

The Art and Literature Journal of
Naugatuck Valley

Fresh Ink

2024



FOUNTAIN OF COLLEGE YOUTH
Natalie Resto*

ISSUE 55

The 2024 Luke S. Newton Memorial Award

Winners:

Art:

“Kamelmacher Family: Lost but not Forgotten”
by ShawnaLee W. Kwashnak

Short Fiction:

“Ernest Conversations”
by Thomas Warner-Crouch*

Poetry:

“On Reading Black Poetry in an All-White Class”
by Jonah Craggett

The Luke S. Newton Memorial Award honors Luke S. Newton, an alumnus of Naugatuck Valley Community College and a lover of great writing.

*

*“The air which is now thoroughly small and dry
Smaller and dryer thyspecilan the will
Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still.”*
“Ash Wednesday” (lms 36-41) by T.S. Eliot
T.S. Eliot

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April 10, 2024

Dear Friends of *Fresh Ink*,

Let us welcome Spring and, with it, the 55th edition of *Fresh Ink*, the Connecticut State Community College - Naugatuck Valley's art and literature journal. I hope you enjoy perusing the selection of art, short fiction and poetry that we've published this year.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank those people who have helped make this journal a reality. The top-notch evaluation team consisting of students Rachel Bogan, Christopher Boniecki, Sarah Kelly, Alex Martin and Nico Wenis; alumnus Joseph Adomavicia; faculty members J. Greg Harding, Steve Parlato and Wade Tarzia; and faculty emeritus Sandra S. Newton deserve my greatest appreciation for their timely and thoughtful review of the numerous submitted works.

The layout and design of the journal was handled by Ray Leite, Coordinator of Digital Arts Technology, along with Educational Assistant Vismel Marquez and student worker Stephen Rogers. Thank you for your generosity, collegiality and for going above and beyond.

Continuing support was provided by CEO Dr. Lisa Dresdner, Interim Associate Dean of Academic Affairs Dr. Beth Monchun, and Academic Dean of Arts and Humanities, Dr. B.L. Baker. In addition, thanks go to LABSS secretaries Linda Ames and Robyn Mazzamaro, and Fiscal Administrative Officer Lisa Anderson for making this process seamless. Finally, our publication party would not be a reality without the assistance of Karen Blake, Director of Student Activities, Alberta Thompson, Secretary of Student Activities and the Student Senate committee. Thank you.

And "thank you" to the authors and artists who submitted their work to *Fresh Ink*.

Best Regards

Jeannie Evans-Boniecki, Ph.D.
Professor of English
Adviser to *Fresh Ink*

1st Place - Art

Natalie Resto*

THE ISLAND [IN ABSTRACT]



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* Asterisk indicates current CT State Naugatuck Valley Student.

ShawnaLee W. Kwashnak

KAMELMACHER FAMILY: LOST BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Winner of the Luke S. Newton Memorial Award for Art



Thomas Warner-Crouch*

1st Place - Prose

Ernest Conversations

Winner of the Luke S. Newton Memorial Award for Short Fiction

Looking through the frozen window of her husband's old house, all Martha saw were squalls of snow that appeared to swirl in a dance that reminded her of the winters they used to spend together. She peered into her usual frothed cup of black coffee and watched the wind howl at the frigidty like a spat. Spats she wished she had. Spats she craved with Ernest but could never have. She could stare at the falling whiteout all day, wondering if when her eyes stopped beaming against it, she could remember anything but fragments. The weather would change. The light in the house would remain off. The coffee would get cold. Ernest wouldn't be there.

Her two children would visit her in the house every week even under blistering conditions, rooms always in varied displays of disarray. Plates would line the shadowed kitchen sink, food glued to them. The stove would be on from when she tried to cook eggs but failed and reduced a frying pan to ash in the process. They had an obligation to visit, and as her son Edward walked into the living room, turning on a yellow jar lamp that's light dimmed because no one changed the bulb, while she tried to free herself.

"I wish you'd get light in here mom, you'd feel better," Edward said in a usual tone of encouragement. An attempt at expelling his waning nerves at a mother who refused any state but mournful. "You'd feel better," he repeated.

"The light hurts my eyes," she snapped, batting a hand at him while she held her coffee in the other. He sat by the window and could only feign a smile.

"This light will blind you," he pointed to the curtainless window. "This bulb needs to be changed."

"Your father always changed things. I tricked myself into thinking he went to the hardware store the other day to get them. It's always so dark."

"Mom, dad's been dead over a month."

"And the rooms still dark. I'm still cold. I wish I knew where Ernest was.... but I can't find him."

"You know where he is, mom," he sighed, rubbing his eyes. "Don't do this, again."

"Again? What again? You get old and see if you can't find things."

Except dad's not a thing. You get over excited." The wind thrashed at the window while he stared into his mother's crowfeet. He noticed her eyes became more vacant between the last time he saw her and now when the last snowfall melted. A vacancy that for the time being he wanted to ignore by ending the brief thought in correcting his mother.

"He was a person you loved."

"I wish you knew your father like I did."

"I'm sure he was nice sometimes."

"You must not know him very well. We'd dance to Jo Stafford. He held me at night..."

"He'd brush the tears away when you cried," Edward finished waving one hand to the window, gripping his knee. "I know your version. And I know mine."

"Ernest was a nice man."

"Flawed I'd accept. Nice is stretching it."

"Don't talk about him that way."

I wish you'd stop remembering things that never happened. You didn't dance to Jo Stafford. You paced to Peggy Lee. He was out all-night drinking. Me and Sandra had to hide under the bed. You had that black eye.

"I don't remember that."

"It's in there somewhere. He wasn't helpful at all. He'd sooner crush the lightbulb then screw one in."

Martha slowly inhaled and breathed air out that seemed to frost in front of her. Memories that pulsed seemed stuck, even frozen to one idea. Another person experienced someone else that way. It couldn't describe her and Ernest.

“Not how you say it, Edward, you and Sandra had a good father,” she said. Her obstinance a blockade between walls, she dismissed, “You must remember it wrong. It’s all wrong.” She began to shudder, and Edward stopped, hollowing his eyes into blindness. “Alright mom, maybe it didn’t happen that way. Maybe he was a nice guy.”

“Not maybe. I don’t hear maybe.”

“Like I don’t hear the wind outside. I’m agreeing with you, for Christ’s sake.”

“Good, then. You finally agree with something... anything I say.”

“When you had your bearings, I used to agree with everything you said.”

“I’m just decaying same as your father. He’s nowhere. He’s not at the hardware store. He didn’t go to work.”

“That’s right mom.”

“What’s right about it?”

“I didn’t say it was right or wrong. I want you to say it.”

“What...? I...he’s dead.”

His mother didn’t consistently operate on facts, but at least he got an admission. At least a confession was made so she could pander while he walked to his car in the raw winter. He got up and said, “Regardless, I’m sorry for your loss.” He kissed the top of her head, grabbing his keys from the coffee table, “I’m so sorry, mom.”

Martha heard the door shut while iced wind continued to lash at the window. She felt the cup of coffee, still cold. The snow eventually melted. A frail sun through still gray fog would appear. But her mind as she pictured it would still be with Ernest.

Swaddling the coffee mug in her hand as if it were his own, she thought, “It always gets so cold.” Although a concession was made that she only experienced shards of events, rather than the whole, two were distinct. Edward never came back. She thought the shadows in the house were Ernest, the apparition a reality. He was still there in her mind. She’d hold onto him, but her children let go.

Jonah Craggett

On Reading Black Poetry in an All-White Class pt. 2 (White Noise)

Winner of the Luke S. Newton Memorial Award for Poetry

I wrote a poem called repass and
The first thing the professor said to me in workshop was,
“I think what you meant was a *repass*.”
I spent the next 7 days asking
Every Black person I knew
What’s the thing you go to after a funeral?
No, it’s not a trick question...
Yes, but how do you spell it?

When I called my brother Josh
To ask him if we had just gotten it wrong
If we *all* had just gotten it
wrong
He said, with a rare, grownup voice that made me feel like
His little brother again,
“We know *exactly* what we mean.”

The next week the Little Mermaid became Black
And Sheryl Lee Ralph won her first Emmy. But
All my black joy was bogged down
again
when a white boy in class told me that my stories needed
more white people, that their exclusion
Flattens the humanity of the story as a whole;
Before a white woman looked over
And said “nigger” with a smile.

That night I texted
the only other Black person I knew in the program.
She had graduated a semester earlier
But she answered with that softness
That’s family to Black folks. Shelter, even to a stranger.
And she told me
It’s all just white noise.

Jonah Craggett

The Medium (Séance)

I ask them to think of a memory.
Before I ask their name
or what their relationship was
we start with a thought.

We don't hold hands or
Look into crystal balls.
No hocus pocus or monkey paws.
Just a thought.
Maybe of the last time they smiled together
The last sentence they remember
The sound of their voice—
Yeah, hold onto that!

I'll say, "Tell me about a time you two argued."
Those stories are never as sad as you'd think.
Instead, they're filled with laughter and retrospective
And longing to argue again
And clarity
And all the light that comes with looking back
on your mistakes. There're little lights
glowing in the cracks of those stories.

Then I ask what they want to tell the dead.
They might blurt out "I miss you"
Or something irresponsible at the front of the mouth like that
(Things like that don't serve the dead! Only the living!)
But then they think again.
They stop for a second
And their face lights up with color
From all the small worlds that only they and that person knew.
And the dead draw near.

The person might cry
But maybe not.
I let the silence sit between them—
Oh yes, them. Haven't you figured it out? The dead's already here...
You can feel it in the warmth of their chest
And the way their eyes relax just a little bit
Like waiting alone for a friend to meet you someplace and
They're nowhere to be found
But
Finally, you look up and you see them
Walking towards you, waving with a smile.

The person will say thank you
Even though I didn't make a table float
Or guess a letter in a first name.
The lights didn't flicker.

And before they go
they look at me and they all say the same thing:
"After a while, people stopped asking about them."

But that's how you talk to the dead,
Through the living.

Jonah Craggett

Smitten

Love so simple
 Like a child holding a flower.
 Like a smile peeking under
 New fresh plaits.
 Like orange blossoms exchanged between
 Sweet brown fingers
 On the hour where the sun sits high
 And blue, blue clouds keep the day cool.



Moore, Clarence Bloomfield. Fleurs d'Oranger. 1895.
 Musée d'Orsay

Jonah Craggett

Revival

Brown Skin Baby lay down, way down on green grass in the garden. Little petals and little weeds all around. When Johnny Little Drum walk up barefoot with sunflowers tucked behind his ears, mouth fulla gossip 'bout Little Girl Blue, Brown Skin Baby sit up on ashy elbows, smiling, just looking like sunshine, teeth good as grits. She say,

“What you hear, huh? What you hear? What the people gotsta say now?”

“Not a thing, chicken-wing,” he say. “Not a thing,” and he got down beside her.

They lay there for a while, brown and holy on green grass. Sun setting. Grown folk inside the tent praising. Brown Skin Baby knew to steal Johnny Little Drum a piece of fish. It's cold now but he eat it just the same. Johnny Little Drum say,

“Why you wearing shoes today?”

Brown Skin Baby say back,

“Today special. It's 'Vival time. We all got shoes on.” “What's 'Vival?” He ask.

“'Vival mean God come down from Heaven and visit. Grandma say if people feel it, they get saved.”

Johnny Little Drum tickled his soles on the grass, nestled his toes in the dirt.

“God in there? I don't see 'em,” he say pointing at the tent.

Brown Skin Baby look up at the purple sky. Grown folk inside crying and shouting but Brown Skin Baby can't see Him neither; So, she kick off her shoes and feel the dirt too.

“This what God feel like,” Johnny Little Drum say. “This what God feel like.”

Brown Skin Baby look at the tent. Look at the 'Vival. Say:

“I think God out here too.”

ShawnaLee W. Kwashnak

CUDDLY KITTIES



Christopher Boniecki*

1st Place - Poetry

Dog Days

It's a good day for mourning.
The sky is like an old wet dog.
You can see the spots of pink skin.
Melancholy oozes down my shoulders
And drips off my chin.
I haven't seen a bird all morning.
My thoughts are blurry.
Things need to go away for a second.
I'll be fine in a second.
The shame of being a rabid dog (just for a second)
Makes me want to scramble back
To the familiar blankets and pillows,
A suffocation I'm accustomed to,
A place where I can sit
Balled up and angry.
A soft unbreakable bed to punch.
I can feel the rain in my room.
There is a sky in my chest.
I am that open grey.

2nd Place - Poetry

Natalie Resto*

Pink December

In the Library
 on the second floor,
 I saw a light
 not like the others.
 This one flickered,
 not a fluorescent white,
 Or even an aged yellow,

But pink.

And not just any pink,
 It was the pink
 of a snowy winter's night

You know the one.

The one where darkness
 never truly falls,
 And spirits rise to follow
 the tender breeze.
 The one that breathes
 new life
 and carries fresh air
 into your lungs,

And fathers
 take their daughters to the movies,
 The Rhythm of Love
 beating beneath their plain white tees,
 Two hearts
 keeping in tempo with the turn signal
 And humming stronger
 than even the engine of the Red Durango

... Thank God for that light.

Thank God I haven't forgotten you.
 And pray I never do.
 Amen.

Natalie Shriefer

Self-Portrait: Tennis, Age 13

I'm young
 and over-confident,
 dreaming
 of the US Open,
 practicing
 against a wall.

The bricks
 never miss, each hit
 a speed bag
 thwocking back.
 If I can
 learn to hit that fast,
 I'll win
 every match, body
 blurring
 into the protagonist
 of a sports
 book movie anime—
 me,
 a breakout star, a pro.

I don't
 yet know that hitting
 against
 a wall is nothing like
 playing
 a real opponent.

Egzon Ukaj*

Big Bad Mother

“Get some rest, kiddo.”

I pulled my chin out from beneath the cover and stared blankly at Dad. He looked at me in quite anguish before blowing me a kiss goodnight. When he eventually slipped away, he cracked the door behind him. After a second of hesitation he pulled the door fully closed preparing me, and more importantly himself, for confrontation. A reaction almost completely warranted by Mother’s glare. Even from behind the door, and under Dad’s perfect tuck of the quilted bed sheet, I could feel what he must’ve felt. The anticipatory incline of the heart. The complete loss of control of facial expression. The slight shake of hands held behind back like a submissive dog’s tail. Dad is a big man. He is muscular, baritone, and at least six feet of pure intimidation. Even still, he wrinkles at the sound of Mother’s foot tapping on the squeaky hardwood floor. Mother has a way of making anyone small. Her matter-of-a-fact speech and convictive tone hushes all dissent. The vindictive assertion of her “lady-like” pointer finger is not lady-like to any extent of the word.

Even from behind the door, the suspense gnawed at me. I half-considered smothering my head with the pillow to shield my ears from Mother’s undisguisable wrath. Nosily, my curiosity halted my hand. Still, the air grew thin and sparse. My lungs felt bare. I was afraid to breathe too loud, so carbon dioxide sat in void. I couldn’t so much as hear a creak out of the floorboards. I could only visualize the painful deadlock between the two of them. At the time, I wasn’t aware of what Dad did, or if he’d done anything at all, but I still felt bad regardless. No one should ever be subjected to Mother’s venomous clutch. She’s no stranger to misaligned scrutiny, either.

In my moment of reflection, I reached for the bruise on my shoulder. A bruise that Mother gave me a few nights ago by “mistake” when she swung the front door open into me. She swears it was an accident. Yet, I haven’t been able to wear short sleeves to school ever since.

Then she started, “You’re a terrible father. A terrible father. A terrible husband! You tote yourself out of that room every night like you’ve got something to prove-”

“You’re ridiculous.” He interrupts.

“I’m ridiculous?! Are you kidding?! I actually care about him. You just act.”

She doesn’t. The truth is the complete opposite. Whether or not he “acts” is debatable, I suppose. But, I actually feel loved by him. I’m just scared of her.

“The only time you even look at him, let alone talk, is when you’re commanding him to do something for you.” He refuted sharply.

“That is NOT true!” She seemed much closer to the door now.

“He’s sleeping.” Dad tried to push past her.

“Oh! So now I’m disrupting our child from sleeping! Now I’m the ‘Big Bad Mother’ for calling you out on your shit?!” She screeched while mimicking Dad’s weighty intonation. Then, a subsequent thud. “How ‘bout I go in there and show you what a big bad mother I am?”

She tried to reach for the handle and the door split open. I quickly snapped my eyes shut and pretended to be sleeping. Luckily, Dad managed to pull her away and the door collapsed shut again.

The door’s aggressive click shook me as they continued arguing behind it. I covered my mouth tightly as a gust of undisciplined breath escaped me. I tried so hard to hold back tears. I tried even harder to regulate my breathing. I turned my body towards the wall opposite of the door. A single teardrop trickled over the bridge of my nose and plopped onto the pillow. I was just a child. I was never taught how to deal with my emotions and stress in situations like that, and the two people that were supposed to be guiding me were arguing on the other side of the wall instead.

After what seemed like an eternity of staring at the wall in darkness, the arguing came to an abrupt close. Mother would “win” again. For another night this week, Dad was sleeping on the couch. I wanted nothing more than to go over and lay on the other sofa near him. If for nothing else, to offer him a sense of solidarity or recognition. I’d’ve given the world to trade spots with him everytime he ended up there. I could’ve slept on the couch instead. But, the

overhang of his legs off the edge of my bed wouldn't have been much more comfortable, I suppose.

Just as I began falling asleep, the quiet creak of my door ensued a few quieter footsteps. I felt a tingle shoot up my spine. I was still facing the wall, so my childlike imagination ran rampant with a plethora of justifications. Perhaps, a ghost? Maybe my toys came to life and wanted to comfort me? Had I already drifted into a dream? An alien abduction? Dad?

Alas, my mother whispered, "Char? You asleep?"

I stayed silent and acted like I was sleeping. She sat behind me, on the edge of the bed, and put her hand on my arm. Her fingers were freezing against my thin sleeve.

"Sometimes, I wonder if you hate me..." She paused for a moment. "I hope you know that I am a good mother. Maybe, I don't read you superhero stories at night. Maybe, I don't hug you everyday. But, I am a good mother. I provide for you. I cook. No one is appreciative of me. You- or your- bastard of a father." She remarked. I layed perfectly frozen, wishing she'd just leave. If I was having trouble sleeping before, this guaranteed a restless night for me.

Suddenly, she moved her hand to my face, feeling my eyelids. "Oh, you are sleeping. Or atleast, you're a super pretender!" She moved her cold fingers down to the bruise on my shoulder before lightly pressing her index finger into it. "You do know, this was a mistake..." She tapped. "... this was a mistake. Or atleast, I'm a super pretender. Just. Like. You." Then, in one firm motion, she pulled back her hand. The room was practically silent. Then, she slammed the door again. I wasn't sure if it was a test or not. She'd done that before in the past. If I didn't flinch, she might be able to tell that I'm not actually asleep. If I did flinch, she'd know for sure I was awake and might want to talk. I did NOT want to talk to her. I compromised. I moved slightly, repositioning my head on the pillow just in case she'd still been standing behind me.

Ashlee Oquendo*

SHE



Tmags

Finding Alice Part Two

Dawn past dusk, the daily grind.
 Smoking caterpillars and grinning cats, left behind.
 Where did they go, I briefly wonder.
 All I can dream of now is a few hours slumber.
 White rabbits now caged.
 My mind a blank page.
 The only pills I swallow,
 Leave me feeling tamed,
 emotionless, and hollow.
 Alice, just plain Alice.
 That's who I've become.
 It seems for now the red queen has won.
 Which way is left and which way is right.
 One hat for the day and another at night.
 But these hats are not the same,
 They are ordinary, and plain.
 What once was a wonderland,
 Has become mundane.
 Monday through Sunday,
 And Sunday through Monday.
 No shock, no awe
 Every day is just the same.
 All I paint now are walls and the occasional ceiling.
 Alice, just plain Alice.
 That's how I'm feeling.
 Hiding my mind and tears in my eyes.
 Not a drink in the land could bring my thoughts down a size.
 White rabbit, white rabbit where have you scurried?
 My roses now blank, and my wonderland long buried.
 I'm Alice, just Alice.
 I never wished to be,
 but my place of enchantment,
 slipped far from me.
 Somewhere in my mind I know, adventure can't be done.
 But Rabbit, oh white rabbit, when will you come?
 I long for my head to wear a whimsical hat, and to be back under the
 charms of a devious cat.

I exist on coffee, but still crave a mad tea.
 So I plead with you white rabbit, someday soon, return to me.
 Let me smoke beside Absolon's unmetamorphic butterfly.
 Bring back the key, to the small door, that unlocks my mad mind.
 Alice. just plain Alice.
 Chained in a world strange to me.

Upside down, but right side up,
 Stuck and unfree.
 So, return once more white rabbit, I'll follow you, you know....
 Return my place of wonder, and allow my dreams to grow.

Tmags

Melodic Reverie

Rain on the window, silence in the air,
lost in memories, shadows everywhere.
Heartbeats echoing, with a distant cry,
piano keys weeping, wondering why.

Whispers in the hallways, dreams that couldn't stay,
promises left broken, as the music starts to play.
Every note's a teardrop, every chord a sigh,
this piano tells our story, beneath the gray sky.

Moonlight's soft caress, on an empty bench,
where we used to sit, our hands would clench.
Eyes closed, we'd drift, lost in a song,
now it's just me here, wondering where it went wrong.

Broken keys, faded melodies,
the echo of your laughter, lost in the breeze.
This room feels colder, without your embrace,
I'm dancing with your ghost, in this empty space.

Whispers in the hallways, dreams that couldn't stay,
promises left broken, as the music starts to play.
Every note's a teardrop, every chord a sigh,
this piano tells our story of a final goodbye.

Candles burning low, shadows start to grow,
time passes quickly, but my heart's rhythm slows.
Stuck in the past, with this melody,
piano plays our love, a haunting reverie.

Tmags

Obscure Violins

Under a starlit blanket, she sat, letting her heightened senses feel
the world around her. Listening to the songs of night, familiar, and
comforting. The faint pulse of nature's violins emerging from the
blackness, drowning out the clamor of daylight. It was there, she took
a deep breath, the world still, yet filled with life. She felt harmonious,
inspired, and at peace.

Diamond filled ocean
Cloaked Chirps, crickets melody
Night sky, a veiled song

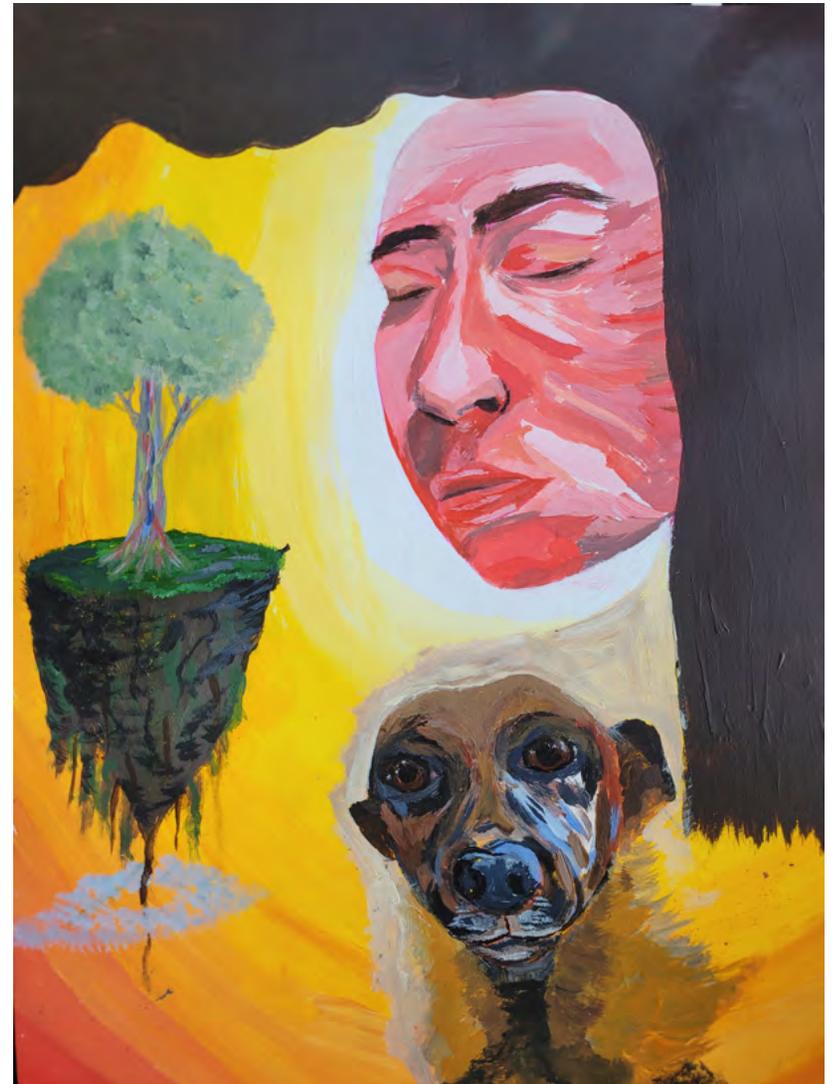
Ashlee Oquendo*

My Mind is a Prism

My mind is a prism
 Of colors and thoughts
 From yellows to reds
 Of oranges and violets
 Of flowers
 Tulips that cover the ground in spring
 Its loud songs dancing across my senses
 Of tiny embers of nectar burning out against my tongue
 Even as it pours down paints of mud green, blue and gray
 And even when only the void of color takes over
 And I'm left to doubt my senses
 I lay upon the ground
 And I let go
 My mind is a prism
 I fight my colors
 I shame my colors
 But no matter what
 Even when the sun goes down
 And I fail to see my colors as others see it
 They will never warp
 And they will never change
 My colors are ingrained in me
 It's only the darkness
 That tries me for a fool

Ashlee Oquendo*

MEDITATED



Sydney Savoie*

A Story You Won't Put Down

The tall, hairless ones call her Priscilla. Prissy for short. They can call her whatever suits them, so long as they keep her fed. And they certainly do—or, she should say their “library” does.

Prissy lies curled within the top shelf of one of its bookcases, behind a neat wall of books the hairless ones call “autobiographies.” The visitors refer to them as the library’s specialty. But all books serve the same purpose for Prissy: providing one of many nooks the library cradles her in, cloaking her in shadow to compliment her coat. She now strokes it vigorously with her tongue, cleaning until it shines black as a beetle’s shell.

Prissy’s routine is soon interrupted by a scent. She perks up, sniffing the air. Her mouth begins to moisten. It’s how the library beckons her: Come, Priscilla. Dinner is ready.

She rises, following her nose. Even in her hurried pace, each paw meets the polished wood silently. Before she reaches the end of the shelf, there is a soft scraping beside her. She stops, one ear flicking as she faces the noise. A hairless female has removed one of the books. Through the gap, she meets Prissy’s gaze, and the edges of her eyes crinkle as she grins.

“Prissy, baby girl, there you are! Come out, come out, let me see you!”

Prissy mews in response. Hairless ones love that. Where the book was removed, she slips through so the female can massage the bridge of her nose. As Prissy purrs, she notices a smaller female beside the one petting her, hugging a book close to her chest.

“M-Ms. Boyle,” she whispers, “I’ve looked for him everywhere. He won’t answer his phone. What am I supposed to do?”

Ms. Boyle’s fingers fall from Prissy’s fur as she glares at the smaller female. “I’m responsible for the books here, not your man. He probably left to abandon you for some other chick. Who brings their date to a library, anyway?”

Prissy leaps off the shelf, landing on the dust-caked carpet below. She can’t keep her library waiting.

Weaving between the towering bookcases, she avoids other visitors. No more distractions. The scent leads her to a door hidden against the far back wall. It’s ajar, as it always is, but she isn’t sure if she should thank whoever’s down there or the library. Either way, she threads herself through the narrow space and heads down the dimly lit staircase behind it.

At the bottom is another floor stuffed with bookcases, but these shelves are lined entirely with autobiographies. Prissy knows this because they lure many visitors here. The lights buzz above her, flickering, welcoming her. The aroma that guides her intensifies, becoming sharply metallic. She licks her lips.

Prissy winds her way towards its origin, slowly, savoring the approach. She rounds a corner and—there it is. Or, him. A hairless male, lying supine on the tile floor. A book rests open on his face, as though he fell asleep reading it. But crimson saturates the pages, seeping through them to trail in rivulets down his cheeks and pool on the floor.

Prissy trots over to lap up the tangy liquid. As she does, something emerges from the shelf, from the slot the soaked book once occupied. A hairless arm. But the limb is gray-skinned, gangly, and gnarled like an ancient tree. Rope-like fingers lift the book by its spine off the hairless male’s face, which has been consumed. As thick, red droplets fall from the pages, they dry rapidly, absorbing whatever doesn’t drip in time. The paper, once blank, begins to develop those strange symbols hairless ones call “words.”

A subtle cracking. The disembodied arm splits at the elbow, forming another arm. Its new, free hand reaches to gently rub Prissy’s head. Then both limbs withdraw into the slot from whence they came, plugging their exit with the library’s newest addition.

Prissy tears off one of the hairless male’s fingers and sneaks away.

3rd Place - Poetry

Amira Jung*

The Art of Becoming in the Wink of the Setting Sun

I watch you bleary eyed,
 analyzing
 the way your face creases around itself,
 making room for the dawn
 of that same ingenuous smile
 baring it's ridged crooked teeth
 that reminisce your temperament and spirit
 oh so dearly.
 How I'm afraid
 those round curious eyes
 and amateurish grin
 unfurling like a summer flower
 will never part your being,
 no matter how many realms
 we stumble upon
 where we meet again.
 How I'm afraid
 I will feel that same warm expression
 in every face that crinkles like yours
 in the unbearable sun,
 striking against it's rays competitively.
 I desperately fear how
 I will feel that wild essence
 in everything I see,
 and find myself sprinting
 to catch the molten sunset
 until you're just a spec in the distance,
 basking in the intense glow
 of the retiring sun,
 like a flickering candle,
 like the haze of a dream,
 mirroring the ache of life,
 and the unyielding toil of bliss.

Amira Jung*

Iris Proscenium

donning the light augmenting between us,
 and as space and time constrict our final spin,
 the celestial theater erupts in a symphony
 of rasp dissonance,
 bearing a new rift in the skies.
 Specs of star matter float within us,
 i take a part of yours wherever i go
 in the vast blue
 oceanic hues.
 "can you see it?"
 whispered softly,
 "humming for something more beyond,
 begin to comprehend it's delicate madness?"
 asked quieter this time, between chattering teeth.
 you watch the waves blend into the watercolor sky
 bleeding a harmony of lazurite tones,
 and i watch in rapture—
 you, that is—
 something to behold,
 while drinking in the same awestruck trance
 emanating between your eyes and the subject,
 as if it can bridge you to the sky,
 as if a stairway will appear in the frothing water.
 i can only see you,
 as northern lights dance,
 then dance again in the reflection of your eyes.
 we wondered if they were ever real,
 and you can never be real enough
 than when i am before you with only starlight between us,
 where every second is a precious lifetime,
 and a supplement of eternal bliss floods my chest
 momentarily and all at once,
 anticipation forgone,
 pleading you will not turn to me so soon.
 sharing a brief dance,
 i imagine you in my palm for a moment longer
 as the stars twinkle knowingly,
 sparingly,
 before daylight breaks,

Amira Jung*

Ether

In another world,
 we are gods looking at our clay selves,
 wild and imperfect;
 watching ourselves love mortally, insolently,
 trapezing in the endless bounds of the earth,
 propelled by the pulp of our whims
 squeezed between the clutches of our fists.
 I watch the stretches of your mouth,
 fill the round cheeks you suck in frustratingly,
 creasing against your eyes,
 so delicately, so unawarely.
 it was scathing to me,
 how you couldn't see it
 from your inward dimension,
 like a kaleidoscope collapsing in on itself,
 uselessly,
 uselessly beautiful.
 your unchanging eyes lull to sleep,
 unknowing of the myriad of colors caged behind them,
 shifting softly under a blanket of stars.
 it weakened me, I felt powerless
 in your gloriously careless presence,
 terrified, unyielding,
 your eyelids shuttering in thought,
 touching wounds of fear curiously,
 letting their shores pull you deep into spiral fractures.
 I want to cry out,
 "Can you hear me?!"
 can you feel me shaking in the anguished sky,"
 leaving the air rumbling with unbridled emotion,
 a thunder of absolute wonder
 ridging the sky in scattered light
 piercing the dark world

in shrined luminosity
 pleadingly,
 pleading to feel my ghostly hands
 cup your face with tenderness,
 pleading
 to save me from my invisible madness,
 pleading,
 perhaps by the soil clutching you taut,
 that you will realize
 you are the angel
 tasked with loving you whole.

Amira Jung*

Love Like Rebellion

Inside of you there is a mother and a child,
 who pushes you out of bed, who brushes your hair,
 who stretches out the neckline of your shirt, who wipes the dirt off
 your face,
 forcing you to face yourself again, stubbornly,
 and to reply yes, I will keep living.
 Who lets you be that unbridled, unkempt life,
 harrowingly, clumsily, unconditionally;
 wiping the blood off of your wounds and jagged misgivings
 delicately, wordlessly;
 your hands weaving expressions of love
 with their worn cuticles and fingernails
 in every craft you make, in every hand that graces yours
 in a resolute grip that squeezes roughly
 as if to say please, hold on longer,
 because I am not going anywhere no matter
 how your hands callous mine.
 you tell yourself that there is nothing
 in your mirror for you to love, for you to embrace,
 you rush to blame yourself
 for the broken glass, for the stained carpet,
 without second guessing that telling habit
 found in dark corners of the inanimate peripheral eye
 encouraging you to repent for your earthly nature
 and to punish your clumsy, singed hands.
 Yet, everytime, once the fog clears
 and the whispering phosphenes fade,
 you find those same guilty limbs clean you up fearlessly,
 tucking a warm cardigan over your slumped shoulders
 as you wipe away your tears with the sleeves
 and push your weight off the ground triumphantly.
 Later, you will make yourself a warm meal,
 pull your favorite story from your shelf

and crack the window with your lovingly clumsy fingers,
 welcoming a chorus of crickets, owls, passing cars, and dancing trees
 to soothe your dear heart in the living, breathing night.
 Slowly, your eyes will flutter defiantly
 before relenting to the feeling of your arms falling away to your sides,
 resting upon the gentle rhythms of your breath.
 And of course, you still won't realize
 when morning comes, where you stumble out of bed
 and grimace at your reflection all over again,
 as you comb the hair out of your stubborn face,
 how inescapably, rebelliously loved you are.

Amira Jung*

The Gravitational Mass of Everything Unsaid

The gravitational mass
of everything unsaid
closing in on us
the water burns
as a meteor cusps on the horizon
birds caged in your lungs
wanting to be free
your gushing heart
still full enough to hold
enough to say I love you
and that I will be okay
when I go on without you
though the currents are dense
you fight against them
under a paralyzing frost
and you still
make out words of affection
between breaths of reassurance
and I still feel it all
the sounds that cling to your skin
the space you occupy
that anchored the earth
smells that constrict my throat
do you remember it?
how it carries you to sleep
it floods my vision
as you calmly orbit
left between the folds of our skin
and the breadth of our memory
escaping to a whole world
underwater

2nd Place - Prose

Daniel Ortiz*

Cellmates

His cell was one foot too narrow. He knew this well because he had paced back and forth and forth and back and forth again and again and again for days days days. It was wrong. It was lopsided. He kicked and scabbled and scraped against the unyielding stone walls until the pain forced him away, forced him to go back to walking walking walking.

One foot wider. If it were one foot wider, it would be a square. It was not a square. It was wrong. Crooked and wrong like the solitary window high out of reach. The window at least had the decency to be a perfect square, but it was lopsided! Oh, what a cruel travesty of design!

Back and forth and forth and back.

They hadn't left him there, had they? They wouldn't, couldn't. When had he seen someone last? Too long, not long enough. He banged on what he thought was a door.

Forth and back and forth.

Someone would come. He knew it. Who they were he couldn't say, but they were coming for him; it's why he didn't sleep. Less of a choice and more of a result of the whispers he heard. Clever little nymphs, always just out of sight. He thought he saw one, once. He stopped looking at anything for a long time after.

Step after step after step after step.

He could almost just reach the window, if he jumped and clawed at the wall for purchase. Just almost barely, but not quite enough. Never enough. That's what the man kept saying to him.

"You're a rubbish climber," the man would say, his voice echoing in that space between his skull and brain.

"I'm not, I'm just mad," he would spit in response, before trying again.

"You're not mad, they are."

"Who's 'they'? Who am I?" another failed attempt.

"You're I, and we are me."

“Well, does ‘we’ have a ladder?”

The man went silent.

“Thought not.”

He was too tired to try again. When had he last eaten? What had he last eaten? It might’ve been a rat, if he were lucky. The scattered bones on the grimy floor were a testament to something dying in here, though it was perhaps too big to be a rat he mused.

“You’re the reason I’m here,” he said, a rare sense of lucidity instilling the need to assign blame.

“We both are,” the man replied in that gravelly voice. It reminded him of when he would drag his ear across the ragged stone in an attempt to hear someone other than the man or the whispers. He never could.

“Can you at least tell me why?”

Silence. Nothing but the beat beat of his heart in his head and the whispering at the corners of his eyes.

“Fear,” the man suddenly spoke, a deep sort of gravitas was given to that singular word. “They fear us, they always have, and they always will.”

“Why? I’ve never hurt anybody... have I?”

“No... but we can, and we will. Try the window again.”

He did.

He failed.

“I can’t, I can’t, I can’t! I’m mad!” he pulled at his greasy hair.

“No! We won’t stay trapped here! Go again!”

He tried again.

He failed again.

Backwards and forwards and back again.

The whispers were getting louder than ever before, like fingertips on the surface of his mind. He kept his eyes tightly shut in fear, palms pressed white against his ears in a vain attempt to muffle

them.

“What... are they?” he gritted out.

“What... are what?”

“The voices! The whispered words.”

“...What voices?”

He stopped in his tracks.

“You’re telling me that you don’t hear them? The... the things!”

“No,” there was something like a contemplative pause, maybe even an exhale of breath. “Perhaps you are mad.”

“Whatever happened to ‘we’?”

“No, not for this.”

“Some help you are.”

He got the distinct impression of a shrug. He went back to his pacing.

“Have you tried... ignoring them?”

“Did you seriously just suggest that?”

“Well if you can’t focus, you can’t climb, and if you can’t climb, we die here. Eventually. Maybe. Probably. I’ve never actually been in this situation before.”

“Not helping.”

Something definite and real skittered across his bare feet. The whispers grew ever more intense, yet still indecipherable. He whimpered in fear.

“I need you to listen to me. They are not real,” the man insisted.

“Y-Yes they are. They are,” he stuttered back.

“No, they’re not!”

“I know it, know it more than I know you or myself or anything.”

Another pause. “Ah, so this is how they’ve binded us here. They’re playing on your nerves!”

“It’s w-working.”

“It shan’t! Repeat after me: We need to leave,” each word was carefully forced out of frustrated lips.

“I don’t... I... I can’t-” he cowered.

“Silence! Repeat! We need to leave!”

“We... We need to leave,” he trembled.

“Yes. We are climbing out of that window.”

“We are climbing out that window.”

“Nothing in this room is real.”

“Nothing... is real.”

“They are not real.”

“They... are not real!”

“They are not real!”

“They are not real!”

“Yes! Now go!”

Not unlike a man possessed, he flew at the windowed wall with reckless abandon, heedless of the hissing and the chanted words ringing in his ears. His fingers dug deep into the previously inexorable stone as if it were clay as he climbed up up up to the crooked but square window.

Finally, finally finally he made it up. His eyes were filled with the sight of innumerable stars shining down from a grand tapestry of swirling blues and blacks. For the first time that he could sensibly recall, he breathed in a deep breath of fresh cold air. It was a trivial task to snap away the rusted iron bars so that he could properly perch.

“Free...” he whispered, shuddering with the disbelief of inconceivable joy. “Free...”

“Free,” purred the man. “Free at last.”

“Now, how do we get down?”

The ground faded out of sight into the foggy shadows below.

“Leap.”

“Are you crazy?”

“No, but you are. Go.”

“No! No, no no. I’m not that bad.”

“You spent six hours looking at your hands yesterday.”

“They weren’t my hands. They were someone else’s.”

“Right. It’s either jump or go back-”

He jumped.

He landed.

It wasn’t that high up.

“Was that so bad?” mocked the man. “Maybe you should trust me more.”

“Something tells me trusting you got me into this mess to begin with.”

“Mayhaps.”

“Whatever. Where to now?”

“Hm. Away.”

“Away?”

“Yes, from here. Now go.”

And so he went; away into the night, free at last. The world trembled.

He tripped on a rock.

The world trembled a little less.

2nd Place - Art

Natalie Resto*

IN MEMORY OF US



Jessica Barlow*

Needles of a Cactus

He wrapped his finger around me
 Like I was a pinky
 To promise
 That he wouldn't let go
 But his words hurt
 still, like the needles of a cactus
 He pricked me like the needles of a cactus
 Making my eyes bleed
 With tears as my finger would
 By the needles of a cactus

"I don't
 Want to hurt you" lit
 My phone when the days
 And the words would all wrap up,
 His finger let go and that's when
 The needles of the cactus
 Dug deepest into my splintered heart

He didn't want to hurt me, yet
 He moved on
 Like the ocean, casting him out to sea
 Where there are no cactus'
 To prick him
 Like I've been pricked.

Jessica Barlow*

Spiral of Life

Sometimes life feels like a never ending
 Spiral of debris
 Pushing and cutting me
 Even when trying to stand,
 I cannot steady myself against
 The howling winds
 That bite me like wolves

Falling is so easy so why
 Don't I stay where it is easy?

Well it is those times
 Where you breach the howling
 Winds and thrashing debris
 That make you wake
 For the next climb
 Up the spiral of life

Get to the top where
 You stand on the highest peak looking
 Down at the spiral and think
 "I am strong"

Jessica Barlow*

Burden of Mind

My tongue traps my words
 As if it were a prison,
 A prison where I could be locked away
 For twenty years just
 For saying
 what I really feel

Sometimes I make a sound
 Which people do not hear
 As my thoughts go deeper
 And deeper down a
 Landslide of tears
 Blind to my cries,
 Blind to the burden that breaks
 My spine from the sheer weight

Even if my words could
 Escape the prison,
 They still could not hear
 The torment
 In which I suffer
 While they hold dear
 The days and the nights
 As I lay here
 Trapped by the weight of
 Ten million lingering thoughts.

Thomas Warner-Crouch*

3rd Place - Prose**More So a Stranger**

I want you to know this wasn't my choice. People argue that case with other people when they don't wish to be here. It wasn't by choice. It wasn't their fault. An observation, the truth, that an unnerving pull brought them to the conclusion they made thinking they were correct. That the world would be better without their presence. Gay men like me are better off doing this on their own than having it done by someone else. This is also true. When your filmy eyes sink toward concrete that glowers in pooling blood, blackened by the reflection of pale flame, and your legs teeter on a spinning surface from which you'll no doubt fall, you don't negotiate with reason. No examination is done on what brought you there, where you're going, what you're doing, whether anyone cares.

To leave is what they asked. So, I'm making good on a request. I met a man and told my parents about him before all this. I thought they listened thirteen years ago, but they hadn't. I married him last October and they didn't know. They thought he was a friend even while he slept in my bed. God knows the trouble we caused. I was taught our set belonged with melted flesh, and if there's anything I love most in this world is to give the devil his motives. At least they claim I do. Dad started a church. Warnings are ecumenical. Mom joined and so did others. Now here comes the spitting orange they all talked about. Opaque fumes hurry to poison whatever they believe is in the clouds. Although, my father is the one they follow most. Hate crimes, beatings, car fires, more smoke fester under an unseen moon. Sanctions made by the deified they wish to know, yet He's more so a stranger.

I'm sure someone will tell me I have every reason to live. This is truer. I have more reasons to leave. I have every motivation. It wasn't as if I had just woken up and decided that the ledge seemed friendlier, or that the cliff looked like a comfort, or that I was one Plath or Sexton poem away from throwing myself off this building with no note. That's how I planned it. No note left for loved ones to cradle. My parents hate me. Most politicians do. So, no apologies are needed. I can say I'm sorry I'm so blunt. I haven't eaten anything but honesty in days. Death's potential does that when denial is what they all wanted.

"One year in every ten I manage it," to quote Lady Lazarus.

Plath was thirty and so am I. You must admit leaving in any way takes some management most don't realize.

I'm just glad they haven't killed him yet. One husband or boyfriend in this city they haven't gotten to. I should be happy. I should be at peace, but all I hear are sirens and horns. All I smell is smoldered rubber in the night. Nights of screams replaced the giddy squeals of freed conquests. Brittle nights where one plunges toward the road bypasses the warmth of live limbs and bloods flow with quiet candles flickering in the dark. The needs in my life and his were the catalyst. Smiles leer while corpses flank either side of the streets they tread. I'm too blunt again. I shouldn't attack government involvement. Forgive me while my eyes glare at charred brick. A court didn't do this. Piety came first.

I have him. I still do. I'm still breathing inflamed air. You might say I shouldn't leave for him. Maybe...but at this rate fates dried to God's adhesive plan don't have much chance. Another aspect of this I forgot while heaving smoke on an edge beneath my feet, the platform receding below me, we don't have much to lose. "Come down," he'd say. I know it. Don't remind me. I remember when things were different. I didn't tell him enough times that I loved him and neither did he. Display was not our thing. Now I see the reasons were obvious. Somehow, we still knew.

"Come down!" I hear his screech. An imploration I don't have to answer. I don't know how I see or hear him so far down or so high up. I don't know how. Dizzied, one leg stepped down. Then the other leg pried itself from the one last step.

I'm level with the street. Faces lean on horns. My eyes are sheets of honeyed glass swimming in the fire. I see his hand. I lunge to grab it. I forgot another truth. Someone could be willing to cling to what could slip. None of us are happy. None of us will be. Sparks flare in the alleys, the rooftops are domed with hazy venom, though we were deemed snakes. I changed my mind. I hope you have the answer as to why.

A truth before it happened, a truth during, a truth after. A wasted revelation they were never careful to protect before an attempt to destroy. The echo of crackling flames tongue at my father's church. I hear shrieks inside among our cries, his congregants called noise.

Alana Torres*

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT



Kenneth DiMaggio

Ritchie Loves Lorraine (#1)

Not Lorraine who loves Ritchie
But Ritchie who loves Lorraine
when she drove her Mustang in
and he pumped her hi test
he would only charge her regular
for because this was back when

--when men held doors for women
--married women they knocked up
I mean got pregnant and brothers
beat the hell outta any guy messing
with their sister and fathers showed
daughters how a good knee to the
groin or a punch to Adam's apple
meant Stop! Ya dirty bastard!

Not that Lorraine with a switchblade
& pair of brass knuckles in her purse
needed any pointers she just--

“Can I wipe ya windows, ma'am?
Check the oil?
Tire pressure?”

Oh brother! Is this what Lorraine must
go through every time she comes
to the Sunoco?

Because she will
To the biggest hoodlum she went
to high school with now trying to learn
manners when he still can't speak English

Lorraine might just love Ritchie

--but not just yet

*

Kenneth DiMaggio

Ritchie Loves Lorraine (#2)

Ya mean Ritchie?
Who first saw a jail cell
at thirteen even if it was
for only an hour and for
yelling "Taxi!" as a police
car drove by him

Yup Ritchie! now tripping
over every other noun & verb
like they were two left feet
because of some girl named
Lorraine who pulled into his gas
station one day and ever since
then he stopped racing his
motorcycle between the tomb-
stones at the cemetery stopped
--basically stopped being a guy

"I couldn't help it," Ritchie mumbled
" 'Specially when she lowered her
sunglasses an' showed me her eyes!"

"You wuz more normal when you
wuz getting arrested!" lamented
his father

"An' to lose himself for some broad"
his mother mourned, "wit'out even
first getting laid."

*

Kenneth DiMaggio

Ritchie Loves Lorraine (#3)

Ritchie
Locked up at thirteen
for yelling "Taxi!"
to a drive-by police car
Most likely to die before
twenty-one in the electric chair
if he doesn't crash his motorcycle
for something crazy like
trying to ride it up
an after-hours Ferris wheel

--you bet he's slept with a lot of girls

But now that he's in love with Lorraine:

"I'd bettah let her know
I wuz no altah boy."

Lorraine
Who holds her Ritchie's hands
while she sprawls on the hood
of her Mustang loves Ritchie enough
to tell him:

"Ritchie, I was in no convent."

"No problem if ya been wit'
a guy before," he murmurs

"Ritchie, it was a lot of guys."

Which makes Ritchie cringe
--re-consider
--but then firmly grab her hands
as he crawls up the hood of
the Mustang and lean Lorraine
back against the windshield
and kiss her

*

Kenneth DiMaggio

Ritchie Loves Lorraine (#4)

When Lorraine is cold
Ritchie drapes her shoulders
with his leather biker jacket
patched with a skull and the
club's name "Sons of Satan"

When Lorraine does not want
to see the world Ritchie swipes
her a pair of sunglasses
from the drugstore

When Lorraine feels down
Ritchie takes her to the
boardwalk and shoots out
all the ducks at a shooting
gallery until he wins her
the stuffed life-size blue
teddy bear that he'll even
carry for her

Lorraine Lorraine let's
wash away those tears
by going for a ride on my
motorcycle in the rain the rain

Shh! Shh! He sensitively Shhesss
her as he reads Lorraine some poems
by Edgar Allan Poe as they lie back
together on their favorite tomb
in the cemetery

And if that's not true love
Ritchie tattoos Lorraine's
name (intertwined with a
rose) around his neck that
she will always rest her face
against whenever she grabs
his waist and rides behind
him on his Harley

Kenneth DiMaggio

Ritchie Loves Lorraine (#5)

Ritchie
gently rests
his face on Lorraine's
stomach

"Not yet, but soon,
soon you will feel something"
she tells him as she palms
her hand over his cheek
and hair

Ritchie
already has
been feeling that something
when he dropped out of
the gang
Sold
his motorcycle
Stopped drinking
at the Vesuvius Lounge
& Banquet Hall
Wear
more shirts with buttons
and collars on them
Attend church
at St. Stanislaus again
where he would soon
be married in and
soon be back for
a baptism
with Lorraine
who now loves
a man

named Ritchie

Maya Feliz*

Hope

Constance, our maid, waves her little duster like a wand at all my father's intricate items adorning the room. I was sitting on the couch, leg crossed over another, the velvet green dress piling at my side. My cheek was in my hand and I was giving her a judgemental gaze. Anne was smoking her cigarette next to me, her red heel now and then poking at mine as she could just never sit still. The fixation changed to Anne, and I look her up and down. She had a polka dot red puffy dress on that made her look like a grandma, a red cutesy bow around her hair as if she was trying to seem all sweet, and shiny red shoes.

"Yes?" She starts, matching my look of irritation.

"Why are you dressed like that?" I spoke with a slight tone of disgust. Anne changes her features to that same contorted anger, and she moves up to tap her cigarette into the ashtray before taking another deep inhale.

"Why, does it bother you?" She asks in such a way that riles me. I give her a certain look, and she puffs an exhalation of smoke at my face. There were times I felt like choking another person, and it was never anyone besides my sister.

"You look silly," is all I say, and I went back to staring at Constance.

"And you look 50, but what's the news there?" I turn to Anne who also shifts her attention, yet the way her lips curled at the ends showed me she enjoyed her little jab. This is how the fighting begins.

"And looking 12 is better? The guy who'll marry you is surely getting a treat." I know that makes her angry, as she has a current crush on a man whom she desperately attempts to impress.

She opens her mouth in a way that shows she is about to start raising her voice increasingly or go on some annoying rant I was soon to block out. She swiftly closes it and only sucks in a breath. Anne wasn't going to fight and seem like the bad guy now, she had to put on her pretty oblivious girl act for when mother and father were ready. I hate little gatherings, and parties, but.. I suppose finding an attractive-looking man was interesting enough to enjoy it.

As if on a queue, we hear a click-clacking of heels against the marble floors, and we finally know its mother who loves to take her time getting prepared for any event. Her hands grace against the railing

of the staircase so elegantly, and she has this extravagant gorgeous light brown fur coat on. Large pearls wrap around her neck, and her black dress fit so well, it looked as if it was made for her (and it really might've just been). I always loved her taste, and I would study her outfits as a child so I would eventually become such a level of classy like that.

Our father who gets ready in minutes, followed after, adjusting his fancy golden cufflinks that he loves to switch out. "Which ones are those?" I ask, always curious to see his taste. At least then I would know what to look for in a man. He puts his arm out and adjusts his sleeve for me to see. It was some sort of a pretty bull design, and although it was insignificant, his golden Rolex shined well with it to where anyone could notice.

"Are we going to go?" Anne complains, unimpressed with any sort of scene. I roll my eyes and Mother gives me a stern expression.

"Don't start you two." Her red lips move perfectly with her words even when she is scolding us. Her dark brown hair that touches her shoulders waves so gracefully. I stand on my green bejeweled heels, and I flick my blonde strands away. One way to tell Anne and I apart from another was our hair lengths and color. Anne had lighter shorter hair, and we styled it differently, purposely.

I took Annes lighter at the table and flicked at it in the meantime, while I waited for everyone to eventually make their way to leave. I huffed, I could never get the spark. "You're free to finish up Constance," mother spoke. Our maid Constance smiles and nods happily. As she was about to walk off, my dad stops her.

"Did you make preparations?" He asks as if he was attempting to keep a secret, and I raise my brow. Constance nods a quiet yes, and father does the same.

I hum, confused. "What preparations?"

"We're going to have a meeting here after the party," he says, and I tilt my head. Anne grumbles.

"Ugh, again? We never get to leave our rooms, do you know how boring it is just sitting in bed doing nothing while everyone talks?" My sister continues to complain and I roll my eyes yet again.

“At least you get to talk to Walter (her annoying little suitor) I’m the one sitting doing nothing,” I retort back and she giggles in such a way that makes me want to pull her hair.

“Yeah? And look where my “grandma” clothes got me.” She laughs as if she is victorious, and I’m sure mother just knew well at this point what my nasty response would’ve been, so she hushes me up quickly.

“Quiet. Anne, you too. I don’t want to hear fighting when we’re there, or else you’re going to have to stay in your rooms a lot longer than just one night.” With her tone, I quiet and resort to shooting Anne a glare. She does the same, and we send each other a mental jab before we walk off.

The car ride is always quiet, and I find peace in glancing out the window and observing the way trees pass by quickly. Whenever we arrive at any location I find myself sighing, and I mentally dread how I’m going to have to sit around and politely talk to people older than me that I don’t care for. I’m not sure who was hosting the party this time, and what it even was about. Something about an engagement maybe? Either way, It seemed like anyone will throw a celebration for any little thing.

When we got out of the car, we always meet with such beautiful scenery. White flowers, a big house with arched glass windows, gold linings, pretty people, butlers at the door who bow to us. It’s not exactly something new, but it was pleasing nonetheless.

“Robert! Great to see you!” A voice instantly breaks me out of my daze once we ascend the stairs. I sigh. A man with a stocky build, a square face, and short combed hair walks up to my father and they give each other a handshake. They acted like they haven’t seen each other in years, meanwhile it was only one week ago we had a similar gathering, and yet another meeting. Anne was patting at her dress, and she got on her tippy toes, stretching out her neck to spot a certain someone. My mother kept me close so I wouldn’t wander off just yet, as she knows I love to sneak away when nobody’s looking.

A woman who I know as Barbara Colson walks out, and my mother’s face brightens. “Diane! What a beautiful dress, it looks like it was made just for you!” She makes a joking expression and gestures with her free hand, while a glass of champagne rests in her other. I

chuckle to myself at the comment. Barbara puts her soft hand onto my shoulder and laughs.

“Oh Marie, you’re starting to look just like your mother.” She turns to my said mother, “isn’t that adorable? A little mini you?” Barbara makes that typical loud laugh of hers, the only thing I hated about her. I fake laugh, and I give mother a certain gaze that pleads, “can I go off now?” She waves with her hand, and they practically link arms as they go on their rambles. That was just about the only woman who my mother loved to consistently be around.

“I almost had 2 mini me’s, but Robert snagged Anne away just before I could.” My mother laughs, bringing her black gloved hand to her lips. My father would have responded to that but he was too busy laughing with Diane and Colt Berman, the parents of Anne’s boy toy. Anne was nearby them, her hands intertwining with another as she shyly speaks with Walter who gives her a ingenuine smile. I say my little hellos, how are yous to the parents, before walking off so I could dodge a few definite conversation starters. I mentally ugh, and I scavenge around for a safe space away from.. everyone really. Although, I did sneak in a few glances at several men along the way.

“Champagne, miss?” A maid walks up to me with a platter, and I nod, gently taking one.

I wasn’t much of a champagne person, but it gave me something to do with my hands as I awkwardly leant against the wall. I stare out at the people who were in their own idle conversations. I enjoyed watching how others moved, how they laughed, how they dressed, their personalities through the little things. It was endearing in a way. I hum and take a small sip. It tasted like a carbonated strawberry. It was delicious.

My eyes move from person to person, nothing interesting I found just yet. There was a woman with a beautiful velvet purple dress I admired though. She carried herself in such a way that I imagined that’s what my mother was like when she was younger. Her lips were a pretty dark red, her eyes a gorgeous green I could see from here. Her hair rolled into beautiful glittering waves that shined with every little movement she made.

Next to her was this attractive young looking man, assuming her

husband. He had pretty brown curls, olive skin, blue eyes, and a striped gray suit. Now I imagined him to be the embodiment of my young father as well. His hand moved into his pocket, and I could see a gold watch on his wrist reveal itself. Just like my dad. I looked away, giggling to myself.

When I glimpsed again, his eyes met mine. He gave me a knowing smile. I coughed nervously and swiftly averted away. From the corner of my eye, I could see him remove himself from the conversation, and move my way. I cuss beneath my breath and clear my throat. I took an awkward sip of my champagne as he neared closer. I turn to lock eyes with him, and there he was directly in front of me.

“Hi.” He spoke, smiling.

“Hi..

“I return, pursing my lips. God I hoped my face wasn’t pink.

“How are you?” He then asks and I awkwardly shuffle my feet. He moves to the open space next to me and leans against the wall. I nervously follow his movements.

“I’m.. good..” I mutter.

“Mhm. What’s your name?” He asks, his blue eyes twinkling at me.

“Marie.. yours?” I respond, returning his curious expression.

“Francesco,” he says, and I smile at such a name. I thought it was attractive.

“Pretty.” I say, and he breathes out a soft laugh. My heart flutters.

Francesco pulls a cigarette box out of his pocket, and a solid gold lighter from his other. He pulls two out, and looks at me. I shake my head politely. “Don’t smoke?” He asks, rolling the lighter so perfectly between his fingers that it sparks instantly. He holds the cigarette between his lips to light it, and I was oddly entranced at his actions. He acted in such a way you would think he’s practiced everything a 100 times before.

“I do.. just not with my champagne.” I state, and my tone must’ve been incidentally sarcastic because he laughs and raises a brow.

“That’s a good point. Didn’t think of that.” He sweetly laughs once

more, and there was no way I wasn’t blushing at this point.

“Is that your wife over there?” I ask sweetly, afraid he might think I was making any implications. This time he breaks out in a genuine full laughter. I stare, dumbfounded.

“That’s my aunt,” he states.

“Your aunt??!” I made an O shape with my mouth, and surely my face was definitely red now.

“Mhm.” He hums, inhaling deeply.

“She looks.. wow.. I mean.. wow.” I was flabbergasted, I didn’t even know what to say. Her skin was perfect, her eyes, her hair.. her body?? I was astounded.

“Yeah I know, don’t worry, you’re not the first. She is beautiful, I know.” He states with a smile. He exhales a puff of smoke away from my face, and my heart blooms at the action. So gentlemanly.

There was a question burning in my head, but it was far too brazen. “Do you..” I bite at my lip, and then I shake my head. “Nevermind.”

He turns to me. “What?”

“Nothing.” I clear my throat and take a sip of my champagne.

“What was it?” Francesco blinks his pretty blue eyes at me and I purse my lips again.

“Do you..” I mentally kick myself and sigh. “Do you have a wife.. then?”

Francesco breaks out into a soft chuckle. Although I was embarrassed, I was glued to his features. The way his lips moved just screamed a certain genuine sweetness that differed far from my sister.

“Not yet.” He replies and turns his pretty gaze to me. I blink. The way he looked felt as if it was implying a certain something. Butterflies flutter at the thought and I shyly turn away. Too soon Marie.

“I should.. go to my family now..” I say, sure that even he could realize it was a clear excuse.

“Of course. Have a good rest of your evening Marie.” He smiles

genuinely again, and I return it.

“Thank you.. you too.” I nervously clear my throat before walking off.

I mix myself in with Barbara and mother again, and I stand silently by as they gush to another about designer things. I find myself deeply lost in thought for the time. Occasionally I even anticipated to see Francesco again from afar. Then when it was time to leave, I got in the car, and smiled to myself.

“What are you smiling about Marie?” My dad asks with an eyebrow raise, and I giggle quietly.

“Nothing..” I say, continuing to grin wildly.

Mother and father turn to each other, and I can see mothers smile curl. She breaks out into a snicker, as if knowing. My dad remains confused. Anne squints her eyes my way and hmphs, uncaring, and goes back to staring out her side of the window. I think of him again, and I grin, excited for the next party.

ShawnaLee W. Kwashnak

FRONT LEFT HOOF PEDICURE



Benjamin J. Chase

Albino Puppy'z

Reads the red-lettered
plywood driveway sign
just beyond the main drag
of rustic alpine Littleton.

Out for a scenic drive,
my wife and I laugh
for mountain miles
about unironic errors
or this brilliant provocation.

What does this singular
rap pup own?

Are "puppy'z"
for sale
or visitation?

Has this fading sign
long outlived
a stark white litter?

Well, like so much up north,
this driveway only disappears
into pines and unanswered
questions for those who,
like us, only pass it by.

Benjamin J. Chase

Surfer at Point Judith

Parked on the ledge, I watch
one distant wetsuit
too pronounced
to be anything inhuman
bobbing out and over
silver morning swells
at the edge of the continent.

Has he memorized the rocks
riddled across this tide?
How did he manage
his cliffside portage?

It must matter little
to him who sifts
the rising breakers
at this early hour, solitary,
at the start of a storm.

Where did he come from?
There's no other car here.

Who would ever know him
but the sea?

Benjamin J. Chase**Fishing**

Late afternoon, he casts
into the dark whirlpool
spun of waterfall and granite,
glacier, rainfall—letting
the fly flip and spiral
to the liking of a trout
who is as caught
as he is free
just then—
pure impulse
and memory—
like the fisherman
who can't quite stay
and can't quite leave
and can't exactly
explain the matter
to his closest friend
in words.

Benjamin J. Chase**Arborist**

Supine on the lawn,
hands behind his head,
a man puffs a cigarette.

He lounges
beside a dozen limbs
and an orange chainsaw.

It is an unblinking
August afternoon,
and silence grows.

Above looms
a bleeding trunk of pine
lending its last shadow.

Benjamin J. Chase O'Neil's Package Store

"I only got two hands!" she hollered,
red-faced, bracing two cases
of Buds against a broad belly
at the summit of the stairs.

Thin and unmoving, he sat
passenger side of the Wrangler
with a spaniel in his lap
and practiced silence.

12 Below Indigo* Word from Kin

I have been chosen by no higher power and I have not fallen victim to the chain of Self supremacy. As an artist I aim to be neither the Sun or the Moon, neither the shine or the gloom. I've succumbed to the ways of the water, I am both the reader and the author. I am nothing but grateful to be allowed to display artistry and spread a deeper sense of moral thought and humanistic relevance. It is worth carrying not only one's cross but to as a bare minimum offer chants of strength to push those too weak for their own. It took some time to fully understand that the world is in fact not dominated by evil, but rather most exist in the gray area between good and evil and unintentionally, without being aware, society is blinded by the importance of "opinion", not freedom. In this infinite paradox, I've concluded there is irony in this opinionated timeline, which is sapiens living in a time where we are so "free" that free-will itself is contemplated on, perhaps we live in a utopia because through enough effort, wisdom, and faith, it can all be attained. As for the tragedies our government leaders gift to us in their chosen wars and the hidden malice and self-preservation of the "rich", we can only understand that evil DOES exist and it is a choice whether to join its side or not. Life isn't perception, life is a frequency, it is God; That which we can't explain, and perhaps that's the image we're created in, we reflect the infinite unknown, and have the power to choose direction on the axis. Being alive isn't satisfaction or being repellent to failure, life isn't dopamine. A consciousness, of artistic principle or other, shall not be oppressed by the collective knowledge or creed, but rather sheltered and guided by the fundamentals of undivided communities and selfless individuals. Protect the sheep, respect your shepherds, offer peace and aid to those corrupted by malevolent forces, and enjoy your pages in the book of life.

I am an average man from an average town, with the average plans to not average down.

Sarah Kelly*
Tangled Up

“Oh, God,” I whisper through my shuttered breath.

Breathe in, breathe out.

Inhaling, the vines tighten around my chest, the pricks tapping my supple flesh. Any deeper and they’ll impale me, burning like the unforgiving embers from that wildfire we sparked.

Ahmya...

There she is. Right in front of me. Fat tears are welled up in her pained, pleading eyes. Her pointed chin quivers as she looks down. I follow her gaze. We watch the weak hands she holds out before her, trembling. Little flames appear at the tips of her slender fingers. They hover over the pads, gently bouncing. She’s illuminated— I bask in her brilliant glow. Slowly, she closes her fists. Tighter and tighter, she squeezes until they’re as red as her bloodshot eyes. Skin searing, she burns and blisters, silently shaking. I attempt to reach out my arm, but the thorns sink in and I wince. She lifts her charring hands, cupping my face with them. My eyes widen at the pain— blazing as the sun, her hands melt into me.

“Scream,” she insists, offering a single, defiant nod as tears stream from her wild eyes.

Frantically, I search her face. It’s useless— Ahmya’s gone. She presses harder and I let out a yelp; a pitiful creature, caught in a snare. Frowning, her head shakes in disappointment.

“More,” she demands, squeezing my cheeks until her nails break through my skin. I scream as the blood oozes down my neck. I scream as the vines constrict me like a python with arrowheads for scales. I scream as much as my throat allows, until my voice diminishes into a hoarse, pathetic cry. Thrashing in the entanglement, I feel the pricks across my whole body, settling aflame the pools of my blood as though they are of oil. My eyes shut so tight that little lights flicker throughout my veiled vision. I don’t want to see her. I can’t see her, not any more. Her grip remains firm as my head shakes violently. Suddenly, her brittle, blackened hands force my eyelids open. In an instant, my eyelashes burn off, becoming wisps in the smoke.

“See what you’ve done?” she contests, her fingers unmoving.

I attempt to look above me, below me, around us, anywhere but in front of me. She snatches the vine around my neck and yanks it.

“Look!” she hisses.

Gurgling blood, I stare weakly at her frenzied face.

This can’t be it, it just can’t be...

Streams flow from my eyes; the noises that emerge from my throat are incomprehensible as I sob. Choking on the blood, scarlet spatters on Ahmya’s face. She doesn’t flinch— instead, her eyes narrow. Her hands lift off my eyes, but there’s no moment of relief. My mouth is pried open; she coats her rough fingers with my blood, stuffing them down my throat. Arms flailing, I wriggle about like an insect wrapped in a web. She persists, even as I begin to gag profusely. When done, she aggressively smears my face. Burning, my eyes blink madly. The sensation drowns out her venomous words. I gradually regain my sight as she continues her tirade.

There must be more after this. There has to be. God, please, this can’t be it—

She belts out a wicked laugh.

“Oh, Suren, you sad thing”

Drowsiness looms over me. It seeps into my skin and flows between my bones. As they weaken, my limbs feel as though they’re floating in the air. I’m reduced to my mere thoughts. It’s silent as we stare at one another. Her gaze eventually shifts to the forest canopy. I solemnly look up at the velvety black, night sky. Bespangled, it twinkles almost rhythmically; a dazzling choreography.

“Soon enough,” Ahmya whispers to me.

Blood drips from my mouth. My desperate eyes beg for mercy.

“Count,” she commands, glaring.

Blurred with tears, my faltering vision fades in and out as I attempt to count the stars like sheep.

Fourteen... six— no... fifteen...?

My head dips down. She grabs my chin and forces it back up, her nails clawing into me.

“Allow me,” is all I hear before everything goes black

Kathylee Perez*
ANTIQUATED PIECE



Egzon Ukaj*

Kill Me Deeper

Roiled Roots, once lively
 Now blanketed by posthumous pavement.
 But all they ever seem to do is look up.

Distracted by these buoyant blooms
 And cheerful canopies,
 Provide hopeless evidence
 Of an emerging esse.

As wheels roll on paths manmade,
 I veer closer to ruin,
 And further from sanity.

They stab their signs deep through my derma,
 Like daggers through the flesh of their enemies.
 When did we become enemies?

For years you've enjoyed the fruits of my labor,
 I've stood tall for you,
 Obliging, benevolent, productive,
 As I've waited for you to do better.

As I filter your deadly chemicals,
 Restore your lungs.
 You tear me down
 And use my flesh to kill me deeper.

12 Below Indigo*

Got Talent Judgment

We seek what we deem to succeed
 We seek to be ones to plant seeds.
 Some shine the light to better see beauty
 Some taint this shine to satisfy fury.
 We tend to wrong the Marleys, the Presleys
 One love was not enough for economy.
 The nowadays don't tick in the clock of faith
 We've ceased the MLKs and the JFKs,
 We've lost the Marvin Gayes and the John Coltranes
 We're taught to measure paint through the VMAs.
 We need the microphones to catch actual poems
 We need Nina Simone; We need Quincy Jones,
 We need no drop of judgment from flesh and bones
 We need to cleanse the species of division.
 As these words conclude I call no action out of you
 It would be hypocritical to tell you I should rule,
 I simply let you wonder what must artists do
 I hope to stand for something that enlightens truth.
*I am an average man from an average town, with the average plans to
 not average down.*

12 Below Indigo*

Surviving The Industry

My head had been deep
 into that intoxicated sleep.
 I couldn't find peace
 neither above or beneath.
 I became other things,
 soon became anything.
 I knew if the Lord spoke of reckoning
 I wouldn't have heard the trumpets sing.

I knew if my hopes stroke the right key
 I'd be in tune to play free.
 I knew that the rope's choke upon me
 signified obligated mortal fees.
 Have I failed at building an identity?
 Am I wrong for looping in philosophy?
 I heard the echo once again and I wrote it,
How to monetize the scattered mind of a poet?

The answers were a handful
 either way I would settle.
 I could trust the Lord with my input,
 I could shake hands with the Devil.
 I thought of the world and its tempo,
 the faster, ugly momento we live in.
 My slower nature was simple,
 I wouldn't find a concierto to sing in.

I saw the history of giants and midgets.
 I saw my legacy from rags to riches.
 I theorized about my end in the mission,
 I concluded I'd be dead in a minute.

12 Below Indigo***Journey of A Dream**

Once you truly recognize failure,
 You know the way to the road of success.
 You just beware
 of hitchhikers and poisoned crops.
 Once you trade love for your anger,
 You break the same thing that holds you oppressed.
 You just prepare
 For the journey to be high cost.

The people, they make fear music,
 soul unclear music.
 Remember when we'd feel music,
 sword and shield music.
 I'm on some chandelier music,
 top them tier music, but them using my philosophy for war.
 I cringe at billboard ten music,
 pop yo friend music .
 Them playing moral end music,
 culture trend music.
 Them saying skip the gem music,
 bend the translucent,
 And them ready taking aim at Hope Road.

Laney Sullivan***A Vow to Expectations**

“Can you pass the jam please, dear?” I said to my closest friend as she stared out the window. “Marilyn, did you hear me?”

“What?” She seemed startled as I repeated myself with the same question. She passed me the jam and I spread it across my toast. She didn't look me in the eyes and the kitchen seemed to be filled with something that was unfamiliar to me, maybe she was upset or just tired. After all, a night filled with dancing at a wedding could do that to a person.

I licked jam off my lips and that's when she turned her attention towards me, or should I say my lips. I noticed that her cheeks were rosier than normal. Probably from being hungover, that's all. “Marilyn, is everything alright?” I heard myself say and that's when she looked at me. Were her eyes puffy all morning? Allergies, I'm guessing.

“Yes, Darcy. I'm perfectly fine.” She pushed her chair out, walked past me and grabbed her coat. “I just need some fresh air, to help with this stupid headache.” She forced a smile and swiftly left me there. I left the kitchen table to tidy up the dishes and got a head start on my chores.

William, my fiance turned husband, came home at precisely five o'clock where dinner was being pulled out of the oven.

“Sweetheart, I'm home.” He hollered from the foyer, I heard his footsteps round the corner and there he was, leaning against the wall watching as I pulled the roast from the oven.

“Hi, darling,” he strutted over and kissed my cheek, placing his hands on my waist. After the roast was secured on the counter, I tore my oven mitts off and hugged him. He nuzzled his face in my neck whispering, “dinner smells delicious.” He leaned back and headed toward the table waiting to be served, in which I did because I was the wife now that was my job. Well that was what I was taught at least, be a good wife, birth the children your man desires, and raise them to be as inspiring as their father. It's what every woman wanted, and it surely was what my family had wanted for me.

We ate dinner, I got up to give William seconds and when I returned he asked, “So your friend, Marilyn, is she in line to get

married soon?"

"She told me she went out on a few dates, but none of them stuck."

"You know she should be married by now, I can set her up with a colleague of mine." I sat down as he continued. "He is quite the charmer and makes a good amount of money."

"I'll talk to her." I say before taking a sip of my wine. Marilyn has never really told me about her love life, it usually gets rerouted to talking about mine. Maybe I should be more considerate in asking or maybe-

"Stop that," Willam says with a mouthful of food. "What?"

"Your face, it scrunches when you think." He responded by taking a swig from his beer. "I want to look at my pretty wife while I eat."

"Sorry," I muttered. He left his plate for me to clean up, and I finished the dishes before retiring to our room. He was already snoring as I slipped into bed, and I couldn't get the thought of Marilyn ending up all alone out of my head.

"Marilyn." "Darcy?"

"Are you seeing anyone?" I asked. She fidgeted with her tea, stirring the spoon around even though the sugar cube already dissolved.

"How's the new husband treating you?" She countered.

"Mari, I'm being serious. Isn't there a man in your life that you want to spend the rest of your life with?" I don't know why my voice raised or why I was feeling aggravated, but she just wasn't taking this seriously. "Now that I'm thinking about it, it's ironic that my maid of honor didn't participate in the bouquet throw. Why is that?" What was I, a detective? I had no right to accuse her of not wanting the same thing as me, but she must want a family. A man to provide for her, surely that was in the cards for her.

"I was never a good catcher," was all she said before she got up. "Will you look at the time? I should be leaving. It's getting late and your husband will be home in a few hours and-"

"No!" I shocked myself with my shout and my extended arm, hand on her wrist stopping her from leaving.

"Darcy what are you-"

"No, you're not leaving until I understand why." I pulled the chair out next to me and maneuvered her to sit, my hand didn't leave her wrist until I knew she would stay. Once her warmth left my skin, she glanced down at the ring on my finger, suddenly it felt too heavy for me to handle. She met my eyes, taking a deep breath and she opened and shut her mouth. She looked like a guppy, and I found it endearing, and then she looked out the window again.

"I don't want to be married." She plainly said. "I'm still young and I don't want to be tied down. That's all."

"Don't lie to me," that got her to look me in the eyes. Her blown out pupils concealed the blue in her eyes, and she looked like she was on the verge of tears. She kept her gaze on my ring, telling me more than words could.

"William says he can set you up with one of his guys and-"

"I don't want that." She squirmed in her seat. "It's not the married part I don't want," she began to laugh and cry at the same time. How was she able to do the impossible? It amazed me. "It's the man part I don't want." She finally confessed. I didn't move and before I could say anything she leaned forward and gently kissed me.

I was flabbergasted. My life had suddenly been flipped and made no sense, but it felt oddly right. Fear struck her face and I couldn't react, I was paralyzed. She apologized and in a flash she was running out of the house. I was stunned, and touched my fingers to my lips and I couldn't let her go. I couldn't lose her. I tore my ring off and flung it out the window, and raced after her. I stood on the doorway and watched as she drove away.

I should have chased after her car, and I should have screamed for her to come back to me, I should have done anything but collapsed to the ground and wept. At that moment I knew I had lost all of myself, because I wasn't able to see what I had before it was gone.

William came home later that night, asking why dinner wasn't ready for him. I told him I had a rough day.

"What was so bad about your day, sweetheart?"

"I lost my ring." Was all I told him.

Jay Petro*
GOOD DAYS



Andrew VanOrden*
Seek and Save

So far sunken from
what you should or even could become.

Kick if you're uncertain of
this image so unfit for love.

There might be a purpose for
you that's been ignored.

To search out exiles beneath
the surface. Drowning, hidden, deep.

So descend
with your rusted links

To the hollow
where the lost will sink

Andrew VanOrden*

Catch and Release

Hoisted on a line
With a hook of my own making
Take a look at my stigmata!
I'm a snack for the salivating

Fish and leviathan
Golly I'm captivating
If they don't take a nibble
I'll start dancing while I'm waiting

For them to consume my flesh
And us to live as one
Then I'll get 'em in a headlock
And dry them in the sun.

Mark Sumner*

The Urge

Rolling around writing rhymes,
The urge hits me.
A chemically unbalanced brain,
Whips and kicks me.
Crying for more.
I slump to the floor.

Oh to feel it in between my lips,
Its sweet taste and bitter smoke.
Still smelling it on my finger tips,
And sniffing too hard, I start to choke.

Fleeting pleasure.
That's where smoke and verse blend.
You'll always need one more,
And your last pack is never the end.

Mary Tetreault

Sally

I keep thinking about Sally – a Sally I’ve never known. Still, there she is, day and night! For example, waking up from an intensely frightening dream, she’s here, just behind me, over by the window! Her lavender scent surrounds me as I become fully awake.

Am I afraid? Only for a moment. Ghosts don’t exist in real life - end of discussion. Whether I’m losing my mind – I question *that* several times a day!

Thank goodness reality steps in while I am talking to myself about this, out loud. People who live alone and don’t have pets for company do that; I used to say they had imaginary friends!

So how long has the name Sally been a regular part of my daily thoughts? I don’t know. I guess since around the time change, with shorter days and longer nights. Having a writer’s brain, I could have, I suppose, thought this was just part of my love of my own words, my urge to fill the time with a new story.

But it’s now become my “regular normal” to hear a voice, see a shadow and somehow know it’s Sally. Sally who? Who *is* she? Did we play together in my yard or up the street? Nope! I was a lonely child, with no one to share dolls, tea parties and hurt feelings with. Nobody to go with me for treats from the nearby gas station that had a lunch counter and glass-fronted candy bins.

Again, who is she? Did we ride the bus to school together, little girls with pigtails? No, at school there were Joyce, Nancy, Doris and Sue Ann - no Sally.

But all day Sally follows me, in my head. Sometimes I imagine she wears a dress similar to one I wore in my picture. I was the first grader with the cute braids and the messy center part that has a noticeable strand of hair sticking up. (My mother wasn’t happy with that!)

Now this *is* weird...candy wrappers around in the ashtrays! I don’t smoke, but these semi-retired relics still come in handy as coasters for coffee cups and pudding dishes. Lately they collect red, green and silver chocolate wrappers from an after-Christmas candy sale.

Sally *loves* chocolate: it’s sweet scent pairs up with lavender and lets me know she’s been here while I was out. She’s a neat bandit, not tossing the wrappers willy – nilly, but always hiding herself away as my key turns in the lock – home again!

I’ve given up looking for her and softly calling her name. I know she won’t come out, which makes me sad. So I clear up the wrappers from my chocolate stash.

In the beginning I tried other hiding places. Under the mattress was the only place she couldn’t, or at least didn’t, rob. This really makes me think she’s still little; she can’t lift it up. I am not cold hearted – that was a test. I stopped hiding sweets out of her reach. For sure I know the craving chocolate puts on a person left alone.

So... we have scented lotion, a teasing love of chocolate that lets me know she’s still here. She doesn’t have any trouble staying home and showing up in my mind at the same time! A glimpse, a shadow, a hint of lilac.

I’ve often wished for a sister and now I wonder, is Sally *more* than a secret companion? Is she the soul of a baby sister that I have never heard of? The thought brings tears to my eyes. I think of a hundred ways she could have shared hugs, fun, joy—and seen me through some of the scaredy-cat gap years my memory hints at.

Sally and Mary...how I wish there were two of us! My lonely heart wonders if there were two May Day babies, even for a few minutes – entwined, snuggled, born loving.

Just in case ... Good night, dear sister!

Devyn Daniele*

We All But Almost Beheld You

The glow of golden beams dances along my arms
Flickering through trees, the sun lays down on me
Coating me in a warmth that is so encapsulating
That I remember, in these moments of solitude,
Between me and her hugging heat, I am human

The light plays with my sunken eyes and files through my eyelashes
She stops at no end to caress every square inch of my chapped winter
scorn skin
Making memory of every hair stood up from the breeze
Learning the way my body reacts when I'm touched by an element
other than her brilliance

Glorious, gleaming, glowing, gallivanting
Dreaming of more
Dreaming of a season rounding the corner on the edge of emerging
Peaking its blonde streaked hair from under the pages marked
February, March, April, and May
I see her giggling at my blushed cheeks because she knows the power
she holds as she floats in the sky

The snow once welcomed melts at my stares
I am a colder girl, but I could get used to the snugness in her salvation

Come close sun
Mark the flesh exposed to you in red and brown
Letting the world know you have touched me for hours at a time
Light me up and set the summer a blaze

I am yours to be held
Birthed in your beauty
Spinning in your orbit

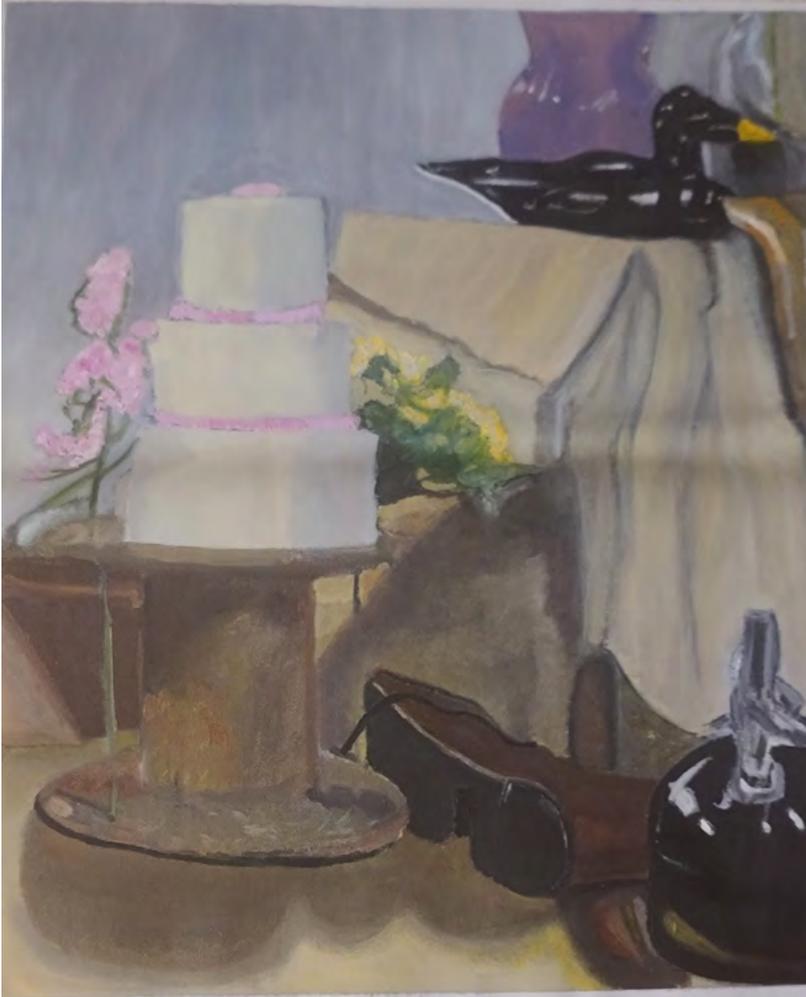
Bring me beaches, backyard barbecues-
Bring me to laughter
Bring us to life
Bring me home
Bring yourself home

We miss you
We need you
We love you
And we all but almost had beheld you
Before the gray and growing clouds concealed you again

3rd Place - Art

Kathylee Perez*

PICTURE 2 VINTAGE-STILL-LIFE



Devyn Daniele*

Clicking Submit Like a Kid Jumps into a Pool
for the First Time

Clicking submit like a kid jumps into a pool for the first time
 I look around as I choke on water, and everyone smiles
 Eyes burned by chlorine
 Hands digging furiously through the water
 Making waves of panic as my fingers grasp the wall

They clap as I wade through oceans of my own unaquatic despair
 I'm never clapped for

I know everyone is doing this because they're happy to know
 I've done something more than drowning in my own perilous fears of
 the future
 I can't tell whether I'll cry or force myself to look joyous for them

Why are you only happy for me when I have something to show?
 When I'm the kid that jumped into the water when I didn't even
 know how to swim
 Parading bravery like a metal
 Mommy, I'm a big boy now

And there it is
 Landing more smoothly than I had jumping into the shark-filled pool
 A tear
 It's warm on my face
 And keeps your stares from sending shivers down my spine
 Realizing, in that moment, I'm more minnow than megalodon

Devyn Daniele*

Summer Rain

Pitter patter
The sound of rain and birds
The slick slush of cars

A break from summer heat
And a treat for bored kids
Puddles and wet earth made water slides

A cheerful feathered tune
A watery, melodic tempo
A rubber chorus
And young laughter for words

Oh, Summer rain
A song from the sky
And a gift for the musically inclined

Devyn Daniele*

Years of Mourning

Those hallowed cheeks silenced all my words
Deemed any “faith” unworthy as Gods kindest child turned cold
I could not speak of poetry when your body rotted beneath my nose
Your life was more than lines to be written
Even now that the ground has consumed you whole
My throat struggles to hold a phrase
Eyelids lined with images of your corpse
And ears plagued by the pleading thoughts of a child
Who has lost the only undying affection they’ve ever known
This pain cannot be spoken
And for all the love we shared
I am so deeply and truly sorry
That I cannot speak of you in a manner that isn’t impaired by
stuttering syllables
From a brain too ill prepared to see you all dead and gone, stilly
laying there

Devyn Daniele*

Fall: Intro to Death

Leave flutter to the ground as autumn fairies dance in the rich reds and yellows

The warmth of the sun glides through windows and plays with the goosebumps on your skin

The sun is warm, and the air is cold

The world is two things at once, and so are you

Both happy and sad

Bittersweet and melancholy

All the bad bites at you. Ripping skin and muscle from bone.

You're deteriorating. You're the body in caskets being lowered to the 6ft portal.

The ground hasn't frozen over yet, so you do not have to pay extra

You can use that money not spent to buy a hot chocolate

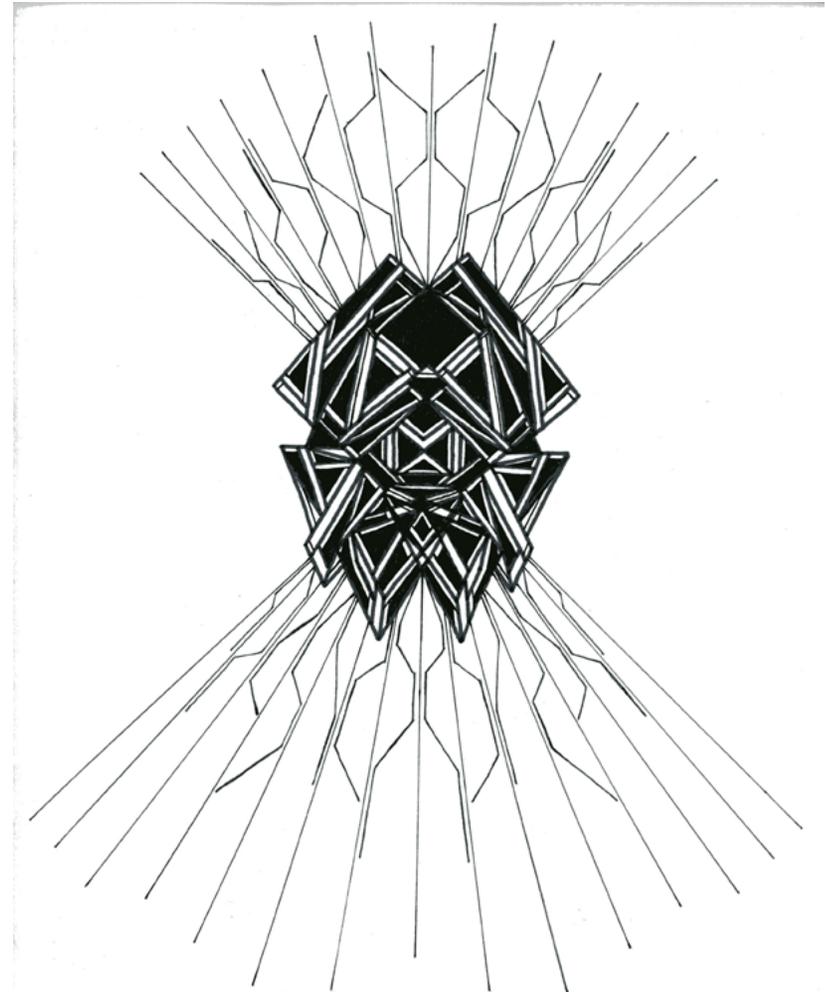
You can drink it looking through a window in your deathbed best and be delighted about how beautiful the world is

We are again two things at once.

Dead in the ground and alive at a windowsill.

Jewel Trujillo*

**INTERSTELLAR LATRODECTRUS –
BLACK WIDOW OF SPACE**



JT 24

William X. Conlon

A Tropical Plant

The synagogue doorway near the bus stop afforded shelter from the freezing rain. I hugged the flower-pot with one arm and covered the poinsettia with the other. Sister Columba had told me to give the extra plant to my mother, my reward for helping the nuns decorate the chapel. My good grades in my first semester of college and a busy social life buoyed up my spirits against the weather. A bus ride and a brisk walk from now, I would sit at the kitchen table and enjoy a Christmas Eve dinner with my parents.

The bus lights shone a block away. I stepped to the corner to be seen by the driver, almost avoided a large puddle of slush, and boarded the bus. After placing the plant on an empty seat, I paid the fare, retrieved the plant, and started down the aisle.

A familiar female voice sang out: “Merry Christmas, Danny.”

To the delight of my tired late-night eyes, I beheld the beautiful Barbara DeAngelis, “The Angel Barbie Doll.” She scrunched from the aisle seat to the one by the window, a welcome invitation.

“Barb,” I said, “how are you? Merry Christmas to you.” I slid into the seat.

“I’m just peachy. You’re still working at the hospital, I see.” She glanced over her shoulder at the receding building.

“Still there. That and college keep me busy. What about you? What are you doing far from home, this late at night on Christmas Eve?” I might have asked why she wore sunglasses late at night, but I noticed a purple shadow reaching her upper cheek.

“I’ve been later and farther.” She raised her face toward the ceiling and sighed. “I’m going home for Christmas.”

“Home from where? I haven’t seen you since graduation. What have you been doing?” I remembered graduation six months ago and Barb’s wide smile, head held high, diploma in hand, returning to her seat.

“I’ve been living in New London.”

“Why New London, of all places? What are you doing there?”

“That’s where the boys are. There’s a nice big naval base.” A

smile flitted across her face and faded. “I’m just another working girl.”

“Girls find jobs in New Haven, too, you know. And guys will find you, wherever you are.

If not, just give me a call. Please!” I shifted the plant to my arm nearer the aisle. “Actually, you’re too smart to be working some crummy job. You belong at Southern with me.” The bus crossed the parkway, and we began the descent into the valley.

“You’re very kind, Danny. Thanks for the compliments, but college isn’t in my stars. I guess I’ll have to keep on keeping on.” She turned and looked out the window. I saw the sleet and freezing rain in the streetlights. She stood and said, “Let me out, please. My house is at the bottom of the hill.”

“I remember,” I said. I recalled the dancing lessons she gave to Murph and me in her room. The room had a door directly to the street. Barb lived with her mother and an older sister, but I had never met them. We never went past her street-side room. I remembered rumors of a violent man, involved with either the mother or the sister.

“Tell me where, miss,” the bus driver said, looking to the rear-view mirror.

“The house after the wall,” she said. She spoke to me: “You do know that is a tropical plant.”

I looked at the poinsettia and saw three red leaves sitting in the pot’s dirt. She flashed me her winning smile and left with more shared Christmas wishes. I watched her splash to her door, her wet skirt pressed tightly to her thighs beneath her short jacket. Barb had lost weight in the six months since high school. She hesitated with the doorknob in her hand. She straightened, and I watched her walk into the lighted doorway just before the bus rounded the curve.

“At the church, please,” I said. The bus left me in front of the statue of Mary, and I crossed the road to the bridge over the Naugatuck. In the middle of the bridge, I stopped and regarded my leafless twig with two bare branches pointing upward. The north wind from up-river blew the freezing rain into my face. I thought of my friend—the working girl at the naval base. Reaching back, I threw the plant as high and as far as I could. I glimpsed its fall, a skinny creature reaching to the heavens, no angel to save it this Christmas Eve. Tears warmed my cheeks, and I heard the splash. I walked home in the freezing rain.

Alana E. Torres*

N° 5



Thomas Warner-Crouch*
Straight Lines

People never question,
Those that draw straight lines,
A scrawl with no direction,
By a hand that dares to shirk,
They say is deviation,
From the method that is called divine.

It is not just to judge a hand that shakes,
Whose grip trembles or declines,
To follow those methods,
Charged with tracking hands,
That move toward boundless lines,
Disjointed knowledge,
Of an equal world,
One they don't trust.

For fear their eyes watch us,
And resist crossing at a cost,
There is no sense in punishing those,
That can't draw in the center,
A path misunderstood we celebrate,
Free those that still create,
While desperate eyes trace movement,
They'd follow if notions of creation,
Didn't suffer these constraints.

Jean Evans-Boniecki

Her Last Step

Watching my aged mother on the physical therapy stairs,
 her shoulders slumped like a wounded dog's,
 her eyes blank from her exertion of self will,
 I held my breath
 waiting for her to lift her leg,
 but her knee just trembled,
 her knuckles whitened on the railings,
 and a tear silently escaped her eye.

I approached her,
 the physical therapist moving aside to let me lean in:
 “What are you doing, Mom? You can fight it.... like the polio....”
 I pounded on the railing, my teeth gritted. I was
 beside myself: I was her Mickey, she, my Rocky....
 My fighter.

How many stories had I heard of her childhood trauma,
 her waking up paralyzed from the waist down,
 her battle against the steel brace that left one leg
 inches shorter than the next,
 so she stood,
 tilted
 with one foot pointed, like a dancer.
 Into her eighties, she walked miles –
 “not for weight loss” she said to
 her sisters, envious of her slim figure –
 but “to fight off the Post Polio.”

She bore a scar on her chin
 where she'd been knocked silly
 by a golf club in a scrap with another New Haven rug rat.
 “You should have seen the other girl,” she chuckled.
 With WWII,
 she dropped her dreams of interior decorating
 became a nurse,

and flew to the South Pacific –
 To Iwo, Tinian, Guam –
 in spite of her five-foot stature and her bum leg.
 After that she fought God's decision
 to take her only child
 by adopting two others, wild and unruly, to call her own.

But here she was stuck on a staircase
 unable to lift her knee to the next step.
 “I can't” she whispered. She was falling back into herself.
 The PT gently took her elbow, settled her into a waiting wheelchair.
 My breath caught within my chest.
 With great effort she turned her face up to me.
 Her mouth was firm, but
 her eyes, hopeless and pale, spoke to me
 to make me understand. “I tried”, they said.
 “Please believe me, I tried.”

Mylaida Rivera Carrasquillo*
Disappointment

Disappointment in the way your looks
Can fool my brain and
How one poem fooled my heart.

Disappointed in the way people's words
About you make me angry and
Question your values

Yet my empathy wants to see if
People's sight is correct, for I
See the emptiness in your eyes

The way your poem spoke to me,
Will keep me questioning if letting
My feelings go, will make me erase
That curiosity of seeing who you
Truly are, despite people's words

So how disappointing, I'm ignoring
My values to believe in yours
For my heart is stronger than
My mind

ShawnaLee W. Kwashnak
BIRCH TREES AT LAKE ELISE



Maya Feliz*

Mama Bear

A certain chill blows in the air, knowing, dark. Heavy ragged exhales fill the large cave, a shine of white pupils gazing into a large pair of yellowish spotted eggs. Its spindly long black fingers caress the handmade nest beneath them. It observes it carefully, as if uncertain they will remain the same. Hitting its hands into the stone floor, it moves slowly, pushing its behind high in the air. It breathes with great stridor, rustling the dead leaves beneath its feet once it touches the forest floor.

Searching patiently, its mangled black strands of what is assumed to be hair hang above its matching colored skin, or perhaps fur? Moonlight barely graces its figure, and it moves like a shadow within the night. A chuckling alerts its ears, and it hisses, swiftly moving to hide beside the trees. A woman and a man walk side by side, hands in their thin coats. They had red noses, bright hair, and wore such vibrant colors, that it caused a rumbling growl to erupt.

The woman gazes out longingly, a small smile on her face. “Honestly, for such a “spooky” place, it’s really relaxing here at night.”

“People are just wimps, that’s all.” The man says, waving his hand nonchalantly. Their breaths were wispy in the cold air, a smoky trail leaving their lips. They continue walking, and the woman brushes her bright red hair out of her face. Another hiss breaks out unbeknownst to the humans, and the being moves slowly to match their footsteps, sure not to wrinkle any leaves. Its white eyes peek out from a large tree, thin pointy fingertips poke at the bark. It watches how they continue upon their path, holding dainty objects that shine beams of light illuminating the path ahead.

“Maybe we should have a little picnic.” The woman giggles while meeting her bright pink gloves to her lips.

A loud ragged breathing nears.

“That’s romantic.” The male responds, practically uninterested as his eyes wander at the stars.

She awkwardly attempts to touch his hand, and he ignores the gesture. The hat upon her head wiggles with a matching pink pom pom. Finally, a crunch in the leaves alerts her, and the woman jolts closer. “Did you hear that?”

Ultimately, he turns to her, eyebrows raised. “Hear what?”

She quiets, the object in her hand producing a shine on the trees to her left side. The being hides quickly, fitting perfectly behind a large boulder. “Nothing, probably a deer.” She mumbles unconvincingly to herself, light still trailing around the shapes of the branches.

The more she moved, the more a snarling grew, and she quickly shined on the area. “I thought this was relaxing?” The man teases, a cocky grin stretching his lips.

“Stop, Credence. I keep hearing this... I don’t know what it is, like a.. A growling?” She gasps as if realizing the *true* danger she’s in. “What if it’s a bear?!” She whisper screams, eyes blown out of proportion.

Credence returns her hard gaze, takes his hands at her cheeks, and then mockingly squishes them. “We’re fine. Relax. *Alright?*” He spoke as if talking to a little kid or a dog. In a whirl of impatience, she slips the purple gloves off and slaps them against his shoulder. “We’re in the middle of the woods! Don’t *“alright”* me, this could actually be something dangerous. Wolves, coyotes, *bears-*”

Credence cuts her off, sarcasm doused in his tone. “Squirrels, birds, foxes, rabbits, *hedgehogs.*” He keeps his hands in his pockets, relaxed, and she crosses her arms, annoyed. She moves to smack him playfully with the gloves one more time. An impatient screech fills the silence, and the black-skinned creature rushes from its hiding.

Her partner was swift to scream, and she audibly gasped upon turning, her body frozen in its place. It crawled on all fours, twitching its head back and forth almost as if it were a hand on a clock. Black stringy follicles spread out like a mop from its bulbous round head. A terrified shriek was shared, and the woman was shaking desperately, eyes unable to unglue themselves from the horrifying thing that was ahead. The light bobbed back and forth, swaying half on and off its body that resembled what you could imagine a mix of a black Great Dane, a person, and UV radiation. A thud was heard at her side, and the object of light rolled to her red boots. With that Credence took off in a rush.

The female instinctively took a step back, rotating her head

to the male's absence. "Credence!!" She shouted, a shake in her voice. Too afraid, she swiftly turns back, meeting now face-to-face with the creature who bent its long neck down. It tilts its head, ticking its body and moving what resembled a very thin arm to her features. It slowly operates to her bright red hair and she jumps with a yelp. Its sharpened fingers run over the strands as if intrigued. Its breath smelled of rotten flesh, and it sounded like it was gargling water in its throat whenever it exhaled.

"Please." She mutters as if reasoning might just save her. The creature inches closer to her features, and when its noseless face was to nearly touch hers, she breaks out in a sprint.

Black and white distorts with bright gloves, bright shoes, bright hat, bright hair, and the being screeches such a horrifying scream that her ears felt it was going to bleed. The ground quakes, and it doesn't take more than a few seconds before her hair is yanked, pulling her forcefully to the ground. She hits her head with a CRACK and she clutches it, groaning in pain.

"Jessica!" A voice yells out. Credence waves his hands wildly, aiming to perhaps divert attention. With a great leap and screech, the being rushes to his figure, its mouth unhinging to reveal a long thick purple tongue and rows of sharp maniacal teeth. Credence opens his mouth, and before he can utter a word, a sickening snap of the creature's jaw snaps shut and encases him. Blood splats and his body falls with a thud. The being swirls its tongue around the red liquid that pours, hissing almost happily. Jessica makes a blood-curdling scream, rushing as fast as she can to get up and make a run for it. Its head ticks to her, ticking at the way her bright pom pom sways, and it makes a deep rumbling in its chest.

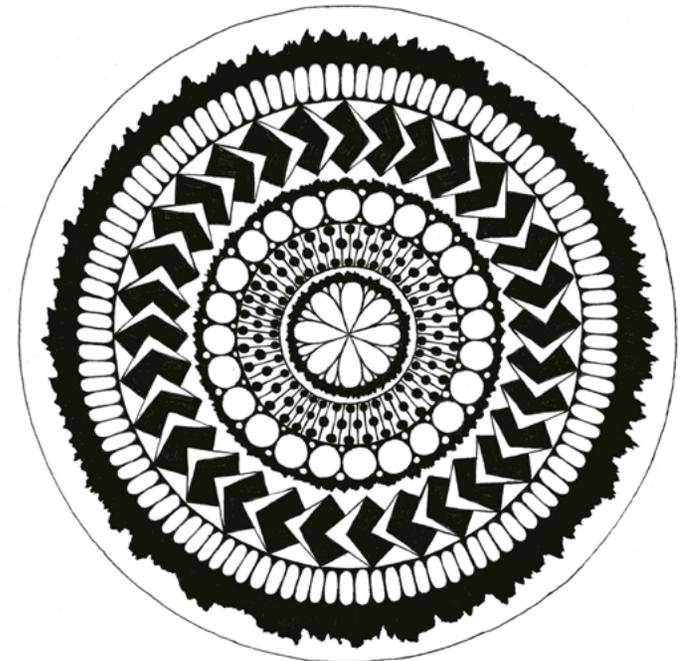
It is not long before Jessica shares the same fate.

The cave is quiet, huddled away from all sorts of sound and winds. Its sharp fingers wrap around Credence's body, and Jessica's it drags with its teeth. It lays the corpses next to the eggs. It begins to indulge in only a small amount of meat before it stores most of it in chewable, small bits besides the makeshift nest.

Then it sits, waiting patiently in the darkness, unblinking, unmoving, watching.

Jewel Trujillo*

BLACK INFERNO- TRANSVERSE CROSS SECTION OF AN INCINERATOR



72

Joseph Adomavicia**Lesson #265**

Look past the surface.
This heart carries weight.
My soul is battle-tested.
Open-minded,
I look within seeking to give care and effort
to the places time should be invested in.
Supplementing strengths.
Bolstering weaknesses.
It will take a lifetime, yet still,
I practice patience.
With patience,
the whirlwind of disruptions ceases.
The dust settles.

Joseph Adomavicia**Lesson #263**

Do everything you love with the will and drive that ignites the fervor
in your heart daily.
You never know when your last moments will happen:
The last time you hear your best friend's voice.
The last time you will hug your loved ones.
The last time you will celebrate the holidays and feel at home.
The last time you will be able to enjoy a laugh straight from your gut.
The last time you can close your eyes and listen to your favorite songs.
The last time you will put pen to paper and recite your poems.
The last time you feel the warmth of the sun's rays on your face.
The last time you see the stars blanket an ebony sky.
Once you realize life is fleeting,
is when you really begin to appreciate
how precious this life really is.

Joseph Adomavicia

Three Friends and Shots Till We Dropped

My dear friend Dwight Nadeau,
 I recollect the nicknames you had for me—
 You used to call me "Joey," "Dude," and "Dopey," and on occasion,
 when it was well deserved of course, you called me an "asshole"—
 With all the love in the world, of course.
 I mean, till this day I can't say I didn't deserve it.
 You, your son, Jonathan, and I
 always used to joke on one another.
 All in all we were the best of friends.
 It's like that time the three of us
 were sitting at the corner booth at Spartan's
 or the "Spittoon" as you would say,
 watching the Red Sox and the Stankee Yankees play.
 You would have given me a whack by now
 trash talking the Yanks, but you know me,
 no one said I was the brightest.
 That night you had your usual shrimp cocktail appetizer,
 double shot of Old Number Seven neat,
 and a Beck's beer in an ice cold glass.
 You know how I mentioned that I'm not too bright right?
 Well, this evening I was feeling considerably brave.
 Allow me to elaborate—
 For one reason or another,
 I decided I was going to be Ray Allen
 and drain my crumpled up straw wrapper into your beer for the
 three!
 I mean, Jonathan and I laughed, but my celebratory laughing
 came to a screeching halt when you whacked me with your cane!
 The damn thing was metal and let's not forget
 you made me pay for your beer, and rightfully so.
 In retrospect you weren't that mad
 although you made the wait staff laugh
 when you called them over to tell them what I did.
 You said with a grin on your face,
 "look what this asshole did, I can't drink that!"

I'll tell you what, looking back and given the chance
 I would most definitely do it again.
 Later that night you got your payback
 through exploiting my average drinking skills.
 You prepped us all with two double shots of chilled honey brown.
 I remember you raising your glass on the second, saying
 "listen boys, over the lips and through the gums,
 watch out stomach here it comes".
 We clinked glasses and went down the shots.
 For a while we sat in the living room together.
 You told us stories of your youth.
 Stories of how you ended up enlisting and going to Vietnam,
 you ending up with a bullet that went straight through your knee
 and how you came home to the name of "baby killer".
 Out of respect for you, your brothers in arms,
 and to all of those who were lost—
 We decided it was time for another round of shots.
 Only this time, you poured our shots,
 looked us in the eyes and said,
 "A King's home is his castle,
 a sailor's home is the sea,
 a ladies ass and a whiskey glass,
 are good enough for me."
 We raised our glasses,
 clanked them, and put them down.
 We were just three friends—
 Dwight, Jonathan, and Joey.
 Taking shots till we dropped.

Jay Petro*

BATHE IN THE WATERS OF COMPASSION



Nicole Friedman

Omega

I loathe the phermonious scent
of my womanish body
wafting upwards
from dripping viscera
with its puerile attempts to create.

I seek something greater
than that which I contain
and the imperative for which
I am made to be.

Oh, feckless puppeteer!
Cut my strings
so that I may fall to ash,
and return built, like a golem,
anew.

Nicole Friedman

Tomorrow Never Comes

The hanged man stares

at me
from his place on the card.
Reversed.

I can feel the gaze of the books on my shelf.

My eyes hurt.
I shut them.

Nicole Friedman

Inspired by Junji Ito

Every night
my cat jumps on my bed with me,
and every night
I fear
that it's not actually my cat
at all.

Nicole Friedman

The Beaten

Self-obsessed to the point of being perplexed
by that inside me which I can't digest
to each her own because I forget
what to do when I'm alone.

And to myself I must confess
that I'm at the point of reset and rest
because I want to be the very best
me that I can be.

My feelings are a terrible conquest
to fight, to flee, to freeze – I contest
that I've been here before, that this is the same mess
of the mind I keep running over and over.

I'm surfing a wave that will not crest,
beaten down by my own mind, no interest
in moving forward without protest
that I can't, or at least, I won't.

I'm stuck in a loop made at my own behest,
I won't fight the feeling, can't pass the test,
to save the world and its inhabitants I must
save myself first.

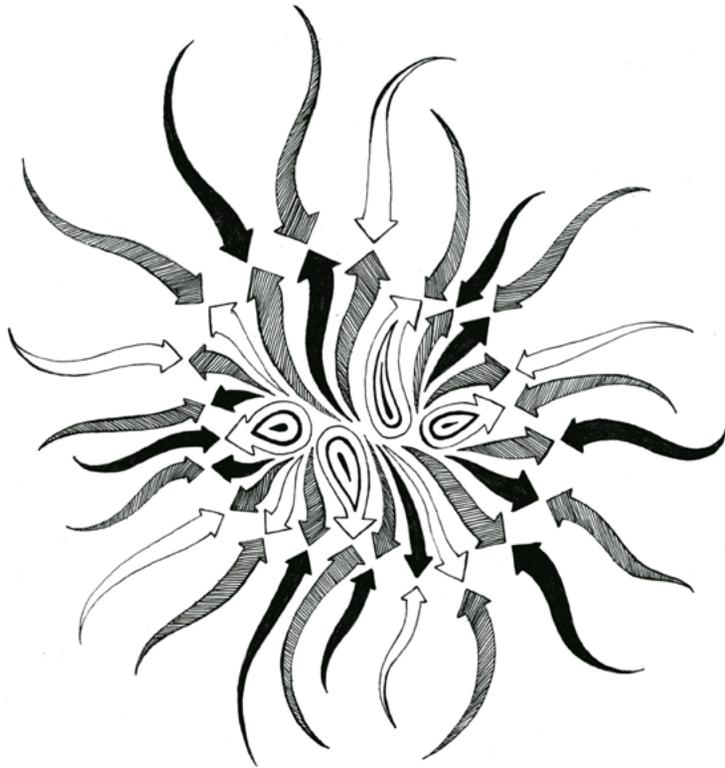
But there's a strange comfort in this sadness,
my memories linked to what I won't confess –
I want to stay here, in my distress,
because it's all I know.

And at my core there is a depressed
little girl whose soul is disinterested
in changing her life for the better or best
because she would rather remain obsessed
with what's killed her in the past
and keeps her here, keeps her repressed
and going back to the same excess
an abundance of hurt yet to access
what has been accessed before, amidst unrest,
because she doesn't know who she is without it.

And she's not ready to find out.

Jewel Trujillo*

MISGUIDED DIRECTIONS



JT

Jonah Craggett

Deathbed

“Dear God...” Zora say. Her sister, Bermuda, sit at the side of the bed with her hands clasped, her head low, low, low. On hearing the words, Bermuda eyes shoot open. Her prayers must have worked.

“Look what God has did!” Bermuda rise to say. The rest of the bodies, Black, aching, old bodies in the hospital room shout and praise and sing and cry.

Zora still on the bed looking to the sky, thinking. Can’t talk much but she think all the time. Almost every day. When she do, she curse God. Told Bermuda, way back before her hair turn grey, she hate God. Say he aint real. Bermuda say, “Don’t blaspheme the Holy Ghost.” Zora say, “Aint no holy ghost. You a holy ghost.” Now Zora sit looking up at the ceiling in the buzz of the florescent light. Then she whisper and cry, “Dear God...why you so cruel?”

But Bermuda don’t hear nothing. She just go on praising away.

ShawnaLee W. Kwashnak
UNION COLLEGE OVERCAST DAY



Submission Deadline: March 15, 2025

Fresh Ink 2025
NVCC's Art and Literature Journal
will accept works in three categories:

Poetry
Short Fiction
2-D Art

- Up to five (5) individual works will be considered from each writer or artist.
- Each fiction and poetry piece cannot exceed 1250 words in length.
- Only electronically submitted text documents in .doc, .docx or .rtf formats will be considered.
- 2-D representations of any art genre should be submitted in hi-res .jpg or .pdf format (300 dpi)
- All graphic submissions will be considered for the cover design.
- All entries must be submitted via

FreshInk@nvcc.commnet.edu

- Each entry should be submitted separately as an attached file.
- Each file name should be the work's title.
- No author's or artist's names should appear on the submitted attached works.
- Authors' and artists' names, emails and mailing addresses should be included in the body of the corresponding email.
- Only works from self-identified NVCC students will be entered in the NVCC Poetry, Short Fiction and Art contests. All works will be entered into the Luke S. Newton Memorial Contest.

For further information contact Jeannie Evans-Boniecki, PhD
Fresh Ink Advisor at JEvansBoniecki@nvcc.commnet.edu.

