gone medium rare, Tommy thought.

"I'll have the porterhouse medium RARE and a side of the lobster linguini."

"Oh boy, you are hungry," Sarah said, smiling gracefully at him. Even though she winked playfully at him, he fought hard not to react angrily to her comment.

When the food arrived, Tommy dug in without hesitation. She tried to initiate small talk a few times, but he only responded with grunts. Without finishing his own plate, he reached over and started cutting into Sarah's lobster. Eating delicately is not sexy, Sarah.

The likelihood of getting a second date was not great. Tommy knew this, but that wasn't important anymore. They were almost finished with dinner and he would be back tomorrow with Laura.

Tommy smiled at the thought of reaching over into Laura's plate the next night and sharing her food. Hopefully she would know better and order her steak medium rare. As he leaned over his plate and took a bite of his steak, Tommy chuckled. He couldn't remember the color of Sarah's eyes, but he remembered how she liked her steak.

REMAINS OF MURDER

Madison Black



Ceramic

TWO FABLES FOR THE AMBIGUOUS

Blake Van Orman

A small, sickly sparrow was the joy of his mother's life. Many years after he had grown into an (admittedly runty) adult, she still refused to let him leave the nest, reminding him all the while of his size and poor health.

"You are much too delicate," she would murmur each morning, smoothing his feathers with her beak. "And besides, you have never left the roost. It is too late to learn the ways of the world, and the cruelties we sparrows must always be on guard for."

It was always said out of love – a persistent, tender caution, which occupied the mother as much as fear for her own life did. Such was her attachment.

Then, one day, while she was out hunting for aphids, the small, sickly sparrow stood on the edge of the nest and looked out. The forest that had always been a tangle of strange shadows and cries, the leafy firmament of his modest home, now called to him with a sudden, urgent demand that he should know it. He leapt.

Unfamiliar with the practice of flying and possessing only one working wing, he fell onto the forest floor. But he did not stop. In a sort of skipping crawl, the sparrow made his way to a clearing at the wood's edge and collapsed onto the grass there, amazed. He had experienced a veritable universe on his way and never could have imagined life to be so large.

It was then that a hawk, circling high above, flew down and swept the tiny bird up.

Floating now far above the forest in its claws, glimpsing for the first time the wonders of the clouds, feeling with his whole sickly body the warmth of the sun he'd never seen before, the sparrow was awed. He felt grateful for this chance to understand the world as it was, unfolding beneath him in its many rivers and trees, and not just what his mother had told him about it.

"At last, I'm alive," he thought.

An ailing man who loved the rabbits in his backyard built a small covered lodging for them, strewn with hay and spinach, by his glass door. He angled it so that the creatures might wander in and stay awhile. From his bed beside the door, he could watch them more closely. He finished the shelter that evening in a state of exhaustion and settled in, hopeful that they might be lured. They were.

Several young hares, tempted by its offerings, ventured into the refuge that night. The man watched them feed with quiet, caretaking tenderness, his hands resting on his chest, his expression gentle and still. He was content to die in peaceful contemplation of their lives; the question of his own future did not concern him. In what might be his last days, it was enough to witness the grateful feeding of these fragile beings, framed by glass.

Later that night, the ailing man awoke to a strange, shrill sound – something like a strangled cry or gasp. He strained to see into the shelter, but all was dark. Was that a rabbit, he wondered, whose coat stood so upright?

By morning, the truth revealed itself plainly. A heap of bloodied fur lay like a weed in its center. A coyote must have found its way inside. Only then did the man perceive the flaw in his design: the too-sloped interior had left the smaller rabbits unable to escape once they'd clambered in. Trapped, they had cried out in distress and drawn the killer straight to them.

And so the ailing man was helpless. Too sick to move, in his last moments of health, he had created the perfect bait. Afterwards, many poor rabbits, cornered by his glass door, provided sustenance for the coyotes of the neighborhood.



FRAMED WATCHER

Norma Ramirez



Charcoal and Pastel

EVERY OCTOBER

Charlotte Erasmus-Woodmore

Every October that rolls around
Is just another reminder of you...
The navy night sky that whispers your name
Is merely a shade of blue

It feels so silly to think of it now
Was the love in your eyes ever true?
Whether two years ago
Or still to this day
I've never had even a clue

Aquamarine and deep forest green
Paint a portrait of our fate
With little reminders
And beginnings that bind us
It's on my mind as of late...

I drown in the Atlantic
And thoughts that are frantic
Have you ever felt this way?
Maybe you're just too young to care
Is it too much to ask you to stay?

Why am I still lingering... on this burnt out flame?
Should I be the one to take all the blame?
Is it just mother nature inflicting this pain?
I know myself, and I'll be back here again...

AUDIO VERSION

HONEY LOCUST TREE, SANTA FE

Elaine Pike



Photograph in Cyanotype

BLUE

Jayden Weathersby

No one's around to see my eyes
Go from green
To blue.
Even if they wanted to see,
They can't.

I'm a ghost.
The version of myself
That no one wants.
Tears don't flow.
They can't.

Yet somehow I'm lost at sea.
A wave overtakes me.
Now all I know is blue.



TRANSIT BALLET

Tracey Roldan



Photograph

ABEL

Michael Burr

My glory in the days
of eternal life dies not.
Under me, I opened
one more day upon the earth.
The ground; my throne.
Walking towards the web of the world—
where they inhabit a palace.

~~KANE~~
~~The drunkeness of youth has passed like a fever, And yet I saw many things, Seeing~~ my glory in the days
of ~~my glory, I thought my power~~
eternal ~~And the days of my~~ life
~~Fixed surely in the years But a whisper came to me From Him who~~
dies not. ~~I called my tributary kings together And those who were proud rulers~~ under me, I opened ~~the boxes of my treasure to them, saying: "Take hills of gold, mountains of silver, And give me only~~ one more day upon the earth."
~~But they stood silent, Looking upon~~
the ground; ~~So that I died And Death came to sit upon~~ my throne.
~~O sons of men You see a stranger upon the road, You call to him and he does not step. He is your life~~
Walking towards ~~time, Hurrying to Meet the kings of India and China. (quoting)~~
~~O sons of men You are caught in~~ the
web of the world ~~And the spider Nothing waits behind it.~~ Where
~~are the men with towering hopes?~~ They
~~have changed places with owls, Owls who have lived in tombs And now~~
inhabit a palace.

Original Text: Excerpt from the screenplay for the film *Citizen Kane* by Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles

A READER LIVES A THOUSAND LIVES

Sophia Dzama



Photograph

THE WRITER'S CAGE

Devon Sithu



Scratchboard

THE WRITER'S CAGE

Alec Elder

After the sun sets, Davis sits in his writer's room drafting his next story. The room is barren. The only furniture in it is a simple desk, Davis's office chair, and a vintage desk lamp. The room is dark. The only source of light is the dim rays of the lamp illuminating Davis's face, reflecting off of his ivy green eyes, and the occasional flash of lightning from the thunderstorm just outside of his window. He's tried all his life to escape a thing that lurks in the shadows, but he has always done his best work in the dark. The irony isn't lost on him. His nightmares have grown darker these past few nights, The Beast barely affording him a few hours of sleep.

Since before he formed his first memory, Davis has always been tormented by The Beast. Every night, it would visit him in his sleep, a dark presence that would sic nightmares on him like rabid hounds. No doctor could diagnose him; no treatment was effective. Only Davis knew the true cause. It was The Beast. A boogeyman blowing nightmarish ash into his face as he slept. Then, one day, Davis began his writing.

It began as just journaling at first. It didn't do much, but it provided some comfort by making the nightmares harmless and controllable words on a page. The more he journaled, the less they seemed like inescapable horrors, becoming inspiration for stories. Later, he expanded these small entries into grander tales of monsters, murder, and mayhem. Something that made the nightmares seem worth it. He was good at it too. For a time, the nightmares lessened in their intensity. The Beast seemingly content, though he could never escape its gnawing presence. Grinning from the shadows. Waiting to deliver a new vision.

Davis has had enough of the torment. His dreams have become so vivid that he can no longer tell if they are mere nightmares used to torture and inspire him or if they are visions of others like him. Being haunted by forces beyond their control. In another time. In another world. Is he complicit in another's suffering? Is he profiting off of countless deaths of hopeless souls, reducing them to mere fiction?

"Enough," he thinks to himself. "Leave me alone!" He shouts to the shadows behind him.

Trapped in an endless loop night after night without reprieve or rest, Davis has only known a semblance of relief when he first started writing his stories, so he figures he will try something new. He'll write a story in a genre he's never explored before. Something bright and hopeful. Something that will shine a light into his mind bright enough to banish The Beast like a bullet

scattering grey matter from a cranium.

Scattered on the floor are abandoned drafts of failed stories. The pages torn out of a notebook in frustration and filled with violently scratched out sentences. The words twisted into horror stories. The brighter each story attempted to be, the more scratched and twisted they became. Each one a failure. Each one nothing more than a soulless and half-hearted attempt at a happy story that couldn't escape the immeasurable gravity of the dark and macabre. Like light trying to flee a black hole. Scratched out and discarded worlds left to fade.

~~"Jester's First Laugh," a story of a jester who is nervous about his first performance for the court but ends up exceeding everyone's expectations.~~ "**Jester's Last Laugh**," a story of a jester driven mad by the growing expectations of his audience and eventually dies trying to swallow a sword as his most ambitious performance yet.

~~"A Day at Rose Park," a day in the life of a simple suburban family spending a day at their favorite theme park.~~ "**The Final Day of Rose Park**," a family is trapped inside of an abandoned amusement park while being hunted by a mysterious killer, ending with them all being murdered before the sun even rises.

~~"Don't Talk to Me Until..." A comedy short about a man who is grumpy in the morning before his coffee, but his order becomes more ridiculous each morning~~. "**Don't Talk to Me!**" The tragedy of a man who alienates everyone around him and dies alone.

Davis will not rest until he has found the right story to illuminate the darkness and escape the thing that has kept him a prisoner of the night for so long. Now, he pens a new story. "**Bard's Promise**," the story of a married couple taking a vacation to a small town to celebrate their anniversary. He's read a similar story once. One of his favorites. That will be his inspiration in place of a nightmare. He's scared to begin writing in earnest. He knows what's about to happen. Anticipating it. Dreading it. He takes a deep breath and starts to put something on the page. He makes some good progress in little time. He's entered a flow, the words pouring out of his mind, through his arm, down his hand and pen, flowing onto the page. The husband in the story is quippy and non-serious, while the wife is left awestruck by the nature surrounding them. It opens with them driving through the forest leading into town.

Jacob sat in the passenger seat of the car. Leaning on the door with his head resting on his fist. Marie scanned the surrounding forest while driving on the empty road.

"Oh my god! Are you looking at all of these trees? I've never seen anything this big! It's beautiful." Marie spoke in awe of the nature around them. She glanced over to see Jacob wearing an anxious look

on his face.

"What's wrong, honey? You seem nervous."

"It's nothing. I've just never really been to a place like this before. It's so…small and out of the way, and the people there will notice that we're not locals, and they might not even like cityfolk and–"

"Jake, you're spiraling. Try not to think about that kind of stuff. It's going to be fine, so just relax and enjoy the weekend with me, okay?"

"Yes ma'am. I just hope we don't get lost on our way home." Marie let out a chuckle as Jacob decided to join her in admiring the trees.

As Davis continues to write, the light of his desk lamp begins to flicker. He hears a low, metallic purr outside of his door. Davis's wicked muse has come to visit him.

"No!" he commands to the door, fully knowing that it won't change what's coming. The lamp goes out as the rain outside falls silent and the purr behind the door becomes a screeching that lies somewhere between a howl and a wail. The screech tears through the air as a violent wind rips through the room. Flashes of horror assault Davis's vision. The storm leaves as quickly as it enters. The light of the lamp returns, along with the pounding of the rain. When Davis recovers from the visit, he looks down at the page to see his work defaced. The Beast scratched out what it didn't like and replaced it with the horrid visions like a ravenous editor, feeding off of Davis's most twisted fantasies.

Jacob sat in the passenger seat of the car, leaning on the door with his head resting on his fist. Marie scanned the surrounding forest while driving on the empty road.

"Oh my god! Jacob, are you looking at all of these trees? I've never seen anything this big! It's ~~beautiful~~ kind of ominous." *Marie spoke in awe of the nature around them. She glanced over to see Jacob wearing an anxious look on his face. "What's wrong honey? You seem nervous."*

"It's nothing, Marie. I've just never really been to a place like this before. It's so…~~small and out of the way~~ creepy and isolated *, and the people there will notice that we aren't locals, and they might not even like cityfolk and–"*

"Jake, you're spiraling. Try not to think about that kind of stuff. It's going to be fine, so just relax and enjoy the weekend with me, okay?

"Yes ma'am. I just hope we don't get ~~lost on our way home~~ sacrificed in the woods by some murder cult." *Marie let out a* nervous *chuckle as Jacob decided to ~~join her in admiring the trees~~* look at his phone for the rest of the drive.

Davis is furious! He is running out of caffeine and ideas of happy stories to use. He can't suffer another night of terror. He won't. He's not abandoning this story as easily as he did the others. He picks his pen back up and continues to

write "Bard's Promise." He and The Beast are in a battle through his writing, and it is a battle he will fight to the bitter end. Even if it takes him the entire night. So begins Davis's odyssey into darkness.

He has been through this scenario dozens of times now. If he tries to write a new draft of the same story, the Beast will only edit it again. Instead, he chooses to try and work within the new set of events laid out by the edits, steering the plot away from the darker tone set by them. It will be a tricky maneuver, but if he's precise enough with his story, he might just be able to pull it off. The current edits are early and tame enough that he only needs to make slight, short-term changes to his original intent.

As the couple drove into town, they noticed that everyone they passed would greet them with a wave and a warm smile. They politely waved back as they made their way to the local hotel to settle in. When they approached the front door, they were stopped by the sheriff.

"Hold it there, you two!" His voice was authoritative yet jolly at the same time. Like a strong cup of coffee with just the right amount of creamer. Marie responded, "Can we help you, Officer?"

"No, not at all. I'm Sheriff Baskins. I noticed you two came into town and I wanted to give you a proper Bard's Promise welcome."

"Yeah, we noticed that we are pretty noticeable here," Jacob said with a joking tone. "Do we really stand out that much?"

"Well, when you're as tight-knit as our humble community, everyone new is out of place. Don't think too hard about it." The sheriff got a message on his walkie talkie calling him to the station. "Alright, I'll let you two go on your merry way now. If you need anything, you can find me at the station. Oh, and be careful going out at night. We've got a bit of a wildlife problem around this time of year."

Davis scans the scene he has written for any flaws in the story. It has to be perfect. Anything less will be an utter failure. As he searches the text, the light flickers, the rain quiets, and the deep purrs become a terrible roar as The Beast tears its way inside the writer's room once again. Davis grips his pen and violently swings at the dark cloud of smoke as it swirls around him and the notebook. His vision is filled with scenes of horror that send a sharp pain behind his eyes. His flailing makes no difference. The Beast leaves and Davis is confronted with more twisted edits.

As the couple drove into town, they noticed that everyone they passed would greet them with ~~a wave and a warm smile~~ grim faces and cold stares. *They* tried to focus on the road *~~and politely waved back~~ as they made their way to the local hotel to settle in. When they approached the front door, they were stopped by the sheriff.*

"Hold it there, you two!" His voice was authoritative and gruff *~~yet jolly at the same time. Like a~~* bitter *~~strong~~ cup of coffee with just the right amount of creamer.*

Marie responds, "Can we help you, officer?"

"~~No, not at all. I'm~~ Sheriff Baskins. I noticed you two came into town and I wanted to give you a warning that you should leave ~~proper Bard's Promise welcome.~~"

"Yeah, we noticed that we're not exactly welcome ~~we are pretty noticeable here,~~" Jacob said with a joking tone. "Do we really stink or something ~~stand out that much?~~"

Sheriff Baskins gave Jacob an unamused stare. " Listen, you seem like nice enough folks, but now really isn't the best time to be visiting Bard's Promise. There's been a murder. ~~Well, when you're as tight-knit as our humble community, everyone new is out of place. Don't think too hard about it.~~" The sheriff got a message on his walkie talkie calling him to the station. "~~Alright, I'll let~~ you two should be ~~go~~ on your merry way out of town ~~now. If you need anything, you can find me at the station. Oh, and be careful going out at~~ I would suggest leaving before night. We've got a bit of a wildlife problem around this time of year."

The story is turning into a thriller before Davis's eyes. Throughout the night, he trudges his way through the rest of the plot. Trying to pivot it in the right direction only to have it be pulled back towards the darkness. After a while, everything begins to blend together. He barely registers what he's writing or what edits are being made. He doesn't notice that he's reached the climax until the final visit. The Beast comes to edit, delivering a dreadful ending void of hope.

Lost, Marie and Jacob ran through the woods trying to flee their pursuers ~~find their way back to town.~~ They thought they were being hunted, but in reality they were being corralled ~~wanted to leave and forget about the strange things that had been happening~~ since the moment they arrived. A sick ritual to lead them on, deeper into the forest, dark . As they wandered with nothing but the clothes on their backs and a single flashlight between them, the pair searched for the hiking trail that they strayed from. After an hour or so they found an altar deep in the forest, surrounded by cultists wearing masks depicting Bard's Promise's founders ~~it and began the trek back to the hotel. Walking for a while longer they finally saw the light at the end of the woods as they rushed toward town, quickly packed their belongings and left. They drove through the night and didn't look back~~ When they tried to run, cultists cut them off and knocked them to the ground. They struggled to break free as they were dragged and bound onto the altar. Jacob and Marie couldn't hear the sounds of their own screams as the cultists chanted their vile prayer and their leader brought down the sacrificial knife.

Realizing that he has failed, Davis throws the notebook across the room in frustration. He turns to face the door that holds The Beast just behind it.

"Why are you doing this? What do you want?" He becomes more enraged as no answer comes. "What are you waiting for? Just do it! Just take me, goddamnit! Get it over with!"

Davis stomps to the door and wrenches it open. Suddenly, he's thrown backwards onto the floor. A cloud of black smoke violently enters the room, forming a hurricane of darkness and shutting off the desk lamp. Davis crawls his way towards the lamp, hoping that its light will harm The Beast. He reaches it and flips the switch. The light sears the darkness around Davis but overwhelms him. It hurts to even think about the light, so he quickly turns it off out of reflex. The Beast throws the notebook to Davis's feet as it fills his head with more visions. Davis tries to push them out of his mind, but it's not enough.

When the visions leave him, Davis finds himself lying on the floor in defeat. The shadows around him lie still and silent, shrouding his sight in a darkness that no light can pierce. Davis looks down to his notebook to see his failure. He gave it everything he had yet here he is. Locked in a cage of shadows, his own home a prison. Is this his fate? A prisoner of his mind, hounded by The Beast for the rest of his nights? He doesn't see any way out. He doesn't see anything but horror anymore, but he refuses to accept that there is no hope for himself. Suddenly a truth dawns on him. A truth he was too scared to accept before. There is one thing he never tried. One last shred of hope out of despair.

A new vision comes to him. A vision walking the line between light and dark, hope and despair. Davis sees a new ending. He cautiously reaches for his notebook, wary of The Beast biting his hand like a rabid wolf. He clears his head of any doubt and begins writing, finally realizing what he needs. A story with enough darkness to satiate The Beast, but with the hope that he desperately needs to escape. With pen in hand, Davis writes this new ending.

The cult fell silent as a loud bang sounded through the trees. Jake and Marie looked up in shock as the cult leader bled through his robe. He had been shot, and the man behind the gun was Sheriff Baskins. He and a few deputies followed the couple into the forest. Using them as bait to lure out the cult. The cult stood no chance against the sheriff and his men. Within a matter of minutes, all of the present members were either dead or arrested. The sheriff escorted Jake and Marie back to town and saw that they drove out safely first thing in the morning. They didn't look back, but they both knew that every time they would close their eyes, they would be back in the forest of Bard's Promise.

Davis feels a weight lift off of him as he closes the notebook in relief. He watches The Beast slither into his pen, waiting to be fed again like a snake in a food coma. Davis cautiously puts the pen down and walks to bed, only making it to the living room couch. Having his first good night of sleep, Davis doesn't care to notice the sun rise.

REMINISCE

Angelina Macias



Photograph

MIGRATION UNFORGOTTEN

Cheryl Garcia



Fused Glass

CARRYING TWO WORLDS: MY FIRST-GENERATION EXPERIENCE

Luz Rodriguez

Carrying two worlds on my shoulders has been my reality since a very young age. At home, I was my family's designated translator, interpreter, and "problem-solver." At school, I was just another Mexican kid trying to learn English by myself. That's the complicated truth of being the child of an immigrant parent. You don't just grow up; you're expected to grow up faster than many kids. From doctor visits and school functions to overhearing people's assumptions about me, I learned that my childhood came with a different kind of pressure that others around me didn't experience. From the very beginning, I had to balance responsibilities and expectations in a world that didn't always make room for someone like me. Carrying these two worlds has taught me resilience, adaptability, and the confidence to define my own identity despite the stereotypes placed on me. These lessons didn't come easily, but they continue to guide me in school, work, and the way I view my future.

One of my earliest memories of this responsibility comes from a doctor's visit when I was around six years old, still in kindergarten. My mom was handed a stack of papers by the receptionist, and she handed them to me, trusting me to fill them out even though I could barely read. "Luz, help me fill these out, please," she said. As I stared at the long words, some of them looked like they belonged on another planet, not in a waiting room filled with cartoons on the TV and the smell of hand sanitizer in the air. My heart pounded as I tried to sound out the English words, translating as best as I could into Spanish for my mom. "Okay...um...name...nombre...address... dirección," I said. She smiled like she trusted me completely. The truth? I had no clue what I was doing or saying. But I knew I had to at least try because if I didn't, who else could? That day, I realized that sometimes responsibility comes before understanding, and I had to grow up quickly to help my family. Even now, I think back to that moment whenever I'm faced with a challenge that feels big. It reminds me that I've been stepping into difficult roles and situations since I was a child.

Beyond the doctor's office, translating became part of my everyday life. Menus at restaurants, school notices stuffed into my backpack, bills in the mail that didn't get checked unless it was by me, and phone calls during which strangers spoke fast and impatiently—all of it became my responsibility. Even when I didn't fully understand, I did my best. Over time, it got easier as my English improved with practice, but the pressure never went away. I wasn't just speaking for myself. I was speaking on behalf of my family, for our place

in a world that didn't always make room for us.

Translating was only part of it. What weighed even more heavily than the words was the pressure of my mom's sacrifices and her constant reminders. She worked tirelessly, often two full-time jobs, to provide for me and my brother. Even when she came home exhausted, she would still say, "Study hard, get good grades, so you don't have to work like me and can work inside an office someday." I felt like every A, every 3 on my report card in elementary through high school belonged to her just as much as it belonged to me. Even after I would come home late from work, I helped around the house as a way of lifting some stress off my mom's shoulders. Knowing the weight she carried crossing borders, leaving her family behind, and enduring jobs that didn't respect her motivated me to keep going and to make the most of the opportunities she gave me to hopefully someday offer her more of my future. Her sacrifices pushed me to see education not just as a personal achievement, but as a way I could show her struggles were worth it.

As if these responsibilities weren't enough, I also carried the weight of balancing two cultures. The one at home was filled with Spanish, early 2000s novelas in the background, and music playing while my mom cleaned and cooked. The one outside was dominated by English. Sometimes I felt like I didn't belong in either world. Among Americans, I wasn't always seen as "fully" American. Among Mexicans, I wasn't always seen as "Mexican enough." That balancing act followed me everywhere. At school, I corrected people mispronouncing my name, but sometimes I let it slide. "Luz," I'd say softly, "it means light." At home, I spoke Spanish, but my grammar sometimes slipped. Switching between them became second nature, changing words, tone, and even body language depending on who I was with. For example, if I stepped into a Hispanic household, I was expected to greet everyone and say, "Buenas tardes" or "Buenos dias." If they were sitting down eating and I passed by them or sat down to eat , the respectful way to excuse yourself was by saying "¡Provecho!." Ignoring it would be considered bad manners. In contrast, in many American homes, people don't usually have to announce themselves or comment on meals, and it's normal to sit down quietly and start eating without saying anything. At first, it was exhausting to switch back and forth constantly, but over time, it gave me adaptability and helped me see things from multiple perspectives. What once felt like a burden eventually became one of my strengths: the ability to connect with people from different backgrounds and be respectful.

Along with balancing two cultures came the challenge of facing assumptions about my identity. If you look different and not like the "average American," assumptions come automatically. Many thought I couldn't speak English well. Others expected me to be fluent in perfect Spanish. One day at work, a customer came up to my register. She didn't greet me; she just placed

her items down and looked at me. Then she said, "You look very exotic." My only reaction was a confused smile as I thanked her. She continued, her tone almost casual, "I mean, you're different. It's... interesting." At first, I didn't know how to react. Later, I realized people often try to define others based on looks, but I don't have to fit into their boxes. Instead, I try to see people for who they are, not through the assumptions others place on them. These moments were frustrating, but they also made me more aware of stereotypes and more confident in my own identity. Instead of letting other people's labels define me, I learned to take control of my own story being formed.

Yes, at times being first-generation is exhausting. But it has also given me lessons that shape how I live every day. I've learned that I can carry my mom's dreams without losing sight of my own. I've learned that those assumptions and stereotypes don't and shouldn't define me; I get to define myself. And I've learned that responsibility, even when it feels like a heavy weight dragging me down, can also be a source of strength for what comes next for me. I get to live in two languages, two cultures, two worlds. Carrying two worlds hasn't always been easy, but it has shaped me into the person I am today. In the end, being a first-generation Mexican-American, a child of an immigrant single mother who gave me responsibility at a very young age, forced me to confront stereotypes, and ultimately taught me to define my identity on my own terms. Carrying two worlds wasn't always easy, but I now see it as a gift that will continue to shape how I move forward in life.



MEDIEVAL WHIMSY

Olivia Poeschl



Ink on paper

THE KING

Hannah Palmer



Acrylic on canvas

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

THE PERSEVERANCE OF HOPE: A SEARCH FOR MODERN LOVE

Hayley Ranae

Love has taken a concrete shape in my mind. Otherwise vague and infinite, this concept has evolved into something I've come to know intimately. I find myself thinking of love often, and how could I not? It's everywhere, isn't it? It wears the crookedly charming smile of a friend from adolescence—something equal parts clear and distorted by time and memory. I've come to recognize love in places I hadn't initially thought to look. In this endeavor of defining and searching for love, there was a time that I completely neglected love that was void of romance, unintentionally omitting love for life, friends, and family—all of which lacked the intrigue I sought but were no less passionate. Thus, love can take many forms, but the love that I continue to seek is that of desire, of intimacy, of surrender.

I've built my conviction upon these pillars, following these notions as a guide towards that which I've pursued persistently. Sometimes, I stray from this vision and find that there are other structures to admire; thus, I wonder what if I have it all wrong?

I know what I think love is and should be, but what if it's not? What if I'm chasing something I've made up, something impossible and non-existent? When my fears combat my hope, there's never a tie. And so, I search, far and wide, desperately seeking evidence that'll make a fool of my doubts and a believer out of a former love critic.

Once, I was untouched by the angst and turbulence of adolescence. Then, I was. The naivete of previous childlike wonder that had fueled so many dreams was abandoned at the cusp of my transition from optimistic to pessimistic. As I grew older and began to recognize the invisible strings of reality that had puppeteered many of my fantasies, the veil of childhood was lifted. For the first time, I saw the world as it was, not how I wanted it to be. Thus, I was forced to accept two seemingly indisputable truths: love was not real, and love would not find me.

At the time, I was thirteen and angry (a real force to be reckoned with), ready to scorn every notion of romantic love because it had not yet found me—and there was nothing more that I wanted than to be wanted. I yearned to be accepted, to be included, to be the person someone else was missing. I needed love to find me as it had found my peers—the friends who professed and paraded their love, like a shiny, alluring, tangible thing. I craved it.

But time passed.

I remained loveless.

And the heart that longed for love condemned it.

All the while I still secretly longed for love, even when I was detesting it. By the time my teenage years began their end, the only love that had found me was either unrequited or kinship-based, neither of which were the love I'd sought. I wanted the love I'd seen in films, photographs, and art, the love passed down from generation to generation, the love I'd felt in poetry and literature, not something unreciprocated or blood-rooted.

I wanted someone to actively choose to love me and trust me with their heart. When I dissect my parents' and sister's love under my microscope of scrutiny, I find a love that binds me to them. It's not free from obligation, nor untainted by proximity. Sometimes, during my autopsy performance of their love, I wonder if my mother wasn't my mother, could she still find love in her heart for me? If my father wasn't my father, would he still cherish me? If my sister and I bled different colors, would she share her love at all?

My first, and only, romantic relationship found me when I was eighteen years old.

I didn't see it then, but there were a million and one issues with our relationship, red flags that I couldn't see clearly but have since come to recognize during a different kind of late-night dissection and the passing of time.

Out of civility to the other party involved, I will refrain from defaming them, abstaining from revealing their name or any personal details relating to them. We were young. We gave it a shot, but it didn't work out. While the relationship fell apart on murky terms, it's not my intention to weave a narrative of resentment. I hold no animosity for the other person involved, but I also do not wish to cross paths again. He's part of my past, and that's where he shall remain. There's no flame to rekindle, just ash, and even then, there is no trace of an ember. We're properly extinguished.

That said, I didn't love him. I thought I did. I wanted to. I tried to, but I didn't.

I could detail the verbal abuse, highlighting the crude remarks made about my body or the comments made about my weight. There are the instances in which moments of intimacy dissolved into moments of fear, when requests for actions to cease further progressed and were met with insistence, as if the violation of my anatomy brought forth a twisted sense of delight. I was finally chosen and given nicknames that made me feel worthless. Dumb, stupid, and idiot were favored "names of endearment" meant to convey "love" even when my discomfort and disfavor for the terms were voiced against every uttered reinforcement of casual cruelty. Of course, there's also the suspected cheating, bolstered by the curious coincidence and emergence of a new girlfriend days after we had "amicably" separated following weeks of dry, meaningless exchanges. Nonetheless, these are the affairs that paved the way to the end.

If only to establish the framework for the "love" I've experienced, the aforementioned must be disclosed. However, for clarification, I was not in love, nor was I ever under any assumption that the "love" that was given to me was anything more than a word tossed around carelessly and dangerously. This "love" was never my salvation. It was not safety, warmth, and connection. It was manipulative, if anything, and draining, if nothing else.

Thus, my desire to love and be loved has only matured in spite of experience. My hunger continues to grow for even the most mundane touch—fingers laced, foreheads resting against each other, noses brushing against noses. Unsated, my appetite persists. I am aware of the choice that I have, the choice to continue to pursue love beyond delusions, illusions, and imitations, and I accept the weight of this decision that betrays perfection and ideals.

As I house this massive anomaly within me, and commit to this search for love, what I'm searching for has become clearer. I know what I'm looking for, and what I'm not entertaining. I hold firm in my search and refuse to slip back into my pessimistic ways, even if my wishes for gentle adoration and personal connection seem unreasonable these days.

And so I ponder, in this modern age, by whose standards is it silly or unattainable for the love I seek to exist?

Modern love has become avant-garde. I don't think there's a soul who truly understands it or knows how to make sense of it. Yet we continue to pursue it. Everyone is searching for it, embarking on their own journeys, but what is it, actually, this conceptual mirage of sorts? Is it something that pokes fun at commitment and companionship to dispel the fear of it? Is it settling for someone and something we know is wrong because it's "better" to have someone than no one at all?

For some, perhaps, but not for me.

I yearn for handwritten notes and romantic candle-lit evenings, not the forwardness of men twice my age sliding into my DMs.

Collectively, when did we stop cherishing the art of human connection? Of gentle touch? Why have we? Is this ache not universal? Are we not all suffering?

I can't be the only one to feel so lost and unsure but still crave and want, hopelessly.

Since I'm equal parts eager and desperate to cling to this grand notion of love and romance, at times I fear that I may fall for the closest thing that shares resemblance, and I wonder if there's more harm than good when it comes to dismissing everything that doesn't fit into the concrete shape love has taken in my mind.

But I refuse to believe that love isn't as grand as I believe it to be. Present the facts and data that rival my elucidation, and I'll refute them. Love is grand—at least for me, it will be. When love finds me, I'll know it—recognizing the

crookedly charming smile of an old friend. And, until then, I won't settle for anything less.

In this tumultuous time, when messages get left on "read," when unfaithfulness is favored to being "alone," and something physical is preferred over something emotional and spiritual, I long for someone, somewhere, who will make the conscious choice to love me. I will slow dance in the kitchen with my lover and read the notes he's scribbled in the margins of his favorite books. Above all, I will keep this love close to my heart, protected, even when I'm compelled to sing its praises from rooftops.

With all of the hope I usually reserve for birthday wishes, shooting stars, and magic, I dream of this love. Should it only ever exist in fantasies and make-believe, the romantic in me couldn't handle it. I am hopelessly devoted to this search. With everything I have to give, I surrender to this rollercoaster of all that's unknown and unpromised. I will brave the mystery of this scavenger hunt. Above all, I will go round-and-round this carousel of loneliness, until the love I know exists guides me off with a gentle hand at the small of my back.

Then, perhaps, I'll be at peace, knowing that the love that has taken a concrete shape in my mind has found me.



MISMATCHED THREAD

Lila Mae Etherton



Scratchboard

MISMATCHED THREAD

Lila Mae Etherton

My veins are made of beads, my hair of yarn
I was built to fall apart
Fixed again, again, once more
Each time looking less like I did before
No more thread to match the seam
No longer a mouth to sing or scream
No two buttons match to make my eyes
No two arms the same to wave goodbye
From the shops, you can find one brand new
Shiny, fresh, fixed up to look like you
Yet there you were, spending time
To make a broken doll, what you called "mine."
So every time I rip and tear, I think of you up there
I'm packed in a box beneath your bed,
the "special doll" of mismatched thread
I'm not pretty, new, or neat,
but broken, mended, unique.
Though dusty and forgotten now,
Once I made you proud.
My veins are made of beads, my hair of yarn,
I was built to fall apart
For when I did, I taught you this:
Don't give up after just one rip.

WALL 2026 STAFF

ALEC ELDER

Editor-in-Chief



Alec is experienced in many disciplines in the arts, including music composition, singing, acting, writing, illustration, and design. He endeavors to work in video game design and draws inspiration from many art forms, personal experience, and the world around him. Favorite artists include the band Periphery, screenwriter Sam Lake, and J.R.R. Tolkien.

JAYDEN WEATHERSBY

Art Editor / Poetry Editor / Personal Narrative Editor



Jayden, an English major at Saddleback, plans to specialize in creative writing when she transfers to Cal State Long Beach. She hopes to one day become an author, work in publishing, and possibly be an elementary school teacher. She has loved creative writing since she was a sophomore in high school, where she wrote her first 10-page screenplay about gremlins taking over the world. Since then she has started writing a fantasy novel, plotting a couple of romance novels, and has messed around in short stories and poetry. She hopes to keep writing for the rest of her life and that those reading find creative writing just as magical as she does.

JOSHUA ARCHER

Art Editor / Poetry Editor



Joshua loves to write prose and poetry, sometimes creating characters who'd likely get locked up in a 1930s asylum. Favoring ethically questionable characters with a side of "this world made me the way I am," he loves to explore moral decay, human evil, systematic rot, and ... how everything will be all right. He's been the creative type his whole life, including serving as a student graphic designer and printer for Trabuco Hills High School's graphic design team in 2025. After he leaves Saddleback College, he'll transfer to University of California, Irvine for a degree in Cognitive Science.

jarcherwriting@gmail.com

JAKOB BAGLEY

Fiction Editor / Publicity Chair



Jakob, a Creative Writing/English major, will transfer in Fall 2027. He considers himself a storyteller, exploring his creativity in a variety of mediums. His aspirations as a storyteller include being a novelist, playwright, and filmmaker. Some of his creative influences include the works of Christopher Nolan, John Green, John Steinbeck, and Walt Whitman. His short story "The River" is his first publication. Jakob has been immensely inspired by the creativity of his fellow staffers and contributors to WALL.

BROOKE LYNN MAGILL

Fiction Editor / Copy Editor



Brooke is an aspiring author and creative who believes in the power of human storytelling to make kinder, happier people and a better world. A lifelong daydreamer, she is inspired by everything from games to theater. Psychological horror, romance, and fantasy are her favorite genres. Brooke earned her associate's in English at Saddleback College and is working toward a bachelor's in Literature and Creative Writing at Antioch University. She also wants to work for independent projects in the future to help other creatives bring their stories to life. Contact her at brookemagillwrites@protonmail.com if you want a writer, beta reader, or editor for a project!

SOPHIA SPARKS

Fiction Editor / Copy Editor



Sophia is an aspiring author of fiction based in Southern California. She wrote her first story at the age of four, though it wasn't any good. Today, Sparks is working on two novels, both of which influence the emotional heart of her other works. "A Fight in Kindergarten" is one of her rare ventures into poetry. After college, she aspires to become a published author of young adult speculative novels. More information about her writing can be found at her site:
tumblr.com/bee-witched-writes

ZAHRA MOLAEI

Graphic Designer / Layout Editor



Zahra is a recipient of the Best Graphic Designer Award at the UNBOUND Spring Student Showcase at Saddleback College in 2026 and a proud member of the Alpha Gamma Sigma and Phi Theta Kappa honor societies. She has earned her Associate degree in Graphic Design and Fine Art from Saddleback College, Mission Viejo, California. As a graphic designer and devoted fine artist with more than 15 years of experience in the design and printing process, her work is guided by a deep respect for the beauty of visual expression and the transformative power of thoughtful design. Her previous graphic design projects, along with her personal and professional experiences across six countries and diverse cultural environments, have enriched her artistic vision and creative perspective. For additional information or collaboration, contact her at: molaei.design@gmail.com

ANGELINA MACIAS

Graphic Designer / Layout Editor



Angelina earned an associate degree in Computer Graphics from Saddleback College in Spring 2026. She is majoring in Society and the Environment at UC Berkeley. Her interest in layout and graphic illustration encompasses both physical and digital mediums. She loves graphic design and styling art to reflect the goal of each page/piece.

MARGARIT PITT

Copy Editor / Publicity Chair



A lifelong storyteller, Margarit has worked across theatre, film, writing, and marketing before returning to college to pursue her English degree. Her background includes stage and film performance, producing, ghostwriting, copywriting, and creative marketing. Deeply passionate about literature, communication, and human psychology, she is currently developing her first novel and preparing to launch a podcast centered on contemporary culture, identity, and personal transformation.

DEVEN LEIGH DEKORTE

Literary Associate



Leigh is a creative nonfiction enthusiast who completed her Associate in Arts degree at Saddleback College, where she spent lots of time overthinking submissions to her long-suffering professors in the English department. Her writing focuses on grief, memory, and the poignant ways meaning tends to show up "late." Before this, she served seven years as a Mass Communication Specialist in the U.S. Navy, documenting service members' lives through photography, video, and writing. She now brings that same attention to detail to the page. Her favorite nonfictionesque writer is fellow East Coaster David Sedaris. Contact: devenleighe@gmail.com

ANTOINETTE MARANO

Literary Associate



Antoinette's work lives at the intersection of observation, memory, and resilience, shaped by an honest examination of real-life experiences, and the quiet tensions of everyday human interaction. With a diverse background and a growing body of creative writing, she explores themes of identity, power, vulnerability, and endurance through both literary and visual forms. Her work reflects a deep interest in the stories people carry beneath professionalism, silence, and survival.

ADAM PEARSON

Literary Associate



Adam, who served as one of the Art Editors for the 2023 edition of WALL, is taking classes at Saddleback College to build skills for his personal projects. He enjoys dabbling in the creative arts and being part of the WALL team.

FERN HELSEL-METZ



Photography Editor

Fern 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, encouraging viewers to discover the hidden narratives within their own memories and surroundings. Contact: fmhmfineart@gmail.com

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, an annual 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 2026 CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

AMITY Z. CARNELIAN
Amity is a current dual enrollment Saddleback College student. She has been published once before in WALL. Writing is her favorite hobby.

DIEGO GARCÍA-TABORGA
Diego is a writer and CTVR student at Saddleback College. He has had a lifelong passion for writing and does his best to dedicate at least an hour a day to the craft.

THOMAS GRANATA
Tom is a Saddleback Emeritus student who graduated from Rutgers with a degree in chemistry. He's always loved reading fi ction and started taking creative writing courses and writing short stories several years ago. Tom has also worked in the visual arts, making sculptures in clay, wood and stone. He can be reached at granatathomas@hotmail.com.

MARY MAGDALEN
Mary is a Southern California writer and former educator whose work explores memory, identity, and psychological tension. Her work appears in The Write Launch, Paragraph Planet, Blood + Honey, and Half and One, with fi ction forthcoming in BULL Magazine. She began her writing journey at Saddleback College in the Summer of 2025. She is currently working on a memoir and a hybrid chapbook.

ANDERA McCARTHY
Andera, a junior at Newport Harbor High School, was chosen as the editor of Newport Harbor's online newsletter, The Beacon, during the 2024-2025 school year. She recently took Catherine Hayter's Introduction to Creative Writing course.

ELIOTTE PAREDES
Eliotte is in her fi rst year at Saddleback College studying psychology. She has very limited writing experience but loves to write in her free time outside of classes. Eliotte is very interested in writing about childhood trauma and development as that is the primary focus of her studies.

ELLA RICHARDSON
Ella, a senior at San Clemente High School, was enrolled in Saddleback during Summer 2025 and took Professor Hayter's Introduction to Creative Writing class, during which she wrote "Music in a Ballroom."

BLAKE VAN ORMAN
Blake is a writer and chess instructor based in Orange County.

DEBORAH ROTHBART
Deborah always loved writing/reading, inspired by her mother. She took advanced English in high school, where her prim, purse-lipped teacher buried the meek along with Deborah's interest in writing. More recently, Deborah met author Barbara DeMarco-Barrett, who, unwittingly, cajoled Deborah's inner writer out of hiding. She has studied with Barbara for several years and is excited to submit.

PERSONAL NARRATIVES

CLARISSA MIRANDA PORTILLO
Clarissa is a first-year student at Saddleback College who is pursuing a mathematics degree. She hopes to transfer to a University of California campus to earn a Bachelor of Science degree after she completes her Associate in Science degree at Saddleback. Outside of school, she works at a math tutoring center to gain experience and skills to prepare for her dream career of being a math teacher.

HAYLEY RANAE
Hayley is a Midwest-born writer currently studying English Literature at Saddleback College. Her passion for literature began at age six, following recognition at the Illinois Young Authors Conference. Today, she continues to develop her craft in California. Her poem "Ode to Owl," one of more than fifty poems she's written in the last year, was recently published by Academy of the Heart and Mind.

LUZ RODRIGUEZ
Luz is a first-generation Mexican American student at Saddleback College. Her writing is inspired by her experiences growing up between two cultures and helping her immigrant family navigate life in the United States. Her goal is to use writing as a way to share meaningful stories about culture, identity, and perseverance.

CHRISTINA YOON
Christina is a Creative Writing student at Saddleback College. She works as a motion and graphic designer and loves to write short stories in her free time. She is inspired by the works of Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, Charles Dickens, and L.M. Montgomery.

POETRY

DANI BARFIELD
Dani, an aspiring author from California, is working toward an associate degree in English at Saddleback College and will transfer to Oregon for their bachelor's degree. Their work has been previously featured in WALL. Dani is currently working hard to get their work published in other literary magazines. You can contact them at danibarfield2028@gmail.com.

MICHAEL BURR
Michael is an entry-level controls engineer who entered the electrical field six years ago. They received a BA in Psychology with a minor in Philosophy as well as an AS in Industrial Electronics. Michael began pursuing their dream of learning how to write in October 2024. More original writing can be found at https://michaelburr8.substack.com/profile/posts

STARLA DARLING
Starla is a passionate artist with a background in art, dancing, modeling, acting, singing, and piano. Art is her medicine and her way of channeling life's pains, giving it purpose and making the incurable ugliness of it beautiful. She is working towards achieving her goal as a performing artist in the entertainment industry. Email: starla.darling@yahoo.com Instagram: @xstarladarlingx

CHARLOTTE ERASMUS-WOODMORE
Charlotte was homeschooled all throughout her childhood across three different continents and now attends Saddleback College pursuing a major in Studio Arts. She has previously taken multiple creative writing classes at Saddleback College and elsewhere. Charlotte has always loved and pursued creative writing but has never published. In 2026, it is her goal to change that!

LILA MAE ETHERTON
Lila is a dual-enrolled high school student currently working towards an AA in Liberal Studies, an AA in Illustration/Animation, and an AS in Computer Graphics from Saddleback College. When she's not busy with school, she enjoys acting with The Laguna Playhouse, songwriting, playing guitar, creating multimedia art, writing poetry, writing monologues, and spending time at the beach. Constantly amazed by the human connection and empathy fostered by the arts, Lila can't wait to see where the avenues of her creativity can lead her.

ELIJAH GOLDSBROUGH
Elijah is an English major at Saddleback College. He has been writing since he was ten years old and hopes to publish a New York Times bestseller one day. Elijah likes to write about his experience as a transgender man and the unique feeling of being one with nature.

LEA PACKER
Formerly a student at Northeastern University, where she attained a BA in International Politics and French, Lea is currently working toward a Certificate in Digital Media at Saddleback College and serves as a copywriter for a non-profit that promotes sustainable technology. She held the editor-in-chief position for the 2026 edition of the Orange Appeal, a student-run magazine at Saddleback. Today, Lea enjoys reading manga and writing articles on politics and pop culture accompanied by her daily six shots of espresso.

EDWIN PAEZ
Edwin is a dedicated father and now degree holder driven by a passion for writing. His ultimate goal is building a stable and inspiring future for his son while fulfilling his own lifelong dream of a career in the literary arts. Awarded the 2025 English Department Creative Project Award, he hopes that his writing will inspire and continue the tradition of human-created art.

HANNAH RAMIREZ
Hannah has been writing since she could hold a pencil and hasn't stopped since. She typically enjoys writing science fiction and fantasy novels for teens and tweens but has been known to dabble in any writing medium that catches her eye. To follow her creative endeavors, you can visit her website at hannahramirezwrites.com.

KEANA SALCEDO
Keana, a published poet and current student at Saddleback College, is pursuing an associate degree in Creative Writing. Keana loves to put her feelings and creative mind to paper, especially with poems.

LAILI SHAHRESTANI
Laili, who is majoring in communications at Saddleback College, does not have a history in publishing. Her poem "No Longer Mine" represents her first time submitting her work.

ART

OLIVIA ANDERSON
Olivia is a Studio Arts major at Saddleback College, transferring to California State University Long Beach in Fall 2026 to pursue a BFA in Ceramics and eventually an MFA. To see more of her work, check out her Instagram: @liv.ingcreation

ALENA ARDASHEVA
Alena is a photography student whose work explores perspective, space, and the emotional language of environments. Through her photography, she seeks to create images that invite reflection and interpretation.

CHRISTINE (SeaBee) BARKER
Armed with a Business Management degree and a habit of creative exploration, Christine merges modern studio tech, specialized darkroom classes, painting, and textile art to stretch her imagery across multiple mediums. When she isn't expanding her fine-art practice, she's either ballet dancing, managing her personal zoo of pets, or fueling her workflow with Smucker's Uncrustables. Follow the journey @ christinebarkerphotography

MADISON BLACK
Madison has studied Studio Arts at Saddleback College since 2023 and is pursuing an Associate Degree for Transfer with a focus on ceramics. Her sculptural work centers on detailed animal forms, and she plans to continue her studies toward a BFA.

BEATRICE DIVINAGRACIA
Beatrice, a second-year student majoring in Studio Arts and Early Education at Saddleback, hopes to transfer to a four-year university to combine studies in design and child development. She loves exploring many mediums such as photography, drawing and painting, and ceramics after taking Art 9 at Saddleback. Her Instagram art account: https://www.instagram.com/the.late.night_artist/

SOPHIA DZAMA
Sophia completed her second semester in photography, which she intends to pursue as a career. "If you stand for nothing, you'll fall for anything."
Instagram @sophias.lenz

LILA MAE ETHERTON
Lila is a dual-enrolled high school student currently working towards an AA in Liberal Studies, an AA in Illustration/Animation, and an AS in Computer Graphics from Saddleback College. When she's not busy with school, she enjoys acting with The Laguna Playhouse, songwriting, playing guitar, creating multimedia art, writing poetry, writing monologues, and spending time at the beach. Constantly amazed by the human connection and empathy fostered by the arts, Lila can't wait to see where the avenues of her creativity can lead her.

BRAD FRIESEN
Brad Friesen, a retired engineer, has traveled extensively throughout and after his professional career. After retirement, he took up photography. His primary interest is travel photography.

CHERYL GARCIA
Cheryl is an interdisciplinary artist based in Southern California who works primarily in glass. Her work explores quiet moments in nature and themes of migration through light, transparency, and form, drawing on an observational relationship with the natural world. Using refraction and illumination, her pieces reflect how movement, stillness, and place shape living forms.

ANGELICA JIMENEZ
Angelica is working toward an Associate in Arts degree at Saddleback College. Her illustration of the story "Memories in the Mirror" in this edition of WALL represents the first publication of her art. Angelica spends most of her free time drawing and coming up with new ideas for her next artwork.

DARIA KMIN
Daria, who is majoring in Studio Art at Saddleback College, moved to the United States from Russia, where she graduated from art school and began developing her artistic practice. She is currently continuing her education in fine arts, exploring themes of perception, contrast, and ambiguity in her work.

MAY BAHI NUR
In high school, May fell in love with pottery. Now a retired dietitian with time to pursue this passion, she has been taking pottery classes at Saddleback College for the past three years and found her community. "Face That Remembers" is a self-portrait made of porcelain clay that depicts remembering trials and tribulations yet smiling with faith that one day she will be free as a bird.

HANNAH PALMER
Hannah is an originally self-taught artist who took classes all through high school and continues to take drawing classes at Saddleback College. She is sure that art will forever be a part of her life. Hannah knows her talent is a gift from God and her goal is to use it to bless others as well. She owns an Etsy shop where she produces pet portraits and other authentic artwork:
https://www.etsy.com/shop/HannahTheArtBanana

ANITA PARAND
Anita is a creative practitioner whose professional focus operates at the intersection of visual communication, contemporary editorial layouts, and innovative branding. Her creative portfolio spans a diverse range of mediums as a visual artist, seamlessly blending detailed digital vector layouts with expressive traditional illustrations utilizing gouache. Guided by a passion for clean, purposeful design and conceptual storytelling, she continuously seeks to elevate her craft and explore bold, innovative concepts to establish a distinctive voice in the professional design industry.

ANNIE PARK
Annie is a custom fine jewelry designer, gemologist, and photographer focusing on jewelry product and pet photography. She is a Gemological Institute of America Graduate Gemologist, Graduate Jeweler, Jewelry Design and Technology Graduate, and Applied Jewelry Professional. Her work has been published in Saddleback College's 2021 WALL Literary Journal and selected to be shown in "Emergence," "Boundless," "Radiant," and "Bloom," exhibitions in the Saddleback Art Gallery.

TERI PFEFFER PERLSTEIN
Teri has just completed her AA in Photography at Saddleback College. She is also taking art classes at Saddleback. Teri would like to teach at one of the area community colleges, Emeritus programs, or community centers along with displaying and selling her fine art photography.

ELAINE PIKE
Elaine has been enrolled in photography classes at Saddleback College since the Fall of 2020. She enjoys experimenting with alternative digital processes such as layering encaustic wax over her images and gilding the reverse side of them with gold leaf. Further examples of Elaine's work can be viewed on her Instagram page @pikeography or her website elainepike.myportfolio.com.

OLIVIA POESCHL
Olivia is a psychology major who also creates and sells artwork. Her work has been featured in the Saddleback Winter Art Show 2025. See more of her artwork on her Instagram, where she uploads art process videos and more original works: @olivia.poeschl

NORMA RAMIREZ
Norma is a Studio Arts student at Saddleback College. Her work is grounded in observation and shaped by a process of projecting imagined scenes onto real environments, then refining them through structure and control. Influenced by science fiction and atmospheric imagery, she explores the tension between reality and constructed perception.

RETAJ RIDHA
Currently majoring in Illustration/Animation at Saddleback College, Retaj has so far attained an AA in Studio Arts for Transfer degree. Retaj enjoys making art and challenging herself with new mediums.

TRACEY ROLDAN
Tracey is a digital photographer whose work is rooted in observation, presence, and the art of noticing. Born in New York and raised in California, her practice spans street and studio photography, guided by a candid, thoughtful approach that emphasizes connection across people, spaces, and subjects.

ALEX SAN FILIPPO
With an Earth Science background, Alex takes inspiration from organic and terrestrial subjects. Having experience across 2D and 3D media, Alex's art practice centers on exploration through medium, nature, and imagination. Over the course of her creative endeavors, she has delved into playful digital illustrations and life drawings. The greater body of work functions as a scientific study of both subject and environment.

DEVON SITHU
Devon, currently studying Graphic Design at Saddleback College, attained a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree with an emphasis in Illustration at Otis College of Art and Design. Devon has exhibited work at The Hive Gallery in Los Angeles. When not drawing, Devon is probably watching a horror movie, photographing plants, or falling down a Wikipedia rabbit hole. Website: deepti-sithu.carrd.co

MULTIMEDIA (Film & Music)

LUKE SHULER

Luke, who studied Film Production at Saddleback College, plans to transfer to Chapman University in Fall 2026 to pursue a degree in Film Directing. His interests in film have been developed through his coursework at Saddleback, where he has had roles such as Director, 1st Assistant Director, Production Designer, and Sound Mixer on student projects.

PIYUSH TIWARI

Piyush, an engineer with a bachelor's degree in Computer Science and an MBA in Finance, works as a manager leading a team of software engineers who build large-scale systems for HUD, Fannie Mae, and Freddie Mac. Outside of work, he enjoys music production and gardening, and he often tries new creative activities to stay inspired and engaged. His writing has been published in several Indian literary magazines and he released his own Hindi poetry collection as a book. Piyush continues to share his work on his blog, where he posts poems and reflections: https://piyush7.blogspot.com/

MYKAYLA TWILA BLISS WANNAMAKER

Mykayla is a singer-songwriter graduating Valedictorian of BEST Academy of 2026 with dual enrollment at Saddleback College. She is interning at West Coast Songwriters Association while working on releasing her own songs, including her first EP and first album. She hopes to continue working in the studio, writing songs, and learning all there is to know about songwriting and the music industry.

